

Travelling to history  
By Rob Hamel

It was a chance for students to meet history, when several Gorham High School students travelled to Keene State College recently to listen to Holocaust survivor Ernest Michel.

Michel's testimony of his five-plus years in work camps, including Auschwitz, often drew collective gasps from the audience.

Speaking to several hundred attendees, at one point Michel recalled his first night at Auschwitz, of which he had never heard prior to his arrival. Dr. Josef Mengele was head of the selection process; a thumbs up from the Angel of Death and you went to the right side for work, thumbs down to the left and directly to the gas chamber. Michel was one of a handful of prisoners selected for work, and when he arrived at his barracks, he asked a veteran prisoner what had happened to those who had been sent to the left.

"The others are already up the chimney," he told me, and that's when I knew what the smell was. That's when I knew Auschwitz was not just another camp."

His trip to Auschwitz was in a cattle car with some 60 others packed inside, travelling for five days and five nights with no food. Life did not get any better at Auschwitz, though, where prisoners were given but 600 calories a day, which, when combined with the camp's brutal conditions, led to a life expectancy of just four to six months. To this day, Michel does not know how he made it out of the camps.

"I survived by a miracle," he told the audience. "I don't know why I, of all people, was able to come out alive."

But survive he did, with his post-Holocaust experiences including covering the Nuremberg trials for a German newspaper, where Herman Goring asked to meet with Michel, having read his articles.

Upon being escorted into Goring's cell, the Nazi strode forward and offered his hand.

"What the hell am I to do?" Michel first thought. "I turned around, asked the MP to let me out, and didn't say two words. I have not regretted that decision to this day," he recalled, a statement that drew a round of applause from the audience.

The Gorham students privileged to hear Michel this night – Katie DesFosses, Steven Flynn, Sarah McGillicuddy Tyler Paine, Sarah Tremblay, Acadia Waddell, and former student Kate Landry – were not limited to the horrific tales of Michel's past. Instead, the survivor used the evening to look forward, doing much more than recalling, but also asking for an awareness of his audience.

"Genocides don't just happen," he said. "They begin with hatred, with a song," and he recalled hearing Nazi Brown Shirts march through the streets singing the words "If Jewish blood spurts from the knife we will all be better off."

Learning from such a past, and realizing the Holocaust was not an instantaneous uprising but instead a gradual melding of hatred to action, is a lesson we have not yet embraced, which is why Michel continues to lecture at 84 years old.

"Mao was responsible for 49 million [deaths]. In the USSR Stalin killed 30 to 40 million. Hitler killed 12 million, including six million Jews."

He then brought the focus of the evening full circle to the present, recounting the words of current Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has gone on record as saying that Israel is a "disgraceful blot" that he wants "wiped off the face of the earth. "There's too much hate in this world," Michel warned. "We live on it. We live in dangerous times, my friends, very dangerous times."

The evening came to an end with questions from the audience, and then several students were able to purchase Michel's book and have the author sign his book for them, giving them a tangible piece of history they hopefully will carry with them – along with his lessons – the rest of their lives.