



Left: Holocaust survivors are assisted by volunteers at a hamentaschen-making event hosted by Congregation Neveh Shalom and Jewish Family & Child Service's Holocaust Survivor Services at Neveh Shalom. (Marina Milman/JFCS/Jewish Review file) Right: Eva Aigner speaks at the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education's 2023 Gala at the Mittleman Jewish Community Center. (Mario Gallucci for OJMCE)

# Survivors serve, are served by, community

By **ROCKNE ROLL**  
*The Jewish Review*

The Associated Press estimated that in January of this year, approximately 245,000 Jewish Holocaust survivors are living worldwide, out of just under 16 million Jews worldwide. It's harder to establish just how many survivors are living in the Portland Metropolitan Area, but many of them are integral parts of the region's Jewish community. And while much work is done to care for those who lived through the most horrific of modern atrocities, many survivors also care for the broader community – Jewish and non-Jewish – by serving as a memory; as an active, collective reminder of that which must never be allowed to happen again.

Survivors are cared for most directly by Holocaust Survivor Services, a division of Portland's Jewish Family & Child Service. HSS provides a variety of services to survivors, the most direct of which is in-home care like housekeeping and assistance with daily activities – these services are performed separately and through contracted providers.

Program Manager Sima Borsuk explained that HSS regularly serves around 60 survivor clients. Most of them are from the former Soviet Union; Russian is the first language of approximately 80 percent of HSS's clients. When they fled Eastern Europe, they came where they knew people.

"People came here if they had some family that brought them here, one of their children or siblings," Borsuk said.

One of the major sources of funding for services to Holocaust survivors is through the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, also known more simply as the Claims Conference. Founded in 1951 by 23 global Jewish nonprofits, the Claims Conference conducts ongoing negotiations with the German government to support the needs of survivors worldwide. JFCS uses those funds to pay for the caregivers that support survivors, as well as offering social programs for survivors such as Café Europa and helping survivors apply for certain one-time payments or ongoing pensions they may be eligible for through the Claims Conference. There are income and asset limits on many of the Claims Conference's programs, but they're not nearly as

stringent as Medicaid's rules.

Beyond HSS's client base and a handful of people who have had their status as survivors confirmed with the Claims Conference but turned down benefits, there's an unknown number of survivors in the Portland community who have not applied for that status or any of the benefits associated with it.

"Some of those survivors, they're considered survivors within our guidelines, but they might not consider themselves survivors," Borsuk said. "So there's potentially people who've never applied. Someone like that reached out to us a few weeks ago, who lives locally, and is in need of assistance. She does not have Medicaid but cannot afford assistance, so her daughter is in the process of applying now."

While some eligible individuals may not have known that these programs were available, others may not have applied for personal reasons.

"They didn't want to take the money from Germany," Borsuk explained. "I think that's becoming less of a barrier, but because that used to be, it could be those folks haven't applied."

In addition to the social programs JFCS puts on directly, Borsuk said that the agency is also partnering with other groups and agencies to facilitate participation by survivors in community-wide events. One example was Chabad's Mega Challah Bake in the lead up to the High Holidays last September.

"We had, I believe, 13 clients come, and it was really nice for them," Borsuk said. "We supported that through the Claims Conference socialization funds. That was a nice way for us to give them an opportunity to socialize, but not have to put together an event on our own. And it was also great for them to engage in the community."

Borsuk has become an expert in navigating the processes of working through the Claims Conference.

"I'm a social worker. I've always wanted to work with older adults. I get fulfillment from working with seniors," she said. "There is a lot of satisfaction with helping our survivors stay connected, get what they need, using the funds that we're given in a way that's as helpful as possible for those who we're servicing."

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While many survivor-focused programs center on taking care of those who endured the horrors of the Holocaust firsthand, there are also programs that provide opportunities for survivors to give of their time to the community.

A prominent example is the Speakers Bureau of the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education. Founded as part of the Oregon Holocaust Resource Center and later merged into the museum, the Speakers Bureau includes five active speakers who are first-generation survivors of the Holocaust, along with a number of second- and even third-generation Holocaust survivors as well as survivors of the Cambodian and Rwandan Genocides.

