

# Survivors Refuse to Forget

## Holocaust Reunion Rekindles Nightmares

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For Dina Sarna, the bad dreams have begun again.

Fire. Gas. Death.

For a time they had subsided, she says, but now they are back again, penetrating her life, making sleep difficult and peace impossible.

"I am not afraid for myself, but for my children," the woman says in her quiet way. "It could happen to anybody. It scares me."

"It" is an event that has colored the Sarnas' lives as surely as paint colors an artist's canvas. When spoken of at all in the Sarna home, "it" is mentioned in hushed tones, or in tones of pained anger. It is something the Sarnas will never forget, nor will their children forget.

And indeed, they say, it is something the world should never forget.

Henry and Dina Sarna of West Covina are survivors of the Holocaust, the systematic destruction of more than six million Jews by the Nazis before and during World War II.

"The world should remember," says Henry Sarna. "Hitler could happen again."

The couple just returned from a gathering in Israel aimed, in part, at preventing such an eventuality.

Billed as both the first and last Holocaust survivors' reunion in history, the event attracted some 4,000 men and women from 23 countries who spent four days reliving the past in an effort to bear witness for the future.

"Our purpose was to find each other," said Anita Scheff, executive secretary of the Southern California Committee for the World Gathering of Holocaust Survivors which organized the event. "What we hoped to accomplish was an understanding of the truth that something like this must never be repeated."

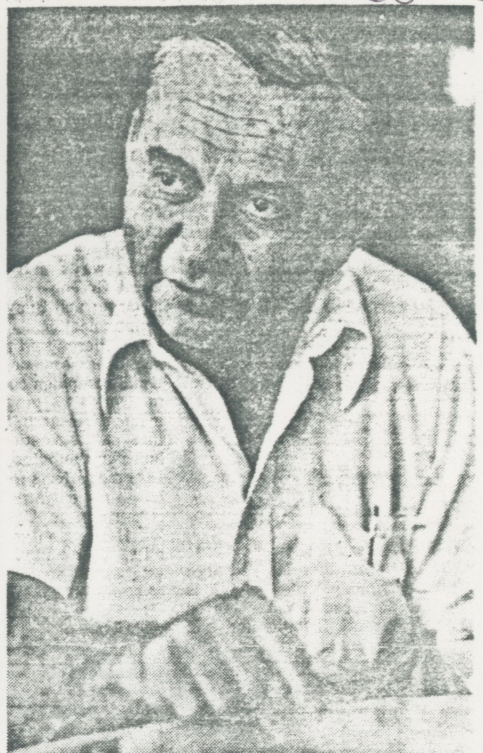
Among other things, she said, reunion participants erected a stone monument to the six million Jews who died during World War II, shared tearful memories of those awful days and, most importantly, searched for lost friends and relatives who may have somehow survived.

That search, in fact, was one of the main reasons the Sarnas went to Israel.

"You always think that maybe someone is alive," says Mrs. Sarna. "You always have that hope."

The Sarnas' story began as did the stories of many Holocaust victims: in Poland during the late 1930s.

Then in their teens and unknown to each other, the pair witnessed the 1939 surrender of their country to the advancing German army.



REFLECTING ON THE PAST — Holocaust survivors Dina and Henry Sarna, above, recall their experiences in a German concentration camp during World War II. The pair, who lost many relatives to Nazi brutalities,

recently attended the world's first reunion of Holocaust survivors in Israel. Below, Mrs. Sarna displays hated tattooed number by which Nazi camp officials identified prisoners.

that was to mark the beginning of a six-year period of intense suffering they now describe as a living hell.

Because the Sarnas are Jewish, they never had the option of cooperating with the conquerors.

"I saw the Polish army march out and the Germans march in," remembers Henry Sarna. "I was 19 and worked for the fire department. I wanted to sneak my family out of the country in a fire truck, but got to the station too late to get one. So I and two of my brothers tried to walk to Russia."

But the enemy had them surrounded. Eventually, realizing there was no place to go and surviving on crusts of bread discarded by the well-fed Germans, the trio returned home. It was only then they learned that 3,000 of their Jewish neighbors had been rounded up by the Gestapo, herded into a local synagogue and burned alive.

"That's when we began to find out what was happening," Sarna remembers solemnly.

Eventually both Sarnas ended up living in the same ghetto, where they first met but knew each other only casually.

It was a difficult life with no work and little food.

In 1943 they were taken in cattle cars to Treblinka where all families were broken up, then to a Polish concentration camp called Blyzen where — after being tattooed with identification numbers on their arms — they were held for more than a year.

Among the missing: Sarna's mother, father and three brothers as well as Mrs. Sarna's brother, who was taken by the Germans when he was only 11 years old.

If any of them survived, they did not show up at the reunion 38 years later.

"In a way it's a relief not to be looking anymore," sighs Henry Sarna.

After the war the Sarnas made their way to the United States,

eventually settling in the Los Angeles area where today they own and manage a gift shop. The couple has two children: a son and a daughter, age 34 and 25 respectively.

But it wasn't until after the recent survivors' reunion that the old dreams — which had taken years to subside — renewed their vengeful attack on Mrs. Sarna's rest.

"It was very sad," she now says of the Israel trip. "It was too late — all we were doing was re-living what we didn't want to re-live. I was paralyzed."

For her husband, however, the experience was a positive one.

"We are representatives to the world to remind people that the Holocaust happened, that it's not a lie," he says. "I think the reunion was a big accomplishment."

But recent events in California and around the world have the Sarnas worried. There is, for instance, a group in Torrance that claims the Holocaust never happened. And recent months have seen increases in anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi activities throughout the world.

"I don't know what's going through their minds," Sarna says of the latest wave of Hitler apologists. "I see them and I feel like fainting."

Then, as if to remind himself of who he is, he glances at the faint blue number still tattooed on his forearm, the once-hated symbol of servitude which he now wears as a sort of badge of courage. Some Holocaust survivors have had theirs surgically removed, but not Sarna.

"It'll stay until I die," he declares, staring at the tattoo with fierce pride. "To remind everybody and myself what I suffered. To remind us of what people can do to people."

