

Survivor says the past is always with her

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Esther Bem says it's getting more difficult to talk about her childhood experiences during the Holocaust.



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FAMILY ESCAPED: esther Bem speaks of her experiences during the holocaust service at the sgoolai israel synagogue on sunday.

"You know, I'll tell you lately it's becoming harder," she said.

"I don't know why that is, but when I'm speaking with my colleagues, we're all becoming more and more emotional.

"Maybe it's because we know that we are the last group that was really there that can tell you how it really was."

Bem was the guest speaker at Sgoolai Israel Synagogue's annual Yom Hashoah Holocaust memorial service Sunday afternoon.

When the Nazis invaded Bem's Yugoslavian homeland in 1941, all of the country's Jews lost their civil and human rights. An 11-year-old Bem escaped to northern Italy with her family and found shelter with residents in a rural village called San Zenone.

The village priest put his life on the line to help her family pass as Christians. Bem quickly learned Italian and was able to communicate on behalf of her parents.

Bem said she feels it's important for her to bear witness to one of history's darkest chapters.

"I know that my friends and my comrades are getting older," she said Sunday. "To be able to tell you how it was from first-hand experience is really important.

"The horror was in the details and we can tell you what it felt like to be a child and to lose all your human

rights and be exposed to such horror."

Lt-Gov. Hermenegilde Chiasson, Mayor Brad Woodside, Royal Canadian Legion Branch 4 President Ardith Armstrong and veterans of the Royal Canadian Legion attended the service as honoured guests.

Bem said it's important for young people to learn about the Holocaust because the future is in their hands.

"I'm trying to tell them that life is in their hands now," she said.

"Who they are going to select or vote for will be the future leaders of their country. They need to be very vigilant and study who they're going to make as their leader. It's important because they live in a very safe place and they need to make sure nobody goes through what we did."

Holocaust memorial observance chairman Israel Unger is another survivor. He said each person to live through the Holocaust has their own story and it's important to pass each one on to the younger generations.

"I lost all my family," he said. "I think it's very important that we learn the lessons of the Holocaust and that we remember the Holocaust in the hopes that it doesn't happen to others."

Unger said Bem's story is important because it's an example of human courage.

"The very important thing about Esther is that she demonstrates that people of good will can avert the worst evil," he said.

"There are many tragedies in the Holocaust. One of the biggest is that people stood by and did nothing. Esther is witness to the fact that when people care, they can avert those tragedies."