NA'AMAT Woman

The Wandering Jewish Storyteller

As a professional storyteller and an American columnist for Holland's only Jewish newspaper, Lisa Lipkin's topics are very diverse. But one theme continually returns for her: the Holocaust.

by LISA LIPKIN

Years of Pain

The greatest sound you could hear as a teenager in Clifton, New Jersey was the blast of the old air raid siren on a snowy winter's morning. That meant, SNOW DAY. SCHOOL IS CANCELED. There were nearly 1,000 kids in my high school class -- far too many to telephone in person -- so whenever there was questionable weather, the school blew that horn instead. All winter we prayed for that siren to blow so that we could sleep in and spend the day at the mall.

It's funny how just one generation earlier, that same siren meant only bad things to high school students. One blow of that old, rusty yellow whistle meant "Hide under your desks! Duck and Cover. It's an air raid, a bomb, a nuclear war!"

Sounds are like that. They're whorish. They have no loyalties. One minute they're your source of comfort, the next, the root of your pain.

I went to Spain for my summer vacation this year. When I first heard the gong of the cathedral bells outside my rented apartment in Barcelona, I thought, "Enchanting." My Danish Jewish traveling companion thought, "Expulsion." When we sat next to a group of elderly people speaking loudly in German, I thought, "Tourists." My friend thought, "Perpetrators." And when an ambulance zoomed by, blasting its distinctly European-sounding siren, my friend thought, "Hospital emergency." I thought, "My mother."

It was 1973 when we decided as a family to travel to Budapest on a vacation. I was 11. We had been living in Zurich, where my father was on a sabbatical doing cancer research at the university. We had taken lots of train trips that year -- one to Florence, another to Vienna, still another to Paris. It was all very romantic to me. I loved the

clanking of the wheels against the tracks, the hissing of the steam and the sound of the conductor screaming “All Aboard!” no matter what language it was in.

As we rolled across the border from Austria into Hungary, armed Communist soldiers climbed aboard. When my mother saw them, dressed in their uniforms, their rifles abutting their waists, her whole body tightened. They opened our compartment door and asked for our tickets in a foreign language. To me, it was Hungarian. To my mother, it was Uzhgorod, 1942.

Apparently, the Hungarians -- not the Germans -- were the ones who rounded up the Jews in her small town in the Carpathian Mountains. But she had never spoken about it, not once, and we never realized the connection. Until then.

With one final, huge release of steam, the train rang its bell, a sound that signaled the start of another delicious rail adventure for me. For my father, it signaled pure hell. He had to watch my mother disintegrate, moment by moment, into a helpless girl of 12, and endure, with each clang of the bell, another squeeze of her fingernails into the palm of his hand.

There were moments of reprieve in Budapest -- when we bought a peasant blouse at a tourist shop, when we ate chicken paprikash in a small family restaurant, when we sat in a park overlooking the River Pesht. But at night, when we lay on our mushy mattresses in our small rented room and an ambulance rode by, it didn’t sound like “hospital emergency” to any of us. It sounded like 30 years of muffled pain. We watched mom curl up into a fetal position and scream the whole night. We left for Zurich in total silence the next morning. We didn’t talk about what had happened. My mom said nothing. To her, it must have sounded like silence. To me, it was the noisiest train ride of my life.

Standing in the Shadows

One thousand high school students crowded into Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey for a full morning of workshops and lectures on the Holocaust. The program, in its 20th year, draws kids from all over the state in an effort to create an awareness of the Shoah.

This year, however, the college added a new twist to their schedule. They asked me, the child of a Holocaust survivor, to give the keynote address. I was floored. Has the mantle finally been passed to the second generation? I wondered, before allowing myself a less noble thought: After a lifetime of living in the shadow of my mother's pain, is it finally my turn?

Thrilled at the opportunity to be heard, I crafted a brilliant speech. It was a child-of-survivor classic, with anecdotes about the dark silences and secrets, the sense of impending doom in our childhood homes, the way we subjugated our emotional needs in order to attend to those of our survivor parents. It was about the price of war, and how it affects not only its immediate victims, but their children and grandchildren too.

