

Is “Never Again” Happening Again?

by Dr. Lori Ripps and Molly Gross (May 2016)

Introduction by Jerry Gordon



From Right to Left: Dr. Lori Ripps, survivor mother Molly and granddaughter Sarah Ripps

The student body of the US Naval Air Technical Training Center, Pensacola, Florida Naval Air Station assembled at the Charles E. Taylor Hanger on May 5, 2016 to attend a Yom Ha Shoah Holocaust Remembrance Day Commemoration sponsored by the Command Diversity Council. The event included remarks by Capt. Hugh Rankin, presentations by three Navy enlisted personnel on the Kindertransports rescue of German and Czech Jewish children (PR1 Jaime Johnson), the life of Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal (AD1 Eric Bobadilla), and the life of the late US California Rep. Tom Lantos, Hungarian Jewish survivor and founder of the Human Rights Caucus (AS1 Brian Schramm). The Invocation and Benediction were given by Chaplain Victor McInnis, LCDR. Concluding Remarks were presented by ATC Cedric Marrioneaux, USN.

The guest speaker was Ahavas Chesed Synagogue, Mobile, Alabama and Pensacola Jewish Federation board member, Dr. Lori Ripps. She and her husband, Dr. Barry Ripps are active in local Jewish and general community affairs. Lori is the daughter of Polish Jewish survivors. Her survivor mother Molly and one of her three daughters were honored guests at this special Yom Ha Shoah commemoration. What follows is Dr. Ripps' and her mother Molly Gross' powerful and emotional speech about her parents' experience during the Shoah, their extensive loss of family members and their liberation.



**Sailors of the US Navy Aviation Technical Training Center,
Pensacola Naval Air Station
Holocaust Memorial Commemoration
May 5, 2016**

I imagine for a moment that it is 1942 and you are just 14 years old. You are confused, but mostly terrified, and yet somehow you sense that you are better off on the truck than not. Shots ring out, and one by one they topple, religious men, lined up and kneeling to receive their punishment. Their only crime is that they are Jews. You cry out, but are quickly warned by others on the truck that you, too, might be shot for such an outburst. More shots and you can hardly contain yourself as you spot the shoes! Your shoes! You gave them to your mother just minutes earlier to slip onto her feet as the Nazis forced their way into the ghetto and rounded up everyone for the selection. It is the last memory that you have of her, your dear mother, lying there amongst the dead and wounded wearing your shoes. You don't know if she is dead or alive as the truck pulls away bound for who knows where and who knows what. You cling to your sister as you begin a journey through hell and back.

Imagine if you can. Countless times I have imagined myself in those shoes, yet I still have trouble wrapping my head around it. I have tried to put myself in those shoes. My mother's shoes. On my grandmother's feet. My grandmother, who I would never know, who did survive that selection as she lay on the ground pretending to be dead, only to be murdered weeks later in the gas chambers at Auschwitz. My mother, who was taken to a forced labor camp in Germany where, after two and a half years of slavery, starvation, illness, would somehow survive and live to bear witness. Witness to countless Nazi atrocities. My mother and her sister were liberated by Russian troops on May 8, 1945 at 4:15 pm. She was 17 years old.

Sixty-one years after that selection, in 2009, we stood in Auschwitz. My mother, my husband, and my three daughters. It was surreal, to say the least, walking freely, holding my mother's hand, through the infamous gates proclaiming "arbeit macht frei"-work will make you free. But my grandparents and dozens of relatives did not walk through those gates freely. They arrived by train, humanity packed and transported like cattle. We stood by those tracks where the selections were performed...who would live and who would die. My mind raced with thoughts of grandparents, my aunts and uncles I had never known. Would they have even survived the trip to Auschwitz? Many did not. Were they led immediately to the gas chambers? Or did they survive for some time as slave laborers before being murdered? I was not sure which fate was worse.

Our daughters placed stones, brought from home, at the site of one of the crematoria and among the train tracks. Placing small stones at the gravesites of the dead is a Jewish tradition as a way of acknowledging one has visited and that the dead are not forgotten. Our girls held on to their grandmother for emotional support.

We walked through the museum exhibits. Countless items collected by the Nazis from their prisoners were displayed in heaps, behind glass windows, out of reach except to the mind's eye. Eyeglasses, luggage, artificial limbs, religious articles, pots and pans, items which the Jews brought with them, believing that they were being transported to a new home, rather than an extermination camp. And then there they were! The shoes! Piled high to the ceiling behind the glass. So many shoes. Belonging to so many feet. So many soles! They were too numerous to count. Yet, my eyes searched for the ones that my grandmother might have been wearing when she arrived here. It was overwhelming, the number of innocent souls, who left their last earthly possessions behind in this murderous place.

