

# GATEWAY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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## **Holocaust survivor speaks with Gateway World Studies classes**

**Huntington** – Students were uncharacteristically quiet and still throughout the hour-long telling of her experience as a teen during the Holocaust in Hungary. Ruth Mermelstein, now in her 80's, detailed her harrowing experience from 1940 until April 1945.

"I survived. I'm telling you my story of survival," she said to the 9<sup>th</sup> graders in World Studies teacher Chris Mosher's class.

Ruth was born in Sighet, part of Romania given to Hungary—a German ally—in 1930. Soon afterwards, hints of what was to come began to filter into her community, but they were too incredible to be believed. Earlier, the older boys and men in her village had been rounded up and marched to the Ukraine where they were lined up and shot into a mass grave. One of the men was not killed but played dead until the Nazi soldiers left. It took him six months to return to his village and tell his story, but few believed him. Radios and forms of communication were confiscated and little was known of what was happening throughout Europe.

In 1942, more men were called up for forced labor—including Ruth's father. They were worked until they were too ill or exhausted to work anymore then put into a building that was set on fire. Some of the men were able to escape, including her father.

He could have tried to reach Russia and freedom but opted to return to his village to be with his family. He returned with several fingers missing (they had frozen and fallen off). People often came to visit him asking about their sons, husbands, fathers and brothers, but all he would say to them was they had looked well the last time he had seen them. She believed later that he knew that they were dead.

Then Adolf Eichmann came to town, forced Jewish families to give up all items of value and moved them to ghettos where they were made to wear a yellow star on their clothing. Food was rationed, school was no longer offered. She was 14 when they were marched to a train station, where 80 – 100 people were put in boxcars designed to each hold 4 horses. They traveled for 4 days and 3 nights, stopping once a day to remove the dead, add more people, and provide one bucket of water—which was given to the very young and the very old. As they neared Auschwitz-Birkenau, her father's last words to her were, "You are strong. You will survive and be free again."

She and her sister were then separated from the rest of their family, with no chance to say goodbye and never to see them again. Her work assignments included sorting the clothes and shoes that had been taken from people on arrival, and also working each day for six weeks on her knees in the sun to build a road—earning an extra slice of bread each day for her efforts.

She described numerous “selections” over who would go to the crematorium, and who would live for the present. Again and again, she was spared. Another train brought Ruth and her sister to a new camp to work in a munitions factory where they enjoyed fresher air and better conditions, for a while. But rumor had it that the Russians were nearing and the women in her unit were forced on a death march through snow and sleet. Those who sat or fell were shot. Five days of marching with very limited rations brought them back to more boxcars for a six day train ride to Bergen-Belsen, which Mermelstein described as a hell on earth filled with human skeletons. Everyone was starving and typhus and tuberculosis was rampant in the camp. In the last days before the liberation, Ruth was beaten severely and nearly died. Dr. Glen Hughes, a British physician, arrived with soldiers to liberate the camp. For many, it was too late. The kindness of giving people food and chocolates, she said, only made many people die faster.

Medical staff went through the camp and marked the faces of those they thought they might still save. Despite her injuries, Mermelstein was selected once again – but this time for medical treatment. She was brought to Sweden where she remained for the next ten years, catching up on school (in classes taught by other survivors) and seeing concerts, operas, plays. She had contracted tuberculosis and endured many relapses but was also reunited with her sister. In time they married American citizens (her husband was also a survivor) and moved to the United States.

One of the more chilling things that Ruth shared was that the German Nazi’s were very highly educated, but used that knowledge to kill the greatest number of people as quickly and cheaply as possible.

“If you are told this never happened, tell them you heard it from somebody who survived it,” Mermelstein told the students.

The virtual field trip was held in the high school library using video conferencing. Mermelstein spoke to students from the Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center in New York City. The opportunity was made possible with a grant from the Gateway Education Foundation, written by Mosher and district librarian Bill Brown.

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***Photo: Ruth Mermelstein,  
Holocaust Survivor who spoke  
with students at Gateway  
Regional High School via  
video conferencing.***