

Seven candles to dispel the indifference

► Area Catholics, Protestants and Jews to gather in memory of the millions who died in Nazi death camps

At 7:30 p.m. Monday, an assemblage of Catholics, Protestants and Jews will gather at the Spring Hill Avenue Temple to commemorate the unspeakable.

In a solemn observance, they will pay tribute to the millions of Jews and non-Jews who perished in the Nazi death camps of World War II.

The occasion is Yom HaShoah Eve, a prelude to the statewide observance of Yom HaShoah at noon Tuesday in Birmingham-Southern's Norton Theater.

Yom HaShoah translates as "Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust." The observance is held annually on the 27th day of the

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The speaker for the mobile event will be Sylvia Wygoda, founder, chairman emeritus and executive director of the Georgia Commission on the Holocaust. She is the daughter of Herman Wygoda, author of the book "In the Shadow of the Swastika."

The presence of Catholics and Protestants

Jewish lunar month of Nisan. It falls between the Passover observance and the Israeli Independence Day. The Knesset, Israel's parliament, established the date in 1951, three years after independence.

Gov. Don Siegelman put the state of Alabama behind the observance in a proclamation issued March 29. The Alabama Holocaust Commission is sponsoring the tribute.

is a recognition that the Holocaust was more than a Jewish tragedy; it was a human tragedy. Mobile's Christian-Jewish Dialogue, an organization of Christians and Jews, has been deeply involved in the observance for years.

At the Mobile observance, seven candles will be lighted. Six are for the 6 million Jews who perished in the Nazi attempt to exterminate their people. The seventh is in memory of the thousands of others — from Gypsies to Jehovah's Witnesses — who were executed because their beliefs or their bloodlines drew the contempt of Adolf Hitler.

Paul Filben of Mobile is chairman of the Alabama Commission on the Holocaust and one of the organizers of Mobile's Christian-Jewish Dialogue.

A Roman Catholic, Filben believes Christendom needs to acknowledge and confront its role in the Holocaust and in the historic persecution of the Jews. He suspects that the

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Mobile has at least 3 survivors of Nazi death camps of WWII

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Roman Catholic church was cozier with the Nazi government than it needed to be, and that the German nation — birthplace of Protestantism — looked the other way while Hitler carried out his diabolical policies.

"I think it's important for us to recognize that," said Filben. "Nothing very terrible is going to happen if we acknowledge our mistakes."

Bishop John L. May of Mobile got the ball rolling toward creation of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue. Paul and Mary Filben were eager participants from the outset.

The couple were deeply moved when they visited the Mauthausen death camp in Austria and viewed the infamous "ash dump," where the Nazis disposed of their victims even as the Allied armies were advancing on the site.

They had recently lost their son, David, in an accident.

"My God," exclaimed Mary,

"David died in a terribly horrible accident, but there was nothing accidental about that."

Yes, nay-sayers, it did happen. I have spoken personally to those who survived the death camps, and I find the personal experiences they related far more credible than any of the mendacious arguments against the reality of the Holocaust. It happened; it happened in a supposedly civilized Western country, and it happened while many in authority knew about it, turned their heads and washed their hands.

Mobile has at least three survivors. Nobody knows how many are still living in Alabama.

"The problem is that there are people who are survivors but choose not to say so," said Filben.

The Yom HaShoah observances will continue an Alabama tradition of sympathy toward the Jews. As Siegelman's proclamation notes, the state Legislature in 1943 called for the establishment of a

Jewish homeland in Palestine. No other state has followed that lead. George Wallace was the first governor in the nation to respond to the appeal of Nobelist author Elie Wiesel for a day of remembrance.

The number of Holocaust survivors dwindles, and with them will go the living memories of the Nazi nightmare. The job of stamping out the hatred that spawned the nightmare is unfinished.

"We have given the message, and nothing changed," Wiesel said of the Jews who survived the war. "Human nature remained what it was. Society remained what it was. Too much indifference in the world."

The lighting of seven candles at Spring Hill Temple Monday night will be an attempt to dispel the indifference.

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