

## The Outrageous Sophie Tucker

Saratoga Jewish Community Arts and Temple Sinai, with the generous grant support of the Jewish Federation of Northeastern NY, invite you to a panel discussion of the documentary *The Outrageous Sophie Tucker*, directed by William Gazecki, on May 2 at 7 PM. Gazecki lays out the life of this icon, Sophie Tucker, with commentary by Barbara Walters, Tony Bennett, Carol Channing, Michael Feinstein, Shecky Green, and others. While known as funny and racy, she insisted throughout her life, "I've never sung a single song in my whole life on purpose to shock anyone. My 'hot numbers' are all, if you will notice, written about something that is real in the lives of millions of people."

Sophie Tucker, "The Last of the Red-Hot Mamas," was born Sofia Kalish to Jewish parents in the Russian Empire, today known as Ukraine, as they were preparing to immigrate to the United States. Arriving in 1887 and settling first in Boston, they resettled a few years later in Hartford, CT. Through a combination of talent, attitude, and a genius for self-promotion, Tucker became the world's greatest female star by the late 1920s. The Hartford Courant wrote: "Miss Tucker was more than a Red-Hot Mama; she had a mama's love for people, and her memorial to hard-working parents, was always to remember other people in need." Throughout her five-decade career, Sophie Tucker was not only a star of stage and screen, but also a dedicated philanthropist, leaving behind a rich legacy of music, television, and film along with one of care, concern, and community support.

Tucker's performance was a complex critique of ethnic, gender, and class codes of morality. Many of her songs were challenges to age, size, and gender stereotypes of women's sexuality couched in the humor that provided an antidote to puritanism. She used her economic independence to empower herself and others, which created tensions in her personal life. Early in her career, Tucker had helped many of the prostitutes who lived in the same rooming houses as she, stashing money from their pimps, noting that, "Every one of them supported a family back home or a child somewhere."

Tucker never forgot her Jewishness, even as she performed for broader audiences. On a 1922 tour of England, she was welcomed by a London audience with a sign reading, "Welcome Sophie Tucker, America's Foremost Jewish Actress." Tucker noted, "I was prouder of that than of anything." Her 1925 hit, *My Yiddishe Momme*, written by Jack Yellen and sung in both Yiddish and English, was perhaps her most famous song. "Even though I loved the song, and it was a sensational hit every time I sang it, I was always careful to use it only when I knew the majority of the house would understand Yiddish. However, you didn't have to be a Jew to be moved by *My Yiddishe Momme*. 'Mother' in any language means the same thing." Several years after Hitler came to power, her recordings of *My Yiddishe Momme* were ordered smashed and the sale of them banned by the Reich. The song had the power to evoke a reverence for Jewish culture and a cultural memory of more peaceful times and was thus threatening to Hitler's regime.

Tucker went on doing her own thing until only months before her death of lung cancer and kidney complications. Increasingly known for her philanthropy, Tucker's favorite charities targeted youth centers, a high school wing in Israel, the Theater Arts program at Brandeis University, a maternity clinic

at Denver's General Rose Memorial Hospital, and Harford's Emmanuel Synagogue. In 1955, she raised almost one million dollars in a benefit performance on behalf of the Hebrew Old People's Home.

"Sophie Tucker always used her power as an entertainer, both to lift spirits and provoke thought in her audiences," says Phyllis Wang, Coordinator of Saratoga Jewish Community Arts. "Her legacy exists in her generous contributions to charity, her influence on images of Jewish culture and women's sexuality, and her role as an entertainer who thoughtfully interpreted the chaotic and captivating world around her."

The Zoom discussion of *The Outrageous Sophie Tucker* will be on May 2 at 7 PM and the film can be viewed on You-Tube. Registration is required for Zoom access by emailing [sjca.sjcf@gmail.com](mailto:sjca.sjcf@gmail.com). Follow us at [www.saratogajewishculturalfestival.org](http://www.saratogajewishculturalfestival.org), [www.saratogasinai.org](http://www.saratogasinai.org) and Facebook.