

Museum of Jewish Heritage November 7th, 2013
A Tribute to Fanya Gottesfeld-Heller

Good Evening Mom, Family, Friends of the Museum,

I feel privileged by this opportunity to address you and share a bit about the life and mind of a remarkable woman. Fanya Gottesfeld-Heller is a Holocaust survivor, author, philanthropist, educator and perennial student. She is my role model, my heroine, and my mother.

My mother NEVER has enough space for her books. The walls of my childhood room were lined from floor to ceiling because my bookworm mother read voraciously, and had run out of shelving everywhere else!

I memorized titles of her books while falling asleep and DREAMED of reading them someday so I would be JUST as smart as her. When I was in fifth grade my teacher, Mrs. Fischer spoke about great literature and asked if anyone KNEW of Dostoevsky.

Blank stares. Flinging my arm in the air I boldly rattled off-“Crime and Punishment, The Brothers Karamazov, The Idiot, The Possessed”. Mrs. Fischer looked mildly shocked; probably wondering what a 5th grader was DOING reading about Raskolnikov rather than Nancy Drew. Of course, I had not read beyond the titles of any of those epic novels. I was, after all, only 10. But thanks to my mother's insatiable love of learning, I was already getting to spend time surrounded by some of history's greatest writers.

During that same fifth-grade year, my mother was amassing enough time auditing night school classes to obtain multiple advanced degrees. For me, the inefficiency of going to a class for no credit was terribly annoying. School for the mere sake of learning? Why?

I realized later that matriculation was a scary prospect for my mother. Survivors like to live under the radar and be anonymous, if not invisible. But I yammered on until she listened. At 45 years of age, she started attending classes for credit, at The New School. Years later, my father, Joseph, ZICHRONO LIVRACHA, proudly attended consecutive graduations as we both received Master's degrees on the same day. Fanya has had to build many more bookcases since. And I have gotten around to reading Dostoyevsky's novels. Well, most of them.

My mother was born into a poor, traditional Jewish family in 1924. She was raised in Skala, a provincial Polish village. She was a skinny, brilliant student who took after her father, Benjamin, an Esperanto speaking, Zionistic, civil engineer. In Skala, her father was considered a wise and worldly free thinker, whose counsel was sought by both Jew and non-Jew. He valued my mother's intelligence and nurtured her drive for knowledge, and the pursuit of excellence. They shared a plan that my mother would go to Paris to study medicine. One day, on her way to a friend's birthday party, she peaked into the book she was bringing as her gift. Captivated, she chose to miss the party in favor of savoring the irresistible book. How did her father react? With a twinkle in his eye, he gently admonished her while embracing her warmly. At THAT moment, my mother recognized that such encouragement was unusual for a girl, and revered her father

even more as a result.

At the beginning of the Holocaust, my mother's, compassion, generosity and love of learning coalesced into a tangible endeavor. In 1941, when she was 17 years old, it was mandated that Jewish children be prohibited from going to school, she, and her friend, Shimek, organized a bustling school for small children in the basement of her home. The school operated on days when local rumblings or warnings of pogrom were absent. All children were welcome to this sheltered, forbidden haven where she was the principal teacher. They had no books or supplies to share-just their memories and their knowledge.

Jewish life continued to disintegrate and while the sun was eclipsed and darkness descended, her personal god vanished. Her budding adolescence, flourishing makeshift "school" and dreams of studying Medicine were left behind, as survival became her sole focus -as it became for FAR TOO MUCH of humankind during those AWFUL years.

With the help of Sidor, the farmer and Jan, my mother, her parents, and little brother Arthur, who we are blessed to have here with us tonight, were forced to live under a cow's drinking trough...TWO dark years of hellish silence, infection, starvation and near literal petrification. Marked for death by her neighbors, and faced with the constant threat of discovery and execution, she miraculously survived to tell her story.

Her memoir is a candid portrait of her family's struggle for survival and her relationship with her Christian rescuers. It took luck and HOPE to survive, but it took courage to risk criticism by speaking up years later. It took fortitude to confront those who would not believe that fellow human beings could and WOULD commit such sadistic, heinous crimes. My mother had seen the best and worst of humankind and in the process had to confront some of the deepest truths about herself, places where most of us are NEVER forced to go. During the war years she was both victim and participant actor, involved in unimaginable events and facing wrenching decisions. All this left her with an indelible, abiding awareness of human frailty, vulnerability and caprice. She learned that a conventional moral code does not apply to extraordinary circumstances. Within her evolved a dynamic, flexible and forgiving morality. The ability to suspend facile judgment about people gives her a uniquely tolerant and accepting character. Thankfully, it also informs her hilarious wit, and refreshing irreverence that I so enjoy and admire. Fashionable and modern, she delights being in the know and keeps a lively pulse on pop culture. Her gift of candor emboldens her to readily admit that she read the complete "Fifty Shades of Gray" when she was 88 years old.

As I was writing this speech I called my mother on the phone and recounted an ongoing robust exchange we had years ago with some of her granddaughters. "Remember how we used to discuss the appropriate age for the girls to read books like Flaubert's "Madame Bovary", Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina", Dreiser's "Sister Carrie" Zola's "Nana" and YOUR "Love in a World of Sorrow". "Of course -I loved it!" "Mom", I said, "I'm not sure I should mention this stuff", I don't intend to trivialize the Holocaust...OR to relate you to the women in these novels". With aplomb she dismissed my worry: "ACH Not at all, no, those are great books-they're ALL about the human condition and...It's all the truth. Say WHATEVER you want. "

Since the publication of her memoir *Love in a World of Sorrow*, my mother's mission has been to inform and broaden the minds of young people, and to bear witness, thereby creating MORE witnesses, be they teachers in attendance at the Museum's Annual Educators program or inner city high school students. The UNCENSORED truth is told and will pass l'dor va'dor -From generation to generation.

I cannot help but wonder if my mother's love of learning and teaching blossomed in that basement in 1941. She inspired a love of learning in those students just as she inspires teachers and students today.

Mom, you are a restless person who is bewildered and bedeviled with memories, wrestling and laboring fitfully toward some understanding of how what you lived through could have been. Down to earth, yet impassioned, you share this struggle effectively with your audiences. Your joie de vivre, warmth, openness and lust for life are SO genuine, and infectious that your personality often captivates your audience as much as the incredible story you have to tell. From inner-city children whose stories of deprivation and degradation remind you of your own, to educators seeking new pedagogical techniques for teaching your history-people WILL carry forth your message. From you they understand not just intellectually, but emotionally on a visceral level, that by taking an active stand against evil, ONE act of human kindness can save lives. By your many acts of kindness in reaching out to those that need you, -you coax and guide us to renew our belief in the possibility of a more human and humane world—AND in keeping HOPE itself alive. That is why you choose to be a part of this magnificent Museum of Jewish Heritage. Hope for a greater future is what drives you, and this Museum is a symbol for all who seek hope.

Mom, you embody the capacity to savor life's gifts big and small. May your legacy of Tikkun Olam continue from generation to generation as we-your children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren---the living proof that the good deeds of a few people reverberate---sit in awe before you tonight in celebration of your resilience and goodness. May you continue to enjoy your life and your many blessings every moment of every day with the love, gusto, grace and gratitude you have always shown our family. I love you.

Jacqueline Heller, M.D.

LOS ANGELES

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