The Fates of Fighters: Literary Portraits of Eight Jewish Boxers Interned at Auschwitz

As an MFA student in creative writing, my project seeks to document the lives of eight Jewish boxers who, while imprisoned at Auschwitz during the Holocaust, were forced to fight fellow Jews for the entertainment of Nazi officers. Many of us have learned, to varying degrees, the atrocities suffered in those death camps. However, that Jews were forced into makeshift rings, to fight one another, bare-knuckled and often to the death, for the amusement of SS officers, is a harrowing piece of Holocaust history that is largely unknown. In the throes of booze, bigotry and bloodthirst, Nazi officers would spend Wednesday and Sunday nights placing bets on the Jewish fighters as they boxed each other until one collapsed. Winners of the matches were given a loaf of bread and a bowl of soup. Losers were shot or sent to the ovens.

I've found documentation of eight well known Jewish boxers, both successful amateur and professional fighters, who hailed from across Europe and North Africa, whom faced this fate at Auschwitz. They are Leone Efrati, Kid Francis, Victor Perez, Klaus Silber, Jacko Razon, Salamo Arouch, Sim Kessel, and Harry Haft. All of Arouch's female family members were gassed at Auschwitz on the first day. His brother was shot dead when he refused to pull gold teeth from the mouths of other prisoners.

By combining finely crafted journalistic and lyric prose, I intend to write a collection of short, literary portraits that capture the unique stories of each of these men. Thus to conduct my research, I am applying for a Willits Ethics Summer Study Award so I may go to Auschwitz, (near Krakow, Poland) and Israel. There I will gather as much biographical and historical information as possible, so I may ethically, sensitively and truthfully retell the lives these eight men— their lives before the war, experiences during the Holocaust, and of the four who survived, the lives they were able to live after. Because all of the pieces will, in some way, relate back to the fights in the camp, visiting Auschwitz will enable me to better understand, and write in detail, of its emotional resonance, the physical landscape and organization, the buildings where the men worked, ate, slept, and the places where they boxed. I will utilize the museum's extensive educational resources, which grants students two day educational residencies, to discuss with museum educators and scholars how to ethically represent the Holocaust in creative work, one of my major concerns and challenges in such an emotionally and historically charged project.

I will also utilize the extensive resources at Yad Vashem, the International Institute for Holocaust Research, located in Jerusalem. Their archives contain vast amounts of original era Holocaust documentation,
including letters, memoirs, art, maps, testimonies—all vital source material for helping ensure historical accuracy as I seek to render the psychological, emotional and physical conditions faced by these eight men. I seek to better grasp why these stories have largely been forgotten, and why are they important to remember, to retell. Writing about the Holocaust is rife with ethical implications. There are the dangers of irresponsible representation, appropriation. Who, or what writing, can do justice to the inarticulate horrors—especially someone like me, not a survivor, not a descendant of survivors, and yet, a young American Jew deeply concerned with memory? I feel an ethical impetus to use my energies as a creative writer to continue probing the recesses of trauma and the darknesses of history. I’m concerned that as Holocaust survivors continue to pass away, there is the risk that subsequent generations may forget the depths to which humanity can sink when intolerance—and then, a toxic, sadistic evil—is not met with fierce and unrelenting opposition. I believe that creative writing, writing that speaks to the human spirit and empathetic imagination, can be one of the most effective tools for communicating both the tragedies of war and the triumph of resilience. But at times I feel the task is too daunting; in 1949, German-Jewish philosopher Theodor Adorno wrote, “After Auschwitz it is barbaric to write poetry.” Although Adorno later retracted these words, his message resounds with the raw, angered hopelessness that defined Europe and its Jews in the immediate aftermath of World War II.

These eight boxers, whose lives I seek to lyrically retell, hung on by virtue of their boxing skill, yet because of it, saw many of their fellow Jews fall to their deaths. They themselves faced such dire circumstances that perhaps the dilemma of guilt and ethics was not even an option. I hope that by writing these eight portraits, intended for the public at large, that I may capture and convey the poignancy of these individual lives, as well as provide a new way to interpret and appreciate Holocaust history. Upon completion of these pieces, I intend to submit the work for national publication in literary journals with a focus on social justice content, such as WITNESS and Mobius: The Journal of Social Change. My writing has previously been supported by the Freeman Foundation for East Asian Studies, a Darmasiswa Fellowship from the Indonesian Government, as well as a Nickerson Family Foundation Scholarship.

Thank you for considering my proposal.