# WHERE WE COME


**THE NEXT STORY:** Arthur Klein, docent at the Yiddish Book Center, recently sat down with Hankus Netsky, left, for a conversation about Klein's boyhood in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, NY.

# FROM | *Conversations with our visitors*


Photos by Ben Banhart

• BY HANKUS NETSKY •

I JOINED THE STAFF of the Yiddish Book Center last fall, and one of the first things I did was to hang around the Great Hall and talk with some of the visitors who came to explore the place. Soon I was bringing my tape recorder with me and capturing some of these amazing and priceless conversations.

The people who come to the Book Center are not just any visitors, but people on a pilgrimage. They come to see a shelf with their family's name, to find an uncle's poetry book, or just to see what a room full of Yiddish books looks like. They are Jewish and non-Jewish, retired teachers, scientists, bus drivers, Harvard professors, historians, cantors, heads of yeshivas, secular Israelis, rare book dealers, and school children, and they all have stories – which are as interesting and diverse as anything you might find in Yiddish books. Here are excerpts from my talks with five visitors. I'm sure there will be more.

## THE POET'S NIECE

It was obvious to me that Jeannette Chesin Rudnick was someone I had to interview. I could tell by the entourage that surrounded her as she made her way in her wheelchair to the shelves where esteemed Yiddish poet Aliza Greenblatt's books are kept.

"My mother looked just like Aliza," she said, showing me a photo of her aunt in a book her husband picked off the shelf. "I looked like my mother and she and my mother were sisters. People would come up to my mother and say 'Oh, hello,' and then they'd say, 'Oh … no,' and she would say, 'Did you think I was Aliza Greenblatt?' And they'd say 'yes.' So there was a very strong family resemblance.

"My grandparents came to Philadelphia from Mogieliev-Podolsk," a town of approximately 10,000 in the southwestern Ukrainian province of Podolia. "They came to Philadelphia because their family had already established themselves there as manufacturers of mattresses." A personal connection kicks in immediately: my grandfather came to Philadelphia from Podolia and became a jobber, supplying all the local makers of mattresses.

She continues, "My grandmother didn't speak English. She spoke to me in Yiddish and I answered her in English, and we understood each other. My mother came to Philadelphia when she was already three or four years old and she would look at the Schuylkill River and say 'the Dnieper's bigger,' and she would look at the Delaware River and say 'the Dnieper's bigger.' Then, when I was seven years old, we went to visit our family that was left in Russia and we looked at the Dnieper River, and where she lived, it looked more like the Wissahickon Creek [a narrow stream in northwest Philadelphia]!"

As much as Aliza Greenblatt was renowned for her Yiddish poetry, she was perhaps even better known in some circles as the mother of Marjorie Greenblatt, a lead dancer with the Martha Graham Company who married American folk music icon Woody Guthrie. "First, Marjorie married a man named Joseph Mazia and they lived in our house because they didn't have money for rent. She commuted to New York to dance with the Martha Graham group, and Joseph worked in Philadelphia at the Frankford Arsenal. He was a metallurgist. And she met Woody in New York, and then her first marriage broke up, it was in 1942.

"But it was interesting, how my uncle got the name Greenblatt. He came from a small town in Russia, and a family from that town had permission to come to America. They had a teenaged son the same age as my uncle. Unfortunately, the son died so they said to my uncle's family, the Stuckelman family, would you want to send your son to America with us? And they said 'Yes, of course,' and they gave him their family name. That's how he got the name Greenblatt."

## "THE HAPPY LIFE YOU'VE HAD"

That same day, I met Anita Titell, a diminutive woman also from Philadelphia, with a compelling family story redolent of the confusion of early immigrant days:

"My mother and father were divorced when I was two. I lived with my grandparents. I knew that my father was a dentist. I never saw him, and I grew up with a nice family. And, three years ago, in the *Jewish Exponent* there was an ad that said 'Looking for Anita F. Rubin, graduated Overbrook High School in 1945; I'm her half-sister, Vera Fern, Dallas, Texas,' and then her phone number.

"I had my daughter call – I was too overwhelmed. I was so overwhelmed that I fell in my kitchen – I injured my shoulder! When I got my senses together, I called. She said that her father and mother had both died and her father never told her that he had another child, but she found the divorce papers in the drawer, with my mother's name and my name, so she took a genealogy course and they taught her to contact the census in Philadelphia. So she found

out all about us, where we lived in West Philadelphia. They suggested she call all the high schools in Philadelphia, which she did. And she found a record that said that I graduated Overbrook in 1945, but she had no idea whether I still lived in Philadelphia.

