



ICS NEWSLETTER

INTERNATIONAL CATACOMB SOCIETY

AN OCCASIONAL PUBLICATION OF THE SOCIETY

SPRING 1993

OUR RAISON D'ETRE

The International Catacomb Society is dedicated to the preservation and documentation of those rare vestiges of history which illustrate the common influences on Jewish, Christian, and pagan funerary practices during the time of the Roman Empire. It also strives to increase understanding among faiths by circulating exhibits, sponsoring lectures, and disseminating publications.

ACTIVITIES

The Society sponsors and hosts public exhibitions and lectures in the United States and abroad in the cooperation with educational and cultural institutions. The operating expenses of the Society are financed through private donations and project grants. Contributions are tax deductible. Donors receive all mailing, periodic newsletters, and privileges of attendance at special events.

A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

This is the first ICS newsletter to be published without the leadership of Estelle Brettman. Her sad and untimely death - so soon after the passing of her husband, Richard, has bereft the Society of a very special vivacious spirit. Grief must run its course, however, and life must go on. We hope that this Newsletter will bear testimony to our members and friends, both here and abroad, that the International Catacomb Society is alive and well, functioning as an organization dedicated to those same ideals, aims and goals that its Founder and Executive Director, Estelle Brettman, represented. We, the Board of Directors, have pledged to apply our energies and resources thoughtfully and responsibly to achieve Estelle's vision for ICS.

Our offices remain at 61 Beacon Street, Boston, in the comfortable second floor condominium willed to the Society by the Brettmans. By reorganizing this space and substantially upgrading our equipment, we have begun a most important task: the computerization of our archives. Estelle's large library of books, voluminous research materials and extensive slides and photographs, will be organized, filed, referenced and stored as a valuable scholarly archive for catacomb studies and related fields. Our small "staff" of computer-primed college students, under the able leadership of Amy Hirschfeld, are doing wonders for us. Though this documentation is a necessary and prerequisite step in the implementation of a primary goal of the Society, namely, the completion and publication of Estelle's book, the development of such an archive will produce a significant and important educational/research resource in its own right, for it contains both rare and unique reference materials relating to many aspects of the Roman catacombs. The finest tribute that our Society can pay to the memory of Estelle Brettman

will be to complete and publish her book: Vaults of Memory: Sources of Jewish and Christian Imagery in the Catacombs of Rome. Her many years of research and scholarship must not be lost. We are committed to see her work achieve the recognition it richly deserves as a significant contribution in the field.

Another important project to Estelle and the Society was the creation of its major educational exhibit, Vaults of Memory. The Board strongly endorsed the need to preserve, protect and display this instructive exhibit. As a result of Estelle's foresight and wisdom, the Society was able to form an affiliation with the prestigious Semitic Museum of Harvard University. Not only does this alliance serve to broaden the base of our potential activities, but it provides, as well, a solid home for the exhibit when it is not travelling.

In collaboration with the Semitic Museum, an Estelle Shohet Brettman Memorial Lecture is planned for March 7, 1993. Dr. Walter Persegati of the Vatican Museums, a dear friend of Estelle's, has graciously agreed to be the speaker. Also in the planning stages is a Founders Memorial Symposium for the fall of 1993. With the Semitic Museum as a co-sponsor, this will be an all day symposium representing the highest tradition of excellence and contemporary scholarship. It is designed to be of major interest to the many scholars in our extensive academic community.

The spirit of Estelle Brettman still infuses the Beacon Street "vaults" of the Catacomb Society, inspiring us to move ahead, to continue the work. And we listen, we remember, we carry on.

Howard Weintraub, M.D.

ESTELLE BRETTMAN
(1925 - 1991)

Estelle Shohet Brettman was a graduate of Girls' Latin School and the daughter of a doctor who inspired in her a love for Judaic studies and ecumenism. At Radcliffe, she majored in sciences, and began her career as a marine biologist. But, by the late 60's and early 70's, she was a docent and lecturer on ancient gems at the Museum of Fine Arts, with a thriving business in antique jewelry, for which she made frequent trips to Europe (especially Italy) and North Africa to buy antique and exotic pieces.

