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Stories of survival

Museum chronicles memories

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Before they're lost to posterity, memories of the Nazi holocaust, American internment camps and the killing fields of Cambodia are being preserved and made public in the Sonoma County Survivor Project, an exhibit to open May 1 at the Sonoma County Museum.

"These are our neighbors – people we see out raking their leaves or shopping at Safeway," said photographer Phyllis Rosenfield of the survivors. "Their stories are special and individual but they have a commonality. It's easier for us to understand their importance, one person at a time."

Rosenfield and writer Lisa Slater, who interviewed the subjects and wrote their histories, undertook the project four years ago, starting with people they knew in their own Jewish culture. They expanded it to include local Japanese-Americans whose homes, lives and civil rights



"I intend, gradually, for my daughter to learn her family history. I try not to use labels like 'Germans.' I

explain to her what the Nazis believed and the ridiculous nature of this whole notion of superiority and inferiority, what it can lead to...

"She learned about the war quite inadvertently. One day it dawned on her, 'Where's my other set of grandparents?' So I told her they were killed in the war. She now has some notion, at least, that the conflicts we term 'war' result in a lot of innocent people being killed who are not fighting."

**DACHAU SURVIVOR,
PAUL BENKO**



"There's a saying, 'shikata ganai,' that means, 'Well, it can't be helped.' That's what

were violated by internment during World War II and Cambodian refugees who had to flee the Pol Pot regime.

“There are other oppressed groups and we thought of expanding the project to include them – Native Americans, Armenians, battered women, people with AIDS, even farm workers,” said Rosenfield. “We had to keep it manageable, however.”

The three selected groups have in common their swift passage into persecution, she noted, each having to pack their few belongings quickly and leave their homes. The European Jews were told they were being sent away to camps where there was work, the Japanese-Americans were told they were being moved for their own safety and the Cambodians were sent out of Pnom Penh with the warning – inaccurate – that Americans were about to bomb their city.

“They’re not the same experiences, but there are parallels,” said Rosenfield.

“Among other things, their experience is a lesson to be skeptical of information a government spoon-feeds its people,” said Slater. “There’s a fine edge between observing critically what you see and becoming totally untrusting, though. These people have been able to come back from there and trust people again... that’s one of the things we’re celebrating.”

The pair supplemented their own work with photos, letters and memorabilia collected by their subjects. Rosenfield reproduced those and created contrast by photographing the survivors today, also, “in their ordinary lives, doing ordinary things... not always with joy, but with great dignity.”

“We need to realize that one can come out of these terrible experiences... and somehow go on as a whole human being.”

So intimate did the association between the women and their subjects become that Slater found herself speaking like the people whose voices she transcribed from her tape recorder. Rosenfield said she would sometimes “sit her in a dark room and look at those photos and just weep.”

“We don’t dwell on the atrocities, however,”

my mother said when she heard we had to go to camp. It was less frightful because all our friends had to go... It never occurred to us that we might die there, or what was going to be the aftermath of the experience.”

**JAPANESE-AMERICAN SURVIVOR,
MEI NAKANO**



“They sent us to help with the rice farming in Battambang. We walked two days and two nights. Then there was a trip by boat. My father-in-law died during this long trip – he was 71

years old. We didn’t tell anyone he was dead because we were afraid they would throw him in the water. We just covered him until we got off the boat and I buried him then.”

“They didn’t let you cry, you know. They didn’t let you cry at all. They didn’t want you to cry, to use incense or mourn in any way, or say prayers – no lamentations. Just bury them and go to work...”

**CAMBODIAN SURVIVOR,
TAY HOR HANG**

she said. “We’re not afraid of that but it’s more important now to find what these people learned, what signs there are to show danger ahead and how to prevent it.”

Not all of the people contacted by the pair were willing or able to participate, however.

“Some we met are not yet survivors; they’re still living their trauma,” said one of the women.

The project focuses on 15 families but dozens of other people participated.

It received early funding from the Sonoma Community Foundation and became an official project of the Center for the Study of the Holocaust at Sonoma State University, sponsored by the Academic Foundation. Much of the research will form a special collection at the SSU library after the museum exhibit. Slater and Rosenfield plan also to create a traveling display of their panels for presentations at schools.

Some thought was given to incorporating the project into a book but the women choose instead to assemble directions on how to re-create the project in other settings with the hope other communities will be able to preserve the experiences of survivors in their locales.

The Sonoma County Survivor Project curriculum and resource materials will be available for school use through the project or the museum, integrating it into the California Social Studies Framework’s “Human Rights and Genocide” unit.



“When I went back to work on Monday (after Pearl Harbor), the owner was already there with a termination check. He said, ‘I have to let you go because we’re not on the same side anymore.’ He didn’t stop to think that I was an American citizen, born and raised in Los Angeles.”

**JAPANESE-AMERICAN SURVIVOR,
SHIRO NAKANO**