

Putting a face ON SUFFERING

Remembering the Shoah

BY WENDY KAHN



EARLIER THIS YEAR, I WAS PRIVILEGED TO SPEND Human Rights Day in Sharpeville. On the square where the horrific massacre took place 56 years ago, I stood next to a woman by the name of Maria Morake, who was a witness to the atrocity. Maria recounted to me her personal story of what happened on that day, 21 March 1960. She described what the square looked like, and the loud bangs that she heard. Since she was only a child, she did not immediately recognise the sounds as gunfire. She recalled pills lying around, dropped by patients who were shot leaving the clinic, and blood soaking the ground, mixing with water from a sudden downpour of rain. She remembered the spears that the police used to make sure that people that were shot were really dead.

Nothing makes us understand the horror and the pain of such tragedies like first-hand witness testimony. We can only start to understand the suffering when we can put a face to it and when we can hear a personal account of how it affected people on a human level.

Over the past years, I have engaged with many survivors of the Holocaust, who have shared with me the horror of their experiences at the hands of the Nazis during World War II. One of these is

Mascha Schainberg whose daughter, Doris Krinsky, shared her story at Yom Hashoah last year. She was twelve years old when she and her family were confronted at their home by soldiers thrusting rifles in their faces and herded into a cramped boxcar train with hundreds of other fellow Jews. After two days without food or water, they arrived at what she described as ‘the living hell’ of Auschwitz, the largest and most infamous of the Nazi death camps. They were immediately put into lines for selection. Mascha and her sisters were sent to the right, their mother to the left. And in that moment, Mascha’s mother knew what lay ahead, and she clung desperately to her four girls before an SS guard hit her over the head with his rifle. Mascha’s last memory of her mother was seeing her being carried away bleeding into the back of a cattle truck. Later that day, she and her sisters saw a large black cloud of smoke coming out of two chimneys. There was an awful stench of burning human flesh in the air. Without understanding why, they knew that their mother was up those chimneys – gassed and cremated together with all the other prisoners designated for immediate death. With no time to comprehend or even mourn

their loss, the girls were stripped and shaven to the skin. They were tattooed with a number on their left arm. Mascha’s number is 34746. Through a series of small miracles, she managed to survive four horrendous years of captivity.

And that is why I was so encouraged by the over 1000 learners from our Gauteng Jewish and non-Jewish schools who attended the Yom HaShoah ceremony this year, equipped with learner guides that we had prepared for them. Nothing can replace our school learners personally witnessing the first-hand account of Veronica Phillips, who shared her memories of life in the concentration camps and on the death marches. Learners from The German School, Assumption Convent, Pholosho School, Pretoria Boys High, and several others for the first time understood the Holocaust from the lips of Veronica Phillips.

Doris Krinsky ended off her Yom Hashoah address saying, “Remembering them is the key to preventing the same atrocities from occurring again. And so we must always remember the very real people, the families and the lives that were lost. Not just today, but every day we must remember to ensure that it never happens again! Not to our children, not to theirs, not to anyone...ever again.” **IL**

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