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On Sunday; An Imagination Breathing Life Into Memory

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LISA LIPKIN turns everything into a story, prying open imagination and history and looking forward to this fresh year for all the clues to the past it will inevitably contain. She makes a living as a 32-year-old folklorist and dramatic monologist and can dip back into all sorts of timely parallels for New Yorkers. She conjures John Adams's visit to post-colonial Manhattan when he pronounced it teeming with "the most vulgar group of people ever." Hooray for our side and for consistency.

Imagined detail, not just laborious memory, is what energizes Ms. Lipkin's stories, like the one about why her mother never discarded the doormat marked "Maloney," the name of the previous homeowner. What? And emblazon "Lipkin" at the family threshold for one and all to see in America?

"She never actually told me that she was a survivor of the Holocaust," says Ms. Lipkin, proud of how she used her child's imagination to deduce this dark secret, thereby discovering an early gloss on human infamy but also the grand power of human imagination.

"There was a sense of hiding out, of impending evil and doom around every corner," the storyteller recalls of her childhood, hardly making angst of it all. She sounds charmed and even grateful at reliving such details as the time she found money hidden in the freezer inside a chicken. "Mother just said, 'You never know when it might all be taken away.' "

The way Ms. Lipkin tells a story, any story, a listener hears her celebrating the story's art in carrying us forward, not merely freezing us in some past tableau. "When Moses led the Jews out of Egypt," she says of one fairly durable story, "I think he was walking backward, describing the bad things behind them, not looking ahead. Like that old Abbott and Costello movie where they sneak into a movie house by walking backward, insisting they're just leaving."

Playful expression does not mask her conviction that Jews must be more than dolorous about the terrible past. "The great irony about my present situation is that I have a problem with Holocaust museums," says Ms. Lipkin, who was tracked down not rummaging as usual through local closets of city history (Hear her sometime about Johnny-ride-a-pony, stoopball, tops, marbles and all the old street games), but working at a Holocaust museum. The Holocaust museum -- Yad Vashem in Israel.

"They want me to try and teach the museum instructors fresh ways to teach little children about the Holocaust," she explains, two months into her own first trip to Israel, which is a Lisa Lipkin story in itself. ("Hated it at first, the people so rude and nasty," she says, sounding like her John Adams in New York.)

"The 'never forget' tendency is what scares me," she says of her approach. "To me the way of never forgetting is to constantly attest to the living Jewish arts, to perpetuating Jewish culture. You never forget by looking at the future, not by staring at pictures of corpses."

Actually, her methods of inviting children to summon empathy, not just sympathy, by imagining themselves back in scenes of Nazi persecution strike her critics as more alarming than the death-camp photos. "I believe in a more metaphoric approach, using inanimate objects. I might have a child reach into an imaginary box in a closet of someone back in the Holocaust and describe what they hold. Or become part of a dreidel, describing what can be seen whirling about some family's home back then."

Using methods that she honed for the last seven years in Jewish-American classes, Ms. Lipkin treasures the imaginings of a 9-year-old boy in Omaha who became a wind-blown Nazi flag surveying the atrocious events of Kristallnacht below. Or an 8-year-old girl who said she was the pinkie ring of an S.S. officer at an elegant dinner table, a man burdened with the disposal of throngs of strangers while mourning his beloved grandmother.

She gets flak about easing small children into such scary things. "But I only follow up on lessons already taught in classrooms," Ms. Lipkin stresses. Yad Vashem officials are searching for ways for the newest generation to glimpse a personal facet in this dark story. "I'm the enhancer," she says, circling back on her own earliest discovery of self-imagining in the shadow of the Holocaust. "I don't pretend to give them the facts. But I do say the key is to distinguish between sympathy and empathy.

"Kids express our hopes, our fears, our impressions. There's no self-reflection in teaching the Holocaust as an evil thing of the past. You need to teach its profound implications for the present, in hatred, racism and violence."

Lisa Lipkin will come home from Yad Vashem in two months with all sorts of stories. Like the glorious sight of Bedouins in the Negev. "Some are drinking camel's milk, others have Diet Coke," she says, working up an opening image.