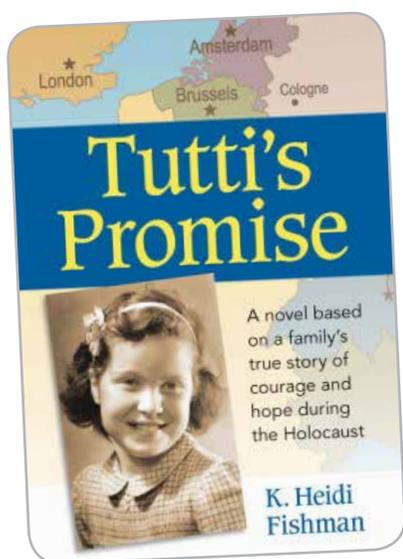


TUTTI'S PROMISE

With middle school readers in mind, a Holocaust survivor's daughter tells her mother's moving story.



BY KIM J. GIFFORD

It is the quintessential question asked of writers: where do your ideas come from? For K. Heidi Fishman the answer not only comes easily, but she can pinpoint the exact moment the idea came to her to document the story of her mother's Holocaust experience in her book, *Tutti's Promise*.

Tutti's Promise is the story of German-born Tutti Lichtenstern and her brother, parents, and grandparents as they experienced the Holocaust. The story begins in 1940 with the Nazi invasion of the Netherlands — 4-year-old Tutti and her family had moved to Amsterdam — and takes readers through the following three years including time spent in hiding and 18 months in concentration camps. It concludes shortly after liberation with family members trying to get back on their feet again.

A MOMENTOUS SCHOOL VISIT

Several years ago, Fishman was visiting her daughter's seventh grade class at Crossroads Academy in Lyme, N.H. Teachers and students had gathered to listen to Fishman's mother, Ruth "Tutti" Fishman, share stories about growing up during the Holocaust. Tutti was a child when the Nazis invaded in the Netherlands. Her family went into hiding before turning themselves in and being sent to the Westerbork and Theresienstadt concentration camps.

Fishman's mother had been telling her story at schools for some time: she had even been interviewed by Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation. Yet, listening to her mother that day and seeing the rapt attention of the audience, Fishman felt she had to find someone to record her mother's story. "When Mom spoke, it was the quietest I had ever heard it," Fishman says, recalling the classroom that day.

"I realized Mom could not do this forever and her story teaches important lessons about bigotry, prejudice, getting along with others, not singling people out, and stepping up when you see something wrong. There are a lot of helpers in her story. They would never have survived by themselves," Fishman says, a lesson she tries to instill in students when she tells the story.

INTENTION TO REALIZATION

That evening, she returned home still contemplating who could write the book. Eventually, she concluded she would write it herself. Although her only writing experience had been her psychology dissertation, she knew she was the one to do it — and that it had to be written with middle-schoolers in mind. "I always wanted to write it for young people when I saw



Ruth (Tutti) and her daughter, Heidi, the book's author.

those seventh graders listening dumbstruck, begging, 'Tell me more.' Plus, my mom's memories are a kid's memories. It's her point of view as a child from which she tells the story," says Fishman.

It took Fishman five years from deciding to write the book to seeing it to publication. She enrolled in every writing course she could find in the Upper Valley, including courses at the Writer's Center in White River Junction, Vt. At the encouragement of one of her teachers, she started a blog which helped make valuable connections that filled in the holes in her mother's memory.

WEIGHTY MEMORIES

The story has a number of twists and turns, many of which were discovered and documented only after Fishman's extensive and often fortuitous research. For example, she learned that her grandfather's role as a metal commodities dealer before the war featured prominently in the family's survival.

"Essentially, the Nazis needed metal and they knew that he knew where to get the metal," explains Fishman. As a result, her grandfather and the other "metal men," whom Fishman hopes to one day write about in more detail, were able to keep many Jews alive not only sorting metal but, whenever possible, also foiling Nazi plans by placing similar-looking metal into wrong piles, so it might weaken weapons and aircraft.

