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Holocaust survivors' stories inspire families



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Avi Wisnia hugs his grandfather, Holocaust survivor David Wisnia, after speaking to a gathering at the National Museum of American Jewish History.

As a child growing up outside Warsaw, David Wisnia was a prodigy. He sang in opera houses and spent time with prominent cantors who tutored him in chanting prayers for synagogue. Years later, as a teenager imprisoned at the Auschwitz concentration camp, that talent became his lifeline.

"What kept my grandfather going, and what saved his life, was his voice," said Wisnia's grandson, Avi, speaking on Sunday at the National Museum of American Jewish History to an audience that included his grandfather. "Word got around. He sang for guards. . . . He became a favored prisoner."

Wisnia was one of three local speakers at Sunday's event, which was dedicated to telling the stories of those who survived the Holocaust, and encouraging other Jewish families to keep their ancestors' memories alive.

Other speakers were Shari Glauser, who talked about her father Kurt Herman's experience fleeing to America from Austria as a small boy, and Erica Herz Van Adelsberg, who spent more than three years in concentration camps.

Herman, who died in 2014, had an idyllic childhood in Vienna until 1938, when Germany annexed Austria, Glauser said. Nazis then took over his family's fabric business and began raiding people's homes. Herman's non-Jewish friends turned on him, and his family began searching for ways to leave the country.

Help arrived with Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus, a couple from Philadelphia who posted a notice in the local newspaper stating that they could save 50 children by bringing them to the United States.

"He hoped to make it to America, where they had baseball and chewing gum," Glauser said.

Herman, then 10, was selected, and left on a ship with 49 other children. He left his parents behind, and was placed with a wealthy foster family in Allentown. A year later, his mother arrived in America; a year after that, his father followed. Herman's grandparents were killed in Auschwitz.

Herman married, started a family, settled in Willow Grove and built a career as an accountant. In 2013, his story was memorialized in the HBO documentary *50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs. Kraus*.

"He liked to say, 'I'm one lucky guy, because I was picked to go to America,' " Glauser said.

Van Adelsberg was born in Munich, Germany and moved to the Netherlands with her family as a girl. At 13 she and her family were sent to Westerbork, a Dutch work camp. Two years later they were sent to Bergen-Belsen, a starvation camp where thousands perished. Her grandparents died before the war ended.

"I learned that emotions do not die, even in the worst of circumstances," she told the audience Sunday.

She and her remaining relatives were freed by Russian soldiers in 1945. She still remembers an American soldier who gave her a Hershey bar.

Van Adelsberg came to America after high school, went to college and married another Holocaust survivor. She taught languages in the Philadelphia School District for years before retiring.

David Wisnia, who later served as cantor of Temple Shalom in Levittown for 28 years, ended up in Auschwitz after his entire family was shot by Nazis in a raid. He survived three years there by performing songs for guards and commanders, his grandson said. Toward the end of the war, while he was being taken to Dachau, he escaped from a train and stumbled upon a line of tanks from the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division. He became the unit's interpreter, learned English and was issued a uniform. He traveled the country, and got to see Germans waving white flags, Avi Wisnia said. Later, he came to America.

"When he arrived on the shores of the United States, he was in full uniform," Avi Wisnia said. "He was a soldier."

David Wisnia, who also served as cantor for Har Sinai Hebrew Congregation of Trenton, wrote a memoir and has told his story often in recent years. Avi Wisnia said he recently started sharing his grandfather's story out of a desire to encourage others to become better acquainted with their own family backgrounds.

"The things that happen to a family reverberate through the generations," he said. "Your family history is the story of where you came from."