When I arrived at the school, I was greeted by the head of the Jewish Federation (the main sponsor of the event). A handsome man in his 70s, he told me to limit my speech to no more than 40 minutes, as the students were on a very tight schedule. He would be introducing me, he said.

He quieted the students by taking center stage and standing there in total silence. When he had everyone's full attention, he began his introductory remarks. "Hello boys and girls. Welcome!" he said. "You are about to experience an unforgettable day, beginning with our keynote speaker." My adrenaline rose, as I prepared to take my place at the podium. "But before I introduce her, let me tell you something about me. I am a Holocaust survivor."

"I was born in a small town in Poland and my entire family was murdered,” he continued. Mouths dropped open. "I was only your age when the Nazis threw my father in jail." Kids stopped slouching in their seats. Ten minutes went by,

then 15. O.K., I thought. I can adapt. I'm the child of a survivor. I'll cut my speech down to 20 minutes, that's all. And I began to edit my lecture in my head.

"When we arrived at Auschwitz, we were given tattoos immediately," he went on. Another 10 minutes went by. Gruesome details were doled out. Few people in the room understood that his need to be heard far outweighed any educational agenda. By the time he concluded, 40 minutes later, there wasn't a dry eye in the room. The teachers were speechless. The kids were spiritually drained. Then it was my turn. With five minutes left, I laughed to myself as I walked towards the podium. Even though the spotlight was following me, I knew I was taking my appropriate place back in the shadow.

Redwoods and Jews

Mendocino, California. Next to the endlessly tall redwood trees, everything in Mendocino seems small. The tiny shops and winding, snake-like streets, the New England-style, white wooden homes adorned with miniature window boxes, the church steeples adorning the horizon, the cafes and independent bookstores on Main Street, and the newest addition to the town, the Jewish cemetery.

It was around Rosh Hashanah, five years ago, when the town council granted the Jewish community a piece of Mendocino's 200-year-old burial ground. Such a graveyard seems out of context in this coastal town, three hours north of San Francisco, which was founded on the sweat of gentile lumberjacks and fishermen. Yet there it stands -- a Jewish graveyard within a gentile one, a small plot of permanence in which to dig deep and lasting roots.

I stood in that cemetery recently and was deeply moved by its emptiness and all that that vacant land implied: the Jewish lives yet unlived, the futures yet unshaped by a Jewish community still unfolding, the hope for a generation of Jews to walk into the future with a sense of permanence and security, not victimization. It's a blank slate in Mendocino, a chance to do it right, to help foster joyous and proactive Jewish lives that will be documented on tombstones here someday.

By all accounts, the community is succeeding. One only need listen to the stories told by the three tombstones in the new cemetery, the only ones thus far, to learn just how successful they really are: One gravestone is for a gay man who died of AIDS knowing the synagogue's inclusive policy in life would not change in death. Another is for the mother of a congregant whose last request was that she have a Jewish burial. Rather than calling in an outside rabbi to handle the arrangements, the community banded together and immediately formed a xx*chevra kadeshaxx*. With a book as their guide, members spent three weeks learning the proper rituals, which they now use whenever there is a death in the community.

But perhaps the most remarkable story lies within the third memorial, which stands higher than the others. It's an iron sculpture, shaped like flames, covered in pebbles and stones, with names of Holocaust victims scribbled atop each one. Just how a Holocaust memorial wound up in a tiny corner of a tiny California town is a story in itself.

When Mina Cohen told her mother, Judith Meisel, she was moving to Mendocino back in the early 1980s, her mother was less than pleased. "Jews should live in cities!" she told her daughter. Rather than heed her mother's advice, Mina packed her bags and, along with her husband and two small children, headed northward to picturesque Mendocino.

