

Holocaust survivor speaks to Christi

by Perilla A. Wilson

The Mobile Christian-Jewish Dialogue opened their 28th year at the First Baptist Church with a testimony to strength and dignity by Holocaust survivor Felicia Fuksman.

She was jointly sponsored by the Alabama Holocaust Commission in cooperation with the Southern Institute for Education and Research at Tulane University. Plater Robinson, the education director of the Southern Institute, introduced Fuksman by way of a slide presentation of some of the events that surrounded the Nazi occupation of Poland in 1939 and the liquidation of Lodz, the town where Felicia was born in 1923.

She appears to be a frail little lady with Parkinson's disease who insisted she had never had any lessons in English. But she told her story in lyrical English with the dignity and determination that had carried her through five years of torture and humiliation. She related that terror was the Nazi's first weapon. She also

pointed out that collaboration with the enemy was uncharacteristic and relatively few did so when "their backs were against the wall."

Fuksman was returning from visiting her grandmother in 1939 when the Germans arrived in her town, a town of very poor and very wealthy where her father was a tailor and she had four siblings. The family was poor but she "was a happy teenager." When she graduated at 17 she wanted to be a nurse but the family was too poor, however, she said, "poverty didn't bother me." But then everything was taken away, "even my name and I had only a number." Her people were all lost, "all taken because of hatred based on difference, the only crime because they were Jews."

She said that the Germans watched them everywhere they went, made them wear yellow stars on their clothing signifying that they were Jews, closed their schools and parks, made them line up for bread and only allowed them on the streets for a

few hours a day. People from different neighborhoods—200,000 of them—prepared to enter the ghetto where each family was confined to one room. They brought what they could carry, usually bedding, and every ten days they received a food ration of bread and vegetables. "Disease and starvation were big in the ghetto." In the ghetto they manufactured goods for the Germans and received a bowl of soup for lunch. "The Germans always had fun when they saw us miserable."

The Nazis took her father and a brother away. She worked as a nurse in a factory which was closed when they had manufactured enough goods for the Germans. Tuberculosis and typhus were epidemic and one sister died of TB and her little sister froze to death leaving only her sick mother and little brother. Felicia and her brother were dragged away - leaving her mother behind—on the last transport to leave the ghetto.

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transport to leave the ghetto.

They were placed in different lines and crammed into cattle trains so crowded they all had to stand for 30 hours before they reached the Ravensbruck Camp. That was August 1944.

At the extermination camp they had heads shaved, gold teeth pulled and clothes taken away and were given other people's clothes with no regard for fit. They were taken to a barracks and given a single bunk for two people. At 5:00 a.m. each day they were awakened to stand in the cold for two hours to be counted and then given coffee or tea and a loaf of bread for each ten people. They were then sent to dig railroad tracks from the ground for the next six or seven weeks. At night they were fed the same food allotment. They were given a uniform and wooden shoes which they wore without changing for nine months.

When the Russians came to liberate them, the Nazis had planted dynamite all around the outside and only eight survived—among them Felicia. It took her a month to travel back to Poland to find a woman living in her house who said she had none of the family's papers or photographs. She then went to work for a year for the Russian occupiers on the Black Market to get to Berlin to the refugee center. After three and a half years she arrived in New York and ten days later was sent to New Orleans with no money and a definite language barrier. Fortunately, she met Max, her future husband, a good businessman, who was from her hometown of Lodz and according to Felicia

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MOBILE CHRISTIAN-JEWISH DIALOGUE—Pictured above are Mimi Finnorn, Perilla Wilson, Felicia Fuksman, and Linda Gregory at the first talk of the year by Holocaust survivor Fuksman.

had “a very good life later on.” They had three daughters but she could not bring herself to speak of the Holocaust to them when they were growing up.

The Jewish survivors who had lost all their families and were now in New Orleans formed a club in the early 1960s called The New Americans. There were 70 members at one time to stand in for the children as “aunts” and “uncles.” Now there are only about ten. Eventually, Felicia saw the importance of passing on her story for future generations. She ended by saying, “Hatred is

a disease and through hatred is all the sickness we are going through. For the first time since the holocaust I feel that life is uncertain. If we recognize differences and learn to live with them, we’ll be much better off.” All who were privileged to hear this remarkable lady are also much better off.

The next speaker for the Dialogue on December 3 will be Ms. Alexandra Zapruder, author of *Salvaged Pages* which won the Jewish National Book Award for 2002. For time and place, please call Mary and Paul Filben at 342-9384.