

## #10

I first heard of Mira Kimmelman when my Language Arts teacher posted the assignment in our Google classroom. I had just finished reading the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel, and was excited when my mom showed me that we had a signed copy of Mrs. Kimmelman's book in our bookshelf downstairs. My dad had the opportunity to meet Kimmelman when she visited Rockwood Middle School to speak to students about the horrors she experienced during Germany's occupation of her hometown, and now I was able to read her book, watch live interviews, and write about the hardships she overcame to publicly share her message of love and tolerance for humankind.

How can anyone survive such horror, such utter torture? And for what? I'm not sure if there is a clear answer to these questions, even to this day, but Mira Kimmelman, a Jewish woman who survived Warsaw and Tomaszów-Mazowiecki ghettos and Bliżyn-Majdanek, Auschwitz, Nordhausen, Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camps, did. Many people don't know of Mira's story or what she had to go through to spread her message of tolerance, but her message is current for all times. She had her dignity stripped away, slept in filthy conditions, saw things she wished she could unsee, helped friends when they needed her the most, and so much more, but she still chose to retell her story to people who didn't even believe it happened.

Mira had her dignity stripped away, she was embarrassed, and was humiliated on a daily basis. Mira's life before the Holocaust was full of thriving people and happy families, but now her life was being torn apart at the seams. Mira's life in the concentration camps included being seen naked in front of men, who were the only ones allowed to do the inspection when new people arrived at a concentration camp. I cannot imagine how Mira continued through her life in the concentration camps and still had dignity left. A story that had an impact on me was when Mira and her fellow inmates were told at roll call that no one except the kitchen staff were

allowed to use the water pump in the women's camp. Mira explained that for weeks they went without water, and some of them drank their own urine just to survive. To think of the women as they stood in the scorching hot weather, without water, knowing that if they tried to quench their thirst, they would be shot, is unimaginable. Mira's experience of having to drink her own urine and having to watch her own friends drink their own urine had to have been humiliating. In my opinion, Mira persevered through the unthinkable.

Mira's description of the living conditions at the concentration camps was extremely disgusting. In Mira's book, *Echoes from the Holocaust*, she tells the reader, "As spring turned into summer, living conditions grew steadily worse. Constant raids into Jewish homes were carried out by the SS or the Gestapo." This statement devastates me because the Jews were totally clueless as to how it was going to get much worse for them as time went on. I can't even begin to imagine what it was like for Mira sleeping on the cold, hard floor with nothing except a threadbare blanket to keep her warm. Sometimes to hold heat, Mira and the other women sleeping in the same quarters would sleep together just to keep warm. Mira tells about the rats that would come into their sleeping quarters and bite them repeatedly. Since typhus was caused by fleas, mites, and lice, the chance of getting typhus was very high, because the fleas that were on the rats would pass it on to humans. Mira's experience with living and sleeping conditions at the concentration camps was extremely unhealthy and terrible.

Mira saw many things during the Holocaust that she wished she could unsee and erase from her mind. In Mira's book, *Echoes from the Holocaust*, she says, "As we waited outside, we saw columns of people marching slowly toward the gas chambers. Young and old, men, women, and children walked in complete silence. They were unaware of the imminent death awaiting them." The gas chambers were basically huge crematoriums for any person who was too weak

to carry on in the concentration camp. Mira experienced the selection many times. A selection was when an SS guard would look over all the Jews one by one and see who was fit to continue working in the concentration camp. The day to day anxiety of being afraid that you were going to die must have been unbearable for Mira and, after hearing her story, life didn't even seem worth living. Many of the senior Jews, who knew what a selection was, told Mira that she would have to walk confidently and without any sign that she was hurt. Mira commented in her book that the smell of the gas chambers was horrid and something she wished she could forget. I can't even begin to compare my simple, happy life to Mira's, and I won't, but Mira must have had a source that she was pulling from just to get through each day. The things that Mira saw on a day to day basis are things that no one should have to experience.

This story that I'm about to tell you stuck out to me because it was so heartwarming and unexpected in these troubling times. In 1944, one of Mira's friends, Lolka, became pregnant, but Mira knew that the SS guards would throw any pregnant women into the gas chambers. Mira and her other friends took action trying to keep this baby a secret, and they finally did succeed, only to find out that Lolka's husband, Hesiek, had been killed. This courage that Mira had was absolutely the most amazing quality anyone could have when living in these hard times. To me, this story was so incredible, and Mira was very brave to break the rules to help her friend.

Mira Kimmelman experienced things that are unbelievable to me. She had to say good-bye to the family she loved, she had all of her dignity stripped away, she saw things that no one should ever have to see, she lived in a world of hate, and she felt unwanted in a country that was once her own. While I would like to believe that the Holocaust didn't happen, I can't deny the fact that it did. I am thankful for Mira Kimmelman's message of hope and tolerance that will live on forever.