Exclusive story
Estelle Shohet Brettman's
VAULTS OF MEMORY:
Jewish and Christian Imagery
in the
Catacombs of Rome
By Adolph L. Salsburg
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Editorial

On the road to tomorrow

As the New Year approaches, let us merge the happenings of fifty years ago with the events of today, thereby developing an insight into what tomorrow might bring.

The happenings of yesteryear hardly differ from those of today. Then, as now, issues were polarized to bring about successful political campaigns — although not necessarily to elect candidates for the good of everyone involved.

Despite the concern, now and then, that intermarriage is decimating our numbers, the same subtle — not so subtle — pressures that bind us as one people, for the betterment of all mankind, are still prompting us to maintain our Jewish identity.

Fifty years ago, in the Texas Jewish Herald (as our newspaper was known in those days), a front-page headline read: "Seek to ban 'Merchant of Venice' from school!" How different was that effort from the attempt made this year to keep this anti-Semitic play from being televised on the University of Houston's Channel 8 and from playing only recently in Hermann Park through the efforts of the University of Houston's Drama Department.

It isn't known how successful the University of Houston was in indoctrinating new hate for the alleged descendants of Shakespeare's Shylock.

In that same year, another headline read: "School Board says religion in public schools is backed by Constitution". Billy Graham Crusade officials must have read our old issue, as the Crusade seeks today to enter the religion-free assemblies of the Houston Independent School District.

And the Moslem Arab world must have had a peek at another issue of that year, as it pushes its "Zionism is racism" theme, to our contemporary discomfort. The governor's race of that day developed some remarkable rhetoric from Jim Ferguson about the Jewish people. A report on the race was published on the front page of the Herald under the title of "The cloven foot of the Dallas Jews". In that report, the governor was quoted as saying: "I have just a few friends in Texas among the Jews that I still believe in and much discomfort to say anything that reflects on their race. But recent disclosures show that there is now hatched in Dallas an unholy alliance between the Big Jews and the Big Klux Klan, whereby the Ku Klux are to get the Big Offices and the Big Jews the Big Business. In other words the Jews of Dallas now think the Ku Klux Klan are on a paying basis and they have taken over the business end of it."

For those of our readers who might not know how that disgusting campaign ended, Ross Sterling was the eventual winner over Mrs. Ferguson (Jim's wife) in the gubernatorial election.

But the hate goes on, and the sophistication of its distribution extends beyond the imagination of well-meaning, decent, thinking human beings.

If one were to sample the past 50 years of happened things in a poll to determine the direction of tomorrow, the results would seem chilling. The Moslem world appears bent on influencing the weaker elements of the other world to join it in its proposed destruction of a people dedicated to the Commandments of good will. The weapon of tomorrow is division — division of the Jewish people — so that it will fall as it never has fallen before. It's no secret that we are to be divided. Already, Jews are being pitted against Jews. We are divided over the final destination of their oppressors who have left the Soviet Union. The concern over Menahem Begin's appropriate moves to guarantee the survival of our people is being publicly laundered. And the eternal squabble over "Who is a Jew?" seems to produce little more than further division of the Jewish people.

The Bible shows us how our own internal dissension has sent us to the four corners of the earth. Let us learn from the discomfiture of our past that only through unity and solidarity will our people have a future. As the New Year approaches, let us resolve not to do the anti-Semites' work of spreading dissension and ill will among the Jewish people. Rather, let us join in a common bond of brotherhood and mutual helpfulness that will speed the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth.

About the Cover

Kneeling in a chamber of the catacombs of Rome is Mrs. Estelle Shoheit Brettman, an artist and lecturer, featured in an article in this magazine entitled: "Vaults of Memory: Jewish and Christian Imagery in the catacombs of Rome". She is reading a Greek inscription about the Jew entombed there some 2,000 years ago.

These pictures are from hundreds collected during research into these Jewish catacombs.

The fragment of a marble sarcophagus dates back to the early days of Christianity. Its symbolism parallels that of Christian and Roman funerary art of the time. A Menorah appears in a medallion supported by two winged victories. To the right stand two "Genii of the Seasons" (of Greco-Roman origin) — Autumn holding two geese and Winter holding a boar.

Paintings on the vaulted dome of a Jewish cubicle show a Menora surrounded by dolphins backed by tridents; in circles are a Shofar and root-like objects, which may be Erotem. Traditionally, the dolphin has been the protector of men in trouble at sea and in some ancient beliefs escorted souls of the dead through the sea to their final abode.

