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On the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, former Staten Islander recounts nightmare of living through the Holocaust

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It was branded onto Rachel Roth's arm when she was held prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II.

"They cut our hair and branded us with numbers, like cattle to slaughter," she said.

Mrs. Roth was the special guest at a ceremony Tuesday marking the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. More than 50 students and guests gathered in Foundation Hall at Wagner College, Grymes Hill, to hear her grim story of death and survival.

Professor Lori R. Weintrob, director of the new Wagner College Holocaust Education and Programming Center, organized the event to recognize the 1.2 million people who were killed at Auschwitz — 90 percent of them Jewish — part of the total of six million Jews who perished during the Holocaust.

The day serves as a stark reminder that "courage and resilience are needed to fight back against oppression," Professor Weintrob said.

"So many communities around the world need to study and think about so many of the lessons from the Holocaust, [which go] far beyond understanding anti-Semitism and the persecution of Jews."

Now living in Manhattan, Mrs. Roth, 89, resided in Todt Hill from 1970 until 2006 with her husband, Shlomo. The mother of five children, she now has 18 grandchildren and 23 great-grandchildren.

"I raised a new generation," she said proudly.

But the losses and suffering of the older generation are not easy to forget.

Mrs. Roth's memoir, "Here There is No Why," published in 2002, details her life under German occupation.

In 1939, she was Roma Rothstein, living in Poland. Her beautiful life was crushed, she said, when the Nazis came.

She lived through the Warsaw Ghetto.

"Life in the Ghetto was hard. People were sent from all over, but we tried to live a normal life," she said. That included having children sneak food through a hole in a wall, and her teacher managing somehow to gather a small group of students in a private house for lessons after education was forbidden.

At some point, she said, people would go out onto the street, "and they never came back."

Among them would be her mother, two sisters and a brother.

She later participated in and survived the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943.

Mrs. Roth recalled that when the Germans came to get her, she was wearing two pairs of pants, one in which she kept a dollar. As the Germans made the women undress, she removed the first pair of pants, then was almost stripped bare of the other.

“I was almost naked. I was ashamed and embarrassed and I held my pants and he [the German soldier] let me go. I still had the dollar,” she said eliciting smiles from the audience, but added, “I did not think about that — only that the German man would see me naked.”

She endured the atrocities of three concentration camps, Majdanek, Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen.

In Maidanek, she was included in a group of women to be killed. They spent the night inside the gas chamber but were spared when the Germans realized they had “made a mistake” and had the wrong group of women. The next day Mrs. Roth’s group was put on the train for Auschwitz. On their way they passed the other group of women - the ones originally bound for the gas chamber.

At Bergen-Belsen, “When English troops came and liberated the prisoners, people were shouting, ‘Long live England! Long live the King! Long live everybody!’ We were kissing their tank. The tank couldn’t go. It was the nicest moment of my life. I was never so happy in my life.”

The event was sponsored by Chai Society and Hillel, Wagner College, in cooperation with the Jewish Community Center of Staten Island and COJO of Staten Island.