

Unique Holocaust autograph book resurfaces in Victoria, BC



Photo: Susi and Mænni Ruben, Copenhagen 1960s

August 17, 2020 – An autograph book that reflects an artist’s life in the Theresienstadt ghetto and transit camp, once belonging to Holocaust survivor and Danish violinist Mænni Ruben, has reemerged in Victoria, BC. Please join us for the [virtual opening](#) of the *1945 Theresienstadt Autograph Book* exhibit on **Thursday, August 20 at 11 a.m. PDT.**

Ruben’s unique perspective on the Holocaust is chronicled in his autograph book as the war is ending and survivors are being liberated. His is a story not only of survival, but about enduring friendships, and the music and art that held them together under grim circumstances. With ethereal drawings from artist Hilda Zadikow, life in Theresienstadt is brought alive and forms a significant part of Ruben’s keepsake.

Besides the concerts and recitals that happened in Theresienstadt, many of the people in Ruben’s autograph book participated in the historic 1944 Red Cross concert, and a Nazi propaganda film.

Ironically, Ruben never set foot in Canada, having died in 1976 in Copenhagen, but his wife Susi did. After living in Victoria for 26 years, arriving with her second husband Dr. Avi Deston, she gave the book to Rabbi Harry Brechner of Congregation Emanu-el preceding her death in 2018.

“When the rabbi showed the book to me last year, I could see right away that it was special and should go to a museum. It is in remarkable condition for being 75 years old and is a tremendous addition to Holocaust studies,” says Project Coordinator Janna Ginsberg Bleviss. “I was fascinated by the book—who were these people and what happened to them? Reading the pages filled with optimistic greetings, illustrations, and pieces of music was like finding a hidden treasure, waiting to be opened. I wanted to discover who these people were and hear their stories.”

With the understanding that it would leave the Victoria Jewish community once gifted to the Winnipeg-based national museum, without anyone knowing about it, Ginsberg Bleviss decided to develop a compelling visual narrative from the book.

“Despite the horrors of being in a camp, these people survived. The emotion behind their inscribed messages speaks to friendships, and the power of music and art that held them together in these dreadful times. I knew these stories had to be told,” explains Ginsberg Bleviss.

The book depicts hope and optimism about the future, of friendships formed through the war, and at the camp. Ruben and his friends, some of whom were top-of-their-field musicians, artists, and intellectuals, survived the Holocaust, and many returned to successful careers in the performing arts. One of the musicians, 109-year-old pianist Alice Sommer Herz, became the subject of the Academy Award-winning documentary, *The Lady in Number 6*.

“There is a huge educational value to these pieces for students learning about the Holocaust, or for researchers who want to continue exploring the stories of these most interesting people during an important time at the end of the Second World War,” says Rabbi Brechner. “We want the book to stay in Canada and are looking to donate it to a Canadian museum.”

An introductory video of the *Theresienstadt Autograph Book*, the exhibit panels, and the replica book with translations and accompanying notes will be available on the [website](#).

The Theresienstadt Autograph Book is sponsored in part by [The Victoria Shoah Project](#). Established in 2016, the project is dedicated to Holocaust remembrance and education.

Founded in 1863, [Congregation Emanu-el](#) is a progressive, Conservative, egalitarian, and inclusive synagogue, and Canada’s oldest one in continuous use.