Over time, Judith came to appreciate her daughter's decision. Not all at once, but slowly, during her weekend visits, when members of the Jewish community would stop by to leave her fresh fruits or vegetables from their gardens; or

when Shabbat meals turned into midnight soirees, replete with song and story. She watched how the community spent months cooking every meal and providing constant support for a woman who had lost her daughter to leukemia. She saw how the community raised money to buy a synagogue (formerly a church) and their first permanent building in only 20 days, then watched her granddaughter donate her bat mitzvah money to the new synagogue. What made this community so unusual was that it was able to generate the kind of dedication almost always associated with orthodoxy. Yet its members weren't religious. Nonetheless, their warmth and inclusiveness had made Judaism appealing to children and viable to adults who had formerly left the fold. Judith had only seen that kind of commitment to community once before: in her shtetl in Poland.

Meanwhile, the film "Schindler's List" had just played to rave reviews and, riding its wave, a television news magazine decided to feature Mina's mother. They would film Judith's return to Studhav, the concentration camp that had stolen her childhood, the last place she had seen her mother alive. In an exhibition area outside the crematoria, she noticed a box of ashes on display and begged the proprietors for a souvenir. Then, opening a plastic zip-lock baggy she had in her pocket, she shoveled the embers into it with a vengeance, filling it so full she could barely close it. The bulging sack embodied everyone she had known and loved, and even those she hadn't.

There was only one place Judith wanted to bury the ashes, the place that reminded her most of her childhood: Mendocino. Not surprisingly, the entire community showed up for the ceremony. Holding the past in an urn, she surrendered it to the future, pouring the ashes into the giant memorial container. It seemed a fitting place for a Holocaust memorial.

Living with Evil

It was a relief being in Amsterdam on September 11. I could watch the sound bites on CNN without having to partake in all those "meaningful" discussions and memorial parades in America.

I'll admit here what I never would back home: I'm tired of hearing about September 11. I'm tired of the relentless merchandising of the tragedy, the T-shirts and the photos of the twin towers that are still for sale on every street corner in New York, the "express your grief" workshops and the "journaling your way to peace" seminars, and the way Americans turn even emotions into commodities. Please don't think of me as callous. I'm not. I feel deeply for the 3,000 victims of the terrorist attacks, believe me, I do. But 9/11 has magnified many of the most troubling aspects of American culture. It has paraded for the world a failed attempt by America to grow up.

I guess I'm not very patient. I'm tired of hearing our politicians say that America is not naive anymore. It is. My countrymen and women still believe they have the right to live without fear. I'm tired of hearing how September 11 changed Americans forever. It didn't. They still believe that evil is something you defeat, not something you learn to live with.

I guess I'm not very American. Every since I can remember, I knew about evil. I merely needed to look around the dinner table at mom's face, haunted by memories of the war. Or listen to Uncle Joe's stories about Auschwitz, or Uncle Gzu Gzu's tales of Treblinka. Or look at Aunt Borishka's eyes, stuffed with sadness, even when she was laughing.

From the time I was three, I've been waiting for September 11. "What took them so long?" I thought to myself when the planes hit. This is not a normal American reaction, I know, but I wasn't a normal American kid. I was taught that peace and tranquility were aberrations. If you experienced them for any length of time, something bad was bound to happen.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not promoting paranoia -- just a realistic understanding of human nature. I'm tired of

the childlike way our administration responded to the terrorist attacks. Invading Iraq was a hysterical overreaction to 9/11. Now all of us are paying the price. I'm tired of living in a country which views 3,000 deaths by terrorists as more scary than 30,000 deaths a year by guns -- or 300,000 due to obesity. I'm tired of an administration that would like to spend 87 billion dollars a year in Iraq while my friend, Roslyn Perry, after being hit by a taxi recently, was kicked out of the emergency room because she didn't have health insurance. I'm tired of looking outward when the most dangerous enemy is lurking within.

I once saw a great cartoon in New Yorker magazine. It showed a guy driving around in his expensive convertible, wearing sunglasses, whizzing past palm trees. The caption read, "I hate my life, but I love my lifestyle." That pretty much sums up why I have a hard time getting into the September 11 commemoration each year. My countrymen will tell you they're honoring life. In truth, they're honoring lifestyle, one which still compartmentalizes "good" and "evil." Until they integrate the two, and learn to accept discomfort, even grief, as part of life, they'll continue to make adolescent choices.

