

# In art, 'I forgot to be afraid'

## Holocaust survivor's paintings on display

By Elaine Ayala  
STAFF WRITER

A string of questions from Catholic school students were coming at Nelly Toll, the Holocaust survivor, artist, author and professor who spoke at Little Flower School this month.

"How old were you when you went into hiding?" asked one.

"Why did Hitler hate Jewish people?" asked another.

"Did you know about what was happening in Japan?"

Adults in the audience couldn't get a word in as hands continued to jet into the air. They listened intently as Toll talked about the 18 months she and her mother spent in hiding in a tiny apartment in Lwów, Poland, in fear of being discovered by Nazi soldiers.



Artist Nelly Toll and her childhood paintings survived the Holocaust.

she did, to tell the world about what happened during World War II to millions of Jews and others during the Holocaust. Her paintings also attest to a vivid imagination and a mother's devotion to a daughter's perception of happiness.

Her mother taught Toll



This painting by Toll is titled "All Alone." The Campus of the San Antonio Jewish Community is hosting an exhibition of her work this month.

depict idyllic scenes of Polish life, school days, family gatherings, outdoor play and vacations documented in Toll's 1993 book, "Behind the Secret Window: A Memoir of a Hidden Childhood,"

school, had adventures and got a doctor's visit when she was sick. In reality, her mother served as teacher, friend and doctor.

In art, "I forgot to be afraid," Toll said. "I be-



and standing up to injustice.

"Education makes you a better, more tolerant person," she said. "It's important to treat everyone equally."

"It's important to stand

Children's Education Fund, who has worked with Catholic and Jewish day schools since the 1990s to foster religious understanding.

When Toll agreed to visit, Garza-Vale said, "it



Then came the question that children and adults always ask about her childhood paintings — considered one of the largest surviving collections of Holocaust artifacts created by a child — “Did you ever think your artwork would be in a museum?”

The answer, of course, was no.

But Toll's watercolors and stories survived, as

several languages, including English, and introduced her to Russian novelists Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the French author Jules Verne and U.S. writer Harriet Beecher Stowe. Some of Toll's work was inspired by those books.

More than 50 digital reproductions are on view at the Campus of the San Antonio Jewish Community until March 31. They

which has been compared to “The Diary of Anne Frank.”

The works compose the traveling exhibit here from the Massillon Museum in Ohio, “Imagining a Better World: The Nelly Toll Story.” They're also part of an ongoing film project.

Her paintings don't reflect Toll's real-life circumstances. In art, she had friends, went to

lived in a better world.”

Some of her original works hang in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., the Yad Vashem Art Museum in Jerusalem and the Massillon, which created a replica of the apartment in which she and her mother hid.

Toll now travels nationally and abroad to share her story and talk of the importance of education

up to bullies,” Toll added. “When someone is a bully or is bullied, go to a teacher or counselor. Never allow it to happen.”

“When you see injustice done, don't be a silent bystander. If necessary, give them a punch.”

Her visit to Little Flower, also attended by students of St. Paul's Catholic School, was sponsored by Francine Garza-Vale, founder of the One Candle

was a dream come true.”

Toll, who lives in Voorhes, New Jersey, with her husband, became an artist — she still paints — because her mother arranged to get her a set of watercolors in hopes of fighting the boredom of seclusion.

Toll's triumph over adversity is also a story of survival amid terror. Born in 1935, she was about 5 when the Nazis overran

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The original “Girls in the Field” by Toll hangs in the Yad Vashem Art Museum in Jerusalem. Other Toll paintings are part of collections at The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. and the Massillon Museum in Ohio.

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**“Summer Home in the Country” and two other works make up Toll’s Vacation in the Country series.**

Poland. By 1943, she and her mother, Rose, were separated from her father and 4-year-old brother, both of whom were killed

in the Holocaust, along with about 50 family members, Toll said.

Her father, a businessman and landlord, had

arranged for a Catholic couple to hide his wife and daughter.

They experienced several close calls.

When police or soldiers demanded to search the premises, Toll and her mother hid in a secret window cavity that had been boarded by bricks on the outside and covered by a heavy rug inside.

Then, in 1945, Russian troops and tanks arrived to liberate Poland from the Nazis. “We opened the doors and went outside,” Toll said. She recalls sitting on a tank.

“The Russians gave me all the candy I wanted,” she said. That made her

audience laugh.

Toll didn’t quite hear one of the last questions, one about God’s role in her life.

“Did God save me so I could tell my story?” she repeated to make sure she heard right.

“I would say yes,” Toll said. “All people are made by God, and all have a right to live equally.”

*Toll’s exhibit at the Campus of the San Antonio Jewish Community, 12500 N.W. Military Highway, can be viewed 9 a.m. to noon weekdays and 1-3 p.m. Sundays until March 31.*

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