

Sydney Taylor Book Award Acceptance Speeches

The Number On My Grandfather's Arm David A. Adler, Author Rose Eichenbaum, Photographer

Introduction by
Merrily F. Hart

Among the fine books published by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations is this year's winner in the Picture Book category, The Number on My Grandfather's Arm. It is a touching and moving book, and yet not overwhelming. This is the perfect book for the first questions children ask about the Holocaust, or for their first contact with the horror of the Holocaust. This book provides answers, but doesn't overwhelm the young reader or listener with facts, with details, with horror. It is a quietly understated and eloquent book.

David Adler conceived the book and wrote the simple text. But when it came to the illustrations, he had difficulty finding the right family to photograph. Mr. Adler and his editor, Aron Hirt-Manheimer, wanted to keep the book as close to reality as possible; they wanted the grandfather to be an actual Holocaust survivor and the child to be the grandchild of one. Mr. Hirt-Manheimer's sister, photographer Rose Eichenbaum, finally found a willing and appropriate grandpa, and her own daughter Ariella is the little girl in the book.

Mrs. Eichenbaum is the daughter of Holocaust survivors and a professional photographer who studied under Leigh Weiner, the noted Life magazine photographer. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband and three children; Ariella is the eldest. Ms. Eichenbaum's fine photographs bring meaning and reality to this simple story.

It is wonderful to be recognized and appreciated for one's creative efforts. *The Number on My Grandfather's Arm* was an effort that came straight from the heart. My first reading of David Adler's text left me with a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes.

As the daughter of survivors, I could see how this book would touch many young hearts and minds. I am unable to remember a particular day or time when I suddenly learned about the Holocaust. It was as if I always knew. The number on my father's arm was a reminder and never hidden from view. As a small child, I had made up a game whereby I would cover his number and quiz him to see if he remembered it. He always did.

Now I am the mother of three and have struggled with the question of how to tell my children. I know now that task will be easier due to this special book.

Creating the photographs for this book was done in three phases.

Phase 1. I began by translating the written text into visual images. I needed to envision each scene before any actual film was used. Due to David Adler's excellent use of language, my mind filled with visual images upon my very first reading.

Phase 2. I needed to find a young child, a mother, and a survivor with a number who was willing to participate in such a project. The child I found under my nose, my eldest daughter, Ariella. The mother was portrayed by my good friend Helene Lesel, who is also the child of survivors. Then came the real challenge. Where was I to find a survivor? I interviewed several: a pizza-shopkeeper, a successful clothing manufacturer, even a survivor I met in the supermarket. No one was willing to give me the time. Only when I called the Martyr's

Memorial in Los Angeles did I hit gold! Not only was Sig Halbreich willing, but he is an authority on the Holocaust and a well-known lecturer on the subject. Ariella and I met with Sig one Sunday morning. He examined David Adler's text, Ariella and I examined his number, and it was a *shiddich!*

*Phase 3. The Taking of Pictures—*I converted my home into a working photo studio. I had the lights, the camera, and all I needed now was the emotion. A very interesting thing began to happen. Just as the grandfather in the story explains to his granddaughter his Holocaust experiences, Sig gently relayed *his* experiences to Ariella. Her eyes widened, she grew silent, and reacted much like the child in the story.

Here is a child who will remember the day and time she learned about the Holocaust. Last week Ariella and I were in a department store, and she pulled my arm. "Mommy, that lady over there has a number on her arm. She was in Auschwitz."

Both Ariella and I thank you for this prestigious award and hope that through our efforts, future generations will learn and never forget!

Rose Eichenbaum holds a master's degree in dance from UCLA. Her thesis was a comparative study of the movement of Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews in ritual activities.

**David A. Adler:
Picture Book Award Winner**

*Introduction by
Merrily Hart*

The author of The Number on My Grandfather's Arm is a multi-talented man. Every time I come across a book authored by a David Adler, such as Amazing Magnets (a science book), or Calculator Fun Book (a math book), or All Kinds of Money, or a special favorite of mine, The Purple Turkey and Other Thanksgiving Riddles, or an increasing number of mystery books featuring juvenile super-sleuths, I ask myself "Is this the same David Adler who is the editor of the Young Readers' Division of the Jewish Publication Society and the author of Our Golda?"

