

Sophia Berman Molk

1897 - 1987



BIOGRAPHY / OBITUARY

Schifra (Sophia) Berman Molk was born December 20, 1897, in Novo Alexandrovsky, Lithuania, at time of wide-spread persecution of the Jewish race. Her father was a student in the synagogue; her mother, Sarah Hurwitz Berman, ran a small grocery store. The Berman family immigrated to the United States, where her father first engaged in the furniture business, and later became a farmer in rural Westchester County, New York.

In 1924, Sophia married Isador Molk of El Dorado, Kansas. The Molks had no children. The first of her seven published volumes of poetry, *A Flame Still Burning*, had as its title poem a poignant poem of the yearning for a child.

She became very active in El Dorado, serving for fourteen years as secretary of the Red Cross. She also served as the county's chairman of home nursing. Besides writing and community affairs, she enjoyed sketching, painting and whistling.

After living in several apartments and bungalows around El Dorado, the Molks designed and built a home at 141 North Alleghany in the 1940s. Built of buff-colored Roman Beauty brick, the home was compact yet containing every modern convenience. It features several striking features, such as music room's northeast corner of double glass blocks acting as a prism, letting in light but not the sun.

Well known for her compassionate nature and her singular perceptiveness in recognizing a need to be fulfilled, she gave open-handed support as well as personal attention to many worthy causes. During her husband's prolonged final illness, which ended in his death in 1967, she provided constant care. In later years, she wrote a poem of this time, which read:

"Folks say to care for the sick is an arduous task.

I like to think of growing flowers;

You weed and hoe, weed and hoe, and soon,

In gratitude, the blooms look up and smile – “

In 1969, Mrs. Molk left for a month's tour of Israel and the Greek islands. While in Jerusalem, she visited Mrs. Judd Pierson Hall, formerly of El Dorado, and her son, Pierson Hall, U.S. Consul in Jerusalem. A woman of keen observation, she wrote interesting articles of her travels, which were published in two installments in the El Dorado Times.

Sophia Molk died March 17, 1987 after a long illness. Following Jewish tradition, her body was placed in a wooden coffin, which was sent to New York to be buried next to that of her husband's in Mt. Hope Cemetery at Hastings-on-the-Hudson, New York.

She was a member of the Wichita Chapter of Hadassah, a member of the Red Cross Board, and a member of the Butler County Council for UNESCO (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization). She attended a conference in New York on behalf of UNESCO. She also served as publicity chairman for the Girl Scout Council.

A charter member of the El Dorado Prairie Quill Club, founded in 1935, she was also a lifetime member of the Kansas Author's Club, which she joined in 1939.

CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Sophia came to Kansas upon her marriage to Butler County resident Isador Molk, a distinguished scholar, published author, and self-made man who was to become a highly successful and wealthy oilman.

Loyal to her adopted home town of El Dorado, she chose to stay there following her husband's death, saying, "It is home to me – like my four walls." She once penned the following free verse:

“A sunflower on the friendly prairie.

Her loving arms enfold me;

Melodious waves wrap me around;

Her halls of culture are exalting.

She is a symbol.

The city of progress, of peace and order –

A shining oasis in a bomb-sick world.”

COMING TO THE AREA

In June of 1924, Isador Molk of El Dorado began thinking of settling down. He made a trip to New York in hopes of finding a wife. His handyman gave him strict instructions: "There's nothing doing in El Dorado. Stay till you get married."

At his sister's house in New York, he met Sophia Berman. Later he was to write, "I was looking for a girl with a heart and a soul, and I had found her." They were married only one week after meeting and returned to El Dorado.

Being used to the country, she thought she would like El Dorado. When asked if it was easy to make new friends, she answered, "I said 'Hello, how do you do,' and yes, it was easy for me to meet people."

ACHIEVEMENTS

Sophia Molk wrote a weekly column on UNESCO, entitled "Unity Within" for the Butler County News for eleven years. Her poems and articles have appeared in the Kansas City Star, Kansas magazine, the Yearbook of Modern Poetry, Magazine Opinion, and other publications. She wrote about the little things she cared about in a sincere and direct way.

Trying her hand at writing in her teen years, she later confessed, "It wasn't very good, but it was something." She went on to become an accomplished and renowned writer with a special gift for poetic expression. She began writing poetry in the early 1930s, composing a poem about a gift from her husband, which was published on the women's page in the El Dorado Times.

Sophia said that she most enjoyed writing about people she had met along life's roads, gathering bits of information here and there in search of simple truths. She also wrote a great deal about political figures. Poems were her specialty and she gained great pleasure from them.

Critics enjoyed her work immensely. The Boston Globe called her book, *Haunting Shadows*, "A freshness of view and charm of imagination." The Tampa Bulletin wrote, "Each poem is a character study of exceptional brilliance and typical of its own phase of life."

Each year during the El Dorado Creative Writing Workshop, Sophia lent a helping hand. She also served as a judge for the Jesse Stuart Poetry Contest, a world-wide competition.

