

Sonia Weitz, 81; Holocaust survivor kept history alive

Sonia Weitz was 13 when Nazis took her mother from the Krakow ghetto in Poland and sent her to a death camp, where she became one of more than 80 members of the extended family to perish in the Holocaust. Only Sonia and her older sister survived.

“Her last words were, ‘Promise that you will tell; promise me you won’t forget,’ ” Mrs. Weitz told the Globe in 2002, though she knew the task of remembering was almost unbearable. In an interview years earlier, she mused, “How does one bear witness to the unspeakable?”

Finding a voice to recount the horrors she and others endured, Mrs. Weitz stood in front of students and organizations thousands of times since the 1970s, keeping alive the history she lived and encouraging all she met to never stand idly by when evil surfaces.

As a teenager, she lived through five Nazi death camps and came to the United States, where she later cofounded the Holocaust Center Boston North, in Peabody, and joined Elie Wiesel as the second death camp survivor named to the council advising the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

Mrs. Weitz, who memorized poems she composed during World War II and later published them as part of a memoir, “I Promised I Would Tell,” died Wednesday in her Peabody home. She was 81 and was being treated for brain and lung cancer.

After her mother was taken, Mrs. Weitz wrote the words that would become her poem, “In Memory of My Mother,” which includes the lines:

I still can hear

The words you spoke: “You tell the world, my child.”

A few verses later she added:

I promised I would

Tell the world . . . But where to find the words To speak of Innocence and love, And tell how much it hurts . . . About those faces Weak and pale, Those dizzy eyes around, Six million lips That whispered “help” But never made a sound.

“As a survivor, she has inspired and moved countless audiences in Massachusetts with her memories and lessons drawn from her personal experiences,” Wiesel, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, said in 2002 when President George W. Bush appointed Mrs. Weitz to the council.

When Mrs. Weitz was honored earlier this month as a “woman of courage” at Temple Ner Tamid in Peabody, her longtime friend Harriet Wacks, who cofounded the Holocaust Center Boston North, praised her deep devotion to living in the face of so much death and suffering.

“In 1945, in the aftermath of the unthinkable, at the age of 16, Sonia chose life,” Wacks said, adding that her friend “is a shining example of the survival of the human spirit.”

Sonia Schreiber Weitz was born in Krakow, where her father, Janek Schreiber, owned a small shop for leather goods and her mother, Adela FINDER Schreiber, kept house.

Only 11 when the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, she was forced with her family to live in a ghetto the Nazis set up for Jews. Because the Nazis were killing children under age 14, her mother falsified papers to say Sonia was older, and she dyed the girl’s hair blond “to make me look less Jewish,” she told the Globe in 1989.

Years later, when she was among those accompanying Cardinal Bernard F. Law in 1986 to Auschwitz, one of the five death camps she survived, Mrs. Weitz told the Globe that she took time to find the Krakow street where she and her older sisters and their friends spent Sabbath afternoons, talking and giggling. Nearby was the courtyard of her family’s home, “now so dark and sad that I knew it was the graveyard of my childhood.”

Not long after her mother was taken to the death camps, Mrs. Weitz was sent away to the Plaszow concentration camp and later to Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Venusberg, and Mauthausen. At 16, weighing only 60 pounds and too weak from typhus to move, Mrs. Weitz was lying on her bunk in Mauthausen when an American soldier gathered her in his arms and brought her outside to freedom.

With her sister, Blanca, she spent three years in displaced-persons camps in Austria, hoping in vain that other relatives would appear. Mrs. Weitz moved to Peabody in 1948 with her sister and brother-in-law.

In 1950, a friend’s mother suggested that Dr. Mark Weitz, a physician, might make a fitting beau. They met when he made a house call at a friend’s house and married six months later, in September.

The Weitzes had three children, Don, who lives in Dallas, and twin girls, Sandy, who lived less than a mile away in Peabody, and Andi Vilnai, who lives with her husband and Mrs. Weitz's three grandchildren on Kibbutz Givat Brenner in Israel.

"The first thing she taught us, and she taught us this every single day, is that everybody is the same; it doesn't matter what they look like on the outside, where they work, where they live — everybody's equal," Sandy said. "Besides everything that she's known for, she was very funny, very sweet, very humorous always about all subjects," her daughter Andi said. "We had a lot of fun together."

Mrs. Weitz's husband died in 1999. Her sister died last year.

With others at the Holocaust Center Boston North, she created the Holocaust Legacy Partner program, pairing survivors with those who promise to keep telling their stories, once they are gone. They recorded DVDs to make permanent records of each survivor's testimony.

"This is one way we think that will really preserve the memory and the legacy, and it will come as close as possible to the eyewitness," said Mrs. Weitz.

She can be viewed in videos by going to the center's website, www.holocaustcenterbn.org, clicking on survivors and then her name.

"I talk about the victims, the victimizers, and the bystanders," Mrs. Weitz told the Globe in 2007 as she described the presentations she made to students and organizations. "I tell them that not everyone can be a hero, but everyone can make a difference. And I tell them that when they speak up and show they care, it really, really makes a difference."

"She was a person who changed lives through sharing her testimony," her son said. "She really touched the hearts and minds of those she spoke to. It didn't matter if she was speaking to 20 people or an auditorium of 500. She was able to teach them not to be a bystander, to stand up and say something, and if possible, to do something."

The family plans to hold a memorial service at 11 a.m. Sunday in Temple Ner Tamid in Peabody. Burial will follow in Sharon Memorial Park.

After the burial, family members will sit shivah on Sunday. All may join the family on Monday and Tuesday from 2 to 8 p.m. at Mrs. Weitz's house in Peabody.

By speaking tirelessly about her experiences, Mrs. Weitz became one of the most prominent Holocaust survivors in Greater Boston, but she often would say that her own survival was due to "dumb luck, pure and simple."

"There were so many 'could have beens,' so many 'what ifs,' " she once wrote. "These tricks of fate haunt all Holocaust survivors."

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