

FAITH

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Lessons from the Holocaust, through the eyes of survivors now in Alabama

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Ann Mollengarden, the education coordinator at the Birmingham Holocaust Education Center, was supposed to speak this coming Thursday at Jacksonville State University's annual Holocaust Remembrance.



ANN MOLLENGARDEN

But global calamity intervened. In response to the coronavirus pandemic, JSU cancelled all campus programs. So we called up Mollengarden and asked her what

she would have talked about.

Mollengarden is a second-generation Holocaust survivor. Her father, Dr. Robert May, was a first-grader in Germany when Hitler came to power. He eventually escaped to England via the Kindertransport children's rescue effort, before rejoining his parents to flee to Cuba, then to the U.S.

After the war, May attended medical school, served in the U.S. Air Force and, in 1953, settled in Birmingham, where he practiced medicine for nearly 50 years.

He used to speak frequently about his experiences during the Holocaust — including an appearance at JSU in 2015 — but he is 94 now, and has cut back on speaking engagements.

"Now I tell his story," said his

daughter.

She tells that story from a slightly different perspective. Where he speaks from direct experience, she speaks as a teacher.

"His story is of the beginnings and the warning signs of how a community and a nation behave," Mollengarden said.

"This didn't happen all of a sudden. It happened in slow steps. If you are not aware of those slow steps, if they don't involve you personally, you're not necessarily aware that it's happening. That's the danger.

"Once it gets to the stage of Auschwitz or the Warsaw Ghetto, the ball is rolling and there is not much opportunity to make a change. But

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those early steps — you can see how your government is behaving and you can say that's not right," Mollengarden said.

"There are so many current events that you can apply that to. We need to be aware of how everyone is being treated — and how we are treating everyone else."

Right now, in the midst of the coronavirus epidemic, she said, the focus is on the bigger picture of how many are dying and what laws are being put in place. What's missing are the stories of the people affected — the frontline healthcare workers, the students sent home with nothing to eat. "We need to hear those individual stories, so people will develop empathy," Mollengarden said.

"When we teach the Holocaust, we stress the individual stories. The big picture is only that — granted, it's a 'wow' big picture. But when you look at the individual stories, and what was lost ..."

Robert's story

Robert May was born in 1926 to a Jewish family in a small town in Germany. He was in the first grade when Hitler came to power in 1933. He still remembers the sudden changes in ... well, everything.

A pro-Nazi mayor was put into place. Classmates joined the Hitler Youth. The nature of the community changed.

The mayor's two sons went to school with young Robert, and they began to torment him. Terribly. "Kids learn what they learn at home, then it comes to school," Mollengarden said. "And if the government is OK with it, then it's OK."

All of a sudden, young Robert was completely isolated. "He recalls childhood before he started school: playing marbles, going to friends' houses, playing soccer. Once this started, he had no friends."

He was miserable.

When he was about 11, Robert's family sent him to a Jewish private school in Frankfurt, about an hour away. It was a voluntary move. Germany had not yet closed its public schools to Jews. An aunt went to live with him.

"But the problem at that school was that, coming from a small town to a big-city school, he was so far behind in his education. He was living with an unmarried aunt. He literally went to school and came home. That's all he did."

During Kristallnacht in Frankfurt in 1938, Robert's school and synagogue were burned, and the apartment he lived in was



Submitted photo

Robert May was a schoolboy in Germany in 1934.

ransacked. Robert and his aunt escaped harm, but a month later Robert left Germany to attend a private boarding school in England. His family remained behind.

"For many years, he would say he wasn't a Holocaust survivor. He was not in a ghetto. He was not in a camp. He didn't suffer like those people," Mollengarden said.

"He will say, 'I was safe. I had a family who loved me.' But I tell him, 'You suffered. Your childhood was upended. You didn't have a childhood. Many of your

family were killed.'"

The aunt who lived with him in Frankfurt. The uncle who let him live in his house in Frankfurt. Another uncle who funded his move to England. Another uncle who took care of his older brother.

"All of those people perished." Years later, Dr. May would say that his greatest regret was not doing more to try to help the family get out.

"He had nightmares of Nazis chasing him," said his daughter.

He still has those nightmares.

A duty to tell stories

The Birmingham Holocaust Education Center is still working to recover the stories of Holocaust survivors who have lived in Alabama. "So many have died, and we can't find family members," Mollengarden said.

The center considers anyone who lived under the Nazi regime to be a survivor. They have identified 158 survivors with a connection to Alabama, including 15 who lived in Anniston. As of today, there are 19 survivors alive in Alabama (none in Anniston).

Last fall, the center created a workshop for Alabama educators based around the stories of three Holocaust survivors: Robert May, Ruth Siegler and Anne Frank. All three were about the same age and grew up about 60 miles from each other in Germany. Their fates were very different.

Anne Frank's story you know. Robert's story you just learned. Ruth, who now lives in Birmingham, grew up in a small town in Germany. After Kristallnacht, her family fled to Holland and lived with a grandmother. They were about to depart for the U.S. when Rotterdam was bombed by the Germans and all their papers were destroyed, trapping them in Holland.

After Germany invaded Holland, the family wound up in a refugee camp, where her father got a job in administration.

"They were in a sweet spot, so to speak, if you can call it a sweet spot." Then one day her brother didn't tip his hat to a Nazi officer, and he was arrested and scheduled for transport to a concentration camp. The family elected to go with him.

They were moved from camp to camp. Only Ruth and her sister survived.

The different fates of these three young people came down to the choices their families made. "A lot of teachers teach Anne Frank and don't know much about the history," Mollengarden said. "We tried to give them the historical background before and after."

This year, the center is planning a similar workshop using the stories of two Birmingham survivors and author Elie Wiesel (because a lot of teachers also teach his book "Night").

"I've been very fortunate to know a lot of survivors and to hear their stories," Mollengarden said. "These are local people who live in our state. They have committed their lives to telling their stories, and it's our duty to continue to tell those stories. What better way than to teach with them?"

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