

Esther Topaz: Sculpting a Life

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one-hour documentary film
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Canadian sculptor, **Esther Tichauer Topaz**, was born in Gurs, the notorious concentration camp in southern France, in 1942, to Jewish parents and who, with her parents, survived against all odds. **This is her story.**

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Introduction

“You have to create your life. You have to carve it, like a sculpture.”

- **William Shatner**,
Canadian Actor, Author, Activist

The title of our documentary is more than a play on words; in a very literal sense, Esther Topaz shaped her life out of difficult experiences. Her choice to use stone as her medium is more than a metaphor. As she has noted, working in stone allows her to leave an object of permanence in a world in which her family and history nearly disappeared.

Esther’s story is inspirational, told by a charismatic, determined woman. To a very great degree, Esther tells her own story, through her extensive archive of photographs, documents, newspaper clippings, and other visual items.

We have had the privilege of interviewing her over many years -- with her aged mother, capturing both the narrator of the actual experiences in Gurs, as well as the intense bond between mother and daughter. The film is also a lesson in the history of the Vichy internment camp system.



Extensive interviews, done over a period of nearly two decades, together with interviews with noted historians, tell a multi-leveled narrative of Vichy complicity in the Holocaust; a family reunion in Palestine in 1945; and a recorded odyssey of self-discovery as she learns, through her life and art, to deal with the generational trauma caused by both her parents' experiences and her own.

By 1942 France was a dangerous country for Jews. Concentration camps specifically created for Jews in France had begun in 1940, and by March of 1942 deportations to Auschwitz via Drancy in the north had begun. By the summer of 1942 Gurs, the largest of the camps in southern (Vichy) France, had also become a deportation center, sending Jews to the killing centers of Eastern Europe.



Her father **Wilhelm** and mother **Adrienne**, from Germany and Austria, respectively, had met and married in the camp of Gurs. Esther Topaz was born in February, 1942, and survived by improbable circumstances. Although a toddler by the camp's liberation in 1945, Esther grew up in an environment marked by generational trauma and the uncertainties of life in the emerging Israeli state, frequently under siege.

We travel with Esther to Germany and France, to visit her mother, and to the camp of Gurs. Archival footage and Esther's extensive collection of family photographs track how she navigated her life's journey, culminating in two remarkable achievements: one, becoming a renowned artist; the other, reconstructing a family, nearly destroyed by the Holocaust.

Esther Topaz's life, sculpted from complex unique experiences and circumstances, but which led towards the wisdom, self-understanding and insight which become later revealed in a meaningful life as a parent, teacher, loyal friend and gifted artist.

Project History

2002

In 2002, Benaquist and Durnford were conducting original research in France that formed the foundation of the 2016 documentary, “Defying the Nazis: The Sharps’ War,” a PBS documentary co-produced by Ken Burns and Artemis Joukowsky. It was at this time that Benaquist and Durnford met Professor Claude Laharie, premier scholar of the history of the French concentration camp of Gurs. Laharie invited Durnford to translate his seminal work, *Le Camp De Gurs: 1939-1945: Un aspect méconnu de l’histoire de Vichy*, into English.

2005

Thomas Durnford, in Montréal on sabbatical leave to translate Laharie’s study into English, issued a request to speak to any survivors in the region who were survivors of the Gurs camp.

Noted Canadian sculptor, Esther Topaz, subsequently contacted Durnford and told him that she had been born in the Gurs camp in 1942 to parents who had met and married in the camp, and who had all survived.



Durnford, knowing of the camp’s lethal treatment of Jews, was astonished at the uniqueness of her story. He offered to interview Ms. Topaz as part of his continuing Holocaust-related research, and she accepted.

He then contacted **Lawrence Benaquist** to join him in Montréal, where they conducted a series of interviews with Esther, and filmed her working in her studio.

2006

They were invited in 2006 to join Esther and her mother in Frankfurt, Germany

where they conducted three days of interviews with Esther and her mother, Adrienne Tichauer.

2009

In 2009, Benaquist, Durnford and Esther attended the ceremonies being held on the seventieth anniversary of the opening of the concentration camp in Gurs, France, where Esther received special recognition and media attention. Over the years, they continued to stay in touch with Esther and deepened their research.

2014

In 2014, Benaquist and Durnford invited their colleague at Keene State College, **Thomas Cook**, to join them in the project on the same volunteer basis. Cook was a professional film editor who worked to shape a narrative from the many hours of filmed interviews that Benaquist and Durnford had amassed.



2017

Thomas Cook joined his colleagues in subsequent interviews, to include further interviewing and filming in Montréal with Esther and her daughter, Jessica, at the Montréal Holocaust Museum in 2017. This collaboration came to an abrupt end with Tom Cook's untimely death in 2023. Durnford and Benaquist continued to complete the script, taking us to the late production stage, where we presently are. We completed the audio visual script early this year.

We have had the distinct advantage of having interviewed Esther Topaz for over eighteen years; accompanied her to Germany and France, filmed her with her mother, now deceased, as well as at the site of her birth, the Gurs camp. As a result of these experiences, she has stated that she has come to a deeper understanding of her past.

Significance

The story of the internment and treatment of Jews in southern France (Vichy) during the Second World War came to be seriously examined in the 1970's,

with documentaries like **“The Sorrow and the Pity.”** The first written studies, works of historians Robert Paxton, Michael Marrus, and Claude Laharie began to appear around the same time, and the evidence they presented played a major role in France beginning to come to terms with its involvement in the Holocaust.

