The Wisdom of Pearl

by

Pearl Ginsburg

with

Peter Weisz

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Dedication

To all my children.

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Rabbi Moshe Scheiner

My son, Ronnie Steinberg

My son, Arnie Steinberg

My daughter, Sharyn Perlman

...and most of all

My son, Alan Steinberg

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Introduction

by
Rabbi Moshe Scheiner

Pearl Ginsburg may be aptly described in the words of a namesake passage, written long ago by King Solomon in the Book of Proverbs and sung around the *Shabbos* table on Friday nights. "*Aishes Chayil Mi Yimtzah, V'rachok Mipninim Michrah*." "A woman of valor who can find? More precious than pearls is her worth." You will be able to find this woman of valor here in the pages of the book you are holding.

I had the good fortune of meeting Pearl Ginsburg in 1996, when she joined Palm Beach Synagogue during its infancy. She was one of those early members who helped to set the foundation and create the nucleus of our congregation. She was part of a core group made up of dedicated individuals who set the tone for what was to become the eventual symphony of our shul. The members of this founding group were people of a particularly righteous character, who succeeded in putting Palm Beach Synagogue on the map. Pearl, in particular, was a guide for me personally. She represented the type of person we wished to attract through our doors and to cultivate within our community. She served, in those early days, as an ambassador to the greater community and was able, through the power and persuasion of her personality, to showcase the values that Palm Beach Synagogue truly represents: Torah and *Menchlichkite*. As Pearl always quotes her Father *(OB"M)* saying: "*A Mentch Darf Gelt, Uber Gelt Darf Huben a Mentch*." "A *Mentch* (a person) needs money, but money also needs a *Mentch* (a person with character.)" Truly a fitting message for Palm Beach.

A wit once said: "Some people bring happiness wherever they go and others whenever they go." Pearl brings joy wherever she goes. She is the embodiment of all the good that love of

Hashem, Torah, family and one's fellowman generates. It's true that one can learn much from books, but one can learn even more from people. — people such as Pearl and her late husband David, who I was also fortunate to know. They represented and continue to represent the very best of Judaism. Anyone interested in learning about the essence of our traditions may do so effectively by studying the life of Pearl Ginsburg. And that, of course, is the key purpose of this book. To provide a close-up look at the life story of someone who embodies and exemplifies Judaism's finest qualities.

Pearl may appear small in stature, but as you begin to speak with her, she grows taller and taller with each passing sentence as her aspirations and inspiration enlarge and ennoble you. Her dreams and hopes for her family and for the Jewish people are so lofty and sublime that one must stand in awe when she begins to share them with you. Her wisdom, insight and values combined with her single-minded devotion to the future of Am Yisroel identifies Pearl as unique among her peers. While others finding themselves in Pearl's situation might spend their days focused on the material trappings of life, she gives such matters little attention. Instead, she is constantly asking herself: "How can I help others in need? What may I do to help perpetuate Judaism?" "How may I repay Hashem for all the blessings he has bestowed upon me?" Creating this book is one answer to those questions.

I have known Pearl during the senior years of her life and many times I have wondered: "How did she come to be this way?" And further: "How can we, as part of our mission, shape our youth to turn out as she did, graceful, generous and so good natured?" That is why I asked her on a number of occasions to write a book about her life. As I said to her, I want my own children to read it. I thank Hashem that she finally agreed.

During a recent *Shabbos*, an Israeli family visited our congregation. They were in our community because their fifteen-year old wheelchair-bound daughter, also named Pearl, was being treated at the world-renowned Paley Institute for a serious

orthopedic condition. As visitors, the family was introduced during the service and a bit about their background was shared with the congregation which included Pearl Ginsburg.

At the Kiddush following the service, many of the two hundred plus congregants chatted with the family — who spoke primarily Yiddish — and extended them a few words of welcome. But one very special congregant went further. Pearl Ginsburg, age 92 — who speaks perfect Yiddish — sat and conversed with the young girl and her family at length, often with tears in her eyes at the sight of this beautiful young lady so impaired and confined to a wheelchair. Pearl went on to invite the family to her apartment after Shabbos and welcomed her to play on her violin. Pearl opened not only her heart and her home, but also her purse with a gift intended to ease the family's medical expenses.

Most people who have reached their advanced years are on the receiving end of c*hesed*, the kindness of others. But with Pearl, it's the opposite. She continues to be a giver of compassion and comfort to those in need. But her greatest passion and purpose is to help educate our youth through the teachings of Torah. Despite the fact that she spent the better part of a century as a Hebrew School teacher, transmitting our people's heritage to generation upon generation, she has never expressed the notion that her work is finished. Pearl rightly believes that she still has much to offer and this book is tangible evidence of that belief. She is living proof that: "Your age doesn't define your stage."

Having known Pearl from age 69 to 92, she seems never to have aged. I simply do not perceive Pearl as an old person. I see her as young in spirit, filled with youthful idealism and purpose. Whenever I ask Pearl what means the most to her, she always responds in the same way: the children. This is because she regards herself as a link in the long heritage of the Jewish people. She sees herself as part of the seamless continuity from our ancestral past into our bright future. In this way, she is fulfilling a

promise to her heritage and gifting a present to her descendants. Hence, she has focused upon the importance of Jewish life as well as education. As you will read, Pearl realized as a young mother that doing so would be her key to success with her own children and until today, it is the pursuit of this passion that continues to be the source of her greatest *nachas* in life. As she states in the book's Conclusion, it is to her children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and future descendants to whom she is speaking in the writing of this book.

