

## **A Handful of Leaves: excerpts**

By Rebecca Jefferson

[Following the performance with song by Jim Liversidge, Curator, Popular Culture Collections in *Composing A Heart and other immigrant stories ...*, presented by Bess de Farber, Rebecca Jefferson, Jim Liversidge at the Nadine M. McGuire Theatre and Dance Pavillion, G13 on November 16, 2012]

For those of you who know me: do not fear, I do not intend to sing ... For those of you who don't: hello, my name is Rebecca Jefferson, and I'm the curator of the Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica here at the University of Florida.

The Price Library of Judaica grew from a core collection amassed by a Rabbi Leonard Mishkin in Chicago. At the time of its acquisition, Mishkin's 40,000 strong collection was the largest and best, private collection in the country. UF purchased it in 1977 and it has since grown to over 100,000 items covering the broad range of Jewish Studies on an international level. The Price Library is the best Judaica research collection in the southeastern United States. Our late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century material places us among the top ten collections in the country. We are particularly strong in Jewish community related materials and we are starting to grow our collection of personal archives. These archives will provide key resources for research into Florida Jewry and the immigrant experience.

It is incredible what one person might own and what another person might collect. For example, you can see here the Yiddish/English notebook of the first Rabbi of Jacksonville; this piece provides linguistic evidence of 19<sup>th</sup> century immigrants as well as a piece of Jacksonville history. Here we have the photograph album of a Lithuanian family murdered by the Nazis – important evidence about life before the Holocaust, and here their last letters from the Ghetto. Here too, you can see the unpublished autobiography of a former professor at the University of Florida, detailing how he survived a Nazi concentration camp.

Lastly, I'd like to focus on this small booklet in Hebrew. This unprepossessing piece is owned by just two US Libraries. A school in Palestine thought it important to produce it, and a Rabbi in Chicago thought it important to collect it. Why? Because it contains excerpts from the diary of a talented young girl, Leah Stupniker, whose family escaped from Russia to Palestine and then went on to America. This dull-looking booklet, called 'A Handful of Leaves' has a great deal to teach us about the immigrant experience.

As Leah herself wrote: *I love words, words that have in them at least something vital and of the imagination; mathematics is so dry and simple!*

In 1923, Leah reluctantly left Palestine, her friends and her school for America. On the ship, she wrote, in beautiful Hebrew, a language that she had mastered in just one year, the following (translated by me):

*Tuesday, the hour I don't know, on deck*

*It's already the second day that we've been travelling and all around us is just sky and sea, sky and sea. The sea is beautiful, wild and free. In Israel I learned to love the sunshine and the sea. It too absorbs the heat, the cold; it is full of zest. How beautiful it is now, for example: sparkling, shining from the rays of the sun, a small white wave revolves here and a small one there. It is as though a thousand wishes glimmer within it, and it is a live and roaring entity.*

*Completely different is nighttime: black, deep black, like the darkness itself; noisy and growling with rage. The waves race, chase after the ship, and in between the foam – it seems – the mermaids dance their wild dances.*

*And it seemed to me -for I saw them- that they were living in the foam. And it seemed to me, for I heard them between the soft sighs of the waves: "Come, Come! How long you have searched for peace. Jump to us and you too will be cold and happy like us." And in the depths of my heart I replied to them: "It is different for you. I do not long for peace. I have not yet labored, and there is nothing from which to feel dejected. I will not consider being with you; I will live". And my heart felt so good, as though some sort of heavy burden had lifted from it.*

*Wednesday, from below deck, 9 in the evening, from the electric light coming in through a crack from the corridor.*

*... I can't sleep. Can't sleep in these cabins. Aside from this, the waves don't let me rest. They whisper, rustle, bring my whole life before me. And I don't know, why I cannot find any respite in them. Dreams aplenty. Oh, how much I dreamed until the coarse hand of life woke me, until I met with cold reality ...*

*Tuesday, towards evening, in the hotel room*

*This is the third day that I've been a little ill. Malaria, fever, or something like it. Completely ridiculous. Mother worries all the time. ... In another three weeks – with any luck – we will be in America. In another three weeks my new life will begin for me in the new world. For the time being, I have lived a life passing between two worlds ...*

What happened next to this precocious young girl? Her teacher explains:

*[Leah] caught a cold on the ship and developed a fatal disease ... What appeared to be the start of a regular cold with passing fever was tuberculosis ... sick, close to death, they took her to the "Island of Tears". There she died after 28 days on the 7<sup>th</sup> Heshvan [October], 1923; she was buried in Brooklyn.*

Leah's sisters made it to America: her twin sister became a specialist in allergies at the Philadelphia College of Physicians; the twins' older sister, Alia, became a social worker and the head of all child welfare in the City of Philadelphia. Saddened at the loss of their sister, they never told their family what was in Leah's diary.

And my message to you: personal papers can teach us a great deal: never dismiss a 'handful of leaves'; leave no box unturned!

I feel as though Leah wouldn't want me to end on a sad note, so let's finish with a final excerpt from one of her compositions penned at the age of 13:

*On Life and Death*

*Evening approaches. The cold air infuses a gentle longing for the dying sun. The west burns with fire as the sun leaves and hides. The lake too; slowly it moves its red waves. Suddenly foam appears on the water and a pure white swan comes into view. He stretches his neck out towards the dying sun and – a song of death is heard coming from within his heart. It is full of longing and remorse for transient life. But it is also strong: what has been determined shall be! Let us die now with honor and not with vain entreaties! And so it seems: the whole world beneath is listening to the song of the king of death. Happy is he who dies like this!*