Twenty-five percent of the Jewish population of France died in the Holocaust -- 76,000 people. Nearly **one-third** of the Jews in France sent to their deaths were from unoccupied France—the southern zone, controlled by the Vichy government. It should be stated that German soldiers were not a presence in the Vichy zone. The selection and deportation were handled by the French themselves. And of that one-third, nearly 4,000 came from the Gurs camp itself, a camp originally designed as a refugee and detention camp. Many people perished while interned in the camps due to the often-horrific conditions:

“French authorities interned thousands of Jews under deplorable conditions in French-administered detention camps—Gurs, Saint-Cyprien, Rivesaltes, Le Vernet, and Les Milles—where at least 3,000 individuals died during the war years. “(USHMM)

By the summer of 1942, Gurs had been completely integrated into the transport system to the death camps:

“Between August 6, 1942 and March 3, 1943, Vichy officials turned over 3,907 Jewish prisoners from Gurs to the Germans; the Germans sent the majority of them to the Drancy transit camp outside Paris in northern France. From Drancy, they were deported in six convoys to the killing centers in German-occupied Poland, primarily Auschwitz.” (USHMM)

By the time of the camp’s liberation, Esther and her mother were **two of the only forty-eight** Jews left alive.

There is an enormous gap between what people know about the Holocaust, and what people think everyone should know.

The Claims Conference (claimscon.org) states: **58% of millennials in the**

US cannot name a concentration camp; 52% in Canada. However, **82% of Canadians, 92% of Americans, and 82% of French** believe that students must study the Holocaust. In other words, a desire to learn more surely exists.

As we've researched the context of Esther's life, we've discovered that most people, outside of those who study the Holocaust, know little about the Holocaust in France, particularly the role of the French detention camps in the south. By focusing on the experiences of one person, the knowledge becomes personalized, explained by a charismatic, gifted artist, who had to come to terms with her early experiences.

Esther, being an infant in the Gurs camp, her specific recalled memories are practically nonexistent. However, the "hybrid" nature of her story -- being born in a camp but not consciously experiencing it -- reveals the opportunity to examine generational trauma, and how the experiences of her parents and family, as well as her early life in Israel, affected Esther.

In this case, to have an artist of great talent, whose work in many respects is an examination of her lived experiences, being willing to tell her story, is a rare opportunity. It is also an opportunity to listen to prominent scholars examine Vichy and the Holocaust.

Our intent is not to specifically look at second generation trauma. We will present the history, listen to Esther, and let her tell her tale. This is Esther's story, and we are honored to be able to present it.

Budget Summary

Having completed the production phase, we are seeking funds for the final stage, which is post production. This includes final editing and sound, rights clearances, narration, music composition and performance, promotion, and the creation of a study guide.

Our estimated expenses to date (2006 to the present), are **\$77,000**, with **\$62,000** of that amount being "in-kind."

Detailed budget will be found on page 23.

Treatment



Open with Esther working in her studio, moving from her work and her descriptions of what she is doing, to her thoughts, which center upon visions of her childhood, her parents; the Gurs camp.

Esther and her mother in Frankfurt in 2006, the two side by side on a couch, speaking in German, as Adrienne, her mother, relates her experiences during the war, fleeing the Anschluss in Austria, to Belgium. Maps, archival footage and photographs outline the journey.

We explore the mother's history, up to the time she is sent by train to southern France in May of 1940, to her arrival in Gurs. We then present Esther's father's history and how he was sent to the same camp of Gurs, in the shadow of the Pyrenees near the Spanish border.



The camp was originally built as temporary housing for refugees from the Spanish civil war. We trace its transformation into a French prison camp for alien detainees fleeing Hitler after France and Germany declared war on one another in September 1939. And finally, we explain how, after the fall of France in June 1940, the camp makes its final change into a holding camp

for Jews who in 1942-43 would be sent to the Nazi killing centers. Historians **Marrus**, **Zuccotti**, **Paxton** and **Laharie** are frequent presences here, both in voice over and on camera.

We return to Esther and her mother as she tells us of the conditions in the camp, how she met **Wilhelm**, Esther's father, their marriage in the camp, his being sent to a French forced labor camp, his escape and imprisonment





in Spain until after the war when he takes a ship to Palestine.

Claude Laharie, historian, speaks of the stages of the camp's existence, from a refugee camp to a concentration camp, and the suffering that took place there because of the conditions.

Adrienne, historians, and archival imagery explain the dark period of the deportations to the killing centers by the French

camp authorities (July/August 1942—March 1943). Circumstances of how Esther and her mother survived are examined. Esther's mother explains the story of how she and Esther, now alone and not sure if Wilhelm is even alive, are taken to a resettlement center near **Limoges**. Photos of Esther and Adrienne in the center. There, they hear of Wilhelm's survival and presence in Palestine, and join him there.

On the ship crossing the Mediterranean, Esther and her mother are befriended by a young man.

Only when they disembark in Palestine and reunite with Wilhelm do they learn that the man who had befriended them on the way across was her father's brother, **Erich**, who also had no idea that he had been befriending his niece and sister-in-law.

We examine the circumstances of the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, the dangers experienced by Esther and her family, the bombings, her father's service in the Israeli army, and their reunion with the few remaining family members left who had survived the Holocaust.

Esther becomes a teenager in the new country. Her relationship with her father is difficult, but she finds solace in friends. In 1958, her parents move to Germany for work, while Esther remains with friends of her parents to allow her to complete the academic year. Later, joining her parents in Germany, Esther finds the cultural and linguistic challenges to be overwhelming and she leaves school.





Purim 1954



Still photographs and interview footage explain Esther's post-secondary years working at homes for Jewish children in Germany near Frankfurt. She trains and is certified as a kindergarten instructor, which she continues, until she is invited to Zurich to teach. While there, she is invited to be the singer in a band, and becomes a successful headliner playing for dances and large Jewish benefit events.

A friend invites her to Montréal, where she again got a position as an assistant head teacher at a kindergarten, becoming head teacher, but after four years she returns to Israel to become a flight attendant for El Al airlines, which she does for three years, travelling the world.

