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Holocaust survivor shares story with students

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North High in Torrance hosts George Brown, who watched the Nazis march his mother to her death at Auschwitz in 1944.

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By Seung Hwa Hong

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The image still lingers in George Brown's mind: clouds of ash spewing from four chimneys at Auschwitz, the sun blotted out by the smoke that hung over the death camp.

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His mother died in the crematorium below the chimneys on June 2, 1944. Brown was 15 years old. The SS guards were directing prisoners who were standing in line: left meant life, right was death.

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"My mother stopped for a second, turned her face toward us. ... Tears were running down her face," Brown said.

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He recounted the disturbing memories to about 500 Torrance juniors at the North High School gymnasium Thursday as part of the 11th-grade U.S. history curriculum, though the talk also coincided roughly with the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camp in 1945. Every year, North High hosts a Holocaust survivor to tell students firsthand about the genocide that killed nearly 6 million Jews.

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There were no birds or flies at the camp and ashes blotted out the sun, Brown said.

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Brown told the North High students how a barracks leader told the new arrivals, "This is the only way you'll ever leave this place, through the chimneys." That turned out to be true for about four of every five people who entered, Brown said.

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The 75-year-old's memory is keen as he recounts the days and places other members of his family died: two brothers and a sister. He also knows his bracelet number: 24,426.

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Brown was born on Feb. 12, 1929, in Hungary. By his 16th birthday, he was struggling in German concentration camps to survive, Europe was in ruins and the Nazi program of extermination had scorched civilization beyond forgetting. His father told him, "Hopefully, when you'll be 17 we can celebrate as free men but if I don't make it, I have a couple of wishes for you."

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The first request was to marry a Jewish woman and the second was to tell the world how Jewish people died during the Holocaust. Brown has fulfilled both of his father's wishes. Since 1994, he has traveled to 18 states to speak at schools, colleges and churches about his experience as part of a program established by the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles.

Another day Brown will never forget was May 6, 1945. It was a Sunday afternoon. The camp in Ebensee was quiet and the German guards had all apparently fled. Nine American soldiers entered the camp. Brown dubbed them "angels." They told him he was free.

"You can imagine being in hell, 11 months, you have to forgive me I get so emotional," he said with tears in his eyes.

At the end of the address, a handful of students approached him to buy his book, *I Survived the Nazis' Hell*. Kris Pachecho, 16, waited in line to have his copy of the small, yellow book signed.

"I got the book because I want to remember this, I want to go up there and shake his hand, too," he said. "I learned more stuff here than in class."

Before Brown left, the students paid tribute to the survivor by singing "Happy Birthday." He will be 76 on Feb. 12.

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