Holocaust survivors celebrate, remember in multi-generational gathering

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MARGATE — Elizabeth Roth was just 19 when she was liberated from a concentration camp, she and her sister the only survivors of a large Jewish family originally from the former Czechoslovakia.

More than 72 years later, Roth, of Vineland, sat with four generations of her family and about 75 other survivors Sunday at the Holocaust Survivor Annual Intergenerational Brunch at the Milton and Betty Katz Jewish Community Center.

“No one can say this never happened,” said Tina Serota, director of Jewish Family Service’s Village By the Shore program. “You all bear witness that this (Holocaust) happened, and that will help prevent it from happening again.”

The event was put on at the JCC by Jewish Family Service of Atlantic and Cape May Counties, the Sam Azeez Museum of Woodbine Heritage at Stockton University and the Sara and Sam Schoffer Holocaust Resource Center, also at Stockton.

The brunch, which included entertainment, celebrated Holocaust survivors and their families who directly and indirectly suffered at the hands of Nazi Germany, even as others in the United States gathered to support neo-Nazi and white supremacist ideals in Virginia this past weekend.

“What scares me is, what happens when there are no more survivors?” asked Alex Drobny, of Vineland. “They will claim that all the photos of the war and the camps were photoshopped.”

The Holocaust, carried out by the Nazis under Adolf Hitler, was one of the largest genocides in human history, resulting in the murder of more than 6 million Jews and millions of others.

Drobny, a second-generation Holocaust survivor, came to the brunch in honor of his mother, the late Magda Atafter, who was born in Czechoslovakia and survived concentration camps in Europe before coming to the United States through Ellis Island with her husband and son.

After they had moved and he was about 4 years old, Drobny finally asked his mother why she had numbers on her arms. He remembers his mother getting very upset, but telling him the basis of how they were put on her arm as a prisoner of the Nazis.

Atafter’s story of living in Europe and surviving the war was written with help from Maryanne McLoughlin, a recently retired expert in Holocaust and genocide studies at Stockton University. She has helped more than 50 people publish their survivorship memoirs.

“We’ve talked about sad, tragic times, but we also had good times, too. I admire your courage,” she said at the brunch. “It’s not the easiest thing to tell, but it is so important for your families and the community. There are (Holocaust) deniers, and your stories are the bulwark against those deniers.”
About 150 people attended the event, organizers said, which featured a performance called “Barry” and dancers, some of whom had survivor family members, who moved across the stage to Yiddish music.

Roth, 91, watched the performances with her children, grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. She said she found comfort in being around others who survived the Holocaust. She immigrated to the United States in 1949 after getting married and having her oldest child shortly after the liberation of Auschwitz concentration camp.

Roth said although she lost so much family in the Holocaust, she is grateful for the large family she has today, although living in the United States has not been without conflict, especially with recent events concerning issues with North Korea and open support for white nationalism and neo-Nazism.

“It makes me sad,” she said. “After we survived, we thought we would have peace, but we have not always seen that.”

Gail Hirsch Rosenthal, director of the Sara and Sam Schoffer Holocaust Resource Center, said focusing on and supporting Holocaust survivors is more important than ever as that population continues to dwindle each year.

“I am a second-generation Holocaust survivor and I know my parents are looking down on me now they are no longer here,” Barbara Roth said. “But when I moved to this community in 2000, I realized I had been missing that feeling of being in a community of survivors.”