

# JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

## OF NOTE

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#### NMAJH Honors MLK Day

Holocaust survivor reflects on civil rights.

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# NMAJH Honors MLK Day Through Civil Rights Reflections, Full Program of Events

### LOCAL

RACHEL KURLAND | JE STAFF

NATALIE HESS CAME to America during a time that wasn't so welcoming to all its citizens.

Originally from Poland, Hess emigrated from Sweden to Evansville, Ind., at 16 to live with her aunt and uncle at the height of the civil rights movement.

She is the sole Holocaust survivor from her immediate family. Becoming a refugee at 10 years old, she was rescued from a concentration camp looking "like a 4-year-old boy," she recalled.

"Weirdly enough, the people who had survived were either older than me, they were

teenagers, or they were younger than me, they were babies. There are very few people my age," she noted.

Now Hess often gives talks at the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH) about her story, which she did on Jan. 16 for Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

Usually closed on Mondays, the NMAJH stayed open to celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. with a full slate of activities.

Sister Cities Girlchoir and Drummers With Attitude — local youth organizations — performed, while other museumgoers participated in a free canvas painting session with Color Me Mine.



◀ Natalie Hess often gives talks at the National Museum of American Jewish History about her life story, which she did on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Rachel Kurland

In the toddler section, a group of children drew pictures with crayons as a woman reading a book to them said, "Now listen, this part is about Rosa Parks."

Jennifer Isakowitz, NMAJH public relations and digital marketing manager, said the museum typically has a diverse audience.

"We find that people come from outside Philadelphia, come from all backgrounds, come with extreme knowledge of Jewish history, come with no knowledge of Jewish history, so the programs that happened today encouraged a more diverse audience to come in," she said. "Our mission as a

museum is to be an open and safe place for everyone to come and learn about not just Jewish American history but the history of this country and how different immigrant groups and minorities experienced American culture."

*Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Movement*, an award-winning documentary, aired downstairs, but in between all the goings-on were people like Hess.

Hess was one of several who led conversations on the civil rights movement with a handful of passersby as they swept through the second-floor exhibit.

After the war, Hess still did not know how to read or write, so she enrolled in schools in Sweden up until her teen years.

Once in Evansville, she graduated high school, taking as many English classes as possible.

"I thought it was all very weird," she remembered of segregation. By the time she enrolled in America, schools

She recalled another time when a different teacher said the school was hiring a black speech therapist, and then commented on the fact that he'll "have to put his hands in the children's mouths," which was another shock to the faculty, "as if their hands were dirty."

She may not have been in the Deep South, but she witnessed plenty of racism.

Hess became a teacher and eventually made aliyah with her husband. They lived in Israel for 24 years, where she taught English and had three daughters.

"I felt that this miracle of the Jewish state happened, that we had waited on for thousands of years, and it happened in my lifetime. I felt I wanted to be a part of it," she said.

Eventually they ended up back in the States, specifically Arizona. After her husband died, she moved to Philadelphia in 2011 to be closer to her daughter.

From there, she began the

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NATALIE HESS

started to integrate, but the process was slow.

"I could not understand what they were thinking, what was on their minds. It just seemed totally, absolutely weird [to segregate]," she said. "Everyone was very timid. We were in the same school now, but nobody mixed. In classes, we sat separately."

When she saw a "colored" water fountain, she thought it meant colorful water would shoot from the spout.

She remembered her class reading an Elizabethan play out loud in English class one day.

"A black girl raised her hand and wanted to volunteer. This shocked [the teacher]. It's a white part, but well, we're acting, you know," she laughed. "She wasn't even opposed, she was just very surprised that this girl should volunteer."

training to give tours and talks at the NMAJH.

"The Jewish story is an immigration story; it's a story of escaping evil and finding a new world where your children and your grandchildren will be free. Where that has worked for Jews, it hasn't for black people," she noted.

Although there have been many strides, there are still setbacks, and Hess said it is unfortunate where we are today when it comes to civil rights.

"If I were black, I would be very upset about how slow all this is going," she said. "But I hope [museumgoers] get a better feeling for Jews, basically, for Jews in the Jewish culture in America." ●

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