

## Holocaust survivor shares inspirational story

Written by April Peregoy

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“On April 14, 1945 a starving emaciated Polish lad lay in the gutter near the electrically charged perimeter fence of Buchenwald Concentration Camp with the guns of war sounding in the distance. His name was Benny Hochman, and this is his story.”

So begins the first chapter of Benny Hochman’s autobiography, “From Hell to Here,” which serves as an account of the author’s life from his days as a boy in Poland to his five-year imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps and his eventual immigration to Sidney, Neb., where he has become a successful citizen and community advocate.

For the last few decades, Hochman has traveled all over Nebraska, Colorado, South Dakota, Wyoming and other states, sharing his story of survival with those who want to hear it. Thanks largely to VFW Post #6482 Quartermaster Steve Millage, Holyoke community members and JR/SR High students were fortunate to hear Hochman’s story, from his own mouth, when he spoke at the HHS auditorium Thursday afternoon, March 19.



His story of survival, of triumph over tragedy, obviously touched audience members of all ages. After his speech, a long line was formed in the HHS commons area to buy his autobiography. All proceeds from the book go towards scholarships of Sidney’s Western Nebraska Community College students.

All the books were quickly sold out, and another 25 people ordered a copy. Those interested in ordering a signed copy can still do so by calling the HHS office at 854-2284.

Those fortunate enough to grab one Thursday afternoon were able to meet the author as he signed their copies.

Tears of sadness over what he went through were shed, sincere appreciation for sharing his story was shown and war stories from vets who served in World War II were shared with the distinguished octogenarian, who had survived the unimaginable and lived to share with them a story of hope and, above all else, freedom.

“I stand here, the only person in my family that survived Poland,” he began.

He then talked about his family and the life he lived as a boy in his hometown of Londz, Poland before the Nazi invasion. His father, a German, and mother, who was from Ukraine, ran the town bakery with the help of their three children: Benny, his older brother Bullick and younger sister Rosha.

“It was a wonderful life,” said Hochman.

But all that changed in 1939, when the Nazis invaded Poland. By this time, Hochman’s older

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brother, Bullick, had graduated high school and become an officer in the Polish army. During the invasion, he was captured but was released a short time later and returned home.

One night, when Hochman was 16 years old, a squad of Gestapo broke down the door of the family's home, saying they were under orders to take away Hochman's older brother. When his mother resisted, she was knocked to the floor by the butt of a gun. Hochman went to help his mother up and the leader then told him he was coming with them now too. Both boys were marched to the local railroad station, where they were herded into a boxcar crammed full with over 100 people.

Hochman and his family were not Jewish. The reason the Gestapo came looking for his brother was because he was educated and an officer, and the Germans were purging Poland of educated people who could possibly resist the new German government.

During the train ride to Auschwitz, which lasted several days, the people in the boxcars were not given food or water, making them all very weak. Some did not even survive the journey.

Hochman's brother became very sick during the trip, and, when they finally arrived at the Auschwitz camp, was too weak to fight for the meager scraps of food they were given. As a result, he grew even more weaker every day.

As Hochman explained it, every morning, the prisoners were lined up and counted. Those who were too sick to stand were shot on the spot. He and one of his friends did their best to help his brother stand through these line-ups, but one day, he was too sick to stand, even with help.

"He couldn't get on his feet, he didn't want to get on his feet, and he didn't want no help any more. They shot my brother beside my feet and killed him."

At this point, Hochman said, he became an animal. "I became a beast," he said. "They're not going to do that to me. I am going to kill before I die. And if there's anything that looks like food, I don't care about you or anybody else, I will get it."

After spending some days in the camp, Hochman said the prisoners were divided into two lines. The fittest were sent to the right line and the others, the left. Those on the left were marched out of the camp into the woods. Soon after, those left in the camp heard machine gun fire. No one returned from the forest.

Hochman and the rest of the prisoners had tattoos placed on each of their left forearms with an ice pick and ink. He still has his number, B-3156, on his forearm today.

When the gas house at the camp was completed, Hochman was one of four men chosen to work there. His job was to collect the dead bodies of those who had been killed in the gas house, load them on a cart, and transport them to the nearby crematorium. He said later on, when the number of persons killed in the gas house became too large for the crematorium to handle, they dug deep pits in the ground and built fires in the bottom, where they threw the corpses to be burned.

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