

Yiddish — The Sweet Stuff of Life

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The November, 1964, issue of the B'nai B'rith *National Jewish Monthly* carried a story entitled "The Yiddishe Shikse" by Samuel Kreiter. It was the story of how my wife Annette, a convert to Judaism, took up the study of Yiddish and carried it forward with almost "missionary zeal." It told, too, how the spirit enveloped me, and how our home has become an epicenter for Yiddish culture in New Mexico. Dr. Jacob R. Marcus, Director of the American Jewish Archives, read the story and asked me to prepare an autobiography for the Archives. In complying, I cannot help but reflect upon the irony of the fact that our cultural heritage of the last millennium has fallen to such a depth of desuetude that anyone who attempts to preserve it becomes a source of Jewish archival interest.

My grandfather Aaron Rosenthal came to America in 1890 from Vilna, Lithuania, in those days as now a Russian dependency. He was then in his early twenties and landed in New York with seven dollars. In his first week on the streets of Brooklyn he was persuaded by a *landsmann* to buy a sword for five dollars. This was, according to his diddler, the only way a man could gain entrance to the carpenter's union and find employment in America.

When my *zeydeh* Aaron returned home with this impressive relic, my *bobbe* Sarah threw it out of the window and wept in despair. Aaron, far from being bitter, immediately perceived the terms of immigrant life in America and chuckled. And so it was with him for the rest of his life. He accepted the pattern of life as it was in the New World, held it at a distance, and laughed at it. The essential man remained unchanged.

Maurice M. Rosenthal, a native Bostonian, and his wife, the former Margaret Annette Engh, a native of Oklahoma, live in a suburb of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Sometime after 1900 the family moved to Boston, Massachusetts. There Aaron raised three sons and one daughter and engaged in a number of businesses: a grocery store, a candy store, the jobbing of leather goods, and finally, manufacturing.

My father Ben, Aaron's oldest son, left school in the fifth grade to help my grandfather in business. The other sons were working, too, after school and weekends, but I think my father was the only one who emerged from the intense struggle with Aaron's singular qualities: the ability to compete without hurting another, the capacity to take hard blows without cynicism, the inner strength to live like a Jew without the outward forms, and particularly, the ability to laugh at himself as part of the seriocomic drama of the Children of the Bible disporting themselves among the baubles of the New World.

In one of the Yiddish newspapers of the time, there was a column called "Farshvundene Menshen" (Missing Persons) which told of the disappearance of immigrant Jews from the Boston scene. Some fled their wives. Some took jobs in the West and were never heard of again. Some ran off with chorus girls. And others were swindled and too ashamed to come home. My grandfather would read the column to his children, and they would laugh together. He laughed because he saw in the new American Jew what the Yiddish author Aaron Zeitlin was later to call "a nar with a car" (a fool with a car).

My grandfather's brother David was a self-styled cantor. Well over six feet tall with a luxurious white beard and deep blue eyes, David was an impressive man. He wore immaculate white suits and combed his hair and beard meticulously. He made every occasion at which he officiated something special with his handsome mien and his flair for the dramatic. Between jobs, David strolled the streets of Beacon Hill, where he had quite a following among the ladies. He passed himself off as European nobility, and his Yiddish accent as Russian. David was in constant trouble with his highbred girl friends and was forever hiding from them at my grandfather's home. Even today when I ask for details about this side of David Rosenthal, I am handed adumbrated sketches.

A few years before the First World War, David read an ad in

the *Forverts* telling of employment opportunities with The Duke Tobacco Company in North Carolina. He rushed there and persuaded Mr. Duke that the many Jewish employees he was taking on would need religious ministrations. Thus he was hired as a cantor for the unheard of sum of sixty-five dollars a week. David stayed in the South for two years, and when he returned to Boston, he wore a southern colonel's suit, a string tie, boots, and two six-guns strapped to his hips. The sight was so startling to the local Jews that he attracted large, chattering crowds wherever he went. And this, far from injuring his "professional" image, made him much sought after as a cantor at ceremonial occasions.