The answer is "Yes." Mr. Adler has many interests and many talents, and somehow manages to keep them all going at once—he must be a wonderful juggler.

David Adler received his B.A. from Queens College of the City of New York and an M.B.A. from N.Y.U. He was a math teacher in New York City, and is currently a financial writer as well as a children's book editor. Mr. Adler is the author of more children's books than I can list, many on Jewish topics, and many on other topics. He is married, the father of two children, and tries out all his writings on his family first.

Winning this award is especially gratifying to me because it comes from you, the Association of Jewish Libraries and because this book, *The Number on My Grandfather's Arm*, was selected.

I have been associated with books for children as a teacher, an editor, a writer, and in my most important role in life, as a Jewish parent. It is in that role, as a Jewish parent, that your reviews and your awards are so meaningful. You guide me and thousands of other Jewish parents in selecting the books we read to our children and the books our children read. I thank you for the guidance, and I'm pleased that in years to come, this award will lead parents, teachers, and children to *The Number on My Grandfather's Arm*.

I wrote this book because of the persistence of my editor, Aron Hirt-Manheimer, and because four-and-a-half years ago, my son Michael came to me with a question. He was in the first grade at the time, and just before Yom Hashoa, Holocaust Remembrance Day, he asked me about the Holocaust.

I answered Michael briefly. I brought him the few books I could find suitable for his age. And I decided to write my own answer to his question. Actually I wrote two books, *The Number on My Grandfather's Arm* for young children and *We Remember The Holocaust* for older children. The second book, which contains many photographs from private collections and many interviews given especially for the book, will be published soon by Henry Holt.

But the seeds for both books, and especially for *The Number on My Grandfather's Arm*, were planted much earlier. Many years ago, on the beach, I saw a woman with a number on her arm. I was a child then, and my mother told me that she heard someone suggest to that woman that she have the number surgically removed. The woman said, "I'll never have this removed."

As I grew older, I became aware of the many emotional conflicts survivors face. All this is incorporated in *The Number on My Grandfather's Arm*.

Remarks by David A. Adler

I remember the days and nights I spent working on both books. Evening after evening, I went to survivors' homes to speak with them. I spoke with a survivor who as a child witnessed his father's death. I spoke with a man who witnessed children torn from their mothers. I spoke with twins, both survivors of Mengele and his brutal experiments. When I came home, my wife, Renee, knew I had to be left alone, to think and unwind. This went on for three years.

Two summers ago, I spent many, many days looking through the thousands of photographs in the Yad Vashem archives. The first day I was there, I ate lunch in the public cafeteria. When I returned that afternoon to the house we had rented, I told Renee that the next time I go to the archives I'll have to bring my own lunch. Something I ate upset my stomach. So the next time I brought my lunch. It didn't help.

Then I thought perhaps it was the heat. With permission, I opened wide the windows in the small room that housed the photographs. That didn't help either.

Then I realized it was the photographs. Hour after hour, I was looking at photographs of fellow Jews suffering. I saw photographs I could never use in any book for children, perhaps not even for adults.

Somehow we must tell our children about that tragedy. And they must pass that message on to their children. It is my hope that some parents, teachers, and librarians consider the reading of *The Number on My Grandfather's Arm* a suitable beginning, a suitable first telling of a tragedy which can never be fully told nor understood.

It is my hope that this book will spark an interest in learning more, and that the book itself does not raise more questions than it answers.

It is important that our children know of the Holocaust, but also that they understand the granddaughter's message, that they feel the warmth of the hug she gives her grandfather. She learns from her grandfather about the Holocaust, and he learns from her that we as a people have survived.

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The Return
Sonia Levitin
Children's Book Award Winner

Introduction by
Merrily F. Hart

The Return, by Sonia Levitin, is a fantastic, terrifying, and heart-rending story, but ultimately a heartwarming story, for it is the tale of the Jews' modern-day exodus from Ethiopia. It is a story of oppression, terror, quiet heroism, a story that the Jews have lived in many ages and many places. Told through one young narrator, it is an adventure story that absorbs the reader.

