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The teenage girl who documented the last days of Theresienstadt

Alisa Ehrmann Shek was 17 when she kept a diary chronicling what proved to be the last six months of the Terezin ghetto. Now a crowdfunding project seeks to bring her journal to a wider audience.

By Ofer Aderet | Jul. 19, 2016 | 12:19 PM | 1

Israeli crowdfunding site Headstart added an unusual project last month: An appeal to raise 20,000 shekels (\$5,180) to publish the diary of a teenage girl who chronicled the last days of the Theresienstadt ghetto.

Alisa (Alice) Ehrmann Shek wrote her journal in Theresienstadt (also known as Terezin concentration camp) when she was 17. The Beit Theresienstadt museum – an educational center and museum located in Kibbutz Givat Haim Ihud – is behind the funding project. “The diary has only been seen by historians in the field of Holocaust research,” says Beit Theresienstadt’s director, Tami Kinberg. “It represents the only documentation of its type of the last days of the Terezin ghetto.”

With two weeks to go, three-quarters of the target has already been raised on Headstart.

The story of Alisa and her husband, Zeev Shek – both originally from Czechoslovakia and survivors of Terezin – is “a Holocaust story with a happy ending. A rare breed, without a doubt, which is inspiring like nothing else,” writes their son Daniel Shek in his introduction to the diary.

“An invisible hand granted both of them, each in their own way, a drop from the so small and so miserly cup of miraculous acts, thanks to which children, women and men were saved from the horror that the Nazis imposed on the continent of Europe and entire history of all mankind,” he writes.

Alisa was born in 1927. She knew Zeev, who was seven years her senior, from the Zionist youth movement in Prague. They next met in the Terezin ghetto, to which she was deported in 1943. They married in secret there, but were separated again soon after. This happened when Zeev discovered that his mother was on the list of those being sent to Auschwitz, and he volunteered to be deported alongside her.

The transport that separated Zeev and Alisa in October 1944 was the starting point for her diary. Zeev instructed her to record everything that happened around her in the ghetto.

"The diary begins the day after my husband Zeev was sent in a transport to the east," Alisa explained later. "Before he left, he charged me with recording the events that occurred in the ghetto from the minute he left, documentation that he had taken care of before that.

"He gave me a suitcase with documents he had collected over time from the ghetto, and asked me to continue it. ... Every day to take down the 'order of the day' from the board, to gather every note that reaches my hands. ... In addition, he asked me to write a diary – what happens every day in the ghetto ... That is how we separated."

Sense of mission

"Zeev was filled with a sense of [mission] concerning the documentation and collection of testimony on what was happening in the ghetto – as if he felt in his heart that the Nazis would try to blur [things] and the world would refuse to believe," says Daniel Shek. This mission, which included the risk of death, was passed on to Alisa, and [Zeev] swore her to record, collect and hide every scrap of information from the Germans, adds Daniel.

The diary is 33-pages long and was written in German but using Hebrew letters. It included drawings and sketches made by Alisa. Only one thing managed to break her dedication to the task: an incorrect report that Zeev had been murdered. "The game is over, you were right," her diary entry read.

His mother was sent to the gas chambers, but Zeev moved through various camps and survived. Alisa took refuge in her work with a Czech farmer and was among the very few who remained in Terezin until it was liberated by Soviet soldiers in May 1945. Zeev and Alisa reunited after the war and immigrated to prestate Israel in 1946.

Zeev went on to become the personal secretary of Moshe Sharett, Israel's first foreign minister (and later its second prime minister), and he was one of the founders of the Foreign Ministry. He passed away at 58 in 1978 after suffering a heart attack in Rome, where he was serving as Israel's ambassador to Italy. Alisa, meanwhile, was an artist. They had three children: Daniel, who followed in his father's footsteps and entered the Foreign Ministry, becoming Israel's ambassador to France; Ruth Shek Yasur, who translated films; and Rachel, a silversmith.

Zeev and Alisa were among the founders of the Beit Theresienstadt museum, which opened in 1975. For 25 years, Alisa volunteered in the archives. Her diary offers a precise record of what actually occurred in Terezin, a camp the Nazis used for propaganda purposes to showcase the "humane" conditions they provided for the Jews – before most of them were sent to their deaths elsewhere.

In a propaganda film produced at the camp in 1944, hundreds of Jews participated as actors and extras, in an attempt to “dispel the rumors” about Germany’s treatment of the Jews in the concentration camps.

At the end of September 1944, the first transport of men left for a “new work camp.” A month later, when her husband joined a transport, Alisa wrote in her diary: “At 9:30 we began to load. Hospital, patients, hospital, stretchers endlessly ... being loaded. Belongings, too. Everyone had so little, and it seems even this little will be taken from them. ... I entered the room, small children aged 3 to 10, shouting. Everyone has a small backpack, eyes wide open, among them those with a scary expression of maturity and quiet. It seems they will cling on to their belongings, but never again to their childhood,” she wrote.

“Everyone alone. ... People walking in a long line, walking, dragging, putting down their baggage and dragging. They walk and they are brave. No one whose story is not a tragedy. Everyone has been left in the horror by men, parents, brothers, lovers. Now they are walking without hope of seeing them again. Looking in astonishment at those whose eyes are puffed up from crying. They are brave. Those who walk have become stone. Those who remain swallow their tears. In the end, the baggage remains, there was no room,” she added.

On November 1, 1944, Alisa wrote: “Nevertheless, I go to work in the morning, and I will eat and sleep, wash my hands, brush my teeth, and maybe even laugh. I won’t think about it, but it hovers over all my thoughts. Maybe everything will go silent again and will be pushed aside, and I will be allowed ‘not to think’ again. Or it will grow and all my thoughts, and life, and time, will come to an end inside it, until my end will come there, too.”

Ehrmann Shek died in 2007. Her family discovered another diary after her death, a more personal one, which chronicled the thoughts of an enamored young woman who misses the love of her life after he was taken from her. This diary was kept in a locked drawer next to her bed. Sections of this diary will be combined with her historical diary. “It ranges from great hope to complete despair about her continued existence in the world,” admits her son.