

Holly Mandelkern

Writing poetry to honor individuals is important to Holly Mandelkern. Now writing lyrics to honor them is a new direction for her passion.

With degrees in European history and library science, Holly documented her father's WWII story as a lead bombardier and POW in Germany. These interviews are now archived at the Eighth Air Force Museum in Savannah. His story also initiated her interest in the Holocaust.

In 1991 Holly traveled to Poland and Israel to study with Holocaust survivors and scholars. Inspired by the leader of this trip, Vladka Meed, who was a courier in the Warsaw Ghetto, Holly taught about Jewish resistance for twenty years at the Holocaust Center in Maitland. Her book *Beneath White Stars: Holocaust Profiles in Poetry* (2017) combines history with poetry to tell stories of those who resisted in a new way. Its title pays homage to poet Abraham Sutzkever whose celebrated poem, "Beneath Your White Stars," was set to music and sung in the Vilna Ghetto.

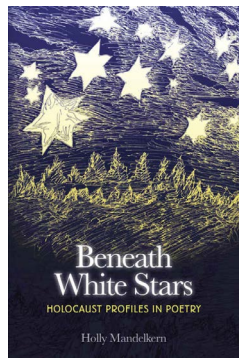
A music lover, Holly was pleased when two composers suggested that these poems would work as songs. She asked one of her favorite folk singers, Brendan Nolan, his opinion. "Do you want me to give it a try?" he responded. A recording based on her poem "Watching Myself Watch My Son" arrived in the mail a few weeks later. Holly and Brendan developed a few more songs, and she sensed that an album was in the works.

Holly began adapting other poems to song form, and her son, Joel, took on the role of project manager. Some poems readily lent themselves to songs, but most, both rhymed and free verse, were rewritten to conform to traditional song form. *Beneath White Stars: Holocaust Profiles in Song*, a collection of 17 songs performed by more than 20 musicians in the U.S., London, Budapest, and Buenos Aires, will be released in the summer of 2021. Holly's role is lyricist and producer.



In 2015 Holly completed the Twelve Chairs Advanced Poetry Course and won the 2016 Thomas Burnett Swann Award. Her poems appear in *Revelry* and journals of the National Council of Teachers of English and the FSPA. Yeshiva University's 2016 *Prism: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators* features her poetry about survivor Roman Kent and her process of writing historical poetry. Recently, she shared her poetry about Roman Kent, Vladka Meed, and others for a commemoration at Rollins College and as guest poet for the Burnett Honors College at the University of Central Florida. Holly hopes to help preserve their legacy — and that of others — in poetry and now also in song.

Here is a link to Holly's website that includes how to buy the book (the album is not yet available): [Link](#)



Elegy Without Words

For Matitiahu Braun

Amidst Frescobaldi's *Toccat*a
and Schumann's fairy tales,
you string us to places far and near.
We rise in reprise
and fall through the voice
of your viola.

When Bach's *Komm, susser Tod* sings of death,
you tell of the sudden end,
neither welcome nor sweet,
of the orchestra director,
your student and friend.
Still, you play your cadenced strains
through your fugue of feelings,
measuring a farewell
in your wooden sanctuary
of sound.

**“Unter dayne vayse shtern”:
A Sonnet for Abraham Sutzkever**

At night I look through darkened doors ajar
for Mama. I (the pitted plum that bears
within the nest, the bird, the tree) have fears
that wagons cart her Sabbath shoes to war.
I wait for Your white hand beneath Your star
to stretch through snowy night and hold my tears;
from cellared holes, dear God, I search the years
past rooftops where Your shelter stands afar.

By night we raid the printer's plates of lead
that once engraved the Golden Chain's old script.
For arms, we melt the ingrained voice of scrolls
while dreamers, turned to soldiers, forge ahead.
We sing a hymn to swamps once nondescript;
we shoulder sacred rifles on our souls.

On Hearing Al Rocheleau Read a Poem

The timbre of your voice takes us to Vilna's pitted plums,
 cellared dreams, wagons carting Sabbath shoes to war.
 You pronounce the illustrious name S u t z k e v e r
 though most in the room have not heard of him
 or his fiery ghetto poems bound in tears.
 Sutzkever's vowels long rise to welcome
 diamond stars that cut his fears.
 Short vowels melt to bullets,
 now luring the armed poet
 into swamp and woods.
 Here minefields whine a melody,
 lulling his mind to anapests
 and amphibrachs, rhythms
 revealing the long and short
 of when to step.

For the first time I hear my poem
 about Sutzkever simmer in your mind,
 soft sounds ripening in your mouth.
 A strain of his Golden Chain rains down
 the decades into our space, binding him to us.
 Your tone, tender and slow, tunes a chorus
 of Sutzkever, you, me, the ones who hear us all.
 What shall we sing today?

Berry Picking

For Wendell Berry

Timbered choirs and the Kentucky poet
 mourn mountains turned to coal,
 trees broken,
 sunshine plunged to a slant of light.
 The mad farmer pens manifesto,
 railing against unholy
 contours and cuts
 as words sharpen the fray.
 Yet his own path remains soft and still,
 picking berries and tomatoes,
 tilling in bare feet,
 midwiving the child within.
 His husbandry finds good
 in old blueprints,
 horse-drawn ways,
 and Sabbath days.
 Neighbors share daily bread
 as clotheslines tie them
 together in their clean space.
 He blesses the manifest—
 golden leaves marking their perfect places
 and wood drakes drawing beauty in water
 as great herons feed and soar.

The leaves and the leaving
 seed dreams of harmony
 in the peace of wild things.