

Weekly Q & A with : Susan L. Smith, **Audience Development Specialist**

by Sarah Connell January 10, 2019



Marc and Susan Smith retired from their leadership of Worcester Foothills Theatre in 1999 after 25 years. In 2002, the Smiths dedicated themselves to a new creative mission: the pursuit of reconciliation between Germans, Jews and Poles, and transmission of memory via the arts. The Kreisau Project consists of two plays written by Marc Smith, “A Journey to Kreisau” and “Karski.” Both plays have been performed in America, as well as in cities in Germany and Poland. In addition, the plays are utilized within the curriculum for Facing History and Ourselves, a nonprofit organization that

develops high-quality educational materials to examine prejudice and injustice. Marc and Susan were married 43 years. He passed away in 2011. You can learn more about the Smiths’ efforts at thekreisaproject.com.

What is The Kreisau Project?

The genesis of the project goes back to 1991, when Marc and I made one of our occasional day trips to Northampton. I enjoyed gallery browsing; he was magnetically drawn to a used bookstore there, down a half-flight of steps. On this particular trip, he discovered a soft-cover galley proof of a book called “Letters to Freya: 1939-1945.” This was not only a time period

that had absorbed Marc's interest since boyhood, but the book seemed to promise a portrayal of a segment of German life that he was not at all familiar with. He read the galley proof, thought it would make a fantastic story for the stage or film, and placed it on a bookshelf. He told how that one book, about a decade later, led him on a life-changing path while addressing a group gathered at the Goethe Institut-Boston in January 2011 to commemorate the passing of Freya von Moltke one year after her death at age 98. In essence, Marc felt that when you learn of a story of great moral courage, especially when stories of that period (1930s and '40s) in Europe are primarily focused on perpetrators and victims, then you have an obligation to bear witness to that story. Likewise, later, with strong encouragement from Freya, he turned his focus on Polish underground hero Jan Karski, sometimes referred to as the man who tried to stop the Holocaust. Karski had written his book, "Story of a Secret State," first published in 1944. Marc, then a 10-year-old boy, read the book in the year it was published and never forgot about this incredible human being. The Kreisau Project hopes to expand the numbers of young students and adults of all ages who learn about these two stories, either from reading the scripts or presenting them as stage plays.

Describe what it means for you to "transmit memory through the arts." There are dozens of kinds of art that serve as paths for storytelling, for focusing people's attention on events and individuals in our past. Think of composers — musicians, visual artists, choreographers, dancers, playwrights, filmmakers, directors and actors — the list could well go on from there. In Marc's view, the storytelling power of "A Journey to Kreisau" and "Karski" was necessarily tied to the personalized focus of each play. Within each script, there are a few facts and dates for timeline and context. The power of each play does not lie in statistical figures, but rather in getting inside the thoughts and responses of Freya and Helmuth James von Moltke and of Jan Karski to the unimaginable horrors surrounding them.

Can you give us a synopsis of your husband's most notable works? His last two plays, "A Journey to Kreisau" and "Karski," comprising The Kreisau Project, were a turning point in a number of ways. Not the least of these was the fact that both these plays provided him with the opportunity to witness the response to his work directly from audiences in Germany and Poland. The two plays also were significant, each in its own way, in a furtherance of The Kreisau Project's mission to pursue reconciliation between Germans, Jews and Poles. When you scan his more

than 20 play titles, you may note some titles suggesting serious themes, such as “Lamentation on a High Hill,” “The Brewster Papers,” “Blood Summit” and “The Story of Dr. Faust,” along with Marc’s last two plays. And then, a batch of other titles reveal his joy in the whole cultural phenomenon known as American Vaudeville. Performers from many different cultures met each other on the same stages, from roughly the 1880s to the 1920s. Marc’s thesis: vaudeville music is the American folk song; vaudeville comedy is that convergence of dozens of national funny-bones to become the American sense of humor.

When did you connect with Facing History and Ourselves and how has it expanded your reach? I first learned about Facing History and Ourselves in the spring of 2013, through friends of ours who lived in Brookline where this non-profit is based. After meeting with now-retired Associate Director of Facing History Marty Sleeper, and of course after he’d read both scripts, the organization agreed to include information on their site. The information about the plays described how roughly 14,000 educators in their worldwide network would be able to receive a copy of either or both of these scripts. When they are used for classroom study purposes only, no fee is charged to the educator. One particularly eye-opening comment came from a gentleman who teaches high school students in Tennessee, where he serves as executive director of EduSource Unlimited. Regarding “A Journey to Kreisau,” he writes: “The historical timeline of events was wonderful. The thing that struck me the most was the bewilderment of the students as the world spiraled downward. ‘How could that happen, didn’t they see it?’... and by doing it in this medium (a play), it is personal ... It is hard to find quality curricula that ends as powerfully as the play, asking the questions of faith, life and death.”

What role has your son taken on as part of this project? Joe has definitely been instrumental with the updating, redesign and editing on the website; and we mutually discuss the various steps we envision on this whole project as it progresses. He and I proofread each other’s copy before it’s officially posted on the site, an essential step. In addition, understanding that an aging mom needs to engage in some realistic advance planning, Joe has agreed to take on full responsibility for the project after I’m no longer around.

(original source here)