

**Reverend Katz Library**

**New Book Reviews**

 **May 2021**

We welcome our new enthusiastic volunteers who joined us at the Reverend Katz Library May meeting. We enjoyed welcoming you to our group and introducing you to the workings of our library. We thank you for joining us and look forward to your further enthusiastic participation and involvement in assisting in the successful running of the library.

**J.S. Margot, Mazal tov: the story of my extraordinary friendship with an orthodox Jewish family BIO MAR**

When 20-year-old student J. S. Margot took a tutoring job in 1987, little did she know it would open up an entire world. In the family’s Orthodox Jewish household she would encounter endless rules – ‘never come on a Friday, never shake hands with a man’ – and quirks she had not seen before: tiny tubes on the doorposts, separate fridges for meat and dairy products. Her initial response was puzzlement and occasionally anger, but as she taught the children and fiercely debated with the family, she also began to learn from them. Full of funny misunderstandings and unexpected connections, Mazel Tov is a heart warming, provocative and disarmingly honest memoir of clashing cultures and unusual friendships – and of how, where adults build walls, sometimes only children can dissolve them.

**Judy Batalion, The light of days: women fighters of the Jewish resistance, their untold story HOL BAT**

One of the most important stories of World War II, already optioned by Steven Spielberg for a major motion picture: a spectacular, searing history that brings to light the extraordinary accomplishments of brave Jewish women who became resistance fighters—a group of unknown heroes whose exploits have never been chronicled in full, until now.

Witnesses to the brutal murder of their families and neighbours and the violent destruction of their communities, a cadre of Jewish women in Poland—some still in their teens—helped transform the Jewish youth groups into resistance cells to fight the Nazis. With courage, guile, and nerves of steel, these “ghetto girls” paid off Gestapo guards, hid revolvers in loaves of bread and jars of marmalade and helped build systems of underground bunkers. They flirted with German soldiers, bribed them with wine, whiskey, and home cooking, used their Aryan looks to seduce them, and shot and killed them. They bombed German train lines and blew up a town’s water supply. They also nursed the sick and taught children. Yet the exploits of these courageous resistance fighters have remained virtually unknown. Powerful and inspiring, featuring twenty black-and-white photographs, The Light of Days is an unforgettable true tale of war, the fight for freedom, exceptional bravery, female friendship, and survival in the face of staggering odds.

**Alex Miller, Max BIO BLA**

An astonishing, moving tribute to Alex's friend, Max Blatt, that is at once a meditation on memory itself, on friendship and a reminder to the reader that history belongs to humanity. 'Max is haunted by devastating insights. Blatt told Miller that the hardest part of torture was the realisation that the torturer was also your brother. It is the same generosity that makes Max such a compelling argument against narrowness and division. Blatt's life has deep and wide ramifications. Miller's intelligent love has created a tale for the ages.' The Age

According to your 1939 Gestapo file, you adopted the cover names Landau and Maxim. The name your mother and father gave you was Moses. We knew you as Max. You had worked in secret. From an early age you concealed yourself - like the grey box beetle in the final country of your exile, maturing on its journey out of sight beneath the bark of the tree.

You risked death every day. And when at last the struggle became hopeless, you escaped the hell and found a haven in China first, and then Australia, where you became one of those refugees who, in their final place of exile, chose not death but silence and obscurity.

Alex Miller followed the faint trail of Max Blatt's early life for five years. Max's story unfolded, slowly at first, from the Melbourne Holocaust Centre's records then to Berlin's Federal Archives. From Berlin, Miller travelled to Max's old hometown of Wroclaw in Poland. And finally in Israel with Max's niece, Liat Shoham, and her brother Yossi Blatt, at Liat's home in the moshav Shadmot Dvora in the Lower Galilee, the circle of friendship was closed and the mystery of Max's legendary silence was unmasked.
Ma*x* is an astonishing and moving tribute to friendship, a meditation on memory itself, and a reminder to the reader that history belongs to humanity.

