

Celebrating 113 Years of Service to the Jewish Community

Newton survivor on a mission to educate on Holocaust Lending a first-hand account to the March of the Living

By Susie Davidson

Advocate correspondent

Sid Handler, 81, was a child when in 1941, the Germans overran his native city of Vilna (then in Poland, now Vilnius, in Lithuania). He went on to lose most of his family in the Holocaust, and has made it his mission to help educate others about its horrors. He serves on the organizing committee of the Massachusetts/New England March of the Living (MOTL) chapter, and as a Director of the Friends of the New England Holocaust Memorial.

Last year, Handler took his wife Claire, daughter-in-law Wendy, and three grandchildren, Michael, Jessica, and Kayla, on an adult MOTL trip. A "survivor contributor," he plans to join Friends of MOTL Executive Director Mel Mann on next year's trip as well.

The 2014 MOTL was not Handler's first trip back. In 2002, he accompanied a cousin from Israel, also a survivor, to Vilna and Germany. "It is impossible to describe how we felt," he said by telephone from his home in Newton. "We were both overwhelmed." Handler



Michelle Warshaw of Sharon joined Sid Handler and Irv Kempner on the 2014 March of the Living trip.

and his wife also went on a 2007 trip to Holocaust sites with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

According to the United Jewish Appeal Federation of New York, there are more than 500,000 Holocaust survivors worldwide, including approximately 200,000 in Israel. Survivors are generally in their 80s, and about 1,000 die each month.

Each year, MOTL, which began in 1988, brings more than 13,000 international Jewish teens to Poland and Israel. To date, over 250,000 Jewish teens have participated. The Mass. MOTL chapter, which is chaired by Irv

Kempner of Sharon, a son of Holocaust survivors, recruits both adult and teen participants and is currently raising money for scholarships for Massachusetts teens who wish to attend MOTL 2016. The trip will include a stop in Lithuania (in addition to Handler's Vilna roots, Mann is the child of Holocaust survivors from Kovno).

"It's one thing to read about the Holocaust or watch a documentary," said Kempner, "but hearing the personal account from a survivor in person brings the story to a whole new level, and to new generations."

Handler emigrated to the U.S. in 1947, went on to grad-

uate from Boston University, and became a successful businessman. He told The Advocate that he has spoken twice at B.U. Hillel on Yom HaShoah about the memories that continue to burden him daily: "Not a single day goes by where I don't think about lying in that attic listening to my mother's tears and gunshots," he told the Hillel audience. "Every day – when I'm alone in the car, going someplace, when I get up in the morning, when I shave – I think about it."

Handler has said, "I long ago vowed to 'never forget,' and to do whatever I can to make sure the world never forgets what happened to my family, along with 65 percent of Europe's pre-World War II Jewish population."

Handler recalls Vilna, a thriving city of 65,000 Jews, with precision. "I remember my hard-working father with his small trucking company, and my mother, who took care of the kids and did his bookkeeping," he told people on the 2007 trip while standing at his grandfather's former house.

The Germans came, and each day, people disappeared. By 1943, residents in their now-

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For Newton resident, Holocaust education is personal

ghetto numbered only 10,000. "People weren't taken to concentration camps," said Handler. "They died from malnutrition or disease, or were simply shot in a nearby field." Some 75,000 Jews alone, he noted, died in the killing field of Ponary.

For these and other stark figures on his former homeland, Handler cited "Ghetto in Flames: The Struggle and Destruction of the Jews in Vilna in the Holocaust," a 1980 book by Yitzhak Arad, former chairman of the Directorate of Yad Vashem.

"I just want everyone to come

on the March of the Living and learn about it," he said.

According to the Jewish Virtual Library, the pre-war, Yiddish-speaking Jewish population of "It's really important to hear survivors speak, because we are the last generation that will be able to, and as they pass away, we must go and bear witness for them," said MOTL teen participant Jake Dinerman, 21, of Rhode Island. "MOTL is also a fantastic way to meet others from around the world and develop bonds that will last a lifetime," he added.

"Sid had a horrific life during

the war," said Kempner. "I applaud his courage to go back and face his history and share it with new generations, to keep the memories of Holocaust victims alive. Hearing Sid's story firsthand leaves an indelible mark."

Dinerman said that the trip was life-changing. "We came back with changed perspectives and appreciations of life," he said. "Walking through the death camps, and then experiencing Israel together, is unforgettable and powerful beyond imagination."

The Mass./New England

MOTL chapter is currently recruiting teens for the 2016 March of the Living to Poland and Israel planned for May 1-15. For information and an application, contact MOTL N.E. Region Director Jana Brenman at the Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island at JBrenman@JewishAllianceRI.org.

Any adult interested in joining Mr. Handler should contact Mel Mann, Executive director of the Friends of the March of the Living at (786) 328-8652 or at friendsmarchoftheliving@gmail.com.

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