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South Jersey Holocaust Survivors Connect With Past and Future on Trip to Museum in D.C.

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Contact: Maryjane Briant
Interim News and Media Relations Director
Galloway Township, NJ 08205
Maryjane.Briant @stockton.edu
(609) 652-4593

Galloway, NJ - Ruth Fisch was 5 years old when her mother and older sister put her on a train with other Jewish children on a journey from Vienna to England. It was 1939 and the Kindertransport had been organized to help rescue children from the Nazis.

Ruth Fisch grew up to become Ruth Kessler, but she never saw her mother, Charlotte, or her 9-year-old sister, Erika, again.

After traveling to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum on an April 29 trip, Kessler finally had confirmation that her mother and sister had died in 1942 in a Polish concentration camp.

Kessler was among 80 Holocaust survivors, veterans of World War II and their families who traveled from Margate, NJ to Washington, D.C. for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's 20th Anniversary National Tribute to Holocaust Survivors and Their Families & World War II Veterans.

The trip was co-sponsored by The Sara and Sam Schoffer Holocaust Resource Center at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey here, the Jewish Family Service of Atlantic and Cape May Counties and the Jewish War Veterans Post 39 of Margate, NJ.

"I found out a lot of what I wanted to know," said Ruth Kessler, now a resident of Ventnor. A representative of the International Tracing Service (ITS) at the museum told her mother and sister had been together in a ghetto in Vienna. "She also told me the

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area where my sister and mother were in (concentration camps) Belzec and Sobibor, both in Poland.”

In February 1941, the Nazis deported 2000 Jewish men, women and children from Vienna to Poland and in 1942, they were taken to Belzec and Sobibor death camps.

Mrs. Kessler said Jo-Ellyn Decker of the ITS “told me that they were together, had not been separated and that meant so much to me. It was worth the trip.”

She was placed in England with Stella and Michael Webber’s family, because Mrs. Webber worked for HIAS, then a nonprofit Jewish rights organization involved in the Kindertransport that today works on all immigrants’ rights issues.

Ruth eventually was able to rejoin her father, Henry Fisch, who had come to New York early on but was unable to get passports and visas to get his family out of Austria.

Her husband, Louis Kessler, said, “The irony of the whole story is... she was not supposed to go. They wanted older children for Kindertransport. Her older sister was supposed to go but she would not leave her mother and they ended up in the concentration camp.”

Mr. Kessler said of his wife’s reaction to hearing details about her family’s end, “It was like a rock off her shoulders to finally know all the particulars that are available. It gave her a little closure.”

Herb Harwood of Atlantic City, NJ, is a World War II Army veteran who helped liberate the Flossenberg concentration camp in Germany. On the trip, Harwood by chance encountered Jeannette Binstock of the Washington, D.C. area. Her father, Leon Kupferman, who died in 2002, had been imprisoned in the camp Harwood liberated.

Those kinds of connections made the trip especially meaningful to participants.

“It was such a moving event,” said Dr. Nili Keren, Stockton’s Ida King Distinguished Visiting Professor of Holocaust Studies this academic year.

“We are talking about people whose ages are between 80 to 90-plus,” said Dr. Keren, an Israeli citizen. “And they were so excited. Some of the Holocaust survivors came with their families, including second- and third-generation...Everything was so well organized – nobody was lost among more than 3000 people who were invited. Everyone was like the only one there.”

The museum had people “sit at tables according to their country of origin - Warsaw, for instance,” Dr. Keren said. “People met people who have not seen each other since the liberation in the camps. It was not something heavy, like you would think in a Holocaust

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event. It was something that showed people began a new life after the Holocaust.”

Dr. Keren said, “For me, it was something so important to give on to my students...I told them about it in class: how happy the survivors are to be alive. How important it is to say: ‘What can I do for the future?’ ”

Five undergraduate students who are earning a minor and two graduate students earning a Master of Arts in Stockton College’s Holocaust and Genocide Studies program also made the trip.

Gail Rosenthal, director of Stockton’s Sara and Sam Schoffer Holocaust Resource Center, said an exhibit called “Some Were Neighbors: Collaboration & Complicity in the Holocaust” was “very powerful for our students...They could identify with it because we all have neighbors. The students commented that this related to their lives and the importance of not being a bystander when help is needed.”

Irvin Moreno Rodriguez, 19, is in a five-year program working for a bachelors and masters in Criminal Justice, with a minor in Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Stockton.

“The exhibits were fantastic, especially “Collaborators” – about how best friends were able to wholeheartedly turn over their Jewish neighbors to the Nazis - even without getting a reward,” he said. “It could (have been) fear or pure hatred - we can only speculate.”

“What was really special was, I actually got to walk around with some of the Holocaust survivors from South Jersey,” Moreno Rodriguez said. “They will relive their lives. You get to interact with them – I don’t even think a museum can do that. You get to see what they’ve been through and how they’ve been able to come back from tragedy.”

“When I was with Ruth Zinman, a Holocaust survivor from Transylvania who lives in South Jersey now,” he continued, “she started dancing the tango at a special event outside the museum.”

“It really speaks to you that they’ve been through so much and they’re able to find the joys of life in anything – including music,” Moreno Rodriguez said. “I think one of the most memorable things she told me was – she’d been feeling ill – but she said: ‘If Hitler couldn’t kill me, nothing is.’ ”

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