

BY MARGIE NEWMAN
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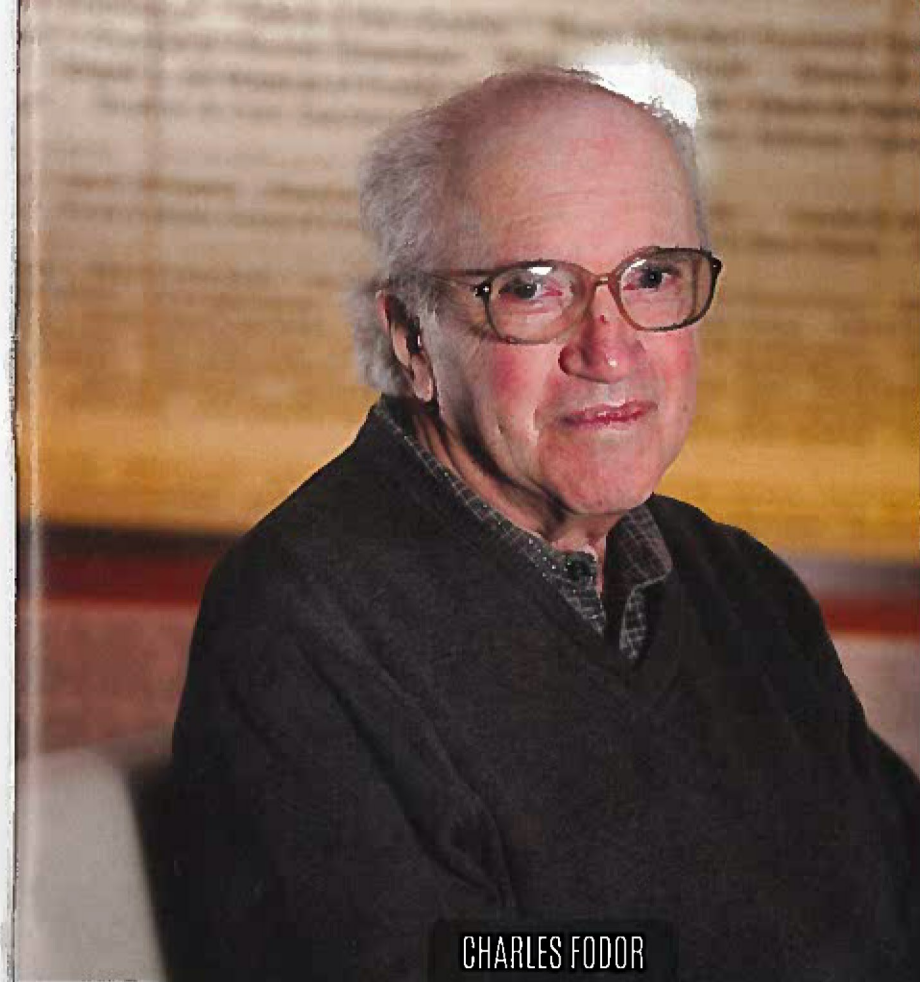
SHARING THE Legacy

The Witness Theater
Project brings together
Holocaust survivors
and youth to make
a better world.

Ruby Stillman, a St. Louis Park High School freshman, looks forward to Sundays. That's when she heads to the Sabes Jewish Community Center and meets up with other teens from Yachad, an organization that works to promote Jewish education for teens, and with Holocaust survivors to participate in the Witness Theater Project. Initiated in Israel, Witness Theater helps Holocaust survivors share their stories, and allows teens and survivors to get to know each other as individuals and build relationships. Teens and survivors talk and share their perspectives. The teens may act out skits based on what they are discussing. The project will culminate in a production in April in the Sabes JCC, created by the teens and directed by JCC theater director Todd Bruse.

Stillman explains that while she has studied the Holocaust in books, this is the first time she has connected with survivors personally. "There's a much deeper impact when you hear survivors tell their stories. My generation is the last to have the chance to talk directly with survivors. The main thing the survivors want us to learn is that everyone has the potential to be evil. It's everyone's responsibility to learn that and raise awareness. The lessons of the Holocaust are very relevant to the world right now. If we can portray those lessons to our audience, we'll have achieved our goal."

