

# A Day of Reflection on Holocaust at Veterans Museum

By Justyna Tomtas / [jtomtas@chronline.com](mailto:jtomtas@chronline.com) | Posted: Thursday, January 29, 2015 10:54 am

Local high school students met at the Veterans Memorial Museum in Chehalis Tuesday to learn about painful and tragic events in an effort to ensure that history would not repeat itself.

The day marked the 70th anniversary of the liberation of one of the most notorious death camps in Europe, Auschwitz-Birkenau. According to Matthew Elrich, of the Holocaust Center for Humanity in Seattle, 1.1 million people went through the death camp's gates, never to return again.

"We have to constantly keep in front of us what went on during that time so we as students and adults do everything in our power to not allow that to happen ever again," Robert Sande, a social studies teacher at W.F. West High School, said.

Elrich gave a presentation on his mother's life and the effects the dark period of history had on his family. She survived the Holocaust and was among those saved on liberation day.

His mother, Felicia Lewkowicz, died six years ago from cancer, but her story was told vividly, marking the trials and tribulations she experienced during her time in Europe.

"It's important to understand the greater lessons of the Holocaust, why we use a capital 'H' for this one," Elrich told the students.

Lewkowicz was born in Krakow, Poland, in June of 1924 and lived a normal life until the Nazis came to power and decided Jews, among others, were an inferior race. The ethnic cleansing, which later took place, attempted to rid the world of unwanted ethnic and religious groups.

After leaving the Krakow ghetto, Lewkowicz found work elsewhere until the day she was arrested as a political prisoner and taken to Auschwitz in August of 1944.



## Holocaust Speaker

While standing in front of a slide of his late mother, Matthew Elrich, talks to local high school students about his mother's experience as a Holocaust survivor on Tuesday afternoon at the Veterans Memorial Museum in Chehalis.

She experienced years of hardship, lost and regained hope, and later worked to share her story.

After being tattooed with the number A25049, an identification code she would carry on her arm for the rest of her life, Lewkowicz had to learn to survive in conditions that are almost unfathomable for the average person.

Standing through long counts that would take place on a daily basis, searching to find scraps of food, undergoing cruel and unusual punishments, as well as learning the fate of her family. Some of her most vivid memories were the stench that filled the air at the camp, the ashes that fell to the ground—the remains of people who were burned in the crematoriums.

“It would be a challenge for you to understand going to a place where from moment to moment to moment you could be shot, gone to selection, which is death, and you’re working—working to death,” Elrich said, touching on stories from the infamous camp that was known for its forced laborers, many who worked themselves to death.

The struggle to survive took perseverance even after his mother was shipped by cattle car along with 3,000 other individuals to Bergen-Belsen, a different death camp.

The camp was filled over capacity, diseases spread quickly and the problem of finding enough food to avoid starvation was a daily struggle. Although the death camp had no crematorium, a place where the victims of the Holocaust were reduced to ashes, it was known for its forced marches, leading to the death of many people.

Elrich’s message was simple: The truth of his mother’s experience is something that must be shared so the tragic events that took place would not happen again.

Although Lewkowicz survived and was liberated by British troops at the camp, her struggle was long from over as she worked to recover from the experiences she had.

“The first generation of survivors are all dying off and what’s left are people like me sort of trying to tell a story, and I know my words don’t do justice to what Felicia went through, but I have to be able to try,” Elrich said. “...How she survived is perhaps one miracle after another.”

Elrich said the experience allows him to be closer to his mother, even after her death, and it gives him the opportunity to share an important story that should never be forgotten.

“Her story is timeless,” he said. “I do what I can to share it.”