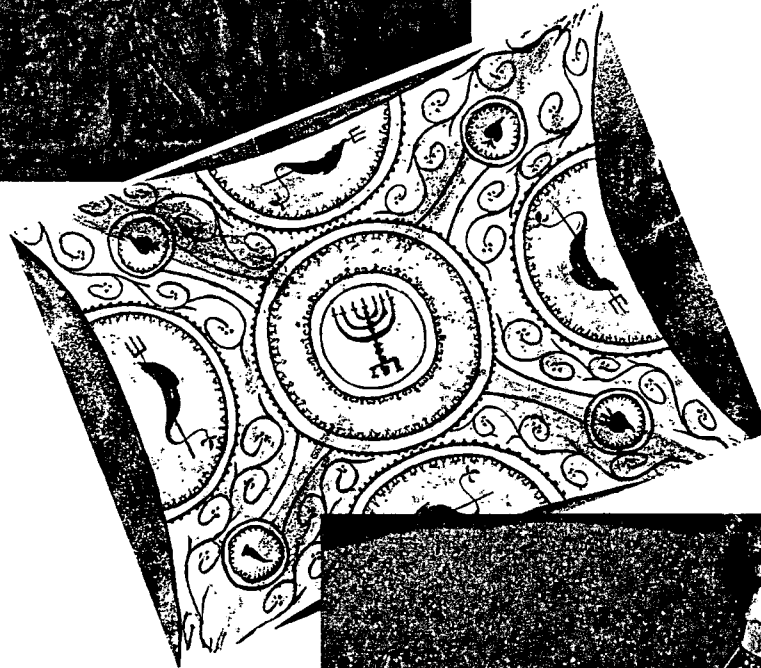


Estelle Brettman -V
61 Beacon Street
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Exclusive story

**Estelle Shohet Brettman's
VAULTS OF MEMORY:
Jewish and Christian Imagery
in the
Catacombs of Rome**

By Adolph L. Salsburg

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Story - Page Seventeen



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Editorial -

On the road to tomorrow

As the New Year approaches, let us merge the happenings of fifty years ago with the events of today, thereby developing an insight into what tomorrow might bring.

The happenings of yesteryear hardly differ from those of today. Then, as now, issues were polarized to bring about successful political campaigns - although not necessarily to elect candidates for the good of everyone involved.

Despite the concern, now and then, that intermarriage is decimating our numbers, the same subtle - not so subtle - pressures that bind us as one people, for the betterment of all mankind, are still prompting us to maintain our Jewish identity.

Fifty years ago, in the Texas Jewish Herald (as our newspaper was known in those days), a front-page headline read: "Seek to ban 'Merchant of Venice' from school". How different was that effort from the attempt made this year to keep this anti-Semitic play from being telecast on the University of Houston's Channel 8 and from playing only recently in Hermann Park through the efforts of the University of Houston's Drama Department?

It isn't known how successful the University of Houston was in indoctrinating new hate for the alleged descendants of Shakespeare's Shylock.

In that same year, another headline read: "School Board says religion in public schools is backed by Constitution". Billy Graham Crusade officials must have read our old issue, as the Crusade seeks today to enter the religion-free assemblies of the Houston Independent School District.

And the Moslem Arab world must have had a peek at another issue of that year, as it pushes its "Zionism is racism" theme, to our contemporary discomfort. The governor's race of that day developed some remarkable rhetoric from Jim Ferguson about the Jewish people. A report on the race was published on the front page of the Herald under the title of "The cloven foot of the Dallas Jews". In that report, the governor was quoted as saying: "I have just a few friends in Texas among the Jews that I still believe in and much dislike to say anything that reflects on their race. But recent disclosures show that there is now hatched in Dallas an unholy alliance between the Big Jews and

the Big Ku Klux Klan, whereby the Ku Klux are to get the Big Offices and the Big Jews the Big Business. In other words the Jews of Dallas now think the Ku Klux Klan are on a paying basis and they have taken over the business end of it..."

For those of our readers who might not know how that disgusting campaign ended, Ross Sterling was the eventual winner over Mrs. Ferguson (Jim's wife) in the gubernatorial election.

But the hate goes on, and the sophistication of its distribution extends beyond the imagination of well-meaning, decent, thinking human beings.

If one were to sample the past dastardly deeds of mankind in a poll to determine the direction of tomorrow, the results would seem chilling. The Moslem world appears bent on influencing the weaker elements of the other world to join in its proposed destruction of a people dedicated to the Commandments of good will. The weapon of tomorrow is division - division of the Jewish people - so that it will fall as it never has fallen before. It's no secret that we are to be divided. Already, Jews are being pitted against Jews. We are divided over the final destination of oppressed Jews who leave the Soviet Union. The concern over Menahem Begin's appropriate moves to guarantee the survival of our people is being publicly laundered. And the eternal squabble over "Who is a Jew?" seems to produce little more than further division of the Jewish people.