In 1971 she marries, moves back to Montréal, and, while shopping for décor and furnishings for their apartment, sees statuary at an artist's display. Suddenly taken with the concept of creating art out of stone, she decides at that moment to take up sculpture as a lifetime vocation.



Subsequent life events clarify and explain to her aspects of her own past experiences and with her family, which she either had not fully understood or come to terms with. Now divorced with two children and on her own, Esther explains to a therapy group in an almost dismissive way that she was born in a concentration camp. Her fellow therapy attendees point out to her that, in

spite of her lack of specific memories of the camp, she had to come to terms with the fact that it was a horrible experience for both her and her parents, although differently.

Children and their mothers become a central theme of Esther's art, which she is studying with Stanley Lewis, the renowned Canadian sculptor. Having given birth, Esther suddenly imagines herself in her mother's situation at the camp, horrified at the thought of what her young mother must have experienced. She looks at herself and sees her mother.

Her experiences now begin a process of re-examination and understanding; for instance, when her son turns twenty, it suddenly flashes into her mind what it must have been like for her father, in the camp of Gurs, at practically the same age, as he struggled to protect his family. She looks at her son, and sees her father.

The death of the children during the Holocaust was a source of particular distress for her. In 1982 she sees the film "**Sophie's Choice**," and imagines the impossible horror of having to decide which of her children shall live and which shall die.



Her artistic reputation becomes established. Parents, children, family, become the central themes of her art. This is made visual through the use of newspaper articles, announcements, photographs, letters of testimony. She is involved in charity donations of her work with **Steven Spielberg**, **John Voight**, among many others, to raise money for the children of Chernobyl.

After the 1986 Challenger explosion, Esther is deeply moved by the fact that millions of young people had literally witnessed the explosion and death of a teacher on their television screens.

(Among the dead was New Hampshire high school teacher **Christa McAuliffe**.) She immediately begins a monumental statuary piece marking the tragedy which she later donates to the United States **National Aeronautics and Space Administration** museum (NASA).

The passing on of knowledge and experience is important to Esther Topaz. Images from the late 1950's to the mid-1960's of her students in Germany, Zurich and Montréal alternate with her statuary, her children, her grandchildren.

Mrs. Esther Topaz
1092 St. Aubin
St Laurent, Quebec, H4R 1Y3

Dear Mrs. Topaz:

We would like to extend our sincere thanks and appreciation for the excellent sculpture piece, "Reach for the Stars", you created in honor of the Challenger astronauts and donated to NASA.

These courageous men and women will always be remembered for their exemplary lives and unselfish contributions toward the expansion of our horizons. Your sculpture will help keep these memories alive.

The work was installed and displayed at NASA's first permanent art gallery at a reception at Kennedy Space Center on August 1, 1987. An invitation was sent to you well in advance of the event and we were disappointed that you were unable to attend. Should you be able to visit the Center, please let me know and I will advise them of your visit. For your information, I plan to be at KSC either the last week of February or the first week in March.

With regard to written documentation on the art gallery, I am sorry to say that there isn't a specific brochure on the facility. However, enclosed is the invitation previously sent to you, along with a NASA Art Program folder and art portfolio.

Thank you again for your creative efforts and we are grateful for your generosity and support.

Sincerely,

Robert Schulman
Robert Schulman
Chief, Special Services Branch

Enclosures: A/S



We see her currently teaching art to adult classes in Montréal, something she began doing years ago.

The traumas of the camp of Gurs which she does not herself directly recall begin to shadow her life. She tells us how she learns to forgive her father, who had been often brutal to her and her brother when they would not eat everything at family mealtimes. She realizes now what he must have gone through to get food in the camp, and how his treatment of his children was a reenactment of the terrors in Gurs of possible starvation. She reconciles with him. We visit his grave in Frankfurt with her, in the rain.

Some years later, invited to Washington D.C. in honor of her donation of the commemorative sculpture to NASA, she finds herself with free time. She relays the story of going to the newly-opened United States Holocaust Memorial Museum early one morning. The guard tells her that while admission is free, she does need to get a ticket in advance. Explaining that she is in D.C. for only a short while, she happens to mention to that she was born in a concentration camp. Immediately admitted, the guard rushes off to inform the staff. As she sits, waiting, Esther sees a map of the major camps in Europe. She searched the map, looks to southern France and finds there is "Gurs." The word "Gurs" was there with locations of far greater notoriety and devastation, but nonetheless a part of the same mechanism of

genocide. (Esther had lost family in Auschwitz and Majdanek.) Thousands of Jews were shipped to their deaths from the very camp she survived. At that moment, Esther realizes that Gurs was not just a terrible place, but part of an invidious system of persecution and death. The happy photographs of her in the camp, taken by aid organization staffers under the watchful eyes of the camp guards, had been a woefully deceptive vision of the actual life in the camp.

In 2009, Esther attends the **seventieth anniversary of the construction of the camp of Gurs**, sponsored by the governments of



Spain, France and Germany. Esther finds herself to be the center of attention. She sees the reconstructed barracks; she experiences the rain and the mud. We film her in the graveyard of the camp, in the rain, saying Kaddish with the Rabbi, and being interviewed by television and newspapers many times for her unique history.

Later that day we interview Esther, still emotional after the experience. This was the first time since infancy that she had been in Gurs, her birthplace, and the experience was nearly overwhelming, as she saw and learned of the circumstances under which she and her parents had survived.

Finally, we end with a family reunion in current-day Montréal; Esther and her family, alive because she survived. We come full circle: her art, her memories, her family.