"Anyway, I found out that I have another sister and a brother. I never met the brother; he lives in Bloomington, Indiana. And my other sister lives in Garden City, Long Island. I saw the ad in July. Then, in October, the two girls and their husbands came to visit us, and they came in, and everybody was crying. And they said, 'Do you have any pictures of your mother?' I said, 'Yes, lots.' I said, 'How about your mother?' And they said, 'No, we don't have any pictures of our mother. Our mother was crazy. She was psychotic, and we had a terrible childhood.' They said their father was depressed and their mother was psychotic."

Her friend chimes in: "I've known Anita for over 50 years, and I think it was *basherte* [predestined]. If you had known that father you wouldn't have had the happy life you've had."

But Anita still wonders. "Mary is my only living cousin who knew both my mother and father; she's 93. After I found out the story, I asked her about all this and she said, 'Your father wasn't depressed. Your father was warm and loving. He and your mother did a lot of things together and loved you. But he had two dental offices, and this woman that he married worked in the other office, and my sister Bara said, when he realized who he married and had three children with, he became depressed!'"

## LOOSE IN THE CATSKILLS

I met Morty Teich in our bookstore. Someone told him of my musical background, and he wanted to share his story of his life as a musician in the Catskills.

"I was fortunate enough to be around in the heyday of what they call the Catskill Mountains in Sullivan County, NY, also known as the Borsht Belt, also known as the "Garden of *Yidn*." It was an outgrowth of Jewish people getting away from their apartments and going to the country. It was founded by farmers who were Jewish who came from the old country, and [the area] catered to Jews who wanted some respite from the city at that particular time. It started out as just a place to go, and suddenly they wanted food to eat and after that they wanted entertainment, but that's a whole history that's in many books.

"When you were a nice Jewish boy in college, I would say in the 30s, 40s, and 50s, it was automatic. As soon as you finished your last exam from college in June, you made your trek to the Catskill Mountains. You were either a busboy, a waiter, a bellhop … or a musician. Those of us who were lucky enough to be musicians did that. I first started taking saxophone lessons and then took up the clarinet. I put a band together right out of high school going into college. I worked at a hotel called the Walnut Mountain House in Ferndale, NY, only one of 200 hotels that existed in that area. There were a number of agencies

that you would go to … you'd go there, you would audition for them, and they would pick out the hotel for you, and that's how we wound up in this hotel called the Walnut Mountain House in Ferndale, NY. I was there for two years, and we played for the people there.

"We played a lot of society music, a lot of Latin, but when the band struck up with a *freylekhs* [traditional lively Jewish circle dance], that was when everybody got out on the floor and absolutely loved it. In order to be able to play in the mountains, we bought the Bible of Jewish music, the Kammen Book, which had all the *freylekhs*, labeled #1, #2, #3. … One of the famous *freylekhs* in that book was the one that Benny Goodman made into 'And the Angels Sing.' A *freylekhs* lasted anywhere from five to ten minutes, compared to a regular society song, which is over in two or three minutes, but once that *freylekhs* started, they don't let you stop. We kept going, into songs like *Yosl, Yosl* (Joseph, Joseph), *Di Grine Kuzine* (My Greenhorn Cousin), and knowing all those songs you'd

segue from one right into another. You did about two or three medleys like that a night, because that was about all they could take. If the crowd was an older crowd, they might go to bed early, and then we'd go off to the larger hotels to play in jam sessions.

"It was a small hotel, and they had larger hotels, but we got to play for all of the top talent because they made the tours from one hotel to another, so they could have come from the Concord or Grossinger's, just to do another gig at that particular time. Every popular comedian from the 40s, 50s, and 60s will tell you that their start came from the Borsht Belt: Danny Kaye in White Row, Jerry Lewis in Brown's Hotel, Sid Caesar in Kutsher's – he was the saxophone player there! They all started that way, in the bands or as social directors (in Yiddish, *tumlers*). The experience was phenomenal. After a while, I felt that I needed to make some more money, so, in later years I became a bellhop and owned a concession in another hotel. But the opportunities were boundless. I feel bad that that era is gone, gone with the wind. The last hotel, Kutsher's, is up for sale now, and when that's gone it will be the end. It was magnificent. You can tell your children about it, but they can't even visualize what it was like."

So, of course, I asked him the obvious question, "Did you remain a bellhop for the rest of your career?" "No, and I didn't become a doctor or a dentist, but I became an accountant. Accountants and lawyers are defined as nice Jewish boys who can't stand the sight of blood."

## DAUGHTER OF THE BUND

One afternoon I was delighted to encounter Hinda Guttoff, one of the most esteemed Yiddish teachers in the Boston area, and she shared a cliff-hanger of an immigration story:

"My parents were leaders of the Bund [the Jewish secular socialist organization] in Poland – my father, Leon Oler, was a very well-known leader. Poland was a very repressive country before the war, and both of my parents had been arrested – they were Socialists, but they were accused of being Communists.

