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Concentration camp survivor says: 'forgive, don't forget'

By Bridget Soper
Staff Writer

Few people today can imagine trading a whole day's food for the use of a sewing needle.

Judith Isaacson can imagine trading everything she had to eat for a needle, because as a holocaust survivor in a concentration camp, she did just that.

To make her world a little brighter, Isaacson traded her ration of bread to borrow a needle to make a kerchief to cover her bald head.

Isaacson was interred in a German concentration camp at the age of 19 with her family. She never saw her father and brothers again, but she survived with her mother and aunt.

Isaacson survived three weeks in the Auschwitz concentration camp. Over the next year, she was moved from one work camp to another in Germany.

"We were always taken east, away from approaching Allied troops", said Isaacson, who spoke Tuesday at the Women in the Curriculum lunch series.

"Seeds of Sarah" is the book Isaacson wrote about her experiences in German slave labor camps.

Isaacson came to Maine shortly after her liberation from the concentration camp with her husband, who had been in the United States Army in Germany.

Eventually, Isaacson went to Bates College and majored in math. She taught math at Lewiston High school and went on to become a Dean of Students at Bates College.

"I have suffered prejudice all my life," Isaacson said. "Prejudice as a Jew and as a woman at Bates College. It was a shock to see a woman in charge of male discipline."

As a dean at Bates, she rewrote many publications to remove sexist language.

Sexism in language does not come naturally for Isaacson because her native Hungarian does not make the distinctions between male and female.

"Seeds of Sarah" took Isaacson 10 years to write.

The title for the book came from the mandatory middle names Hitler gave to all Jewish people. The middle names were given as a way for Jewish people to be easily distinguished.

"We were told by a German overseer that even if we women survived the war we would be taken to a deserted island with no men. There would be no seed of Sarah," Isaacson said.

Because all the prisoners in the concentration camp had their heads shaven, many of the women wanted to look more feminine. Someone found a needle and made a kerchief to cover her head.

"The women in my barracks were able to sustain our sanity with mere trifles, even in hell," she said.

Remaining sane in the environment of the camp was important to Isaacson. Her educational background helped her survive. She hummed Beethoven and recited poetry everyday so she would not forget her life before the concentration camps.

When Isaacson returned to one of the villages where she had been a prisoner, she was asked to speak at the 700th anniversary to the village. Her thoughts turned to her wartime experiences.

She said one image has stayed with her since her liberation. All the houses in the villages she travelled through as a slave laborer had lace curtains hanging in the windows. The idea of all the happy families behind the curtains reminded her of what her life had been before she was put in a concentration camp.

"We cannot forget but only try to learn to forgive," Isaacson said. "I can't erase the pain."