Audience

As conventional wisdom says of **Holocaust Studies**: there is one story, and there are a million stories. Every Holocaust experience has core similarities but remains unique. Esther's story is like the rest, in that her story has, as its origin, the Holocaust itself, with the narratives and themes of genocidal prejudice, isolation, torn social fabric, loss of family and friends. Its unique value lies in how this particular woman, both a first and a second generation Holocaust survivor because of the circumstances of her birth, navigated a life of great value and creativity.

Hers is an international story: first of all, Esther was born in France; Esther has clear memories of the excitement and violence of the creation of the State of Israel; she moves to Germany, to Canada, back to Israel, and finally, settles with her family in Montréal.

Her story will undoubtedly attract interest among survivors and their families, as well as historians, teachers, students of the Holocaust, as well as artists, people curious to know more about France and the Holocaust, and those interested in journeys of survival and self-discovery.

While in Germany for her final year of secondary school, Esther's lack of knowledge of the German language caused her to leave school. She received credentialing and certification in teaching the young. She also studied at the **Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts**, and later studied with one of Canada's noted sculptors, **Stanley Lewis**, and went on to build an

international reputation. And while gender was not an issue raised by Esther in any interview, still it must be noted that she has gained prominence as an artist in the medium of stone, which is dominated by men, five to one.

As noted earlier, there is **a real desire among people who lack knowledge of the Holocaust to learn more.** We envision the film to be of interest to students of Art and the Holocaust, Vichy, women's studies, Jewish film series, classrooms. Also, this film presents the work of the scholars who were largely responsible for the revision of Vichy complicity in the Holocaust. Consequently, it is the kind of story which would have broad appeal; not only audiences which love public television will find it of interest. Nearly a **quarter of the population of both New Hampshire and Maine, and 29% of Vermont, trace their heritage to Québec,** our neighbor to the north, and themes dealing with cross-border topics are often of interest. Students of generational trauma would be interested, as would people interested in art as an expression of past experiences.

Humanist Topaz captures emotions in shapes as soft as stone

ALAN HUSTAK
THE GAZETTE

For Montreal sculptor Esther Topaz, the challenge is "to put passion into something that is very cold, to give life to something inanimate, to put emotion into stone."

Topaz began sculpting 15 years ago. At first glance, there might appear to be a derivative quality to her work, but the male/female forms are undeniably playful, sensuous and serpentine.

An exhibition of recent works in white Italian alabaster, as well as drawings and other pieces, opens Nov. 12 at Galerie Michel-Ange in Old Montreal.

"I like working with alabaster," she said. "It is very majestic. When you start, the stone controls you. The challenge is to get out of it what you want."

"My forms are abstract, figura-

Spotlight on ESTHER TOPAZ

I like to play with forms. Basically, I like to play with the contours of the human body.

My sculpture explores relationships — my relationship to the stone, my relationship to other people, and the power and the love of my relationships with people. I also like to bring a harmony to the stone.

Other emotions like anger and frustration, go into the execution, she said. "Sculpting is very physical. Very hard work."

Topaz was born in Gurs, France, in a Nazi concentration camp near the end of World War II. She and her Hungarian mother were liberated, and were reunited in Israel with

her German-Jewish father, who had managed to escape the gas chambers.

Topaz came to Canada in 1966, was married in 1971, had a son and a daughter, and was divorced three years ago.

Her career as a sculptor began as a hobby.

"I was always into the arts. I was always working with all kinds of mediums," she said. "But I never concentrated on any one. I didn't pay much attention to sculpture until I started to do it."

"One day, shortly after I was married, I went to visit an artist's studio. Out of the corner of my eye I saw some stone sculptures. It was an immediate attraction. I didn't know where it was coming from."

"I took art classes at Concordia and at the Saïde Broffman Centre, but, I preferred to go by my own way. Once I learned the principles

of working with the stone, I wanted to go with my own ideas, my own feelings.

Topaz exhibited various pieces in group shows, until 1984 when she had her first one-woman exhibition at Carriac Gallery in New York.

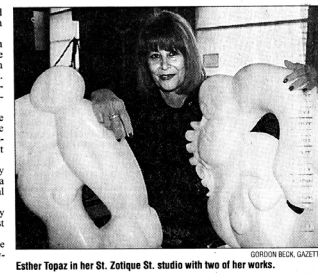
"Somebody I knew knew somebody there, so I sent off my portfolio, and got my first show."

One of her pieces, Reach for the Stars, done to commemorate the 1986 Challenger Space Shuttle disaster, is part of NASA's permanent collection.

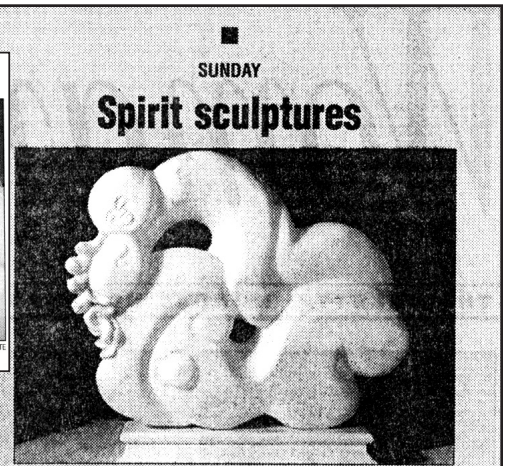
This year, she was approached by an organization in Montreal to do a five-foot limestone piece, Eternal Flame, for the City of Jerusalem.

Recently, Topaz was described by one critic as being a "feminist sculptor," a label she decries.

"I am not really a feminist," she said. "If you want to call me anything, call me a humanist."



Esther Topaz in her St. Zolique St. studio with two of her works. GORDON BLOK, GAZETTE



Esther Topaz's sculpture, Spirit of Life.

Sculptor Esther Topaz opens an exhibit this week, titled Spirit of Life.

