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Woman tells class about her escape to America

BY C. M. SCHMIDLKOFER
STAFF WRITER

Wauconda fifth graders sat spellbound Tuesday as they heard the chilling tale of Tilli Schulze's escape from communist East Germany in 1950 at the age of 16.

The Belvidere resident wrote a book about her daring escape, her arrival in America two years later and her life as a child under first Nazi and then Russian communist regimes.

"Tilli's Story: My Thoughts are Free" was published last year and has sold over 2,500 copies. Schulze co-authored the book with freelance writer Lorna Collier. Both reside in Belvidere.

Schulze and Collier held two assemblies at Wauconda Grade School for fifth graders who are studying World War II and the Holocaust.

Schulze told students her vivid tale which began when war broke out in 1939 when she was 5-years old. As German citizens, they were exempt from persecution unlike non-Germans and Jews. Schulze's life changed little during the next six years on her family farm located in a village near the Baltic Sea.

In the wake of the German defeat, the Soviet Union occupied most Eastern European countries and, eventually, East Germany where Schulze lived.

"They were brutal to us," she said.

Sanctioned by Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin to do as they pleased, Russian soldiers raided and pillaged the country, forcing communism on their victims.

When she refused to join the Communist Youth Party, Schulze was faced with being sent to a "re-education camp." She had no choice but to flee her home and follow her lifelong dream to become an American citizen. It was her second attempt at escape.

"I knew I wouldn't be accepted in America if I was a communist," she said when asked why she didn't join to survive.

She described how she hid in a farmer's potato wagon as he crossed the border from communist Germany into Western Germany and waited another

two years before being allowed to migrate to America, where relatives were waiting for her.

Students viewed Schulze's family photographs and maps of Germany during a PowerPoint presentation.

Because students are about the same age as Schulze was during the war, they asked what school was like, what did her friends feel about the war and what was the scariest part of the war for children.

They were mesmerized learning how Schulze lived for six months in a windowless attic compartment with 12 other young girls to hide from Russian soldiers who could show up on her family's farm at any time -- day or night.

"We could not make noise," she said. "We could not stand up. So we just laid there on straw."

A case of tuberculosis turned out to be a blessing in disguise, she said. Not only could she forget about the communist regime for several weeks while battling the high fever, but she returned to the main part of the house.

"They (soldiers) stopped coming then," she said. "They were afraid of that."

Student Kimmy Sroka marveled at Schulze's determination to get through the experience.

"She was really brave," she said.

Principal Debra Monroe said fifth grade teacher Beth Ekeroth coordinated the event.

Ekeroth talked with students about Schulze's upcoming visit and her book and helped them put questions together to ask at the assembly.

"We thought it would be good for them to get another perspective (on the war)," Ekeroth said.

Schulze said she enjoys speaking to students about her experiences.

"I think it's important for children to hear the story because a lot of them don't even know that this happened," she said. "Mostly what I want people to know is about how valuable freedom is and that we should not take it for granted. If you don't have your freedom you have nothing."

Schulze and Collier have been visiting schools, book clubs and other organizations to promote the book and tell Schulze's story.

"Most books were under Hitler with a Jewish perspective," Collier said. "Our book speaks from the German perspective and showing what happened in the postwar years."

Writing the book was cathartic for Schulze, which was titled after the name of a popular German song at the time her mother used to hum to let her daughter know she did not support communist protocol.

"It was like therapy," she said. "After that I had no more nightmares."

More information about "Tilli's Story" can be found on Schulze's Web site at www.mythoughtsarefree.com.

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