The Bible shows us how our own internal dissension has sent us to the four corners of the earth. Let us learn from the disharmony of our past that only through unity and solidarity will our people have a future. As the New Year approaches, let us resolve not to do the anti-Semites' work of spreading dissension and ill will among the Jewish people. Rather, let us join in a common bond of brotherhood and mutual helpfulness that will speed the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth.

About the Cover -

Kneeling in a chamber of the catacombs of Rome is Mrs. Estelle Shohet Brettman, art historian and lecturer, featured in an article in this magazine entitled: "Vaults of memory: Jewish and Christian imagery in the catacombs of Rome".

She is reading a Greek inscription about the Jew entombed there some 2,000 years ago.

These pictures are from hundreds collected during research into these Jewish catacombs.

The fragment of a marble sarcophagus dates back to the early days of Christianity. Its symbolism parallels that of Christian and Roman funerary art of the time. A *Menorah* appears in a medallion supported by two winged victories. To the right stand two "*Genji of the Seasons*" (of Greco-Roman origin) - Autumn holding two geese and Winter holding a boar.

Paintings on the vaulted dome of a Jewish cubiculum show a *Menorah* surrounded by dolphins backed by tridents; in circles are a *Shofar* and root-like objects, which may be *Etrogim*. Traditionally, the dolphin has been the protector of men in trouble at sea and in some ancient beliefs escorted souls of the dead through the sea to their final abode.

The Greek inscription Mrs. Brettman is reading says: "Here lies Maronius, also named (obliterated), grandson of Alexander, also named Mathius, arclion of Siburesious, aged 24 years and 3 months. In peace (his) sleep."

Siburesious was one of 13 synagogues in ancient Rome. "*Arclion*" (Greek-derived title) seems to have been a lay leader principally involved with non-religious concerns of the congregation, such as negotiation of contracts, leases, and political affairs.

(Please see story on Page Seventeen.)

Vaults of memory: Jewish and Christian imagery in the catacombs of Rome

By Adolph L. Salsburg
Mention the catacombs of Rome, and people nod knowingly. Some who have visited them will tell you where they are. But Jewish cemeteries in the catacombs? Who ever heard of them?

Meet Estelle Shohet Brettman,

more years ago, before and during the early days of Christianity.

Why did people in Rome bury their dead in catacombs?

The catacombs, Mrs. Brettman explains, "are complex underground networks of galleries, which served as burial places for religious communities, especially

2,000 or more years ago. Scholars knew—some in government, many in the Vatican. Many in the Jewish community know. But it is not general knowledge among Romans at large.

Mussolini did not know!

During World War II, Mrs. Brettman relates, *il Duce* called Roman Jews "strangers in Italy".

"Ironically," Mrs. Brettman points out, "when he made this statement, he was residing in the Villa Torlonia on the Via Nomentana, sitting above a five-acre laby-

rinth of Jewish burial places, to which there was access through the stable behind his Villa!

"These burial places belonged to Jews who dwelt in Rome more than 2,000 years before. They were ancestors of these 'strangers in Italy', known to be the oldest continuous Jewish community in the European diaspora."

It was to these Jewish catacombs, as well as to some in Christian sections, that the Vatican gave Mrs. Brettman access. Her idea was to study the religious symbols



Pope John Paul II held a private audience on July 2, 1979, for Estelle Brettman, with Mrs. Eleanor Bourgeois (cousin of Cardinal Caprio, who arranged the audience), and Mrs. Frank Gaeta of Saugus.

dynamic and dedicated Bostonian. Mrs. Brettman has been in the Jewish catacombs — many times. She has taken hundreds of pictures there in color. She has lectured about them, has a fascinating exhibit about them, and has a handsome book going to press, which catalogues, in full color, more than a hundred of the pictures that accompany her exhibits.

She tells of cemeteries in the catacombs owned by Jewish families who lived in Rome 2,000 or Jews and Christians.

"These sepulchers, cut into rock, have their antecedents in Egypt, ancient Etruria, and other Mediterranean areas. This burial concept may well have been brought to Imperial Rome by displaced Jews from ancient Israel where the Patriarchs were entombed in caves which have become sacred shrines.

"Of seven catacombs once maintained by Jewish families of long ago, only three are extant, and these have been closed to the public to protect against deterioration and vandalism."



