

Holocaust survivor has never lost her optimism

By Bill Rea

Faigie Libman is a survivor, and she insists on talking about her experiences.

She wasn't always willing to talk. In 1945, having survived the ordeal of the Holocaust, she didn't want to discuss her experiences.

She and her mother came to Canada, starting a new life in Montreal in 1948. In 1952, she married her husband Benny Libman, raised four children, became a kindergarten teacher and eventually moved to Toronto.

What got her talking was a Toronto Star article from June 1982, reporting the RCMP had arrested a man, Helmut Rauca, on suspicion he was responsible for the murder of more than 11,500 Lithuanian Jews, including members of her family and friends. She also learned this man had been living only a few blocks from her North York home.

That compelled her to tell her story.

"You can't shut me up," she told a group gathered Monday for an Afternoon of Remembrance at the Albion-Bolton branch of Caledon Public Library. The event was arranged in partnership with the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies.

"I started to remember," she added. "I remembered him very well. He was labeled a butcher."

Libman was born Feiga Schmidt in Kaunas, Lithuania, July 29, 1934. Her mother was a surgical nurse, and Libman commented she had been a little afraid of her. Her father owned a book store. "My father was my very best friend," she said, recalling she always went places with him. Her mother was always working.

She also recalled Kaunas as being a cosmopolitan city and a nice place to live. Even the Soviets moving in in 1940 didn't cause many problems. "I don't remember anything bad," Libman said.

She recalled the present she received for her fifth birthday from her aunt who lived in New Rochelle, New York, was a Shirley Temple doll. "I was the envy," she said.

Problems started when the Germans invaded Lithuania, "and the things were very bad," she said.

Being Jewish, she and her family was forced to wear yellow stars, and they could be shot if they didn't. A ghetto was formed in a suburb called Slobodka, and they were forced to move in there. Libman called it "a very rundown place, surrounded by barbed wire."

She also recalled she was allowed to bring one thing with her; her Shirley Temple doll. It was a difficult time, as she said there was never enough food.

There was a little hospital in the ghetto, where her mother was able to find work.

"If you had a job in the ghetto, that meant you were useful," she observed.

In addition to her parents, Libman said her father's parents and his sister were with them at the start in the ghetto. Rauca was in charge of the ghetto.

She remembered Oct. 28, 1941, when Rauca ordered all Jews in the ghetto to assemble in Democracy Square to be counted. Rauca, carrying a whip and wearing white gloves (Libman said since that day, she has never owned white gloves), divided the population.

Those who ended up on the wrong side were sent away and cut down by machine guns next to open pits that became mass graves.

"They were all massacred," she said, pointing out some 10,500 Lithuanian Jews were killed in one day. She also said Rauca was extradited to West Germany, and died in prison.

Despite that, her parents and grandmother were still with her, so Libman still had hopes that things would be fine.

"I'm a terrible optimist," she told the audience. "Sometimes, it gets me in trouble."

There was one morning in 1942 when her mother forced her to go to work with her. She was fortunate because that was the day the SS deported the children and elderly to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

"It was a very eerie feeling," Libman recalled when returning to camp at night. "I heard terrible crying."

"It was the most horrible thing I had ever experienced," she added, commenting that people understood the meaning of Auschwitz.

In July 1944, with the war going badly for the Germans and the Allies getting close, Libman said the decision was made to empty the ghetto. The Jews were shipped to concentration camps in cattle cars. She and her mother were sent with other women to Stutthof in Poland, while her father was sent to Dachau.

The trip into Poland took about three or four days. "I cannot describe the horror in cattle cars," she said, adding they had no food or toilet facilities.

Upon arrival, they were told to leave everything they brought with them, get a bar of soap and go for showers. Libman said the women know there was the possibility they would be gassed.



Holocaust survivor Faigie Libman addressed an audience at Albion-Bolton Community Centre Monday.

"We were lucky," she remembered. "Real water came out."

They were then directed to select clothes from a pile, and her mother worked on finding clothes that would make her look older than she was. Libman said that enabled her to be considered a worker in the camp.

Despite all they had been through, Libman said she had not lost her faith in people.

"I still have to believe in God," she said. "I still have to believe in the goodness of people."

She got a lesson in that from the German nurse who was in charge of the camp infirmary. Libman was discovered with scarlet fever, but the nurse wrapped a cloth around her neck and the Nazi doctor never found out.

"She risked her life to help a fellow human being," she remarked, adding Germans could be shot in those days for helping Jews. At the time, they didn't think to get her name. "I think of her all the time."

She also stressed that her mother was quick to line up when work details were being assembled, thus giving them the chance to be useful.

"I was a terrific trench digger," she said, adding that work continued until the ground froze, then they were taken on a death march to keep ahead of the advancing Allies.

Libman described the terrible feeling when she would see someone fall down on the march, and not have the strength to help them.

Early in 1945, she said they saw a man coming toward them who identified himself as a Russian captain. She added her mother later wrote that it was a good thing the Russian army was close behind. "The women would have kissed him to death."

A lot of them hadn't seen food for some time, and Libman recalled her mother walking among them, warning them not to eat too fast.

She also recalled a shower and clean clothes was the best part of being liberated.

They later learned that her father had died around the same time on the death march from Dachau. "I lost my very best friend," she said, although she also realized she was lucky to still have her mother.

The two spent a couple of years in a displaced persons camp in Austria, before being able to come to Canada.

Libman said she goes from place to place telling people of her experiences.

"It's not easy, but I have to speak to young people to make sure they know what happened when hatred ruled," she remarked.

She also told some stories about other people who have been deemed Righteous Among Nations, such as the man who was the Japanese Ambassador to Lithuania in 1940 and who made out visas without permission, allowing about 6,000 Jews to escape.

There was also a woman who lived near the Warsaw Ghetto, and helped about 2,500 Jewish children escape. She was arrested, her arms and legs were broken, and she was left for dead. Libman said she eventually met this woman in Toronto. She lived to be 98.

There was a man who went into Hungary, presenting himself as a Spanish ambassador and he was able to get a lot of Hungarian Jews out of the country.

Libman said she had destroyed her Shirley Temple doll when she realized she was the only child in the labour camp who had not been killed. But the mother of a director of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies made her another one.