

Awards Lunch Speaker *Esther Nussbaum*

When I received the email from Peggy Pearlstein about the conference and asking me to speak on behalf of the SSC past presidents I think I took some time before agreeing because while I am deeply connected to books through various activities I haven't really stayed in touch with library issues directly. So I did what any librarian would do – I researched my own archives and visited the JTS Library to go through past AJL Newsletters – what a treasure trove of information they contain and memories they jogged.

Here are some of the highlights:

I started attending AJL Conventions in 1982 –was inspired and I think I attended every year thereafter, missing celebrating my birthday with my family most years. I considered attendance to be my annual continuing education opportunity, and not only the excellent workshops where I learned a lot but I think I speak for the experience of every past president and others as well, the networking opportunities with others working in the field were equally valuable. AJL had such a unique quality that just doesn't seem to exist in other professions where the sincere and open sharing of information is frequently rare. The continuing commitment to Kashrut observance so that everyone can dine together is also rare in other Jewish organizations.

Another unique aspect is the successful cooperation of the two divisions – it was particularly important to me as a high school librarian since my collection and subjects that concerned my library were often closer to the R&S than to the SSC so being able to network with both was important.

The Board reflects that cooperation, alternating presidents between the two divisions, running meetings very professionally – The adherence to constitution by-laws and the devotion of the members of the board on a volunteer basis is impressive.

The Sydney Taylor Book Awards were and are always a highlight of AJL. I knew Sydney Taylor in her later years when she and her sister Ella, familiar to all of you from the All-of –a Kind Family books both worked at Cejwin Camp. She taught dance to the younger campers. My daughter was in her group. One of my favorite winners is a Holocaust memoir that received an award in 1984 at the convention chaired by the past president Hazel Karp who also served as one of the co-editors of the newsletter with the wonderfully dedicated Irene Levin-Wixman.

In the Mouth of the Wolf by Ruth Zar tells the story of her escape from the ghetto in Poland and with false papers living as a gentile and working for an SS officer. While sitting in the park in 1944 in Crackow reading *Gone with the Wind* she comes to the part about the burning of Atlanta. Only then does she realize that her dreams of returning home with family would never happen. Just as the southern way of life was gone forever so was hers. Ruth Zar stood at the podium accepting the award and said –“ To think that

I would be standing in Atlanta 40 years later to receive this award is almost inconceivable.” Her book, I might add, is still being read.

Marcia Posner the dedicated AJL president who initiated the formation of many local chapters and inspired many of us by her own creativity and dedication was responsible for what are now some of the most productive of ongoing Jewish library activities in all the regions of the US. Just reading past president Toby Rossner’s columns in the AJL newsletters is evidence of her success. Local chapters have ably organized the annual conventions and this conference is exemplary.

Convention 1993 I co chaired it with the indefatigable Past President Edith Lubetski, Librarian at YU Stern College. Together with past president Pearl Berger, recently retired Dean of Libraries of YU they are two superb representatives of our profession. That convention is notable for the near disaster we had to face when the first World Trade Center terrorist attack almost canceled it. The hotel we had contracted with was damaged irrevocably and we had to find a new venue. Fortunately it ended well with a wonderful location. We had many wonderful sessions that year including one on the emerging topic of Gay and Lesbian Jewish literature.

My work with the Avichai Foundation’s BookShelf program was closely connected to AJL. I recruited librarians whom I knew through AJL (including Michlean Amir) to serve as mentors to the libraries at Day Schools across the country that Avichai was generously funding for a period of 9 years. I convinced Avichai to fund attendance at AJL convention of representatives from those newly established high school libraries. Those who took advantage and came to convention where some special workshops were planned for them found the experience extremely valuable.

I could go on reminiscing but I know how chock full the program is and nostalgia can be limitless unless restrained. It is regrettable that so many of the past presidents from SSC could not attend to be recognized. On behalf of all of them I thank the conference planners and Board for this honor.

I recently visited my family in Jerusalem –two of my three children live there- and towards the end of my stay I went to a reception at the Joint Distribution Committee to celebrate the recovery of my 91 year old friend who had gotten very sick on Passover, and after weeks in the hospital and rehabilitation made a remarkable recovery and was well enough to speak about his 70 year career with the JDC. In the course of his talk with just a few notes he recounted many memorable experiences and concluded with the following:

“In my many years involved in leadership development the most important insight I had gleaned is that if you remove the outer layer that distinguishes one person from another, the common essence I have found is the yearning for a sense of significance that somehow their lives have meaning and purpose.

Now how to respond to that hunger is to connect people to causes that are significant and one significant way is to connect people to the 4000 year drama of the Jewish people”

AJL Librarians are crucial to that connection!