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Fire in My Heart: The Story of Hannah Senesh
An Inspiring Exhibition about the Real Life of a Young Hero
Opening this Fall at the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust

New York, NY— “There are people whose brilliance continues to light the world though they are no longer among the living.... They light the way for humankind.” Hannah Senesh, a young woman who took part in a secret British mission so that she might also help Jews in Europe, was one of those people. She was also the talented poet who wrote those words that would, along with her diary, be read by millions of people around the world. On October 13, the **Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust** invites the public to get to know this remarkable individual through her own words and personal artifacts, many of which have never been on display anywhere before, when it opens ***Fire in My Heart: The Story of Hannah Senesh***. This is the first major museum exhibition about her life, one that has inspired books, plays, and films.

Known throughout the world as the author of the hymn *Eli, Eli*, Hannah Senesh came of age as a promising poet in cosmopolitan Budapest. In 1939, she immigrated to the Land of Israel and two years later became a pioneering kibbutznik. In 1943, she volunteered to participate in a secret British mission to parachute behind enemy lines, hoping she might at the same time aid Hungary’s embattled Jews. She was caught, and executed the following year at the age of 23. Almost immediately, Senesh became a national hero to the fledgling Jewish community in Palestine. The Museum will launch a website devoted to Hannah in September. Visit www.mjhnyc.org/hannah for more information and artifact explorations.

The exhibition will also include multi-media displays and films by Roberta Grossman, director of *Blessed is the Match: The Life and Death of Hannah Senesh*. An award-winning filmmaker with a passion for history and social justice, Ms. Grossman has written and produced more than forty hours of documentary television. Her work has been shown on A&E, PBS, and AMC.

Hannah’s nephews, Eitan and David Senesh, helped make the exhibit possible by entrusting the Museum with many rarely seen artifacts and documents. Eitan said, “As an Israeli who was born, educated and raised in the sovereign state of Israel, I believe that Hannah’s life story, the values she embodied, and her way of life should be brought to the attention of young people throughout the world. I believe that by presenting the materials she created and left for us through an exhibition at the Museum of Jewish, we can achieve this goal.”

Museum of Jewish Heritage Deputy Director Ivy Barsky said “We feel privileged to have this opportunity to tell Hannah’s story. Her life and idealism will resonate with younger audiences who will be inspired by her courage and her will to change the world. Hannah’s eloquent poetry and prose will move visitors of all ages. Finally, Hannah’s story serves as an example of Jewish response to the Holocaust—bold initiative and action against all odds.

About Hannah

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Hannah Senesh was born on July 17, 1921 into a Hungarian-Jewish middle class family. She went to a private Protestant secondary school where she was one of a small number of Jewish students. While she excelled there, she also eventually encountered institutionalized anti-Semitism. Her response was to become an ardent Zionist intent on settling in Palestine. She left Budapest for Palestine in September 1939, two weeks after Germany's invasion of Poland. After completing two years of studies at the Agricultural School for Young Women in Nahalal, she joined the newly organized kibbutz, Sedot Yam. In the summer of 1943, wanting to help in the effort to defeat the Nazis and to do something for the Jewish remnant in Europe, Hannah accepted an invitation to join a unit being trained to parachute into occupied Europe. There, she and the other Palestinian-Jewish volunteers would carry out a double mission. For the British, she would help set up escape routes for downed Allied air-crews who had evaded capture; for the Haganah—the Palestinian Jewish underground army— she would organize Jews and help them to escape.

Hannah and two colleagues parachuted into Yugoslavia in March 1944. She crossed into Hungary in early June, but was immediately captured by the Hungarian authorities. She was imprisoned for six months and was brutally interrogated. While in prison, she taught her fellow prisoners Hebrew and inspired them with stories of life in Palestine. Her mother was arrested in an attempt to extract information from Hannah, but Hannah refused to give her captors the information they sought. She was tried for treason, and executed by firing squad on November 7, 1944 at the age of 23. Her remains were moved to Israel in 1950, and she is now buried in the section of Israel's national military cemetery dedicated to the parachutists. Hannah's mother and brother survived the war.

Highlights of the Exhibition

The exhibition, which will occupy 2,500 square feet, will shed light on the real life of the “Israeli Joan of Arc.” It will start in cosmopolitan Budapest of the 1920s and 1930s, exploring Hannah's home life, education, and religious beliefs as part of a bourgeois Jewish family; it will show how her priorities changed in 1938 and 1939 upon facing anti-Semitism, and how she became a Zionist. The exhibition follows Hannah to the Agricultural School of Young Women in Nahalal and portrays her physical and spiritual life there and at Kibbutz Sedot Yam through the use of her own words. Hannah's mission, imprisonment, trial and execution will be narrated through the words of her acquaintances, family, and friends who were witness to these tragic events. The exhibition concludes with a section describing Hannah's legacy.

