Bayside’s Shoah Treasure, Not So Hidden Anymore

Queensborough Community College’s new Holocaust Resource Center. Sharon Udasin

by Sharon Udasin
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Huddled inside a bus station in Bayside, Queens, last December, Paul Cavalieri shuddered in the cold air and watched the snow come down around him, hoping his bus would soon roll into sight. But then his brain reeled back 15 minutes to his interview with Queens Holocaust survivor Ethel Katz, who told him of her two-year escape from the Nazis. It was a perilous trek that at one point took her through knee-deep snow in nothing but a nightgown.

“I could sit here at this bus stop and freeze for a little while,” Cavalieri remembers deciding. “It put my problems into perspective.”

Along with other students, Cavalieri tells a similar version of the story on an LCD touch-screen panel in an exhibition at the new Holocaust Resource Center at Queensborough Community College. The building, a starkly modern glass structure, stands out on a campus of sprawling parking lots, nondescript buildings and mobile classrooms.

Twenty-four years ago, the original center — essentially a basement library — grew out of a course taught by William Shulman, who said that his students needed a place to broaden their Holocaust research. There it languished until Queensborough Community College President Eduardo Martí took over in 2000 and decided that a cramped cellar was no place for Holocaust resources. With the help of the center’s director, Arthur Flug, he obtained funding from the state, a $1 million gift from Harriet Kupferberg and $2.8 million in private donations to open a new, 9,000-square-feet building last month.

“He saw the potential of connecting the Holocaust to young college students,” said Owen Bernstein, 87, a board member of the center who donated personal funds as well, said of Martí.

At a first glance, Queensborough Community College may seem like an unlikely spot for a Holocaust center, as very few of its 15,000 students are Jewish. But from this humble corner of Queens the center has become a launching pad of sorts for the spread of information about the Shoah. Over 50,000 booklets and other materials created at the center are used in public schools in the New York area, and in dozens of schools and institutions throughout the world. And those materials help tie the abstract, far-off...
notion of worldwide genocide to the very concrete notion of local hate crimes.

“We teach the Holocaust as an event that took place, and we use it to equip our students to address a hate-crimes program,” Flug, who is 70, said. “The students that come out of this know how to respond to crimes of hate.”

For the Jewish community of Bayside, especially its sizeable elderly contingent, the center is their baby, which they helped birth and continue to nurture through financial support and visits. Without the center, they, like many of their aging fellow Jews in various pockets in Queens, might well be forgotten. Now, they have a legacy in bricks and mortar, so to speak.

“I'm proud of my husband and what he and the board and Dr. Flug did to make this dream come true for Queens,” said Bebe Bernstein, 82, who said that both she and her husband lost many relatives to the Shoah, though they were both in America at the time. “Queens has one of the most beautiful structures in memory of the Holocaust.”

Harvey Sacks, 87, who visited the center with the Bernsteins and his wife added, “Nothing will give information about the Holocaust a greater boost than this center, which will provide the authority to start spreading that information.”

Flug has already been running programs for the past four years, hosting public lectures, producing texts on various Holocaust themes and overseeing internships that allow students like Paul Cavalieri to interact with Holocaust survivors. While the focus of the center remains the Holocaust, Flug said he gears his lectures and events toward helping community members recognize hate crimes. Unlike Holocaust victims, hate crime victims have laws to protect them if they find themselves under attack, even if they aren’t citizens or don’t speak perfect English, he said.

“A large number of [students] realize what a hate crime is,” Flug said. “A lot of them say, ‘Well, isn’t that just life?’”

Local scholars say that making the connection between the Holocaust and hate crimes is appropriate, as long as the directors take care not to marginalize or over-universalize the Holocaust itself in the process.

“That’s a trend in Holocaust centers around the country and around the world,” said Shulman, the retired former director of the center, who began teaching his Holocaust class in 1976. “There’s a tipping point where you become more a tolerance and a genocide center than a Holocaust center, and the Holocaust loses its importance. I don’t think that will happen here.”

Owen Bernstein agreed, adding that it was important to him to memorialize the Holocaust as “an event that was unique in its horror.” Given the design of the building, whose facade conjures up Kristallnacht in its use of jagged glass, that point is clear to visitors as they enter the campus and the center comes into view.

“We’re keeping the central focus of course on the Jewish Holocaust of World War II,” said Jeff Gottlieb, president of the Queens Jewish Historical Society and board member of the center. “But we’re also bringing in the fact that hate is worldwide — you have killings all over the place.”

