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In honor of Librescu: Virginia Tech hosts Holocaust survivor to share hardship

Andrew Shedlock, news reporter Apr 26, 2017



Ahmed Mustafa / Collegiate Times

Rabbi Nissen Mangel, a child inmate and survivor of Auschwitz, points to the tattoo given to him by the Nazis during the holocaust before an audience, Moss Arts Center, April 24, 2017.

On Monday, the Jewish Student Union and the Chabad at VT hosted Rabbi Nissen Mangel, a survivor of the Holocaust, as part of the Dr. Librescu Memorial Lecture. Liviu Librescu was a Virginia Tech professor who gave his life on April 16 blocking a door so students could escape through a window and was also a Holocaust survivor. The lecture coincides with Yom Hashoah or Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Over 800 people arrived to hear Mangel speak about his experience through the Holocaust.

Mangel took those in attendance through his story of living through the Holocaust. The lecture began with Mangel explaining what he saw as the three types of Holocaust survivors: those who refused to accept the existence of God, those who had no change in their religion and those whose belief in God was only strengthened. "I am part of that third group," Mangel said.

"In the darkest moments, I always saw a glimmer of light which sustained me," Mangel said. Mangel began describing his experiences in Auschwitz. When Mangel and his family arrived in Auschwitz, they were sorted by the "Angel of Death," Josef Mengele.

As they were quickly being sorted, Mangel's father attempted to hide him by his side so that Mangel could avoid the gas chambers.



Rabbi Nissen Mangel, a child inmate and survivor of Auschwitz, takes questions from Samuel Kessler, a Virginia Tech postdoctoral fellow in Judaic Studies, before an audience, Moss Arts Center, April 24, 2017.

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Mengele determined the life or death of over a million people. As Mangel and his father ran by, Mengele stopped them to examine Mangel. As Mangel described, "It was a miracle that he sent me with my father." Mangel was 10 years old at the time and unlike many children, Mangel was not sent straight to the gas chambers. This has left Mangel with the continuing question of why Mengele stopped him and let him continue to live.

Mangel described another time while he was in Auschwitz in which he was at the medical block, recalling how Mengele looked over him and decided "to make a medical experiment out of me by finding a vein in my neck and seeing how long this liquid would take to kill me."

As Mangel heard this, he said that he jumped off the stretcher and yelled at Mengele, "Experiment on monkeys, not me!" multiple times before getting back on his stretcher and accepting his death. At this point, Mangel believed that he was as good as dead for screaming at Mengele, but as Mangel described, he was saved by some miracle.

Mangel related these two stories to two Bible parables: one of Abraham being thrown into King Nimrod's furnace and surviving and the other of Daniel in the lion's den.



Dr. Librescu Memorial Lecture

Rabbi Nissen Mangel, a child inmate and survivor of Auschwitz, shakes hands with Sameuel Kessler, a postdoctoral fellow from the Department of Religion and Culture, following a question and answer session where he told his story of faith and surviving the holocaust, Moss Arts Center, April 24, 2017.

Ahmed Mustafa / Collegiate Times

“I was in the inferno and in the lion’s den with Mengele and survived,” Mangel said. “This was the light I saw which saved me.”

The last experience that Mangel shared with the audience was about an event during the death marches. Mangel described how after days of marching in the cold snow, he was going to give up and step out of line so that the SS guards would shoot him. Fortunately, Mangel had another prisoner who helped him along until he could no longer keep going.

Yet Mangel describes what he thought was another miracle. An SS guard helped Mangel keep going and survive the Holocaust. Mangel said, “Who was this, for them to kill a Jew was an honor. They were the scum of the Earth. Perhaps this SS was an angel sent to save me. God almighty sent this angel to help me.”

This led Mangel to make his final point for why his faith in God was strengthened by his ordeal in the Holocaust. It is Mangel’s belief that the miracles of not being sent to gas chambers, not being killed by the SS and the SS guard who helped him survive were all miracles allowed by the mercy of God.

To the question that many people ask when thinking about the Holocaust: "Where was God?," Mangel said, “Only God almighty can answer this question, and I will ask him myself.”