

From the big screen to the bimah

At Hebrew College, 'Pianist' co-star prepares to become a rabbi

By Lori Harrison-Kahan

Special to the Advocate

In 2002, Jessica Kate Meyer made her major motion picture debut, appearing with actor Adrien Brody in Roman Polanski's Holocaust film, "The Pianist."

Last month, Meyer made a very different kind of debut: she led High Holiday services for the first time. Meyer's rabbinical debut took place at Wellesley College, her alma mater.

Meyer, who is currently a student at the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, admitted that she was nervous at first. But as she sang the call to worship, she settled into her new role and her congregants became increasingly responsive.

"It was wonderful to be back on campus," said Meyer, who ushered in the New Year alongside Wellesley's Jewish chaplain, David Bernat. "My favorite part was connecting with the students. Since I didn't have a Jewish experience particularly in college, I had a lot of questions for them."

Although she took courses in Hebrew as an undergraduate at Wellesley, Meyer recalls that she had few Jewish friends on campus and rarely attended events at Hillel. Instead, she studied Shakespeare and performed in student theatrical productions, preparing for a career as a professional actress.

But while she has now traded the big screen for the bimah, the 35-year-old Meyer has not lost her yen to perform. On Oct. 16 at Temple Reyim in Newton, she will lend her riveting voice to "Klezmer and Beyond," a café-style concert that will include everything from jazzy numbers and "raunchy Yiddish songs" to traditional numbers collected from Holocaust survivors.

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Tufts donor offers \$1m for Shoah program

Catholic alum was moved by a survivor

By Elise Kigner *Advocate Staff*

A year ago, Bill Cummings and his wife, Joyce, visited Yad Vashem, and listened to a lecturer tell their Tufts University group about how he survived five concentration camps in Poland and Austria.

"There wasn't a person in that group of 40 who didn't have a handkerchief out, including the Israeli guides," said Cummings, a Roman Catholic who had never before heard directly from a Holocaust survivor.

He was so moved by the experience that he decided to bring the speaker, Eliezer Ayalon, to the United States to tell his story. On top of that, he decided to donate the profits from his new restaurant – or at least \$1 million – to endow a Holocaust and Genocide Education program at Tufts Hillel.

Cummings will make good on his first pledge Oct. 19, when Ayalon appears at Tufts's Cabot Auditorium in Medford.

The speech will help kickoff the university's new Holocaust program, which will be administered by Tufts Hillel, though events will be interfaith.

As to the donation, Cummings is calling on the university to raise \$1 million to match his contribution. He intends to use profits from Beacon

Grille steakhouse in Woburn, which opened in January. If the restaurant falls short, the Cummings Foundation will come up with the rest, the Winchester real estate developer said.

Cummings, 73, is a long-time donor to Tufts, his alma mater, and its Hillel. In 2005, Tufts dedicated the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine in Grafton in his honor.

He said the new program would include lectures by those who witnessed the Holocaust and other genocides; a traveling exhibit on the history and causes of the Holocaust; film screenings; a scholar-in-residence; and subsidized international trips for diverse student groups.

Cummings said he first brought up the idea for the program with Tufts President Lawrence Bacow, who said he supported the program, but did not want to be involved himself because as a son of a Holocaust survivor he felt too close to the subject.

"My mother was a survivor of Auschwitz, the only member of her family to survive, so Bill's gift touched me personally," wrote Bacow in an email. "We hope this programming will interest not just Jewish students at Tufts, but will

engage students of all faiths at institutions throughout the US.”

Cummings has already started funding genocide programming. In June, he sponsored a 10-day interfaith mission for 20 Tufts students to the Agahozo Shalom Youth Village, established for victims of the Rwandan genocide. Before heading to Rwanda, the students raised \$5,000 to build bleachers in the village’s sports fields. In the village, they spent mornings helping build the seating, working with a construction crew to lug rocks and cement. In the afternoons, they volunteered in an after-school program.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit, director of Tufts Hillel, said to build on the genocide-related programs it already offers. Partnering with groups representing black, Asian and GLBT students, the Hillel has organized trips to the national Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. Hillel has also sent interfaith groups to Berlin to

visit Shoah-related sites and learn how Germany was handling the legacy of the Holocaust.

“Part of our education about the Holocaust is that we have a responsibility as Jews to be sensitive to genocide throughout the world,” Summit said. “If our community isn’t sensitive to this, then who would be sensitive to this?”

But he stressed the need to reach outside of the Jewish community: “Ultimately we study the Holocaust in order to sandpaper peoples’ awareness so when they see anti-Semitism, when they see racism in society, we have an early warning system so people know how to confront these examples of oppression in society.”

Before Ayalon addresses the public at Tufts, he plans to lunch at Beacon Grille with Tufts administrators. He will then participate in a text study at Tufts Hillel led by Summit.

Ayalon was born in Poland in 1928. His parents, who were Zionists,

unsuccessfully applied for visas to Palestine. In 1941, his family was sent to the Radom ghetto; by lying about his age, Ayalon was able to work at a German clothing warehouse on the outside. In 1942, the ghetto was sealed, and only those with work permits could leave. Ayalon did not want to go, but his mother insisted he save himself. He was sent to the Blizyn camp, where he worked as a shoemaker. His parents and three siblings were killed in Treblinka.

After spending three years in various camps, Ayalon was liberated in May 1945. Jewish soldiers in the British Army transported him and other survivors to Italy. That November, he boarded a ship to Israel, where he has lived ever since. His story is recounted in the book, “A Cup of Honey” by Neile Sue Friedman.

Ayalon will speak at 8 p.m. Oct. 19 in Cabot Auditorium at Tufts University in Medford. The presentation will also be streamed online. For more information, visit tuftshillel.org.