Young Desta leaves her stone-age village in Ethiopia to travel on unknown roads, through dangerous regions, surrounded by unfriendly villagers and harassed by hostile soldiers to reach the almost mythical land of Israel. The heroism that extraordinary events call forth from ordinary people is captured in this story.

Beautifully written, The Return brings this important episode in modern history alive for the young reader.

Mrs. Levitin is a well-known author. Her first book, Journey to America, written in 1970, was based on her family's escape from Nazi Germany, and won the National Jewish Book Award. Her more recent popular titles include Beyond Another Door, The Mark of Conte, and A Season for Unicorns. We are glad that Mrs. Levitin has returned to a Jewish theme and was inspired by the heroism of the Beta Israel to write The Return.

Born in Berlin, Mrs. Levitin now lives in Southern California. She attended the University of California at Berkeley, received her B.S. from the University of Pennsylvania, and attended graduate school at San Francisco State College. She taught elementary school in Mill Valley, and has also taught adult education and creative writing. It is a pleasure to present the Sydney Taylor Book Award to Sonia Levitin.

Remarks by Sonia Levitin

Who knows exactly when a book is born? I remember being in the second grade, learning about the animals of Africa, and I was intrigued. I imagined going to Africa; I was excited at the thought of all those people, so different from me, yet also alike—for aren't people everywhere basically the same? I've always thought so—one of the reasons I write is to proclaim this idea. We are all alike in our needs, our desires, our capacities for good and for evil. The conflict between good and evil interests me profoundly. *The Return* is such a story.



Sonia Levitin Photo by Michael B. Rubin

I was led to it one Rosh Hashanah about five years ago, when our rabbi spoke about the existence of a desperately poor community of Jews living in Ethiopia. Black Jews, who followed Torah to the letter, who have been isolated from mainstream Judaism since Biblical times. Jews who claim to be the descendants of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. I was intrigued. Then, I was frustrated, as my attempts to learn more about these people were thwarted. But I've learned in my career that frustration is often the impetus to a book. Frustration and anger and concern all combine into a growing cauldron of energy—and then it usually takes one more catalyst to set the book free. The catalyst this time was Operation Moses.

Operation Moses was a heroic and remarkable feat that took place in 1984–1985. In secret, some eight to ten thousand Ethiopian Jews were airlifted out of Africa and brought to Israel, their ancestral homeland, the land of their prayers and dreams.

The moment I heard about Operation Moses, I knew this was my book to write, and that it would be the most difficult and also the most thrilling book of my career. Because this story brought together so many elements of my own past and my own yearning, it was a story so rich with potential to show the best in people, to inspire us and give us courage. Operation Moses is the antithesis to much we hear that is wrong with the world. Operation Moses showed us that there are still people who will save, who dream bold dreams and have the determination to make them come true. On paper, Operation Moses was impossible. In reality, Operation Moses happened in our own time, among our own people, and it must never be forgotten.

Africa is a continent steeped in tragedy. Famine. War. Disease. Drought. Flood. All these have taken their toll along with the human scourges of exploitation, interference, and neglect. For years I have been concerned about Africa, that beautiful land so rich in variety and possibility, so horribly neglected. It is neglect that called me to write this book. As a child of the Holocaust, I know well the fruits of neglect. The Holocaust memory is something I have had to live with every day of my life. And I have also lived with the guilt—both individual and collective, of seeing evils all around me today and lacking the commitment or energy or courage to make a difference. Maybe my power lies in the pen; maybe I am to be a witness to events, a bridge between cultures. I only know that this book cried out to be written, and it was mine to write. Why mine? Because I knew what it was to be persecuted. To be poor. To be hounded out of the country of my birth. To want freedom and security. And I knew, also, what it is to long for Eretz Yisrael, to want and need to put my feet on that soil, to feel my face pressed against the Western Wall, to see the Jews of the world mingled there, to come home.

That was the personal part. The writer in me saw this as the story of the decade, if not of

the century; I was so intense and fired up about writing it that I was sure every author in the free world would rush to do this novel before I could get started. In 1985, I made two trips to Israel. The first was to see for myself the Beta Yisrael. I was not yet committed to the book, but wanted to reach out, to say to them in effect, Welcome.

