

Helga Melmed to share her story of surviving the Holocaust

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VENICE

Venice woman shares her story to combat rising tide of anti-semitism



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Sarasota Herald-Tribune



VENICE – Helga Melmed was a 5-year-old in 1933 on her first day of school in Berlin, when her teacher called her a “dirty Jew.”

“And she beat my hands,” the now 95-year-old Melmed recalled. “I ran home to my mama and asked, 'Why am I dirty? I just got a bath, I have new clothes, my hair’s clean.’”

“It was really difficult for her to explain to a 5-year-old.”

She was 10 in November 1938 during Kristallnacht – the first time Nazis made mass arrests of Jews just because they were Jewish – a time so named because of the broken glass from vandalism of Jewish homes, businesses and synagogues.

Young Helga was almost 13 in October 1941 when she, along with her parents Freida and Georg Arndthelm, were deported and traveled via cattle car to the ghetto of Lodz in Poland where Nazis forced Jews to work in factories.

SWEDISH HOSPITAL - SIGTUNA



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Her father was shot and killed there and her mother later died from exhaustion.

Melmed was deported to Auschwitz in 1943 and in 1944 worked in forced labor camps near Hamburg, before being sent on a death march to Bergen-Belsen – she weighed 46 pounds and was sick with typhus, typhoid fever and tuberculosis when the British liberated Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945.

Melmed will share the story of her survival of Auschwitz and the hard labor camps at 10:30 a.m., Feb. 16 in commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day at the Venice Community Center, 3236 Nokomis Ave. S.

The program is sponsored by the Chabad of Venice & North Port, the Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee and Gulf Coast Community Foundation and includes world renowned violinist Vladimir Tsypin.

Tickets are available through the Chabad at <https://www.chabadofvenice.com/tickets>.



“We were bunkered in a big stable, four to five girls in a row, next to the building that housed the gas ovens,” Melmed said in a recollection used in a Chabad advance announcement of her talk. “We smelled the flesh from the gas ovens burning.

‘I can still smell that horrible flesh-burning smell.’”

'A walking skeleton'

Melmed was barely conscious when the British liberated Bergen-Belsen.

“I heard the noise and the hollering outside,” said Melmed, who was then carried away. “I was so scared they were going to put me in a mass grave because that’s what they were doing – but they weren’t the Germans, they were the British and they took me to a field hospital.”

She stayed in a field hospital for a while and then was transported on the Swedish Red Cross ship Kastelholm to a hospital in Sigtuna, Sweden, where she recovered with other survivors.

Melmed said they measured her gradual recovery by encircling a limb with a thumb and forefinger.

“My thigh wasn’t even as thick as your wrist,” Melmed said.



Her daughter Lisa Bean, who has accompanied her mother on numerous speaking engagements both in the U.S. and internationally, quickly added, “That’s insane isn’t it – like a walking skeleton.”

Melmed recovered in the hospital and was later taken in by the Schroeder family in Sweden.

“They had two children of their own and they became my little sisters and they treated me just like the kids,” Melmed said.

But her mother’s sister, Paulal Bein – Taunta Paula – found out Melmed was alive and wanted the young girl to live with her family on Onderdonk Avenue in New York City.

“She expected to find my mother but she found me and she insisted that I come here,” Melmed said. “I was sad leaving Sweden because I was very comfortable with the people there and I loved the people,”

Freida Arndtheim had doted on her only child and frequently sent Taunta Paula photos of her as a child and youth – rare images that Melmed uses in her presentation.

Learning English and becoming a nurse

Before she left, Melmed studied English but spoke very little until she arrived in New York and, “the teacher handed me a big red Thorndike Dictionary and told me, ‘You go and learn,’” Melmed said.

Melmed learned English from the dictionary and by working with children and at Beth Israel Hospital in Union Square.

“They taught me a lot of English,” she said. “Kids do that.”

Melmed could not study to be a nurse in New York because she was not yet a citizen but she could at Philadelphia Jewish Hospital (now part of Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia), became a citizen and took her state board exams.



After marrying Charles Melmed, she went back to college at Glassboro State College – now Rowan University – and earned a bachelor’s degree.

They had four children and lived in the New Jersey suburbs of Philadelphia until they moved to Venice because Charles Melmed wanted to be in the warm weather. Charles Melmed died in 2016.

Melmed worked for a dozen years as a nurse with the Florida Department of Health in Sarasota County administering vaccinations to babies and youths and became known as “the shot lady,” as Bean recalled after an encounter with school children who recognized her mother at a grocery store.

She retired in 2003.

Melmed also volunteered with Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Suncoast and was paired with her “little” Katie Wilson for roughly a decade.

Sharing her story

Melmed said she started opening up to Katie about the Holocaust and her youth.

That led to other talks at schools and universities, as well as trips to Berlin in 2019 – as part of a reconciliation program meant to build ties with Berliners who had been forced out by the Nazis – and Hamburg in 2021, and again in 2022, for the 77th anniversary of the liberation of the prisoners of Neuengamme concentration camp. She spoke both at the commemoration event and to schoolchildren.

Locally Melmed has also become part of Impact Theatre, a collaboration between the Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee, Temple Sinai, and Newtown Alive.

A short documentary film about Impact Theatre was scheduled to debut at 2 p.m., Feb, 12, at the Sarasota Art Museum, 1001 S. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota.

Melmed said she continues to share her story because “I keep hoping people will learn from the memories that I have because there’s so much anti-Semitism out there now and hate and violence don’t work – all they do is bring war.

“We’ve got to learn to get together and respect each other and love each other rather than hate each other.”

This report includes information from the Associated Press and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.