

Eastport Woman's Letters Tell Poignant Story of Holocaust

THE CAPITAL - ANNAPOLIS MARYLAND

APRIL 22, 2001

By Theresa Winslow, Staff Writer

Memories surround Thea Lindauer in her Severn House home. The walls are covered with brightly-colored still lifes and portraits she painted. Keepsakes fill every table, chair and corner. But she stored away for 50 years some of the most poignant reminders of her past two small stacks of folded, yellowed letters. Neatly written in German on single sheets of paper are the almost weekly messages sent from her father, Samuel Kahn, who was in the small city of Eisenberg, to Mrs. Lindauer, then a teen-ager living in Chicago with a foster family. A Jew, he sent his daughter to America in November 1934 to avoid Nazi persecution and continue her education. It all seemed like a grand adventure at the time.

The 78-year-old Eastport resident and former president of the Annapolis Opera recently started rereading the letters after learning more about the 1,000 other children who made the long journey on a modern-day "underground railroad." "They represent to us what was America's response at the time to the threatened existence of the Jews, especially children," said Iris Posner, president of the Silver Spring-based One Thousand Children, Inc., a nonprofit organization that documents the experiences of people like Mrs. Lindauer. "We've have a lot to learn from them."

Mrs. Lindauer took part in a special Baltimore Yom Ha'shoah, or Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony last week that featured five of the surviving children. She's the only one living in Anne Arundel County. Yom Ha'shoah services were also held last week at Congregation Kol Ami and Congregation Kneseth Israel in Annapolis and Temple Beth Shalom in Arnold. "People should not think it is too horrible for it to happen again," said Rabbi Pinchas Klein of Kneseth Israel, whose parents are Holocaust survivors.

The Holocaust services aren't confined to just synagogues; the observance at Temple Beth Shalom included members of Broadneck-area churches and their clergy. "The idea is that this just a Jewish concern," said Rabbi Robert G. Klensin. "It's something for all of us." Another service will be held this afternoon at St. Andrew the Fisherman Episcopal Church in Mayo, and the Naval Academy is

planning a special program Tuesday night. "The Christian church is interested in the reconciliation of all people," said the Rev. Richard Larabee of St. Andrew. "Everybody in the world ought to attend this kind of thing, (regardless) of their faith."

The Naval Academy program, which is open only to the Brigade of Midshipmen, features the film "Weapons of the Spirit" and one of its subjects. The film chronicles the tiny Protestant village of LeChambon, whose 5,000 residents sheltered and saved 5,000 Jews, including guest Rudy Appel, from the Nazis. Lt. Cmdr. Irving Eslon, academy rabbi, said it's especially important for the brigade to learn about the Holocaust because it teaches leadership. "We train tomorrow's leaders, and (Nazi Germany) is a great example of leadership gone bad," he said.

Safety a world away

It's hard to know for sure how many Holocaust survivors live in the county. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., keeps a registry of survivors, but officials there couldn't provide an Anne Arundel total. In Annapolis, about 10 people are listed. Statewide, there are 2,643, and worldwide there are 170,000. But officials stressed the counts include only those who've registered with the museum and could include people now deceased. Neither Mrs. Lindauer, nor her husband, Harry, a retired Army colonel, is listed, although both qualify as survivors, according to museum officials.

Mrs. Lindauer's parents and younger sister, Ruth, made it out of Germany in 1939, also coming to Chicago. But they didn't immediately reunite. Mrs. Lindauer was told to remain with her foster family, the second of two she lived with, to finish her high school education. They shared a roof again when Mrs. Lindauer attended the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts after high school.

Mr. Kahn, now deceased, ran a small department store and was friends with a newspaper publisher who kept him informed about the goings-on in Nazi Germany. "In 1934, no one wanted to send children out," Mrs. Lindauer said. "They all thought my father was crazy. He said, 'This is one way you'll get your education.'"

The trip to America took 10 days. Mrs. Lindauer was one of the first 100 children sent to foster families and she got seasick and caught pneumonia on the journey. Her school friends dressed in Hitler Youth uniforms came to say good-bye when she left; she later learned they were punished for seeing a Jew off.

When she arrived, the only English she knew consisted of "Yes," "No," "How do you do," and "Ladies and gentlemen, let us begin." She was supposed to be in the fifth or sixth grade, but she was placed in third because she spoke German.

Her father would offer her advice and answer her questions in letters that began, "Dear Little Thea." Some excerpts from the first: "Be careful not to break any thing... knowing how you like to rush around... People think maybe I am not so crazy after all, putting an ocean between you and Germany and now are wondering about sending their own children... You must always remember people are basically kind and trustworthy. The proof is where you are now and all that is being done for you." Mrs. Lindauer missed her family, but everything in America was new and exciting.

Speaking out

For a long time, Mrs. Lindauer said she felt guilty speaking about her experiences because nothing horrible happened to her or her immediate family. But she slowly came to realize that it was important to tell her tale.

She and her husband, who came to America in 1936, lived all over the world, but settled in Annapolis in 1967, when Col. Lindauer was sent to the Far East. Mrs. Lindauer wanted a home in a community where the military was looked favorably upon.

A mother of three and a grandmother, Mrs. Lindauer for four years as president of the opera company, retiring in 1998. She succeeded her husband to the post, and together they served at the helm for 10 years. Mrs. Lindauer helped design Mitscher Hall Chapel at the Naval Academy and the couple played a big part in getting a rabbi on staff there. Both have also spent time helping relatives of concentration camp victims find out what happened to the families. The couple have spoken to students here and in Germany about the Holocaust and she's currently translating her father's letters in the hope of turning them into a book.

Mrs. Lindauer considers her exodus to America a gift that's she justified by doing the most she can with her life. "I remember it always," she said. "You just live with it. It just sort of guides everything I do. I don't take anything for granted."

Published 04/22/01, Copyright 2001 The Capital, Annapolis, Md.

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