

The Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Competition

Presentation by
Lillian Schwartz

One year ago at the AJL convention in Cleveland, I was invited to assume the position of Secretary for the first Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Competition. It did sound exciting to be part of a fresh, new concept, and I readily agreed.

I did not know then that the publicity that Merrily Hart sent out to Anglo-Jewish periodicals and other special newspapers would inspire over 150 letters from all over the world; and 42 manuscripts from practically all over the world.

I didn't know then that my mailman would be so besieged that he would consider requesting an early retirement, that the UPS delivery man and I would develop a relationship on a first-name basis, and that I would receive a very generous offer from Jesus Saves.

The thrilling opportunity this competition afforded to the aspiring authors all around us was absolutely the most beautiful aspect of this position. There are many caring, Jewishly dedicated men and women who welcomed this opportunity.

I must commend our judges for their professional expertise, compassion and plain hard work. My winter months were brightened by the late-night and early morning telephone conferences.

The very first judge to review the winning manuscript sent it back to me with the comment, "This could be it!" and indeed, this is IT!

And who is this author, our first prize winner? Rosalie Fleisher has been an elementary school teacher, a writer who developed special materials for the deaf student, and a teacher of handicapped and disabled children. She and her husband have three children, and make their home in Rockville, Maryland. She has written a story which meets the high standards set by Sydney Taylor in her books, shining with positive Jewish values.

We are honored to have Ralph Taylor here with us tonight. We are very proud to acknowledge the legacy of Sydney Taylor in whose name this award is given, by acknowledging Rosalie Fleisher, the recipient of the Association of Jewish Libraries First Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition Award for her story *Spirit*.

Remarks by Rosalie Fleisher

What a pleasure it is for me to be here tonight so I can thank all of you for making this possible. I understand that not many of you have read my manuscript, but I hope that eventually you all will. I know that most of you are curious about this "mystery" manuscript, so I'd like to say a few words about it.

It began when I visited Israel. I was so overwhelmed by the beauty and richness and diversity of the land and the people, that I wanted to share what I had seen and felt. I knew I would do this by writing a children's book, but I also knew that what I wanted to say fell into a category somewhere between a travelogue and a textbook. Eight-to-twelve-year-olds can be very discriminating readers, as you well know, and if I expected them to read my material, I'd need a unique way to express myself.

I chose to have the readers see Israel through the adventures of a boy to whom they could relate. David is a composite of several Israelis I met during my stay at the kibbutz which appears prominently in the story. Its real name is Kibbutz Sa'ad, though I changed it in the book. This kibbutz is quite unusual, as two of the major settings emphasize. It has a large cactus garden where every variety of desert cactus known to man can be found. Tourists come from all over to see this fantastic sight. The other part of the kibbutz that adds a rare touch is its zoo,

where both wild and domestic animals are kept to teach the children responsibility while caring for animals.

I took David, an independent person who cherishes freedom and a new animal, a zebra (which the real zoo does not have), and used this combination to present what I wanted to say about Israel. I intended to do this by having David attempt to free the zebra, Spirit. David would ride Spirit across the country to a wild game preserve. In this way, I could do the travelogue without having it appear as one.

I realized that the sum total of my knowledge of zebras amounted to a casual recognition of the ones in the zoo. Because I wanted my story to be realistic and accurate, my research began. It was then that I became a *maven* on zebras. I couldn't believe how different they are—but that's another story.

I went from zebras to cacti to Bedouins to the flora and fauna of Ein Gedi and the Negev. As a result, the writing of *Spirit* was a true learning experience for me. My original intention of sharing what I already knew turned out to be a fulfilling personal education that I thoroughly enjoyed.

Needless to say, my pleasure in this project has been multiplied many times because you chose *Spirit* as the winning manuscript. I'm delighted to be here now so I can say thank you to everyone.