

# 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 13<sup>th</sup> 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.