The artist's stone sculptures exude a raw primeval energy, using male and female forms. One of the highlights of her new exhibit is a sculpture called Eternal Flame, a five-foot-tall limestone piece honoring Jerusalem, which will later be donated to the city.

Topaz, born in France and raised in Israel, came to Canada in 1986 and began a successful sculpting career. She has exhibited in Montreal, Toronto and New York, and her Reach for the Stars piece, created in memory of the Challenger disaster, is on permanent exhibit at the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida.

For details on how to see the current exhibit, see the calendar listing for Sunday.

Cold stone exudes passion

arts scene

By HEATHER SOLOMON

MONTRÉAL — The human figure has been the subject of stone carvings through the ages, as fertility deities, earth goddesses, and good luck charms.

Galerie Citron, 1875 Rue Levesque W., is currently hosting their contemporary versions until Nov. 25 with 16 of Esther Topaz's sensuous sculptures. "Stone sculpture is something people always shy away from," says Topaz. "It connects me with the distant past and the essence of life."

All the pieces seem to speak of the energy of humankind. Stylized, masklike faces issue from African robes, rounded visages from fruit and even Picasso's exaggerated limbs appear certain bodies.

Adding to the universal atmosphere created by the sculptures themselves, is their location in John Donovan's spacious gallery, just below street level off an intimate Japanese stone-garden courtyard.

But Topaz's originality in her command of the stone and its overall composition is unmistakable. Some of her sculptures are couples intertwined in eternal relationships, others are women or men alone, with flowing body parts that balance them on the edge of abstraction.



Esther Topaz

er senses it, therein lies their power. Passion and love are their intent. "Just to bring out from the cold stone some passion is a challenge," says Topaz. She manages to extract passion from African Wanderstone, Canadian Wanderstone, and Raspberry, Greek, Carmel and Crystalline alabaster.

Topaz is the only sculptor carried by the Galerie Citron because, says owner Donovan, "her work is very thorough." That thoroughness means aesthetic pleasure from every angle and a sensitivity to the natural contours of the stone.

One monolithic woman, titled Eve, Mother of All, reclines with her huge belly shaped to its fetal content. Gallery-goers are encouraged to touch the sculptor's skin-like surface and feel its fondness.

Topaz still smiles when she recalls the transport of the piece into the gallery by "three men like bulldozers, wearing as they carried this

very relaxed."

The artist's smaller pieces are a tour de force of those measuring over four feet, all initially released from the raw stone with pneumatic tools then hand-rasped to a polish. Topaz learned her technique over 20 years ago privately and in classes at the Saïde Broffman Centre, School of Fine Arts and at Concordia University.

She was born in France of German-Hungarian camp survivors raised in Ramat Gan, Israel and studied early childhood education in Germany where her parents moved 30 years ago to nurture its Jewish community. As exemplified by her 30-year-old works, causes and social statements have often powered her themes.

Notable is her sculpture Reach for the Stars inspired by the Challenger explosion that took the astronaut lives including that of a grade-school teacher. It stands in the Kenned Space Centre in Florida, the only piece accepted by NASA to memorialize the tragedy.

A feminist sculpture inspired by justice in the courts and in male dominated societies is her next theme, Feminism, for Topaz, is simply survival. She is a single mother of two teenagers, Jason, 19 and Jessica, 15 with a building over a decade ago when they share one of the best-situated stone sculpture studios in the city, running out space to other artists, as well as teaching privately.

Topaz donates her time to the Galerie Age Association Art Room teaching stone sculpture on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. or by appointment at 439-0822.

Coming art exhibitions for Esther Topaz and Yehouda Chalki

ARTSeen

By Bernard Mendelman

Two artists, whose common link is that they lived their formative years in the same city, are exhibiting this November in local galleries.

Sculptor Esther Topaz, who was born in France, raised in Israel and came to Canada in 1966, will be showing her works at Galerie Michel-Ange from Nov. 12-26.

Painter Yehouda Chalki, who was born in Athens in 1938, immigrated to Israel in 1960, moved to Paris in 1960 and in 1962 moved to Montreal, will have an

exhibition at Waddington & Goetz, Nov. 4-26. "Spirit of Life," which will feature a work called "Eternal Flame," a five-foot limestone sculpture in honour of Jerusalem's 3000, that she will be donating to the lost-captured city. Another of Esther's sculptures is on permanent exhibit at the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida, "Reach for the Stars" in memory of the Challenger disaster. For

his own character and of mind. Chalki's paintings reappear at auctions and secondary markets. I who own them been emotionally attached, collections that they are important and of the world. Since 1967 has remained with Saïde Broffman Centre head of painting and drawing in the fine arts department and as an art advisor. In his introduction Chalki's book, A Legacy of Passion, Herbert Aron has written that to say about artist, "Chalki's most tongue is painting, began to draw and it because he didn't speak other language enough. I suspect, not we were his favoured means of expression." This is Chalki's first exhibition in Montreal since 1992, and I always look forward to seeing what new magic Yehouda has invented.

The city's oldest annual charity art auction is run by the Hefkallah-WIZO Herman Abramowitz Chapter and takes place tomorrow night at the Westin Mount-Royal Hotel. As she has done for many years, Miyuki Tanabe has donated a painting. The small sketches of the Fairmont Bagel Factory will be a high-light and should fetch a good price.



Sculpture by Esther Topaz. Photography: Owen Egan.

These are landscapes of the mind, and they are painted in a room without windows. Derived from recollections, they may be part Laurentian mountains, Greek islands or the desert in Israel. The flowers also cannot be identified. They are not real flowers but lushly-coloured forms and shapes, bursting out of the artist's imagination. Chalki puts together what looks like natural elements, such as lakes, trees or rocks, but this is done only to convey

Project Plan and Timeline

Our first step will be to meet with the Editor, **J. Alex Cucchi**, and the **Consulting Archival Producer, Stephen Sowers**, to determine which areas still need additional work in terms of visuals and sound. The fact that these two have worked together in the past will be of great benefit.

