

Faith Life

Art by a young Holocaust victim

An exhibit at Drexel centers on pictures a girl drew at a Nazi camp before her death at Auschwitz.

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Sonja Fischerova was 11 when she walked into the Terezin concentration camp in Czechoslovakia and began to paint colorful impressions of life under the bleakest of circumstances.

From that August day in 1942, reality was soothed by her imagination. The Czechoslovakian Jewish girl drew pictures of flowers in crayon and sketched her grandmother's living room while living at the way station to Auschwitz.

Sonja was one of 14,900 children who passed through Terezin, only to die at the hands of the Nazis. But in the two years she spent at Terezin, Fischerova and other children created thousands of pieces of art, works that are being preserved by the Jewish Museum in Prague.

Her artwork is the centerpiece of an exhibit on children, art and the Holocaust that opened Thursday at Drexel University's Hagerty Library.

Robert Fischl, a retired engineering professor at Drexel — and Sonja's cousin — discovered the artwork by chance on a visit to the Czech Republic four years ago. Finding the handiwork of his childhood playmate, he said, was an overwhelming moment.

"My daughter saw a picture with Sonja's name, and I didn't believe it was hers," said Fischl, 72, president of a Mount Laurel engineering firm. "It was too much for me, so my daughter talked to the curator."

The family discovered 30 pieces of art she created, with her name written neatly in the corners. There are pictures of buildings at Terezin and children dumping ashes into a river, as well as studies that show Sonja was practicing how to draw figures.

The museum furnished the family with reproductions of the works that are on exhibit at Drexel. In addition to her works, collectively called "Sonja's Legacy," Holocaust-related items from Drexel's archives are featured, including books and catalogs about children, art and the Holocaust.

Several of the items feature the work of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, a renowned artist from Germany's Bauhaus School who was interned at Terezin and taught art to children there.

Considered to be a cofounder of art therapy, Dicker-Brandeis used art so her young pupils would "keep their minds off their troubles and express what they couldn't possibly say in words," said Susan Goldman Rubin, author of *Fireflies in the Dark: The Story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the Children of Terezin*.

The children drew self-portraits, experiences in the camp, and pictures of meals they remembered.



"*Bouquet of Wild Flowers*," a work Sonja Fischerova did while imprisoned, as it was displayed recently at Katz Jewish Community Center in Cherry Hill.

If You Go

■ The "Sonja's Legacy" exhibit continues to May 28 at the W.W. Hagerty Library, 33d and Market Streets. Hours are 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. Admission is free. Information: 215-895-1500.

They used any paper they could find, including the backs of forms smuggled out of offices at the camp.

Sonja, growing up in Prague, lived with her mother, "Mitzi"; grandmother Anna Fischlova; and sister Renee. Her father left the family in the mid-1930s to work in England when he couldn't find work in Czechoslovakia. Fischl's family lived just outside the city, on a 350-acre farm.

"We were the country kids and Sonja and Renee were the city slickers," Fischl said. "Sonja was interested in everything. They loved to visit us because we had all the toys, the cats and dogs, and a tennis court."

On March 15, 1939, the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia. The Fischl

family was confiscated three months later, and Fischl's father decided to leave Europe.

Lacking money and "thinking it would all soon be over," Sonja's father told his family to remain in Prague, Fischl said. Sonja's mother even declined tickets purchased for them by Fischl's father.

The Fischl family left for what is now Israel in January 1940. Two years later, Sonja was deported to Terezin with her mother, sister and grandmother.

Sonja and her family lived in the dirty and dark barracks. They sent postcards to family members recounting the death of Sonja's grandmother from breast cancer and urged loved ones to "write again soon" and "think of us."

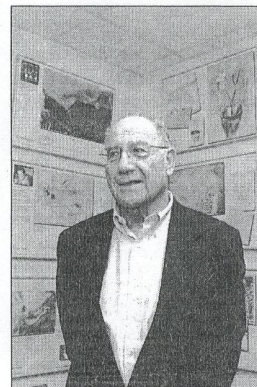
Through it all, Sonja took classes with Dicker-Brandeis, Fischl said.

The lessons were given in the children's rooms around a wooden table or in Dicker-Brandeis' small quarters, which were decorated with pictures of flowers, said Ela Stein Weissberger, who was one of the Terezin students.

"Friedl would take us to the window to look out on a spring day, and she would say, 'Children, look



"*The River*" was also done by Sonja Fischerova. Children used any paper they could find for their artwork.



Drexel University professor emeritus

Robert Fischl happened upon his cousin's art in Czechoslovakia. He and his family helped create the exhibit.

out. There are mountains around the camp, and there is sun behind those mountains, and if you survive, there will be freedom and hope for you behind those mountains," said Weissberger, 73, of Tappan, N.Y.

Weissberger said she's not sure if she knew Sonja, who was a year younger and probably lived in a different room. Weissberger survived because her family worked on the farm of a landowner while they were imprisoned at the camp. The farmer, who was not a Nazi, insisted to camp authorities that he needed his workers to continue working on the land, which they did until the war ended in 1945.

