

Holocaust survivor speaks about his journey “From Heaven to Hell”

By: Kaitlyn Mixon

Colorado State University just held its 23rd annual Holocaust Awareness Week, and on Wednesday, March 3, 2022, people of all ages gathered to listen to a survivor's story.

The event began with four Yiddish songs performed by CSU students, picked by the survivor himself, Osi (Štaub) Sladek. Before Sladek started his speech, Rabi Yerachmiel Gorelik spoke about the importance of Holocaust awareness and his views about survivors.

“Holocaust survivors are, bar none. The most joyful people that I know,” Gorelik said.

Sladek began to speak about his childhood journey from heaven to hell, as he was six years old when the Holocaust began. He explained that he was speaking in order to raise awareness of the Holocaust so that no similar event would ever happen to any country or people group in the future. Emotionally and thoroughly, Sladek continued to explain the difficulties and horrors he faced throughout his time facing this atrocity. He had a certain depth to him that was expressed in the stories of his tragedy-filled past.

“I may be one person standing here, but I am not standing alone here. My family, who disappeared on me, is standing here with me,” Sladek said. His family and he loved Germany as he grew up, German was his first language. They could not believe the events that were occurring to them during the time, as they were in love with the German culture.

The children at school ridiculed him and beat him, saying, “Dirty Jew, they’re going to kill you. Go back to Palestine.” He said that it was the beginning of his holocaust. His parents’ business was taken away from them. Citizenship and bank accounts were taken away from them. Apartments were taken away from them.

“We became fugitives in our own country,” Sladek said. His mother was instructed to take care of him and hide him from a German soldier. He spent the next 2 years in fear every time there was a knock at the door as his mother rushed him to hide under the bed.

To keep him safe, his parents sent him to Hungary, where he spent a year. “I was free,” he said, “but every night I went to sleep. I cried myself to sleep.” He was just 8 years old. Following a year of this, he was taken back to his family.

Sladek recounted his journey west through the Tatra mountains in 1944 as an escape from Nazi operatives. He said that the trip lasted four months during the worst winter Slovakia had ever endured. Living with about a dozen other Jews hiding from the Nazis, Sladek explained the conditions of the mountain stay in detail. They were treacherous; food was only brought to them twice a week by a young farm boy.

Following these months, Nazi troops began entering the mountains. His family moved to the safety of a cave, and just three hours later, the Nazis arrived and the shooting began.

"We thought they were killing our friends. Boots, boots, boots, coming. They didn't find us," Sladek said.

Sladek announced that a novel about his personal experiences during the Holocaust would be coming out sometime within the next month, at the time of his speech. Now, *Escape To The Tatras: A Boy, A War, and A Life Interrupted* has been published and can offer even more insight into the terrifying years of danger he encountered, filled with desperation, deprivation, and imprisonment. The book is based on Sladek's journey of fleeing west with his family to escape the Nazi troops.

One Jewish CSU student who attended the event, Emily Mumby, was moved by Sladek's speech. Mumby stated that she attended nearly all of the Holocaust Awareness Week events and loves expanding her knowledge of her culture's history.

"It was incredible to see such a large representation of our student body at the event to not only celebrate Jewish culture but learn more about what makes our people strong," Mumby said.