It will be necessary to acquire high resolution copies of archival materials to use in the film to take the place of what we have in our working document. Our Consulting Archival Producer, an expert in Holocaust archival materials, will be deepening and enriching our archival sources. As he proceeds, he will also be clearing rights for us.

We will review the script with our **Musical Director** who will begin to develop ideas as to the use of music to enhance the story. **Pianist Virginia Eskin** is an expert in music of the Holocaust. It will be a mix of work by artists of the period and place, along with original music.

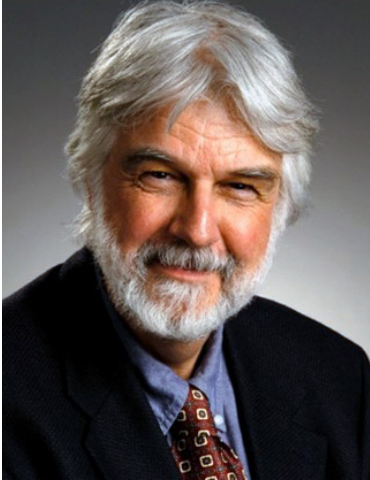
Our **Historical Advisor, C. Paul Vincent**, will be constantly consulted as to historical accuracy.

Our **Narrator** is **Jessica Binstock**, an established and versatile professional voice artist, based in Montréal. Jessica also happens to be Esther's daughter, a fact we did not know until recently. However, her voice is ideal for this project. And, the fact that Esther's story is being narrated by Jessica, her daughter, while perhaps unplanned, is most satisfactory on several levels.

Because we are in the very final stages of production, the process of editing can begin immediately. Once we receive funding, we estimate that completion will take eight months. This is because we have virtually all the elements in hand, with a completed script.



Principal Participants



**Lawrence Benaquist,
Producer**

Lawrence Benaquist is Emeritus Professor in Film Studies, Keene State College, N.H., a program which he founded.

He holds a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies, and was a Visiting Scholar at USC and UCLA, Cinema History and Theory, as well as a student at Temple University's documentary film program in Santa Fe.

He has produced several films which have been on public television, including a documentary on Jonathan Daniels, civil rights activist and martyr, which was on national PBS.

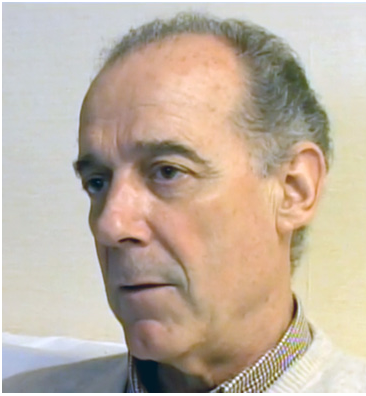


**Thomas Durnford,
Producer**

Thomas Durnford is Emeritus Professor in French and Linguistics, Department of Modern Languages and Cultures, Keene State College, N.H.

He has a Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut in Medieval French Language and Literature. He has worked creating English subtitles for the French documentary film company, Les Films de l'Autre Côté, based in the city of Rennes.

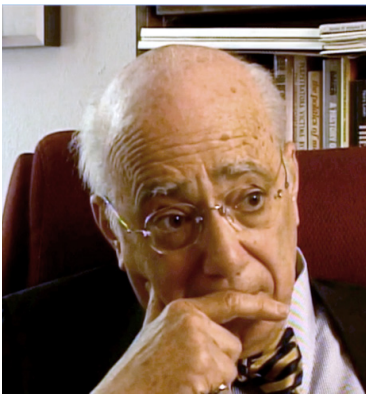
He has lectured on the camp of Gurs, and has translated Professor Claude Laharie's seminal book on the camp into English.



**Claude Laharie,
Historian**

Claude Laharie was a history professor at the University of Pau, France, a large city near the Gurs camp. The focus of his research on the history of WWII and the Gurs camp resulted in his book, *Le Camp De Gurs: 1939-1945: Un aspect méconnu de l'histoire de Vichy* (1985) which was the first major historical work on the camp to be written in the forty years after the end of the war, translated into English by Thomas Durnford.

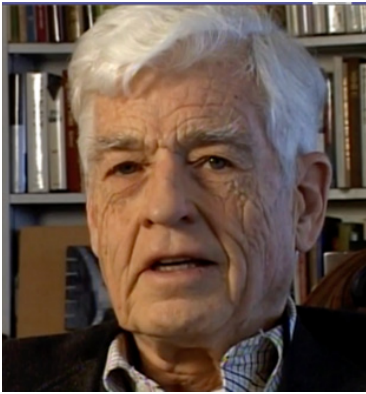
In 2021 he authored *Les Basses-Pyrénées dans le Seconde Guerre Mondiale*. He was instrumental in the founding of the Amicale du camp de Gurs, the organization that keeps the history of the camp current and the actual site accessible.



**Michael Marrus,
Historian**

Holding a Ph.D. from University of California, Berkeley, the late Michael Marrus was Professor of History and Dean of Graduate Studies at the University of Toronto. He was a senior fellow of Massey College until 2017 and was the Chancellor Rose and Ray Wolfe Professor Emeritus of Holocaust Studies.

In 1981 Marrus co-authored with Robert Paxton *Vichy France and the Jews*, which demonstrated that the anti-semitism of Vichy France was not imposed from without. Vichy was more homicidal and antisemitic than was the then-current belief, the Vichy administration playing a significant role in the deportation of Jews to Nazi death camps.



**Robert O. Paxton,
Historian**

With a Ph.D. from Harvard University, Robert Paxton taught at University of California Berkeley and SUNY Stony Brook before joining the faculty of Columbia University in 1969.

