



News Release

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Holocaust survivor speaks at Charleston Air Force Base remembrance ceremony

CHARLESTON AIR FORCE BASE, S.C. -- Flora Singer, from the National Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., was the keynote speaker at the National Days of Remembrance ceremony April 23 at the Base Chapel here.

"Every time I'm asked to speak, the question arises 'Where do I begin?'" Singer said. "What I really enjoy talking about is the joy of celebration, especially celebrations involving candles, like birthday parties and other occasions.

"But there is a time for everything," she continued. "A time to rejoice and a time to mourn. A time came I thought I'd never see again, where I light candles not for joy, but to mourn, all because of man's hatred of fellow man. I know too well the pain of lighting memorial candles."

Singer spoke about her childhood, cut short when she, her mother and two sisters went into hiding to escape persecution by the Nazi government.

"We were proud of being Jewish," she said. "Had we been Catholic or Muslim, we would have been proud too, because man always looks up to a higher being. All religions teach love. But the stars were not put on us to be proud, but to be ashamed. And we were. We walked with our heads down."

She described the special rules and laws for Jews, which in addition to wearing the star included not being given a ration card, having to abide by curfews and more.

"Then people started to disappear," Singer said. "On the advice of a German officer, who had been a friend of the family, we fled Antwerp for Brussels. He warned us something was going to happen. When we got to Brussels, my mother told me to go back and warn our neighbors. When I got there, I walked through empty streets. I was too late."

In Brussels, the family changed their identification and took new names. There they met what Singer called a "spark of light."

"He had a factory in Brussels and was a devout Catholic," Singer said. "All the factories had to work for the Germans by day, but at night he worked for the resistance.

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“He protected mom, gave her a job, a cross and chain of his wife’s and a fake identification card,” she continued. “He also hid me, his brother hid one of my sisters, and his secretary hid the other sister.”

The arrangements made for the children soon changed, and a Franciscan nun lied to her superiors in order to shelter the children at her convent, Singer said.

“Before we left my mother wagged her finger at me and she said ‘God help you if anything happens to the kids,’” explained Singer, who at 11, was the oldest of the three. “I lived in panic 24 hours a day, and I didn’t know if I was more afraid of the Gestapo, or mother if something happened to the ‘kids.’”

Singer then talked about another hero of the family, Father Bruno, a Benedictine monk.

“He was a liar. He was a thief. He was a forger. And he was also a monk,” Singer said. “He was a criminal, eventually pursued by the Gestapo when they found out he was hiding Jews.”

All told, Singer said Father Bruno helped save about 300 Jewish children and 90 adults, including her family.

She finished her address with a story from Maryland, where she and her husband, Jack, live. She said on Easter Sunday, several visitors attended a Presbyterian service. One was Muslim, another Jewish. After the service, the Presbyterian pastor spoke with the visitors, and all three agreed their religions preached the same basic principle: peace.

Singer said she hopes all three can spread that message to their congregations.

Joe Engel, a Holocaust survivor who lives in the local area, has attended the Charleston AFB service for a number of years.

“I think much of it,” Engel said. “Things like this should never be forgotten. My friend and I come every year. We’ve dedicated our lives to the young generation; they should know what went on in the past. It’s unfortunate the world hasn’t learned its lesson yet.

“After the second war, I thought we wouldn’t have any more,” Engel continued. “I never thought I’d be alive to see what happened September 11, when they killed so many good, honest people, who just went to work to make a living.”

Charleston resident Charles Cross was also in attendance at the ceremony. Cross witnessed first-hand the atrocities of Buchenwald, a concentration camp, as an Army medic in Europe at the end of the war.

“I very much appreciated the ceremony,” Cross said. “It’s the kind of thing people all over this country should hear.”

According to Jack Singer, his wife’s speaking is something she has to do.

“She speaks all over the country because she feels she was spared for just this purpose,” he said. “I’m very proud of her.”

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