Inside the glass exterior of the center, the 2,000-square-foot permanent exhibition features a Torah recovered from Poland, as well as five four-sided pillars that represent different time periods — the years 1919, 1933, 1938, 1943 and 1944. The 1919 block chronicles the story of Jews who fled Europe because of anti-Semitism, while the 1944 “Liberation” block features marker sketches by Nathan Hilu, a soldier who guarded Nazi war criminals during the Nuremberg Trials. Across the back wall, an LCD timeline documents the events from 1934 to ’45, from German President Paul von Hindenburg’s death until the...
onset of the trials. Situated near a window is the touch-screen where visitors can listen to the accounts of the interns, all of whom share their life-changing reactions to their interviews with local Holocaust survivors.

“IT just really made my problems feel very small,” said Cavalieri. “And still to this day, whenever I want to complain about something or think I have it rough, I always remember [Ethel Katz] and the struggles she went through.”

Cavalieri, 35, wants to be a history teacher and says he learned much more about the Holocaust during an internship at the center and his interview with Katz than he did through any “crash course” in high school.

“Who’s going to tell their stories for them? Who’s going to speak about them?” Cavalieri told The Jewish Week. “Right now I’m just getting goose bumps thinking about things that she told me.”

Another student, Vincent Wheeler, recalled survivor Eddie Weinstein’s story on the screen and said, “I value my life because of it.”

Listening to the students’ stories on the touch-screen, Bebe Bernstein was moved. “That’s going to perpetuate the whole story” of the Holocaust, she said. “But the most important part is to reach out to the young students, who are not necessarily Jewish, so that they too can spread the story.”

For Martí, Queensborough Community College’s president, “What happened in Germany during the Second World War is something that’s the ultimate expression of prejudice.” In an interview with The Jewish Week he stressed that the new center is neither a museum nor a memorial. “This is a laboratory, where we use the lessons of the Holocaust to teach our students about prejudice, and what happens when you see something taking place and don’t speak out.”

To bring the new center into being, Martí, a Cuban-American, said he enlisted the help of state Assemblyman Mark Weprin (D-Little Neck), state Sen. Frank Padavan (D-Northern Queens) and City Councilman David Weprin (D-Hollis) to raise $6 million from city and state funds, plus additional aid through Queens Borough President Helen Marshall. Martí says he is currently halfway toward raising an additional $5 million in restricted endowment funds, which would ensure that the college always has the money to operate the center.

The exhibits may be ideal for those who are tired of revisiting the standard images of the Holocaust, both Flug and Owen Bernstein pointed out. Instead, the displayed artwork of Holocaust survivor Samuel Bak includes images like an emotionless teddy bear with ripped-off arms and a ghetto in the form of a sinking ship. Also housed in the center is a 5,000-book circulating library, where Flug says books are available for checkout to everyone.

“We wanted a lesson to be learned and I think we’re doing that,” Bernstein said. “The Holocaust is being remembered.”

Even outside the walls of the building, Flug and his assistant director Ayala Tamir continue to spread the messages of the Holocaust center. In conjunction with the Department of Education, Flug has spearheaded a public schools program to address hate crimes. Last May, he brought together 250 administrators from Queens schools to hear Holocaust survivors speak about their experiences and learn how hate crimes can be prevented. Flug intends to extend this initiative next to Brooklyn and Manhattan schools; he and the survivors have also lectured at Columbia University Teachers College.

After a gay student told him about a hate crime he had faced, Flug organized a community meeting in Flushing, co-sponsored by Hillcrest Jewish Center, to address issues facing gay youth; it attracted 150 people, he said.

“The reaction was an eye-opener to many of the people there,” he continued. “The people who got up to speak were usually the parents of gay students who talked about the pain they felt for what their children were feeling.”

Flug said he has also worked with Councilman and Comptroller-Elect John Liu (D-Flushing) to teach students, teachers and community members how to react when preventative measures fail and hate crimes such as this one do unfortunately occur.

“Our purpose here is to take all the suffering and pain that came out of the Holocaust and give it some meaning,” Flug said. “The Holocaust emerges not just as a lesson of history but as a lesson of survival skills.”

The Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg Holocaust Resource Center and Archives is located on 22-05 56th Ave., at Queensborough Community College in Bayside. For more information, call (718) 281-5770 or visit www.qcc.cuny.edu/KHRCA/index.html.