

Alexandra Zapruder speaks to meeting of Mobile's Christian/Jewish Dialogue

by Perilla A. Wilson

Alexandra Zapruder, the young author of "Salvaged Pages", winner of the National Jewish Book Award for 2002, was the Christian-Jewish Dialoguespeaker to a packed house of youth and adults at Bernheim Hall. She served as the primary researcher for "Remember the Children, Daniel's Story", the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's exhibition for young visitors. She also served as the Assistant Director of the Oral History Department to record the testimony of survivors. Currently she is consulting on the development of a children's center to be built in the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

The genesis of her project that eventually produced "Salvaged Pages" began ten years ago as the researcher for an exhibit for eight to twelve year olds. She was hired to do historical research for Daniel's Story in 1991 and she asked for any youth diaries that were available. She found five or six publications that were out of print and was astonished to find them "so compelling about the character of daily life at that time." She wondered why none had been heard from as had Anne Frank. She began searching for more diaries of young people between ten and twenty. Over time she found sixty, a genre of its own, diaries not like letters or journals. These youthful Jewish writers were different with extraordinary diversity from all over Europe. Some writers were orthodox, some very assimilated, some converts to Catholicism but most in the middle. They were refugees in exile, in foster care, in hiding with false identities, or separated from family. Most were living in ghettos. There were none from concentration camps. Their voices are preserved as frank youth, both with serious historical significance and literary expressiveness.



MOBILE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE—Alexandra Zapruder of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum signs a copy of her book "Salvaged Pages" while Caroline Philpot of Holy Family Parish looks on.

Zapruder read excerpts from half a dozen of the diaries with comments about the background of each. Yitskhok Rudashevski from the Vilna Ghetto in Lithuania wrote of the collective experience - "not just what happened to me" - and the way site becomes a witness to an event, marks the place and time. The speaker said that the youth spent a lot of energy marking dates and passage of time. The beginning of events was always noted and so always was liberation in the context of the sense of stagnation and how to be productive through this time.

An anonymous girl in her teens from the Lodz Ghetto in Poland wrote about what it is like to live with hunger over many months and comparing the need to eat versus the desire to share what she had, the intense struggle to be moral and her failure to be the person she wanted to be. An orthodox male, Moshe Flinker, who was fluent in eight languages, wrote from Brussels, Belgium, that he was trying to learn Arabic. He wondered how to believe in a benevolent God and reconcile that belief with the "persecution and killing of 100,000 Jews" (in reality it was 3 million in December 1942 when he was writing). He contemplated what the meaning

was, not to negate the suffering nor a good God in his spiritual and theological struggle.

Elsa Bender, from Stanislawow, Poland, was a 21 year old who considered the centrality of liberation as the focal point for all those living in ghettos. Hope was raised and dashed constantly. Perception had nothing to do with reality and liberation was perceived to be imminent even in 1941 and '42. The idea of hope was somehow distorted. According to Zapruder, hope was a moral value for Anne Frank but for these people that Bender spoke of, it was a fragile feeling, not a value, that had nothing to do with how people wanted to feel. "For most in these diaries," she said, "hope was directly tied to one's own fate," but Elsa asserts faith in the reestablishment of moral order.

An anonymous boy in the Lodz Ghetto, having nothing else to write on, wrote all through the margins and the end pages of a French novel. He wrote in English and even though he knew four languages he found it difficult to capture the character of a moment experienced by many. All believed the allies would come and he wrote with a heightened sense of the imminence of liberation in July of 1944. The last story she quoted

from of the fifteen in the book, was from a woman , Alice Ehrmann in the Terezin Ghetto in Poland, who was from a mixed marriage. She told of the despair, exhaustion and disbelief among the people who were the last from the Polish ghettos to be sent to Auschwitz where most died by the time of the liberation in April 1945. "It complicates what we think of liberation and the pain for survivors. Not until liberation did the real truth become known and the struggle to accept it. Whatever imagination might have been, reality was far, far worse."

"The entire fabric of the human condition in Europe changed for all, even those who never experienced it."