

# SENIOR LIFESTYLES

## Immigrant shares tales of life under Nazi rule

By Mark Pattison  
Catholic News Service

SILVER SPRING, Md. — Nesse Godin just turned 73 years old, and she's still too busy to hate.

A Holocaust survivor from Lithuania, Godin is always careful to draw the distinction between "Nazis" and "Germans." The former she has no use for; the latter, she says, are "beautiful."

She survived the Holocaust with the loss of only her father within her immediate family.

"I was blessed," Godin said. "Maybe this is why I felt more obligated to tell my story — because I had my mom and my two brothers."

And tell it she does. Her appointment calendar has dates filled with speaking engagements before school groups, clubs and organizations.

"My message: While I share memories, my message is not how people kill people, it's what happens when people don't care," Godin said. "If we don't teach love," she added, her voice trailing off.

"That's why I get invited to so many places. Because I talk about love."

Godin was born March 28, 1928, in the city of Siauliai, not far from the Latvian border. Her parents ran a dairy store in town.

Godin spoke Yiddish and Lithuanian in the home, Hebrew in the synagogue, and a little bit of English at school.

Then the Soviets came to annex Lithuania in 1940. Godin, out of necessity, learned to speak Russian. A year later, the Nazis occupied Siauliai and began wreaking havoc on the Jewish community there. And, to save her life, Godin, who was barely a teenager, learned German.

In 1944, as the Soviets were on the advance once more, the Nazis sent Godin to a concentration camp in Stutthof, Germany, near the Baltic coast. She was on a death march with other Jewish women when the Russians liberated them in 1945.

She could have died on that march, she told Catholic News Service in an interview at her home in Silver Spring, a Washington suburb.

At one point, when the women were in a farmer's barn for the night, Nazi soldiers started beating the women after the farmer complained that the women were milking his cows and drinking the milk. Godin was struck in her right temple by a rifle butt.

Godin felt she couldn't go on. Other women propped her up to make the walk-

ing easier. "If you live, don't let us be forgotten," she said they told her. It was not the first time while under Nazi captivity that Godin heard such sentiments from her fellow captives.

And so she speaks to virtually any group that asks. Grade school is too young an audience, she says, but middle school-age students can begin to absorb and reflect on the Holocaust's meaning.

She'll be busy throughout the spring. On April 19, which is designated Holocaust Memorial Day, she'll be speaking to a group in the evening. She won't be able to watch the PBS broadcast of Steven Spielberg's Oscar-winning film about the Holocaust, "Schindler's List." "I'll just have to tape it," she said.

Godin met Schindler in a displaced persons camp after the war. "He was a bum, a drunk, a womanizer," but "a wonderful man" because he risked so much to save Jews during World War II.

Godin met and married her husband, Jack, in a displaced persons camp in Lodz, Poland. In 1950, with the help of one of Godin's aunts, they came to Washington.

The aunt had been living in Washington well before World War II. Nesse's parents always sent pictures of the family and of relatives to the aunt in air-mail letters to the United States.

This has helped Godin retain fond memories of the past as well as the ugly ones. The family pictures are framed and crowded together on seemingly every available space on cabinets, end tables and desks in the family home. The walls are similarly adorned with framed certificates, newspaper clippings and other memorabilia.

Godin works regularly with the U.S. National Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. She is also co-president of the Jewish Holocaust Survivors and Friends of Greater Washington. There are about 90 people in the organization. The Holocaust museum counts about 60 area survivors of the Holocaust.

But that figure, according to Godin, includes anyone who lived under Nazi rule. Of those who were dispatched to concentration and work camps and survived, she says, there are only about a dozen.

During the interview she pointed to another end table with still more portrait photos of young adults and children.

"This," Godin says, "is my victory over Hitler. My grandchildren."



Nesse Godin holds a photo of her family taken before it was disrupted by the Nazis.



Martin Lueders/CNS

Nesse Godin, 73, a Holocaust survivor from Lithuania, speaks to schools, clubs, churches and other organizations about her experiences.

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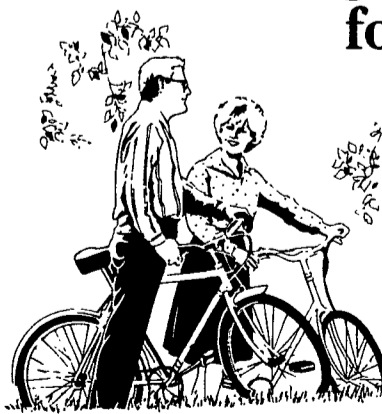
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