

# Novelist remembers parents' Holocaust

*By Arielle Gomberg/Assignments Editor*

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Amir Gutfreund had a wonderful childhood. Growing up in Haifa, Israel in the 70s, he played soccer, went to the beach and enjoyed the sunshine.

But he said his innocence was surrounded by vapors, which were as invisible as they were flammable.

You don't see them or feel them, Gutfreund said in Hebrew yesterday during a presentation of his book *Our Holocaust*, but in a flash, they ignited everywhere.

The vapors were the realities of the Holocaust, which infused every aspect of Gutfreund's young life, even if he was initially unaware of them - and their discovery is the subject of his critically acclaimed first novel, which has been translated into English.

As an adolescent, Gutfreund realized his many grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins were not related to him by blood.

Rather they were a makeshift family of Holocaust survivors, which his parents - both Holocaust survivors - created in an attempt to form a community, despite the mass murder of their relatives, Gutfreund said.

His parents' survival, while their relatives did not, Gutfreund said, "[Was] not courage, not wisdom, just luck, random luck."

The Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, in cooperation with the Israeli consulate, brought Gutfreund to the University for two days of book readings, which were open to the public, in addition to private readings held with Hebrew classes, said Yael Zerubavel, the director of the center.

Gutfreund's appearance is part of the Bildner Center's initiative over the past few years to provide programs in Hebrew rather than English, she said.

About 50 Hebrew speakers attended the public program Sunday night.

Although the subject matter of *Our Holocaust* is sober, Gutfreund said he combined autobiographical elements with humorous ones.

Similarly, when discussing his literary accomplishments in person, Gutfreund incorporated some jokes into his presentation, saying he takes two pills everyday to reduce his ego.

While Gutfreund's reality is defined by facts - such as the fact he won Israel's most prestigious literary award, The Saphir Prize, in 2003 - it is also defined by an absence of facts.

He said his generation is defined by the unborn children of the murdered, in addition to the children of survivors.

These grim realities continue to infuse Gutfreund's daily life.

Gutfreund said when he sees his blonde haired, blue-eyed son running across his front lawn at home in Israel, he thinks as the result of his past, if there were another holocaust, his son could pass as Christian, just as many Jewish people did in order to survive the Holocaust.

But in the Middle East, his son would have to be dark skinned and dark haired to pass as Arab, not an Aryan, which means his son is still not safe, Gutfreund said.

Although he said these thoughts are illogical, he also said they are involuntary symptoms of the trauma he experiences as the child of survivors.

Yet Gutfreund also said he hesitates to tell his young children about the Holocaust, since he doesn't want them to be traumatized like him.

In New Jersey, it is mandatory to teach the history of the Holocaust in public high schools. Through the Bildner Center, teachers learn how to teach this subject matter.

"It is our responsibility to help with this [learning] process. And to make sure the teachers are well informed so the students will be better informed," Zerubavel said.