

Holocaust survivor shares experiences



Diana Golden, concentration camp survivor.

By Mike Koller
Of The Print

"Hol-o-caust": a great or complete devastation or destruction, according to the Random House Dictionary.

To most Americans, it's only a vague term referring to some unpleasant incident that happened long ago on another continent. Why think about it now?

The Holocaust ended a mere 35 years ago, and it was indeed a complete "devastation," but not of a city being engulfed by flames or a town swept away by a flash flood. Instead, it was a systematic extermination of a human race, the Jewish people.

When the war in Europe ended in 1945, Adolph Hitler and his fanatic followers had almost succeeded with their deranged plans. About 67 percent of the Jewish population in Europe had either been starved to death, executed without reason, shot callously in cold blood or gassed in the grisly chambers of the concentration camps. An estimated six million fell prey to Hitler's tyrannical ideals before his reign of terror ended.

Diana Golden, now a Vancouver, Wash., 58-year-old, is one of the fortunate individuals who survived the genocidal practices of Hitler and his regime and now takes the time to share her shocking experiences.

Last Wednesday, Golden came to the College to present her tragic, yet fascinating, story to the "Holocaust and the

Problem of Jewish History class taught by Dr. Donald Epstein.

Born and raised on the then-Italian-owned island of Rhodes (located off the southwestern coast of Turkey, over 200 miles from the Italian mainland), Golden's family members were descendants of Spanish Jews who were expelled from Spain by Queen Isabella over 500 years ago. They were given asylum by the Turkish government (who owned Rhodes at the time), and allowed to settle on the 542-square-mile island.

On Rhodes, Jews were free from the persecution that hounded their race throughout most of Europe. Italy eventually gained control of the island and the Italian government treated Jews as equal citizens until 1940, when things began to change.

"Up until 1940, everything was fine in Italy. Benito Mussolini was our leader and our army had conquered Ethiopia which we were all in favor of. Then Mussolini sided with Hitler," Golden said. This collaboration was to have a disastrous effect on the Jewish population of Italy.

Italy eventually entered the war as an ally of Nazi Germany, but by 1943, the Italian Army had been virtually decimated. Germany then invaded its one-time ally and took control of the country. By July, 1944, Rhodes was also at the mercy of Hitler and his cohorts.

"Immediately after the German takeover on our island, Jewish men 14 years old and

up had to present themselves to city hall. These men were forced to work in the fields and then later the Nazis told them the other members of their families were to join them. The Nazis warned us that for every person missing, 10 of us would be killed," she recalled.

Without notice, they were informed that they were going to be "relocated."

"We brought what we could and then we were put on boats that sailed for Greece. This was in the heat of the summer without food, water or toilet facilities," she said.

The journey to Greece took eight days. During the trip, many of the elderly died from the poor conditions and had to be thrown overboard.

consisted of pathetic living conditions and endless hard labor. In the morning the women (now separated from the men and children) had to stand at attention for one hour without moving and in complete silence. Most of the day was spent constantly marching or carrying bricks for two miles without a purpose.

"The shock was too great for many who died very soon after entering the camp," she said. "Many were just melting away, with no will to live. Some committed suicide, but no one in my group."

In mid-October, Golden and a younger sister were transferred to a factory that built machine guns. Conditions improved at this new location as the women were given new clothing and were fed somewhat better.

"The factory was spotless and we were disinfected, then

Golden was fortunate enough to have relatives living in America and in February 1948, she arrived in the U.S. She and her husband eventually started a music instrument shop in Vancouver, Wash.

But despite being an ocean away from where the tragedies had occurred, the psychological effects of being through such an ordeal weighed heavily on her mind.

"I was unable to talk about what happened for 20 years, but time really is the great healer," she emphasized.

The Holocaust is still with us, as witnessed in Uganda with the crazed rule of Idi Amin, in Cambodia with the ruthless Khmer Rouge exterminating the population, and even now in Afghanistan as many believe the Soviet Union is using chemical warfare. Golden believes dictatorships are one

"We must beware of dictatorships. Freedom is the greatest thing a person can have."

"Persecution started on the mainland as SS men hit people without reason," Golden said.

Golden and her people, who had survived so far, eventually arrived at Athens, Greece, where they were shoved and pushed, 75 to 100 at a time, into boxcars for a three-week journey to Auschwitz. Auschwitz: the worst of the concentration camps, the home of the gas chambers where an estimated three million Jews perished in all.

But people had no way of conceiving that such a hell on earth existed. They were just trying to survive the terrifying journey to an unknown destination.

"On the three-week travel, we were only given water that had something like olive oil in it. The taste was rancid. Many of us were developing typhoid fever and nearly everyone had body lice," she said. At age 22, Golden met her first tragedy when her father died on the train to Auschwitz.

When the shocked and fatigued survivors arrived at the concentration camp, they were met with new horrors as many were separated by SS men from their families, for what would turn out to be a lifetime.

Golden and the other Jewish women had all their body hair shaved off and were forced to stand naked in front of the SS officers.

"We were glad to have all our hair shaved off because of the body lice, but we were terribly embarrassed standing naked in front of those men. But at least we were not raped. We were beaten and starved, but never raped. What man in his right mind would have wanted to, we looked so awful," she said.

Concentration camp life

given a very sandy soap to keep ourselves clean. Now, we at least each had a bed," she said.

By mid-April 1945, the Russian Red Army was closing in fast. Golden and some others were transferred again to a camp in Czechoslovakia, designed purposely as a facade camp by the Nazis to show the Allied forces that no atrocities were occurring with the prisoners. They were soon liberated by the Russians, but now new problems occurred.

"We were very scared. The Russians didn't like us because we were Italians. We weren't sure where we would be sent. Eventually, we ended up in Vienna, Austria, where in September, Italy sent a train to pick up us survivors," she said.

Back in Italy, Golden faced the devastation left by the war. Out of the 2,500 people who left Rhodes along with Golden, only 100 women and 30 men had survived the horrors of the Holocaust.

of the greatest causes of the world's problems.

"We had a blind belief in a dictator (Mussolini), and Germany did the same with Hitler. The results were disastrous. We must beware of dictatorships. Freedom is the greatest thing a person can have," she stressed.

Despite what Golden went through at the hand of the SS, she holds no resentment against the German people.

"The SS was responsible for what happened. They knew what was going on, but the German people cannot be blamed," she said.

Golden's experiences have made her appreciate freedom as the greatest gift a person can have. Because of this love, she has the courage to make others stop and realize just how important are the freedoms that we Americans take for granted so often.

Diana Golden says she was very lucky to survive and find freedom. Six million others never had the chance.

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