Paxton's book, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*, argued against the then-prevalent belief that the Vichy government was not a willing partner in the treatment of Jews, and never resisted collaboration with Nazi Germany.

In 1981, Paxton and historian Michael R. Marrus co-published the book, *Vichy France and the Jews*, which had a profound effect on the then-prevalent views of France and the Holocaust.



**Paul Mirat,
Historian**

Paul Mirat is a native of southern France, a published historian with a deep knowledge of the history of the international humanitarian efforts performed in the Béarn region in France, where the Gurs camp is located.

He has written on the activities in town of Meillon (a commune in the Pyrénées-Atlantiques, very near the Gurs camp) where his grandfather served as mayor during the Second World and who, at the risk of his own life, protected many Jews who had fled to the south of France.



**Susan Zuccotti,
Historian**

Professor Zuccotti holds a Ph.D. in Modern European History from Columbia University, specializing in studies of the Holocaust. She has won a National Jewish Book Award for Holocaust Studies, and the Premio Acqui Storia - Primo Lavoro for *Italians and the Holocaust* (1987).

She also received a National Jewish Book Award for Jewish-Christian Relations, and the Sybil Halpern Milton Memorial Prize of the German Studies Association in 2002 for *Under His Very Windows*, a study of the Papacy during the Holocaust.



**C. Paul Vincent,
Historical Advisor**

Paul Vincent taught history and Holocaust studies at Keene State College. With a Ph.D. in history from the University of Colorado, Professor Vincent has published two books — *The Politics of Hunger: The Allied Blockade of Germany, 1915-1919* (1985) and *A Historical Dictionary of Germany's Weimar Republic, 1918-1933* (1997).

He was a Fellow during 2007-08 at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies and was a Fulbright Scholar at Jagiellonian University's Centre for European Studies in Krakow, Poland (spring, 2015), returning to teach there as a Visiting Professor in 2018.



**Stephen Sowers,
Consulting Archival
Producer**

Stephen Sowers has been working in documentary film for over a decade. He has worked in-house for many production companies, including Ken Burns' Florentine Films where he was an archival researcher on the acclaimed series *The U.S. and the Holocaust*. His work has appeared on Netflix, PBS, and ESPN, with an upcoming series premiering on Amazon Prime in 2025.



**J. Alex Cucchi,
Editor**

J. Alex Cucchi was an apprentice editor at Florentine Films with documentary filmmaker Ken Burns on *The Address* and subsequently the PBS series, *The Vietnam War*.

Following that, he continued his work at Florentine Films as an assistant editor on *Country Music*, *Benjamin Franklin* and *The American Buffalo*. He also produced and edited a behind the scenes documentary, *The Making of Country Music*.



**Virginia Eskin,
Musical Director**

Virginia Eskin is a world-known pianist, having performed for years for symphony orchestras, CD recordings, television programs. Her website lists dozens of positive reviews of her work in major newspapers.

Eskin scored and performed the music for the 2024 PBS documentary, *Composer: Amy Beach*, the groundbreaking American composer who helped redefine the role of women in American music.



**Jessica Binstock,
Narrator**

Jessica Binstock, experienced professional voice artist, based in Montréal, is a documentary narrator, recorder of audio books, blogs.

She has done extensive work on television and radio.

For more detailed information, visit her website at <https://jessicabinstock.com>.



**Neal Evan Caminsky,
Marketing & Design**

Neal Evan Caminsky is the founder of Red Dream Studios, a digital marketing agency based in Montréal. Since 2001, the services offered by Red Dream Studios include website design and hosting, WordPress development, marketing and content creation, search engine optimization (SEO), graphic design and print, branding & identity, social media marketing, photography, and video production.

Red Dream Studios has been a trusted partner to almost 500 businesses and start-ups.

For more detailed information, visit <https://reddreamstudios.com>.



Vernon Thornblad is an award-winning creative with extensive experience providing creative/strategic leadership as an Art Director and Creative Director. He is currently the principal at Keene Web Designers Guild LLC, a New Hampshire-based media strategy and design firm. For this project, Vernon is working closely with the Producers to develop communication media and publicity to get the word out about this important documentary and ensure it gets needed and much deserved funding.

**Vernon Thornblad,
Communication,
PR and Fundraising**

Distribution Plans

The film will be made available for broadcast on New Hampshire PBS, PBS stations across the country and on Canadian broadcasters. It will also be available on streaming platforms.

Along with submitting it to festivals, the filmmakers will host in-person screenings and post viewing discussions.

The filmmakers will also create a downloadable film discussion guide for use in classrooms, museum settings and other venues.

Trailer Link



<https://shorturl.at/f7jm9>

Fiscal Agent

Arts Alive, Inc., has agreed to be our not-for-profit, tax-free agent for all financial support that comes in. Jay House, Interim Director of Fundraising & Operations, can share information about Electronic Fund Transfers, and other arrangements.

Arts Alive, Inc.

15 Eagle Court, Keene, NH, 03431, USA

Office Phone: 603-283-0944

office@monadnockartsalive.org



Budget

Post-Production budget (to be expended after January 1, 2026)

Final Editing, Sound Mixing	\$25, 000
Archival Rights, Music Rights; Clearance and Licensing.....	\$25, 000
Errors and Omissions Insurance	\$3, 500
Narration	\$1, 000
Historical Advisor.....	\$2, 000
Musicians, Composer	\$3,000
StudioTime;Narrator,Music.....	\$2,000
Communication, PR and Fundraising	\$5,000
Subtotal	\$68,500
Admin fees (15%; Arts Alive)	\$10,275
TOTAL	\$78,775

Endorsements



August 9, 2024

Larry Benaquist, Ph.D.
Emeritus Professor
Film Studies
Keene State College

RE: Esther Topaz: Sculpting a Life

Dear Larry,

New Hampshire PBS is proud to support the production of local and regional filmmakers and content for possible broadcast in our area. We base our decision on the interests of our viewers and needs of the local communities we serve.

