

EULOGY FOR SONIA SCHREIBER WEITZ

June 27, 2010

by Rabbi David Klatzker, PhD

My friends:

Sonia requested a very simple memorial service, and we will honor her wishes. Obviously, no eulogy can possibly do justice to her. All I can do is provide a brief and partial tribute.

A couple of weeks ago, the last time I was able to have a full conversation with her, we spoke of her tree—the tree her father had planted in the courtyard of their apartment house in Krakow when she was born, the tree that survived the war, the tree she visited years later and wrote about in her book, I Promised I Would Tell. The tree of life, she called it.

I quote her poem: “[I]ts limbs reach for the sun/And one (or two) with leaves/Green and tender, refused to surrender/ And dared to survive. It is still alive.”

To us, that tree represents Sonia. As tempting as it was to give up during the trials of the Shoah, she refused to surrender, she dared to survive. She matured into what the rabbis called an *ilan naeh*, a beautiful, elegant tree. She was, as the prophet Jeremiah put it, *etz shatul al mayim, ve-al yuval ye-shalach shorashav*, “a tree planted by waters, sending forth its roots by a stream,” *velo yireh ki yavo hom, ve-haya alehu raanan, uvi-shenat batzoret lo yi-deag, velo yamish laasot pri*, “it does not sense the coming of heat; it has no care in a year of drought; it does not cease to bear fruit.”

You are undoubtedly familiar with the stereotype of people who have endured great suffering. It is often said that their troubles make them hard and prickly. They make unreasonable demands. Sometimes the victims even become victimizers.

But that stereotype is completely wrong, and I offer Sonia as my proof. Sonia disproves that pernicious theory about victims because her experiences made her not *less* sensitive, but *more* sensitive, *more* willing to embrace human difference, *more* willing to throw her arms around anyone who needed a hug, *more* attuned to their stories, *more* attentive to all of the details.

She was “a tree planted by waters, sending forth its roots by a stream.” Those waters represent the great love that Sonia’s parents gave her—her mother (*Mamusia*, “Mommy” (in Polish), Sonia called out to her this past week, as she was dying), and her father who so memorably danced with her in the barracks. She was nurtured by the waters of courage provided by her sister, Blanca, who managed to stay with her through all the concentration camps, the “death march” from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen, the DP camps, and afterwards, until Blanca’s passing last December. The waters that sustained Sonia were the gentle kindness of Blanca’s husband, Norbert, and the deep devotion of Sonia’s own beloved husband Mark, who passed away in 1999—Mark and Sonia were married for 49 wonderful years.

And, in a profound sense, the waters that gave Sonia strength were the values she had been taught as a child, the ideals by which she lived. The notion that we should treasure the differences that distinguish one person from another. The belief that we can overcome senseless fear and hatred, that we can shed our apathy and take responsibility for one another.

In the camps, one of her primary motivations for survival was the idea of becoming a witness. In other words, for her, survival was not a matter of convenience but a mission. Sonia, who began writing poetry at age twelve and kept a diary, knew that if she was caught with her writings in the camp, it would mean death to her and others. She burned her diary but continued writing in her head. Day after day in that “other world,” Sonia mentally recorded what happened to her.

It was not until she reached the DP camps in 1945, that she finally had the luxury to write down her words. And, about forty years after that, she somehow found the courage to reread her reconstructed diary, and recognized that her personal efforts to remember had to be shared with others and integrated into something larger. She understood that her memories could teach others. With the help of Margo Stern Strom and the wonderful people at Facing History and Ourselves, Sonia’s recollections were disseminated.

I marvel at the directness and clarity of her writings, which revealed the truth to us, and made it possible to feel with her.

Over the years, as you know, Sonia spoke tirelessly to thousands of young people about her experiences. She traveled everywhere to testify before them. She especially enjoyed visiting Catholic parochial schools, and Gordon College. Some of those young people, now grown, are here today. Sonia had an incredible ability to reach their hearts and to show them that they have to make ethical commitments about life. She cared about each and every one of them.

In return, the young students inspired her. When they heard that she was ill, they sent her a myriad of letters—we need you, they wrote, don’t give up, just as you’ve taught us never to give up.

