

# Frances' song



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A photograph of Abraham and Frances Gersten, his grandparents, is placed next to the chair of Michael Gersten during the Holocaust Remembrance Day Ceremony at the McAllen Performing Arts Center. Gersten performed excerpts of a new work he composed that follows three Holocaust women, one being his late grandmother Frances.

## As McAllen remembers Holocaust, survivor's grandson debuts new music in her honor

**BY XAVIER ALVAREZ**  
STAFF WRITER

McALLEN — The city in association with Temple Emanuel held a Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony at the McAllen Performing Arts Center on Wednesday afternoon to honor the lives lost and remember the lessons learned from the horrors of the Holocaust.

As part of the observance, students from Temple Emanuel's religious school read poetry written by Holocaust victims, and excerpts of an original composition was performed by members of the South Texas College faculty.

The piece was composed by STC's assistant professor of woodwinds, Michael Gersten, and was inspired by his grandmother, Frances Gersten, a Holocaust

survivor.

The event was broadcast live on McAllen's Spectrum channel, website and YouTube channel as well as Temple Emanuel's Facebook page and welcomed people of all faiths.

Yom HaShoah, also known as Holocaust Remembrance Day, is not only

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observed as a day to commemorate the 6 million Jewish lives lost and honor those who survived, but to remember the lessons learned.

“We must vow to never forget this sin against humanity,” McAllen Mayor Jim Darling said in a news release. “However, one only has to look around the world to recognize that the lessons of that horrible time in the collective history of human beings seem to have been forgotten.”

Lessons remembered through Yom HaShoah are just as significant today, according to Temple Emanuel’s Rabbi Nathan Farb, who called attention to the plight of migrants at Wednesday’s ceremony.

“Jewish ethical teachings tell us that we must recognize the humanity in every individual person and to honor that humanity with dignity,” Farb said. “Whether it is a migrant refugee crossing the border or a member of an ethnic minority in China or the Middle East.”

Near the end of the event, six candles were lit with each candle representing a million of the six million Jewish lives lost during the Holocaust.

For some members who participated in Wednesday’s event, not only was it a memorable occasion but also a personal one.

### FOR FRANCES

Gersten lost his grandmother in August of last



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Michael Gersten during the Holocaust Remembrance Day Ceremony at the McAllen Performing Arts Center.

year.

He had already been working on a similar project as the one performed Wednesday but had excluded his grandparents, who were both survivors, due to feeling unable to handle how personal their story was to him.

“We knew about it as kids, we saw the numbers tattooed on their arms, but it’s not something they talked about a lot,” Gersten said. “I don’t know why she chose not to talk about

it with us. I don’t know if that was because she didn’t want to relive it or because she didn’t want us to think about her in that way.

“I think maybe she just wanted us to think of her as just ‘grandma’ and not ‘grandma, holocaust survivor.’”

Gersten learned more about his grandmother’s experiences from interviews she gave through the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute, which were used in the

video portion of his performance along with two other testimonies by Gerda Klein and Halina Kleiner.

After her death, he felt it necessary to continue to tell her story, and decided to include her in his project about the women taken from the same area of southern Poland and sent on a death march.

He described her demeanor as very quiet and “went along with things” which he attributes to how she survived.

His parents told him about some of his grandmother’s experiences, saying if there were gunshots, you couldn’t react; or if there was a body on the ground, you stepped over it and kept going.

The survivors couldn’t draw attention to themselves because that meant death.

Frances Gersten carried this long after she escaped.

When she was finally liberated, she spent time in a U.S. military hospital due to malnourishment and was then sent to a refugee camp where she met her future husband, Abraham Gersten.

Her maiden name was Fella Eichner before she married, which Gersten paid homage to during the first excerpt of his performance.

He said the melody in the somber song included the notes F, E followed by F, G — the initials of his grandmother, Fella Eichner and Frances Gersten.

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