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LOCAL

Holocaust survivors tell stories

Students at Reagan Library listen

By Michele Willer-Allred
Special to The Star

Holocaust survivor Renee Firestone recalled how her idyllic life was suddenly uprooted back in 1944 when she and her family were taken from their home shortly after her 20th birthday and sent by cattle cars to the German concentration camp Auschwitz.

"All I could see was Nazi soldiers marching up and down the railroad tracks holding on to vicious dogs," she said. "The people were screaming, crying and terrified."

Now 91, Firestone spoke on Friday about her experiences at Auschwitz, a camp in Poland, during a special presentation in front of several hundred students at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Simi Valley. Joining her was Hermine Liska, an Austrian victim of Nazi tyranny.

The event is part of a speaking tour across the United States with author and award-winning international filmmaker Bernhard Rammerstorfer, whose latest book and DVD is an account of Nazi-era eyewitnesses titled "Taking the Stand." Firestone said that before she was ordered from her home by the Nazis, she put on a floral bathing suit under her dress. It was a gift from her father and a reminder of the good times she enjoyed with friends by the pool.

Once at Auschwitz, she said, she was taken to a bathhouse and Nazi soldiers told her to undress. "I was standing there in this bathing suit. I just couldn't take it off. All of a sudden I felt this burning sensation on my face and I realized the Nazi soldier slapped me and ordered me to remove it. I started to cry. I took my bathing suit off and left it on top of my clothes," said Firestone.

"With that bathing



PHOTOS BY DAVID YAMAMOTO/SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Holocaust survivor and teacher Renee Firestone answers a question related to her experience in Auschwitz during a presentation Friday at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Simi Valley.

suit, I remember I left all those wonderful memories and my father's love all behind."

Liska, who spoke through an interpreter, said she was an 8-year-old farm girl in Austria when she was subjected in school to join the Hitler Youth and give the Nazi salute.

Her parents were Jehovah's Witnesses and anti-Nazi, and when they refused to sign a pledge to raise their children according to Nazi ideology, Liska was sent away to a Nazi children's home, where she still refused to conform and was subjected to punishment.

Liska told the students at the Reagan Library that they too face a lot of peer pressure, and when that happens, they need to stand up and say no.

"It takes real courage to say no, I'm not going to do it, but then you're not included. But, the

one that refuses is the stronger one. You must also encourage tolerance and respect. That is very important," she told the students.

Firestone lost her mother and sister to Auschwitz. After the war, she came to the United States and built a successful career in fashion design that spanned three decades.

Today, she speaks around the world about the Holocaust.

She said she is disturbed by the continued genocide in the world, as well as what she sees going on in schools, where bullying is rampant and children bring guns to classes.

She hopes talking to them will make them more aware and eager to do the right thing.

"Every time I look at a class full of schoolchildren, I think to myself, you know, there was a man by the name of Adolf



Sereth Malagone, 17, grasps the hand of Hermine Liska, thanking her for sharing her story during a book-signing session Friday. Liska also gave a presentation to students.

Hitler who single-handedly almost destroyed the whole world," Firestone

said. "Looking at the kids in the audiences that I speak to, maybe one of

them will grow up and save the world. That's what I'm hoping for."