As I think of Sonia, images pop up in the corners of my mind. I see the picture of a white hand and a black hand intertwined, which Sonia painted after Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in 1968. I see the photo of Cardinal Law and Lenny Zakim standing in prayer with Sonia at Auschwitz in 1986. I’m sure you see these images too, and other images. Bless those images.

In 1982, Sonia was interviewed by a young freelance reporter, Harriet Wacks. They became great friends, and together founded the Holocaust Center Boston North. Harriet encouraged Sonia to complete her GED, so she would at least have the equivalent of a high school diploma; of course, this was before all the honorary degrees that Sonia received. Peabody’s late Mayor Peter Torigian was a major supporter of Sonia and Harriet, as is our current mayor, Michael Bonfanti. The Holocaust Center is thriving today. The Legacy Partners program in which survivors are paired with people who volunteer to tell their stories after they are gone, is a brilliant continuation of Sonia’s work.

As you all know, Sonia was a presidential appointee to the US Holocaust Memorial Council—only the second survivor to be appointed to the council, after Elie Wiesel. Every year, she would commemorate the Armenian genocide. She cast light on the Cambodian genocide, the Rwandan genocide, the genocide in Darfur. She helped to organize the No Place for Hate committee in Peabody, which has reorganized and is now called Peabody United. Every year, on Yom Kippur, she would read some of her poetry here at Temple Ner Tamid.

But let me focus on her role as wife, mother and grandmother. When she first met her husband, Dr Mark Weitz, he was doing what doctors used to have time to do—he was making a house call to a friend of hers. With love and understanding, he helped her adjust to this new world after the horrors she had experienced in Europe. They

had fun with the children, and they enjoyed traveling, the two of them, together every year. They shared a real love of life, an awareness of the preciousness of every moment.

Sonia was a tree that bore fruit. She inspired her children—Don, Sandy and Andi—like her, they are independent, principled and committed. To praise them is to praise Sonia, who regarded her children as her greatest achievements. I know how she loved to talk about them. And Sonia was simply crazy about her Israeli son-in-law Nachman, and grandchildren, Tal (and his wife Rona), Raz and Dar.

The family told me about Sonia's 80th birthday celebration in 2008. Everyone came together to rejoice.

When she fell ill a few months ago, she faced it with her characteristic courage and humor. She kvetched—about her appearance—and joked about it. Do you know that she once wrote a poem about humor?

IT HAS BEEN RUMORED

THAT A SENSE OF HUMOR

MAY SAVE YOUR LIFE IN A CRUNCH

IT COMES IN HANDY

OVER WINE OR BRANDY

AMUSING AND FUN OVER LUNCH

AND IN SERIOUS TIMES

TO FOLLOW THESE RHYMES

MAY BE EXPEDIENT AND WISE

BECAUSE WE DERIVE

THE WILL TO SURVIVE

FROM DEFIANT WIT AND SURPRISE

That was Sonia. Wit and surprise.

Sonia's children cared for her at home with great devotion in her last weeks, Andi came from Israel, and Don from Dallas, Sandy who lives here on the North Shore never left her. Their mother was never a burden; they loved being with her. They were blessed to be able to spend time with her, reminiscing and saying goodbye.

They asked me to acknowledge Sonia's nurse from Partners Hospice, Ellen Iseminger, whose skill and devotion were exceptional.

I know how brief, how incomplete, this eulogy is, and I apologize. But let me conclude by emphasizing something that everyone who encountered Sonia sensed about her. She had a genuine faith. Although she was as secular as any of us, and had her doubts and questions, she was more a believer than most of us. She saw the world as it really is, and yet she was profoundly spiritual—she was convinced that God would give her strength in her lifelong struggle against forgetfulness, evil and death.

If we share even a fraction of her faith in life and in goodness, then we should be able to trust her daring conviction, that she is safe and at peace and in the best of hands, and that we are too. In that spirit, we have to give thanks.

Thanks for this beautiful tree, rooted by a flowing stream, never ceasing to bear fruit. A tree of life. It is still alive, she is still alive, in our hearts and minds.