

Here's a wonderful story about former IHS math teacher, Mr. Lotas.

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Non-Jew tells another side of Holocaust story

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Alexis Lotas never had any family members shot to death and tossed into mass graves for the simple crime of being Jewish. Still, the retired teacher's Holocaust tale is one of survival – of learning to overcome harrowing memories of slaughter and horror.

Lotas, 75, was born a Muslim Tatar, a people of Eastern Europe who moved westward with the Mongol invasion in the 13th century before being absorbed into Russia. Although he's not Jewish, Lotas became friends with Jewish children in the small Lithuanian village his family fled to following the Soviet occupation of the country in 1940.

The Pepper Pike resident shared his story Dec. 9 at Congregation Shaarey Tikvah as part of "Face to Face," a synagogue-sponsored Holocaust education program for middle- and high-school students. Lotas spoke to 11th graders from Cleveland's Saint Martin de Porres High School, a private Catholic school.

Living under Soviet rule was frightening, recalls Lotas, a native of Kaunas, Lithuania. He had heard tales of entire families being shipped to Siberia to die in the gulags. As distressing as those stories were, however, they could not prepare young Lotas for what came next.

Nazi forces invaded the country in 1941. After about three months of occupation, Lotas's family, along with the rest of the town's non-Jewish residents, was roused from their home to witness the village's 50 or so Jews being marched in procession-like fashion to a gully that had been dug into a deep ditch earlier that day.

"It was like a parade," says Lotas. Although only 7 years old at the time, he remembers the hours that followed the forced march with haunting clarity. Lotas watched in terror as people were lined up four or five at a time and shot, among them the boys he learned Yiddish from and played with in the schoolyard. The massacre was drawn out with agonizing slowness, with soon-to-be victims briefly spared and sent to the back of the line if they were able to offer their smiling and joking killers anything of value.

"The most horrible sound was mothers with babies in their arms begging not to be shot," Lotas says. "I remember (that day) like someone branded it into my brain."

His town's fate was the same as many others throughout Lithuania. Between 1941-44, more than 90% of the country's 200,000-plus Jews were killed: one of the highest casualty rates of the Holocaust. Muslim Tatars were spared, although some, including Lotas's father, were taken to work as slave laborers for the Third Reich.

Lotas's family survived the war, leaving Lithuania for Czechoslovakia and later Germany. After an additional five years in a displaced persons camp, Lotas came to the U.S. at age 15. He finished his education stateside and began a long career as a teacher and administrator at the high school and university levels. The father of two moved to Cleveland in 2000.

The long years since that endless day at the gully have been spent ensuring that nightmarish experience didn't overtake his life, admits Lotas. Therapy has helped, as has the empathy of American Jews.

Last week's Face to Face event was the first time Lotas had ever told his story in front of a large group. Avi Goldman, vice president of Kol Israel Foundation and a second-generation survivor, contacted Lotas after hearing about his tale from a colleague.

"Alex brings a completely different perspective" to Shoah history, shedding light on the many non-Jews afflicted by the Holocaust, says Goldman. "He is an asset to the community."

For Lotas, he views sharing his tale as another form of therapy. Cathartic attributes aside, the story also gives voice to those long gone.

"My dead friends have no way of speaking, and it's up to me to say something," says Lotas. "Denial is wonderful, but you have to face the truth."

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Non-Jewish survivor Alexis Lotas, right, was asked to share his tale by Kol Israel vice president Avi Goldman.



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