

Holocaust horrors strike teen deeply

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Faith & Family

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Kearney student lost members of her family during World War II

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

IRONDEQUOIT — "All the time" is how often Michele Czaphnik said she thinks about the Holocaust.

Borderline obsession? Not when your own relatives were among the estimated 6 million people exterminated during World War II.

Michele's grandparents survived concentration camps, yet many of her other Jewish ancestors in Poland were killed by the Nazis.

"I was thinking about it today at the bus stop," Michele, 16, said recently. "It was freezing out, and I've seen pictures of (Holocaust) survivors where they were standing in the same temperature with hardly any clothes on.

"I wouldn't have lasted a half-hour. I could never be as strong as any of them. It boggles my mind how people survived this, watching their family get killed in front of their eyes."

Michele wishes her peers would also take an active interest in the Holocaust; however, she voiced frustration because that doesn't always happen. Describing a class she took on Holocaust awareness earlier this school year, she recalled, "I would lie awake at night after the class, but there were people falling asleep in class."

Yet Michele also said she's pleased with growing efforts to publicize the Holocaust at Bishop Kearney High School, where she is in her junior year. The chief example is a library — The Rose and Joseph Denaro Interfaith Center for the Study of Genocide and Violence Prevention — that opened at the school in September 2002.

"I think it's a good idea because kids really need to be aware," Michele said.

The impressive library, housed in a former third-floor storage room, contains Holocaust-related books and photographs as well as videos and DVDs. It serves as a resource center for students and also hosts guest lecturers, including Holocaust survivors.

Dr. Allan Cuseo, the school librarian, co-founded the center along with Dr. Esther Denaro Maltese, a professor at St. John Fisher College. Cuseo said he was motivated by "trying to figure out what is evil, why there is evil in the world and why do people do these



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Bishop Kearney junior Michele Czaphnik holds a photo of her grandfather standing outside the Nazi concentration camp Bergen-Belsen after it was liberated on April 15, 1945. Michele's paternal grandparents survived concentration camps, but several of her Jewish ancestors in Poland were killed by the Nazis during World War II.

things to other people." The library's mission statement also emphasizes the study of violence prevention "through the lens of culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, disability, age, race and ethnicity."

The center sponsored an assembly at Kearney in April 2003 to observe Holocaust Remembrance Day. Cuseo said a similar event will likely be held this spring, centering around a Holocaust remembrance garden that was planted outside the school last year.

Michele said these efforts help punch home how deeply tragic the Holocaust was. She recalled that when a Holocaust survivor described her experiences during last year's April assembly, "People were crying. I think that's good."

She said these reminders will help educate future generations about the Holocaust — an important issue because several anti-Semitic factions in the world claim the Holocaust never occurred. On this point, Michele grew visibly agitated and gestured at the many Holocaust photographs displayed in the library. "I'd like for them to

sit right across from me, and try to tell me how that didn't happen," she said, vehemently smacking a fist into her other hand.

Michele, who was raised Jewish, has Jewish ancestry on her father Gene's side and Italian ancestry on her mother Roxanne's side. Beginning a few years ago, she has intensely studied the Holocaust to learn more about the environment surrounding people such as her grandfather, Mike Czaphnik, a prisoner at the Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps.

At Bergen-Belsen, Michele's grandfather was responsible for digging mass graves and placing bodies in them. This ghastly duty allowed him to be spared; however, many of his brothers and sisters were killed. "I have no family at all on my father's side," Michele said. She noted that her grandfather actually continued living in Bergen-Belsen after it was liberated, because he had nowhere else to go.

Michele's grandmother, Helen, spent time in labor camps as well. She and Michele's grandfather met and married after the war. Both of

Michele's grandparents died before she was born.

"If they were alive today I would want to ask them so many questions," Michele said, noting that she has a photo of her grandfather upon his release. "He was so skinny," she remarked. "How did it feel to watch people get killed, to be beaten and starved? How did he do it? How did he survive it?"

She continues to stand in awe of the horrors that her grandparents and other Holocaust victims attempted to overcome. "I can't even begin to understand ... I could never have done what Anne-Frank and all the other teenagers did," she said.

What lessons can Michele take from the Holocaust and apply to her own life? For one, she said she's been ridiculed about her Jewish heritage but prefers to put those tensions behind her, saying her ancestors wouldn't have wanted that. "I try not hate people in my past, certain groups of people," she said.

She has also learned about the human spirit from the example of Holocaust prisoners: "Just to never give up, like they never gave up."