KELLY LYNCH

Simone Arnold Liebster speaks with West Noble Middle School eighth-grade students over Skype Tuesday afternoon from her residence in France. As a Jehovah's Witness, Liebster was part of one of the many groups persecuted in the Holocaust, and because of her faith, at the age of 11, she became a resister to the Nazi occupation by refusing to "Heil Hitler."

Skype brings together students, WWII survivor

Jehovah's Witness imprisoned during the Holocaust shares her experiences with West Noble eighth-graders

BY KELLY LYNCH
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LIGONIER — When students asked Simone Arnold Liebster whether she believed the Holocaust could happen again, she turned the question back to the West Noble Middle School eighth-graders.

"I will leave it up to you," Liebster said. "Ask yourselves what caused the Holocaust."

The students understood. After months of researching various aspects of the genocide that took place during World War II and creating the school's annual Holocaust Museum project, they knew.

"It's about teaching," Liebster continued. "(The Holocaust) is only the continuation of what has been seen over the centuries, so of course it could come back."

Discussions such as the one that took place Tuesday morning over Skype serve as a way to educate and inform the last generation that will have the opportunity to interact with Holocaust survivors, such as Liebster, about the birth and impact of such hatred.

As an 11-year-old Jehovah's Witness when the Nazis occupied Germany in World War II, Liebster refused to "Heil Hitler" — an act antithetical to her beliefs — and spent two years in isolation in a Nazi penitentiary school, where she wasn't allowed to speak and was forced to do hard labor.

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West Noble Middle School eighth-grade student Sam Pena asks a question to Holocaust survivor Simone Arnold Liebster over Skype during a presentation Tuesday morning on the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Nazi Germany. Behind him, Kristi and William Keller of the Arnold-Liebster Foundation, which makes such connections available to students, listen as Liebster talks with students from her home in France.

Speaking from her home in France, she credited her conviction and faith for keeping her strong in her resistance, even after both her parents were taken to concentration camps.

While Witnesses were a smaller group within the millions persecuted during the Holocaust, about half of its population of 25,000 were convicted or sentenced for crimes, and about 1,400 died in the camps.

And with recent statements from Russia's Justice Ministry that the country intends to ban the religion due to members engaging in "extremist activities," the education and knowledge that Liebster can share is more vital than ever, said Kristi Keller, Syracuse resident and a representative of the Arnold-Liebster Foundation.

Both she and her husband, William Keller, were at the presentation Tuesday to introduce Liebster to the students, after making a presentation on Jehovah's Witnesses' persecution during the Holocaust weeks before.

They found the students were engaged in the subject and hope they can take the lesson and use it to inform their decisions moving forward in a divisive political landscape.

"They're about the same age. She was 11, that's about what sixth-graders are," William Keller said. "Even if they don't think about it now, perhaps later something will come up in life that they will think about it."

Students were able to choose the questions presented to Liebster during the one-hour conversation, speaking directly to her through the computer. The questions ranged from how she found the courage to stand up to the Nazis and her feelings during her stay at the penitentiary school, to her reunion with her family after the war and what the repercussions of the war mean for them today.

Describing the relief, but not joy, she felt at the end of the war and the nightmares her father dealt with after his experiences in the death camp, she said she never wavered in her belief.

"I always felt God was with me, not against me," Liebster said, describing her determination.

The Kellers said they've listened to Liebster speak many times, and each time, the same themes of tolerance, conviction and faith always strike a chord with the audience.

Students took notes during each of the 20 questions, and West Noble eighth-grade teacher Danielle Long said she was proud of the interaction and discussion between a living survivor and the eighth-graders, who may be among the last generation to speak to someone with firsthand knowledge of the Holocaust.

"It's been an honor to be able to bring this knowledge and open discussion to these students," Long said. "I think today, it's so important to look at history and learn those lessons but also … examine current day situations to make sure that these things don't happen again."

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