"When the war broke out, my father was taken into the army, but the army, of course, collapsed – Poland didn't have the wherewithal to fight Germany. My father found himself in the Russian-occupied part of Poland. He was able to get to Vilna and we went to try to meet him there, but unfortunately the Russians came in – and they arrested him for being a counter-revolutionary! It was because he was well-known enough to the Jewish Communists. There were very few Polish Communists and they didn't care, but, unfortunately, I have to say that it was the Jewish Communists who told the authorities about quite a number of Bundists who found themselves in the territories. Because he was a Socialist they arrested him as a Fascist and sentenced him to ten years in prison.

"But the Russians were attacked by the Germans, and all Polish citizens who had been arrested were freed to rejoin the Polish army, which my father did. He was sent to India, South Africa, and then to England until the war was over. We were able to get out from Russia through Sugihara, the Japanese consul in Lithuania who gave a lot of transit visas for Japan, which his government forbade him to do, but he did that anyway and saved several thousand Jews – my mother, my sister, and I were among them.

"We lived in Japan from January through August of 1941 and then we went by boat to Canada. The Germans attacked Russia again and took over Vilna in June of 1941, so we were very fortunate to be in Japan, because you know what happened to the Jews. We stayed in Canada for two years, and then our uncle brought us into this

country. I got my education at Hunter College in New York, where I studied psychology, and at the same time I was trained as a Yiddish teacher with the Workmen's Circle. Then, I married my husband, Ed, and that's how I got to Boston!"

All I could say was "Unbelievable!" Until I heard the next story. . . .

## "MIR YIDN ZAYNEN TAKE FUN AYZN"

### *(We Jews are Really Made of Iron)*

I met Shelly Wiprinik on one of my first days on the job. He had come to the United States from Israel to visit his friend, long-time Book Center member Arnold Clayton, a writer and historian from the Dorchester part of Boston. Originally from Czyzew (pronounced *Chizeve*), a town of approximately 1,500 located about 70 kilometers southwest of Bialystok in northeastern Poland, he was born in 1926, the middle son of a moderately religious family.

"My mother and father were observant Jews. We observed the Shabbat, and the holidays, we didn't drive, we didn't cook. It was traditional, warm, cozy – and also an insecure environment, because we were always facing pogroms from the Poles. Every time Christmas or Easter came along they wanted to kill the Jews. This was true way before the Nazis came."

While his brothers both attended yeshiva, Shelly was not drawn to the observant lifestyle, but instead found himself more interested in physically defending Jews against the anti-Semitism of his Polish neighbors. Thus, his survival story is particularly riveting. When the Jews of Czyzew were confined to a ghetto, Shelly was able to pass in and out through secret passageways – the Polish guards would not stop him. One day he returned to find that the ghetto had been emptied. He went off into the countryside, passing himself off as a Pole, and found work with a cruel boss. One day a Nazi officer on patrol saw Shelly's boss beating him. He took out his gun and shot the boss – and the German officer took Shelly on as his valet for the rest of the war!

"I am an old man with a young heart. There are many stories like mine." He paused for a moment. "I am very moved by my visit here and by what you are doing. In Israel, there is still an audience that is willing to listen to and learn from a few voices from the past, and the younger generation needs to absorb that, and strengthen themselves about what we will face in the future. We need to enlighten this world not to repeat our forefathers' mistakes. *Di yidn zaynen ale mol di kapoyrim do* [Jews are always the scapegoats]. I hope we can leave something behind." And then, standing in the middle of the stacks, he recited this original Yiddish poem transliterated here in Polish dialect:

*Yidn, zayt tsufridn,*
*Hot nisht kayn moyre, ven di gleybst in di toyre*
*Dortn lernt men zikh tsu zayn an erlikher mentsh.*
*Zey kent als, di goyim.*
*Yidn, nishts im gleybn.*
*Zey lozt undz nisht geyen oyfn glaykhn veg.*
*Yetst iz di tsayt, di velt tsubaysn,*
*Mir yidn zaynen take fun ayzn.*
*Un der yidisher folk vet lebn in eybikayt.*

Jews, be happy
Have no fear if you believe in the Torah
From it, one can learn to be an honest person.
Non-Jews know everything.
Jews, don't believe what they say.
They don't allow us to travel on a straight path.
Now is the time, the world would chew us up,
We Jews are really made of iron.
And the Jewish people will live forever.

*Ayzn* (iron) will bend for a genuine peace, shalom.

There are many voices, many strands of Jewish history, in the stories one hears within these walls. ♦

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