

Remembering Mira Kimmelman and Retelling Her Story

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I was in the 3rd grade when I chose to be Anne Frank in our class wax museum. Little did I know that this decision would lead to my keen interest in learning more about the Holocaust and its role in the Jewish experience.

Later, when I was 11-years-old, my great-grandmother introduced me to Mrs. Mira Kimmelman, an 80-year-old Holocaust survivor living in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. I remember being fascinated to sit down and speak with someone who actually lived through this horrific event. I was particularly moved by one story she recounted about the canteen she kept with her during her time in the concentration camp. In that canteen, rather than storing water, she kept her only picture of her family. Mrs. Kimmelman told me how much she valued that one picture and how the canteen was the only way to keep it safe from the Nazis, who would have confiscated it from her. That picture represented her past, and no matter what happened to her, she would never give it up.

But Mrs. Kimmelman was an open book about many of her her experiences; thoroughly enjoying sharing her stories with me. She had indeed experienced more than a lifetime's worth of trauma during her three years in Blizyn, Auschwitz, Nordhausen, and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps. It started with being separated from her family, who were sent to different camps, when she was only a young teenager. For some meals in the concentration camp, she ate only food

scraps. Interestingly, the Nazi guards considered potato skins as scraps, but Mrs. Kimmelman had learned as a child that these actually held a significant amount of nutrients. Still, she valued all food she could get her hands on because she was being starved. Living in concentration camps meant sleeping together with many other people; sometimes even on top of one another. The working conditions were also very disturbing—having to work hard labor jobs for ten or more hours at a time while taking verbal (and often physical) abuse from the Nazi guards.

Although I had learned about many horrors of the Holocaust through books, websites, and films, there was nothing like hearing about the dangerous living and working conditions directly from Mrs. Kimmelman.

When I asked her why she was so excited to recount the nightmares she had lived through, her answer was inspiring: Mrs. Kimmelman believed that passing on this information would inform future generations and keep the ghosts of the Holocaust alive so that history would not repeat itself. Since that day, I have been profoundly affected by her zeal for keeping this important part of history alive. Even though Mrs. Kimmelman recently passed away, her legacy will live on forever because of the unforgettable stories that she shared with everyone. My interaction with her that day left a mark on me as permanent as the identification tattoo given to her by the Nazis in the concentration camp. The story of her canteen

and the family picture had a particularly strong impact—the lesson being to always treasure your family. Mrs. Kimmelman kept that picture with her during thick and thin, and just the feeling that her parents and siblings were “right there” made her continue to have hope and believe that things would eventually get better. Like Mrs. Kimmelman, family is extremely important to me; especially living in a Jewish home. Although I don’t live in the same region as my large extended family, I am thankful for the opportunities to celebrate Jewish holidays with them and attend other lifecycle events such as B’nai Mitzvot, weddings, and even funerals.

Another life lesson I learned from Mrs. Kimmelman is the love of sharing stories. Indeed, Mrs. Kimmelman wanted others to understand the impact of the Holocaust on her life, and she did this by writing books as well as sharing her story verbally with many people. Being someone who enjoys storytelling myself, I was moved to start my own journal of experiences that I plan to share with others. Most likely, my stories will not be nearly as treacherous as Mrs. Kimmelman’s, but they will hopefully serve to educate in one way or another. I also read Ellie Weisel’s book, *Night*, which describes the author’s story of his survival. I truly admire how Mrs. Kimmelman and Dr. Weisel’s legacies will live forever and continue to make an impact since they put their life experiences on paper to share with the public.

Looking back on the afternoon I spent with Mrs. Kimmelman, the overall message that I walked away with was the importance of determination and perseverance. Mrs. Kimmelman wouldn't have survived in the concentration camp, and the Holocaust in general, if she did not believe in her own strength and resilience through all of the struggles she endured as a Jewish girl in Poland in the 1930s and 1940s. We cannot control how people treat us (or *mistreat* us in Mrs. Kimmelman's case), but we can control how we think about the situations we are in and how we think about ourselves. It would have been easy for her to give up and view her situation as helpless. But Mrs. Kimmelman managed to persist by stubbornly refusing to think this way and instead having the mindset of a survivor; someone who would eventually be able to share her harrowing story with others like myself.

In today's world, mostly everyone learns the basics of what happened to Jews and other ethnic minorities in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. But, Mrs. Kimmelman wanted everyone to have a deeper understanding of the Holocaust. She explained to me how history can and does repeat, and how another Holocaust could happen at anytime, anywhere. This is very relevant in today's world—and even in our country—as there has recently been a resurgence of hostile treatment of minority groups. Immigrants who want to become U.S. citizens are also being

treated similarly to what happened during the Holocaust when there were a great deal of xenophobia. The parallels between this and what happened in the years leading up to the Holocaust are eerie. I feel strongly, that as a Jew, it is important to take an active role in combating social intolerance in addition to making sure the memory of the Holocaust endures. The admiration I feel for people like Mrs. Kimmelman has not only given me perspective on the Holocaust, but made me aware of the importance of storytelling. Therefore, I pledge to retell Mrs. Kimmelman's story to do my part in making sure history does not repeat itself.