



BY TOM HOLOUBEK

After seeing a rehearsal of "Wreath of Memories," a Holocaust survivor asked the Holocaust Museum to bring it to D.C.

Holocaust's Young Victims Inspire a Living 'Wreath'

By SARAH KAUFMAN
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Nesse Godin lived through the Holocaust as a teenager, surviving a Lithuanian ghetto, the Stuffhof concentration camp, four labor camps and a death march. She has dedicated her life to the remembrance of the horror, in the hopes that it will never be repeated. But lately, she told an audience of fellow survivors at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, she has been worried.

"What's going to happen when we are not around anymore?" Godin asked those gathered at the museum's Meyerhoff Theatre on Tuesday evening. Who will continue to honor the legacy once the firsthand witnesses are gone?

She had her answer in the dance performance that followed. "Wreath of Memories," performed by students at Wisconsin's Beloit College, was inspired by the experiences of the many children imprisoned at the Terezin and Auschwitz concentration camps during World War II, some of whom left behind photos, artwork and poetry of simple, searing eloquence. (These have been gathered into the book "I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems From Terezin Concentration Camp 1942-1944.") Slides of the photos and artwork, as well as recitations of the poems formed the backdrop for a depiction of the prisoners' code of support and humanity that sustained the children even as they perished at the hands of the Nazis.

The focus of this extraordinary evening—only the second dance performance ever hosted by the museum—was on the young: those who

were sacrificed, and those who have chosen to carry on the legacy of the lost. For this audience, the evening's emotional pull didn't spring solely from the dance's theme and its earnest execution. Equally meaningful was the fact that it was a group of college-age non-Jews who were bolstering the effort of not letting the world forget.

The choreographer of "Wreath of Memories," Chris Johnson, an assistant professor of dance, said she knew little about the Holocaust when she traveled to Poland in 1986 and toured Auschwitz, but she came home so moved by the experience that she vowed to create a dance around it. Her aim, she said between rehearsals recently, was to show "how to look at things like the Holocaust and not look away. You need to look at the darker side of life in order to appreciate the brightness of the triumph."

Johnson's work came to the attention of the Holocaust Museum after Godin attended an early rehearsal at Beloit—she had heard about the work in progress from one of the dancers, Washington native Camille Fox, who had interned at the museum some months earlier and struck up a friendship with the older woman. Godin, a volunteer at the museum, was so moved by what she saw in the rehearsal studio that she persuaded museum officials to present the work for a single viewing.

Johnson chose blessedly uncomplicated means to make her point. The 20 dancers were clad in unadorned gray trousers and shirts and carried lighted candles, which they placed on upstage tables to help light their performance. They moved in

clean lines, at times forming circles or breaking into tightly entwined partnerships, with suggestions of games and childish pleasures. They spoke as well as danced, announcing the historical timeline, listing names and ages of some of the young victims, reciting their achingly perceptive words.

"'Goodbye' was the motto at Terezin," one dancer declared. Alluding to the infamous sign reading "Arbeit Macht Frei" ("Work Makes You Free") over the camp's entrance, she continued, "It was 'goodbye,' not work, that made us free."

There were occasional snippets of the soundtrack to a little-known Greek movie, "Eternity and a Day," with appropriately poignant piano and guitar, and there was the chilling sound of a train whistle. Dozens of slides were projected onto a screen above the stage, bright crayon drawings and grainy black-and-white photographs of little round faces, clusters of children in their striped prison uniforms, staring at the camera through barbed wire, with old eyes.

Wisely, the dancers never detracted from these archival images; their interpretation of events and sentiments did not overshadow the reality. But although the slides and the text provided the emotional thrust, there were many beautiful moments in the choreography. The image of togetherness and community was stirring portrayed, especially in the last scene: One dancer was held up high by the rest of the cast, who surrounded and buttressed the young woman as if she were Venus rising from the sea.

"I survived Terezin," she announced, "not alone, and not afraid."