Memory and Amnesia

I've been back in Amsterdam less than a week and already I've found comfort in my familiar favorites: fresh herring, gouda on crusty bread, the clanking of bicycle wheels under my window, my daily stroll along the Amstel River, and an endless stream of cafes lined with Dutchman who know how to do nothing better than anyone in the world. Still, there are some things that never feel right.

This afternoon I suggested to a Dutch friend that we have drinks at one of my favorite pubs, Diva's, on Jekerstraat. "Jekerstraat?" he said. "That's the street my grandfather was born and lived on." Naively, I suggested we meet in front of his grandfather's old house, figuring he would share childhood anecdotes with me about ball playing or bike riding or joyous Shabbat meals. Instead, he pulled up to the front door of the house on his bike and casually said, "Yep. This is house that my grandfather lived in the day the Nazis came and took him away forever. Want a coffee?" To him, it was another day in Amsterdam. To me, it was a potent reminder of how different my way of being Jewish is in America.

I'm still amazed by the ability of my Jewish friends in Holland to live among such physical reminders of pain, to coexist with those dirty little secrets that live within walls, underneath pavement, behind doorways, which scream out stories of hatred and anti-Semitism. Jewish Americans have no such landmarks. Instead, we recreate them. We want to remember the pain. It helps us identify as Jews.

On Yom Hashoah this past spring, I was invited to speak to high school students in a Hebrew day school in Maryland about my experiences growing up as the child of a Holocaust survivor. As I pulled up to the school in my car, I was stunned what I saw. The students had redesigned the entranceway. It included black train tracks on the ground leading from the parking lot to the front door and a huge sign above the entranceway saying, "Arbeit Macht Frei."

This scenario is by no means atypical. In my work, traveling across the country as a Jewish storyteller, I see such attempts at manipulation on a regular basis. American Jews are obsessed with monuments and memorials and any other visual aide which will help lure them out of complacency and help them "feel" Jewish, even if it is prompted by a sense of victimization. I'll never forget the time the director of the Georgia Holocaust Commission described to me with great zeal how she was the driving force behind a new Holocaust video for high school students in the state. "These teenagers don't know anything about the war," she said. "So I fixed that. I made them insert the most graphic images -- you know the stuff -- the corpses and ovens and barbed wire, and now those kids will never forget!"

Dividing my time between Amsterdam and America is like trying to decide whether I want to forget or remember. Do I walk among guilty streets here in Amsterdam and pretend they're innocent? Or ride into modern neighborhoods and school yards in America, with nothing but the future as landscape, and pretend they're guilty? Can I find some common place where memory and amnesia coexist? Only time will tell.

A "Normal" Thanksgiving

This past November, I packed my bags and headed for Massachusetts to be with my family on Thanksgiving. It had been seven years since I've allowed myself to celebrate the holiday with them, a "*shmitah*" period to rest the familial soil and heal old wounds. All of us needed the break.

Thanksgiving in the home of Holocaust survivors is so bizarre and un-American, only the persecuted Pilgrims might have understood it. While all my American friends were eating candied yams and watching football on TV, my family was dropping casual lines like, "I would have loved to have invited my friends, but they're all dead."

