



STUDENT ACTORS MEET WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
“Terezin: Children of the Holocaust” performed at Brooksby Village

April 28, 2023 – Amesbury, MA – With the dramatic rise in Anti-Semitic incidents, regionally and nationally, a group of local student actors had the unique opportunity to meet with Holocaust survivors, on Tuesday, April 18th at Brooksby Village in Peabody, MA. The students were at Brooksby to perform the highly regarded play *Terezin: Children of the Holocaust* for hundreds of Brooksby residents.

Terezin, depicts a day in the life of six children imprisoned in Camp Theresienstadt in the Czech Republic. It has been performed both locally and across the globe for more than 50 years. The performance on April 18th had special meaning for the student actors who met with the survivors prior to their performance. The group generously shared their emotional personal stories from the war and their connections to the themes of the play.

In 1939, at the age of six, Margot Holender was sent to live in the French countryside to avoid escalating bombardments in Paris. Her parents joined after one year, only to have her father taken away in the middle of the night by SS officers. Ms. Holender shared that seeing the student actors in costume was difficult for her. “When I see that little fellow, wearing that star... I can see all my cousins, myself, I could have been wearing a star like that and sent away to a concentration camp... When I look at you I don’t see little American happy children, I see kids in a concentration camp.”

Brooksby resident Rita Kaplan shared that she was saved by the “Kindertransport.” England had invited Jewish children from Germany to stay in England to keep them safe from the war. In January 1939, at 14 years old, she went on a train by herself to England to stay with an acquaintance of her great aunt. Her parents escaped Germany in July of 1939, however, the rest of her family was not as fortunate. “We couldn’t get my grandparents or my mother’s sister out and they were killed. My grandparents were killed in Theresienstadt and my aunt was murdered in Poland.”

Amely Smith shared that her grandfather had died of typhoid fever in Terezin. She too had lived in Germany until her family escaped to England in 1939. She shared photos and letters from that time with the student actors.

Retired Army corporal Dick Connuck and his wife Marion provided the perspective of a young, American GI. In 1945, at the age of 19, he was in Germany as the labor camps were being liberated. He described seeing, “these strange people in striped pajamas... as they were being freed from the labor camps.” They came upon Dachau, the infamous concentration camp, and saw a German soldier being stoned to death by a group of newly liberated prisoners. Later they came to a railroad site where he counted 39 railroad cars loaded with dead bodies. “Dead men and women... Some naked bodies, some barely clothed but piled up like pieces of wood. This was April 29th, 1945. As you can probably tell by my voice it did affect me. And it’s lasted to today. You’ve heard of post-traumatic stress syndrome? I have it... I can wake up during the night and I’m having a flashback. But I’m able to deal with it because of you. I can talk about it and get it out and what I’m doing is putting some stones on your back, you’re helping me carry them.”

Ava Valianti, an 8th grader from Newbury, MA who has performed in *Terezin* in a variety of roles over the past 9 years, said of the experience with the survivors, “Getting to know these survivors and their stories brought *Terezin* to life for all of us. We always try to make sure we are representing real people and their experiences, but this had so much power because we met people whose lives were forever changed by the Holocaust. Our play rang true to them, and it reaffirmed that we need to keep telling these stories. Being a part of this play has changed my life, and I’ll never forget meeting these extraordinary people.”

Following the meeting with survivors, the students performed *Terezin* for more than 200 residents of Brooksby Village. Audience members thanked the student actors and Anna Smulowitz for their commitment to sharing the stories of Holocaust victims. Brooksby resident Nancy Fast, shared, “What talent and how enlightened and



bright they all were. It showed great respect for the older generation and to keep the stories talked about. So we 'never forget'."

Playwright and director Anna Smulowitz noted, "While the play takes place during the Holocaust, it teaches audiences about the consequences of hate and discrimination in our everyday lives, the need for greater social responsibility, the power of every individual voice in standing up to hate, and the inherent childhood capacity for hope. *Terezin* looks forward to another 50 years of inspiring young people that art ignites action."

Terezin will be performed for the public on Monday, May 15th at 7:00PM at the Firehouse Center for the Arts in Newburyport, MA. For tickets please go to <https://www.firehouse.org>.

Terezin: Children of the Holocaust is a not-for-profit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to fighting racism, antisemitism, discrimination, intolerance and bullying through education and the arts.

For more information please visit the website at <http://www.terezin.org>.