

Holocaust survivor tells her story to students at Hall

By Bill Rea

A bully can be a problem, but so can those who stay back and let the bullying happen.

That was explained recently to students at Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School in Caledon East by one who ought to know.

Eva Olsson, 89, was a Hungarian Jew who's family was caught up in the Nazi Holocaust during the Second World War. Today, she is an author and speaker, stressing the need to avoid hate.

'Every German was not a Nazi, and every Nazi was not a German,' she told the students.

She advocated against even using the word 'hate.'

'How many of you use the word 'hate' every day?' she asked. 'I don't use the word 'hate.' Hate is a killer.'

'I don't like it when I'm called names,' she added, 'and I don't like it when I'm pushed around, but I don't hate.'

She also pointed out bullies do what they do because of lack of acceptance. Olsson said Canada is about people whose ancestors were accepted here. She stressed the need to be accepting of newcomers, telling the students anything less than that is disrespectful to the country that accepted them.

And teaching others to stand by and do nothing when they see bullying essentially gives the power to the bully.

'There are no innocent bystanders,' she said.

She also observed that a high school student once told her people bully for kicks. Kicks don't last, she said, but the pain caused to other people does.

The Second World War began in September 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. The teenage Olsson was aware of it, but naively thought it wouldn't affect her in Hungary.

The Holocaust eventually resulted in six million Jews being killed, along with five million others. Olsson said some of them were killed for hiding Jews. The victims included about 1.5 million children, and five of them were her nieces.

'I'm here to speak for them, and all other children who's voices were silenced by hate,' she said. 'I'm sure that's why God saved my life 69 years ago.'

Olsson recalled her life changed for ever March 19, 1944, when the Nazis marched into Hungary.

She was 19 at the time, living with her family in two rented rooms without hydro or plumbing. They had to share an outdoor toilet and some of them slept on the floor.

May 15, she said they were ordered to pack bags and they were marched to a train station, being told they were going to a factory in Germany. Olsson recalled they were packed in box cars, 'standing room only,' arriving four days later at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

'It didn't take long to find out what it was about,' she remarked, recalling heavy black smoke filled the skies, and guards were everywhere. The new arrivals were lined up for a selection process, conducted by the notorious 'angel of death,' Dr. Josef Mengele. People who looked healthy and 16 or older were ordered to go to the right. Olsson was ordered to the right, and she said she turned to look back, but was too late to see her mother.

'How I wish I could have given her a hug,' she said.

Olsson's presentation included a number of pictures, many of them disturbing, such as people waiting to go into the gas chambers.

'Who could this? Animals?' she said. 'Animals don't do this to each other. People do. What kind of people? People who have hate in their hearts.'

She also recalled there were screams and moans as people were forced into the chambers, but things were silent after about 20 minutes. She added children were always at the bottom of piles, sometimes with their heads crushed because the other bodies had fallen on them. And then the bodies were put in the crematoriums. 'That's what we smelled, day and night,' she said.

Killings on a mass scale were happening all over Europe during those days. Olsson spoke of mass executions in Budapest. She said 20,000 Jews were taken to the banks of the Danube, ordered to undress and then they were shot. The bodies were pushed into the river. In Ukraine, police were ordered to shoot babies if their mothers were holding them, the idea being to have the bullet pass through the baby and kill the mother. They saved bullets that way.

There were some positive stories. Olsson said people in Denmark wouldn't allow the Nazis to send Jews to camps. about 7,200 Jews were smuggled to Sweden on fishing boats.

Olsson eventually was sent to Bergen-Belsen camp (where Anne Frank died). She said about 104,000 died there, recalling they used bulldozers to move the bodies.

'Every one of them had a name,' she told the students. 'Every one of them was part of a family.'

As the war was nearing its end, Olsson said the Gestapo gave orders that the prisoners were to get no supplies. They knew the allies

were coming, and they were anxious to speed up the killings.

"My spirit didn't let it happen," she told the students.

Olsson said she witnessed a "small miracle" at 11 a.m. April 15, 1945 when the camp was liberated by British and Canadian forces.

The reason she called it a miracle was she said orders have been issued to execute the prisoners at 3 that afternoon.

Olsson eventually went to Sweden, where she met her future husband, but he was later killed by a drunk driver, leaving her with a 10-year-old son.

"I cannot focus on what I have lost because it would take energy," she said. "I have to be grateful for what I have."

