

March of the Living Speech at Kehillat Beth Israel

May 26, 2018 by Shelli Kimmel

Shabbat Shalom

I am the child of a survivor – my mother was a Kindertransport. At the age of 15 she had to leave the safety and security of her home, her family, and travel to a strange land, live with strangers, speak a different language. My grandfather died because as a diabetic he was not allowed his insulin. My Grandmother was murdered in Maly Trostinecs – an extermination camp near Minsk.

While I have been to Austria and visited Mauthausen, I have always felt something was pulling me to go to Poland, I felt it was my duty.

Last fall, the opportunity to chaperone the March of the Living arose. MOL is an annual educational program which brings students from around the world to Poland, where they explore the remnants of the Holocaust. On Yom HaShoah, thousands of participants march silently from Auschwitz to Birkenau, the largest Nazi concentration camp complex built during World War II. There is an adult option but I personally felt that chaperoning was a more meaningful way for me to go, to share my family's story with the teens, to hear the stories of our survivors.

Our group of 22 teens – 19 from Ottawa, 1 from Montreal, 1 from Nova Scotia and 1 from Kingston, was one of the largest we have ever sent.

We had 2 amazing survivors – David Schaffer from Vancouver and Angela (Angi) Orosz from Montreal. Angie was born in Auschwitz. Some of you may have heard her story when she spoke on Yom Hashoah last year. They were both so inspirational and shared their stories so openly.

The other chaperones – Karen Palayew and Michael Kent and I worked hard to prepare the kids as best we could for the trip. But no one can properly be prepared for the horrors that are seen on this trip.

We had an amazing group of teens – sensitive and empathetic. While it was the chaperone's role to be supportive of whichever participant was in need, the teens themselves were so supportive of each other.

While in Poland we toured Warsaw and Krakow, Auschwitz 1 and Birkenau, Majdanek, Treblinka, Tykoshin and the Lupowhowa Forest. Many of us attended shul on Shabbat in Warsaw in the Nozyk Synagogue, the only surviving prewar synagogue in Warsaw.

On Yom Hashoah we joined about 12,000 people from 40 countries for a 3.2 km march from Auschwitz to Birkenau for the 30th March of the Living.

And then it was time to visit Israel. The arrival was a very emotional one, particularly for the many participants who had never been to Israel.

We especially experienced the highs and lows of Israel – observing Yom Hazikaron and then celebrating Yom Ha'atzmaut. We climbed Masada, rafted on the Jordan River, hiked the Banias and prayed at the Kotel.

For me I found it a hopeful experience. I remember many years ago chaperoning an International USY convention in Toronto. The feeling I had when hundreds of teens came streaming into the hall, singing, dancing and waving flags – gave me hope for the Jewish future. I had the same feeling on this trip, not just with our group of 22, but watching the coast to coast group of 68, the over 900 Canadians or the thousands from around the world. Each participant connected in their own way, but the importance was the connection – to our past but more significantly to the present and to the future.

My wish is that the participants will take the phrase “Never Again” to heart. As we stood on Golan, looking down on Syria, we thought of the thousands being massacred there. We spoke of others around the world who are being exterminated, about the rise of anti-Semitism and realized that right now there is no Never Again.

Elie Wiesel said “When you listen to a witness, you become a witness”. So through this trip we have created many witnesses.

Ottawa participates in the Coast to Coast Canada trip – which includes Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, Ottawa and other small communities. Coast to Coast only runs every second year, so I urge anyone who knows someone who will be in grade 10, 11 or 12 in 2020 to encourage them to consider participating. It really is a life changing trip.