



### **Resilience and rebirth**

Chagrin Falls Middle School eighth-graders, from left, Will Dietz, Michael Mashke, Austin Pawar, Jake Thompson, Emma Murphy and Cadyn Firehammer learn about the Torah from Shaarey Tikvah temple docent and Kristallnacht survivor Bob Schubach at the Face to Face program in Beachwood. Mr. Schubach's father was a World War I decorated German soldier, and his mother used that status to get him out of a concentration camp. Mr. Schubach brought his father's medal with him and showed it to the students.

# Never give up: Holocaust survivor shares story of resilience and rebirth

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**By Krista S. Kano**

Stanley Bernath was 17 years old when he learned the true meaning of hell.

In 1944, two police officers entered Mr. Bernath's home and told his mother that they had 15 minutes to gather their belongings and line up outside their home with all of the other Jews in their community. They marched for three days and three nights to a ghetto, a word Mr. Bernath had never heard before, where they lived with five or six families in a small home. Three weeks later, they were lined up on the street again and saw 30 to 35 cattle cars.

"Everyone was forced in. Children, babies, the elderly. We didn't ask questions and we didn't have answers. We were 50 percent brain dead. We traveled three days and three nights with no food. We had one small container of water, but no one could get to it because there were so many people. Three days later, we arrived at a place called Auschwitz," Mr. Bernath said.

"All my life, I knew the word hell and now I knew what it was."

Mr. Bernath, 91, shared his story of survival and rebirth with the Chagrin Falls Middle School eighth-grade class last week during Congregation Shaarey Tikvah's Face to Face, a Holocaust educational program. The program, now in its 25th year, provides an opportunity for local students to learn about the Holocaust from Cleveland-area survivors. West Geauga Middle School, Notre Dame-Cathedral Latin and Kenston Middle School also participate in the program. This is the first year the Chagrin Falls district has taken part.

The students are currently working through a Holocaust unit in their language arts classes, and have been reading the stage version of "The Diary of Anne Frank," "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas" by John Boyne and "Parallel Journeys" by Eleanor H. Ayer.

"We thought this would be a great supplement and get some hands-on learning," said Chagrin Falls language arts teacher Marissa Ausperk, who organized the field trip. "I feel as though (the students) feel it happened so long ago, and I don't think it's as real to them. To see a Holocaust survivor and have a chance to listen and ask questions is an experience they might never get again and that their children won't have."

After learning about Jewish traditions from Rabbi Eddie Sukol of Pepper Pike and listening to a history of the Holocaust from temple member and docent, Jeff Kaplan, the students headed into Face to Face's temporary museum, where docents were stationed to discuss different aspects of and their personal connections to the Holocaust.

One group heard from Bob Schubach, 85, who lived through Kristallnacht, known as Night of Broken Glass that occurred on Nov. 9 and Nov. 10 in 1938, which many regard as the beginning of the Holocaust. Mr. Schubach explained how he was 5 years old when Nazi Germany banned Jews from owning property, and that another family was given his home. Mr. Schubach's family continued to live in the attic of their home.

"The Nazis barged in and knocked everything down and tried to grab him," said eighth-grader Rita Schneider, 13, of Chagrin Falls, who heard Mr. Schubach speak during the program on Feb. 15. "So he bit the Nazi and was about to shoot him but didn't because his mom stopped the Nazi from doing it. I was really surprised they had to live in such bad conditions."

Mr. Schubach also shared the story of how his father was a decorated German soldier from World War I, and how his mother used the medal to get his father out of a concentration camp. Mr. Schubach brought his father's medal and showed them to the students.

"It was really interesting," said Conall Rogers, 14, of Chagrin Falls who also heard Mr. Schubach speak. "When you read it in a book or listen to someone else talk about it, it's not the same."

After exploring the museum, the students heard from Mr. Bernath – a survivor of Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Melk and Ebensee concentration camps – and had the opportunity to ask him questions.

Mr. Bernath shared how he worked near a guard tower as a prisoner at the Mauthausen camp, located in Austria, and how one day, a package dropped from a window.

"I didn't know what to do. If I pick it up, they'll shoot me," Mr. Bernath recalled. "So I pick it up, and I took it behind the barrack and opened it up. Two pieces of bread and one slice of meat. He dropped food every day. Now if he were caught, he would have been shot. Of course the food was very good, but what was more, I knew that not everyone is a monster.

"That helped me."

Without those daily packages, Mr. Bernath would have only eaten what was provided: a cup of coffee (which Mr. Bernath said was really just black water), and one cup of soup (which was the same liquid Nazis gave to cows). Mr. Bernath later learned that it amounted to about 200 calories a day.

Mr. Bernath shared how he was made to line up for roll call for two hours every morning in temperatures that were well below freezing.

"We didn't think about anything but survival. But we made it," Mr. Bernath said.

The students were silent as Mr. Bernath discussed the days leading up to liberation on May 6, 1945, when American soldiers entered the prison and when Mr. Bernath had only weighed 65 pounds. To this day, Mr. Bernath celebrates May 6 as a second birthday. He explained how he left the camp and stayed with a family in a nearby farm who gave him food and took him to a hospital. Mr. Bernath said that while he never met the person who dropped him packages of food, once he joined the U.S. military, he returned to the farm and met the people who helped him.

Students asked Mr. Bernath questions like, "Did you make any friends in the camps?" ("Heck no. We were brain dead. We had no mind for friends. We only need food," Mr. Bernath responded) and whether he was tattooed with an identification number ("When I arrived in Auschwitz, they took my name and I had a new name. 70465. I had to remember that every time for roll call, but I wasn't in Auschwitz long enough (to be tattooed)," Mr. Bernath said).

Another student asked Mr. Bernath what is the hardest question he's ever been asked.

Mr. Bernath responded, "They're all hard, but I guess the hardest is how did I survive. There were three things. Believe in yourself. Never ever give up, no matter how bad things got. And nobody is better than I am, and I'm not better than anyone.

"No hatred. People ask, 'Don't you hate the Germans?' No. 'Was every German a Nazi or a killer?' No. You cannot generalize. Hatred is like a parasite invading a brain."

At the end of his presentation, the entire eighth-grade class gave Mr. Bernath a standing ovation. Many stayed to speak to Mr. Bernath or simply shake his hand. When they returned to school, Mrs. Ausperk's class reflected on their experiences.

"All of them were impacted by Stanley's story. I had one student who called him a true hero," Mrs. Ausperk said. "It was very moving to hear his story and to hear his final message. When he gave the three items, that was my favorite part because he made his story relatable to the kids. It applied directly to their lives, and that was really important. I'm just grateful that the kids got to meet someone who was so engaged. It made it very real to them."