The Classical background of her high school years, the fascination with ancient gems that led her to study symbolism and iconography, her travels, and her own heritage, came together in preparation for what became the passion of her later life. Her art lover's eye and researcher's intellect were stimulated by the decoration of ancient structures, especially the catacombs, and the inscriptions she sometimes literally stumbled over at ancient sites. Wanting to know more about what she was seeing, she had to delve ever deeper and find her way to original sources.

She set out to learn all she could about the life and beliefs of the people who had created or were commemorated by the ancient remains. She was impressed that for a time under the Roman Empire, Classical paganism, Judaism and early Christianity existed side-by-side, mingling influences, until the differences between them became the ruling issues and common roots were ignored and lost sight of. To Estelle, the common roots were the keys to reconciliation.

The fragility of the ancient material and the loss that had already occurred of valuable monuments with all that they could teach us, disturbed her. With characteristic energy and determination, she undertook to awaken people



to a cause which few might have been concerned about until Estelle touched them with her vision.

The International Catacomb Society grew out of her heart, her home, with Richard Brettman's support and good advice, and an ever-widening circle of friends that eventually included every creed, class and interest. Some of the staunchest friends of the early days have passed on and are greatly missed; many friends are, happily, still an integral part of the Society. It was their dedication, for which Estelle was enormously grateful, that helped her to build the Society and bring the exhibition to reality.

Estelle spent some of her happiest times in Italy. The beauty, history, and language, the Italian temperament, and the close friendships she formed, made her feel at home. The Italians seemed to respond to her with equal warmth. Her brilliant dark eyes, sparkling with enthusiasm, the quick smile and confiding manner that implied her trust in the listener's readiness to be a friend and make her happy no matter what she asked, seemed to speak to them as clearly

as her spoken words in the Italian language. The help and consideration she received from the Vatican, the Antiquities Service, and the innumerable individuals who became supportive friends, made her research and accomplishments possible.

Estelle had two great missions: to give Richard as full and comfortable a life as she could, and to pass on the knowledge she so delighted in gathering. With her exhibitions and her book, she hoped to get us all to understand how much more we have in common, as people of good will, than there is to separate us.

If Estelle could be summed up in a few words, they would be that she "cared passionately." Whatever she took on, she committed herself to completely. There

may have been those who found her intensity and energy too much to keep up with, but for those who could, there was excitement: a sense of being in on something important and of sharing in a significant cause, whether it be to save a local shul or to illuminate an ancient period of history, half a world away.

Estelle gave us a wider vision of what can matter to us. She showed what one woman could accomplish with determination, terrifically hard work, and a gift of persuasion that made her friend Walter Persegati, then Secretary General of the Vatican Monuments say, "They tremble in the Vatican when they hear it is Mrs. Brettman on the telephone." It was hard to say "no" to her.

Estelle hasn't really left us, because her vitality, her dedication and love of scholarship have made such a strong impression on us all; we must see to it that the work she started will go on to be a living memorial to her remarkable life.

Florence Wolsky

REMEMBRANCES...

On Thursday, April 25, 1991, a few days before Dan and I were to leave on a three-week trip to southern Italy, I stopped by at 61 Beacon to pick up a few things Estelle had asked us to deliver: letters and photos to Sister Maria Francesca at the Priscilla Catacombs; a doll for Sister Maria Francesca's mother; letters and a book for Baldo.

When I arrived, she was doing 50 mph on the second floor, in the eye of the usual hurricane--phones ringing, word processor humming, papers and books lying open at apparent (but only apparent) random. Dick had been in the hospital for weeks at that point, and she was frantically grabbing time for work between vigils at Spaulding, calls to and from doctors, lawyers, accountants, and of course friends and relatives. She chattered about all of it as she somehow typed a letter at one table and wrapped a package at another.

What she didn't mention was her own condition. I assumed her paleness and loss of weight had to do with fatigue and misery. "Work," she assured me. "That's the ticket. Keeps me in shape. Don't worry about me."

She sent me off, heaping blessings on me in the patented Brettman benedictory style. But then she called after me: She couldn't let me leave without giving me the names of her favorite restaurants in the area of the Campo dei Fiori in Rome, a neighborhood she loved, as do we. It will come as no surprise to anyone who knew Estelle that, without the slightest memory glitch, she smoothly reeled off four of five names and addresses complete with recommended dishes and the names of the owners ("Tell them I sent you"), as if she had just lunched there the day before. In fact, the last time she'd been in Rome was in 1985, when Vaults of Memory was at the Castel' S. Angelo.

