

The Daily Record

50¢

ANDERSON CREEK ANGIER BENSON BUIES CREEK BUNNLEVEL COATS DUNN ERWIN FALCON GODWIN LILLINGTON LINDEN NEWTON GROVE

HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR SPEAKS TO STUDENTS



Daily Record Photo/Tyler Douglas

Pittsboro resident Renee Fink, above, was born in the Netherlands (commonly referred to as Holland) in 1937, a short time before the region was under Nazi rule. Aided by a local group in opposition to the Nazis, she was placed in hiding with a Catholic family in the area. On Tuesday, Mrs. Fink shared her experiences with a group of students at South Johnston High School.

Catholic Family Hid Jewish Girl

By TYLER DOUGLAS
Of The Record Staff

It's not every day that you meet someone who has experienced the Holocaust firsthand. Personal accounts of the heroism and atrocities of World War II are quickly becoming few and far between — a reduction to simple text on a page with each passing year.

Pittsboro resident Renee Fink, 77, is aware of the importance of her own personal history. She is not a native North Carolinian; she was born in the Netherlands —

commonly referred to as Holland — in 1937, a short time before the region was under Nazi rule.

Aided by a local group in opposition to the Third Reich and its ideas known as the Dutch Underground or “The Resistance,” she was placed with a Catholic family in the area. It was the beginning of a frightening journey — hiding in plain sight while suspicious Germans milled about her homeland.

On Tuesday morning, Mrs. Fink greeted a small group of students inside South Johnston High School's media center. Visit-

ing on behalf of the state's Holocaust Speakers Bureau, she held a lengthy question-and-answer session based on her wartime experiences.

“How did I live and how did I survive? I have to say, it is a matter of the courage of other people. That is the only reason I survived,” she explained.

Before taking questions from students and staff, a short documentary about Mrs. Fink's life in Nazi-occupied Holland was shown — “On the Back of a Stranger's Bicycle: Renee Fink's Story.”

“Life was not drastically changed at first,” she said from the screen, referencing when the Germans made their way into the Netherlands. “But gradually, our freedoms were taken away.”

“We were lower than dogs,” she continued, noting the situation soon became “extremely dangerous” for Jewish people. In the film, Mrs. Fink spoke about The Resistance, but also about many supporters of “all things German” in Holland. It was a divided land — small, but polarized

See Survivor, Page 3

Survivor

Continued From Page One

during wartime, she explained.

She found out much later, she told the students, her mother and father were betrayed by their supposed keepers and perished in a concentration camp.

Her aunt and uncle joined the Dutch Underground around the time she went into hiding with her Catholic family — a common practice in the area as many Jewish children found themselves in the ranks of Christian families.

She stayed with the Catholic family from 1942 until 1945, when she was reunited with her grandmother — a strong woman who was known within their small community prior to the German invasion.

“My family had a strong sense of humanity. It was totally right for them to hide me, that’s how they thought about it... And to say they were putting themselves in great danger is an immense understatement,” she said in the documentary.

“Everybody was a tiny cog in a huge machine,” she said of the resistance effort. “There were tiny jobs and only that person knew what they were doing... Knowledge was dangerous during that time.”

Her Catholic home was filled with children. She soon found herself with several brothers and sisters and there was “much love” between them, said Mrs. Fink. When the Germans would come through periodically looking for stowaway Jews or anything out of the ordinary, the family pretended she was sick or was being punished in a faraway corner of the home — it worked like a charm.

She also talked about wartime Holland and the alarming number of starving people. Her family adhered to a strict ration of bread until they ran out, resorting to eating flour mixed with water and tulip bulbs. She later realized that period was known historically as the “Dutch Hunger Winter.”

“We lived in constant fear. Anybody, the neighbors, could have turned you in. We lived in a level of fear that is not easily explained,” she said in the video. “There were horror stories about children hiding — some kids were abused, sexually abused, some were essentially little slaves.”

Her family, however, were “courageous” people, she said, and never mistreated her.

“The toughest part of our lives was surviving the survival,” said Mrs. Fink.

Her grandmother took her to

America in 1948, but could not afford to support the two of them together. She continued to bounce between families in New York and piece together a much-delayed education, as she was not in school during the war.

She eventually went on to graduate from the University of Vermont and marry a “very American man.” Her late husband encouraged the move to North Carolina because of the bustling furniture industry at the time. She has two children and five grandchildren.

After the video, Mrs. Fink stepped in front of the group and fielded several questions. Students seemed a bit intimidated at first by her harrowing and complex past, but soon a few hands were visible around the media center.

Some of her answers:

She was a certainly a “devout” Catholic while in hiding, but she embraced being Jewish upon reuniting with her grandmother. She is very proud to be Jewish today, said Mrs. Fink.

She no longer speaks Dutch. The family she was forced to stay with in the United States didn’t allow her to speak her native tongue.

She changed her name several times, but eventually settled on “Renee” once in the United States. She obtained her U.S. citizenship when she was 16 years old.

She was married for more than

40 years. Mrs. Fink still resides in Pittsboro.

She doesn’t visit Holland often because her Catholic family there “treats her too well” when she visits. “It’s always this big to-do and what more can they do for me?” she said with a smile.

“I don’t want you to think I’m whining — we are remembering history — but I do know the struggles of teenagers and the peaks and the valleys. I know it might be tough in your own homes and each of you have your own stories — and I very much respect that,” she told the students in Johnston County.

“There were people that decided they could not be bystanders, they had to stand up for what was right morally — and risk their lives to take in people and save people,” she continued. “Everyone of you in this room knows instinct when something is wrong — as members of the human race. You’re obligated to stand up to what you know is wrong. I know it’s easier said than done, but it’s a thought.”

“Another thought. Being free is such a wonderful thing. You’re all free, you may not know it having never not been free — it’s another thinking point,” she said.

“Another thing I would leave you with is to be upstanders not bystanders.”

Commissioners