

Bradford Times

Lessons of the Holocaust

September 18 2014



Cutting the ribbon to launch the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre's Tour for Humanity in Simcoe County, from left, Innisfil Mayor Barb Baguley, Holocaust survivor Max Eisen, Friends of Simon Wiesenthal President and CEO Avi Benlolo, and South Simcoe Police Staff Sgt. Steve Wilson, who helped orchestrate the visit on Thursday, September 4, 2014

Humanity will show video presentations on its 3 large screens, on the Global Experience - looking at acts of genocide around the world, and the heroes who have stood up against hatred; the Canadian Experience, from the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II to the Residential Schools; and the "Happy Experience," a blueprint for community involvement and action.

On September 4, the Tour for Humanity was welcomed to Innisfil by the South Simcoe Police Service, Police Services Board, and Innisfil Mayor Barb Baguley and her Council, launching a season of touring Simcoe County schools.

Avi Benlolo, President and CEO of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal, thanked police and the Town for the "great privilege of speaking to groups like yourself," and told them, "Today, Holocaust denial is big business. Some of this is emanating from countries like Iran... Did the Holocaust really happen? The Holocaust happened. It is for real."

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." - George Santayana.

That's what prompted the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies to launch the Tour for Humanity - an education program on wheels, that is designed to initiate discussion on human rights issues, encourage students and others to take action against hate, and to remember the Holocaust and other acts of genocide.

Housed in a bus that serves as a mobile classroom, accommodating up to 30 people at a time, the Tour for

The challenge, Benlolo said, is “how we can educate people today so it doesn’t happen again.”

There was an opportunity to take the “tour,” watch a video presentation, and to hear Holocaust survivor, Max Eisen.

Eisen, who grew up in ethnic-Hungarian Czechoslovakia, saw the erosion of the rights and freedoms of Jews in his village, with the rise of Nazism in Germany.

When Hitler took power in 1933, Czechoslovakia, with a population of about 13 million, was “an amazing little country,” Eisen told the audience - a country where Jews had lived for over 1,900 years, achieving full emancipation under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Emperor Franz Josef .

The years from 1919 to 1939 were “golden years for the Jewish people,” he said.

In the small town of 5,000 where he grew up, there were 98 Jewish families - about 400 people - who saw the gathering storm clouds in Germany, but “couldn’t believe what was coming down the road.”

In 1933, the Nazi ideology targeted political dissidents, and individuals based on religious beliefs, and racial features. In 1935, the Nuremberg Racial Laws were passed, targeting Jews.

“This was apartheid,” Eisen said. “It was the same old propaganda and brainwashing... When you dehumanize a people, it is so easy to step on them and kill them.”

It led to the “Final Solution to the Jewish Problem in Central Europe” - a plan for genocide that extended to harvesting the gold from teeth, the hair from women’s heads; “even the ashes will be sold as fertilizer.”

For the Eisen family, the floodgates opened in 1938, when British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier “gave away a democracy,” and allowed Hitler to seize the Sudetenland, following a policy of appeasement.

Nazi Hungary took over the portion of Czechoslovakia where the Eisens lived. Jews were banned from owning radios, or bicycles. Then businesses were closed and confiscated. “Our freedoms were gradually taken away from us, step by step,” Eisen said. “By 1940, every Jew had to be photographed.”

In 1941, Jews were prohibited from employing non-Jews - and Jewish men between the ages of 18 and 45 were rounded up into Work Battalions, to work in the mines, farms and forests of Hungary.

Czechoslovakia was partitioned in 1942 - the same year that the Nazis issued their "Final Solution" - and the members of the Eisen family who farmed in the German part of the country, disappeared.

A "lying postcard" was received, claiming that the family was happily working on a farm in Poland but, Max said, "The killing was already in full swing in the east, and we didn't know about it."

In April 1944, the Eisens celebrated Passover. "We sat around the table for the last time... This truly was the last supper," - although there was talk that Nazi Germany was facing defeat, with the advance of Soviet forces. There was hope. "We were like a ship that could see the shore."

The next day, the Eisens were warned by a non-Jewish neighbour to flee, because Hungarian gendarmes planned to round up all Jewish families. The neighbour offered to hide the family in the woods.

Max's father refused; as an Orthodox Jew, he would not travel during Passover.

The following day, Gendarmes kicked in the gate, arresting all, including Max's younger brothers and infant sister. Jews were rounded up and marched to the railway station where they were crammed into cattle cars. "They told us we were going to work in farms. "You will be resettled in the east - you will be working on farms", and we believed this."

But their destination was Auschwitz.

For 3 days and 3 nights, crammed 100 people to a car in unimaginable conditions, there was initial relief when the locked doors were opened. SS Doctors met the new arrivals, sending able-bodied men and women to the right, and the rest, "old people, women with babies, little children," to the left.

Those who went right had their heads shaved, their arms tattooed with a number, and were set to work as slave labourers. Those who went to the left, went to the gas chambers and the crematoria.

Max, his father and an uncle were sent to the right. His mother, 2 younger brothers, and baby sister were sent to the left. He never saw them again, or expected to. "By the end of the day, we knew where we were."

Prisoners worked 10 to 12 hours a day, on a diet of 300 calories a day. "People were dying. They were starving, beaten to death." Anyone who couldn't do the work, who fell, who got sick, faced death - including Max's father.

His father's last words were, "If you survive, tell the world what is happening here." But, said Eisen, "If a door didn't open for you, you could not crawl out of this place."

Eisen's "door" was a severe beating from an SS guard. He was sent to the Red Cross hospital at the camp - where the doctor saved his life, by giving him a job as a cleaner.

The Red Army continued to advance; but rather than surrender their prisoners, the Nazi guards forced them to walk, in the winter of 1945, to a new prison camp, the notorious Ebensee in the Austria. "We had no food, we were black with frostbite. We were dying from Typhus."

Then, on May 6, 1945, the prisoners heard the sound of planes overhead, and found the guards gone. The Black Panther tank unit of General Patton's 3rd Army rolled through the gates, to find walking skeletons, and piles of the dead and dying. "They were my liberators," said Max. "They were in total shock."

And so, said Eisen, "This is where we come from, we survivors."

He arrived in Canada in 1949, and settled in Toronto. At first, "Nobody wanted to hear our stories" - but he began to talk about the Holocaust after being invited to address students at a Catholic school in Barrie - and after seeing a new rising tide of anti-Semitism.

"For me, the most important thing is to keep this country safe, to 'Stand on guard for thee', " Eisen said. "Be careful of what is happening. Be vigilant. It starts with words - the lies become the truth. We need to read between the lines."

There are atrocities being committed today, that require action, he said. "We're here. We need to do the best we can. We have to educate our young people."

"To me, the most important part (of the Tour for Humanity) is the 'Heroes' - the dedicated community leaders, who have dedicated their lives to improving the human condition every day," Benlolo said, noting that more than 13,000 students have already visited the Tour for Humanity bus - and hopefully, will challenge themselves to be better persons.

"We as human beings are hateful, I'm sorry to say. Something in us is like that... How can we rise? We are trying to inspire people to change."