I took a taxi to a hotel in Netanya where the Ethiopians were temporarily housed; I begged to see them, and was probably taken for a crazy person. But after about an hour of negotiating and convincing the officials of my honorable intentions, I finally got an interview with the director of the place. After twenty minutes of explaining the Ethiopians' plight and the reasons for keeping curious writers away, he invited me to visit the nursery. There I saw the black babies. Sabras. There I saw an Ethiopian mother, already speaking Hebrew, wearing Western clothes, in every way emulating the Israelis. As she bent over to pick up her baby, I saw that around her neck was tattooed a necklace of dark welts, African style. The paradox and the juxtaposition of cultures settled it; I had to write this story.

Back home, I began researching in the library, learning all I could about Ethiopia, its history, language, culture. I made plans to return to Israel, and I began the search for people who had traveled to Ethiopia, which resulted, finally, in dozens of interviews. For once, I would get the story immediately and first-hand. So often stories come to a writer through the filters of time and other people; this time I would be there. I could not make myself black, I could not become an Ethiopian Jew—but I could immerse myself in their lives. Total immersion for months and months is for me not only the best way to write, but the most interesting way to live.

To that end, I contacted everybody I had ever heard of in Israel who might be involved with the Ethiopian immigrants—and when I got to Israel on my first research trip, I had twenty-five appointments for interviews in the space of nine days. It was an absolutely exhilarating experience. In Jerusalem, I needed but five hours of sleep a night. The rest of the time I worked. I spoke to government officials, social workers, reporters, rabbis, teachers, counselors, doctors. I visited schools, absorption centers, homes. And I got so many stories, that when I got home, Desta was already a reality, her adventures borrowed from the many true experiences, both victorious and tragic, that I had heard about.

People ask me, have you been to Ethiopia? No. I studied everything I could on film and videotape and in magazines, watching the same bit of film again and again, so that I felt

I'd memorized the look, the feel, the smell of the country—what grows there—how a mud hut is built—plowing, pottery smithing, Amharic words, songs. I read scholarly works and doctoral theses on the culture of the Ethiopians, so that when I came to write their story, I felt that I knew their thoughts, the cadence of their speech, their preoccupations, their ways. Presumptuous? Maybe—but when the book was done, a woman in Los Angeles who had made

But of course, the praise for this story rightly belongs with the people who made the true escape happen. All over the free world there were people who worked quietly, tirelessly, to bring it about. Our own State Department was involved to the highest echelons. People took incredible risks. One man I tried to contact, who was responsible for organizing the transport from Sudan to Israel, had disappeared. He had been spirited away to South America, because his

THE RETURN

SONIA LEVITIN



many missions to Ethiopia said to me—“Have you really never been there? It is impossible to believe, because you brought it back to me in a thousand ways.” A rabbi who worked with the Ethiopians in the various stages of absorption wrote me: “How did you ever do it? The stark accuracy, the mores, ways, feelings, practices, beliefs of an esoteric people—and Desta, so intensely Jewish in such a strange way . . . I have grasped many an Ethiopian shoulder in alternate embrace, looked into a lot of eyes and listened to a lot of confidences, and all the little grains of information that clung to me in the process attest and confirm that you did it and did it just right . . .”

life was in danger after Operation Moses became public knowledge. In Europe, America, and Israel, small groups of Jews held endless meetings, raised money, plotted and planned how to save a beleaguered community of black Jews, not from famine or political persecution, but from religious extinction.

The Ethiopians cried out to world Jewry, not because of their poverty, but from despair of not being allowed to teach Torah to their children. They were a dying race. Once a million strong, they were reduced to about 25,000 souls in the 1980s. And now people responded. That was the story I had to tell.

Because what happened in 1984 confirmed to me that our Passover reading of the exodus from Egypt, and the return to Jerusalem from Babylon—these are not something esoteric or distant, but valid for us, today. There are still people to save, and the risks are no different now than they were in ancient times. Freeing the captives is always complex. It is always difficult. It is always costly.

Imagine the rescue. What could be more complex? Someone had to go to Ethiopia, to communicate to these distant villagers that the time for their return to Jerusalem, that time longed for and prayed for these past 2000 years, had come now. Now. Avoiding the secret police, giving encouragement without running afoul of the government—these were some of the complexities. And then there was the further risk that the Ethiopian Jews would actually respond, for they had been tricked before, had been led out only to be robbed or killed by unscrupulous people.