NHPBS has reviewed the proposal and materials for *Esther Topaz: Sculpting a Life* and found it to meet our mission. After years of documenting Esther Topaz's life, you have reached the final phase of production. The narrative is incredibly well crafted. The story is relevant for all those living today who may have little understanding of the role that France played in the Holocaust, that children born within the harsh realities of the camps often survived with little memory of the experience, yet spent their lives processing the trauma. It is a powerful narrative that could easily be offered for national distribution.

Please feel free to share this letter with potential grantors and funders to demonstrate our support of your project.

While NHPBS reserves the right to base our final broadcast decision upon review of the completed program, we have no doubt that Esther Topaz's story will resonate with audiences all over the world.

All the best,

Dawn M DeAngelis

Dawn DeAngelis
Vice President and Chief Content Officer
New Hampshire PBS
ddeangelis@nhpbs.org

268 Mast Road | Durham, NH 03824-4601 | 603-868-1100 | nhpbs.org



Musée Holocauste Montréal
Montreal Holocaust Museum

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MEMBRE HONORAIRE
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DOROTHY ZALCMAN
HOWARD

MEMBRE HONORAIRE
HONORARY MEMBER

DANIEL
AMAR

DIRECTEUR GENERAL
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Letter of Support

Addressed to:

Mr. Larry Benaquist, PhD
Emeritus Professor of Film Studies

Mr. Thomas Durnford, PhD
Emeritus Professor of French

Keene State College
Keene, NH, USA 03435

RE: Esther Topaz: Sculpting a Life

Dear Professors,

We are writing with great interest and enthusiasm to express our support for the documentary project *Sculpting a Life*, which chronicles the remarkable life of Canadian artist Esther Tichauer Topaz.

Born in the Gurs internment camp and having miraculously survived the Holocaust, Esther Topaz went on to build an extraordinary life that reflects her resilience and talent. We are proud to include one of her works in our collection alongside a deeply moving oral testimony highlighting the breadth of her artistry.

The proposed documentary holds immense educational value and is of high priority for the Montreal Holocaust Museum.

In the current climate, where the scourge of antisemitism is once again on the rise, this documentary will serve to illustrate that the Holocaust is not only a European history but also a Quebecois and Canadian story. It will emphasize the significant contributions Holocaust survivors have made to the economic, scientific, cultural, and artistic landscapes of the countries in which they rebuilt their lives.

.../...



514.345.2605 • info@museeholocauste.ca • 5151, ch. de la Côte-Ste-Catherine, QC, H3W 1M6 • museeholocauste.ca

Moreover, this film will underscore that there is life beyond tragedy. Survivors should be remembered not only as victims but as courageous individuals who have rebuilt their lives and, through their stories and creative expressions, continue to educate future generations about the perils of racism, antisemitism, and hatred.

Ultimately, this documentary will serve as a poignant reminder of a dark chapter in French history, highlighting the collaboration and betrayal of the values of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity under the Vichy regime. The involvement of leading historians of the Holocaust in France assures us that this film will become an essential resource in Holocaust education.

We thank you for this timely initiative, which perfectly aligns with the Montreal Holocaust Museum's educational mission and aspirations.

Please feel free to share this letter with potential donors and sponsors to affirm our strong support for your project.

We wish you the best of luck in continuing your work and hope that the Museum will have the privilege of hosting the premiere of this documentary.

Sincerely,

Daniel Amar
Executive Director
(514) 246-1990



Cohen Institute for Holocaust
and Genocide Studies

**Cohen Institute for Holocaust
and Genocide Studies**

229 Main Street
Keene, NH 03435-1402
(603) 358-2688
keene.edu/cchgs

December 4, 2024

Dear Drs. Benaquist and Durnford:

I am writing on behalf of the Cohen Institute for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Keene State College to express our support for your film, *Esther Topaz: Sculpting a Life*. Having reviewed the proposal for this project and spoken with you about it directly, the Institute believes this work is of critical importance in telling the story of Vichy France's complicity in the Holocaust in a way that is humanizing and grounded in the story of Esther.

As you know, only in the 1980s and 1990s did scholars and politicians begin to more widely acknowledge the role that France played in the persecution of Jews and other victims of the German occupation. Marrus and Paxton's book *Vichy France and the Jews* (1981) challenged many long-standing narratives about France's role during the Holocaust, especially the nation's overemphasis on the role of resisters who tried to undermine Nazi Germany. And, in 1995, then-President Jacques Chirac's public apology for France's role in rounding up Jews for deportation deepened the sense of national reckoning with this history.

However, despite these shifts, there remains a dearth of films and other broadly accessible sources to educate global audiences about the complexities of this history. As someone who is teaching a course at Keene State College in spring 2025 on "The Holocaust and France," I myself have struggled to find well-researched films—especially for English-speaking audiences—to integrate into my undergraduate-level course.

We are living in a time when questions of truth and accountability in regard to the Holocaust are of utmost importance. Your film has the potential to spark much-needed conversation about the role of France in the Holocaust and will be of use for both scholarly and non-scholarly audiences. Your project also aligns with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's "Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust," especially in terms of contextualizing the history and translating statistics into people. The story of Esther Topaz is also deeply compelling – and her work as an artist also opens up exciting possibilities for interdisciplinary engagement with the film.

The Cohen Institute looks forward to viewing your film upon completion and we hope to screen it on campus at Keene State College in the future. We also invite you to share this letter of support with potential funders and grantors if doing so will help to advance your work. Thank you for your commitment to this project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kate Gibeault". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Kate Gibeault
Director, Cohen Institute for Holocaust and Genocide Studies