

March is act of remembrance of Holocaust, Nazi death march

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For the Jews, the march never ends.

Most Jewish holidays are cause for looking backward through time, to various episodes in history when the Jews survived, often against all odds. They survived slavery in Egypt and 40 years in the desert. They survived the ruthless oppression of the Greek king Antiochus. They survived the previous year — for even Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, is meant for retrospection and repentance.

On April 12, 1951, the Israeli parliament established a new holiday: Yom Hashoah, or Day of the Catastrophe. Ever since, Jews have paused collectively to look back and remember the millions who died in the Shoah — the worst genocide ever wrought by mankind.

The Holocaust was memorialized Tuesday night at Brith Sholom Beth Israel Synagogue, and the infamous Nazi death march was symbolically recreated by hundreds, including survivors of the death camps and Mayor Joe Riley, who walked from the synagogue to Marion Square, where candles were lit in honor of the dead.

Afterward, Riley spoke of his visit last month to Auschwitz. “It was the most powerful experience I ever had,” he said. “I went there thinking I knew something,” but the history books did not prepare him for what he saw — the enormous piles of eyeglasses and shoes, the gas chambers and crematorium, “the evil, the system of evil.” It became suddenly real for him, he said, struggling to find the words.

Ernest Michel, the guest speaker at the Yom Hashoah Memorial Program and a Holocaust survivor, thinks about the past every day, but it is the future he worries about most. Michel, who survived nearly six years in German concentration camps, escaped the death march, then, in an incredible reversal of fortune, covered the Nuremberg Trials as a journalist for the German news agency DANA, works tirelessly to ensure that future generations understand what happened to 6 million Jews and 5 million others more than 60 years ago.

He arrived in the United States in 1946 and eventually went to work at the United Jewish Appeal, a New York organization that raises money for Jewish causes. Today he holds the title of executive vice president emeritus. “I’m still active as I was before,” the 82-year-old said. “I never give up working.”

Earlier in the day, three Holocaust survivors sat together to talk about their lives. Although Michel (No. 104995) lives in New York City, this is not the first time he has seen Charleston residents Joe Engel (No. 84009) or Pincus Kolender (No. 161253).

“When I see survivors in a city I go to, it’s such a *mekhaye* (pleasure)!” Michel said.

During Passover in 1944, Michel huddled in the corner of his barracks with a few others and prayed. The call for redemption that typically ends the seder observance — “Next year in Jerusalem” — wedged itself in his memory and became an insatiable desire. He promised himself that, if he did not succumb in the death camp, he would transform a symbolic phrase of hope into a reality.

In 1981, the first and only World Gathering of Holocaust Survivors was held in Israel and attended by 6,000 Jews, including Engel, who is now 78, and Kolender, who is 80. It took Michel four years to organize the gathering.

He said Tuesday's memorial march through the streets of Charleston was the best such event in which he has participated. Its large, diverse crowd revealed a degree of respect and sense of community not typically found at Holocaust remembrances, he said.

Marchers held signs and candles as they made their way down Rutledge Street and along Calhoun Street to the park. "Make your memory relevant," one read. "No matter what our faith is, we will remember." "Never again."

But it seems as though it will take forever to extinguish all the hatred in the world.

When Kolender visited the Polish town of his birth two years ago, he saw that someone had defaced a movie poster, drawing a large nose on the depicted face and scrawling "Kill the Jews" over it.

When Engel traveled to his Polish hometown in 2005, a shop owner confronted him, saying, "You got what you deserved."

"I went away (from her)," Engel said. "I didn't say anything, but my blood was boiling."

For the Jews, the past is made of blunt material. It is a tangible, vivid, traumatic and joyous place. It is what informs Jewish identity and fuels the spirit. While the past is real, the future is abstract — merely a direction, often ill-lit. "Next year in Jerusalem," perhaps the most hopeful sentiment Jews know to utter, is filled with a longing that carries the weight of 4,000 years.

The memory of the Holocaust is something the Jews will keep with them as they continue their long march through time. It will obligate them always to look over their shoulders, mourn the past, celebrate their survival and think about their children's children.