January 27, 1945, Allied troops liberated Auschwitz, the notorious Nazi concentration camp where at least 1.1 million Jews were killed. Shocked citizens of the world cried “Never again!”

On October 31, 2021, persons unknown spray painted Nazi swastikas, anti-Semitic messages, and anti-LGBTQ screeds on the walls of Bonita Vista High School and Middle School just across the street from Southwestern College. Citizens of the community cried “It’s happened again!”

Holocaust survivor Rose Schindler had seen it all before … in Czechoslovakia in 1943. “That is often how it starts,” the 93-year-old told assemblies of BVH students days after the vandalism. “We also had messages on the walls. They told people we were criminals and sinners. At one time (Jewish people) were the leaders of (our home) city. Then, because of the Nazis, we were soldiers and nurses.”

A intrepid group of 80- and 90-year-old Holocaust survivors continue their tireless efforts to teach tolerance and peace.

BY NICOLETTE MONIQUE LUNA
News Editor

Regional Holocaust survivors continue to share their stories of horror, survival and joyfulness with younger generations.

Photo courtesy of Sandra Scheller

Permanent Reminder — (l-r) Holocaust survivors Rose Schindler, Benjamin Müller and Gerhard Maschkowski show the tattoos they were given by the Nazis at the Auschwitz and Birkenau extermination camps. The trio, gathered for Maschkowski’s 97th birthday, remain active speaking at schools and gatherings about the shoa (the Hebrew word for Holocaust).
Jews are a small but mighty minority who have contributed much to America

Jewish people are a small minority of Americans, according to the 2020 census, representing 2.4 percent of the United States population. It can be argued, however, that Jewish Americans have had an outsized influence on our nation and culture. Bob Dylan, Steven Spielberg, Natalie Portman, Harrison Ford, Barbara Streisand and Daveed Diggs are Jewish as are sports giants Aly Raisman, Sandy Koufax, Rod Carve, Theo Epstein and Hank Greenberg. The great Albert Einstein was Jewish as is Burt Sugarman.

California is about 3 percent Jewish and so is San Diego County. There are no reliable measures of the Jewish population in the South Bay, but Jewish leaders and demographers have estimated that its percentage is higher than the state or nation. One possible reason is the thriving Jewish community in Mexico, which American Jewish scholars say is concentrated in Mexico City and Tijuana.

JEWISH IN MEXICO

Jewish-Mexican-American filmmaker Isaac Artenstein said Jews have thrived in Mexico for about 500 years, but particularly since about 1530 when turmoil in Russia compelled Jewish immigrants to migrate to North America. World War I caused more Jews to leave Europe for the United States, but until numbers were not allowed entrance. His documentary “Tijuana Jews” concluded that a wave of immigrating Jews include Jews in Mexico instead.

“In the early 1900s many European Jewish immigrants hoping to enter the United States were turned away, so they ended up entering Mexico through the port of Veracruz,” according the film. Jews entering Mexico came from Poland, Russia and other parts of Europe where anti-Semitism was swelling.

“Mexico basically welcomed Jewish European Jews with open arms,” said Artenstein.

Thousands of Jews still hoping to enter the U.S. came to Tijuana. After World War II ended, joined them, including a wave of Holocaust survivors. Many of Tijuana’s Jewish business owners are immigrants, including Dorian’s, started by Jewish-Mexicans.

“I grew up eating lox and bagels, chilaquiles, and rice and beans,” Artenstein said. “It’s also wonderful that vodka and tequila are both kosher!”

JEWIS H CHULA VISTA

Historians Steven Schenher and Susan Walters researched the influence of Jews in Chula Vista for their 2011 book “Chula Vista Centennial.” Much of that research did not make it in the final version of the book, but was published online by the South Bay Historical Society. Schenher and Walters joined in on a few notable Jewish Chula Vistans who made substantial contributions to the community.

