

## Holocaust Survivor Dr. Eva Olsson Shares Her Story

March 15, 2011

Eva Olsson, a slight, soft-spoken eighty-seven year old, spoke to the students, staff and guests at Hillmond Central School today. She spoke softly and told the audience about her life and about the lessons that she had learned. She spoke for an hour and a half and during that time the people in the packed gymnasium listened in absolute silence.

Eva Olsson was born in 1924 in Szatmar, Hungary. In May of 1944, when she was 19, a man came into the town square and told the residents that they had two hours in which to pack their clothes prior to boarding a train to go to a work camp, a brick factory in Germany. She and her family were marched 7 kilometres and forced onto boxcars. The cars contained 1 pail of drinking water and 1 pail for a toilet, for 110 people, for four days. They were taken to Auschwitz, an extended family of 17 among the 430,000 Hungarian Jews transported to the camp to be killed there during 56 days between May and July.

“I am here to speak for them. They cannot speak for themselves. When I leave your school I hope that I will have touched your heart.”

Disembarking from the train Eva was approached by a prisoner who told her to ‘give the child (she was carrying her niece) to an older woman.’ She gave her niece to her mother, and survived, because women with children were executed immediately.

“We came to the gate where the angel of death was standing, Dr. Josef Mengele. He didn’t speak to us, he just pointed in the direction he wanted us to go, left or right. And that was how he decided who shall live and who shall die. Beside me were my younger sister, aged 17, and other young females. We were ordered to the right, all the others were ordered to the left.”

“By the time I turned my head to the left, I couldn’t see my mom, and the moment I couldn’t see my mom, how I wished I could have put my arms around her and tell her how much I loved her, but it was too late. For me it was too late. I hope in my heart that for you it is not too late. Do it while you can.”

Selected as a worker Eva lived in a barracks, sleeping sitting up in a small cubicle with 8 others, listening at night as black trucks moved around the camp collecting 2000 prisoners per night for the gas chambers. As the days passed she became aware of the routines of death –the gas chambers, the screaming and the silences that came twenty minutes later, and the sickening smell of the black smoke that came from the crematorium smokestacks.

“My father was sent to Buchenwald. He endured 7 months and died of starvation in December of 1944. People die. People die of old age, people die of sicknesses. People die if they have an accident sometimes, and we are given the strength to deal with it. What I have not yet been able to deal with, eleven million people died and the cause of their death was hate.”

“Racism is a learned attitude.”

“In every one of the European countries that the Nazis had occupied there were good people. Many of those good people were also murdered. Catholic priests in Poland were hung for trying to help Jewish people. But something was missing in some of those countries and that was compassion. Had there been compassion in those nations I wouldn’t be standing here. In Bulgaria and in Denmark they wouldn’t allow the trains to leave. They prevented the Jewish people from being transported to the death camps. They protected the Jewish people. And why? They weren’t going to be bystanders. Bystanders are as guilty as the perpetrators.”

Selected a second time along with 2000 other young people Eva and her sister Fradel were taken first to Dusseldorf to unload ships, and later, with 500 others, to Essen to work at the Krupp factory.

“If we had a healthy body we were blessed. We became slave labour.”

After the camp was burned to the ground in an Allied bombing raid the workers were housed in a cellar with a dirt floor for the remainder of the winter. Then, as the Russian forces began to close in they were moved by train in February to Bergen-Belsen.

“Bergen-Belsen, where Anne Frank died. 104,000 died at Bergen-Belsen. There were no bunks, no chairs. All the prisoners had to lie on the floor, a floor that was covered with diarrhea and lice. Dysentery was epidemic. They had no food, no water and they were sick.”

As the allied advance came closer Eva fell ill with typhoid, Six days before the camp was liberated the SS shut off the water completely and took away all the food rations in order to speed up the deaths.

“How did people survive? I can only share with you how I survived. I didn’t want to give up. Never. Never to give up. I kept hope alive, and I was responsible for my sister. She was three years younger, so I couldn’t die. If I were to die then the Nazis would have won.”

On April 15<sup>th</sup> 1945 at 11:00 AM the British and Canadians liberated Bergen-Belsen. They found Eva lying on the floor amongst the dead, and marked her forehead with a red cross She was taken out of the hut and disinfected prior to evacuating her to a hospital. In spite of massive efforts 13,944 inmates died after the camp was liberated.

“It’s not about the challenges we face. It’s about how we deal with them: the choices that we make. Only together as a people can we make a difference, so that this generation will never experience the horrors... never shall a child die by the power of hate. I cannot change the past, nobody can, but the future lies in your hands. You need to ask yourselves what example will you leave behind for the generations that follow you. I cannot make those choices for you. They are yours. I can ask you however to not be a bystander, but to be one of those who make a difference in someone else’s life.”

Eva relocated to Sweden after her recovery. She married Rude Olsson and they immigrated to Canada in 1951, settling first in Montreal and later to Richmond Hill.

“My husband was a Swede and a Christian, he was educated and I was not, but he understood that it’s about being different and accepting being different. My husband had a short journey. He died at 37, the victim of a drunken driver. He showed me unconditional acceptance of another human being. It’s not religion or education or colour or culture that makes us different. What makes us different is our attitude. Unconditional acceptance, and love. Pass this on. It’s the only thing worth having. The things that you can buy depreciate in value very quickly... the way we treat other human beings, with respect and dignity, will never, ever depreciate in value. This is the only thing I have to bring into your school, and the only thing I have to give away. Pass it on.”



Photo by Robyn Hunter