Her literary talents were widely known in Kansas and well beyond its borders. A poet of deep sensitivity and high technical skill, her works were treasured in many a library. Her poems have universal appeal. Six volumes of her poetry were published. Their titles are *A Flame Still Burning*, *Prairie Trails*, *But Yesterday the Vow*, *Haunting Shadows*, *On the Wings of the Wind*, and *Isle of Tears*.

She also authored four novels, a novelette and a book of short stories. Among these is the autobiographical tale, *The Chickens All Came Running*, set in Lithuania and the United States.

As president of the Kansas Author's Club, Fifth District, in 1948, she acted as one of the hostesses for its 44th annual dinner in Topeka. She contributed poems to the club yearbook every year until 1967. In 1942, she influenced the club to dedicate one page of yearbook to members who were in service for their country.

With each volume published, Sophia Molk received sincere praise, proving the durability of the old poetic tools of warmth, lyrical line, simple imagery, and genuine emotion.

On October 24, 1965, her poem on Adlai Stevenson was read during a memorial service to a televised group at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago.

Published in 1968, her book, *But Yesterday the Vow*, stands as a frank, sometimes poignant testament of the author's devotion to the memory of her husband. It deals with a mature and abiding love with no end. Intensely personal in concept, experiences are beautifully captured in tight, lyrical lines. The 12-line title poem ends thus:

"But yesterday the vow
Pledging heart and mind and soul;
The bitter years and sweet;
I cannot separate them now."

In August of 1971, her sixth book of poetry, *Isle of Tears*, gave a dramatic look at the plight of the nation of Israel. Rich in subject matter, disciplined in form and text, the new volume dealt with the trials and tragedies of the Jewish people before the formation of the nation of Israel until after the 6-day war. Also included were poems on Old Testament persons such as Jonah, Job and Ruth.

With the publication of this volume, her readers noted a new maturity of expression, attaining a new degree of dignity, descriptive force, and narrative power. When asked about this book, she said, "It was just a notion that I wanted to get out of my system so it would be gone."

In January of 1977, *The Way of the Chosen* was released. Several of the poems reflected the author's natural sensitivity to the fortunes of the Jewish people – past, present and future. Tributes were paid to Golda Meir, Albert Einstein and David Ben Gurion, among others. Also in this volume are poems of nature, love, and people Mrs. Molk listened to, testifying to her abiding faith in God.

Among her prime interests was the furtherance of education, both in El Dorado and in Israel. In the latter, she established scholarship grants of impressive significance.

The Molks were generous patrons of El Dorado's junior college. As of 1983, they had donated approximately \$66,000. They had created more scholarships over the years than any other contributor to the college, including scholarships in the vocational technical area.

In February of 1970, a gift of \$10,000 went to establish scholarships for nursing students at Butler County Community College. In the form of a trust fund, income from the fund was used to provide the scholarships, based on academics and on the basis of need. In April of 1973, an additional gift was made to the scholarship fund.

Sophia once wrote an open letter to Kurt Waldheim, Secretary General of the United Nations, which was published in the El Dorado Times on Nov. 6, 1975. In it, she questioned the General Assembly's condemnation of the democratic State of Israel, accusing the nation of being racist. Mrs. Molk called to point the fact that Israel's schools and hospitals are open to all persons of whatever persuasion: Arab, Christian, or Jew.

In 1981, Butler County Community College revived the El Dorado Creative Writing Conference with the help of the Molk estate. Sophia Molk played an active part in this effort.

AWARDS, RECOGNITION

The Sophia and Isador Molk Endowment Fund, established with the Butler County Community College, was set up to provide academic scholarships based on need. Nursing scholarships at BCCC established in 1970 designated as Sophia Molk Nursing Scholarships.

The Sophia Molk Scholarship Trust was established from the estate of Sophia Molk, and issues several scholarships to a variety of programs at Butler, including nursing and vocational technical programs.

In 1971, Sophia was honored when two of her poems were selected for inclusion in the Yearbook of Modern Poetry, published by Young Publications of Appalachia, Virginia. The two selections, "Vignette" and "Integration," were critically assessed as being "of exceptional literary merit and deserving a place in the libraries of the world, where they may be read and reflected upon..."

In August of 1976, Sophia was among those named to receive special awards from the Kansas Authors Club Bicentennial Contest. Honorable mention was given for her poem "Immigrants." As the oldest professional writers club in the state, the KAC sponsored the contest in order to give Kansans an opportunity to give written expression of their interest in and support of the Bicentennial.

El Dorado's Fifth Creative Writing Workshop in October of 1981 was renamed the Sophia Molk Series, in honor of the writer. Edwin Newman, CBS correspondent and author, was among the speakers at this two-day event.

When Sophia Molk died in 1987, an additional memorial was established in her name at Butler County Community College.

The Sophia Berman Molk Foundation is part of the Taft Foundations and Corporate Giving Database, providing nearly 10,000 profiles of private and corporate foundations and giving programs.

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