

Remarks upon Receiving the AJL/Capital Area Chapter Achievement Award
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- Though poetry may not attract headlines, let alone reviews in *The Washington Post*, the poetry scene is strong and vital throughout the Washington area – several readings a week, independent presses, poetry and literary magazines, bookfairs – Jewish and non-Jewish. Also, literary programs, including poetry, at the Hebraic section of the Library of Congress.
- While Dryad Press has published numbers of books with Jewish themes, I haven't thought of myself as a Jewish publisher, not in any exclusive way.
- Only in first conceptualizing the Dryad Press website some years ago did I realize how many books were of Jewish interest – in poetry, in prose memoirs, in translations from the Hebrew, e.g., *After the First Rain: Israeli Poems on War & Peace*, ed. by Moshe Dor and Barbara Goldberg and Ronnie Someck's *The Fire Stays in Red*, a bilingual collection of poems, translated by Mose and Barbara.
- If asked what kind of a publisher are you, then? My answer unhesitatingly: a literary publisher
- What do I mean by “literary”? I can come at that by quoting two poets.

The first, William Butler Yeats: “Out of the arguments with others, we make rhetoric; out of the arguments with ourselves we make poetry.” In this context, I take “arguments” to mean venturing out, exploring the known *and* the unknown, questioning what we think we know, whether in theme, subject matter, style.

Second: Jean Cocteau from his film *L'Orphee*. Orpheus is in despair because the young don't listen to him anymore -- he is a poet without an audience. What am I to do, he asks his companion, who replies understatedly, ASTONISH US.

- This is to say that I have been compelled by writers who are explorers, who head into uncharted territory and territory that is seemingly known, who are questioning, questing. And in doing so, trying to “connect” with others who are receptive to such questioning.
- I think of these lines from Walt Whitman’s small poem, “A Noiseless Patient Spider”

And you, O my Soul, where you stand,
 Surrounded, surrounded, in measureless oceans of space,
 Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing,--seeking the spheres, to
 connect them;
 Till the bridge you will need, be form'd--till the ductile anchor hold;
 Till the gossamer thread you fling, catch somewhere, O my Soul.

* That’s the aesthetic the late Neil Lehrman and I started out with in 1968 when we began publishing *Dryad*, a modest poetry magazine -- the name *Dryad* is from “Ode to a Nightingale” by John Keats:

That thou light wing’d Dryad of the trees
 In some melodious plot
 Of beechen green, and shadows numberless
 Singing of summer in full-throated ease

- By the mid-70s I could no longer keep up with all the poetry submissions flooding my mailbox (this was long before MFA programs). The short story of *Dryad* Press is that our poetry magazine evolved into our publishing books of poetry, at first books by poets who appeared in the magazine but had not yet published any full-length collections – books!
- Among the first of these was Myra Sklarew’s *From the Backyard of the Diaspora*, which received the National Jewish Book Award for Poetry in 1978. This is the second edition, beautifully designed in Hebrew calligraphy by the late Susan Foster. Numbers of other first books followed, e.g., Rodger Kamenetz’s *The Missing Jew*, and Philip Jason’s *Near the Fire*. These are by Jewish poets but other first books were not – Rod Jellema and Roland Flint, for example.

- In truth, serendipity has played an immense role in the books that Dryad Press has published – an eclectic range of memoirs, fiction, and poetry, some in translation, that reflect my widening literary interests over these years. They have come by various ways. I could give more than my five minutes here to just listing some of the manuscripts-that-became-books that found their way to me and I to them.
- One example: Susan Morgenstern at the JCC in Rockville called me one night years ago about *The Beginning of Things*, the first seven days of Genesis translated into free verse by Harry Rand with black and white watercolor paintings by Mindy Weisel. She read two poems over the phone and I was hooked!
- Michlean Amir, librarian at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, spoke to me of a manuscript that became *They'll Have to Catch Me First: An Artist's Coming of Age in the Third Reich*, by the Israeli artist Irene Awret, about her years in a little-known transport camp in Mechelen/Malines, Belgium – a book that Walter Laquer wrote a foreword to and that I co-published with the University of Wisconsin Press.
- Ephraim Sten's *1111 Days in My Life Plus Four*, an extraordinary diary of being hidden as a young teenager by a Catholic Ukrainian family for more than three years, along with his mother and other Jews, and then his response to each entry fifty years later. The book came by way of Ephraim's good friend, Israeli poet Moshe Dor who translated it from the Hebrew. Robert Leiter, longtime reviewer of the *Jewish Exponent* in Philadelphia wrote that it was "like no other Holocaust volume I know of."
- Several works by my dear friend the late Herman Taube – especially *Autumn Travels*, *Devious Paths*, a gathering of poems, talks on Yiddish writers, and stories.
- How have I supported these? Years ago through some grants, through money I invested (rather I should say "we": I have an extraordinarily supportive wife, Ann Slayton, a poet herself), through sales, especially libraries, through gifts, through co-publications – for example, five

books of Jewish content with two university presses both directed by Robert Mandel, Syracuse University Press and Wisconsin University Press. Robert has retired but he and Irene Vilar are now the publishers of Mandel Vilar Press .

- In concluding, I'll quote a famous line from Ecclesiastes, "of making many books there is no end." The sentence that follows, however, is generally not quoted: "and much study is a weariness of the flesh." I don't believe this! Books that matter – I'll call them "literary books" -- stimulate the mind, they give us deep pleasures and deep insights. They often disrupt the beliefs we take for granted and don't question; they inform us more deeply about what we know -- or think we know -- to teach us about the world and about ourselves.

- Why else are we all gathered here.