

# THE OJC

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DEVOTED TO AMERICAN AND JEWISH IDEALS

## AIPAC to hold annual Columbus event Aug. 12

page 2

## Deadline for Israeli Komen for the Cure Aug. 5

page 2

## 'Rape by deception' can mean jail time in Israel

page 3

## ORT receives \$1M gift from Fellowship

page 3

## Nazi death camp suspect indicted in Germany

page 4

### ABOUT THE COVER

Poems from the Warsaw Ghetto were held safe in milk cans such as these which were buried when the ghetto was liquidated. A few survivors returned after the war to retrieve them and hand them over to the Holocaust Museum. Over the past decade, Dr. Sarah Moskovitz has translated them from the Yiddish and posted them on a website so the words and witness live on.

### In The Chronicle

At The JCC .....	12
Bowling .....	13
Community .....	7-8
Deaths .....	13
Dining Guide .....	10
Editor's Mailbox .....	6
Federation .....	11
In The News .....	11
Front Page .....	2
Marketplace .....	14
Synagogues .....	15
Viewpoint .....	5
World News .....	3-4



## BEARING WITNESS 'Poetry in Hell'

By Pam Spence

The inspiration for creating Poetry in Hell, a newly launched website for translations of Yiddish poems from the Warsaw Ghetto, began with a poem pinned to a wall.

Dr. Sarah Moskovitz was visiting the Holocaust Museum of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw when she saw it. "They were doing renovations at the time, and there was a poem, written in Yiddish, pinned to the wall. The poet was confined to the ghetto, looking out a window at the city. They could not go out..."

"I neglected to get a copy of that poem," the retired California State - Northridge professor, told the OJC in an interview recently. But the poem had moved her deeply and she felt compelled to track it down. "I called the museum later, but the poem was nowhere to be found."

Moskovitz says that the poem drew her in, in no small part because of her own family members who vanished into the Warsaw Ghetto. "My father left his oldest sister and her three children in Warsaw {when he emigrated}." Although the family searched for her and other family members through the international Red Cross, Moskovitz says they received notice that no trace of those missing relatives could be found.

The poem opened a window onto those experiences that hovered like a dark and sinister cloud in her younger life. "My family lived in Springfield MA during the Holocaust—and I was aware of the heavy losses in our family—but no one talked about it. Because of my parents' inability to talk about what was happening, it motivated me, after I became a psychologist and a professor, to study the stories of child survivors. I couldn't help but wonder what my life might have been like if my parents

had stayed in Warsaw."

The poems that Dr. Moskovitz came to translate were contained in what is known as the Ringelblum Archives. From within the confines of the Warsaw Ghetto, Emanuel Ringelblum led a group, the *Oneg Shabbat* Society who undertook the difficult and important task of documenting everyday life during the Nazi occupation.

"Ringelblum recorded everything; he wanted to document how the women coped; about the slave laborers; the poems they carried with them, the poetry they wrote," she says.

Some of the poems were remembered from times past, written down from memory as a spark of light to hold close in those dark times. "People collect and remember poems that are very meaningful; they carried those scraps of paper with poems written on them behind locked doors, as a sort of talisman, a remembrance of better times. There is something about poetry that touches deep chords—beyond words. Creating or remembering a poem was like creating a refuge, a sanctuary in the darkness."

"Other times, the poems were written out of sheer despair. There was a need to put the poems out there because the writers were choking on the emotions they were experiencing. Some simply cherished the hope that someone—someone out there would hear."

The creation of art in the midst of such horror, says Moskovitz, is ultimately, an act of defiance.

When the word came down that the ghetto was to be liquidated, poems and notes about daily life in the ghetto were hastily gathered up, secured in metal milk cans and buried.

Two survivors who had had a hand in burying the cans returned after the war and were able to retrieve two of them; the third has never been found.

"Someone from the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw photographed the poems and documents after the war. But you have to realize, the documents were in terrible shape. They had laid buried under rain and snow and debris for years—and when they photographed the poems, they did not have the sophisticated photographic equipment we have today."

By the time Moskovitz encountered the collection in the Washington D.C. Holocaust Museum, the quality of the photographs—now stored as microfiche—had deteriorated even further. "My husband was looking through the files, handing them to me to see if I could translate them. They were very hard to read: they were handwritten in Yiddish—a lot of it was unintelligible."

Her husband Itsik, however, well versed in computer technology, was able to enlarge, enhance and clean up the images and Sarah Moskovitz was able to translate almost all of them. The project was to take her almost ten years.

The poems were originally written in Yiddish, but she made the decision to translate them into English to ensure that they would be accessible to a wider audience. Even so, she mourns that which is inevitably lost in translation. "In any language, there is 'special stuff' that gets lost in translation. I really tried to work—around that—find idioms that approximate meaning—but it is not the same."

Moskovitz translated every poem from the milk can, even in the face of criticism from some "literate Yiddish scholars" who have told her that some of the poetry is "not very good."

She paid no heed: "These people were in the throes of being starved, shot, killed; and still they risked their lives to collect, read, write poetry. That effort deserves to be honored.

Some of the poems are 'vaudeville' types of things, but they were trying to cope any way they could and their writing still deserves to be heard.

"The collection is 'soup to nuts'—common stuff and great poetry. Katzenfer, a great poet, was not 'religious': he was a socialist-Zionist—but on the night the ghetto closed, he wrote 'Invitation to Tanakh' because he wanted the people to be encouraged by the triumphs of our past:

*...Tanakh!  
The first evening of Tanakh!  
Come lonely brothers, lonely sisters  
we will hide ourselves for an hour  
in our old, old castle, in our fortress  
in the Tanakh—  
Great thunder and sharp lightning—  
his speech, stone cliffs and mountains  
his hardened cries...  
the rustle of winds, his singing,  
and the brightness of sun  
his main theme, his leit motif,  
the shining moon—his tender song  
(and) the golden stars—his rhymes,  
the ideas are broad and full and deep—his are all the seas!*

"These poems show what human beings are capable of doing - of creating—even in such dire circumstances. And so I translated everything."

Noted Holocaust historian Michael Berenbaum describes Poetry in Hell as a "sacred task of bearing witness. Some could preserve their souls, could cherish the word until the very end. They believed and perhaps we too must believe, that the word can become eternal."

The poems and information about the project are available on the web at [www.poetryinhell.org](http://www.poetryinhell.org).

*Pam Spence is the editor of the OJC.*