We hugged, and I was on my way, when she hailed me back yet again. She had dashed into the pantry, whence she emerged in a moment with a ragged,

faded plaid dishcloth, of a heavy and rough texture. "Ever see one of these?" she asked. "No, of course not. I swear the only place in the world that sells these is a little sort of catchall store off the Campo dei Fiori on the Vicolo delle Grotte." No rummaging in the memory for street names, of course, but the name of the store? "You know, I don't think it even has a name. It's owned by a darling old couple. Look, you may not be able to find the place, but if you do, will you bring me back two of these, only the next size bigger? This is my very last one. I can't do without them." We measured hers and found it to be 14" by 21". More hugs and thanks, and then I was off, with tanti auguri for her beloved Italy.

Was ever messenger charged with task so sacred? I fretted over it for two weeks, even while faithfully discharging her errands (and while reveling in the hospitality her introductions created for us). But at last, Rome. This was it. We must find the Vicolo delle Grotte. There could be no sightseeing, no lunch even, until we had at least begun the Quest. It was Dan, of course, who found the Vicolo delle Grotte, truly the last word in inconspicuous alleys. And almost at the very end of this nondescript backstreet, as it was about to open into the Via dei Giubbonari, was a hole in the wall (literally) with assorted detergents and mops in the window.

With pounding heart, I followed my guide inside. It was dark. It was crowded with ill-assorted stacks of plastic measuring cups, flyswatters, bottles, boxes, and brushes. Ah, but no old

couple. "Oh," said the young woman behind the counter, "they retired. We took over from them four years ago."

The pieces of the puzzle were in place. Exactly as in one of the folk tales Estelle loved, I looked about in the gloom, and there, straight ahead, neatly stacked in the shelves, was the Golden Fleece itself; in fact, in three different sizes and designs.

I laughed, I cheered, I hugged Dan. And then I bought. I bought for Estelle and I bought for me (surely, I reasoned, if Estelle sent halfway around

the world for them, we ought to have some too). The proprietor looked on, bemused, as we celebrated this singular transaction: the purchase of dishcloths.

I called Estelle the day after we returned. We had a book for her from Baldo, a picture from Paestum she'd requested, and even, yes, even the famous dishcloths! "Oh, I can't believe you. Such wonderful people!" she ex-

claimed. "But you must have jet lag. Call me in a couple of days and we'll get together. Thank you, thank you!"

Estelle entered Brigham and Women's two days later. I got the book to her, and the picture as well. But I still have the bag of dishcloths, hers and mine, in the garage.

Janet Tassel

Editor: Howard Weintraub, M.D.

Special thanks to:

* *Florence Wolsky, coeditor without portfolio*

* *Heidi Pursley, our "resident" graphics expert, w/o whom we never would have arrived.*

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June 16, 1992

Dear Mrs. Wolsky,

It is with sadness that I read the communication you had the kindness to let me have on Estelle and Richard Brettman.

I met with them several times in Rome where Mrs. Brettman often studied the Catacombs of the Hebrews in Via Appia.

Her work was very much appreciated and the proof is the success of the reception she gives at Castel St. Angelo in the presence of outstanding personalities and students interested in their researches.

When, some times ago, I learnt by phone of the death of dear Richard and the serious illness of Mrs. Brettman I was painfully surprised. But, I had the chance to speak with her by phone expressing my regret and assuring her of my prayers.

I am very happy to know that her work continues and I wish to express to you and to her collaborators my sincere wishes; may 'all the parties concerned in the International Catacomb Society keep her memory alive.

With my assurances of highest consideration and best personal regards, I remain

Sincerely Yours

+ Giuseppe Cardinal Caprio



MONUMENTI MUSEI E GALLERIE PONTIFICIE

July 1, 1992

Estelle S. Brettman

I met Estelle years ago in the Vatican. At that time I was Secretary General and Treasurer of the Vatican Museums and she was visiting the Vatican collection of inscriptions from some of the Jewish catacombs in Rome. She was fascinated by these objects that with their symbols and texts were making life of the Jewish community during the Roman period come back to us vividly and realistically.