'A wonderful book. It is a story that needs to be heard.' Jay Winter, Charles J. Stille Professor of History, Yale University

**Anna Solomon, The book of V F SOL**

Lily is a mother and a daughter. And a second wife. And a writer, maybe? Or she was going to be, before she had children. Now, in her rented Brooklyn apartment she’s grappling with her sexual and intellectual desires, while also trying to manage her roles as a mother and a wife in 2016.

Vivian Barr seems to be the perfect political wife, dedicated to helping her charismatic and ambitious husband find success in Watergate-era Washington D.C. But one night he demands a humiliating favour, and her refusal to obey changes the course of her life—along with the lives of others.

Esther is a fiercely independent young woman in ancient Persia, where she and her uncle’s tribe live a tenuous existence outside the palace walls. When an innocent mistake results in devastating consequences for her people, she is offered up as a sacrifice to please the King, in the hopes that she will save them all.
In Anna Solomon's The Book of V., these three characters' riveting stories overlap and ultimately collide, illuminating how women’s lives have and have not changed over thousands of years.

**Heather Dune Macadam, The nine Hundred: the extraordinary young women of the first official transport to Auschwitz HOL MAC**

The untold story of the 999 young, unmarried Jewish women who were tricked into boarding a train in Poprad, Slovakia on March 25, 1942 that became the first official transport to Auschwitz.

On March 25, 1942, nearly a thousand young, unmarried Jewish women boarded a train in Poprad, Slovakia. Filled with a sense of adventure and national pride, they left their parents' homes wearing their best clothes and confidently waving good-bye. Believing they were going to work in a factory for a few months, they were eager to report for government service. Instead, the young women, many of them teenagers, were sent to Auschwitz. Their government paid 500 Reichsmarks (about 160) apiece for the Nazis to take them as slave labour. Of those 999 innocent deportees, only a few would survive.

The facts of the first official Jewish transport to Auschwitz are little known, yet profoundly relevant today. These were not resistance fighters or prisoners of war. There were no men among them. Sent to almost certain death, the young women were powerless and insignificant not only because they were Jewish, but also because they were female. Now, acclaimed author Heather Dune Macadam reveals their poignant stories, drawing on extensive interviews with survivors, and consulting with historians, witnesses, and relatives of those first deportees to create an important addition to Holocaust literature and women's history.

**Janet Skeslian Charles, The Paris Library F CHA**

The instant New York Times bestseller, inspired by the true story of the librarians at the American Library in Paris who risked their lives during the Nazis' war on words: a story of courage, defiance and betrayal in Occupied Paris

Lily is a lonely teenager desperate to escape small-town Montana. She grows close to her neighbour Odile, discovering they share the same love of language, the same longings. But as Lily uncovers more about Odile's mysterious past, she discovers a dark secret, closely guarded and long hidden. Based on the true Second World War story of the heroic librarians at the American Library in Paris, this is an unforgettable novel of romance, friendship, family, and of heroism found in the quietest of places.

Odile Souchet is obsessed with books, and her new job at the American Library in Paris - with its thriving community of students, writers and book lovers - is a dream come true. When war is declared, the Library is determined to remain open. But then the Nazis invade Paris, and everything changes. In Occupied Paris, choices as black and white as the words on a page become a murky shade of grey - choices that will put many on the wrong side of history, and the consequences of which will echo for decades to come.

**Adam Begley, Houdini: the elusive American BIO HOU**

In 1916, the war in Europe having prevented a tour abroad, Harry Houdini wrote a film treatment for a rollicking motion picture. Though the movie was never made, its title, “The Marvelous Adventures of Houdini: The Justly Celebrated Elusive American,” provides a succinct summary of the Master Mystifier’s life.
Born Erik Weisz in Budapest in 1874, Houdini grew up an impoverished Jewish immigrant in the Midwest and became world-famous thanks to talent, industry, and ferocious determination. He concealed as a matter of temperament and professional ethics the secrets of his sensational success. Nobody knows how Houdini performed some of his dazzling, death-defying tricks, and nobody knows, finally, why he felt compelled to punish and imprison himself over and over again. Tracking the restless Houdini’s wide-ranging exploits, acclaimed biographer Adam Begley tells the story of a mystifying man’s astonishing career.