The Greek inscription Mrs. Brettman is reading says: "Here lies Maronius, also named (oliverted), grandson of Alexander, also named Mathius, archon of Siburuious, aged 24 years and 3 months. In peace this sleeper.

Siburuious was one of 13 synagogues in ancient Rome. "Arciius" (Greek-derived title) seems to have been a lay leader principally involved with non-religious concerns of the congregation, such as negotiation of contracts, leases, and political affairs.

(See special story on Page Seventeen.)

5-7-4-2 — ROH HASHANAH EDITION
Vaults of memory: Jewish and Christian imagery in the catacombs of Rome

By Adolph L. Salburg

More years ago, before and during the early days of Christianity, scholars knew—some in government, many in the Vatican, many in the Jewish community—know. But it is not general knowledge among Romans at large. Mussolini did not know! During World War II, Mrs. Brettman relates, Il Duce called Roman Jews "strangers in Italy." "Ironically," Mrs. Brettman points out, "when he made this statement, he was residing in the Villa Torlonia on the Via Nomentana, sitting above a five-acre labyrinth of Jewish burial places, to which there was access through the stable behind his Villa!

"These burial places belonged to Jews who dwell in Rome more than 2,000 years before. They were ancestors of these 'strangers in Italy,' known to be the oldest continuous Jewish community in the European diaspora."

It was to these Jewish catacombs, as well as to some in Christian sections, that the Vatican gave Mrs. Brettman access. Her idea was to study the religious symbols dynamic and dedicated Bostonian, Mrs. Brettman has been in the Jewish catacombs—many times. She has taken hundreds of pictures there in color. She has lectured about them, has a fascinating exhibit about them, and has a handsome book going to press, which catalogues, in full color, more than a hundred of the pictures that accompany her exhibits.

She tells of cemeteries in the catacombs owned by Jewish families who lived in Rome 2,000 or Jews and Christians.

"These sepulchers, cut into rock, have their antecedents in Egypt, ancient Etruria, and other Mediterranean areas. This burial concept may well have been brought to Imperial Rome by displaced Jews from ancient Israel where the Patriarchs were en-tombed in caves which have become sacred shrines."

"Of seven catacombs once maintained by Jewish families of long ago, only three are extant, and these have been closed to the public to protect against deterioration and vandalism."

It was news to many that there were Jewish families in Rome.

Pope John Paul II held a private audience on July 2, 1979, for Estelle Brettman, with Mrs. Eleanor Bourgeois (cousin of Cardinal Cushing, who arranged the audience), and Mrs. Frank Gaeta of Saugus.

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in the funerary art of the period when Christianity had its beginnings.

She brought back color photos she took in these Jewish and Christian burial vaults, often lying on her back, thirty feet underground, with only a lantern for illumination.

Mrs. Brettman is a knowledgeable person who "wears many hats." She is an art historian—an expert in ancient artifacts such as jewelry. Greek gems and seals, religious art, and symbolism of many civilizations.

She is an instructor at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where she teaches other instructors who guide visitors through collections there. She is a lecturer with slides, as noted, and about which more is to be written.

She is a skilled jewelry designer with a prospering business in antique jewelry, which she collects and redesigns for sale.

These are only some of the hats Mrs. Brettman wears. But her most appropriate one at the moment would be a miner’s cap with lantern attached. She spends so much of her time underground, taking pictures in those ancient Jewish and Christian catacombs that she finds so fascinating.

During her many-faceted career, Mrs. Brettman has found time, energy, and funds, over a period of 28 years, to further her study of religious ways and symbols by visiting archaeological digs in Italy, Greece, Sicily, Israel, Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Spain, France, England, and Ireland. Her focus always has been on tracing development of religious symbols and customs from one civilization to another, with special attention to Hebraic and Judaic.

What impels her drive for this knowledge? It is in her genes—heritage from her grandfather and father. Grandfather was a famed rabbi in Lithuania, known in his day as the "wise man of Anetel." Her father, Dr. Gabriel H. Shohet, was a general practitioner with wide practice in heart cases.

Dr. Shohet had the scholarly urge. He spent his "spare time" on astronomy. He wrote a book, "Kinoships," about his childhood in Russia, life with his famed rabbi father, and relationships with people he had known.

He helped earn his way through college and medical school teaching Hebrew.

No wonder, then, that this descendant of a scholarly rabbi and a scholarly father is a researcher in the arts, history, beliefs of civilizations which peopled this earth in past millennia—with special attention to her forebears—the early Hebrews and later Jews.