Clinical psychologist Dr. Ruth Hornstein, the program's director and a daughter of survivors, values the opportunity to help share the legacy of the Holocaust. Hornstein explains, "The goal of Witness Theater is not just what happens onstage in April, but also to have dialogues and develop relationships



CHARLES FODOR



RUBY STILLMAN



TODD BRUSE



MANNY GABLER



between youth and survivors. Many of the kids came in not knowing a lot about World War II history. They crave the knowledge and understanding that survivors can provide. When Charles Fodor, a survivor from Budapest, gave a talk about his experiences, the kids were drawn into a whole other world. They could never get that from a book. They're not talked at. They're able to have active conversations, and that's one of things that makes the program successful."

Yachad's teens work with Bruse, who serves as the project's creative director, to write the script for the performance, which will be held at the Sabes JCC theater. Beginning with improvisation exercises, Bruse works closely with the students to build the trust that is crucial for creating and performing together. Bruce emphasizes that it's important that the performance portray survivors' lives before and after the Holocaust, as well as how the Holocaust affects us today. Bruce is encouraged by the students' attention to the survivors' stories and their commitment to the project. "It's such a unique and powerful opportunity for teens to work together with survivors, and very soon, the opportunity will be no more."

Judith Meisel, a Holocaust survivor born in Lithuania, has shared her story with thousands in schools and other groups. Meisel, along with

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—JUDITH MEISEL

her mother and sister, were in the Stutthof concentration camp. Meisel and her sister survived; her mother perished. Transmitting the values of Judaism to the next generation is Meisel's motivation for participating in the program. She wants to help fight injustice and persecution, and ensure that something like the Holocaust never happens again. "I want to show them that we care for each other. Not just for other Jewish people, but for everyone. I don't want to focus on the horrors. I don't want to talk about the camps. I want to give hope, to teach about the beauty of the Shabbat table, the holidays, and most important, how we treat our neighbors. I ask the kids, 'What kind of world do you want for your future, and what are you doing to make it happen?'"

The youngest of the war survivors in the program is Manny Gabler, whose mother was pregnant with him when his family fled Germany for Italy; he was only a year old when they escaped from Italy to Shanghai, home to about 18,000 Jewish refugees during World War II. Gabler describes a session where various objects were set out on a table, and each person was asked to choose one and share why they were drawn to it. Gabler picked up a locket, and explained to the group that he chose it because when his family fled to Shanghai, the only thing his mother took with her was a gold locket. "I loved to look at that locket. It was the only beautiful thing in the ghetto," he says.

TO LEARN MORE:

In *Tak For Alt*, a documentary made in 1999, Judith Meisel recounts her childhood growing up in a small town in Lithuania and chronicles her experiences during the Holocaust, her rescue and time in Denmark where she and her sister received an open-hearted welcome after their liberation from the Stutthof concentration camp, and her life in the U.S. after the war.

- *Light From the Yellow Star: A Lesson of Love from the Holocaust* by Robert O. Fisch.
- *Fisch Stories: Reflections on Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness* by Robert O. Fisch
- *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: testimony of Judith Meisel and thousands of other survivors.* ushmm.org.
- *New York Times* nytimes.com/2012/06/20/travel/jewish-life-in-shanghai-ghetto article about the history of the Shanghai ghetto.

"The goal of Witness Theater is not just what happens onstage in April, but also to have dialogues and develop relationships between youth and survivors." —RUTH HORNSTEIN



Amy Weiss, director of programming and development of the program for teens, initiated the Witness Theater Project in Minnesota and organized the partnerships that make the program possible. Says Weiss, "I'm so grateful to all our partners for helping us bring survivors and teens together." Partnering with Yachad are Sabes Jewish Community Center, Tolerance Minnesota of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas, the Joint Distribution Committee, and Better Together, a nationally funded project that creates intergenerational programs for Jewish teens and elders. Weiss

explains that a priority of the project is for the youth involved to know the survivors as individuals, with full lives before and after the Holocaust. Weiss is grateful to the Sabes JCC for sharing their resources, and allowing Yachad's teens to share survivors' stories with a wide community audience.

The performances will be April 30 at 2 p.m., May 3 at 7 p.m. and May 4 at 7 p.m. All performances will be held at the Sabes JCC. *s/p*