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Much has been written about Sonia Weitz since her death on June 23; but the north of Boston Jewish community is well aware of who she was. It was here that she lived her adult life and — although she traveled and spoke widely — it was among this community that her influence was most deeply felt. She will be remembered not only as the woman who put a human face on the Holocaust for generations to come but also for assuring that the center she cofounded would be not be a Jewish organization but a interfaith one — not in name only, but in deed as well.

History Professor Robert McAndrews, long time president of the board of the Holocaust Center, recalled the early days of the center when board members Rabbi Samuel Kenner of Salem's Temple Shalom and Gordon College Professor Marvin Wilson would engage in theological discussions over Harriet Wack's dining room table.

“Sonia would smile in awe at the depth of knowledge that Marvin had of Jewish history and the Torah,” McAndrews said, adding that she was fascinated by the conversations of the two scholars.

It was these spontaneous interfaith dialogues that would stretch far beyond Wack's Peabody dining room to solidify the Jewish/Christian effort that would become one of the pillars of the Holocaust Center. Sonia's friendships with the Anti Defamation League's highly regarded executive director, Lenny Zakim, and his connection with Cardinal Bernard Law would further add weight and expand the influence of the Holocaust Center. Over the years, survivors of the Armenian, Rwandan and Cambodian genocides would share the podium with Holocaust survivors to recount their stories.

“It's why the Holocaust Center has been as successful all these years,” McAndrews said.

But he acknowledged that no one could electrify an audience as Sonia did when bringing her story home to audiences. She would speak about herself, her sister, their parents, a tree growing in her yard and an improbable last dance with her father in the Plaszow concentration camp while a young boy played the harmonica.

“She just, boom, right into your bones,” McAndrews said. “Whether it was middle school kids, clergy or DAs or cops, she cast a spell on the room. I always think about her intelligence. So beautiful, so graceful and soft spoken — many people underestimated the vast knowledge she possessed.”

Whenever McAndrews would mention a book he'd discovered, Sonia would not only know the book but she'd converse with him about how it compared with others of its kind.

“We have been blessed. What can I say . . . What a loss!” he said.

Even though it never ceased being emotionally draining for Sonia to speak before audiences, she would retell her story of going from light and beauty to a world of morbidity and darkness. For 29 years, from the time Sonia and Harriet Wacks founded the Holocaust Center until nearly the end of her life, Sonia would tell, because she promised she would tell so that the world would know and never forget. She told of her beautiful childhood in Krakow, of being surrounded by family, of living in that sophisticated city and vacationing in the country, of taking walks in Krakow's public garden with her older sister, Blanca, and her beau, Norbert.

Sonia would tell Christian and Jewish students in New England as well as audiences outside the region how her safe and protected world came under the thrall of the Nazis who, like pythons devouring their prey, entered Jewish Krakow and began chocking off its life blood — taking away rights, humiliating its pious rabbis and

scholars, rounding up Jews and shooting them in public squares. And yet, this was but the beginning of the four-year Holocaust that came so close to extinguishing Sonia as it did more than 80 members of her family, a small portion of the six million Jews murdered. Of their family, only she and Blanca survived. Together they somehow lived through five concentration camps until, emaciated and nearly deranged, they were liberated in 1945.

Commenting on her speeches, Professor Wilson said, “Sonia would talk about three groups: perpetrators, victims and bystanders. After talking about the first and second, she’d emphasize the third and encourage students to speak out,” and to be “upstanders” rather than bystanders.

He has sent many of his students to work with Sonia and Harriet Wacks at the Holocaust Center. For Wilson, that seminal event “is not a Jewish problem. It’s a problem that humanity has to face.

“One of Sonia’s greatest assets was to not make others feel guilty of the past, but to challenge everyone to personal responsibility, to moral accountability, to humaneness in the present,” Wilson said. “It was her way of approaching ignorance, prejudice and hatred.”

Remarking that “everyone loved Sonia and wanted to hug her,” Wilson related a story about taking her with him to speak at a Christian conference in Austin, Texas in 1985. She told her story to an audience of 300 people.

“They were so moved by her address, 150 people lined up to hug her when it was over. The ‘hug line’ extended out the door of this large auditorium. It took over an hour. She told me later she almost got hugged to death,” Wilson recalled.

What now for the Holocaust Center? What must it do to keep the tragedy from becoming a mere footnote to history?

“The Jewish people continue to live,” said Wilson. “There’s something beyond. There’s a future. The Legacy Partners program is that connection with the future. The voice will not be silenced.”

Thanks to board member Neil Donnenfeld and a willing board and staff, the Legacy Partners was born several years ago to assure that survivors’ stories will not cease to be told when they die but will live in the voices of others who promise to tell. Like a mother’s hand stretched out to grasp her child’s and steer it in the right direction, our local survivors have handed off their stories to a younger generation who are now relating them in schools and before adult audiences. The Holocaust Center is making sure that survivors’ memories will live another day.