**Ilan Stavans, Seventh Heaven: travels through Jewish Latin America HIS STA**

Jewish Book Council Natan Notable Book 2020 Internationally renowned essayist and cultural commentator Ilan Stavans spent five years travelling from across a dozen countries in Latin America, in search of what defines the Jewish communities in the region, whose roots date back to Christopher Columbus's arrival. In the tradition of V.S. Naipaul's explorations of India, the Caribbean, and the Arab World, he came back with an extraordinarily vivid travelogue. Stavans talks to families of the desaparecidos in Buenos Aires, to "Indian Jews," and to people affiliated with neo-Nazi groups in Patagonia.

He also visits Spain to understand the long-term effects of the Inquisition, the American Southwest habitat of "secret Jews," and Israel, where immigrants from Latin America have reshaped the Jewish state. Along the way, he looks for the proverbial "seventh heaven," which, according to the Talmud, out of proximity with the divine, the meaning of life in general, and Jewish life in particular, becomes clearer. The Seventh Heaven is a masterful work in Stavans's ongoing quest to find a convergence between the personal and the historical.

**Jaci Byrne, The music maker of Auschwitz IV HOL BYR**

The inspirational true story of an Allied POW appointed Kapellmeister to the Nazis in Auschwitz.
When called up to fight in yet another World War, Drum Major Jackson promised his beloved wife Mabel that he would return to lead his band and play for her once more.
In May 1940, he was captured at Dunkirk and interned in several German forced labour camps throughout Poland. Two years later he was transferred to Auschwitz IV, part of the notorious concentration camp complex where it is not widely known held Allied POWs.

When his captors appointed Jackson their ‘Kapellmeister’ (man in charge of music), he seized the opportunity to provide entertainment for his fellow prisoners at rehearsals, and cover for escapees during concerts.
Finally liberated in May 1945, malnourished and gravely ill, Jackson carried his secret war diary—an incredible exposé on five years of life and death in Nazi concentration camps.
THE MUSIC MAKER OF AUSCHWITZ IV, based on Jackson’s diary, is written by his granddaughter. It is a thrilling testament to the resilience one man found in the darkest of times through his two greatest loves—music and the woman who waited for him.

## John B Simon Strangers in a strange land: How One Country's Jews Fought an Unwinnable War alongside Nazi Troops… and Survived HIS SIM

What did it feel like to be an openly Jewish soldier fighting alongside German troops in WWII? Could a Jewish nurse work safely in a field hospital operating theatre under the supervision of German army doctors? Several hundred members of Finland’s tiny Jewish community found themselves in absurd situations like this, yet not a single one was harmed by the Germans or deported to concentration or extermination camps. In fact, Finland was the only European country fighting on either side in WWII that lost not a single Jewish citizen to the Nazi’s “Final Solution.”

Strangers in a Stranger Land explores the unique dilemma of Finland’s Jews in the form of a meticulously researched novel. Where did these immigrant Jews—the last in Europe to achieve citizenship status—come from? What was life like from their arrival in Finland in the early nineteenth century to the time when their grandchildren perversely found themselves on “the wrong side” of WWII? And how could young lovers plan for the future when not only their enemies but also their country’s allies threatened their very existence?

Seven years researching Finland’s National Archives plus numerous in-depth interviews with surviving Finnish Jewish war veterans provide the background for a narrative exploration of love, friendship, and commitment but also uncertainty and terror under circumstances that were unique in the annals of “The Good War.” The novel’s protagonists—Benjamin, David and Rachel—adopt varying survival strategies as they struggle with involvement in a brutal conflict and questions posed by their dual loyalty as Finnish citizens and Zionists committed to the creation of a Jewish homeland. Tensions mount as the three young adults painfully work through a relationship love triangle and try to fulfill their commitments as both Jews and Finns while their country desperately seeks to extricate itself from an unwinnable war.