



Excerpt from *In the Shadow of Death: A Young Girl's Survival in the Holocaust* by Miriam Kominkowska Greenstein

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One day in 1970, I answered the phone. A man asked if I was Mrs. Greenstein, and I said that I was. He told me that he was fundraising for the American Nazi Party, and asked me for a donation. When I replied, "I am not interested in donating to your party," his voice became threatening and obscenities poured out of his mouth. He ended his tirade by calling me a filthy, rotten Jew and said, "We are going to get you and yours! We'll burn your house down! We'll get you!" Then he hung up.

I stood there speechless and terrified. He had managed to transport me back to the horrors of the concentration camps. Shaking like a leaf, I called Tole. He was with a patient and couldn't leave his office. He calmed me down and said to call the police. I followed his instructions, and spoke to the police as well as to an FBI agent. They were wonderful, and for a time provided a special patrol to watch our house.

The terror had returned, but I couldn't let my children see it. I didn't want them to inherit my fear. Tole and I informed them of the incident and told them to be observant and aware of anything different in our neighborhood. Nothing happened, and I am sure that my daughters have no memory of that event.

In 1987, swastikas and graffiti appeared on the walls of businesses in southeast Portland, in the area surrounding Cleveland High School, the school from which all four of my girls had graduated. Skinheads were becoming a common sight in that neighborhood. I was upset and quite nervous, but continued to ignore the situation until one terrible evening in 1988. On November 13th, an Ethiopian student at Portland State University was murdered by racist skinheads while walking on a street maybe a mile from where I lived. His name was Mulugeta Seraw. He was a mere twenty years old, and had come to our country in pursuit of higher education. He was not involved in gangs or any other illegal activities. His crime was the color of his skin!

I remember hearing about this horrible event on the evening news; his murder was also reported in the *Oregonian* newspaper. I was shaken and outraged by this stupid act of hatred. I recall thinking that something had to be done. *Who can do it? Where do I call?* Suddenly I realized that I was expecting someone else to take steps on my behalf. But who would express the outrage I felt? A paraphrase of a quotation popped into my head: *If not I, then who? If not now, then when?"*

Shortly thereafter I joined the speakers bureau at the newly formed Oregon Holocaust Resource Center. Unkie and Ciocia were dead. Tole had died in 1985. All four of my girls were married and had children of their own. Not having Jewish-sounding last names, they were safe. At last, silence would no longer suffice. It was time for me to talk about it!

My first speaking assignment was at Cleveland High School. Of all the possibilities, who would have thought that my first time would be at the school my own children had attended! I worried and fretted about the students' sensibilities. How do I tell them about my experiences during the Holocaust? I decided to be gently, and not too graphic in my descriptions. But when I asked the teacher for some feedback a few days later, he said that the students had thought that, compared to Anne Frank, what I had been through was not so bad. The next time I spoke I didn't try to tone things down, and told my story straight out. The fifty eighth-graders were spellbound. From then on I have always treated the students as adults.

I spoke at middle schools, high schools, universities, to high-school assemblies of as many as seven hundred students. I spoke at juvenile correctional institutions, state prisons, federal prisons. In 1992 we brought an exhibition about the life of Anne Frank to Portland, which was so popular that a smaller version of it was created to travel around Oregon over the following year. Every local Holocaust survivor who was willing to speak about his or her experiences was invited to join the speakers group; during that year I must have spoken two or three times a week, sometimes traveling two hundred miles a day. I even journeyed to Alaska to speak at youth groups and prisons in Anchorage and at schools and other venues in Juneau.

By 1994, all that talking brought on frequent nightmares, in bright Technicolor. In the middle of one night I got out of bed and found an empty canvas and my painting supplies. I set a small easel on the counter of my kitchen island, and furiously proceeded to slash paint all over the canvas. My memories of the Holocaust were pouring forth. I painted nonstop for months, never knowing what might come out of me. My paintings were a work of my subconscious, emotions and memories buried deep under the veneer of culture and sophistication.

Now, as I write this, I am rapidly approaching old age. So far, I am still continuing to speak at schools and various other venues, and I serve as a docent for the Oregon Holocaust Memorial. Thousands of people visit our Memorial every year, including organized tours for students. For the past twenty-two years my mission has been to educate people, primarily young people, about intolerance and its consequences. I talk about the awful things that occurred, but I also tell them about the acts of kindness.

I throw a little pebble into a still pool of water, in the hope that the ripples it creates reach the shores of acceptance and respect.