

Living history, past pain
By Ruth Gesmer Silverman

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— Becky Shiffman, 26

Never again

As Holocaust generation grows older, grandchildren of survivors begin to take up cause

Clogs are “must-have” shoes for women of all ages. Right?

Not necessarily, says Jennifer Seidner. The 28-year-old Buffalo Grove High School graduate says her 85-year-old grandmother, Lonia Mossak, can barely look at them.

For Mossak, Jennifer’s beautiful suede clogs evoke a flood of memories of a bitter-cold march and frost-bitten toes. Mossak was one of 60,000 prisoners the Nazis herded out of Auschwitz in January 1945 just ahead of advancing Soviet troops.

Cheap wooden clogs were standard issue for camp prisoners, inadequate foot covering at the best of times and no use at all on that brutal winter march to another camp 35 miles away. About 15,000 died.

“Snow stuck to the bottom of their feet,” said Seidner, who repeats what her grandmother shared with the Arlington Heights family.

“She told us she ate lots of snow, so she would stay hydrated and look a little healthier; and she shared meager rations with others,” Seidner said. “In spite of her efforts, people still dropped along the way or were shot.”

Seidner is part of a developing wave of third generation Holocaust survivors — grandchildren who now are determined to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive, long after their grandparents are gone.

About 250 people attended a recent fund-raiser held by the Holocaust Remembrance Committee, a young leadership group with the Holocaust Museum and Education Center. The new, \$40æmillion Holocaust Museum under construction in Skokie is expected to open in 2008.

It was the first fundraiser for the museum’s general campaign, and 45 regular members and their friends raised an unexpected \$23,500, more than double their goal.

Becky Shiffman, 26, also a Buffalo Grove High School graduate, is chairman of the HRC.

For many years, her grandmother, Felicia Brenner, now 87, spoke at schools around Illinois. Two years ago, she was named Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley's Speaker of the Year, at the city's annual Holocaust Memorial event.

But when Brenner and her husband, also a survivor, first came to the United States they did their best to fit in. They rarely talked about their experiences, even to their children and grandchildren. Her grandfather died when Becky was 3.

Becky was 11 or 12 when she heard her grandmother speak at Congregation Beth Judea, in Long Grove.

"I remember being very emotional," Becky said. "She was one of seven children, and was in the ghetto at Lodz, in Poland with her mother, her father and her little brother. They were sent to Auschwitz, where she lost track of everyone.

"She was the only one in the family to survive. When she was liberated, she had typhus, malnutrition and had to spend time in U.S. Army hospitals to regain her health."

The young men and women in the HRC held their "Night on the River" event at Fulton's on the River, in Chicago, joined by many of their parents, including Shiffman's mother, Judy.

Some of them are adult children of survivors. Other area supporters include Keith Friedman and Brad Auerbach, both graduates of Stevenson High School.

Seidner, who is supported in her efforts by her husband Matthew, 27 — also a grandchild of survivors; her brother Brad, 24; and her mother Doris Lazarus, said there is concern among the third generation that the memory of the Holocaust will fade once the survivors are gone.

"There is a fear that the world will forget," Seidner said.

"It's our generation's responsibility to keep this alive. My personal connection draws me to do this, but others are getting involved."

Her grandmother, Lonia, was born in Chahanov, a shtetl (Yiddish for a small village) in Poland.

Her brother Brad, a financial adviser, said his "Bubby" has been an inspiration for him.

"When I'm exhausted and worn out, I think of what my Bubby did and I do more," he says. "She's 83 and still working."

Becky has visited Holocaust museums in Israel and several in the U.S. She looks eagerly toward the completion of the new museum in Skokie.

"We look at it as our responsibility to know the history and to help, as well as to get our friends, who might not be related to survivors, involved," she said.

Of her daughters, Judy Shiffman says they are sensitive and protective toward their grandmother.

"At their Bat Mitzvahs, my daughters dedicated a part of what they read to their grandmother's younger brothers, who did not have Bar Mitzvahs."

The Holocaust Remembrance Committee holds educational programs, with speakers like Deborah Lippstadt, a professor of Modern Jewish Studies, at Emory University in Atlanta. Lippstadt is an expert in analyzing political response to the Holocaust and anti-Semitism.

They have also welcomed Jonathan Drimmer, a former administrator for the Justice Department, where he supervised and also prosecuted war crimes cases.

One of the most important missions of the members of the younger group is to partner with survivors, so they can learn their stories and continue to share them.

Becky said she and her sister Jori, 23, will start sharing Felicia Brenner's story with school children when they are comfortable with it and can do so, seamlessly.

"She's a very special person," says her grand-daughter. "Doing this in my free time is a no-brainer."