‘never again’

Holocaust survivor to speak as part of JSU Remembrance Day

Above, the spotlight in the main tower over the entrance to the uploading ramp at Birkenau, the sister camp to Auschwitz. Prisoners' wooden clogs, tight, are now part of the Auschwitz Museum archives in Poland.

BY BRETT BUCKNER
Star Staff Writer

or all scars are visible to the naked eye. Some remain hidden, consumed by the darkness of memory, where the delicate suffering of hope serves only as a constant reminder of a pain once endured but never forgotten. These are the scars that never completely heal.

Max Steinmetz has many scars.

As a Holocaust survivor, Steinmetz has witnessed evil and dropped his eyes from his hateful state. His body has withstood the depths of human cruelty that destroyed his will to live. And his mind has spent the past 50 years struggling to find reason amid the insanity of the Nazi’s “Final Solution” that included the torture and mass murder of 6 million Jews — two-thirds of the European Jewish population — his entire family among them, during World War II.

Steinmetz, 79, who now lives in Birmingham where he is retired from the retail business, knows the only way to forefront the atrocities of the Holocaust never happen again is to reveal his scars and the scars of all the survivors to the world. So he’ll be sharing his story as part of Jacksonville State University’s annual Commemoration of the Holocaust of World War II on Thursday. The event takes place at 7:30 p.m. in the Stone Center Theater.

Simply because he is willing to do so doesn’t mean that speaking about his survival in two of the most infamous extermination camps — Auschwitz and Dachau — has gotten any easier. In fact, Steinmetz says that he has only recently begun to talk with his three children about what happened to him.

“I just can’t,” he says in a voice thick with regret, his eyes darting and distant. “It’s very emotional to talk about because talking about it means reliving it. But the reason that I finally did start to speak to people was because I wanted to...
Steinmetz: 'The Holocaust' was taken from the Greek word meaning 'sacrifice by fire'

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make sure they knew that everybody lived so that nothing like that is ever to happen again.

We have to make sure that kids learn the truth because they are the future. They are the ones that must stand guard.

Dan Nepola, director of education for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., says many people do not really know what took place between 1933 and 1945.

"Most people are not aware of the facts," he says. "People have a media-saturated perspective and may believe that the Holocaust never took place or was invented. There is a lack of knowledge. There is a need for education and understanding.

The Holocaust, taken from the Greek word meaning 'sacrifice by fire,' was a coordinated, state-sponsored persecution and murder of more than 6 million Jews, as well as millions of others.

In addition to the 6 million Jews, 5 million non-Jewish Poles were murdered, along with millions of others, including the Chinese, Serbs, Greeks, Yugoslavs, Tunisians, Greeks, Serbs, Lithuanians, Yiddish people, socialists, and communists. The genocide especially began in 1933 and ended with the Nazi Party coming to power in Germany in January 1935, according to the Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The Nazis believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, referred to as the "inferior race," were "life unhealthy, of" life, according to the museum's Web site. During the "Final Solution," the Holocaust, which took place between July 31, 1941, and April 28, 1945, millions of Jews were imprisoned in concentration camps where they were subjected to brutal conditions, forced labor, medical experiments, gassing, and torture.

"It changed me in so many ways. I don't have much respect for humanity," Steinmetz says. "It happened once, and it can happen again. That's why we must not forget.

'They're all dead'

In the fall of 1943, Max Steinmetz, along with his entire family, was among the hundreds of Jews rounded up on the wooden ramp of a Polish railway station and sent in line for the gas chamber. It's the background story of a sign that was hanging in the museum that was later adjudicated as a false report.

Prisoners endured hours of grueling labor at Auschwitz.

Arbeit Macht Frei (Work Makes You Free)

Steinmetz says, "They were completely lied to. They were told there was no gas chamber. They had no idea where they were going or what would happen to them. When we got there, we were told it was going to be labor camps as a whole family and we were separated from our families.

Born in what would become Hungary, Steinmetz and his family were rounded up and sent to Auschwitz. Their family was quickly separated into groups. The youngest and the smallest were taken to the gas chambers, and the rest were sent to work in the camps.

By the time the doors opened in Poland, they were already suffering from hunger and fatigue.

As they stood on the railway platform, German doctors inspected the prisoners and found that the elderly and the young were the first to be taken to the gas chambers.

Prisoners were marched to the gas chambers, but some of them knew that the time had come. Steinmetz says:

"One night, right after we were released, a man who knew a great deal about the prison, including the horrible torture and starvation, said to me, 'Steinmetz describes as something like burning man.' I asked him what it was. He said, 'It is Arbeit Macht Frei.'"

"You don't know?" Steinmetz asks.

"No" I said. "What do you mean by it?"

Steinmetz also mentions that his family was separated. He and his brother were taken to the gas chambers. His mother, father, and baby sister were sent to the left. He would never see them again.

Later that night, sick with worry, he grabbed the arm of a passing guard, a man who knew a great deal about the prison, including the horrible torture and starvation, said to him, "I asked him what it was. He said, 'It is Arbeit Macht Frei.'"

"You don't know?" Steinmetz asks.

"No," he said. "What do you mean by it?"

"It means 'Work Makes You Free.'" Steinmetz says.

Then he took off the sign and gave it to Steinmetz. The sign was a lie, Steinmetz says.

"It was our goal and after that didn't even matter anymore. You lose your will to reason. You lose all hope because there is no future. We thought it was all over, we were all going to die.

After only a few weeks at Auschwitz, Steinmetz and his brother again were packed into freight cars and taken to Dachau, Germany, the oldest concentration camp known as "underground school." It was a terrible place where people went to other camps.

At Dachau, Steinmetz would grow even more afraid of the Deutsche. On Apr. 4, 1945, the day his brother finally left, the camp was filled with Germans.

"He starved to death," he says. "He was literally starved to death. He was so weak that he couldn't walk.

"I told him just before I went out, that he shouldn't be alive when I got back. And he wasn't. I never saw him again after that day.

Liberation

ON MY 18th birthday, Steinmetz was liberated by American troops. At the time, he was a prisoner for less than 30 days even though he's more than 6 feet tall.

Eventually, he was taken to a hospital in Russia. For U.S. citizenship and in 1948, the application was granted.

After being in a short hospital in Colorado, Steinmetz has spent the past 30-40 years in a film factory in the city of his origin, his grandfather's city. And though he has lived in the United States for 30 years, he says he has yet to find something that couldn't come from another land.

Steinmetz now works at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. He has never returned to his home in Hungary.

And almost every day, he misses his travels while on good health.

"I can't answer to why I survived when so many others didn't," he says. "I don't want to forget. I don't want to forget because maybe someone else doesn't know. I just survived. That's all I know and I have to go on.

There's no reason for it to just be.

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