Still, I was dutiful. Each year, I made the five-hour car journey and one-hour ferry ride to Martha's Vineyard Island, where my family owns a second home and always celebrates the holiday. The house is far enough from New York to require a weekend stay, an obligation only the leather-skinned can endure with any levity. Once there, it didn't take long before the familiar family dynamics began taking shape: my infantilized brother, who would scream and have tantrums, yet whom we had to pretend was normal; my mother's Hungarian sisters, who would rip people to shreds with their vicious gossip and go through our closets and drawers as if it were their right; the "surrogate" relatives -- survivors from the neighborhood -- who had no family of their own and whom we had to call "aunt" and "uncle" and smile as they shoved money and chocolates in our pockets

As the weekend progressed, the comments about our clothes or new haircuts or weight, got worse. My favorite was a 1976 classic, in which mom said to me, "It's such a shame that beautiful face doesn't have a body to go along with it… Want some more chicken?" And then there were the tears, brought on by a memory, a story, even a joyous moment. You never knew when someone would start crying -- only that it would happen. You pretended everything was normal and began passing the turkey around. "Want some more gravy, Bella?" you would ask my hysterical aunt, while her tears fell into her pumpkin soup.

Still, amid the horror, there were always magical moments. Like the laughter, which was bolder and noisier and more life-affirming than any I heard in my American friends' homes. Or the hugs, doled out with such force, you could feel the bones in your back crack. Or the closeness, a special kind of intimacy reserved for Eastern Europeans, in which your thoughts and joys and fears became theirs. Even the food, rich with garlic and fat, would be ladled out with such love no one mistook its real significance.

It took a long time before I could return. I did this time, to a table that was smaller and much more mellow than in past years. Aunt Borishka died two years ago. It's been six since Uncle Joe passed on. Roszika had a stroke and can't travel any more. Suddenly, my family, in all its madness, seemed like something to be cherished, not avoided. Mom made a toast. She told us she was filled with thanks and

gratitude. As always, she started to cry. "Want some gravy?" my brother asked her, and continued to pass the turkey around the table as if everything were normal. And indeed, it was.

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Why There?

By Lisa Lipkin

Not too long ago, at a holiday party in Manhattan, a man asked me a question which stopped me in my tracks.

"Where do you live?" he said.

I paused, unable to come up with a simple answer. Do I say the Netherlands, the country I've been living in for the last ten years, or New York, the place where I was raised and where, somehow, I continue to return, time and time again?

If I say Amsterdam and he asks "Why there?" I'll give him the easy answer, the one that is definitely more fun.

"I was brought there by Xaviera Hollander, remember her?"

I'll remind him that the Dutch Ms. Hollander, aka, Xaviera De Vries, wrote a bestselling book in the 1970's called *The Happy Hooker* recounting the joys and escapades of her life as a prostitute and a Park Avenue madam. "She's now the *Happy Booker*, booking Jewish theater in Holland," I'll add.

I'll tell him how she brought me to Amsterdam years ago to perform my one-woman show, "What Mother Never Told Me" an autobiographical piece about my experiences growing up as the child of a Holocaust survivor, and how I fell in love with Amsterdam and never left.

I'll charm my partygoer with stories of Xaviera, how she still writes a sex column for Penthouse and fills her house with erotic art, how she only hires "house boys" to cook and clean for her. I'll regale him with descriptions of her audience members--bohemian intellectuals, Jewish community leaders, a gay priest, a South African puppeteer, a New

York bagel maker—and describe her Gertrude Stein-like salon, which lingers long after the performance is over. I'll make a fleeting reference to the legalized marijuana, the red light district, how liberal it is over there, and how much I enjoy the people and the life style, and he will be appeased.

What I won't tell the man at the party is the real reason I decided to stay in Amsterdam. My story would be too dark, too complicated for this happy-go-lucky American to swallow along with his beer. I won't tell him that each night during my performance, I related to the eyes of my audience members, sad like mine, jaded like my mother's, cynical, like those of my Holocaust survivor relatives. I won't tell him how grateful I was to be in a room of people who have also experienced great loss, even the gentiles, who know what it is like to live with paranoia and fear although the war has been over for sixty years.

"So where do you live?" the partygoer persisted. I relent and say "New York," It's easier. There's less explaining to do. I tell him I own a house in the Catskills Mountains, in the heart of the *Borscht Belt*, where countless Jewish comedians made their start in the resort hotels that once blanketed the area, like Kutshers, Grossingers, and The Pines. Even though the hotels closed years ago, I enjoy the country life. I tell him my work as a Jewish storyteller often takes me to Europe.

