

Author explores persecution of Jews

● A Kansas University alumna has written a book for teen-agers.

BY TERESA HEINZ
JOURNAL-WORLD WRITER

Deborah Spector Siegel understands the struggle to survive.

As a Kansas University student in 1978, Siegel traveled to Mexico City with Lawrence residents Stuart and Susan Levine. On several occasions, Siegel, who is Jewish, attended Friday night services at a Mexico City synagogue.

"I uncovered a whole realm of people," Siegel, who now lives in Chicago, said. "In the synagogues, I met the descendants of Marranos."

Siegel's recently published book for teen-agers, "By Cross by Day, The Mezuzah by Night," draws on the persecution of the Marrano Jews who lived in Spain during the Spanish Inquisition.

During the Inquisition, Spanish leaders King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel wanted to create a unified Catholic nation. As a result, they shunted Jews into ghettos and waged war on Islamic people. Some Jews converted, while the Marranos, or "Secret Jews," survived by living as Catholics by day and practicing Judaism in their cellars at night.

Siegel's book, which is set in the year 1492, dramatically tells the fictional story of Isabel Caruso de Carvallo. A wealthy Catholic girl, Isabel is about to celebrate her 13th



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birthday when she learns her family is not Catholic, but Marrano.

After Isabel's traumatic discovery, her family prepares to flee Spain during the Inquisition's "cleansing of Jews," she said.

Siegel said Marrano history appeals to her religious faith and historical interests. As a KU student, she was an active member of Lawrence's Jewish Community Center. She wrote the center's newsletter and baby-sat for its members' families.

A Kansas City, Mo., native, Siegel moved to Washington, D.C., after graduation and worked as communications director for a trade association. In 1980, she moved again to become a features

writer for several Jewish newspapers in Chicago.

In the late 1980s, she resumed the Marrano research put aside while finishing her master's thesis. Siegel said the research is the background to her book's strong characters, who battle religious persecution.

"It is a complex novel about real people and their struggles to come to terms with ethnic cleansing," she said.

Siegel is familiar with struggle. In 1984, she was pregnant with her second son, Noah, when she discovered a lump in her breast. Within a

year of a mastectomy, she found another lump.

"It was very difficult to get through," she said.

She stayed in remission until 1991. While substituting teaching a third-grade class, she felt a lump in her neck. Doctors said a bone marrow transplant was her best hope because the cancer had spread.

In a biographical account published in the Chicago Tribune, Siegel described the cancer "beast" that had claimed the lives of her mother, cousin and grandmother. Meanwhile, she and her husband, Howard, waged a court battle against her insurance company, which refused to pay for her treatment.

Siegel fought the cancer and the insurance company and won by late 1993.

She frequently speaks about her experiences with cancer groups. In addition, she is free-lance writing and working on two Jewish novels for teen-agers.

Siegel said she has not visited Lawrence recently because of her illness, but she is eager to share the news of her recovery and new book with old friends.

"I wake up every day, and think that I'm not only alive and have my family, but I'm fulfilling my dreams," Siegel said.

— The Mag's phone message number is 832-7146. Send e-mails to jbiles@ljworld.com.