

Congregation Emeth: Program by Holocaust Survivor Ruth Seinfeld

On Wednesday, February 11, Congregation Emeth welcomed Ruth Krell Steinfeld, from Houston, Texas, to speak about her experiences as a child survivor of the Holocaust.

Prior to Ruth's presentation, the congregation received a specially framed Holocaust Torah fragment, from John Fensterwald, San Jose. Fensterwald had received the fragment from his 91-year-old friend, Karin Fortun Van Strein. This Torah fragment, from Deuteronomy 32:1, is part of Moses' final poem to the Israelites, the beginning of the chapter Ha-Azinu. This chapter is the last one read in the synagogue on Shabbat morning before Rosh Hashanah.

Karin Fortun Van Strien was born in Thuringen, Germany in 1924. The fragment, apparently part of a Torah which has been torn and partially burned during *Kristalnacht*, "the Night of the Broken Glass", was rescued by her father, Fritz Fortun, who served as an officer in the German Army during the war. He preserved the fragment, recognizing its importance, and stored it in the family chest. Karin, who married a Unitarian minister, David van Strien, and moved to Peterborough, New Hampshire after the war, was given the parchment by her father. She says she is "thrilled that the parchment has come back to life."



John Fensterwald framed and presented this Holocaust Torah fragment to Rabbi Debbie Israel, for Congregation Emeth. It will hang in the temple's library.



Kristalnacht took place in 1939. At that time Emeth's guest speaker Ruth Steinfeld was only 6-years-old, living in Ladenburg, Germany. Her sister Lea was only a year older. In 1940, Nazi soldiers put took her entire family on a train, heading to Drancy, a French concentration camp, where the men and women were separated; she never saw her father again. At the urging of their mother, she and her sister were rescued by the Agency for the Rescue of Children and the French underground, and were taken into France where she lived as a hidden child throughout the remainder of the war.

After the war, Ruth and Lea were brought to America where they joined their grandfather and an uncle who had managed to leave Germany before the war.

But the highlight of Ruth's story begins in 1981, when she went to the Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Israel. It was there that she went to a dedication of a beautiful monument, which included her parents' names. For her, it was as if she was finally burying her parents. Afterwards, she went back to Ladenburg, her little hometown in Germany, and confronted her past in a profound way. "I couldn't ever forget, but I could forgive. I no longer had to live with the hate and the pain that I lived with all of my life," she told the standing room audience at Congregation Emeth. "From that moment on, things have been different. I finally found peace."

A longtime friend of Congregation Emeth's rabbi, Debbie Israel, Ruth has devoted her adult life to speaking about the Holocaust, especially to schools throughout the greater Houston area. Ruth is a founding member of the Holocaust Museum of Houston.

Congregation Emeth is South Valley's Jewish community center, located in Morgan Hill, and serving South San Jose, Morgan Hill, Gilroy and Hollister. For further information go to www.emeth.net, or call (408) 778-8200.

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