Survivors: Living Witnesses Inspire Education

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By Beth Porter

Like many - people who suffered through the Second World War, Baruch Rand does not volunteer information about his wartime experiences.

When he does recount his story – of murder, misery, trauma and the decimation of his family – he is strikingly matter-of-fact. “We were among the lucky ones,” he says. “It was because people helped us that we survived – because of their kindness and because of the risks they took.” While his father was deported from a small city in Czechoslovakia to his death at Auschwitz, his mother fled to the countryside with the ten-year-old Baruch and his brother. When they came out of hiding in 1945, all of his father"s family were dead and only two of his mother"s seven siblings had survived.

Rand is now a respected educator and the founder of the Toronto Heschel School (noted for its nurturing spirituality and promotion of social justice). He and his wife Jackie have become our good friends at L’Arche Daybreak, a community of people with developmental disabilities and their friends. Sometimes we ask them to talk to us about Judaism. This year Rand spoke at Daybreak’s Holocaust Education Week.

Why did we hold a Holocaust Education Week program at Daybreak? That the Nazi obsession with the concept of “racial hygiene” resulted in the deaths of thousands of people with disabilities could be reason enough. But we also have Jewish members and friends. And a third reason is stated in the L’Arche Chapter: our desire to be “a sign of hope” in our world and to be “in solidarity with all those who work for justice.”

The courage to help was personified by our other speaker, the poet Maria Jacobs who, as a girl living in Holland, helped her mother shelter Jews. Jacobs told of journeys into the desolate wintry countryside to find more food since their ration cards were not adequate to feed four extra people, and any attempt to buy more food would have aroused suspicion. At best, their trips would net a few potatoes and turnips and some unmilled rye or wheat which they would grind at home.

Proclaimed officially by the City of Toronto, Holocaust Education Week is the largest Holocaust education and remembrance program in the world. Often what makes its events so powerful is the presence of those – like Baruch Rand and Maria Jacobs – who can still recall the terror of the war years. From scholarly lectures and panel discussions to theatrical and artistic presentations, the week’s events seek both to inform about the Holocaust and to draw contemporary lessons from it.

Through listening to people like Rand and Jacobs, some important lessons come to mind. Many good people want to have the courage to respond and to raise children who respond when another human being is at risk. And while the churches have begun to look at their culpability vis-à-vis the

Holocaust and have issued some important statements, much of the anti-Judaism in Christian theology and scripture has yet to be addressed.

Genocides continue, along with antisemitic, racist and discriminatory acts. As the modern archetype of utter dehumanization and horror, perpetrated in the heart of Christendom, the lessons of the Holocaust must be heeded if we are to live in a civilized manner in our increasingly plural society.

Beth Porter is a member of the L’Arche Daybreak community in Richmond Hill, Ontario, and serves on the Holocaust Remembrance Committee of Christian-Jewish Dialogue of Toronto. With kind permission. © Copyright (November 14, 1999) Catholic New Times