The Ethiopian Jews responded. They piled their few possessions onto their backs, walked down cliffs, through the desert into that hell-hole called Sudan. This trek took weeks. They traveled at night to avoid bandits, soldiers, and hostile tribes. Secretly they crossed the border into Sudan. There they waited for the rescue that God had declared in the Book would someday come. Who among us would do what the Ethiopian Jews did, risking everything as an act of faith?

Difficulties? Imagine the difficulties of putting this plan in motion—contracting for airplanes, bribing officials, of keeping the Ethiopian Jews alive in those camps in Sudan, where they had to hide the fact that they were Jewish. Some waited for months until they were brought secretly to Israel. Imagine their arrival in Israel. I cried when I wrote about it. Imagine the further difficulties of helping them to adapt to their new lives.

Was it costly? You bet it was. There is always a price on the head of every captive person—man, woman and child—and to think otherwise is foolish and naive. But the price was paid. Nothing was too complex, too difficult, too costly. And lives were saved. That is why I wrote *The Return*. Because it shows what can happen when people of courage are allied with people of conscience. Nothing we write or say can equal the achievement of saving even a single life.

There are still lives left to save in Ethiopia. Operation Moses ended too soon, because the secret airlift became known. Now

families are split; the Ethiopian government does not allow the remaining Jews to leave and join their families in Israel. As before, the situation is complex. Difficult. Costly.

The good part of the story is that these people, just out of the stone age, today in Israel are living productive lives, have joined the twentieth century, have indeed come home. Boys less than a year out of African mud huts have already begun to work on computers. I have seen Ethiopian boys repairing autos, working in woodshops, making tools. I have heard the children talking Hebrew and English. I have visited with their mothers and fathers who are students, factory workers, nurses, teachers. Are they having problems? Yes. Aren't we all? Israel isn't heaven. They'll have problems. But they are alive, and Israel has let them in. Israel has no quota. Ten and twenty years from today, we will see the magnificent harvest that this aliya has brought.

On a personal level, this book was my deepest experience as a writer. In looking for the story line, I met wonderful and remarkable people from all over the world. And the story isn't over. I have gone back

***Maybe my power lies in the pen;
Maybe I am to be a witness to
events . . .***

again and will return, I hope, many times. Someday I will write a sequel; I'm not in a hurry. My last trip to Israel confirmed my desire to write another adult novel, this time with a Jewish theme. Certainly, writing *The Return* will have helped prepare me for this. Because as I was writing *The Return*, something new happened in my work. Early on, I made a decision. I would begin each writing session with meditation and prayer. I would pray to God to release me from my ego, to let me feel and live this story. To turn away from all thoughts of myself, or what the book might do for me. This book was for them. About them. About Desta—whose name means 'happiness'—and all the people in her life. And so, I let go of myself, and I became Desta, and as the incidents of the story unfolded, I could be true to her experience, her desires. When Desta and Joas and Almaz escaped, I knew how she would quake at having to light a match on the Sabbath. When her brother died, Desta still carried herself with dignity, and did not cry out against God. She wept, and she covered her brother's naked body, and then she prayed to find a place to bury her brother. She finds a ledge, a rocky outcropping, and she does what must be done,

after which she takes charge of her little sister who wants to go home. "We are going home," Desta says, "Home to Jerusalem." And when Desta and Almaz are desperate, hungry and unable to buy food because they are Jews, they meet a Moslem family, and they help each other. That small scene meant a great deal to me; it expanded Desta's humanity, it was a reaching out beyond Judaism, beyond one's own problems, to the universal and the eternal.

These things are not planned in writing a novel. They happen out of the emotional impact of the work, the combination of research and yearning. Desta's reunion at the Wall is purely my own. At first I thought it too highly personal ever to share. Then I realized that since I had invented Desta, was her mother and her creator, I could not hold anything back. I gave her my supreme moment and my vision.

How can I thank you enough for honoring my book? To be here with you, with so many familiar faces, all of you so warm and so caring about Jewish literature, is not only an honor, but a great joy. You and I are partners. We love the same traditions. We hope for the same kind of future. We believe that through heroic stories we are inspired, emboldened, kept free.