FROM BRIGHTON TO BROOKLINE

My father took over the wallet factory that my grandfather had established in 1917. The other sons scattered and were in and out of a hundred marginal jobs. They never had my grandfather's steadfast qualities in a competitive world, and from this point on it was blood ties more than common interests that kept a semblance of unity among the brothers.

My mother's parents came from the region of Kovno, Lithuania, about the end of the nineteenth century. The oldest daughter was born in Europe, but Effie, my mother, and her four brothers were born in Boston. The family of Morris Lazarus, the tailor, was instinctively serious, and hard work, books, and music filled their days. My mother was reared in the finest traditions of the Jewish *balebosteh* (homemaker) and remains even today a paradigm.

I was born in 1926 and grew up in Brighton, a suburb of Boston. We were not wealthy, but comfortable and relatively untouched by the Depression. Our family was close-knit and secure. Like most Jewish families of the time, we knew nothing of divorce, drinking, nervous problems, or external divisive forces. After public school hours, I was sent to a small *cheder* for religious training and rebelled with all the force in me. The teacher was well-intentioned, but harsh. He tried to teach us Hebrew by rote with his heavy Ashkenazic (East European Yiddish) accent. I fought him constantly, not only for his severities, but because I was denied free

time to play after school. At the age of twelve, I was finally expelled and had to finish my preparation for bar mitzvah with a private tutor. When it was over, I knew no more than my portion of the *haftarah* (the reading from the Prophets chanted on the Sabbath of my becoming bar mitzvah).

We then moved to nearby Brookline, a fancier suburb, and I was through with my religious instruction, such as it was. Brookline society then already had many of the elements of the American Jewish society of today: clean-scrubbed youth unfettered by traditional ties, an excellent school system, and a student body feverishly dedicated to college entrance. Many of my new friends bore Anglicized names. The girls were starting to have their noses bobbed. The only overt reminder of our Jewishness was that which was forced upon us by the Irish Catholic boys of the town. Theirs was an open, vicious anti-Semitism: fights, beatings, insults, ripping of clothes. Only a few of us fought back. This was in the early 1940's, and I remember reading of Hitler's depredations with what seemed to be tangible referents in Brookline.

BOSTON CAME ALIVE TO US

In my teen-years one difference seemed to mark our family life from that of my friends in the suburbs of Boston — my father and his influence. Because of him, our home pulsed with life and laughter. Our dinner table always crackled with good Jewish humor. The stories he told us in English I could understand, but those he directed at my mother in Yiddish I couldn't. They seemed to tickle me, nevertheless.

My father's interests were wide. He read eclectically and had a marvelous faculty with the English language. Everything fascinated him from both the Old World of his father and the New World of his children. Every Sunday he took us some place of interest: to the fishing fleets at Boston Harbor where he would speak to the Italian fishermen in their native tongue (he had learned Italian in the "melting pot" section of Boston as a youth); to the Navy Yard to clamber aboard *Old Ironsides*; to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's Wayside Inn at Sudbury; to Concord and Lexington to examine

the sites of the American Revolution. And he loved, too, to go to the Jewish sections around Boston and engage the street vendors in the most fantastical transactions in Yiddish, with flamboyant gestures. Because of him, Boston came alive to my younger brother Nate and me, such as it never did to our friends in the community.

It was the same way at social occasions, too. Whether we went to a party, a bar mitzvah, or a wedding, a crowd would always gather at Ben Rosenthal's side. He was a good listener if the occasion demanded, but usually he was the focal point, the unofficial *bal simcha* (guest of honor). His brilliant wit, his fluency with language, his ability to weave in and out of several cultures distinguished him from others who were just funny.

My father never hurt anyone, but he could not stand grandiosity or pretense. Among Jews he would employ Yiddish folk idiom to deflate; among others, whimsy of his own invention. When I was sent to camp as a youth, the director insisted that the parents write daily. What kind of news can you send to a seven-year-old child every day? My father sent me stock market reports. And if General Motors declared an extra dividend, he'd rush me a special delivery letter. I didn't know what it was all about, but the counselors loved it.

