

Woodland students get hands-on study of Holocaust
April 30, 2009 Gurnee Review

<http://www.pioneerlocal.com/gurnee/news/1554187,gurnee-holocaust-043009-s1.article>

By KORRINA GROM kgrom@pioneerlocal.com

When Woodland Middle School students streamed into their school library Monday afternoon to learn about the Holocaust, they didn't have to merely view artifacts behind glass.

Instead, students were encouraged to pick up and examine the artifacts, including pages of the Torah that Nazis had used for mailing parcels.

"We want it to be interactive," said Debbi Spungen, who visited the school with her brother, Danny. Representing the Florence and Laurence Spungen Family Foundation, Debbi and Danny brought along 75 Holocaust artifacts for students to study. "It's really awareness. And exposure. I don't know how much exposure some people have."

Monday's presentation included not only the artifacts but also a visit from Dede Harris, wife of Holocaust survivor Samuel Harris. Samuel planned to speak at the event but was unable to attend due to a death in the family.

Danny Spungen, a docent-in-training at the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center, said his involvement in collecting Holocaust items began when he found an envelope made out of a Torah scroll.

"When I saw this, I said, 'I want this collection,'" said Spungen.

He said that while growing up near Skokie, his family never talked about the Holocaust.

"My family had friends with Auschwitz tattoos on them, but we never talked about it," said Spungen. "I am a student just like you. Believe it or not, I've only been studying the Holocaust for one year."

After acquiring that first envelope, Spungen started adding more items to his collection, including books, letters and money. What he considers the top items in his 700-piece collection were displayed for Woodland Middle School students Monday.

"Believe it or not, back in the 1940s, there was no e-mail, there was no text messaging. We wrote letters," said Spungen. One piece of mail students saw Monday was an Easter card that got through to a prisoner in Auschwitz despite the ban on Easter cards at the time.

The money in his collection, Spungen said, is much like that which prisoners in concentration camps used on the black market to purchase food.

The most famous piece in his collection, however, is the envelope made from a Torah scroll, Spungen said. The envelope has Nazi stamps on it.

Debbi Spungen said that envelope is one of just three or four such pieces known to exist.

Before she addressed all of the students gathered in the Woodland Middle School library, Dede Harris explained to one student the importance of the Torah, which is written on special parchment.

"The Nazis took this and they made an envelope out of it," said Harris.

Harris' husband, Samuel, is a Holocaust survivor. The Chicago-area resident recounted his story in the book, "Sammy: Child Survivor of the Holocaust."

"He was actually your age when he came to America and he could only say three words: Yes, no and Coca-Cola," Harris said.

She said Samuel was just four and a half when he was playing in the fields near his Deblin, Poland home and saw German planes flying and fighting overhead.

"And then he saw the planes getting lower, killing people in the fields," said Harris. At the beginning of the war, tanks and trucks rolled into Samuel's town. He saw a soldier hitting an old man and the man's head was bleeding, said Harris.

"Soldiers would walk around and shoot people," said Harris. She explained that Samuel's own father, a very religious man with a long beard, was a target for the Nazis, who beat him and once threw a cup of hot tea on his face.

Samuel's parents and some siblings were transported to a concentration camp, while Samuel and two of his sisters, Sara and Rosa, hid in various locations. They eventually snuck into a labor camp, where Rosa would share her food with Samuel. The food, Harris explained, was often soup made from water and potato peels and bread that consisted primarily of sawdust.

Later, Samuel and his sisters were transported to another concentration camp. That camp was liberated on Jan. 17, 1945, Harris said.

"He left the camp with his sisters. They had no place to go. They didn't have anything," said Harris.

Samuel and Sara were placed in an orphanage and were eventually adopted by families in the Chicago area.

"He shares with you and others because six million Jews and millions of others who were not Jews were slaughtered and can no longer talk," said Harris. "It is our hope that the mistakes of the past will not be repeated."