



Staten Island Advance

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Staten Island Holocaust survivors and families honored at JCC celebration

by VIRGINIA N. SHERRY

Billed as a celebration of hope and courage, 18 Staten Island women and men who survived the Nazi Holocaust during World War II — along with their second, third and fourth generation family members — gathered Sunday morning for a lavish buffet breakfast and riveting program focused on their personal stories as Jewish residents of cities and towns in Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania.

Sunday was the fifth annual event — known as Café Europa — held at the Joan and Alan Bernikow Jewish Community Center on Manor Road in Sea View, and the first time it was organized in collaboration with Wagner College.

“Today is a celebration of family, courage and hope,” said Rachel Borenstein, who has chaired Café Europa for the past five years and whose father, Emil Jacoby, survived a Nazi concentration camp and lived in Grasmere from 1985 until his death in 1998.

“This year, Staten Island’s Holocaust survivors are the central focus of the program,” noted New Springville resident Sara Cohen, who coordinates the Jewish Life and Learning Department at the JCC. “Generally we have a guest speaker who tells his or her story, but this year the people attending Café Europa have their own stories featured.”

“For me, they are heroes — and it’s wonderful to see them here with their families, sharing their legacies and stories,” Cohen added.

More needs to be written, told

“There is a need for more to be written and told,” said Wagner College professor Lori Weintrob, who narrated a moving multimedia slide show, focused exclusively on Staten Island’s Holocaust survivors. It included historic black-and-white photographs of these survivors during the era of Nazi oppression and genocide.

“Courage, resilience and love — this is your legacy,” Weintrob told the survivors in the audience.

Staten Island is the only borough of New York City that does not have a Holocaust center, said Weintrob, director of Holocaust Education and Programming at Wagner College, who continues to collect histories of the Island’s remaining Holocaust survivors.

Selected art work from “Tragedy and Resilience: Holocaust Survivors of Staten Island” — on exhibit at the Hormann Gallery at Wagner College — was on display at Sunday’s event, including contemporary photo portraits of the Holocaust survivors taken by Sara Signorelli.

Staten Island Holocaust survivors featured in Sunday’s program included: Chaim Ben-Aron, Harry and Pola First, George Gelb, Rachel Gottlieb, Gabi Held, Miriam Jacobs-Schwartz, Brenda and Moritz Perelman, Rachel Roth, Egon Salmon, Arthur Spielman, Hannah Steiner, Benjamin Wayne and Abram and Mirjam Zylberberg.

Café Europa is funded by the UJA-Federation of New York and the Claims Conference.