Sonja and her family were sent to Auschwitz on May 18, 1944, and killed when they arrived, Fischl said. Dicker-Brandeis died at Auschwitz several months later.

Sonja's pictures, along with 4,500 others by children at the camp, remained stored in two suitcases that Dicker-Brandeis had hidden in an attic in the camp, Rubin said. The suitcases were recovered after the war and taken to Prague, where they eventually wound up at the Jewish Museum.

In 2000, the museum gave Fischl the photo reproductions, and he and his family spent time to develop the 14-panel exhibit, which is sponsored by Drexel's Judaic Studies Program. The paintings were shown at the Katz Jewish Community Center in Cherry Hill and are set to return there after the monthlong exhibit at Drexel.

Fischl takes some of the work to schools, where he talks to students about the Holocaust.

"I never knew we had such talent in the family," Fischl said. "What would have happened if she had survived?"

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Sonja's Legacy Paints the Walls of Warren Hills

By: Chris Rogers

News Editor

On Nov. 21, seniors of Warren Hills were escorted to the auditorium for a special presentation on the Holocaust.

Dr. Robert Fischl presented a story of his cousin, Sonja, who unfortunately did not survive the Holocaust.

Why did you choose to present Sonja's Legacy? It started in July 2000, when we toured a synagogue dedicated to artwork from the children of Terezin during our family's Root's trip. We were looking at the drawings, paintings, and collages by young children. My daughter noticed one drawing with bright yellow roof and other cheerful colors called "Cleaning the Dormitories" by Sonja Fischerova. We were completely overwhelmed and began to sob in front of the hordes of tourists. Yet we had found something tangible that is left from them when we thought there was nothing. Something for us, even to enjoy. As sad as it all is.

We discovered that there were 30 more of Sonja's watercolors and pencil drawings, gardens and flowers, vibrant colors, still-lives and landscapes. The Sonja Legacy panels, I showed at the Warren Hills HS, were put together by my daughter and I.

Sonja's Legacy drawings, gave me the courage and stimulus to speak about the Holocaust and what prejudice and antisemitism leads to – the murder of a 13 years old girl, who began her art career in a place called Terezin and ended not quite 2 years later in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

What other places do you present your cousin's story? I have spoken frequently to school students who come to the Holocaust Education Center (HEC) in Cherry Hill, NJ. I have also spoken at Middle Schools, High Schools in Burlington & Camden counties and such schools as the Camden Creative and Performing Arts High School that have contacted the HEC. I have also spoken in Synagogues in NJ, NY and even Albuquerque, New Mexico. How close were you and Sonja? We were very close, but all that ended in January 1940 when my family managed to escape, while hers stayed behind. Sonja and I were the same age (born in 1931) - she was older by 2 months. (I am the youngest of 6 cousins.) Before the war, I saw Sonja often, either when we visited our grandparents during holidays who lived in Prague, or when she visited us in Klicany during school vacations. She liked to visit us, since we had all the latest toys, cats & dogs, a big garden with many trees to climb on. Even after we were ordered off our farm in the fall of 1939, Sonja and I spent a lot of time together since we moved in with our grandparents in Prague and she lived close by. We were lucky – our father managed to get a Visa for all of us to Palestine. This is after bad luck with the Visas to Australia, because all Exit Visas to countries of the British Empire were cancelled after the outbreak of the war with England in 1939. Our luck held out further when our father requested an Exit Visa at the Gestapo headquarters. This was the last time I saw Sonja, her sister, Renee, my aunt, Mitzi, my grandma Anna, and grandpa Otto. 1 ½ years after I saw her last, Sonja, her sister, mother and grandma were deported to Terezin. She was 11 ½ when she walked the 3 miles from the station into the Terezin Concentration camp carrying her single allowed suitcase. Since she was considered to be a child, she could live with her mother in the married women barracks. They lived in Terezin almost 2 years until a few weeks after Sonja's 13th birthday. On May 18, 1944, 2 weeks before D-Day in Normandy, Sonja, her sister & mother were put on a train transport to Auschwitz. Their luck ran out – as they were herded off the train and the Gestapo overseer decided "Who shall live and who shall die". We did not know about this. The news we had was a postcard from my aunt Mitzi, dated May 5, saying that they are fine – but they were already killed/gassed.

What's one thing you would want people to know about Sonja's Legacy? I want people to remember that Sonja was only one of the many talented young children, who were killed for no fault of their own, only because they were Jewish. I keep thinking, how better the world could have been if these kids managed to grow up and contribute, just like many of those that have survived the Holocaust.

During the holocaust and many years later, my father kept telling me, "The only things no one can take away from you are what you have in your head; so study and learn, study and learn. Everything else, people can strip you of." We lost everything, but they never took what we had in our heads.

With this information, the seniors walked away with a greater sense of knowledge about the Holocaust. So many lives were taken, yet no one knew of the story that was Sonja's Legacy.