She was interested in securing casts of some of these inscriptions for one of her many projects: the exhibition "Vaults of Memory."

Many times we met after that first visit, and a friendship was born with her and her husband. A Friendship out of admiration on my part for Estelle's dedication to her cause, her enthusiasm and energy in pursuing her goal. Easily excited when talking about history as passed to us by the catacombs and their content, she would become silent and timid once inside one of them. She would start listening with reverence and devotion. The past was talking to her.

Her eyes were penetrating and very much alive. They were betraying the fire inside. Yes, this is the feeling I had every time I was with her. She was burned inside by the passion of her ideals. She had discovered a treasure and she could find no peace until everyone was able to share it with her.

I have lost a friend and the International Catacomb Society has lost much more: its unreplaceable soul and leader.

Dr. Walter Persegati



MONUMENTI MUSEI E GALLERIE PONTIFICIE

PATRONS AND FRIENDS OF THE VATICAN MUSEUMS

The International Coordinator

ESTELLE BRETTMAN AND THE HARVARD SEMITIC MUSEUM. (HSM)

In May of 1985 a team from the HSM was at work in the Archivio Segreto of the Vatican - copying early photographs of the Middle East which had been presented to the popes, particularly Leo XIII. A chance meeting on the street with Estelle made us realize that single-handedly she was undertaking a project of titanic proportions: presenting *Vaults of Memory* in Castel San Angelo, the mighty fortress which the popes had "recycled" out of Hadrian's Mausoleum. At first channeling our offers to help solely to addressing envelopes,

Estelle marshalled our forces efficiently and tirelessly, but also with her typical graciousness and joie de vivre. Estelle introduced our team to the subterranean delicacies of porcini as served in da Costanza, a restaurant built into the Forum of Diocletian. At the great opening evening, Estelle in her velvet gown of Tyrian purple, warmly welcomed ambassadors and cardinals, and even the most exotic member of our HSM team: Dr. Raouf Sa'd Abujaber, President of Jordan's Friends of Archaeology. Over intervening years, the HSM has been tremendously pleased to pass on skilled researchers for ICS projects, notably Debbie Rokoff, now working

at the Archives of Jewish Art in Jerusalem. Never anticipating that it would be the HSM's own privilege to display *Vaults of Memory* here in Cambridge, we are particularly happy to share with Newsletter readers some of the comments received from visitors.

A professor of anthropology from Stanford University presently engaged in research at Harvard Divinity School for a cross-cultural study of Abraham's Sacrifice has commented that for her own work, *Vaults of Memory* provides fresh and unparalleled iconographic evidence as well as a deeply moving and beautiful experience. Inscriptions in the museum's guestbook include:



- * *A unique exhibit. Nothing like it in any other museum.*
- * *Wonderful!*
- * *This was a great experience. I plan on returning.*
- * *A good opportunity to familiarize myself with one root of our Western heritage.*
- * *The exhibit is very well set up indicative of careful thought and planning for all such materials on view.*
- * *Well worth the trip - Thank you.*

Founded in 1889 "to promote sound knowledge of Semitic languages and history," the HSM began its public education in the spring of 1891, almost one hundred years precisely before Estelle's final wishes that the museum take over the care and travel of *Vaults of Memory*. It is

with a profound sense of honor, as well as with a conscientiousness about the research still ahead of us, that the HSM staff gladly hopes to further appreciation of our common heritage through Estelle's work. In the spring of 1993, a special educational outreach project is being undertaken

with the Boston Latin School (founded in 1635, the year before Harvard), so that young viewers of *Vaults of Memory* will be encouraged to scout their own neighborhoods to record historic burying grounds and symbols of faith and hope in our own midst. - *Father Carney Gavin*

"We remember the Thanksgiving holidays we always spent with our aunt and uncle at the house of our parents, Yale and Elaine Shohet Berry.

We remember our aunt's exuberance and her fascinating stories about the Italy of ancient times and of today. She had a glamorous way of bringing to joyful life the spirit of other times and other places.

We also remember our uncle's jokes and his love for his family, his friends, and his wife."

- *Pamela Worstell
for Estelle's family*

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