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Children of Holocaust survivors preserve their parents' stories

By MELISSA CATES CLAMAN

While the general atrocities of the Holocaust are widely known, only some grow up with parents who actually experienced them.

The Holocaust & Human Rights Education Center in White Plains offers a special workshop for the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, teaching them to effectively compose and relate their stories and their families' stories. Since the remaining Holocaust survivors are mostly in their 80s and 90s, the center has reached out to the second and third generations of those survivors in an effort to replenish its corps of volunteer speakers, as well as to expand the trove of personal histories of the epic event.

"Their stories still need to be told," Millie Jasper, the center's executive director said. "We will not let their stories die. These children will continue to tell the survivors' stories long after the survivors are no longer able to do so."

Generations Forward is a group of second-generation survivors who meet regularly at the center. Since many group members wanted to learn how to better tell their parents' stories, the center created a weekly workshop on memoir writing called Safekeeping Stories.

Led by Jill Sarkozi and meeting at space donated by Larchmont Temple, the workshop is an 18-week class run twice each year for children of survivors. They learn to tell not only their parents' stories, but also their own about growing up the children of Holocaust survivors.

Two workshop groups have already graduated, and the third is about to begin.

Kathy Zaltas attended the first workshop. She is the daughter of survivors who both grew up in large, loving, successful families in Czechoslovakia and Slovakia.

Both were the lone surviving members of their large families.

Zaltas grew up with just her parents and one sibling, but no extended family — no grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins. As a child, Zaltas knew her family was different and experienced a constant sadness and isolation her friends didn't understand.

Her father never spoke about his Holocaust experiences.

When Zaltas was 13 years old, she recalled her mother watching the trial of former Nazi SS officer Adolf Eichmann — one of the chief administrators of the deportation and extermination of Jews during the Holocaust — on television and beginning to cry and yell at the screen. The trial coverage prompted her mother to begin openly speaking about her experiences in Auschwitz. Soon she felt a responsibility to pass on her family's story, and experiences of other Jews she witnessed.

Joining Safekeeping Stories last year helped Zaltas finally understand feelings she was not previously able to verbalize, and her unusual view of the world shaped by being the child of a Holocaust survivor.



MELISSA CATES CLAMAN PHOTO

Kathy Zaltas, daughter of Holocaust survivors, was part of the first Safekeeping Stories workshop.

"I think this is the story I deeply wanted to tell my whole life, but had been scared to say out loud before now," Zaltas said.

She noted Sarkozi was extremely helpful in eliciting the stories of the other workshop members.

According to Sarkozi, the workshop's purpose is to save memories, life stories and family histories. Working with the center, she customized the workshops for this particular group and the commonalities they shared, utilizing activities to help them connect with their pasts and think about the important ideas they want to take forward. Sarkozi taught the participants how to craft their stories in small slices to effectively share them with others.

"Everyone has a story to tell," she said. "It's all about locating the story that is inside of you."

She explained the workshop focuses on both the survivors' and their children's stories because growing up with parents who have lived through an intense, life-altering trauma also emotionally affects the children. Even seemingly mundane daily experiences like eating meals are affected by their trauma, since most

Holocaust survivors experienced starvation.

"Every single person who has taken the Safekeeping Stories workshop has crafted an incredible story and has a unique message for listeners that teaches compassion, miracles, pride, love and just how far the trauma inflicted on another human being can go," she said. "Each one of these stories has deeply impacted me personally and the connection that all of us share by engaging in this project together has been life-changing. I believe in the power of their stories to impact the world."

Survivor Ron Unger is from Tarnow, Poland, and was imprisoned in the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. His daughter, Audrey Reich, remembers when growing up her father would get disturbed by unusual things, like being physically near a policeman. Unger wouldn't allow Reich to buy clogs when they were trendy, which she later discovered was because they reminded him of the rudimentary wooden-soled shoes Jews were forced to wear during the infamous 186 "Stairs of Death" at Mauthausen when inmates were forced to carry heavy stone blocks up the steps from the quarry.

Reich's father avoided discussing his past for many years until he was interviewed by Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation project in 1997. While speaking about his experiences during the Holocaust was very difficult for Unger, it sparked a desire to do more. He involved himself in his local Long Island Holocaust education center and started speaking to student groups about his experiences during the war. He now views it as a personal mission to continue talking about the Holocaust.

"The workshop was very special," Reich said, grateful for the camaraderie created among the members of Safekeeping Stories.

Beyond simply documenting history with names and dates, the workshop promotes meaningful personal discoveries for second-generation survivors. The process has empowered Reich, who now speaks often of her father's experiences as well as her own. She and her father sometimes speak together.

Anita Greenwald, whose mother, Helga Schmitz Luden, and father, Mayer Luden, are both survivors, considers herself fortunate to have connected with other children of survivors.

"I feel like it was a complete gift," Greenwald said. "Growing up the daughter of Holocaust survivors defined who I am."

Greenwald was surprised by how much the children of Holocaust survivors have in common.

"Writing the story was important to me, to get it on paper as a legacy for my children," she said.

Each member of Safekeeping Stories completed the workshop with meaningful stories about their parents, detailing events and histories before, during and after the war as well as revealing stories about themselves.

All five graduates of the first workshop have begun publicly telling their stories. The center hopes the workshop will continue as long as there are stories to be discovered and told.