What I don't tell him is that even though I have had a lease on my Amsterdam apartment for seven years, I've been unable to move there full time. Something pulls each of my legs in opposite directions, one in Europe, the other in America. I have truly become a wandering Jew.

When you go to a holiday party in the Netherlands, no one asks you American questions like "Where do you live?" or "What do you do?" They go right for the kishkas.

"Why do you want to be Jewish ***here***?" my Dutch Jewish friends always ask me.

I understand their confusion. Why would I want to live in a place like the Netherlands, a country which lost 84 % , over 100,000, of their Jews during the Nazi occupation--the highest per capita death among Jews anywhere in Europe—and whose streets and doorways are screaming with hidden stories and unspoken pain? What would possess me to leave the safe and diverse Jewish community of New York City for a xenophobic, out-dated one in Europe?

The answer is complex, and one that took me until now to fully understand. It has something to do with war, both the external one- the Holocaust- that emotionally crippled my Hungarian mother and in turn, me, her daughter, and the internal one, between my culture and my theology.

I've always felt like a foreigner in my own country. Maybe it has something to do with the bizarre way I grew up--the endless array of yahrzeit memorial candles that were alit every Yom Kippur for each invisible relative I was supposed to remember but was told nothing about; the Chanukah menorah my mother placed proudly in the window just before pulling the shades down; the storehouse of powdered milk and frozen food that got rammed into every available storage space for the day we might be without; the paranoia and constant reminder that everyone hates the Jews, even Mr. Brown , our good natured Fuller Brush man that sold household products , door to door.

My mother was constantly nervous. If the Nazis weren't coming to my hometown--Clifton, New Jersey—then burglars, rogues, or villainous neighbors surely were. She was overprotective. She would follow me on dates in her lime green station wagon. She once sent a police car to pick my brother up from a friend's house, one block away, when he wasn't home by 5pm. She may have survived Auschwitz, but she had me convinced she couldn't survive me crossing the street. I believed her. For forty years, I stayed close.
When I finally moved to Amsterdam at 41, I wasn't just crossing the ocean, I was crossing the street.

Freedom at last. But what was really on the other side, the European side? More pain.

More sad memories. More faces haunted by war. I was away and yet I was home.

I remember the first time I was invited to a Rosh Hashanah meal in a Dutch Jewish home.
I walked into a room of strangers and I felt like I was with family. I knew no one at the table and yet like the audience members in Xaviera Hollander's salon, their faces were the same as those I had grown up with. They all had bad teeth, like my Hungarian relatives, crooked and stained and unafraid to announce themselves by smiling. Each had those same sad eyes too, a melancholy so entrenched in their beings that separating joy from pain would be impossible.

My mother had survived the war with her two sisters, who in turn, married survivors, who had a few living family members of their own. As a result, every family occasion in New Jersey was spent with my European relatives, like uncle Gzu Gzu, whose old world manners including bowing and kissing my mother's hand, or Uncle Joe, who sold woolens on Orchard Street yet wore impeccable suits and ties, or Aunt Bella, who baked nut cakes that rivaled any in the local Hungarian bakery.

Suddenly, when I walked into my Dutch hosts' home, and watched the body language of their guests as they hunched over the pickle plate, discussing nothing as if it were an epic poem, the way they gesticulated, substituting a wave of the hand for the word, "no," even the way they elegantly cut their meat, using their knife and fork in a European style, I knew I belonged.

I liked their manners, old world, polite, and gracious. They asked me questions about my life. I was pleasantly surprised. After years of American gatherings where people just handed me their business cards or talked about themselves, believing that being i*nteresting*, not *interested*, was the way to impress people, the attention felt good.
I shared their world view too, one which hopes for the best but expects the worse. When September 11th happened, I was the only one among my New York circle of friends that wasn't surprised. "I'm so shocked," my American friends all said. "What took them so long?" I replied.

