



**SYMBOL OF SORROW:** Sima Budman, leader of the Holocaust Survivors Club, right, holds up 85-year-old Yolana Lieberman's arm to show students at St. Athanasius school the permanent mark "A-8068" branded there during the Holocaust.

## Holocaust Survivors Bring History to Bensonhurst

BY MARIE ELENA GIOSSI

Sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders at St. Athanasius school, Bensonhurst, came face-to-face with history last Friday morning when five Holocaust survivors visited the school to talk about the atrocities they lived through during World War II.

Members of the Holocaust Survivors Club, Lyuba Abramovich, Boris Gelfand, Faina Ryzhikova, Sima Budman and Yolana Lieberman, were invited to speak to about 80 students about their personal experiences during the Holocaust, which the students are studying in their history classes.

Budman, leader of the Holocaust Survivors Club, which is affiliated with the Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst, introduced the four women and one man.

Gelfand told how he watched the Nazis kill his two brothers, his parents, and grandparents. He then joined the Russian army to fight Hitler. As he spoke, everyone's eyes were mesmerized by the front of his suit, where he wore dozens of gold medals earned while defending his homeland. Ryzhikova spoke of her teenage years which were spent working seven days a week and living in a house with six other Jewish families. Although she escaped death, the experience has been seared in her memory much like the number 1080 was branded on her left arm.

Unlike the others, Lyuba Abramovich is fluent in English and recounted her experience in her own words. She described herself as a happy young wife and mother living in the small town of Slonim in Belorussia, now Belarus, in the early '40s. But her happiness was abruptly extinguished on June 22, 1941, when Hitler invaded Russia.

"Almost all the houses were wooden and they burned as matches," she said with a heavy accent. "This day we lost everything in five minutes. Everything that had been acquired from generation to generation. I grabbed my child and ran away in the burning streets. I was looking for a place to live, to raise my child. I found only a room in the evening. We had no money, nowhere to change and no food. But the coming days were worse than this."

Germans occupied her town and forced everyone to wear stars of David. In five short months and two attacks, the Germans carted both her husband and her 13-month-old son away never to be seen again.

"My husband was killed in the first action. In the second action I lost," she paused to wipe away her tears, "my child

and my friends. After that I only wanted to be killed."

Instead, she joined an underground movement, smuggling weapons to partisan soldiers whom she later joined in fighting the Germans. Years later, she was called to be a witness against the mayor of Slonim who was a general in the Schutzstaffel (SS). He sent 45 Jews from her small town to their deaths. Her testimony sent him to jail for life.

She remarried, but never had any more children, and worked in Belarus for many years. Now she resides in Bensonhurst and is happy to live in a free country.

Time ran out before 85-year-old Yolana Lieberman, known in the Nazi death camps as A-8068, had the opportunity to talk but she did pull up her sleeve to show the permanent, albeit faded reminder of the atrocities she survived in Auschwitz, where her family and friends died in a crematorium. She has lived in Bensonhurst for 28 years and takes comfort in knowing that unlike her parents, siblings and millions of others who died in the Holocaust, her final resting place will be in a Long Island cemetery next to her husband Solomon.

"There are some people here today who suffered at the hands of bullies you couldn't even imagine in your wildest dreams and worst nightmares," St. Athanasius' Principal Lorraine Garone-Tesoro told the students. "They're here to let you know about what they suffered, how they survived and how they lived through their experiences."

"This is an opportunity that you may never have again in your whole entire lifetime, and it's very important that you listen with open ears and an open mind."

Incidences of swastikas being graffitied in neighboring communities and tire slashings in Jewish areas prompted State Assemblyman William Colton, a St. Athanasius graduate; Msgr. David Cassato, pastor; and other community leaders to address acts of intolerance and prevent more from occurring.

Msgr. Cassato suggested bringing Holocaust survivors who live in the community to area schools.

Like many of her schoolmates, sixth grader Corrada Spatola was shocked and saddened by the terrible portraits the survivors painted with their words.

"The assembly was very emotional but it made me understand more about what people went through in a very painful and hard time."

"Just because you are of a different race or have different beliefs does not mean you should be put through so much agony and hatred. We are all God's people, therefore we should all be treated equally," she said.

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