Dr. Alvin May

As a teenager in 1948 Peschi went with his father to Yugoslavia, but three years later they moved to Israel where Peschi’s parents divorced. He returned to Austria, the home of his Jewish grandfather in Poland before the 1939 Nazi invasion.

Dr. Robert Penner

A founder of the venerable Temple Beth Sholom, Penner served as a member of the San Diego Port Commission. He may be best known as the husband of the legendary PBS journalist Gloria Penner.

Ben Midler

“On Easter Sunday 1941, Peschi and his mother to take Peschi to Italy where he up in Auschwitz.”

Peschi decided to convert to Christianity to save his life. He said. “At midnight all the people in the jail were put on a transport and ended up in Auschwitz.”

Peschi was baptized.

Schindler is joined by his old Ben Milder, 86-year-old Ursula Israelski, 88-year-old Louis Peschi and Gerhard Maschkowitz, who turned 97 this month.

Sandra Scheller, a Chula Vista Holocaust scholar and human rights activist, said the world is nearing a time when no Holocaust witnesses remain.

“We are steadily losing our last Holocaust survivors,” she said. “Our Holocaust survivors are all in their eighties, nineties and one hundred.

It is essential that we help them teach younger generations about what happened to the people who suffered through the Holocaust and those who were killed. So many (survivors) are old and sick, on the time will come when we will not have their voices to remind us about the horrors of the Holocaust.”

Scheller’s daughter of Holocaust survivors Kurt Sax and Ruth Goldschmied Sax is working tirelessly to amplify the voices of the remaining survivors — particularly with children and teenagers. She spent years shopping her mother to hundreds of school assemblies, television appearances and recording sessions. Ruth Sax was a 2018 Southwestern College Honorary Degree recipient. She died in December 2018, but not before enjoying her Bat Mitzvah at age 93.

Inspired by her mother, Scheller curated an exhibit at the Chula Vista Public Library Civic Center Branch called RUTH: Remember Us, The Holocaust. It opened in March 2020 and has been extended through August 2021 due to pandemic-related closures.

RUTH tells the story of local Holocaust survivors and has a rich collection of artifacts from World War II. Scheller said her mission is to tell the stories of local Holocaust survivors and to eventually establish a permanent museum in the South Bay.

“It is not a seed, a gift to my city,” she said. “Like any seed, it takes people to water it and nurture it. I hope it will find a new home.”

Chula Vista has an unusual number of Holocaust survivors, Scheller said, as an active community coalesced in the 1950s and 1960s.

“Chula Vista should be a Holocaust Center,” she said. “This loving community gave me hope.”

Scheller has actively been seeking out Holocaust survivors and interviewing them on video to preserve their experiences for future generations.

Peschi and Gerhard Maschkowitz, other Holocaust witnesses.

“They are amazing stories,” Scheller said. “These people endured so much brutality, yet they are such loving and generous souls. They are all determined not to let the Holocaust be forgotten.”

Louis Peschi, 88

Louis Peschi was born in 1934 in Zagreb, Yugoslavia (now part of Croatia). His mother and father were Jewish, he said, though not particularly religious.

On Easter Sunday 1941, Peschi and his mother traveled to Belgrade, Serbia to visit his grandfather and uncle. They were unexpectedly caught up in the Bombing of Belgrade, which killed an estimated 70,000 people. Trying to return to Zagreb by train they came to a screening hall. A railway bridge had been destroyed in the bombing. They made a perilous journey home only to discover German officers staying in their house. The Nazis left in the morning and the Peschi thought they would be okay.

Soon, however, Peschi’s father was arrested by the German business partners that the next time he encountered Nazis the soldiers would kill his family. Only Catholics could travel, so they converted and were baptized.

“We converted just so we could live, survive,” said Peschi.

His parents sent him to live in a small provincial town with his Catholic aunt and uncle. He hid in plain sight and played the role of a Catholic boy.

