

Feature Stories

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Author of the play, *Hana's Suitcase on Stage*, wowed school children at Lighthouse Point Library

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Christy Keyes, director of Doreen Gauthier Lighthouse Point Library, and Doreen Gauthier were elated to have playwright Emil Sher come to the library on March 7 to speak to school children about his play. Keyes welcomed the fourth and fifth graders from Trinity Christian School, Highlands Christian Academy, and home school programs as they arrived to hear, question and meet Sher, author of *Hana's Suitcase on Stage*. They were studying the Holocaust and were very excited to have an in-person contact with a live author of a play about a child who died in the gas chamber at Auschwitz concentration camp.

Gauthier, who co-hosted the event, says, "As I was reviewing information for Emil's event, I visited the book's website www.hanassuitcase.ca. On the website they list the 'Restricted Rights of Jews in Czechoslovakia and in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia 1939 - 1941.' One of the restrictions listed (1941) was that 'Jews are banned from public libraries.' That really hit home for me." The squirming, twisting and poking, typical of this age group, stopped the moment Sher began to speak.

About one hundred people in attendance were mesmerized as Sher told the story about a young Japanese educator, Fumiko Ishioka who wanted Japanese school children to learn about the Holocaust. After years of intense research, she tracked down a suitcase belonging to Hana Brady, and used it to involve Japanese boys and girls in the story of just one of a million and half children who were murdered in Hitler's Auschwitz camp. Hana's story became a book written by Karen Levine.

Sher, in his introduction to his play, gives thanks to Karen Levine for the book, George Brady, Hana's surviving brother, Fumiko Ishioka and Allen McInnis "for tilling the soil so a play could flourish." Not a sound was heard as Sher told the sad story of Hana along with the uplifting part about finding her brother, Brady, who survived. Brady shared memories of Hana's brief life and terrible ending. The children began to wave their hands hoping to ask questions. One poignant question was "Does it make you sad to talk about it?" "Yes it does," Sher responds, "but we do this so that your generation will learn the lessons of the Holocaust and make sure that such a tragedy will never happen again." "Why didn't the Nazis murder Hana's brother George?" Sher replied. "George was lucky. He had plumbing skills. He was good with machines and the Germans used him in the work camps. He has to



live with the knowledge of the horrible deaths of his mother, father and sister. George now lives in Montreal with his wife and children of his own but he never forgets the horror of his childhood. Once he learned of Fumiko's years of research and Hana's Suitcase, he visited her in Japan, talked to her "Small Wings" group. He was so moved by the experience that he joined Fumiko in lecturing about the Holocaust around the world so that no one will forget his family and the six million Jews who died because they were Jewish."

Then Sher's face breaks into a smile as he says, "We have a Holocaust survivor in the audience...my mother, Olga Sher. Come up, Mother and help me answer these questions." Everyone clapped as a tiny woman, the size of a fifth grader, stepped up to the podium beside her son. He held out an armband with a Jewish star on it, saying "This was Mother's armband which she had to wear at all time during Hitler's purge of Jews." A young voice called out to Olga, "Did you hate the Germans?" With a sweet smile, Olga answered. "No. Many good people helped us. There's a list of those good people too. These people did not want to be part of Hitler's madness. They hid me for a long time before I was found and put in the camp. When I was lucky to come out alive, I saw a school acquaintance holding a baby and I realized that life had been happening while I struggled to survive from 1941 to 1944. You have to forgive. In Warsaw there is a monument documenting the Holocaust. As I stood reading the words, I saw a German prisoner sweeping the streets. He was very thin and looked to be a sad soul. I felt pity, not anger. You must be able to forgive. I have had a good life since that terrible time. In Canada, I married a loving husband and we had two wonderful sons. I am now a snowbird from Montreal. When I am here, I get to volunteer in this wonderful library."

Olga Sher's final words to the group were "As Doreen can tell you, when Hitler gained control in Germany, one of the first rights he took from us was forbidding Jews the use of libraries. Perhaps that is why I love volunteering in this library and welcoming all who come to use it."

Parents and children lined up to buy Mr. Sher's book, *Hana's Suitcase on Stage*. He signed copies of the book and one of his daughters acted as cashier. The audience left, emotionally drained, but ready to digest this reminder of the 6,000,000 people who died because they were Jews.