SHE TAUGHT HERSELF THE ALEF-BEYS

I was eighteen years old in 1944 and joined the Navy after being graduated from high school. I was discharged in 1946 and went to Bowling Green State University in Ohio for four years. Then I came to Albuquerque to take graduate work at the University of New Mexico. I fell in love with the West: the open space, the blue skies, the easy pace, the amiable people. I decided to stay here after my school years and took various jobs that finally led me to the investment business.

Ever since I left home, two forces played in and out of my consciousness: one, the ability to get along with all types of people by remaining a quiet, well-adjusted young man free of Jewish mannerisms; the other, a feeling of kinship with Jews, of inner relaxation when I was in Jewish society. But from the time I left home, I took what came, one side or the other, without too much

thought. Sometimes, though, I would be dimly troubled when, at native folk festivals, I would see Jews from Eastern cities in sandals and serapes playing the role to the hilt and speaking Spanish with seeming delectation. These same people never appeared at Jewish celebrations and proudly shrugged off any knowledge of Yiddish or Hebrew. I wondered what it was about Jews that impelled them with such force into any culture but their own.

In 1955, I sent to New York for a copy of Uriel Weinreich's *College Yiddish*. In retrospect, my motives were not very clear: I had a vague, perhaps sentimental fondness for the language, and I suspected that knowing a few phrases would enhance the fun I usually had with my father when I went home on vacation. But when the book came, I immediately set it aside. It was written in Hebrew characters, and I hardly remembered a third of them from my *cheder* days. Thus ended my first attempt at Yiddish.

I met my wife Annette Engh in 1961, and we were married the same year by Rabbi Abraham I. Shinedling. I remember saying — she was a Lutheran — that the only condition I would place upon our marriage was that I would remain Jewish and that if we had children, they, too, would be raised as Jews. She readily agreed and added that she herself would like to become a Jew. I had no real conviction on this point and left it to her.

My serious interest in Yiddish began when my wife found *College Yiddish* in my library. It was the same book I had essayed and dismissed six years earlier. She taught herself the *alef-beys* (the alphabet) and from there to read, write, and speak Yiddish. It was entirely her own accomplishment, for I could not help her. My surprise, my amazement, my shame, my pride — it is impossible for me to relate — when I would come home from work at night and be greeted in warm Yiddish phrases, and then see little notes written in perfect Yiddish script. It was at this time, too, that Annette started buying Yiddish records. Our home suddenly sprang forth with the accents of the past. I felt as if a bridge across some deep chasm had appeared, as if I had tapped a profound wellspring. Her Yiddish reminded me of the stories I had heard as a boy in adult company, of the Friday night candles, of my father's incomparable humor, of the half of my consciousness that had been

carefully subordinated to the other half, yet still sought expression. All this and more.

We agreed to study together, to get more books, to build up our library of the spoken and written word. We bought Sholem Aleichem and Peretz books, both in English and in Yiddish, and read to each other at night. We worked out the grammar lessons in our textbook, and we spoke Yiddish at the supper table. "Chanele" liked the homely warmth of the language, and while it was that to me, too, it was a half-perceived world returning in whole form. I felt my Jewishness returning, not only emotionally, but in the thousands of ways I had missed it before; for it was Yiddish that brought me into contact with the concepts, the attitudes, the rites, and the history of our people.

THE HUMUS OF LIFE

After six months of home exercises in Yiddish, I felt that it would be good to expose ourselves to the living language and ventured to speak to other Jews in Albuquerque about getting together for an evening of Yiddish conversation. At first the response was cool, with a tinge of amused cynicism. Then I got one other couple, then two. In a month we had ten people, representing three generations. We had no idea of a program, so we talked a little, played a few records, reminisced, and read a few articles from a Yiddish newspaper.