My father was not able to join us on that trip back to Poland, as he suffered for many years from dementia at the end of his life. He, too, was a survivor of the Nazi atrocities. At age 17, he and a group of partisans fled into the woods to escape the Nazis. Ultimately, my father was taken to Buchenwald concentration camp, where he became prisoner number 116177. On April 11, 1945, the soldiers of the Sixth Armored Division of the US Third Army liberated him and 21,000 emaciated prisoners at 3:15 pm. He was 20 years old and weighed only 86 pounds. He was the one and only survivor of his family. His five younger siblings, his parents (my grandparents) and dozens of relatives were also senselessly murdered at Auschwitz.

Although talk of the concentration camps, the grandparents and family members that my brother and I never knew, and the struggle to put their lives back together came readily at home, my parents did not always speak publicly about their ordeals. It was not until later in life that my father began to break his public silence. He was once quoted, explaining "Basically, it was a catastrophe that the world knew very well what was transpiring, and nobody in the outside world cared. I don't want to die and have to face my ancestors when they ask 'What did you do to prevent this from happening again?' I would not want to tell them that I did not tell their story." And so he broke his silence by speaking

wherever he was invited, including churches, local public schools, and at colleges and universities. My parents were interviewed year after year for local newspaper articles. I often joined my father when he spoke, and each time I would learn another fact or hear a new story that I had not known before. It occurred to me that there was more to their stories than he or my mother would ever be able to put into words, and much that I, and the rest of the world, would never be able to comprehend. In one such interview he asked of himself, "Why was my whole family, my whole village killed and I was spared? Why did so many people die and time after time I escaped?" His answer was simply "I don't know." But unlike my mother, who believed that she was spared from death in a gas chamber because "God was there and watching," my father was no longer able to believe that God existed. I could not blame him.

I am incredibly fortunate to have had survivor parents who were able to share their stories with me. Many survivors found it simply too painful to speak of their experiences, and their stories were never shared. But many survivors are no longer with us, like my father, and before long we will have no first hand witnesses to these atrocities. As the years pass, the memories of those who fell victim to these ultimate hate crimes must not diminish. Their memories are important because the number of Holocaust survivors is diminishing with each passing day. I am so grateful that my parents have passed along to me the desire to tell the world that we must never forget what transpired. By telling and teaching, we help assure that this will never happen again. It has been one of my greatest blessings to know that my three daughters share this desire, because it is the future generations that must continue to tell their stories.

I feel honored and blessed to have my mother, Molly, here by my side on this day of Holocaust Remembrance. She is still going strong at 88 years old. (Mom joined me on stage). Every day I learn from her what it truly means to be a survivor, to have lived through horrors we, even as we try, cannot imagine; to still have hope in humanity and to be able to love unselfishly. Mom, you are my hero. I know that my father, who passed away two years ago, is here with us in spirit. He, may his memory be for a blessing, was an incredibly strong person. He was always the wind beneath my wings. He and my mother would have celebrated 65 years of marriage – today!

And although today marks the time to remember the Holocaust and its victims and our commitment to "Never Again," perhaps we should continue to ask "How did it

happen?" How did Hitler and Hitler's Germany accomplish state-sponsored and complicit mass murder? Simon Wiesenthal, survivor, Nazi hunter, and writer once said, "For evil to flourish, it only requires good men to do nothing." The National Socialist Party of Germany, the Nazis, systematically removed the sources of resistance through the arrest and murder of opposition leaders, through widespread hate propaganda which influenced the public mindset, by disarming the population and confiscating guns and making ownership illegal, by removing any freedom of speech. The Nazis established a youth education program, The Hitler Youth; to indoctrinate and prepare the youngest for a Nazi designed future. Adolf Hitler said "He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future."

We say "Never Again," but could it happen again, today? Two and a half million European Jews and 40% of Jewish leaders there see no future because of rising anti-Semitism in Europe. Is "Never Again"...happening again? On this Yom Ha Shoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, I am grateful that you have given me the opportunity to speak with you. I thank you on behalf of my survivor parents, my grandparents and relatives who did not survive, the millions of others who perished at the hands of the Nazis, and for all those around the world who suffered and still suffer man's inhumanity against man. I beg of you to commit to "Never Again" so that we never have to imagine again, the unimaginable.

To all of you here who so nobly serve our country, we thank you from the depths of our hearts. It is you who are giving of yourselves to ensure the ideals and freedoms that are the pride and glory of our country, and I am very grateful to you. As my father often said in his deep Polish accent, "God Bless America!"

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