It was news to many that there were Jewish families in Rome

OF THE JEWISH HERALD-VOICE — 1-9-8-1

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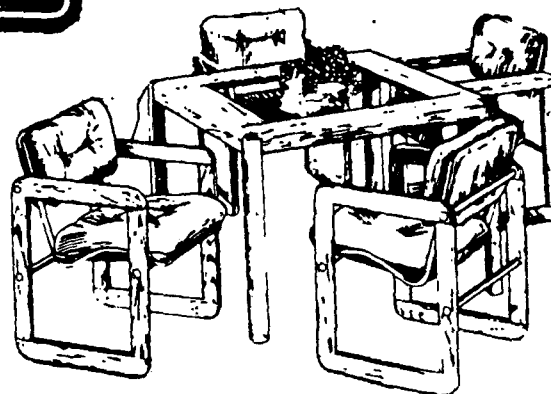
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in the funerary art of the period when Christianity had its beginnings.

She brought back color photos she took in these Jewish and Christian burial vaults, often lying on her back, thirty feet underground, with only a lantern for illumination.



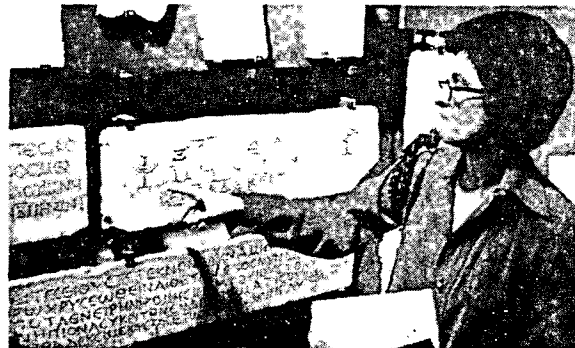
Mrs. Brettman is a knowledgeable person who "wears many hats". She is an art historian - an expert in ancient artifacts such as jewelry, Greek gems and seals,

religious art and symbolism of many civilizations.

She is an instructor at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where she teaches other instructors who guide visitors through collections there. She is a lecturer with slides, as noted, and about which more is to be written.

She is a skilled jewelry designer with a prospering business in antique jewelry, which she collects and redesigns for sale.

These are only some of the hats Mrs. Brettman wears. But her most appropriate one at the mo-



This is one of the 130 grave makers rescued from now-collapsed Jewish catacombs under Monteverde. Estelle Brettman lectured about them in a Vatican storage room to a Peace Mission of the American Jewish Congress. The marker, in Greek, says: "Judas, aged seven, lies here."

ment would be a miner's cap with lantern attached. She spends so much of her time underground, taking pictures in those ancient Jewish and Christian catacombs that she finds so fascinating.



During her many-faceted career, Mrs. Brettman has found

time, energy, and funds, over a period of 28 years, to further her study of religious ways and symbols by visiting archaeological digs in Italy, Greece, Sicily, Israel, Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Spain, France, England, and Ireland. Her focus always has been on tracing development of religious symbols and customs from one civilization to another, with special attention to Hebraic and Judaic.

What impels her drive for this knowledge? It is in her genes - heritage from her grandfather and father.

Grandfather was a famed rabbi in Lithuania, known in his day as the "wise man of Arbel". Her father, Dr. Gabriel H. Shohet, was a general practitioner with wide practice in heart cases.

Dr. Shohet had the scholarly urge. He spent his "spare time" on astronomy. He wrote a book, "Kinships", about his childhood in Russia, life with his famed rabbi father, and relationships with people he had known.

He helped earn his way through college and medical school teaching Hebrew.



No wonder, then, that this descendant of a scholarly rabbi and a scholarly father is a researcher in the arts, history, beliefs of civilizations which peopled this earth in past millennia - with special attention to her forebears - the early Hebrews and later Jews.

She has a drive to learn - a drive to share what she learns.

How she found her way into the paths of archaeology is a story in itself.

After high school graduation from Girls' Latin School in Boston, she entered Radcliffe College, received her A. B. in 1945, with major in biology and minor in fine

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arts.

For eight years, she worked in biology, then for several years administered a program for Boston Aid to the Blind.

In 1968, she began studies at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, concentrating on their Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Etruscan, and Near East collections. She also audited courses in Harvard's Department of Classical Arts, covering ancient architecture, art, coins, and seals of many ancient periods.

She became an authority on ancient gems, the history of gold and methods of working it, and use of glass in inlays and mosaics.

For all her accumulated knowledge, Estelle Brettman wants it understood that she is not entitled to be called archaeologist. She has never received a degree in that discipline. She has never conducted a dig of her own.

She is an art historian and lecturer who has been speaking for years on art history to small private groups around the areas of Boston, Cambridge, and New York.

In late 1979, she caught the attention of the press and art world of Boston with an exhibition of her catacomb pictures and arti-

facts in the Boston Public Library. It drew crowds.

An outstanding event was a multi-image slide lecture she gave on Sunday afternoon, Jan. 6, 1980, to a capacity crowd in Rabb Hall of Boston Public Library.

