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Gast! City's Ghosts Evoked

A Storyteller Says New Yorkers Ignore the Lessons of History

BY LISA LIPKIN

On a shivery night in New York in the 1920's, a full moon scudded eerily across a darkling, windswept sky. All was still in the cemetery besides St. Mark's Church. The construction crew that had paved Second Avenue had finished its work, though in the process, it had cut off a corner of the cemetery.

Suddenly, the bell atop the church started ringing wildly. The sexton, still in his nightgown and cap, stumbled toward the church and unlocked the door, and the ringing just as suddenly stopped. But inside he found that the bell rope had been severed, and the next morning he found the other half of the rope—in the vault where Peter Stuyvesant was buried. The feisty Dutch governor of New York was not one to ignore a slight. Even now, it pays to mind your manners when you walk past St. Mark's Church on a windswept October night, or you may see a milky white apparition in the cemetery or hear a mysterious tapping: Peter Stuyvesant making his rounds on his wooden leg.

Ghost stories. Every year at about this time I tell audiences young and old about the New York that used to be and the spirits of the past that live on here. I've been doing it for seven years now, and their reaction has taught me a lot about New Yorkers.

For one thing, they have no sense of the city's past, no feeling for how today fits into the fabric of yesterday. They ignore the lessons that history can teach. Yet even the most serious and sober of them find in these stories a license to be young again.

New Yorkers are determined to believe that life in the city today is the worst it's ever been. They're convinced it used to be better. Back in 1862, the city health inspector wrote: "There are so many mercenary landlords who only contrive space so that they can stow the greatest number of human beings in the smallest space." He longed for an earlier, gentler, New York—like 1777 perhaps. That's when John Adams declared New Yorkers to be the rudest people he'd ever met and bemoaned the good old days when gentlemen still in Manhattan. He must have been referring to the start of that

century, the era of Captain Kidd, a time of filth and disease when cutpurses and bandits roamed the streets.

Kidd is the central figure of one of the great New York ghost stories. A British general who lived down on Wall Street until he turned pirate, Kidd amassed a fortune in gold and jewels by plundering every ship in sight. After his death by hanging in London, Wall Street con men sold shares in a hunt for Kidd's lost treasure. But the captain took to that unkindly. At one downtown meeting of investors, his ghost appeared and blinded all those in attendance. And to this day, on Halloween, Kidd's bluish form can be seen at night on the streets of lower Manhattan, winding through manholes and keyholes, looking to blind anyone still in pursuit of his hidden treasure.

When I tell such stories to adult audiences, I see a different New Yorker from the one I encounter on the street,. The cynicism and chip-on the shoulder attitude drop away, and men in three-piece business suits, fresh from a power lunch, wear expressions on their faces that hearken back to Halloweens gone by., It's not so cool to ride the playground slide or the carousel in Central Park, but the performance provides an acceptable opportunity to be a child again.

In fact, I think the oral tradition of storytelling has a lot to offer in the way of helping us cope with the trials of living in New York:. It is an exercise in imagination, which television has almost removed from our experience. Historic legends can help us put our urban woes in perspective, calming the spirit. And the recapturing, even for a moment, of the innocence of childhood can bring a note of sanity into our lives.

Lisa Lipkin is the storyteller in residence at the Museum of the City of New York

Review of the Academy Award nominated movie, *Life Is Beautiful*

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by Lisa Lipkin

To the viewing public, Roberto Benigni's Oscar nominated film, *Life is Beautiful,* is about the Holocaust. To savvy film critics, it's about a father/son relationship within the context of war. But to the children of Holocaust survivors, the movie's underlying premise is as obvious as it is familiar. It's about rewriting our family's stories.

Half the kids on my block in Flushing Queens, in 1967, were the offspring of survivors. On the surface, we acted like all the other youngsters. We wore polyester bell bottoms, rolled our hair in banana curls, and hung Bobby Sherman posters on our walls. Our local heroes were Tom Seaver, Mayor Lindsay, and Mr. Geitlitz, who always threw us Yodels from the back of his Drakes delivery truck as he rode along 34th Avenue. The only difference between us and all the other kids was that while they were dreaming of the future, we were dreaming about the past, about our parents' pasts. While they were playing kick the can and stick ball on one end of 171st Street, we were saving our relatives from the Nazis on the other.

In Benigni's fantastical version of a concentration camp, he uses the public address system to declare his love for his wife, camouflages his son under blankets and in storage bins, and even gets the boy a five course meal by passing him off a German.

While Benigni's depiction of the camps may be totally unrealistic, it echoed my childhood play. I can hardly remember a Sunday afternoon in Flushing Meadow Park when I didn't pretend to outwit the Gestapo and ease my mother's pain, or feed her sisters, or save her brother. Although my uncle Moshe didn't survive the war, in my mind I rescued him time and time again. Like Benigni's character, Guido, who cleverly concocts ways to hide his son from the SS officers, I hid with Moshe amongst rats and urine under his bed in the camps, transforming a park bench into his rotting bunk. In one game, my friends and I turned the New York City Building from the 1939 World's Fair (now the Queens Museum) into barracks, and I pretended to hide my uncle from the guards until we escaped through a hole in a non-electric fence. In another, we fled to safety by digging a tunnel under the length of the park and ending up on the pitcher's mound at Shea Stadium.

My mother's father perished at Auschwitz. But that didn't stop me from rewriting his script in grand cinematic style. Each time my mother and I strolled down Main Street to the bakery I would fantasize that every old man that walked past us was my grandfather. "It's all a big mistake," I could almost hear him say. "I'm alive." He would then tell us how, like Guido, he had gotten a job in a Nazi kitchen and charmed the officers into letting him live or how he had bribed them with the candy he always carried in his pocket before the war. I pictured us hugging outside the Gertz Department

Store just before he came home to live with us forever.

My most memorable dream still recurs. I'm at a party with Hitler and he's taken with me. I like him too. I flirt with him and try to seduce him into letting my mother go. I get the feeling he's going to listen to me. But he never says what he will do, and I always wake not knowing.

Not all of our fantasies ended in hope, but they did give us some small sense of power. Benigni, whose father was imprisoned in a labor camp, must have felt that way too. Those of us who grew up without a tangible way to ease our parents' pain found other ways to come to their rescue--through fanciful New York narratives which, for a brief moment, ended happily ever after.

Letters to the editor

To the Editor:
As the professional storyteller who created and ran the workshop for Holocaust survivors at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, mentioned in a May 3 news article, I was surprised and dismayed that you missed the point of that event: to help survivors recall their joyous Jewish pasts, before World War II, and tell stories about those rich and fulfilling lives rather than once again recounting their memories of their brutal wartime experiences.
As the child of a Holocaust survivor, I recognize only too well the importance of remembrance. But remembrance, stitched together solely of persecution and victimization, is a dangerous proposition. The survivors of the Holocaust knew what it was like to be Jewish proactively, and their exquisite stories of prewar Jewish life, which tumbled out so freely and vividly at the museum that day, are a compass for the next generation.

LISA LIPKIN
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