

Opening the doors of history

By Erica Faith Giller

Some view doors as an entrance, others as an exit, but one artist sees doors as a means of telling and preserving her family's history for future generations.

Beth Grossman of Oakland, California, has illustrated the life story of Bella, her maternal great-grandmother, beginning with her immigration to America from the Ukraine, on a series of seven wooden doors. The exhibit, entitled, "Passages," will be on display at the May Museum at Temple Israel of Lawrence through June 30, after being open to the public at Ellis Island for two and a half months.

Ms. Grossman, who has been painting since she was a child, has always been interested in her family's heritage.

"This type of exhibit shows how important it is to document history in a fun and creative way while we can," she said. "I love to show it to children as well as elders. The paintings inspire people as they begin to tell me their own family's history. I hope to motivate people to get their history down."

The artist is fascinated with learning about Jewish immigration, ghettos and other aspect of the culture and history. Ten years ago, she and her mother traveled to the Soviet Union to explore their roots and to participate in the International Conference for Jewish Women. While there, they also worked with Jewish Refuseniks.

Ms. Grossman creates most of her artwork on domestic objects such as doors. Also included in the



Artist Beth Grossman leads Temple Israel of Lawrence kindergartners on a tour of her exhibit, "Passages," now on display at the May Museum.

exhibit, which took the artist five years to complete, are paintings done on suitcases and an ironing board. She explained that she looks for objects that have their own history.

"Doors have a lot of symbolic meaning. They serve as an in-between space and as a passageway," she said. "That passage can be through heritage."

The doors each depict a significant aspect of her great-grandmother's life, including leaving Europe, arriving at Ellis Island, meeting with a matchmaker, her marriage and family life in Michigan. Ms. Gross-

man explained that this is an common experience that can be shared among the Jewish people.

In the second part of the exhibit, "Home in a Suitcase," a series of suitcases represents the constant displacement and escape from anti-Semitism by the Jewish people throughout history. Objects that the artist believes may have been among the possessions Bella brought with her to America are on display in one pile of suitcases.

"I started thinking, if I had to leave what would I take," said Ms. Grossman. "I collected suitcases and thought about what she packed."

In addition, parts of the exhibit show what her grandmother's home was like, hectic and busy. In one part of the display, entitled, "I Stand Before You Ironing," two ironing boards are positioned like tablets and inscribed with a re-written version of the ten commandments, that keeps women in mind.

"I hope that my work can inspire people from different ethnic and racial groups to write their family history down," explained Ms. Grossman. "There are so many different versions of family history and the more of us that write it down, the more voices we will have to tell it."

The May Museum is open Monday, Wednesday and Thursday from 3:30 P.M. to 5 P.M.; Friday, before and after Evening services and Sundays from 9:30 A.M. to 11:30 A.M. For more information about docent tours and special hours for groups, one may call (516) 239-1140.