

Images of Darkness, Flickers of Light by Lynne Bohlman

The horrors of the Holocaust occurred more than 40 years ago, yet the world still struggles to understand the implications of this nightmare of human history.

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The RIT community received a powerful lesson in April when "Insights from the Holocaust Experience: Deaf and Hearing Survivors" was presented on campus. The program, sponsored by RIT, the Hillel Foundation, and Rochester's Jewish Community Center, included a panel discussion led by deaf and hearing survivors and "In Der Nacht: Visions of Deaf Survivors of Nazi Oppression," an exhibit of historical documents, photographs, and art.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the program for many of the 450 participants, most of whom were students, was the discovery that Jewish people were not the only victims of the Holocaust.

"Because of my Jewish background, my parents brought me up to be aware of the Holocaust," says Sheryl Eisenberg, career opportunities advisor in NTID's National Center on Employment of the Deaf. "I was aware that others—gay and disabled people, for example—also were victims of the Holocaust, but I didn't know in detail about deaf people. It was a real eye-opener."

While as many as 1000 deaf German Jews were among the six million people who perished during the Holocaust, many more deaf people, Jews and non-Jews, were victims of the Nazi sterilization program.

In support of Nazi leader Adolf Hitler's determination to create a perfect race, the Reich Association of the German Protestant Ministries of the Deaf declared: "The government has ordered: Whoever is congenitally diseased shall not have any more children in the future, since our fatherland needs healthy and fit people."

While some disabled people underwent sterilization voluntarily, many were forced to do so. During World War II, as many as 375,000 people were sterilized in Germany; 17,000 of whom were deaf. Thirty-seven percent of the deaf people who were sterilized were reported to the government by their teachers or schools.

One deaf man who ignored three notices to show up for sterilization was arrested, and as punishment, operated on without anesthesia, says Dr. Simon Carmel, visiting assistant professor in NTID's department of liberal arts support.

Carmel, co-organizer of "Insights from the Holocaust Experience," says that in recording the history of the Holocaust, deaf victims have been overlooked. It was not until about 1980 when Dr. Horst Biesold, a former high school teacher of deaf German students, began his research that the sterilization of deaf Germans during World War II became widely known.

Many deaf Jewish people also were victims of Nazi concentration camps. Carmel first became interested in their experiences when he began his study of deaf folklore. Though he first met two deaf survivors in 1957 in Atlantic City, New Jersey, it was not until 1982 at the National Congress of the Jewish Deaf in Washington, D.C., that Carmel realized the importance of preserving their stories.

"Time is getting short because more and more deaf survivors are dying," he says. "We have to videotape and publish their stories for the future. We want to educate deaf children and adults about deaf survivors and their experiences to make sure the Holocaust never happens again."

Carmel is involved with other members of the World Organization of the Jewish Deaf (WOJD) in a worldwide effort to collect data from and study deaf survivors. This project, says Dr. Alan Hurwitz, NTID's associate dean and president of WOJD, will be one of WOJD's major focuses.

"Insights from the Holocaust Experience" gave many of us at RIT an opportunity to understand what happened to deaf people during the Holocaust," says Hurwitz, "and emphasized the importance of preserving the heritage of Jewish deaf people. The WOJD wants to extend that understanding of our heritage around the world."

In an effort to increase understanding at RIT, three deaf survivors shared their stories with students. One, Frieda Wurmfeld, of Brooklyn, is the grandmother of Sarah Rosen, a third-year student in the School of Visual Communication Careers.

Wurmfeld, born in Czechoslovakia, used strength and luck as well as positive thinking and patience to survive the concentration camps. Wurmfeld and her husband initially avoided being sent to a camp by pretending to be Italian. Finally in November 1942, they and their infant daughter were sent to the first of three camps.

It was at the third camp, Terezin, along the Czech/German border, that conditions were the worst. Children drank coffee rather than milk and ate potatoes for lunch. Adults survived on barley and one loaf of bread each week. Though they were starving, Wurmfeld forced her family to eat the bread slowly throughout the week, thus maintaining their strength and avoiding illness.