The project, organized with the assistance of associates on the staffs of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Public Library, and Boston College, was a salute to the Archaeological Institute of America on its centennial.

A "by-product" was three TV programs.

Amid all her activity, she found time to be program chairman for the Boston Society of the Archaeological Institute of America. She arranged a lucrative program to raise money for the organization.

She has a busy schedule of exhibits and lecture bookings for this fall and winter and into next spring.

At present, her exhibit is on display at the University of Michigan, at Ann Arbor, in the Kelsey Museum of Ancient and Medieval Archaeology. It will be exhibited from Oct. 23 through Nov. 15 at Boston College.

Two more exhibits are in the works for Zionist House in Bos-



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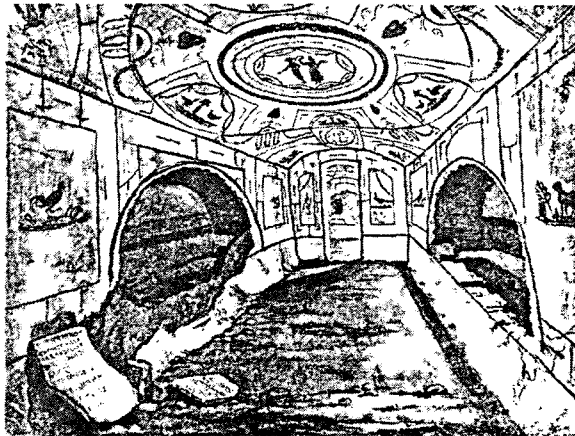
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A funerary chamber in the Jewish catacomb under Vigna Randanini in Rome, from a drawing made in 1881 by the German artist Theophile Roller, shows a Victory crowning a nude youth — plus peacocks, other birds, animals, and symbols borrowed from ancient mythology.

ton and Countway Medical Library of Harvard University.

One of her more demanding experiences came in April, 1980, while in Rome. Mrs. Brettman was "drafted" to give a lecture the following day to a Peace Mission of the American Jewish Congress. The subject was 130 Greek and Latin burial inscriptions rescued from a now totally collapsed Jewish catacomb. The lecture was given where these were kept in the

Vatican Museum storage.

The unusual lecture was arranged by Monsignor Jorge Mejia, secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Relations with the Jews.

Another Vatican official who aided Mrs. Brettman was Father Umberto M. Fasola, rector of the Pontifical Commission on Sacred Archaeology, who opened his archives and libraries to her for research and enabled her to visit the catacombs.

Mrs. Brettman points out that

in his official capacity, he was greatly concerned for the Jewish catacombs and in large measure responsible for preservation of those still extant.

Also a valued friend is Giuseppe Cardinal Caprio, of the Prefecture of the Holy See, who "adopted" Mrs. Brettman as part of his official family when he presented them to Pope John Paul II at a special private audience.

(She wants it made clear that she did not at any time convert or give up the precious Jewish heritage of her rabbinic grandfather and schol-

arly father.)

What triggered Mrs. Brettman's awareness of Jewish symbols in ancient burials in and around the Roman Empire area?

In early 1978, she was investigating a Byzantine necropolis ("city of the dead") whose use dated back to a Hellenistic period during the second and first centuries B.C.E.

She relates that she literally

(Continued on Page Twenty-Two)

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stumbled over a rough stone, examined it, and discovered that it was carved with a *Menorah*.

"Right then," she says, "I was 'hooked' on the use, among Jewish and Christian burials, of motifs from Old Testament and pagan myths and their adaptation by

each religious group to its funerary art."

No wonder that when she got a look at the Jewish catacombs, her interest grew into excitement. Estelle Shohet Brettman, being the person she is with the background she has, kept going on from there ... and is still going on. ☆

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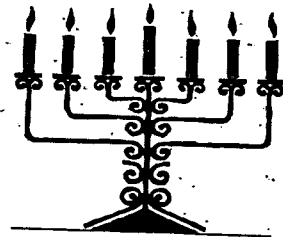
Behind Estelle Brettman's drive is the urge to make history live.

"Archaeology should be a tool to unveil history," she declares. "Instead of being locked in an ivory tower for the knowing few, it should arouse active interest in preserving the vestiges of our past before they vanish."

She has found like-minded associates. Together, they have organized the International Committee for the Preservation of the Catacombs in Italy. They have incorporated (not for profit). IRS has approved it as qualified for tax-deductible contributions.

Funds will go to restore and preserve extant Jewish catacombs of Rome and explore suspected sites of others in Italy. Also, the Committee is considering the feasibility of reopening the Jewish catacombs to public viewing under the administration and supervision of the Jewish community of Rome.

Tax-deductible contributions can be made payable and mailed to the International Committee for the Preservation of the Catacombs in Italy, 61 Beacon Street, Boston, Mass. 02108.



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