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by Debra Rubin NJJN Bureau Chief April 2, 2018

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Shoa victim's viola keeps her song alive

Program explores Jewish life, music in Czarist Russian

Dr. Tamara Reps Freeman describes it as "bashert," destiny in Yiddish: The Holocaust ethnomusicologist was united in New Jersey with the viola of a Jewish musician murdered in the Theresienstadt concentration camp in the former Czechoslovakia.

The spirit of that musician, Tauba Botzel, will be heard on April 8 when Freeman, using that same viola, plays Jewish melodies that were popular before the Shoba in 3 "The Jews of Tsarist Russia and Bessarabia" at the East Brunswick Public Library. The program is the fifth and final installment of an annual series, "The Jews of Eastern Europe Before the Holocaust," which examines the history, culture, and music of the Jews in the pre-war era.

By performing with Botzel's instrument, specially crafted in 1935 to fit the musician's small hands, Freeman offers a poignant reminder of what was lost. Botzel was born in Hungary, but moved to Bertin because "she wanted to be surrounded by the highest possible culture and civility," Freeman told NJJN in a phone interview.

After Botzel was seized by the Nazis from her Berlin apartment in 1942, the viola was saved by a Christian neighbor who, Freeman said, risked his life to sneak into the apartment and secure the instrument, and then sent the viola to Botzel's sister, Senta, who lived in New Jersey. Botzel was 77 when she was killed at Theresienstadt in 1942.

Senta Botzel held onto the instrument until she learned of her sister's death. The viola, she decided, should be played by someone who cherished it as much as her sister, so she sold it to a professional musician. From then on it passed through several hands until the day Freeman came into a bowmaker's shop in Maywood.



Dr. Michael Kesler of East Brunswick, a retired cantor is producing and performing in "The Jews of Tsarist Russia and Bessarabia." Photo courtesy Michael Kesler





The bowmaker was selling instruments on consignment, including Botzel's viola. "He knew the story behind it, had the papers, and asked me if I was interested in taking a look at it," said Freeman. "He had no idea I was researching the music of the Holocaust and was working toward a doctorate in Holocaust music. It was a bashert moment."

Freeman would later go to Yad Vashem-The World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem to learn all she could about Botzel, and she said the museum staff was "completely blown away that I had her viola and that Tauba's voice is still alive through her instrument." The fate of the viola is now part of Botzel's legacy, as it is in the permanent collection at Yad Vashem.

Freeman, a resident of Saddle River and an adjunct professor of Holocaust music at Montclair State University, is the musicologist for the Association of Holocaust Organizations. Her dectoral dissertation, "Encouraging Racial Respect through Holocaust Music," became the basis for the first Holocaust Music," became the basis for the first Holocaust music curriculum for elementary through high school students.

Dr. Michael Kesler of East Brunswick, a retired cantor, petroleum engineer, and author, is producing ur, michaet Kester of East Brunswick, a retired cantor, petroleum engineer, and author, is producing this year's program, which is sponsored by the library, Karma Foundation, the East Brunswick Jewish Center, and the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey. Besides Freeman's performance, the event will feature historians who will speak about the rich culture in Bessarabia, the former Jewish community under Czarist Russia, before it was destroyed, as well as other musicians who will perform popular songs from the region. Most of the area that was Bessarabia along the Black Sea, is now Romania.

"Almost half of the six million - 2.7 million - victims of the Holocaust came from these Eastern European countries," said Kesler in a phone interview with NJJN. "It could be said this was the incubator of Jewish culture. Three-quarters of American Jews derive their roots from these countries."

Presenters and performers will include members of Makhelat HaMercaz, the Central New Jersey Jewish choir, Donna Messer, founder and president of the Highland Park Recorder Society, and Kesler's daughter, dancer May Kesler, and granddaughter, Korina Kesler, a high school junior and violinist with the Westchester County Symphony Orchestra.

The Yiddish folksongs that attendees will hear from Freeman and others were "such an important form of expression of everyday life," she said, adding that some were "humorous and charming. Some showed a respect of ilitury, Jewish ritual, and the importance and respect of rabbis and cantors in the communities. These programs celebrate the rich culture and people will walk away enlightened, enriched, and quite uplifted because I think people in the audience feel the history in their DNA."

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