Life at the camp was precarious. Wurmfeld once traded a pair of silk stockings to obtain medicine that would save her ill husband's life. Later, she was scheduled to be sent to the gas chambers when the camp was liberated by Soviet and American armies in May 1945.

"Not enough deaf survivors tell the world about their horrible experiences," says Rosen. "My grandmother has begun to write down some information so that it can be passed to future generations."

Howard Mann, career opportunities advisor in the department of career opportunities and admissions, enjoyed the opportunity to experience "living history." He found the presentations by the survivors to be more moving and powerful than reading or watching a movie about the Holocaust.

"It's amazing that, despite their horrible experiences, they were willing to share them with us," he says. "I appreciated their openness, honesty, and willingness to tell what happened to them."

Robert Abaid, a fourth-year electromechanical technology student who attended the survivors presentation, was angered and perplexed by their experiences. When he returned to his apartment to type a report for his sociology class, Abaid says, he typed so hard he almost broke his computer.

"Inside I felt really upset," he says. "Why did the Germans kill so many people? What was the purpose? Can't we make peace all around the world forever?"

Abaid attended the presentation as part of an assignment for his class. Dr. Greg Emerton, associate professor in NTID's liberal arts support department and Abaid's sociology teacher, says the program coincided with his class's discussion of race and ethnic relations.

"We were studying sanctions used by majority groups against minority groups, including genocide," Emerton says. "Instead of just talking about the subject, this was a splendid opportunity for students to talk with people who actually experienced it."

Though he, too, watched the survivors' presentation, the "In Der Nacht" exhibit had the greatest effect on Emerton.

"Following what had been a normal life and watching it unravel had a powerful impact on me," he says.

The photo-narrative exhibit, produced by Michelle Baron and Marta Petal, of All the People, Inc., in Los Angeles, is composed of 26 panels that weave what is largely Biesold's research on the Nazi program of genocide with the story of Max and Rosy Steinberg Feld. The journey with the Felds, told through Max's photographs and Rose's words, begins when they were playmates at school and travels through their marriage and birth of their daughter, their separation. Rose's survival by living for nine months in the basement of a French country house, and Max's murder at Birkenau in 1942. Rose lives in Hollywood today.

David Bloch, another deaf survivor, shares his memories through more than 60 paintings and woodcuts that depict the Holocaust. Pieces of his work, "an eternal monument to the Holocaust;" as well as artwork by Morris Broderson, were on exhibit as part of "In Der Nacht." Bloch, who after being arrested during *Kristallnacht* in 1938 spent a month at the Dachau concentration camp before escaping to Shanghai, also spoke during the RIT program.

"The exhibits and program were put together so that participants walked away with a sense of how political ideas affect people," says Wendy Low, visiting instructor in liberal arts support and co-organizer of the program. "Political ideas are not abstract when they affect people."

"The irrationality of the whole thing becomes more clear," she adds, "when you think of your own group being persecuted."

One key to preventing such political ideas from becoming oppressive realities, Low says, is understanding how they develop.

Still, she feels, a warning to never let such an atrocity happen again is not the only lesson to be learned from the Holocaust. Another message, she says, is one of hope that we learn not only to accept, but to celebrate cultural and individual differences, while upholding common humanity and human rights.

Societies still have not learned, Low says, to fully appreciate the richness that cultural and individual diversity bring.

"The more people are educated about different cultures," says Eisenberg, "the more they develop a sensitivity to and understanding of different cultures."

"We have to make a choice whether we want to be ignorant or educated."

"Insights from the Holocaust Experience: Deaf and Hearing Survivors" echoed the hope that people will choose education. The program was put together in the same spirit as the "In Der Nacht" exhibit, which states: "... [W]e share this human story with you in the hope that we may learn from the darkness how to shape a brilliant future together."