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Interfaith Holocaust commemoration features speaker who survived because his parents gave him away

By Bill Sherman World correspondent Apr 28, 2019



Holocaust survivor Abraham Foxman
Evan Agostini/Invision via AP file
Evan Agostini

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Interfaith Holocaust Commemoration

What: Yom HaShoah/Interfaith Holocaust Commemoration

When: 7 p.m. Monday, May 6

Where: Temple Israel, 2004 E. 22nd Place

Speaker: Holocaust survivor Abraham Foxman

Free, public event recommended for ages 12 and older

Holocaust survivor Abraham Foxman, who will speak here next week, was just 15 months old when his family in Poland was broken up by the approaching Nazi army.

Now, more than seven decades later, he cannot separate his actual memories of those events from the stories he was told growing up.

The year was 1941.



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Two years earlier, the Germans had invaded Poland and were moving across the nation.

“My parents decided to move east, hoping that they could outrun the Germans,” Foxman said in a recent phone interview.

“The Germans caught up with us in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania.”

When his parents were ordered into a ghetto, his nanny, a Catholic woman, agreed to take Foxman into her home to keep him safe. They thought it would be for a few months.

“They could never explain to me how they made that decision, for parents to be separated from their own child. It was a horrendous decision ... but it saved my life, and it saved their lives because, separately, they were able to fend for themselves.”

“Human compassion — the love of my nanny — saved me.”

Months stretched into years.

Foxman was given a non-Jewish name and baptized a Catholic.

Miraculously, he said, his parents survived the war. When he was nearly 6 years old, they came looking for him.

By then, he said, the nanny loved him as her own child and was unwilling to give him up.

“The nanny said I belonged to her and to the Catholic Church.”

For a period of time, he straddled two worlds, attending the Jewish synagogue with his father on Saturdays and the Catholic Church on Sundays.

“I was raised in faith, and as long as I knew I was praying to the Almighty, to God, I was happy,” he said.

Eventually, his parents won the custody battle.

It was a bittersweet time, he said, but he believes he owes his life to the courage of his nanny.

The family of three lived together for about four years in a displaced persons camp in Austria before getting approval to immigrate to the United States.

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Foxman was 10 years old when they arrived in New York City. He still lives in that area.

He went on to get his law degree and then took a job with ADL (Anti-Defamation League), a leading national organization fighting anti-Semitism and bigotry.

He retired three years ago after 50 years to the day with ADL, the last 28 years as director.

“I was so lucky to be able, all of my adult life, to deal with the issues of hate that almost destroyed me,” he said.

Foxman continues in retirement to work to fight bigotry. He is a consultant on a project to build a permanent exhibit on the history of anti-Semitism at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City.

Foxman said the world, and the United States, are “not doing well” in the fight to eradicate anti-Semitism.

“We’ve learned to find ways to contain it, put a firewall around it,” he said, by education and by providing consequences for bigots.

“You can be a racist. We will protect your right to be a bigot, but you will pay a price,” he said.

“But that firewall is disappearing. The memory of Holocaust is disappearing.

“The internet has made it much, much worse. It’s great, but it’s a superhighway for hate.”

Foxman will speak at the Yom HaShoah/Interfaith Holocaust Commemoration at 7 p.m. Monday, May 6, at Temple Israel, 2004 E. 22nd Place. The free, public event is recommended for ages 12 and older.

It is sponsored by the Tulsa Council for Holocaust Education of the Jewish Federation of Tulsa and the Tulsa City-County Library, working with dozens of interfaith and community organizations. Elliott Wulff will sing “Kaddish,” by French composer Maurice Ravel. Holocaust art by Tulsa-area students will be displayed.

The event will not be Foxman’s first time in Tulsa. In November 1988, he marched in a torchlight parade in downtown Tulsa commemorating the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the destruction of Jewish synagogues and businesses that historians say marks the beginning of the Holocaust.

A documentary film, “Secret Lives: Hidden Children and Their Rescuers During WWII,” will be shown at 2 p.m. Sunday, April 28, at Circle Cinema, with a Skype Q-and-A with director and producer Aviva Slesin following. For details call 918-585-3504 or go to circlecinema.com.

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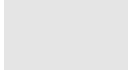
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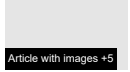
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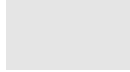
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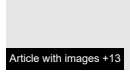
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