It is hoped that the exhibition will travel across the United States. Following the tour, it will be given to the Hannah Senesh Legacy Foundation in Israel, which will use it as the basis for a permanent display.

Featured objects and artifacts include:

- A poetry notebook written in Hungarian that includes a tribute to Hanukkah, one of the more than 30 poems she wrote between 1928 and 1936. Hannah showed interest in writing from an early age. Her earliest poems were dictated to her grandmother who wrote them down for her, as Hannah was only seven years old.
- Hannah's first diary notebook, which she began in 1934 when she was just 13 years old. Early entries focus on school, Zionism, world events, and her family.
- Hannah's first attempts to write Hebrew, her letter of application to agricultural school in Nahalal, her immigration certificate and her passport with its visa to Palestine.
- The portable typewriter Hannah brought with her to Palestine along with letters she typed to her mother that sometimes included drawings and handwritten messages.
- The camera she brought to Palestine, and photographs she took that illustrate Hannah's love for the land.

Fire in My Heart at Museum of Jewish Heritage

- The original copy of her famous 1942 poem “Halikha L’Kesariya,” (“A Walk to Caesarea,”) known worldwide as “Eli, Eli.” This short Hebrew poem was set to music in 1945, and has since become a virtual second anthem in Israel. It has been sung by a multitude of singers. Recent performers include Regina Spektor and Sophie Milman.
- The suitcase in which Hannah stored her notebooks and other possessions when she went on the mission. She left a letter stating that she is leaving the suitcase at the kibbutz “containing Daddy’s books and other personal items, which I would not like anyone except Gyrka [her brother] or Mother to touch.”
- The last photo of Hannah and her brother Giora (Gyuri) taken in Tel Aviv the day Hannah departed on her mission. He had arrived in Palestine the previous day. The back of the photo was inscribed by her brother. “How good and pleasant it is for siblings to be together,” and sent to her in Egypt. Hannah returned it to him, adding, “How good! Hannah 1944 March 10.”
- The last known poem by Hannah “Egg-kettő-három,” (“One, Two, Three,”) written in prison in Budapest, Hungary, June 20, 1944 and found after her execution. It ends with the following lines: *I could have been twenty three next July. I gambled on what mattered most. The dice were cast. I lost.*
- Hannah’s last note to her mother also written in her Budapest cell, undated. The note says:

My dear beloved mother,

I have no words. Only this I can tell you: millions of thanks. Forgive me if possible. You alone understand why there is no need for words. With unending love,

Your daughter

Credits

This exhibition is made possible through major funding from Bruce Ratner and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. Additional support provided by the David Berg Foundation and The Laszlo N. Tauber Family Foundation, Inc.

We are grateful to the Senesh Family for making the exhibition possible by providing material from their collection.

Travel generously sponsored by El Al Airlines.

Related Programming

Wednesday October 13, 7 P.M.

Fire in My Heart: The New Story of Hannah Senesh

Curatorial talk by Dr. Louis D. Levine, Museum senior advisor

New scholarship sheds light on the real Hannah Senesh, a remarkable young woman who was full of life, had a sparkling sense of humor, and a burning desire to make a difference in the world. Join us for a behind-the-scenes talk with the curator of the first-ever exhibition about Hannah Senesh, and hear what he discovered about this intriguing figure whose heroic death ignited a fledgling nation's imagination.

\$5, free for Museum members

Join us for a tour of *Fire in My Heart: The Story of Hannah Senesh* at 6 P.M. Space is limited and pre-registration is required. Call 646.437.4202. Monday, October 18, 7 P.M.

No Mere Bagatelles

Fire in My Heart at Museum of Jewish Heritage

(Judith Leiber, LLC, 2009)

Judith Leiber and Gerson Leiber interviewed by author Jeffrey Sussman

Beginning with Judith's life in Budapest under Nazi occupation and her marriage to Gerson, an American GI, the Leibers recount their memorable lives and how his paintings ended up in the world's most important collections, and her handbags have been treasured by every First Lady since Mamie Eisenhower.

\$5, free for members

About the Museum of Jewish Heritage

The Museum's three-floor Core Exhibition educates people of all ages and backgrounds about the rich tapestry of Jewish life over the past century—before, during, and after the Holocaust. Special exhibitions include *The Morgenthau: A Legacy of Service*, on view through December 2010 and *Project Mah Jongg*, on view through January 2011. It is also home to the award-winning *Keeping History Center*, an interactive visitor experience, and Andy Goldsworthy's memorial *Garden of Stones*. The Museum offers visitors a vibrant public program schedule in its Edmond J. Safra Hall and receives general operating support from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

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