

Voices from the Holocaust

The Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at California State University Channel Islands (CI) presented an unforgettable symposium of personal stories from the Holocaust on June 6, 2019. "Voices of the Holocaust" presented three survivors of the Nazi brutality, two of whom are CI OLLI members. They shared vivid details of their imprisonment and efforts to survive. Over 140 OLLI members and friends listened in awe during the presentations, many visibly moved.

At 96 years young, Lee Edwards described her life in Germany before WWII. As a child, she and her family found themselves in the terrifying grip of the Nazis. She said the pressure on Jews in Germany started slowly, but quickly picked up steam as the Nazis took power, and made anti-Semitism not only acceptable, but public policy.

Her brother was a 20 year old college student who was arrested for his anti-Nazi work, but survived eight years in the Buchenwald concentration camp. He wanted the family to flee Germany, but Lee's parents wanted to wait until her brother was released.

In November 1938, Kristallnacht occurred with a violent riot aimed at the Jews, when mobs burned Jewish stores, buildings and synagogues and beat Jews as authorities turned their heads, or even sanctioned attacks. Lee's father was arrested and sent to the same concentration camp as her brother. Lee's brother told her father to send the teenage girl out of the country for her safety.

In 1939, Lee Edwards was just 15 when her mother sent her to Great Britain, among 10,000 mostly Jewish children living in Germany, in the Kindertransport to escape the horrors of the Nazi occupation. She made the voyage to an unknown place, not knowing a soul. Her father, who had been tortured in captivity, died shortly after she left Germany. Her mother died in one of the Nazi death camps. Lee didn't know her parents were dead until she returned to Germany after the war to try to find them.

In spite of her terrifying past, Lee showed her positive attitude and great sense of humor, attributes that have helped her survive for 96 years.

Fran Elson's story begins when the Nazis threatened Poland, and her father, along with 450,000 Jews, was sent to the Warsaw ghetto. In 1941, he escaped and headed north to Russia. He was the consummate salesman who rode the trains, bribed officials and sold anything to anyone – without a permit. Eventually the police arrested him and sent him to a prison camp in frigid Siberia. When the Russians evacuated the prison camp in 1943, he ended up in a Displaced Persons Camp in Kazakhstan.



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Fran's mother's family was forced to leave her city in Poland and spent time in a Soviet "relocation camp" before being evacuated to the same Displaced Persons Camp in Kazakhstan, where she met Fran's father. They were married and Fran was born in the camp.

When the war ended, the Red Cross helped refugees find relatives abroad. Fran's father had an uncle in Detroit who tried to get them to the US, but the US government denied them visas. The uncle met a friend in London, Ontario, where the Jewish community was building a new temple and needed a cantor. Fran's father was trained in Warsaw by a famous cantor so in 1948 the London, Ontario, community invited his family to immigrate to Canada.

As an artist, Fran shares the legacy of her family's plight and expresses the fragility of their freedoms through the fragility and strength of fused glass. Her work is displayed at <http://fuzionbyfrances.com/>

Celina Biniak never talked about her years in Auschwitz until her family was grown. Not even her husband knew of her history until 1982 when she read in the New York Times book review about a new book by Australian novelist Thomas Keneally called *Schindler's List*. She never wanted her family to know the horrors of war she faced.



As the youngest girl on Schindler's list, Celina's story began in Krakow, Poland. Celina was eager to enter third grade, but Jews couldn't attend school. By the Fall 1940, the Krakow's Jews had been relocated to a labor camp in Podgorze, the ghetto section of Krakow. Celina joined her parents at a factory sewing uniforms; the factory was owned by Julius Madritsch, an anti-Nazi businessman from Vienna -- and savior like Schindler.

In 1944, as the Russians approached, the Germans ordered all factories in the Krakow area closed. Madritsch sent many of his workers, including Celina and her parents, to join Oskar Schindler, who was relocating his arms factory to Czechoslovakia. First 800 men and 2-weeks later 300 women were herded into boxcars, but their journey did not end in Czechoslovakia – but in Auschwitz.

Celina and the other women were stripped naked and marched in front of Dr. Josef Mengele, who, with the flick of his yellow pencil, determined life or death. 13-year-old Celina was directed to his right, frightened to find herself on the wrong side. Then unexpectedly, Mengele ordered Celina's group to repeat the inspection. This time, as Celina approached Mengele, she looked up at him and said, "Lassen sie mich." ("Let me go.") Weeks later, Celina and her mother were again herded in boxcars and this time arrived at Schindler's factory in Czechoslovakia.

A video of Celina's presentation from Voices of the Holocaust is available on <https://youtu.be/fc7861jktW8>. Our hope is that the personal stories of Lee, Fran, and Celina are shared with younger people everywhere so they learn from people who lived the horrors of prejudice.

For more information about incredible events like this one, please check out the CSUCI OLLI website <https://ext.csuci.edu/programs/osher-lifelong-learning-institute/index.htm>.