

# CALIFORNIA

SATURDAY, APRIL 18, 2020

## Holocaust ceremony goes virtual

**SANDY BANKS**

Edith Izsak was 13 when the persecution of Jews reached her small Romanian village in 1944. Her parents were farmers and her family “quite comfortable,” until Hungarian gendarmes, doing the bidding of Nazi Germany, showed up.

“A few weeks later came the rule that every Jew had to wear the yellow star,” she recalled. And Edith went from popular to pariah, tormented by classmates who pelted her with rocks and mud and taunts of “dirty Jew.”

“I couldn’t understand,” she says, looking back. “I wasn’t dirty yesterday, why am I dirty now?”

What she didn’t understand was that her family, and the three other Jewish households in town, had been marked for death during German dictator Adolf Hitler’s genocidal reign.

Edith and her older sister Eva would survive the brutality of Nazi concentration camps, including time in Auschwitz and a labor camp in occupied Latvia. She would never see her parents or younger siblings again.



JOHN PREGULMAN Museum of the Holocaust

**EDITH FRANKIE** in front of the Tree of Testimony, a 70-screen video sculpture made up of survivors’ testimonies, at the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust.

But 17 years later, when she moved to Los Angeles with her husband — survivor George Frankie — and their son, Edith Frankie would find a community of Holocaust survivors who understood their ordeal.

Every spring they’d gather with hundreds of others at the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust on Yom HaShoah — the international Holocaust Remembrance Day — to mourn those who perished and honor the survivors.

But that holy tradition has been upended this year

by a new enemy: COVID-19. Coronavirus social distancing rules ban the sort of communal gathering that survivors and families of the dead have relied on for comfort over the years.

So on Sunday, the museum in Pan Pacific Park will host a virtual remembrance ceremony instead, marking the 75th anniversary of liberation and the end of the Holocaust. Survivors, supporters and grieving families all across the county can watch on Facebook Live or gather on Zoom to participate.

“It’s the one day when the world comes together for mourning or remembrance,” said museum CEO Beth Kean. “We share stories, light candles, recite prayers for the dead. ... The survivors never really were able to honor them in the traditional Jewish ways because they didn’t know where or when they died.”

It’s always an emotional memorial, and Kean — a granddaughter of Holocaust survivors — understands that guests will miss that sense of fellowship. But she also knows how dangerous the coronavirus can be.

Kean was diagnosed with the virus last month after she returned from a visit to Israel, where her college daughter was studying abroad.

“It took a good two weeks” for her to even begin to feel better, she said.

And while COVID-19 may temporarily reshape the tradition, the pandemic also makes it more meaningful this year.

“We feel like the ceremony this year is more important than ever,” Kean said. “We’re at home all the time; people are lonely, people are scared, people have uncertainty.”

And for survivors particularly, the rise of anti-Semitic acts in the last few years has been a disturbing reminder of how quickly ordinary people can embrace intolerance and cruelty.

Edith Frankie still vividly remembers how stunned she was as a teenager to realize that Germany was the architect of the mass extermination campaign that would take the lives of 6 million Jews.



Family photo

**EDITH FRANKIE** as a child, left, with relatives. “We said this is impossible. It must be a nightmare,” she said of her experiences with her sister at Auschwitz.



STEVE COHN

**FRANKIE**, widowed since 2016, celebrated her bat mitzvah last year in the Los Angeles Jewish Home.

Even as they smelled death in the smoke rising from the crematorium at Auschwitz, Edith and Eva refused to believe.

“We said this is impossible. It must be a nightmare,” Edith recalled.

“We’re going to wake up and be in our own beds.

“We couldn’t comprehend; how could they burn people alive? Germany was the most intellectual nation in those days. So it’s impossible they would do such a

cruelty — just because of our religion, not because of any crime we did.”

The last time Edith saw her parents and two younger siblings, Andre and Lily, they were at the entrance to Auschwitz, when guards forced the prisoners into two separate lines. She and Eva were ushered into the camp; her family in the other line was left behind.

They’d been forced from their home weeks earlier, with orders to bring one meal and three changes of clothes. Edith wanted to pack her best outfits. “But my mother, I guess, had some intuition; she said take the sturdiest shoes and the warmest clothes you have.”

They were hauled on a wagon to the outskirts of a city 15 miles away. “It was a place where we used to go for treats, with a kosher restaurant and a movie theater where we saw ‘The Wizard of Oz,’” Edith recalled.

This time they were dropped off in a crowded courtyard, blockaded with heavy locked doors — and packed with thousands of strangers wearing yellow stars.

“It was the ghetto,” Edith said. “With 6,000 Jews, all from different little towns. Anytime I talk about this, I can still see those heavy metal doors, painted green.” The family’s next trip was a cattle car to the concentration camp.

I talked with Edith on the phone for two hours about the year she spent at the mercy of the Nazi regime. I was shaken by the horrors she recounted, and astounded by her equanimity.

Woven through stories of being starved, beaten and forced to carry dead bodies were memories of hope and grace: The older prisoners who taught the girls to cook for the families they might have. The guard who tricked his comrades into thinking he’d administered a beating to Edith and the other Hungarian Jews; he spared them because he was Hungarian too.

And then there was the sight of the Statue of Liberty, as she sailed toward her new home.

“The crowd broke out in ‘God Bless America,’ ” she recalled. “I still get goose bumps every time I hear that song.”

Edith is 88 now, widowed since 2016, retired from the beauty shop she owned, and enjoying life in a Jewish retirement community. She’s shared her story all across the country, at museums, schools and universities.

She’ll be speaking on Sunday at the Museum of the Holocaust’s virtual Yom HaShoah event.

But her story has meaning today beyond the dwindling circle of Holocaust survivors, the people who love them and the folks who join the museum on Sunday in honoring lives lost.

In this era of lockdowns, shortages and social distancing, it’s easy to feel deprived or put upon.

But as Edith narrated, without a hint of self-pity, the horrors she’s been through, I realized how puny my own grievances are: I’m running out of toilet paper, I miss seeing my daughters and I really need a visit to the hairdresser.

“The survivors keep reminding us, we’re not in prison, we’re not in concentration camps,” Kean said. “We have our Facebook and our phones. And we can look to them for inspiration and hope.”

We are not facing anywhere near the sort of existential threat that Europe’s Jews endured — a reign of terror so brutally inhumane it strains rational belief.

But we are suffering mightily during this pandemic from fear, lack, loss and loneliness. And when this crisis is over, we will be survivors of an era that has reshaped society.