Thank you for being who you are, and for inviting me to participate with you.

ADLER

(Continued from p. 170)

I thank my editor, Aron Hirt-Manheimer for his help. And we all owe special thanks to Sigfried Halbreich. We searched for him, the grandfather in the book, for more than six months. The president of one survivors' group even suggested that we use a "real" number and paint it on someone's arm. We wouldn't do that. We approached several survivors who declined. We enlisted the help of some very prominent members of the survivor community, including Elie Weisel.

Then we found Sigfried Halbreich. He is a Polish-born Holocaust survivor, the first Polish Jew in a German concentration camp. He helped the U.S. War Crimes Branch prepare for the Nuremberg trials. He testified at the trials of Nazi criminals, including the trial of Adolf Eichmann. He is a good representative of all Holocaust survivors. He belongs in this book.

The granddaughter, Ariella Eichenbaum, belongs in this book, too. She is the granddaughter of a survivor.

"What makes a good Jewish book?" . . . in a truly Jewish book, the Judaism is essential to the story.

As an author and as an editor, I have been asked many times, "What makes a good Jewish book?" I have often responded that in a truly Jewish book, the Judaism is essential to the story. If the Judaism is taken out of the book, the book falls apart. This was true with my first book of Jewish interest, *The House on The Roof* and with the almost twenty Jewish books that have followed. It's also true of the books I edit at the Jewish Publication Society.

It is certainly true of *The Number on My Grandfather's Arm*. There is an effort today to deny that the Holocaust was a uniquely Jewish tragedy. It can't be done. I feel strongly that we must write and publish as many good books about the Holocaust as we can, and I feel that *now* is the time to do it.

I hope to write and edit many more books of Jewish interest. One of the many reasons I plan to continue is because of your encouragement and your support. Thank you for telling me and my fellow authors that what we are doing *is* important. And thank you for this award.

The Sidney Taylor Manuscript Award Competition

Presentation by
Lillian Schwartz

The Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition has a short history as compared to the AJL book awards, which began in 1968.

The first manuscript award was presented in 1986 to Ricky Fleisher, a writer living in Maryland, for her story Spirit, a narrative bursting with the independence and cultural intensity of a young boy living on a kibbutz.

The 1987 award was presented to Elaine Solowey (who did live on a kibbutz), for her tender and timely story of two Ethiopian children struggling to reach the haven they dream of—Eretz Yisrael; and the help they found in that land that did not fail them.

The high quality and positive Jewish values of Sydney Taylor's work have served as guidelines for our judges as they have for the Book Award Committee. These two manuscripts capture the highest ideals and values of Judaism in today's world.

There has been a recurrent theme in the manuscripts submitted for this competition, the same theme Sydney Taylor depicted in her stories of the American-Jewish immigrant family. In fact, in 1986, the runner-up was a charming story with this setting.

In the preface of his book How We Lived, Irving Howe notes that the "immigrant Jewish experience, significant as it was for the history of the country and crucial for the lives of most American Jews, is in danger of becoming a myth, often a sentimentalized myth, and thereby unavailable to serious understanding." Our judges are mindful of this pitfall.

Therefore, it is significant that the award this year (1988) is given to a writer who tells the story of an immigrant family.

In The Streets Are Paved With Gold, Debbie is an only daughter surrounded by four brothers. She is involved in her two worlds—home and school. During the year-long span of the novel, she develops a link between the two, as the family copes with the realities of life in America of the early 20th century.

One of the judges commented after her initial reading: "This is a terrific book. It has real and engaging dialogue, good plot, authentic details and values—plus menschlichkeit." The author who has merited this generous praise is Frances Weissenberg.

Ms. Weissenberg was raised in Brooklyn, graduated from Brooklyn College, and received a Masters in Education and her MLS (Master of Library Science) at Queens College. Her professional career was divided between the classroom and the library. She and her husband, also an educator, currently reside in Tucson, Arizona. Of particular interest to this audience is the fact that Ms. Weissenberg's only previously published work was an article on bibliotherapy.

I am pleased to present the Association of Jewish Libraries Third Annual Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award to Frances Weissenberg for her novel, The Streets Are Paved With Gold.

Lillian Schwartz has served as chairman of the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Committee since its inception.