

Holocaust survivor speaks to students and community

By Bill Rea

It is possible to get over a lot of ordeals, and that includes the Holocaust.

That was spelled out last Thursday at a program jointly run by Caledon Public Library and Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School. It featured a talk by Andy Reti, who survived his time with his mother in the Budapest Ghetto during the Holocaust. Reti was only about three when he and his mother were liberated in 1945. But he does have some memories of that time, and also watched presentations his mother made before her death in 2015.

Much of his presentation was centred around what he called 'the Ring of Love.'

'I am wearing that Ring of Love,' he said.

The Holocaust represents a time when evil played too great a role in events, but he stressed to tell his audience that there were other, more positive forces at work.

'Not every Nazi was a German,' he said, 'and not every German was a Nazi.'

He added that every survivor of that time owed his or her life to the act of kindness of at least one person 'who were the upstanders, not the bystanders.'

Reti reflected that we live in a very violent world, with such things as bullying.

'The Nazis were the biggest bullies in history,' he remarked, pointing out they were responsible for the deaths of six million Jews, as well as victims from other groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, etc. They did it because they considered themselves superior.

But he also recalled the words of his mother, who admitted to being bitter and finding it difficult to forgive, 'but you can't live with bitterness in your mind all the time.'

Reti was born July 16, 1942. His parents, who both came from poor families, were married in 1939.

He said in those days, it was common for women to use the same ring to mark their engagement and marriage. They just switched the ring from their right to left hand.

Reti observed that the Jewish population in Hungary was left pretty much in tact early in the Second World War, but that changed when the Germans occupied the country in 1944. The destructive work on the Jewish population went ahead very quickly. There were about one million Jews in Hungary in the spring and summer of 1944, and about 600,000 of them were murdered.

Reti said they were living in Budapest at the time. 'We were the last ones to be rounded up,' he said.

Prior to the occupation, Hungary was led by Admiral Miklós Horthy, who was neither friendly toward the Jews, or a major anti-semiter, but he was deposed when the Germans moved in.

The following day, Oct. 16, is the day Reti said the Holocaust in Hungary started.

He and his mother were living with his paternal grandparents at the time. Reti's mother's parents, who were living near the border with Yugoslavia, weren't as fortunate. The Germans were quick to round up the rural population and his grandparents were sent straight to Auschwitz.

He said the day came when young troops appeared at the door of the house and told everyone they had five minutes to pack up and get out. He asked the audience to imagine being told, at gun point, that they had five minutes to pack their belongings. What would they take? And he mentioned his mother had the needs of her infant son to consider.

Reti said they were living in a mainly Jewish neighbourhood, adding it's natural for people to want to live near others of similar background.

He said tens of thousands of people were marched down a street. They came to blankets spread on the ground and were ordered at gun point to hand over all their jewelry and other valuables.

His mother, however, was not ready to surrender her ring, which was the only tangible memory she had of her husband.

'She hid it in the baby's diaper,' he said.

They were then told to move. 'We had no idea where,' Reti said.

They were marched to the infield of an open-air race track (he reminded the audience this was October), where there was no food, shelter or toilets. Thousands of people were marched in, so eventually there was no room to sit.

Reti played a video of his mother describing the scene. As they were being marched down the road, there were people at the side yelling ugly words and throwing things. Someone grabbed a blanket she had been carrying, and someone else said that had been for the baby and instructed that it be returned.

'Who could be that one person who spoke up?' she asked.

Reti said that was a case of someone standing up rather than standing by.

‘There were some,’ he observed. ‘Not as many as there should have been, but there were some.’

They were kept in that field until Oct. 18, then were told they could go home. But Reti said the relief was short-lived for many, because the troops open fire with machine guns. He and his mother survived that, but many standing near them weren't as lucky.

Reti said there was no formula that could be followed in a situation like that to ensure survival.

‘It was one miracle after another,’ he said.

They were rounded up two days later and taken to a brick factory. Reti said that's when another miracle occurred, among people who his mother described as having ‘rocks in the cavities where their hearts should have been.’

His grandmother recognized a young police officer from her home town and begged him for help. He pointed to a group of people and told her to stay well away from them, because they were about to be shipped to Auschwitz.

They were sent to the ghetto, and were actually rather lucky. Being among the first groups sent there, they were able to secure a two-bedroom apartment which 27 people shared, including seven children younger than 10.

The gates of the ghetto were closed after a couple of weeks, and there was a constant feeling of hunger as the provisions started to run out.

Since there were a number of young children in the room, the adults had to deal with the problem of keeping them quiet. One solution was to read and tell them stories.

His mother and her friend (who had a daughter named Kati about six months older than Reti) were able to have access to fold-out chesterfield, and the two children slept with their feet touching each other's. Kati, he asserted, had the ‘coldest feet in the universe.’

Dec. 25 was a memorable day, Reti said, because that was the day his grandfather escaped from the forced labour camp he and Reti's father had been taken to. That big relief had a negative side, because that meant there was another mouth to feed. He remembered watching his grandmother refusing to feed her husband, insisting the food go to the children.

Reti said liberation came Jan. 18, and he the first piece of food he had was a roll.

They were also lucky to be liberated by the Russians, who knew how to deal with starving people. The survival rate of those liberated by the Russians was higher than those rescued by the Americans, who let people over-eat, when their starving stomachs couldn't handle that much food so fast.

Reti also said it took a while to come to terms with the fact his father was not going to return. For some years, he had been told his father had died of typhus, but Reti said his father's cousin was with him at the time. They were in a group of about 30 people, with the Germans realizing they were losing the war. The cousin advocated running away, but Reti said his father was concerned about what would happen if they were caught. He decided to stay where he was, and was killed.

Reti said he obtained his father's wallet, although he didn't know where it came from. He said inside were pictures of himself and his mother.

Reti bragged that he's a biker today (he even put on his biker's vest).

He recalled when he was about six, his mother took him to an amusement park, with motorcycle rides being among the attractions. He naturally wanted a ride, but his mother was reluctant to let him, believing he was too small. She relented when the person running the attraction said he could go for half price.

‘It was the thrill of a lifetime,’ he declared, adding he got his first motorcycle when he was 60.

Since then, he has taken part in Rides to Remember, and was on the organizing committee of such a ride to Parliament Hill in 2012.

There, he got to recite the Pledge, which ended with the words ‘We pledge never again.’



North York resident Andy Reti spoke of some of the things he and his mother endured in Hungary during the Holocaust.