“He had to hide his name, I had to hide who I was, I had to hide everything,” said Peschi.

Somehow the authorities caught on. When Peschi was in the second grade he was arrested and jailed by the police. His aunt stayed with him. His uncle was able to negotiate with the chief of police for the boy’s freedom. He was spared a terrible fate.

“I got out at six in the evening,” he said. “At midnight all the people in the jail were put on a transport and ended up in Auschwitz.”

Most of them were never seen again. His resourceful uncle found a woman to take Peschi to Italy where he was reunited with his parents.

After the 1948 liberation of Italy, Peschi’s parents divorced. He returned with his father to Yugoslavia, but three years later they moved to Israel where
A BIG FAN OF THE YANKIES — Louis Peschi with a trio of American soldiers during the liberation of Italy, where he moved with his parents to avoid the worst of the Nazi’s ethnic cleansing of Jews.

Rose Schindler, 93

“Young people who care about peace and justice need to pick up the torch and carry it forward,” Schindler said. “The Holocaust ended more than 75 years ago. Most of the survivors are gone. There are fewer and fewer left to pass on their stories.”

Research by social scientists verifies Schindler’s concerns. A 2020 Pew Research Center study reported that half of American teens and young adults do not know much about the Holocaust, the concentration camps or the Nazis’ attempt to exterminate all European Jews. “It’s not your fault,” Schindler told her young audience. “It’s the passage of time. As time goes by people tend to forget. We cannot let that happen. We need to pass the torch.”

Born in 1929 in Czechoslovakia, Schindler called herself a “happy child” until she and her family were arrested by the Nazis. Her father and brother died in a concentration camp and murdered. Their bodies were all forced into very small spaces in their honor in 2003. Anne Hedenkamp was a young Ben to tell the Nazis he was a mechanic. His uncle thought the Nazis owned vast tomato and cucumber fields at the East End of Brooklyn and was sorted into a group of tailors and clothing. Afterwards he worked in a quarry making gravel for muddy eastern European roads.

Benjamin Midler suffered severe malnutrition in Birkenau and other Nazi concentration camps. He said he survived by eating food left behind by the beat. It took years for him to regain his health. Today Midler is a widely read and a gifted storyteller.

“I had hope,” she said. “Hope is what kept us going.”

Benjamin Midler, 94

Benjamin Midler agreed that hope and optimism were essential to his survival. So were other strategies. “I volunteered for everything,” he said. “I learned that it wasn’t a good idea to stay in one place for too long. Your chances of being killed were greater. So I volunteered for every work detail and every project hoping that I would seem valuable and they would keep me alive.”

Muller said he grew up in a Polish city that was 65 percent Jewish “with a temple on every other block.” His father made a good living selling milk as a distributor.

He was 11 when his happy childhood turned into a six-year struggle to survive. In 1942 Germany declared war on Poland and partitioned the country. Germany took control of the western half while its allies—the Russians took over the eastern portion. Midler said in the beginning of the occupation the Russian side was better for Jews than the German half. He could do most of the things we had always done except run businesses and practice our religion,” he said. “The Russians didn’t want us going to Temple on Saturday.”

Jews who fled the German side were not permitted to return to Poland as fear that the Reds were shipped to Siberia and put to work, he said. That took a turn for the worse in 1943 when Germany declared war on Russia and took over the entirety of Poland.

“They happened on June 22, 1944,” he said. “I remember that clearly because I was 11 and looking forward to my Bar Mitzvah. I never got to have my Bar Mitzvah as a teenager. I was 88 years old and in America when I finally had my Bar Mitzvah.”

Polish Jews were forced to wear cloth Star of David and had to do so until they were killed. He and his family were forced to live in a Jewish ghetto created by the Germans. Each family was allotted one room in a house or apartment.

“It was very difficult,” he said. “We were all forced into very small spaces without enough food or mattresses or blankets.”