She has a drive to learn—a drive to share what she learns.

How she found her way into the paths of archaeology is a story in itself.

After high school graduation from Girls' Latin School in Boston, she entered Radcliffe College, received her A. B. in 1945, with major in biology and minor in fine art. She went on to graduate from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, in 1949, with major in fine art history and minor in Greek and Roman art.

In 1954, she was awarded the Ph.D. from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, in 1954, with major in fine art history and minor in Greek and Roman art.
For eight years, she worked in
biology, then for several years ad-
ministered a program for Boston
Aid to the Blind.

In 1968, she began studies at
the Boston Museum of Fine Arts,
concentrating on their Egyptian,
Greek, Roman, Etruscan, and Near
East collections. She also audited
courses in Harvard's Department
of Classical Arts, covering ancient
architecture, art, coins, and seals
of many ancient periods.

She became an authority on an-
cient gems, the history of gold and
methods of working it, and use of
glass in inlays and mosaics.

For all her accumulated knowl-
dge, Estelle Bredman wants it
understood that she is not entitled
to be called archaeologist. She has
never received a degree in that
discipline. She has never conduct-
ed a dig of her own.

She is an art historian and lec-
turer who has been speaking for
years on art history to small private
groups around the areas of Bos-
ton, Cambridge, and New York.

In late 1979, she caught the at-
tention of the press and art world
of Boston with an exhibition of
her catacomb pictures and arti-
facts in the Boston Public Library.

It drew crowds.

An outstanding event was a
multi-image slide lecture she gave
on Sunday afternoon, Jan. 6, 1980,
to a capacity crowd in Rabb Hall
of Boston Public Library.

The project, organized with the
assistance of associates on the
staffs of the Boston Museum of
Fine Arts, Boston Public Library,
and Boston College, was a salute
to the Archaeological Institute of
America on its centennial.

A "by-product" was three TV
programs.

Amid all her activity, she found
time to be program chairman for
the Boston Society of the Archa-
ological Institute of America. She
arranged a lucrative program to
raise money for the organization.

She has a busy schedule of ex-
hibits and lecture bookings for this
fall and winter and into next spring.

At present, her exhibit is on dis-
play at the University of Michigan,
Ann Arbor, in the Kelsey Museum
of Ancient and Medieval Ar-
chaeology. It will be exhibited
from Oct. 23 through Nov. 15 at
Boston College.

Two more exhibits are in the
works for Zionist House in Bos-

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in his official capacity, he was greatly concerned for the Jewish catacombs and in large measure responsible for preservation of those still extant.

Also a valued friend is Giuseppe Cardinal Caprio, of the Prefecture of the Holy See, who "adopted" Mrs. Brettmann as part of his official family when he presented them to Pope John Paul II at a special private audience.

She wants it made clear that she did not at any time convert or give up the precious Jewish heritage of her rabbinic grandfather and scholarly father.

What triggered Mrs. Brettmann's awareness of Jewish symbols in ancient burials in and around the Roman Empire area?

In early 1978, she was investigating a Byzantine necropolis ("city of the dead") whose use dated back to a Hellenistic period during the second and first centuries B.C.E. She relates that she literally

(Continued on Page Twenty-Two)
stumbled over a rough stone, examined it, and discovered that it was carved with a Menorah.

"Right then," she says, "I was 'hooked' on the use, among Jewish and Christian burials, of motifs from Old Testament and pagan myths and their adaptation by each religious group to its funerary art."

No wonder that when she got a look at the Jewish catacombs, her interest grew into excitement. Estelle Shohet Brettman, being the person she is with the background she has, kept going on from there ... and is still going on.

How to help preserve the catacombs

Behind Estelle Brettman's drive is the urge to make history live.

"Archaeology should be a tool to unveil history," she declares, "Instead of being locked in an ivory tower for the knowing few, it should arouse active interest in preserving the vestiges of our past before they vanish."

She has found like-minded associates. Together, they have organized the International Committee for the Preservation of the Catacombs in Italy. They have incorporated (not for profit). IRS has approved it as qualified for tax-deductible contributions.

Funds will go to restore and preserve extant Jewish catacombs of Rome and explore suspected sites of others in Italy. Also, the Committee is considering the feasibility of reopening the Jewish catacombs to public viewing under the administration and supervision of the Jewish community of Rome.

Tax-deductible contributions can be made payable and mailed to the International Committee for the Preservation of the Catacombs in Italy, 61 Beacon Street, Boston, Mass. 02108.