



Gratz Insider, April 2014 - Story Continuation

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The Grossmann Program: ‘The Forgotten Legacy of Unarmed Resistance in the Holocaust’

Endowed by the Grossmann Family, the Deena Grossmann Memorial Education Program at Gratz College supports teachers with free lectures and workshops in memory of Deena Grossmann, a Gratz alumna passionately committed to Jewish education. Although this year’s program was open to all interested participants, its primary objective was to provide educators with strategies for teaching the Holocaust. As Mindy Blechman, coordinator of the Gratz Holocaust and Genocide Studies department, explains, “Teachers are not ‘born’ knowing how to teach the Holocaust just because they are teachers. It is a highly sensitive, difficult and upsetting topic.”

For Claire Goldstein Simmons, the Holocaust has always been part of her life. With her mother a survivor of Auschwitz, Simmons was born in a Czechoslovakian displaced persons camp after the war. Deeply affected by her family’s past, Simmons ultimately became a historian and an educator. She created the Hebrew department at American University in Washington, D.C. In addition, as a longtime teacher and chairwoman of the Jewish Studies department at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, Maryland, Simmons played a leading role in the school’s development into one of the largest Jewish day schools in the nation. And she now leads intensive Jewish study tours in cities throughout Europe and across the world.

During the program at Gratz, Simmons emphasized the need to instill in students an emotional connection to the Holocaust - but not by depicting Jews “as objects in this drama of butchery.” According to Simmons, students need to be exposed to the range of seemingly small, but symbolically significant forms of spiritual resistance that emerged in the concentration camps. And she recommends that teachers use artifacts as a powerful window into these courageous acts.

Simmons described, for example, a spoon fashioned from a scrap of metal by an Auschwitz prisoner, who was determined to live as a human being until the end. She also showed pictures of other artifacts made by prisoners in the camps, including a Jewish Star created from metal wire and pieces of plastic, as well as a comb with the faint likeness of a Jewish Star scratched into the metal. In addition, there was the prayer book found in Auschwitz, which had been bartered for with a piece of bread, and the French book whose margins were scrawled with the writings of a former inhabitant of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Serving as a legacy to us and to future generations, these relics are all testaments to the unarmed resistance of Jews during the Holocaust. Lingered over the photo of the French book, Simmons urged the educators in the room to tell their students, “These words were written for you.”

For those interested in more in-depth study, Gratz College offers a full course on Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. We also offer both a graduate certificate program and a master’s program in Holocaust and Genocide Studies, both of which can be completed entirely online. For more information on the Holocaust and Genocide Studies programs, contact Mindy Blechman at 215-635-7300 x 154 or mblechman@gratz.edu.