And yet, it is this very cynicism, this incessant memory of war and persecution, that has stunted the growth and evolution of Jewish practice in the Netherlands and for that matter, most of Europe. Initially, I was shaken up by this xenophobia, revealed each time I heard the term "father Jew" and watched committed European friends, whose accident of birth banned them from full inclusion by their Jewish communities, feel rejected; each time I watched the pain of my female friends, after being refused permission to say kaddish for a loved one on the bima and instead, were exiled to the balcony; each time I met a Jew who was so turned off by the rigidity of their rabbis, that they chose to stay away rather than participate in communal Jewish life.

Several years ago in this magazine I wrote about a brave Dutch friend of mine, Wanya Kruyer, who along with an American man, started the first progressive synagogue here in Amsterdam. She was called a traitor by the members of the mainstream Dutch Jewish community. She was told that the missionaries, the gentiles, and the Nazi youth would come. She was forced to sneak a torah out of the Jewish Historical Museum in her knapsack during the high holidays for fear that the community would find out about the loan and withhold the museum's funding. In time, her community, Beit Ha Chidush, has won some acceptance and has even hired the country's first and only woman rabbi, but they are still considered a fringe movement.

It wasn't until I lived in Europe that I came to appreciate my American Judaism. America's founding fathers wanted to stem the tide of religious hatred they had witnessed in Europe and thought that establishing a country which separated church from state was a great way to do it. They felt deeply connected to the Old Testament. George Washington's struggle was compared to that of Moses against Pharaoh. The country's first congress even considered making our national language Hebrew and made the study of it mandatory in the Connecticut public schools for awhile. Anti Semitism has never been in our government's bloodstream, even if a few of its citizens and politicians have caught the bug from time to time. As a result, we are secure enough to allow new ideas to infiltrate Jewish life without feeling threatened.

Where else but in America can you find a Reconstructionist siddur that incorporates Einstein, Maya Angelou and Maimonides, or a Jewish renewal congregation that features a Grammy-nominated, Columbia Records recording artist-turned-rabbi, like Jack Gabriel of Sonoma, California? Where else but in the United States can one find groups like the OrthoDykes or The Gay and Lesbian Yeshiva and Day School, a synagogue in Philadelphia that says the pledge of allegiance before davening, or another in New York City that has Shabbat services but no God? Where else can one find such events like Chanukah on Ice, the Conference on Rural Judaism, or the annual fundraiser for JewishRappers.com?

I remember the time an orthodox rabbi with whom I was friendly told me about one of his female congregants, a convert from a Roman Catholic background. When he brought the Torah around to the women's section--already radical by European standards--she genuflected with her siddur, touching the torah with it before making the sign of the cross against her body. To his credit, he said to me, "I took that as the ultimate sign of respect and awe for the Torah." I can't imagine any part of that scenario happening in Europe.

And so, I keep accepting gigs in the States. In part, because I miss my American Judaism , which inspires and fulfills me. This week, I'll be an artist in residence at a synagogue in Montpelier, Vermont. I love witnessing how comfortably and fluidly its members integrate their rural lifestyles into their Jewish practice, the new curricula they have developed for home-schoolers, the classes for gentile spouses, the freshly grown, organic vegetables they serve after Saturday services, the openness and lack of suspicion its member share for outsiders, and the comfort it creates among its members as a result.

I'll pretend I don't notice the lack of fresh flowers, the paper plates, (even in green Vermont), the bad table manners, the lack of curiosity about the other that seems to plague most Americans, because I am so relieved and grateful to be in a country which embodies the best of Judaism and Jewish practice.

But in my quieter moments, I'm aware of the real motivation for my return. It will reveal itself, as it always does, when I finish my work and head straight down to my mother's apartment on Park Avenue. I'll be happy to indulge in her chicken paprikash and be in her company, even if it means enduring critical barbs and painful asides, doled out with precision, as only a Hungarian can do.

I'll look into her sad eyes and be so grateful for the fact that I managed to liberate myself from her consuming grasp, that I was able to save myself, in some measure, from the plight of the second generation, the selflessness to the point of implosion.
And I'll pretend that I live abroad, even though I know I am still the little girl who is keeping her mother alive by not leaving.