“Given their age, it’s mostly child survivors; hidden children and children who fled,” OJMCH Head of Public Engagement Mariah Berlanga-Shevchuk, who manages the Speakers Bureau, said of the first-generation survivors still active with the Bureau. “They range from having been 2 to 10 years old. They have really strong memories of what they were experiencing at that time.”

Those experiences resonate with students, who are a common audience for the Bureau’s speakers thanks in large part to the state’s Holocaust education mandate.

“The students really are impacted by it, especially when speakers can kind of bring in their own childhood experience into it,” Berlanga-Shevchuk said. “They can connect and put themselves in their shoes in a way that’s really moving and impactful.”

One of the Bureau’s first-generation survivor speakers is Eva Aigner. As a child in Czechoslovakia and later Hungary during the rise of the Nazis, her father died in a forced labor camp while she, her sister and their mother were confined to the ghetto in Budapest. Her mother was later taken away to a labor camp but escaped from the train and returned to Budapest as her children were being led to the banks of the Danube. There, members of the Nazi-affiliated Arrow Cross militia were murdering the occupants of a portion of the ghetto by shooting them into the river – memorialized by the “Shoes on the Danube Bank.”

“My mom recognized my sister’s crying voice in the line,” Aigner said. “She still had her wedding ring, and she bribed the Arrow Cross men. ‘I’ll give you my ring; let these two girls out of the line.’ They didn’t think she was Jewish.”

A few weeks later, the city was liberated. She went on to meet her husband, Les Aigner, z”l, who was a survivor of Auschwitz whose mother and sister were murdered in the gas chambers. Considering what they had both been through, it was a natural fit.

“We had so much in common in our lives,” Eva Aigner said. “We fell in love and 59 days later we got married.”

The couple emigrated to the United States. The pair were part of the efforts to build the Oregon Holocaust Memorial in Washington Park. In 1989, the couple saw a headline in *The Oregonian* about increasing Holocaust denial at the time.

“Both my husband and I decided that as painful as it is, we have to come forward,” Aigner said. “It wasn’t easy to share, because it brings back so many memories.”

At first Aigner didn’t speak – she said she wasn’t ready. But over time, she began to tell her story alongside her husband’s and has continued to speak after his death. They traveled throughout Oregon and elsewhere; Idaho, New York and

Los Angeles, just to name a few, presenting to audiences of all kinds. Aigner particularly remembers a presentation they made to a group of juvenile inmates at the Washington County Jail in Hillsboro.

“I will never forget this young man when he heard our story. He felt he was abused by his parents and he had a million excuses why he did some crime,” Aigner recalled. After the presentation, he said, ‘Mr. And Mrs. Aigner, after listening to your history, I have no excuse. You still turned out to be decent people.’”

They received thousands of letters and drawings from children over the years.

“I never had the feeling that you can change everybody. But I knew that some of them really took it to heart the way they wrote. And this one kid wrote, he said, ‘I hated everybody, because I didn’t grow up with love. But I see that you went through so much hate and you still made it in life.’ And we knew we made a difference, and that gave us the drive to continue,” Aigner said. “Hate doesn’t only happen against the Jewish people; they always find somebody to hate. My husband and my message was always love instead of hate.”

Their message was more than just love – it’s spelled out in Hebrew on a pin Aigner wears whenever she speaks publicly, a pin given to each attendee at her husband’s celebration of life service, in one word - *Zachor*.

“It means ‘remember,’” Aigner said. “My husband and I never spoke without having this on.”

It’s a mission that’s not lost on the people who work with the survivors who take on the work of speaking about their experiences.

“It’s an honor, honestly, to get to work with them and to help make sure that future generations can witness firsthand and hear this testimony,” Berlanga-Shevchuk said.

More information about JFCS’s Holocaust Survivor Services is available at [jfcs-portland.org/services/holocaust-survivor-services](http://jfcs-portland.org/services/holocaust-survivor-services). Learn more about OJMCH’s Speakers Bureau at [ojmche.org/teach-learn/speakers-bureau](http://ojmche.org/teach-learn/speakers-bureau).

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