Therapist for Holocaust survivors remembered

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FARMINGTON HILLS — He was an extraordinary man. That is how Cheryl Gayer, the Holocaust Memorial Center’s interim executive director, described the life and work of Holocaust survivor and therapist Henry Krystal. Krystal turned his experiences into a platform to help other survivors in need of therapy.

“We have known about him for a very long time; he is an extraordinary professor,” Gayer said about her and her husband’s relationship with Krystal.

On Aug. 25, Krystal was celebrated at the Holocaust Memorial Center by hundreds of attendees who heard tributes, learned about the impact of second-generation survivors.
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Holocaust survivors and more.

"It was a wonderful celebration of his life and work and brought together people of all parts of his life — it was really quite extraordinary. You had neighbors and friends and mental health professionals and families he had treated, and the survivors and their children and colleagues. It was just a total cross-section of a community who had great respect for his work and his accomplishments. It was moving."

Krystal died on Oct. 8, 2015, at age 90 due to Parkinson's disease complications. His funeral was held at Ira Kaufman Chapel in Southfield.

The Bloomfield Hills resident was born in Sosnowiec, Poland, in 1925. Not too long after the invasion of the Nazis, Krystal's brother, and later his father, were able to flee to the Soviet-occupied zone of Poland. At the time, Krystal and his mother lived in Bodzentyn, Poland.

In 1942, Krystal was sent to a labor camp; his mother was sent to a death camp, where she died.

From then until the end of the war, Krystal was a member of a labor unit and was sent from place to place.

In 1947, Krystal moved to Detroit and became a psychiatrist.

Eva Fogelman, a New York-based psychologist and filmmaker, spoke at the HMC event, and she said during a recent phone interview that she thinks Krystal helped the entire mental health field understand the impact of massive psychic trauma on individuals.

She said that before Krystal, Holocaust survivors were diagnosed with psychotic paranoid disorder.

"Dr. Krystal helped everyone understand that the symptoms that survivors of such trauma have are related to the trauma and (are) not psychotic or paranoid," Fogelman said.

Fogelman said some Holocaust survivors will cross the street when they see a police officer or anyone in uniform, because uniformed people during the Nazi invasion put them on trains headed to concentration camps.

Fogelman said that before Krystal's work came to the fore, many psychology experts brushed off what Holocaust survivors had to say.

"Today it sounds mind-boggling, but this is what Holocaust survivors experienced," Fogelman said.

Krystal, a board-certified psychiatrist in Detroit, studied how some Holocaust survivors used coping mechanisms, such as psychological numbing, to be-

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come numb to a situation, in order to survive.

"That numbness has remained with them throughout their life, unfortunately," she said, adding that Krystal also studied the impact of the Holocaust on survivors' children and grandchildren.

"You can imagine what it is like for a person to say, 'My son is getting married, but I don't feel anything. I am not feeling the joy.'"

Fogelman said that while the feeling of being numb is terrible, it was a great release for the survivors to hear from Krystal that their coping mechanism came from their massive trauma experience.

Krystal worked in Detroit, taught in the Wayne State University psychiatry department, had a private practice, and worked in many other capacities.

During the 1960s, Krystal was the chair of a series of international symposiums on psychological traumatization, before the introduction of post-traumatic stress disorder.

He edited a book, "Massive Psychic Trauma," which discussed commonalities between other atrocities and the Holocaust, such as the Hiroshima atomic bomb.

Fogelman said that Krystal also went to the American Psychiatric Association and asked for a study group to investigate the impacts of the Holocaust on the second generation.

The study group started in 1975 and has been going since then.

"In the 1980s, the American Psychiatric Association included the diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder (on its list of disorders),"

Fogelman said. "It took the American Psychiatric Association another 20 years before Henry Krystal's ideas were incorporated through his work with people who had experienced genocide ... at that time."

Gayer said that Krystal's memory was honored by the more than 400 people who attended the HMC event.

"That is how we chose to honor his memory," she said. "He was a person who really made a difference in so many people's lives in large ways, small ways, extraordinary ways." For more information, visit www.holocaustcenter.org.

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