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Nazi sympathizer's granddaughter speaks from the heart

BARBARA AIELLO | FEBRUARY 8, 2014, 9:56 PM |

“I loved him,” begins Dr. Martina Emme. The tremor in her voice is audible now and, for those of us sitting in the front row, we can see that her eyes are filling with tears. Dr. Emme, keynote speaker at the International Holocaust Remembrance Day hosted by the Tampa Bay (Florida) European Consular Corps, is speaking about her grandfather – a man who played a prominent role in her life. “We had a special relationship,” she says. “I recall one winter when I was just a little child. The snow was deep and covered the trees, yet to my astonishment I found a bright red apple hanging from a snow-covered branch. I was delighted and later I discovered it was my grandfather who created the surprise, by tying the apple to the tree and announcing that apples in the snow would be our new invention!

With this idyllic snapshot placed firmly in our minds' eye, Dr. Martina Emme went on to describe her teen years and the questions she asked about her family's history. “In those days we never spoke about the Holocaust,” Martina said. The family referred to those years as “The War,” and when Martina persisted she was told that the family worked hard to survive.

Questions begat more questions and Martina learned that her beloved grandfather, who was once a worker in a hat factory, became the factory's director during “The War.” When Martina's sleuthing produced information that the factory was owned and operated by the Weinberg family, Martina asked, “What happened to the Weinbergs?” The vague and convoluted answers from her family said it all as Martina later learned more about the Nazi sympathizers in her family's past. The grandfather who Martina loved so dearly apparently was the same grandfather who suddenly became factory director after the Weinberg family went “away.”

The audience of 400, most of whom were Jewish and many of whom had suffered Nazi persecution in the labor and death camps of Europe listened to Martina's story with a level of rapt attention that is rarely seen in gatherings of this size. It was almost as though we couldn't believe our ears. A young German woman, granddaughter of a Nazi sympathizer, was speaking of the

personal embarrassment, painful guilt and deep mortification she felt for her country's factory killing of six million European Jews.

January 27, 1945 marks the Liberation of the Auschwitz death camp, where one million Jews were murdered by the Nazis. In November 2005, the United Nations General Assembly resolved that January 27 should be observed as a day to honor the memory of Holocaust victims and encourage the development of education programs about Holocaust history to help prevent further acts of genocide. For this reason Dr. Martina Emme was selected to speak to the Tampa event on January 26, 2014.

The program, organized and directed by Vincent Genovese, Consular Correspondent of Italy for Tampa Bay, with help and support by the Italy's Consular General, Adolfo Barattolo, included a speeches by Chaim Shacham, Israeli Consul General and Holocaust survivor's daughter, Bonnie Stein. Auschwitz camp survivor, Rose Safar Rosen, who was liberated on January 27, 1945, was an honored guest along with other survivors of Nazi persecution, all of whom lit candles in honor of the Six Million. Yet, remarkably it was Dr. Emme's words that brought the audience to its feet.

Dr. Martina Emme explained how she attended an extraordinary meeting in 1993 where she first met descendants of survivors of the Shoah. She and two of her colleagues, Dr. Wilma Busse, the daughter of a Polish-Catholic labor camp survivor and Rosalie Gerut, the daughter of Jewish Shoah survivors, created a group process experience that included direct dialogue between the children of Nazi sympathizers and the children of victims of Nazi horror. These three courageous women along with several others founded the "One By One" organization dedicated to bringing together individuals polarized by war and genocide for in-depth, authentic dialogue. These groups have been meeting in Berlin, Germany since 1995.

It was Bonnie Stein, daughter of Holocaust death camp survivors who verified the need for Germans like Martina Emme to speak truthfully and to take responsibility for Germany's past. When Bonnie was invited to Berlin by Martina's group, she found the experience to be such a positive and life-changing event that Stein and Emme now travel together and share their stories.

"We must never forget our guilt," says Martina. "We must not bury it with simplistic terms like "closure," for there is so much for us to learn." For the victims and survivors of Germany's Nazi past, "Never Again," can be an achievable goal thanks to the strength of character of Germans like Martina Emme whose determination and courage will facilitate a dialogue that no matter how painful, will allow us to learn from history's darkest hour.