SPOTLIGHT ON CITY PEOPLE

A real head for tales

By Bill Bell
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Lisa Lipkin loves stories like the one she tells about a relative in Philadelphia who disagrees strongly with Einstein's monumental theory of relativity. His automobile license plate is a mathematical formula that translates as "Energy Does Not Equal Mass Times the Velocity of Light Squared." (For the record, the plate reads $E \neq mc2$).

Everybody's got a story like that," she says, "and the trick is to get them to realize it, to tell it."

That's where she comes in. She teaches storytelling.

Earlier this week, at the Anti-Defamation League in midtown Manhattan, she was giving tips to 19 men and women with painfully real stories to tell.

"Show, don't tell," commanded Lipkin. Everyone scribbled this into notebooks.

This was an audience with a special challenge—how to talk about themselves. Everyone in the room had survived the Holocaust in basements, convents, barns, wherever anybody would conceal a Jewish boy or girl from the Nazis.

As members of an organization called The Hidden Child Foundation, they often are asked to tell their stories at schools, churches, and other places. Some find the subject too painful. Others wonder whether they rely too much on statistics and dates. Some doubt their experiences reflect the suffering of others in the war.

Enter Lipkin.
"If you want others to know what happened to the Jews," she says, "tell them what happened to you." You must trust that your story is a metaphor for what happened to others."

New York has lots of storytellers, and with her writing, performances, seminars, and workshops Lipkin is among the busiest and best known. For years she was the storyteller-in residence with The Museum of the City of New York, and she criss-crosses the country promoting the gift of gab.

"I'm more interested in the fingernail than the hand," she says. In other words, detail, detail detail.—close up and personal—works best. "When you tell the story, think of the senses and use color," she says. In a way, it was the wartime experiences of her mother, Sari, that inspired Lipkin, and shaped her storytelling talents.

Her mother and her two sisters, who grew up in Uzghorod, which is now part of Ukraine, survived the war because they were plucked from a death camp and sent to Lithuania to build a railroad.

After the war, the sisters immigrated to New York. Her mother and her physician father, George, a cancer researcher and teacher at New York University School of Medicine, now live in Clifton, New Jersey, where Lisa grew up.

Lipkin gradated from Sarah Lawrence College, in Bronxville— We weren't allowed to do anything practical there, so I don't have a major." But he was active in theater,
Once settled in New York in 1984, she was hired to tell recycling stories at schools, accompanied by a musician who played instruments he made from junk he collected from the streets. "I used to drive to work in a frog suit," she says. "Even the cops freaked."

Later, she added stories of old New York, and still does. One big annual production, at the World Financial Center, uses actors portraying historic New York writers.

In 1990, she joined a group of men and women whose parents had survived the Holocaust. The group hired a psychiatrist to help them work through emotional and psychological problems, and as she listened, she began focusing in stories with specific Holocaust themes.

Her first story—"more like an autobiographic monologue"—was called *What Mother Never Told Me.* It was the first time she told personal stories.

Next came *Taking the Shoah on the Road,* a controversial look at the Jewish obsession with Holocaust as a definer of identity, complete with bitter comedy. One routine features death camp pickup lines—"What do you say? Come here often?"

Since its premiere at the 92nd Street Y, she has taken it cross-country.

Lipkin does not use props or costumes. They get in the way, she says. "The stories are the important thing." They are our gift to the next generation," she says.