Fishman's grandfather was allowed to leave the camp and go into the city to arrange the metal deals. It was on one of these trips that he brought back Poppe, a doll for Tutti. He put the family's remaining assets inside the doll's head and made 9-year-old Tutti promise to keep the doll safe; hence, the title of the book.

Fishman says she often asks students how they might have felt in Tutti's place. "Imagine you are 9 years old and you are placed in charge of your family's finances," she says. "They are dumbfounded. You see it on their faces."

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Tutti and her brother, Robbie, on March 24, 1943



Tutti's class photo, 1942

OPENING YOUNG MINDS

Lauren Williams, a history teacher at Loomis Chaffee School in Windsor, Conn., confirms that Fishman and Tutti's visit to the school left students awe-inspired. "I would say that this visit was extremely special for our students as they heard Tutti's stories from her — a rarity nowadays. Our students were able to ask questions and this led to many thoughtful conversations that continued for many days after," says Williams.

Fishman says this is not unusual. She recently signed books at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. While signing, she mentioned that the story was about her mother, a Holocaust survivor. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed a young girl who jumped at the word "survivor."

"She survived?" the girl asked, wide-eyed. Shortly afterwards, the child reappeared with her mother, wanting a copy of the book. "This child had just come from seeing the exhibit and was astonished that anyone had survived that," says Fishman.

EXPLORING MORAL ETHICS

Fishman's book offers children an opportunity to explore gray areas and moral ethics surrounding the

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Holocaust. The book tells of one incident in which a Nazi guard in charge of the root cellar deliberately leaves his post so that Tutti's father can gather vegetables for his family. This was in a concentration camp where people were starving.

"Was the guard good or bad?" Fishman asks.

She not only opens the conversation up at her book signings and talks, but offers discussion questions on her website for readers and educators as well. Interestingly, Fishman later learned that this guard might have helped her grandfather because of a shared history. He had been the headwaiter at the Hotel Bristol that her grandfather frequented before the war and he always tipped well.

PRESERVING FAMILY HISTORY

Many, in turn, wonder what the impact of the book was on Fishman and her mother. "Heidi managed to express her love for me through *Tutti's Promise*," Fishman's mother says. "Her constant research and



Tutti and Popje give a school presentation about the Holocaust.

tenacity digging into our family history was admirable and opened my eyes to details that previously were unknown to me.”

Fishman says that what meant the most to her was her mother’s exclamation when she first read the book: “Wow, you brought us all alive again!”

Students have asked Fishman if writing the book has changed her own understanding of the Holocaust. She tries to answer honestly without being too political. “My answer is I thought it was something that happened once a long time ago, but now I understand it didn’t happen just once. It happened once with that name, but we’ve had a lot of other genocides, a lot of other groups have been targeted and are still targeted,” she says.

The solution she hopes lies in the story itself: “Every survivor is only a survivor because someone helped them, somebody hid them, somebody gave them extra food, somebody forged a passport, somebody did something for them. The lesson is about not being a bystander when you see something wrong, question it, bring it up whether a kid in school is bullying someone else or whether it is a teacher or someone in authority. We need to invite a new kid over for lunch before the semester starts, do something nice for the new one, so we can stop the idea of people who are different deserving less,” Fishman concludes. 🍌

Kim J. Gifford is a writer, photographer/artist, avid dog lover and blogger. Her Bethel, Vt., home is always filled with nieces and nephews and her three pugs: Alfie, Waffles and Amore. Find her at pugsandpics.com



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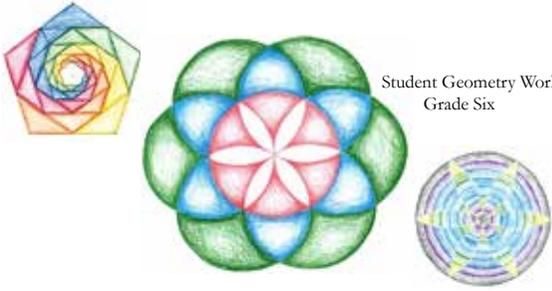
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