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mel wacks
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By Mel Wacks

A medal exhibit will be on view throughout 2020, on the main floor of the Cincinnati Skirball Museum. The six women chosen for the display are Emma Lazarus, Ernestine Rose, Henrietta Szold, Lillian Wald, Gertrude Elion, and Rebecca Gratz. There is a paragraph devoted to each woman so that people can learn a bit more about their accomplishments. The following texts accompany the medals.

Power of Her is a collaboration of organizations across the Greater Cincinnati region united to activate and amplify women’s voices in the arts. Led by ArtsWave, and inspired by the centennial of women’s suffrage in 1919 and the ratification of the 19th amendment granting women the right to vote in 1920, the initiative salutes the women who came before us and honors female leadership and woman-centric works of all kinds.

At its core, Power of Her underscores creativity as a vehicle for inclusion and equality by celebrating the female voice and the many ways that voice champions a more diverse and vibrant world. Each of these women has made significant contributions in literature, education, advocacy, medicine, and public service. These medals are from a collection representing 50 years of the Jewish-American Hall of Fame, recently gifted to the Skirball Museum by Mel and Esther Wacks, Debra Wacks, and Shari Wacks.

All but one of the six medals displayed were designed by women. Gerta Ries Weiner designed the medals for Ernestine Rose, Emma Lazarus, Rebecca Gratz and Henrietta Szold. The medal for Lillian Wald was designed by Virginia Janssen. The Gertrude Elion medal was designed by Daniel Altshuler.

Emma Lazarus medal

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land,
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp! " Cries she,
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me.

Emma Lazarus (1849–1887)

In 1883, a Pedestal Art Loan Exhibition was held to raise funds for the Statue of Liberty’s pedestal. A young poet
who was also involved in charitable work for refugees, Lazarus was asked to compose a sonnet for the exhibition. Inspired by her own Sephardic Jewish heritage, her experience working with refugees, and the plight of the immigrant, she wrote "The New Colossus."

The sonnet appeared in The New York Times and New York World, then slowly faded from public memory. Emma Lazarus died at the age of 38, only four years after writing the sonnet. In 1901, a friend found a book containing the sonnet in a bookshop and organized a civic effort to resurrect the lost work. The sonnet was inscribed on a tablet and affixed inside the Statue of Liberty in 1903. In 1945, the tablet was moved from the second story landing to the Statue’s entrance, where it can be seen today.

"Each of these women has made significant contributions in literature, education, advocacy, medicine, and children. In a letter written in 1887, Ms. Rose summed up her life: "For over 50 years I have endeavored to promote the rights of humanity without distinction of sex, sect, party, country or color."

Ernestine Rose (1810–1892)

A self-described "rebel at the age of five," Ernestine Louise Potowski was born in Piotkrow, Poland, to a rabbi and his wife, the daughter of a wealthy businessman. She would not agree to an arranged marriage at 16, and left home within a year, having rejected the idea that women were inferior to men and the Jewish texts and traditions that supported this belief.

Her career as an advocate for social reform was launched in 1832 in England. In 1835 she married William Ella Rose, and the following year the couple settled in New York. In the United States, Rose’s speeches on religious freedom, public education, abolition, and women’s rights in New York and nearby states, the South and as far west as Michigan, earned her the title "Queen of the Platform." Rose toured with Susan B. Anthony and worked closely with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Paulina Wright, Sojourner Truth, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass.

Rose may have abandoned her Jewish religious practices, but she spoke out against antisemitism when the editor of the Boston Investigator attacked the Jewish people. After 15 years’ work, Rose secured New York legislation in 1869 that allowed married women to retain their own property and have equal guardianship of children. In a letter written in 1887, Ms. Rose summed up her life: "For over 50 years I have endeavored to promote the rights of humanity without distinction of sex, sect, party, country or color."

Henrietta Szold (1860–1945)

Henrietta Szold was born in Baltimore, Maryland a little more than a year after her parents arrived from Hungary. Her father, a prominent rabbi, gave Henrietta the attention and education usually reserved for an eldest son. She learned German, English, French and Hebrew. After graduation from high school she taught at Miss Adam’s School and at Ohab Shalom religious school, her father’s congregation. She also gave Bible and history courses for adults.

In 1899, she took on the lion’s share of producing the first American Jewish Year Book, for which Szold was the sole
editor from 1904 to 1908. She also collaborated in the compilation of the Jewish Encyclopedia. Szold studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America but was not permitted to seek rabbinic ordination.

Her commitment to Zionism was heightened by a trip to Palestine in 1909. During her tour she was impressed both by the beauty of the land and the misery and disease among the people. In 1912, with the support of Rabbi Judah Magnes, she joined six women to form Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, recruiting American Jewish women to upgrade health care in Palestine. Within a year, the fledgling organization had two American nurses in Jerusalem.

