

Holocaust survivor in Wanaque urges compassion as lasting memorial of WWII genocide
By Jeff Green, NorthJersey.com
11 April 2013

WANAQUE — Bella Miller still remembers the day the tattoo was engraved on her arm.

She was inside a barracks at Auschwitz, the infamous Nazi death camp in Poland, weeks after she arrived with her family in August 1944. Another inmate dipped a long needle in ink and punched the number into her arm. There were about three minutes of excruciating pain.



Bella Miller shows the number tattooed on her arm as a survivor of Auschwitz. (Viorel Florescu/Staff Photographer)

“You were not anymore a human being, you were a number and believe me that number will never leave my mind,” Miller said. “A24977: That’s what I was.”

Miller, 80, who had survived a harrowing experience hiding from capture before her eventual transport to Auschwitz, told her story before more than 100 people in Wanaque on Thursday night. It was an event that brought out people’s reflections on one of history’s most nightmarish episodes. People described the outrage and insisted on remembrance.

Miller, who has lived in the borough with her husband, Ed, for the past two years, said she hopes her story inspires people to be compassionate. “People should be a little kinder to each other, see that everybody is a human being,” she said.

For Steve Fabian, 57, of Ringwood, it brought out anger toward the still-living Nazi guards who have not been apprehended and prosecuted.

“You can’t be a sheep; you have to aggressively find these people,” he said. “All those that suffered are trivialized unless we do all we can.”

Herb Geller, 82, of Wanaque, said he believed it was important to study and remember the time period so history will not repeat itself.

“It’s a terrible tragedy in the history of Jewish people, but also represents a certain element of survival, strength to move on,” he said. “Hopefully it will be an example against genocide in all other communities and parts of the world.”

Miller was only 7 years old when World War II began in Europe in September 1939. She grew up well-off with her family in eastern Poland, the first country to endure all-out aggression by Nazi Germany.

She recalled a gradual but steep decline in her living conditions as Jews were rounded up in labor camps, robbed and executed. Miller, along with her brother and parents, started off hiding in the basement of her uncle’s wine shop by creating an artificial wall, obscured with a fake shelf. They placed pepper on the floor to fool dogs that could sniff them out. That worked for a while, but it eventually became too unsafe to stay there. Her family managed to avoid capture for much of the war by moving in with three different families, giving them gold and diamonds as payment so they could hide in their stoves, barns or sheds.

But the last homeowner turned Miller's family in, after which they were sent to a labor camp. Not long afterward they were rounded up with about 40 others and shipped to Auschwitz during a two-week train ride. Immediately upon their arrival, the women and men were separated into two groups.

"I never had time to say goodbye to my brother or father and I never saw them again," Miller said.

She was greeted by the Nazi doctor Joseph Mengele, who was infamous for his cruel experiments. Miller said his boots were shiny, his uniform straight, his hair cropped. He asked how old she was. Her mother responded in German, "15." She was actually 12 but another inmate told them to say she was older. He moved on.

Miller lived with her mother for most of her time there. Meals consisted of a square piece of bread, dark colored soup and black water. They were almost always hungry, sick or both. At one point Miller had scarlet fever.

They lived at Auschwitz from August of 1944 until January of 1945, when Soviet troops liberated the camp. Afterward, during one exploration of the camp, she ventured into an office where she saw a painting that depicted people being hung. She also found a blueprint of the death camp that she took and still has today.

Eventually Miller moved to the United States and found work at a grain processing company, where she was employed until she married her husband in New York City.

The talk was sponsored by the Chabad Jewish Center of Upper Passaic County, run by rabbi Mendy Gurkov and his wife.

Before her talk, Gurkov helped Miller light six candles, one for every million Jews who died during the Holocaust.

Gurkov said it was an honor to hear Miller talk. Such educational experiences are a critical part of reacting to the Holocaust, he said.

"Proper Holocaust awareness is that we never forget our past," he said. "At the same time we don't forget, we have to build as well. To have Hebrew schools, to continue the Jewish flame."

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