



'This was a slaughterhouse for human beings'



Holocaust survivor Max Eisen appears before a Niagara College audience on Wednesday in Welland. (Greg Furminger/Welland Tribune/QMI Agency)

By Greg Furminger
Welland Tribune

A-9892. Once tattooed on Max Eisen's arm, he understood he was no longer a human being.

And despite it being 70 years since the liberation of Nazi death camps, Eisen says lessons that should stem from the greatest genocide of all time have not been fully learned.

"If you look too close, you might understand what I'm speaking to," he said to a packed auditorium at Niagara College's Welland campus Wednesday afternoon.

Since then there have been genocides in Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, Cambodia.

And as recently as January, Jews were targeted in a deadly attack in Paris, a city in which Jews are prohibited from wearing skull caps in public. Not unlike in Berlin or Brussels.

"That to me is a big warning sign," Eisen said.

"My biggest disappointment is that after 70 years, this poison has come back.

“I say Israel is the Czechoslovakia of today.”

And that’s where his tortuous tale began.

Growing up in an eastern town of 5,000 people with just two radios, he remembers the time he first heard “this terrible poison” pouring from the lips of Adolph Hitler: Jews are to be eradicated from Europe.

From 1938 on, and fuelled by the Nazi propaganda machine, people were singled out by physical appearance, race, ideology. Jews began to be stripped of their citizenship, told what park benches they could sit on, what time of day they were allowed to shop. All modes of transportation were seized, then eventually art, money and all other possessions. Forced into ghettos, those ghettos “were systematically being liquidated.”

There were 90 Jewish families in his Moldava hometown, about 450 men, women and children.

For 1,900 years Jews had lived there, until Passover in 1944, when Hungarian soldiers kicked in the gates and doors of his large L-shaped home that housed three families, Eisen and his relatives were given five minutes to pack — and to leave all money and jewelry behind because there was no longer a need for it where they were going. Synagogues were desecrated. The Talmud and other religious books were burned.

All the town’s Jews were hauled away to a local school gym. Eisen, who was 14 at the time, wonders often had his mom left his year-old sister with a neighbour if she would be alive today.

From the school, Eisen and the others were dispatched — “an exodus” — to a brickyard in his province’s capital city to join 30,000 other Jews. There was one water source. One communal latrine. And for the last third of the three weeks they were kept there among the red brick dust, they were brainwashed.

“There was a time when all the lies became the truth.”

Believing they were headed to a better place, they crammed 100 at a time into cattle cars with a pail for a toilet and no place to sit or sleep. They stood for three days in darkness as their train made its way to its intended destination. It was a nightmare from which Eisen could not wake.

When the door opened and sunlight burned his eyes, his grandparents, his mom, his two younger brothers and his year-old sister were told to go left.

It was the last he would see of them.

No goodbyes.

This was the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp.

And his mom and siblings were being taken to gas chambers, capable of killing 2,000 people at a time.

“This was a slaughterhouse for human beings.”

It was not the better place his family had longed for. It was a place Eisen had not heard of before then.

“I couldn’t understand how I was standing in a place run by criminals.”

Eisen went right with his father and uncle and other able-bodied men. Those with gold crowns had their teeth ripped out with pliers. They were forced into slave labour, fed a 300-calorie-a-day diet of liquids and a piece of bread. There was no toilet paper, no spoons. A piece of two-by-four with a canvas strap was replacement for worn out shoes. Possessions were limited to one metal dish for food.

“Here people would kill for a crumb of bread,” Eisen said. “People would eat the bark from trees. This is what hunger did.”

Eisen remembered his father asking a member of the SS officer when he would next see his other loved ones.

“Your families have gone to the chimneys,” he was told.

Eisen came to learn soon what that meant. He can still see the “angry red flames” shooting 20, 30 feet into the air. The smell of burned flesh. He would imagine faces of anguish.

Eisen prayed he would be shot with a German Luger than be forced into a fire.

Ashes were sold as fertilizer. Women’s hair was “baled by the tonne.” Protheses and glasses were confiscated.

“One second was like a thousand years.”

His tattoo, his brand if it were, that was assigned to him he is not ashamed of. But back then it symbolized not that he is a survivor as he is today, but something else.

“We were no longer human beings.

“We were a number.”

Eisen had two months with his father after arriving at Auschwitz. His dad and uncle, it was later learned, had become science experiments, injected with various poisons and used for drug testing.

“He told me if I survived, I must tell the rest of the world what happened here.”

And so he has, telling his story across Canada for more than a quarter-century.

His harrowing tale includes spending time in five concentration camps — one of 30,000 the Nazis set up — in the span of a year, a “death march” to Mauthausen, Austria, in freezing cold and snow, and how he believes there “was always someone” who was looking out for him, be it a Polish PoW doctor who performed surgery on him and had him work in a camp hospital, or a gentle blacksmith at a work camp.

His biggest saviour came on May 6, 1945, when an army tank with a white star on it rumbled into the Ebersee concentration camp.

“There was a black soldier sitting on the turret. That was the most amazing sight.”

He later formed a bond with that soldier, Johnny Stevens, of the 761st Black Panther Battalion.

Only Eisen and two cousins made it out of the camps. After living in an orphanage for three years, he came to Canada in October 1949, arriving first in Quebec City aboard the SS Samaria. He eventually made his way to Toronto that year, where he later married, had children and ran a manufacturing business before retiring in 1991 to become a volunteer Holocaust educator.

Eisen was brought to Niagara College by its school of justice studies

“This is a chance of a lifetime. People like Max and our World War II vets aren’t going to be around much longer,” said professor Mark Simchison, who called the opportunity to host and present Eisen “a humanitarian thing to do.”

“College-wide, all our students need to have an appreciation of what happened, and how to prevent it in the future.

Niagara Regional Police Chief Jeff McGuire, who introduced Eisen, has toured the remains of death camps with the Toronto senior.

“When you’re walking around with someone who’s been there, it’s a completely different thing” than reading about it or watching documentaries, he said.

Eisen’s more than two-hour talk left third-year law enforcement student Brock Francis with a lasting impression, something he expects will influence him in his future career.

“It’s good to hear those life lessons,” he said.

Sadly, said Avi Benlolo, president of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies, not everyone has learned.

“To understand the Holocaust, we need to understand anti-Semitism,” he said. “Hatred of the Jewish people — it spans for centuries.”

Long-placed hate can also be attributed to modern-day genocides.

“Our world today, unfortunately, hasn’t learned from the Holocaust and other like events ... and it’s very, very troubling,” Benlolo said.

“One person can make a difference, if they try,” he said, encouraging the audience to engage in dialogue via social media.

“Freedom is not a gift. It’s man-made.”