

Our Survivors

by Alanna Berman | [April 2011](#) | [1 Comment »](#)



Sixty years ago this month, Israel's Knesset established Yom HaShoah, or Holocaust Remembrance Day, to be the 27th of Nissan. And while commemorations around the world honor the survivors of one of the largest genocides in world history every year, this year, as the number of survivors dwindles, it is more important than ever to honor them before it is too late.

The official commemoration in San Diego, "Our Survivors: Their Lives and Legacies," will this year be at 1:30 p.m. May 1 at the Lawrence Family JCC. The afternoon program, which has been held for more than three decades, always draws a crowd, last year filling the parking lot of the JCC with more than 700 community members; this year, attendance is expected to be greater than in years past.

Michael Bart has been chair of the Yom HaShoah planning committee, made up entirely of volunteers, for the past six years, increasing both the size and scope of the program each year.

"We are now the largest Yom HaShoah commemoration in the country," Bart says. "Where at one time 80 percent of attendees had some ties to the Holocaust, and maybe 20 percent were members of the community, now we are the other way around, truly making this a community event."

Along with survivors and their families, the program will feature an opening by a military color guard, musical presentation and candle lighting ceremony. A documentary film, created especially for the program by Bart's wife Bonnie,

will feature interviews, photos and archival footage. The film features three San Diego-based survivors: Hanna Marx, Ben Midler and Gussie Zaks, all of the New Life Club, an organization of Holocaust survivors in San Diego. The film will focus not only on the survivors' individual recollections, but stories about their families, heritage and culture.

"The film is not just about these people's lives during the Holocaust, because they were sons and daughters and neighbors and friends [before the war]," Bart says of the film's importance in understanding the whole person, not just the survivor aspect.

Keynote speaker Marilyn Harran will also speak about the importance of a commemoration event and continuing education for future generations.

"The more I've gotten to know Holocaust survivors and appreciate what it takes for them to talk about these events in their lives," says Harran, the director of The Rodgers Center for Holocaust Education and Professor of Religious Studies and History at Chapman University, "I feel a sense of responsibility to keep their memory alive and reinterpret it by a new generation while we are still fortunate enough to have these survivors with us. "In the days ahead when there are no survivors, this will become even more important so that Holocaust denial never takes root and triumphs."

One way Harran ensures a connection between younger generations to the Holocaust is by chairing the Holocaust Art and Writing contest, where students are asked to view testimony from organizations like the USC Shoah Foundation Institute and use what they learn to create their own memories through art and writing. Held each year at Chapman, with more than 100 schools in participation, the project culminates in an awards ceremony at the school's Holocaust Library.

"I like to say that [my work is] really education of the head and the heart," Harran says. "Having students connect to survivors' testimonies — and then finding ways to really express that in their own writing and art so that it becomes a connection between their lives, their memories and the survivors' memories — is really such a powerful tool."

Bart, who met Harran on a trip to Chapman's own Holocaust commemoration last year, says he asked her to speak at San Diego's event after seeing how much energy and effort she has put into her work at Chapman, which was founded as a Christian institution. Harran, who is not Jewish, has made Holocaust education her life's work and is one of the major reasons Chapman now offers a minor in Holocaust education to its students.

“In my mind I never imagined that someone who was not Jewish would put their heart and soul into the Holocaust [the way Harran has],” Bart says. Bart, whose parents survived the Holocaust in the Vilna Ghetto and later became partisans in the resistance movement, has understood the Holocaust all his life, but it wasn’t until 15 years ago that he felt the kind of responsibility that Harran speaks about, of younger generations to these older survivors. “For many years I blocked [the fact that my parents were Holocaust survivors] out,” Bart says. “It wasn’t that I was ashamed, but something that impacted me so greatly happened before I was born. The Holocaust is the reason I never had a grandparent, I never had an aunt or uncle or first cousins, because they were all killed.”

Since Bart began attending his Yom HaShoah commemorations with his parents, they’ve always been about teaching younger generations and giving people a reason to be proud of their heritage.

“At a time when we have so few survivors, we want to be able to remember what they’ve experienced so the world never forgets,” he says. “It’s so important to listen to the survivors speak, because the person who hears them can then be a witness to the Holocaust [themselves].”

In this vein, a permanent Yom HaShoah fund has been started and will be announced at the event by Marjory Kaplan, president and CEO of the Jewish Community Foundation. Thanks to a \$100,000 endowment from the Leichtag Family and Viterbi Family foundations, the Foundation will manage the Community Holocaust Remembrance Endowment and will ensure vital funding is secured for future Yom HaShoah events by enabling community members to donate tax-deductible funds throughout the year.

Bart says the creation of the endowment fund has been a longtime dream of committee members, but to finally see it realized ensures the program he and others have worked so hard to perfect will continue for years to come.

“Most of the survivors in San Diego now are in their 80s and 90s, and we are losing survivors pretty quickly, so [now is the perfect time for the endowment],” he says.

And although the event is a commemoration of one of the darkest times in Jewish history, Bart doesn’t want to make it solely a somber affair.

“We’ve tried to make this not just a memorial service but also a program where [attendees] feel good about themselves and the program’s space in the community,” he says. “Above all, I want people to walk away from this program proud to be a Jew, having learned something.”

The free community event will be 1:30-3 p.m. at the Lawrence Family JCC, in the David and Dorothea Garfield Theatre, 4126 Executive Drive, La Jolla. For more information, visit www.jewishinsandiego.org or call the Jewish Federation of San Diego County's office at (858) 571-3444.

A History of Yom HaShoah

A day for remembrance of those six million Jews killed at the hands of Nazi soldiers was inaugurated in Israel in 1951, anchored in a law signed by the Prime Minister of Israel David Ben-Gurion and the President of Israel Yitzhak Ben-Zvi.

On April 12, 1951, the Knesset proclaimed Yom HaShoah U'Mered HaGetaot (Holocaust and Ghetto Revolt Remembrance Day) to be the 27th of Nissan.

The name later became known as Yom HaShoah Ve Hagevurah (Devastation and Heroism Day) and, even later, simplified to Yom HaShoah.

If the 27th of Nissan falls on a Friday, Holocaust Remembrance Day is moved to the preceding Thursday. If the 27th of Nissan falls on a Sunday, Holocaust Remembrance Day is moved to the following Monday.

In Israel, the day is observed by sounding a siren for 10 minutes at 10 a.m., during which time the entire country comes to a standstill. Traffic stops, flags fly at half-staff and people on the streets stop what they are doing and remain silent. Radio stations play only solemn songs and national television is devoted to playing stories of survival.