

Holocaust Survivor Shares Spellbinding Tale

March 30, 2017



A University Campus audience of varying ages heard eyewitness testimony this month of the terror the Holocaust wreaked on Western Europe. The audience of undergraduates and campus visitors listened raptly to an escape story told by a man who was only 6 years old at the time.

Pieter Kohnstam, along with his wife Sue, presented “Narrow Escape—A Flight to Freedom,” through the sponsorship of the Saint Leo University Center for Catholic-Jewish Studies on Wednesday, March 29. CCJS Director Matthew Tapie, PhD, explained during a brief introduction that the Catholic Church calls for contemporary Christians to explore why and how the Holocaust occurred.

This story of the Kohnstam family began in Nuremberg, Germany, where Pieter’s predecessors ran a successful toy company. Because the family was Jewish, Pieter’s father, Hans, became a target for the Nazis in the 1930s. So Hans and his wife, Ruth, both in their 30s, fled to Holland. The small nation was then politically neutral. They thought they would be safe there. Pieter was born in Amsterdam in 1936. The family in Holland also included Ruth’s mother, Clara.

It happened that the Kohnstam family resided in a large apartment building, Merwedeplein, with another German Jewish refugee family one flight up. The neighbors were the Frank family, made famous by the post-war posthumous publication of the diary of Anne, the family’s younger daughter and one of the victims who died in a concentration camp. Many Americans recall reading during their childhood *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, and so find that story a point of reference in imagining Pieter’s early life. Pieter, now nearing age 81, vividly recalls stories of the friendship and visits between the families, even playtimes. Pieter’s wife, Sue, was able to find Kohnstam family records and other historic artifacts from that time, with the help of a historian, and incorporate the visual elements and her observations into their joint presentation.

During 1942, the advance of the Nazi regime made Amsterdam unsafe for Jews, first for resettled German Jews, and then even for Dutch Jews. The Franks decided to go into hiding, but for various reasons, that was unworkable for the Kohnstam family. Pieter’s parents decided to take the risk of fleeing with their young son, while the boy’s grandmother Clara (Ruth’s mother) stayed behind.

The Kohnstams’ journey demanded that the young family use forged documents and often that they dress in disguises. Sometimes they had to split up and later reconnect. They moved often by foot, sleeping in pastures or barns. Sometimes they were able to travel by rail. They were breaking Nazi law by traveling and if caught, could be imprisoned or executed.

One part of the trip involved making a perilous, silent river crossing in French farmland before dawn. They were then with another family they had met along the way. The crossing proved deadly to two elderly married people in the traveling party—as the rest of their family and the Kohnstams watched helplessly. The traumatized survivors had to cross at the next chance. Pieter calmly told the audience that the memory of this incident has stayed with him all these decades.

Later in the family’s yearlong journey, Pieter’s mother, Ruth, was apprehended and kept for a few months in a women’s camp in France. Eventually, the family was able to make it to Spain. There, a Catholic bishop created false records of Catholic baptisms for the family members so that they would be able to secure passage on a ship to Argentina. Even then, Pieter recalled, the war created naval conflicts that imperiled and prolonged their journey across the Atlantic.

Pieter and his wife now live in Venice, Florida. They act as educators and praise all the “unsung heroes” who tried to help and protect targets of Nazi persecution. Pieter’s book on that part of his life is called *A Chance to Live: A Family’s Journey to Freedom*.