Today, Hadassah's hospitals in Jerusalem are world-renowned, treating patients of all religions and races. In 1933, at the age of 73, Szold embarked on a major project to rescue Jewish children from the oncoming Holocaust. By 1948 her Youth Aliya program brought 30,000 children from troubled Europe to Palestine.

**Lillian Wald (1867–1940)**

After growing up in Cincinnati and New York, Lillian Wald enrolled at New York Hospital's School of Nursing in 1889. She graduated from nursing school in 1891 and took courses at the Women's Medical College, but by 1893 left school to help poor immigrant families in New York's Lower East Side as a visiting nurse. Along with another nurse, Mary Brewster, she created the Henry Street Visiting Nurse Service, which became the major model for visiting nursing in the United States and later the Henry Street Settlement.

Around that time Wald coined the term "public health nurse" to describe nurses whose work is integrated into the public community. Her ideas led the New York Board of Health to organize the first public nursing system in the world. She was the first president of the National Organization for Public Health Nursing, established a nursing insurance partnership with Metropolitan Life Insurance Company that became a model for many other corporate projects, and suggested a national health insurance plan.

Wald helped to found the Columbia University School of Nursing and persuaded the New York City Board of Education to put nurses into public schools. The Henry Street Settlement still stands and now serves the neighborhood's Asian, African-American, and Latino population. Today, the Visiting Nurse Service of New York is the largest not-for-profit home health care agency in the nation.

In a speech to Vassar students in 1915, Wald encouraged the young women to serve the public. She quoted from Proverbs 31:20, "She reacheth forth her hands to the needy." These words are inscribed on the medal issued when Lillian Wald was inducted into the Jewish-American Hall of Fame.

**Gertrude Elion (1918–1999)**

Nobel Prize-winning biochemist and pharmacologist Gertrude Elion was born in New York City. When her grandfather died of stomach cancer, the teenage Elion dedicated herself to finding a
cure. She graduated from Hunter College, where she later established a scholarship for female graduate students in chemistry and volunteered in a chemistry lab when she couldn’t find a job. She endured anti-Semitism at the lab but gained experience and saved enough money to enroll at New York University. The only woman in her graduate chemistry classes, Elion earned her Master’s degree in 1941.

In 1944, Elion was interviewed by Dr. George Hitching of Burroughs Wellcome (now GSK), the pharmaceutical company. Working alone, and with Hitchings, as well as with Sir James Black, Elion revolutionized the way drugs were developed, and her efforts have saved or improved the lives of countless individuals. Her innovative research methods led to the development of the AIDS drug AZT. She also developed the first immunosuppressive drug, azathioprine, used for organ transplants, and the first successful antiviral drug, acyclovir (Zovirax), for the treatment of Herpes infection. Her work also contributed significantly to the treatment of childhood leukemia.

Elion shared the 1988 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine with Hitchings and Black. Few Nobels have gone to scientists working in the drug industry or those without doctorates. Elion was only the fifth female Nobel laureate in Medicine, the ninth in science in general. In 1991 she was awarded the National Medal of Science and became the first woman to be inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame. She was a recipient of 25 honorary degrees. In the true spirit of scientific collaboration, she stated: “It’s amazing how much you can accomplish when you don’t care who gets the credit.”

Rebecca Gratz (1781–1869)
Philanthropist and educator Rebecca Gratz was from a prominent Jewish family in Philadelphia. At the age of 20, she began a life of charitable work as one of the founders of the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children of Reduced Circumstances. Gratz and her family were active in the Jewish community in Philadelphia, and Gratz’s interest in religion and her desire to prevent Christian evangelizing to Jews led her to found nonsectarian and Jewish organizations including the Philadelphia Orphan Asylum, Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, Jewish Foster Home and Orphan Asylum, Fuel Society, and Sewing Society. Gratz often served as secretary of these causes, thereby ensuring that the organizations ran smoothly.

One of her most influential accomplishments was the creation of a Hebrew Sunday School Society in 1838. It was an innovation in American Jewish educational practice with its Sunday format, inclusion of girls in the school, and openness to all children regardless of financial background. The school was led by women and became a model for Jewish education in America. Due to her connection with elite painters, writers, and other leaders, it was rumored that Gratz was the inspiration for the character Rebecca in Sir Walter Scott’s novel Ivanhoe. Gratz College, started by Rebecca’s brother Hyman as a Jewish teachers’ college, continues Rebecca’s educational legacy.

The Jewish-American Hall of Fame offers members of Women In Numismatics discounted prices on the following bronze medals: Ernestine Rose (reg. $50 – only $40), Lillian Wald (reg. $85 – only $60), and Gertrude Elion (reg. $75 – only $50). Add $5 for shipping. To order, send check to the non-profit Jewish-American Hall of Fame, c/o Mel Wacks, 5189 Jeffsdale Ave., Woodland Hills, CA 91364 or place credit card order by calling 818-225-1348.