

April 10, 2013

Pan Pacific Park draws generations for Yom HaShoah

BY RYAN TOROK

http://www.jewishjournal.com/los_angeles/article/pan_pacific_park_draws_generations_for_yom_hashoah

As Holocaust survivor Robert Geminder led a walking tour in Pan Pacific Park on April 7, pre-arranged memory markers — labeled “ghettos,” “camps,” “resistance” and “rescue” — transformed an outdoor path into a historical timeline.

“The No. 1 reason I’m talking to you here is my luck,” he said.

Stopping at “camps,” Geminder, who was born in Poland, discussed how he and his family escaped from a train bound for Auschwitz, where death would have been all but a certainty.

“We knew what was behind those Auschwitz gates,” the 78-year-old said.

Organized by the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust (LAMOTH), the walking tour was part of a day of activities that commemorated Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day), which officially began on the night of April 7.

In addition to the walking tour, there were poetry readings and performances by dance company BodyTraffic and Cantor EstherLeon Schwartz that drew attendees to an amphitheater at Pan Pacific, a public park adjacent to the museum. Afterward, a ceremony of commemoration featured a musical presentation by actor Theodore Bikel and a keynote lecture by University of California, Irvine, professor emerita Ruth Kluger, a Holocaust survivor. L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa also made an appearance.

Geminder spoke of the relative good fortune he’d had during the Holocaust. When he was just a boy, he and his family were packed with other Jews into a graveyard in the Stanislawow Ghetto in Poland. He watched as Nazis gunned down thousands of Jews — but those remaining, including Geminder and his mother, grandmother and older brother, were told to go home as it had become dark and begun to snow.

Among those participating in the walking tour was the Taurus Squadron Cricket Club, a British military unit made up of soldiers ages 19-21. They were on a cultural visit in Los Angeles.

“I thought this would be an ideal opportunity where these guys could learn something that affected everyone...[and] learn about the good work [the British military] did with the U.S. in the 1940s,” said Sgt. Rohit Mohan, the group leader.

This year marked Yom HaShoah’s 60th anniversary. Since its 1953 inauguration by the Israeli government, Yom HaShoah has provided an opportunity for survivors like Geminder — a congregant of Ner Tamid in Palos Verdes who regularly speaks at LAMOTH and at schools, synagogues and churches — to give firsthand accounts of what happened during the Holocaust.

As survivors age and pass on, those telling the stories on this national memorial day will change.

“I worry about the responsibility of being a survivor’s child and how I will pass this on,” said Geminder’s daughter, Mindy, who joined her father’s walking group.

Beth Chayim Chadashim’s Rabbi Lisa Edwards, joined by other members of the synagogue, prepared a note to add to one of the walls of the Goldrich Family Foundation Children’s Memorial, which featured 1.2 million holes signifying each child who died during the Shoah.

Survivor Max Stodel, who attends Temple Akiba in Culver City and turns 90 on April 12, appeared to enjoy the physical activity and conversations that came with Yom HaShoah as he joked with the museum staff and security. Yet his upbeat disposition did not mean the pain of all that he had to endure — he was interred in nine camps during the war — isn’t still with him, his daughter, Betty Lazarus, said.

“I said to my father, ‘At least you have a day out today,’” Lazarus said. “And his response is, ‘At what cost?’ ”

© Copyright 2013 Tribe Media Corp.

All rights reserved. JewishJournal.com is hosted by Nexcess.net. Homepage design by Koret Communications. Widgets by Mijits. Site construction by Hop Studios.