



FIG. 27. *Hannah Senesh 806*. Leather, archival pigment on canvas, fabric, metal, zippers; 54½ x 58½ x 2 inches; 2015.

Hannah Senesh (1921–1944)

As one of 37 Jews from Mandatory Palestine parachuted by the British Army into Yugoslavia during the Second World War, Senesh assisted in the rescue of Hungarian Jews about to be deported to the German death camp at Auschwitz. She was apprehended and killed by the Nazis. Born: Hungary. During Holocaust: Palestine, Egypt, Yugoslavia, Hungary.

HANNAH SENESH

Stoic and Rebellious Poet

Marge Piercy

Hannah Senesh [or Szenes] was born into a comfortable and intellectual Jewish family in Budapest in 1921. Her diaries and the reminiscences of family members show her to be a bright but otherwise ordinary child of such a family. Her father, who died when she was six, and her mother, Catherine, were assimilated Jews with no interest in Zionism and little in religion. Hannah's first experience with anti-Semitism occurred in a Protestant high school that admitted Jews and Catholics, while charging three times as much for their tuition.

Hannah wanted to be a writer from an early age, as her father had been a well-known playwright. She was elected to the school's literary society but was excluded from being an officer because she was Jewish. Although she had high grades and was rated by the school as gifted, she could not go to university as Jews were forbidden. In the context of increasing laws and violence against her people, she became interested in Zionism, joining Maccabea, a Hungarian Zionist organization for young people. It was not a path common among her relatives or peers but viewed as strange and slightly uncouth.

In spite of a lack of comprehension on the part of her mother and brother, to whom she had always been close, she decided to immigrate to Palestine in 1939, a stubborn and lonely choice. No one in her family supported her plan. She made her way there and enrolled in the Girls' Agricultural School at Nahalal. Her diaries of the time reveal great self-searching both personal and religious and fears for her family back in Hungary as well as new friendships. She was neither conventionally religious nor conventionally secular. She was not at home in synagogue prayers but felt driven by what she identified as G-d.

She studied Hebrew passionately in order to become fluent, and Hebrew is the language in which she eventually wrote the few intense, direct and moving poems we have as part of her legacy. She traveled around the land, visiting various kibbutzim before settling after graduation in Sedot Yam. She chose a kibbutz where she would be forced to speak Hebrew, as opposed to one comprised of Hungarian Jews. At Sedot Yam she carried out all the ordinary tasks of working in the fields and in the kitchen and laundry, specializing in raising poultry. She committed fully but confided in her diary doubts about whether what she was doing was the best use of her abilities. She never stopped thinking about the situation of Jews back

in Europe. She did not pride herself on her smart choice of emigrating out of danger but rather brooded about what she could still do to help.

In 1941, she joined the Haganah, the paramilitary group that defended Jewish settlements against constant attacks. She was as much a soldier as any of the men. She became part of the Palmach, the more militant force within it. The Haganah was sometimes recognized and used by the colonial British powers that ruled the country and sometimes not, including unsuccessful efforts to disarm them from time to time. When the British White Paper set strict limits to Jewish immigration away from the Nazis, the Haganah brought in refugees illegally. But well into World War II, the British again approached the Haganah and set up Jewish brigades to fight in Africa. They saw that trained fighters could be useful to them.

In 1943, while the British were recruiting Palestinian Jews to fight for them, Hannah joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force as an

Aircraftwoman 2nd class. After training as a wireless operator and then a paratrooper, she volunteered for a clandestine group who were to operate behind enemy lines in Europe. Her brother Grury by then had managed to get into Palestine and they had a very emotional reunion.

Here in Eretz Israel she was in safety. She had had the foresight to get out of Hungary while it was possible to do so. She had established a life in her new country that suited her. She had friends. She had work. She had begun to write strong poems in Hebrew. And she gave up the safety, the life she had created to go into danger and probable death, all in the hope of saving perhaps a few Jewish lives from the death camps. If that isn't heroism, I don't know what is.

In mid-March she and 16 other Palestinian Jews parachuted into Yugoslavia, as it existed then. Their official mission was to help downed British pilots to get out of Nazi-occupied countries. What Hannah aimed to do was to help Jews escape the Holocaust. While in Eretz Israel, she had begun to write those intense short and memorable poems that people find so moving today. She joined the partisans in Yugoslavia, waiting for a chance to enter Hungary. A poem she wrote in the partisan camp ends:

*The voice called and I went.
I went because the voice called.*

Shortly after she crossed the border with her radio into Hungary, now occupied by the German Army, she was captured. She was taken to a prison in her hometown of Budapest. There Hungarian authorities tortured her, hoping for details of British plans and wireless codes. She was stripped, tied to a chair and whipped and clubbed for three days, losing several teeth. She resisted torture and refused to give any information.

Her mother was being held in the same prison. They were brought together by the authorities so that the emotional shock (Catherine had thought her daughter was safe in Palestine) might loosen their lips, but even the sight of Hannah's battered condition and the threats of their captors did not sway either of them. The authorities threatened to kill Catherine if



Hannah did not give them the British wireless codes. She refused. She was dedicated to her mission and knew if she gave up the codes, others would be in danger. She would not let herself be responsible for anyone else being captured.

After that, Hannah and Catherine caught only accidental glimpses of each other. Hannah communicated with other prisoners using a mirror at the window of her cell and also by singing. She tried to keep up the spirits of those prisoners she could reach. Finally Catherine was released and tried to secure Hannah's freedom.

After six months in prison, in November of 1944, Hannah was tried as a spy and sentenced to death. She was 23. She wrote her last poem ending, in English translation: "The die was cast. I lost." Stoic and rebellious to the end, she faced a firing squad and refused a blindfold. She chose to look her German executioners in the eyes as they shot her to death.

Somehow her body was secretly carried to the martyrs' section of the Jewish Cemetery for burial. In 1950, her corpse was exhumed and brought to Israel and reburied in an honored place in the cemetery on Mt. Herzl in Jerusalem. Her mother survived the war and joined Gyury in Israel, where she lived out her life celebrating her daughter's work and life.

Where did Hannah's strength come from? She had passionate convictions and powerful empathy for those in danger. She could not stay in safety when others were being put to death for no reason other than being Jewish or part Jewish. She made herself a poet in Hebrew, not her native language. She made herself useful in manual labor and studied poultry diseases to better serve her kibbutz. She turned herself into a warrior, took up arms, studied combat and infiltration as she had studied literature and languages. She never asked for any exemptions or quarter for being a woman. Photos show her as attractive, but that never seemed important to her. She was a gifted poet who might have developed into a major writer, but again, that did not make her feel entitled to opt out of danger. She did not value her life in spite of her gifts, she did not value her life any higher than any other life. It was what she had to give and she gave it



The British knew there was little chance any of these paratroopers would survive and I believe only one of them did. He left a powerful tribute to Hannah's bravery, leadership and charisma. The volunteers themselves knew the odds were far from in their favor. Yet they went. She went.

She gave herself utterly into what she considered the thing she was called upon to do, regardless of what it would cost her. That's why she is sometimes called the Jewish Joan of Arc. Like Joan, she was driven to fight for her people. Like Joan, she had a vision of how she could be effective. Like Joan, she died a hero for what she believed and even more, what she did.

Every year at Pesach when I lead our seder, when we light the candles I recite her poem "Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame." And I remember her heroism and honor her. ■