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## Stories to tell Oral histories called crucial to remembering Shoah

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Oral histories give the stories not only of those who survived the Holocaust, but of those who died, as well.

That reality hit Debra Linick on a Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington mission to Israel earlier this year.

"As we were touring Yad Vashem, our tour guide said to us, 'How many of you know someone who survived the Holocaust?' and a lot of us raised our hands," Linick, the JCRC's assistant director for Northern Virginia and the District, said in an interview. "And then he said, 'How many of you know the story of somebody who didn't survive?' and hardly anyone raised their hand. It reminded me that these voices are getting silenced over time; that retaining the memory of those who perished is also critically important."

She kept that in mind in planning Sunday's Northern Virginia Yom Ha'Shoah Commemoration, sponsored by JCRC and Temple Rodef Shalom. The event, co-hosted by 20 synagogues and Jewish organizations, was held at the Falls Church synagogue and featured a talk by Ina Navazelskis, program coordinator at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's department of oral history.

In her presentation, "As Long as There Are Stories to Tell," Navazelskis shared some of the stories from the museum's more than 9,000 video and audio firsthand accounts -- 2,200 of them prepared by the museum itself -- of those who experienced, witnessed or perpetrated the Holocaust.

One of these accounts came from Lucille Eichengreen, who penned *From Ashes to Life* and whose mother died from starvation in the Lodz ghetto. Eichengreen and her younger sister, both teenagers at the time, buried their mother after retrieving her body from hundreds in a burial hall in the Jewish cemetery.

"We spent that July day digging a grave until it was deep enough to bury her. We put a wooden marker on it," Eichengreen says in her testimony. "We scratched the name with a stone on the marker, and we walked back. From that day on, I think, my sister stopped talking."

Also included was the story of Lithuania's Irena Veisaite, whose final memory of her mother came in a hospital room in 1941. Veisaite stayed in the hospital with her mother for the first few days of the war. She was 13; her mother, 35.

On the last visit before she would die, Veisaite's mother imparted three lessons, Veisaite relates in her testimony: "Be independent and self-sufficient," "always live with truth, because lie doesn't help," "and the third, which is maybe the dearest to me, and probably saved me in some way, I should never take revenge."

Accounts such as those of Eichengreen and Veisaite, Navazelskis said, sometimes "are the only proof we have that an individual person with a specific name from a specific place ever existed at all."

Navazelskis said the interviews began in 1989, four years before the museum opened its doors.

"The [museum] strives to be the central resource center to make as much information available as possible," she added.

Approximately 425 people, including 20 Holocaust survivors, attended the event, which builds upon a more established annual commemoration in Maryland. That program was held in Potomac earlier in the day.

"Especially with the survivors getting older and more frail, you can't accommodate with one program and one location," Linick said in an interview. "I think the turnout ... is a tribute and a testimony to the fact that we need this kind of program in both places."

In her remarks on Sunday, State Rep. Vivian Watts (D-Annandale) recalled reading Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl as a young child, and how she couldn't believe the experience of somebody who was virtually the same age.

Watts also read from a resolution enacting an annual Day of Remembrance "in memory of the victims of the Holocaust, in honor of the survivors, rescuers, and liberators."

Before the main program, B'nai B'rith's Chesapeake Bay Region hosted an "Unto Every Person There is a Name" event, where community members -- some of whom had family members who perished in the Holocaust -- read the names of Holocaust victims.

"We have people that are waiting to get up [on the podium] and talk about their personal lives and then read names of some of the Six Million," Marilyn Bargteil, B'nai B'rith Chesapeake Bay Region program consultant, said. "We are reading names so we remember and so we never forget. B'nai B'rith is committed to doing this and will be doing this as long as we exist."

Prior to the formal program, JCRC also hosted a Dor L'Dor event where the Holocaust survivors spoke to and answered questions from teenagers in a relaxed dinner format -- passing oral histories from generation to generation.