Muller said the German captives realized the same thing and decided to call the population of those ghettos. Soldiers took his father and others into nearby woods and shot them, dumping their bodies into a mass grave. He said it was years after the war before he learned what had happened to his father.

Muller said he is alive today because of “three miracles.” His first miracle happened in 1943 when the haggard Midler downhill skiing and was hit by a bullet in his leg. He was 15 years old and panicked and told the truth. “I worked as a presser in a tannery shop,” Midler said. “He told the German officer I was a presser.”

It saved his life. Young Benjamin was sort of a group of tailors and cobblers. All mechanics were German and Russian soldiers needed uniforms, coats and shoes, so Midler volunteered by making and repairing and clothes. Afterwards he worked in a quarry making gravel for muddy eastern European roads.

The Holocaust happened. He saw many dead. It took years for him to regain his health. Today Midler is a widely read and a gifted storyteller.

“It was very difficult,” he said. “We did most of the things we could do most of the times.”

Benjamin Midler suffered severe malnutrition in Birkenau and other Nazi concentration camps. He said he survived by eating food left behind by the beat. It took years for him to regain his health. Today Midler is a widely read and a gifted storyteller.

“I volunteered for every difficult task,” he said. “I always ate all of my food right away.”

“By volunteering for every difficult task at the right moment, to embarrass anyone in public. “Servetter was concerned, to help those less fortunate and not to do it, but it does affect my philosophy. My religion teaches how to conduct myself, to be humble, to concern, to help those less fortunate and not to embarrass anyone in public,” Servetter said. “I was universally respected by younger South Bay educational leaders and was a mentor to many.

Helen Waterford

A Holocaust survivor, Waterford joined forces with former Miller Youth Alfonso and the pair made presentations about the destructiveness of anti-Semitism during World War II and beyond. Their goal was to ensure the maintenance of Jews from their very different vantage points were considering life and changing for thousands of students and community members who attended their talks.

Anne and William Hedenkamp

The education and civic activities had a Chula Vista Elementary School District campus named in their honor. In 2003 Animals was a Congregation Beth Israel. “My religion doesn’t enter into my work, but it does affect my philosophy. My religion teaches how to conduct myself, to be humble, to help those less fortunate and not to embarrass anyone in public,” Servetter said. “I was universally respected by younger South Bay educational leaders and was a mentor to many.

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Trapped in the war, she and her mother fled their native Berlin to avoid capture by Nazis. They went to Belgium where they banded for two years in a tiny attic, much like Anne Frank and her family. Like the Franks, they too were eventually discovered by the Nazis.

Young Ursula was when SS officers showed up at their door and took her and her mother to their headquarters where they banded in terror all night. In the morning German army trucks arrived and the crowd of Jewish prisoners massed at the headquarters were ordered aboard. Nazis wedged as many Jews into the trucks as possible, but Ursula did not fit.

“They didn’t take me,” she said. “They took everyone else. I stood there by myself. The truck drove away with my mom. I saw her wave at me as the truck drove away.”

Abandoned and utterly alone, Israelski was sent to an orphanage. Then another. Then another and another for the next decade. She estimates she lived in about 15 different orphanages or family homes. She said she suffered constant physical, mental and sexual abuse.

When the war ended in 1945 Israelski was about 13 years old. Her mother was severely ill and her father was abusive to anyone who came near her. She said she didn’t recognize her. She said, “I didn’t recognize her. She was like a ghost. I looked at her… and I said, ‘Mom?’ and she didn’t answer.” Her mother dashed, Israelski returned to a churning of abusive orphanages and foster homes, the region’s most respected costume designer, Scheller worked for Cirque du Soleil for many years. In Las Vegas she returned home to Chula Vista to visit her mother, Ruth Sax, as she continued her Holocaust witnessing into her 90th year. Scheller has taken up her parents’ cause and helps other Holocaust survivors in various outreach efforts.

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