

# As 'array of witnesses' dwindles, survivor, daughter carry message

Minneapolis Star Tribune

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April 19, 2001



Two generations bear witness: Survivor Hinda Kibort and her daughter, Joni Sussman, Holocaust chair of the Jewish Community Relations Council. (Star Tribune photo by Brian Peterson)

Hinda Kibort of Edina said she and her fellow Holocaust survivors constitute "an army of witnesses." In Eastern Europe after the defeat of Nazi Germany, she saw other groups that had been abused going on rampages against Germans. But she never saw the Jews do it.

"We wanted to bring them into court" and see their tormentors put on trial, she said. Her husband and fellow survivor of the Stutthof concentration camp, Leo Kibort, testified at the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal. " They returned to Germany in 1969, because the Nazi commandant of their native area in Lithuania had just been captured and they wanted to go to his trial.

Kibort still bears witness, telling about her experiences. She tells her audiences to hang onto their self respect and self-esteem no matter how anyone tries to humiliate them. She remembers how the female inmates were forced to relieve themselves in front of male guards and how the guards used to call her an animal. And she remembers how Frau Schmidt, one of her role models, would say to the women: Who is the animal, the inmate who is being forced to degrade herself, or the guard who could turn his back but chooses to watch and mock?

Keep your self-respect, she tells her audiences, and you can build a new life, as she and other survivors had to do, "starting over without a family, without a country . . . without everything" except self-respect.

But the army of witnesses is dwindling. Leo Kibort died in December. Hinda Kibort just turned 80. And the job of witnessing is passing to a new generation.

Kibort's daughter, Joni Sussman, 46, also of Edina, is Holocaust chair of the Jewish Community Relations Council. "I want people to know about [the Holocaust]," she said. "I want us to keep trying to understand how a civilized democracy like Germany was after World War I could turn into the Third Reich."

She wants them to remember what can happen when good people do nothing, or don't vote, or allow freedom of expression to be compromised, or look away when their neighbors are abused, or put their own economic well-being ahead of basic human values.

Sussman belongs to an organization called Children of Holocaust Survivors Association In Minnesota. The acronym, CHAIM, is the Hebrew word for "life."

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