Book Review

January 2009

By Lisa Lipkin

Leaves from the Garden of Eden: One Hundred Classic Jewish Tales. by Howard Schwartz

I Loved My Mother on Saturdays: Tales for the telling from the shtetl and beyond. by Roslyn Bresnick-Perry

One of the first performances I ever gave as a professional storyteller was at a conference for Jewish educators in Long Island, over twenty years ago. Amidst a sea of bored Hebrew school teachers and administrators in the audience, two sets of eyes caught my attention.

Both pairs were wide-eyed and whimsical. The first set belonged to the silver-haired man in the back of the room, Howard Schwartz, a folklorist, and the second, to the lady with the contagious laugh sitting next to him, Roslyn Bresnick Perry, a New York clothing designer-turned-storyteller. I could tell that they loved my tales, chock a block with metaphors and carefully chosen adjectives, but not as much as I loved their capacity to listen, to drink in my stories with the thirst of desert travelers.

It comes as no surprise to me that twenty years later, those two sets of eyes are still searching for great stories. Howard Schwartz, who by now is a three-time winner of the National Jewish Book Award, has just edited his fifth collection of Jewish folktales, Leaves from the Garden of Eden: One Hundred Classic Jewish Tales. (Oxford Press) Roslyn Bresnick -Perry, now 86, and the recipient of the National Storytelling Network Lifetime Achievement Award, has published her second collection of original stories,
I Loved My Mother on Saturdays: Tales for the telling from the shtetl and beyond. (Ben Yehuda Press). Although different in tone and content, the two volumes are related in important ways.

In Leaves from the Garden of Eden, Howard Schwartz has amassed 100 Jewish stories categorized into four "essential" categories: fairy tales, folktales, supernatural tales, and mystical tales. These riveting tales defied my assumptions about Judaism. Who said the devil and demons were the jurisdiction of the Christians? They have nothing on us. We have Angel of Death, who waits at the gates of Luz, a city where immortality is guaranteed, the Witches of Ashkelon, a coven of eighty witches who live in a cave at the outskirts of the city, and Satan, who disguised as a werewolf, disintegrates into ashes at the hands of the Baal Shem Tov. Who says myths belong to the Greeks? We may know little about the ram that Abraham sacrificed on Mount Moriah, yet in these rabbinic elaborations it's regarded as a kind of holy being. In his introduction, Schwartz, who is a Professor of English at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, reminds us of the mobility and flexibility of these stories, shaped and reshaped by people who lived centuries and continents apart, but who were ultimately inspired by the same source: the Torah and Talmud.

In many ways, Bresnick-Perry's work is a natural extension to Schwartz's, in that she demonstrates the idea of the living story, changing, growing, expanding with each telling, yet fueled by a culture steeped in Judaism.

The autobiographical stories in I Loved My Mother on Saturdays, based on the author's life, first in a shtetl in Belarus, then as a new American immigrant in New York, and finally, as a garment center designer and mother, were first spun orally. This gives her writing a lively, spoken word rhythm, as if she is the raconteur in your living room telling tales out of school. In some stories she speaks in the first person, other times in the third, mixing past and present tenses even within a story, but this inconsistency only adds to excitement and vibrancy of her narratives. This is the oral tradition in its truest sense: stories shaped by the listener and by time.

Bresnick-Perry's stories are wildly funny and deeply moving. Although her entire shtetl was obliterated by the Nazis, Bresnick-Perry wisely chooses to focus on the living, recreating a cast of eccentric characters- Cousin Zisl, Bubbe Zelde, Uncle Avram Leib-- who scream, interrupt, pray, sing, cook, and love so passionately, one yearns to sit at her pre-war Shabbat table for just a day.

Whether ancient or modern, folk stories are truly a mirror of the lives of the people, transmitted orally within a community until they are finally written down. "You know," says Bresnick Perry, "There's nothing so sad as a heart full of stories with no one to tell them to."