Now in its third year [1965], the Yiddish club has Jewish professors from the University of New Mexico who speak to us in Yiddish. We read the classics and work on the refinement of our language. We have also started on a Yiddish play that will be presented to the community in the fall of 1965. On the other hand, I have been accused by some of my assimilated acquaintances of trying to restore a ghetto mentality to the community. Nothing could be further from the truth. Yiddish did not create ghettos any more than Negro work songs created slavery.

Further, I have come to believe that the free exercise and celebration of one's cultural heritage is one of the transcendent virtues of a free society. I have our own little microcosm before me as a good

example. Since the organization of our Yiddish-speaking group, we have become more natural in our approach to living culture. We speak Yiddish freely among ourselves whenever we meet; we use it as a medium of conversation on the telephone. Our Gentile friends, people of good will, have expressed their admiration, and the children of the club members are starting to pick up the language. Most important, though, is the feeling that we are returning Yiddish from the realm of the sentimental past to that of the meaningful present.

I know that I am not the only "evangelist" for the cause of Yiddish, but the many apologias I have read tend to defend Yiddish on grounds of historical necessity, i. e., as a means of knowing the last one thousand years of Jewish history. Or, it is defended in terms of our literature: the tremendous achievement of the last hundred years in which a folk language grew to great stature and Yiddish authors entered on a golden age of literature, only to be stilled by the gas chambers of Hitler's inferno.

All this is true, and more. But to me the surpassing importance of Yiddish, the language and the culture, is its essential humanity, i. e., its peculiarly Jewish way of looking at things, which is, at bottom, humane. Yiddish culture has a tenderness, a regard for life forms, an indwelling sense of right that has been for ten centuries the living social model of the talmudic precept. And to the laws of our biblical fathers Yiddish has added the sweet stuff of life: the warm hearth, the kitchen redolent with food, and the joys of family life. We need Yiddish today as we have never needed it before. The highly organized and automated condition of modern industrial society has taken its toll of the human heart and its ability to respond to the emotional needs of others. Yiddish, grounded in the humus of life, is a refreshing antidote.

AY, BRIDERLE!

Our religious leaders in particular, I feel, should not ignore the cohesive force of a living, peculiarly Jewish culture. American Judaism is on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, it confronts the American life-style; on the other, religious formalism. We educate our young to accept the dichotomy as a part of being Jewish,

and they do — cerebrally. But the depth of feeling that characterized East European Jewry and was our source of strength is missing. I fear for the future, for to build our edifice upon an educated mind and a neutered heart is to build upon half a foundation. The solution to the dilemma must come about through a deeply personal commitment to a common Jewish culture. Only in the acting out of the cultural process are the elements of faith, reason, feeling, and brotherhood reconciled and renewed daily.

Many Jews regard the State of Israel as the proper emotional common denominator of the far-flung communities of the Diaspora. I am dubious. Without denying the historical necessity of *Eretz Yisrael*, I feel that she is rapidly moving away from the spiritual resting-place prayed for by every Jew since the destruction of the Second Temple. Israel is becoming a highly industrialized and technically oriented country, and her citizens celebrate her accomplishments as a national political entity, not as a spiritual center for world Jewry.

I think that history will prove the Yiddish culture of Eastern Europe to have been the highwater mark of Jewish spiritual life. There we studied for the pursuit of truth, not vocation. There we lived the words of the Patriarchs, even in the very teeth of death. There the soul of Jewish existence manifested itself in ringing song. The culture and the religion were one. I do not advocate a return to a world that no longer exists, nor am I unaware of the indignities suffered by our people in Europe for centuries before Hitler, but I do think that the model is there to appropriate in spiritual essence. We, as a people, need the lyric of whole Jewishness in our hearts. The pattern, Yiddish culture, is still fresh in our minds. The living descendants still exist among us.

I wonder if the scholar of the future who has learned the grammar and vocabulary of Yiddish will ever know the inner glow of those of us today who still meet in Jewish brotherhood and sing: *Ay, briderle, es iz gut tsu zayn a yid!* (Ah, brothers, it's good to be a Jew).