Mission: never forget; Holocaust Center opens

by Liz Rhoades, Managing Editor
Sisters Alice Oster and Jane Keibel listened intently Friday at an exhibit where fellow Holocaust survivors told of their ordeal. It is one of several hands-on displays at the new Kupferberg Holocaust Resource Center and Archives in Bayside.

Both women called the new space “terrific.” Recalling their flight from Nazi Germany as part of the infamous “Voyage of the Damned,” the two still count their blessings. “We were on the S.S. St. Louis in 1939, which was not allowed to land in Cuba,” Keibel said. “Nobody wanted us.”

Eventually, the 930 Jewish passengers from Germany were taken in by Holland, Belgium, England and France. Oster and Keibel went with their parents to France and emigrated to the United States a year later. “We moved to Kew Gardens, where we still live,” Oster said. They learned English at Richmond Hill High School, went on to marry survivors and had two children each. Keibel, 86, has one grandchild and Oster, 83, has four.

“When we get together for holidays, we think how lucky we are,” Keibel said.

Their story and so many more are artfully displayed or archived at the Holocaust Center on the campus of Queensborough Community College.

There is a torah that was sneaked out of Germany and a diary of a young girl with recordings of her reading from it.

The 7,000-square-foot, $5 million facility was built as an addition to the Administration Building and uses some of its space as well. The first temporary exhibit — on display for six months — features the art work of Samuel Bak, a respected artist who also survived the Holocaust.

Speaking at a sneak preview, Arthur Flug, the museum director, said it is the center’s obligation to show what happened during the Nazi regime so it won’t be forgotten.

Eduardo Marti, QCC president, an immigrant himself from Cuba, agreed the center serves that important mission. “We must educate the next generation so that it can never happen again,” Marti said. “It is their responsibility to speak out when they see something wrong.”

He is seeking a $5 million endowment to ensure the center’s future. “It’s the only way we can guarantee it’s here in perpetuity,” Marti said.

The center also has a lecture and film series, hate crime programs, a student internship survivors project, a freedom seder and more. The building officially opens on Sunday, Oct. 18. It replaces cramped basement quarters in the college’s library where the center was located for more than 25 years.

Flug estimates there are 3,500 survivors living in the Queens/Nassau area and many, like Oster, serve as docents and speakers. For information on programs, call (718) 281-5770.