

# The West Sonoma County Paper

May 16 – June 5, 2001

## The Survivor Project

By Simone Wilson

After the soldiers fired, Chhuon Pok lay still so the firing squad would think he was dead. He later escaped from Cambodia to Thailand, then came to America.

The day after Pearl Harbor, Shiro Nakano's employer fired him from his job at a grocery store because "we're not on the same side anymore."

When Vera Korkus arrived at the Nazi concentration camp she hid in her mouth the watch her mother had given her, so the guards wouldn't take it away.

Their courage and resourcefulness, along with that of dozens of other Sonoma County residents, is celebrated in The Sonoma County Survivor Project, currently on display at the Sonoma County Museum. The Project tells the stories of several dozen survivors from three communities: European Jews who survived the Nazi Holocaust, Japanese Americans who were forced from their California homes and imprisoned in remote camps during World War II, and Cambodians who escaped the Khmer Rouge massacre of the 1970's.



The exhibit, which remains at the museum through June 9, was put together by two local women, Phyllis Rosenfield, a photographer, and Lisa Slater, a computer programmer with a background in oral history. The origin of the five-year project was Rosenfield's photo essay about survivors of Nazi Europe. Slater, trained in oral history at Harvard added her interest in how people pass on knowledge through songs and folklore. Gradually, the scope of the study increased.

Their timing was fortuitous. The state of California was just starting to formulate a new social studies curriculum with a "human rights and genocide" unit, says Slater "and they had no material."

Slater and Rosenfield worked with 17 families - about 30 people in all - to gather recollections of the diverse survivors. They located participants through community groups like the Japanese American Citizens League as well as Santa Rosa Junior College's ESL (English as a Second Language) program, which had attracted a number of Cambodian refugees to the area. Slater conducted interviews; Rosenfield took the photographs. The materials - tapes, photos, memorabilia, and lengthy transcripts - are destined for the Special Collections archives at Sonoma State University.

But The Survivor Project is above all designed to travel to schools as early as next year if funding comes through. The Survivor Project has already received some support from the Sonoma County Foundation and the Museum itself.

Suffering isn't unique to any one group, and Slater and Rosenfield had to narrow their focus to create a manageable project. They finally limited the study to "people who survived a discrete event with the living memory of a community," says Slater.

Within their three chosen communities, they looked for "people who came through with the ability to form intact relationships, to have whole lives," says Slater. "For the educational purposes of the project, it's not the level of suffering, but the way in which one responds and rebounds." Often people kept their memories, but grew beyond them.



**HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR Vera Korkus in her Sebastopol home (left) and as a young girl in Vienna (top)**

*In New York the German Jewish refugees got together in pastry shops, as if they were in the old coffee houses, and all they ever talked about was what they were and what they had and what they had lost. I studiously avoided the ghetto mentality. I said, I do not want to live this way. If I have to make a life here, it has to be different.*

Vera Korkus, Sebastopol

Slater and Rosenfield don't try to discover *why* certain people survived while others didn't. "A lot is a matter of chance, of randomness," says Slater. "You cannot assume there was a right thing to do."

Rosenfield's contemporary photos hang next to photographs salvaged from the people's earlier lives. That some of the personal photos themselves survived is another miracle, a tribute to people's determination to hang onto their identity. Borin Kang's relatives, for example, hid a family photo in the wall of their home in Phnom Penh. Two years later they retrieved the photo and not much else, from the looted house before they left Cambodia.

Many early photos show people in happier times, before calamity engulfed them. One of Slater's favorites is a photo of Korkus as a girl before the Nazi Holocaust.

"It's the quintessential Anne Frank photo," says Slater. "People get the idea that Anne Frank was a unique individual, and in some ways she was, but she was also one of many of the little girls who perished."

The impact of the photos is paralleled by the accompanying text. These are the words of the survivors themselves, speaking directly to the onlooker. The testimony of Japanese Americans has a special impact, because not just the victims but all the players in the conflict were here in California, sometimes in Sonoma County itself.

*We boarded the train in Santa Rosa; the tracks went right down next to our property. Our neighbors were out there waving goodbye. One neighbor, a German, had a camera with her to take a picture of us on the train. An MP came and took the film out!*

- Martin Shimizu, Cotati

As Shimizu's testimony makes clear, Japanese Americans didn't know, during their train ride across flat, isolated, unfamiliar country, whether their experience would parallel that of the Jews in Europe:

*They stop the train; they order you off. You have regular soldiers out there with machine guns. What are you supposed to think?*

-Martin Shimizu

The Cambodian disaster involved a different kind of prejudice, because it was not a case of one ethnic group persecuting another.

“It’s the only case of true autogenocide—they killed their own people,” says Slater. The Khmer Rouge, during their reign of terror, exterminated intellectuals and bureaucrats, emptying Cambodia’s cities and forcing everyone to become peasants. No records were kept, but as many as 3 million people—half the population of the country—were wiped out. Ordinary city people survived by escaping to Thailand or pretending to be farmers.

Some survivors, like 19-year-old Sophear Hang, offer advice for getting along based on their own experiences of adjusting in order to survive. Hang escaped from Cambodia to Thailand with her family, including her father Tay Hor Hang and her sister, Sopheap, who both participated in the project as well.

*I learned about surviving and getting along...If a tiger fights a tiger, you don’t get any results. Negotiate or walk away.*

---Sophear Hang, Santa Rosa

“We wanted students to become aware of the way governments separate people,” says Slater. Prejudice thrives where people are isolated from one another, where the members of one community don’t mix with people different from themselves.

*It comes home to me just now that this attitude allowed the Nazi mentality to be absorbed very easily. People didn’t know each other very well.*

---Renée Newman, Santa Rosa

Several participants agree that racism stems from ignorance, that individuals can put aside barriers when they know each other.

*Those that knew us individually were sensitive, and they came to the train, said goodbye, and wept. That leads me to say that if you know the people, you will not prejudge.*

---Ed Hirabayashi, Glen Ellen

Bigotry is a sort of contagion, says Slater, and the testimony of these survivors of intolerance may serve as an antidote. The project aims not only to preserve experiences of those who survived, but to prevent today’s students from becoming victims - or perpetrators - of similar tragedies.

”The next time it happens, maybe they won’t be uncritical,” says Slater. “Their antennae may be up.”