



TORY ZIMMERMAN FOR NATIONAL POST

Holocaust survivor Rachel Shtibel holds the violin that once held her own life story. It belonged to her uncle, who buried it before the war. Ms. Shtibel came into possession of the violin after two years in captivity and found inside it her baby pictures and photos of the uncle she later learned was her biological father. Her memoir is part of a boxed set released last night.

Holocaust survivors publish memoirs Putting faces behind the numbers

BY AMY SMITHERS

A new series of memoirs written by Holocaust survivors was launched in Toronto last night in a bid to ensure their personal witness to history lives on even after they are gone.

"The survivors are not going to be with us for very long," said Dr. Naomi Azrieli, executive director of the Azrieli Foundation, the non-profit organization undertaking the project. "We feel a sense of urgency."

The Toronto-based Azrieli Foundation, in partnership with the York University Centre for Jewish Studies, has collected 170 manuscripts so far, six of which have been released in this first boxed set. The goal is to eventually publish all the manuscripts — and any more that they may receive — and distribute them free to libraries and interested readers.

"Any memoir that's out there, I want to get it," said Tamarah Feder, the memoirs program manager.

Many survivors found it difficult to think about old and painful memories, and initially did not want to write the memoirs. For John Freund of Toronto, a

survivor of both Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, it was the media coverage of Ernst Zundel's public Holocaust denial that finally convinced him to write his story.

Rachel Shtibel of Toronto was inspired to write her memoir after her emotional video testimony for Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation for Visual History and Education. Her husband, Adam Shtibel, also a survivor, disagreed with her decision, believing old wounds would be opened up by the experience. However, his testimony to the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Warsaw from 1948 was found and translated from Polish to include in the volume with his wife's story.

Holocaust education was important to the Shtibels as they raised their own two daughters and five granddaughters. They said they were careful not to burden the children with too much, but still wanted them to know what they had endured.

"When we babysat [our granddaughters], instead of reading children's stories, we told them a bit of our history," Mrs. Shtibel said. "Not all in a scary way, nice moments too ... bit by bit."

Dr. Ruth Westheimer was the keynote speaker at last night's event. She is a Holocaust orphan,

sent away to safety at a children's home in Switzerland before her parents were killed.

Widely known for explicit and often humorous advice on her phone-in sex show, Dr. Westheimer had an uncharacteristically serious agenda, discussing the problem of "Holocaust fatigue" in a world in which Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad can question whether six million were killed by Hitler during the Second World War.

"We need to talk about [the Holocaust] more than ever before," she said.

The Azrieli Foundation has concentrated on education since it was established in Montreal, Toronto and Israel by philanthropist David J. Azrieli in 1989.

It runs the Azrieli Institute for Educational Empowerment as well as a fellows program for graduates at Israeli universities. The publication of Holocaust memoirs for distribution to libraries across Canada was therefore a natural step forward in its goals for Holocaust education.

The memoirs will be available online in April, 2008.

"As pieces of literature, they truly stand on their own," Ms. Feder said. "We're hoping they will put a face to the numbers."

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