But whether you are among the young or the young at heart, WISDOM OF PEARL is a book that will uplift, as well as entertain you. In its pages, you will get to know a singular soul, unique among all whom you have ever met. And by passing her story and her spirit on to the next generation, you will actually be taking a page from this book. You will be employing the Wisdom of Pearl to help build the future of the Jewish people.

One of Pearl's annual traditions is to sponsor the Kiddush for the entire community every year on the Shabbos before her birthday. It is always a joyous occasion during which her children and grandchildren travel to Palm Beach to honor her. She always gets up and speaks about her love of *Hashem*, the Torah and her family. One year in 2007, when she was celebrating her 80th birthday, she got up to offer her good wishes and said: "I feel so blessed. I have everything I can ever want in life. A loving Jewish family, *nachas* from all of my children and grandchildren, comfortable living conditions, good health and many close friends. What possible birthday gift could I ask of *Hashem* now that I have reached age 80?" She squinted, smiled and paused for just a beat before announcing: "To reach 81!"

Pearl has made a similar pronouncement every year since then and clearly, *Hashem* has seen fit to grant each birthday wish. I hope to be on hand when we celebrate Pearl's 119th birthday and to hear her reply with "To be 120.

About Rabbi Scheiner

Rabbi Moshe E. Scheiner was born and raised in Brooklyn. He holds a Masters degree of Talmudic studies and Jewish philosophy from the Rabbinical College of America. He completed a two year internship at the Rabbinical College of Australia and New Zealand, and returned to New York to receive his rabbinic ordination at the United Lubavitcher Yeshiva.

He has lectured to communities in Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Singapore, Colombia and other communities throughout South America and the United States. In 1994 he became the founding Rabbi of the Palm Beach Synagogue (PBS). He also founded the Ethel & Eugene Joffe Maimonides Leadership Institute for post Bar and Bat Mitzvah students. Rabbi Scheiner resides in Palm Beach with his Rebbetzen, Dinie and their six children.

In January 1994, a small group of dedicated people started holding traditional Shabbos services at Temple Emanu-El in Palm Beach. This gathering was transformed into a community with the arrival of Rabbi Moshe and Rebbetzen Dinie Scheiner. Based on the philosophy of outreach and inclusiveness, the Scheiners were passionate in their desire to "make a difference." From its humble beginnings, Palm Beach Synagogue has blossomed into a flourishing center of Jewish life and activity that prides itself on being a place of warm welcome for Jews from all walks of life and all levels of Jewish observance, while maintaining its abiding adherence to traditional Jewish law and observance of mitzvot.

PBS offers unique programs in Jewish education and communal life, numerous youth activities, holiday services and celebrations, daily morning and afternoon/evening minyanim and weekly Shabbos services.

Foreword
by Peter Weisz

"Have I got a book for you!" these were the excited words of Rabbi Moshe Scheiner in the fall of 2018 as we spoke by phone. I knew that he was not talking about a book for me to read, but rather one for me to write.

Rabbi Scheiner had founded and serves as the spiritual leader of the Palm Beach Synagogue, one of the nation's most active and exemplary Orthodox shuls. He and his dynamic wife, Dinie, had been firmly implanting Yiddishkeit into this island of abundance off the sunny south Florida Atlantic coast since their arrival some twenty-five years earlier.

"Pearl Ginsburg is a congregant in her nineties," he went on to explain, "and she would like to write her memoirs. She is, without a doubt, one of the most amazing people I have ever met." This certainly piqued my interest and prompted me to reach out to her and her family. It turned out that Pearl spent her winters ensconced at the Palm Beach Hotel, a few steps from the shul, and she was prepared to spend the 2018-19 season working with me in compiling her life story. After working out the logistics, we set to work in early December and met frequently for one-on-one interview sessions. It was during these meetings that I go to know — and grew to admire — the truly incredible Pearl Ginsburg.

I have, over the past 17 years, helped my clients — both men and women — produce literary legacies of their personal histories. In so doing, I have become intimately entwined in the lives of some very impressive and highly successful individuals. A trip to my website (www.peterweisz.com) will reveal their identities.

But, prior to meeting Pearl, I had yet to encounter a person with such a single-minded determination and clearly focused vision.

Pearl is an ordinary woman with an extraordinary mission in life. The perpetuation of the Jewish people. Coming from a secular background, Pearl discovered her purpose in life through a dramatic epiphany. This mission guided her steps back to the traditions of her people and has shaped the unique and life-affirming person she has become.

When you meet Pearl, the first thing you will notice is that she does not engage in chit-chat. After a few cursory pleasantries, she is immediately off on a topic of importance. Whether it's the political situation or the content of this week's Torah portion, Pearl is not one to waste many minutes on idle chatter. And, if you listen closely, you will discover, embedded in her words, frequent pearls from Pearl. I'm speaking of pearls of wisdom. Wisdom, unlike knowledge, is something that may not be easily transmitted through traditional teaching methods. Wisdom is a quality that enables certain people among us to absorb such knowledge, process it, and then deploy it to benefit of themselves and others. You will likewise find such pearls of wisdom, or Wisdom of Pearl, embedded in the pages of this book…if you seek them out.

Whether you read this book for the simple enjoyment of learning about a life well-lived, or if you will be prying the afore-mentioned pearls out of her story, I am confident that your life will be enriched by the time you have finished.

In closing I extend to you, dear reader, my appreciation for acquiring this book and reading its pages. I also extend to you the greatest possible wish I can imagine: May your life be as rewarding and as meaningful as that of Pearl Ginsburg. Now read the book and enjoy.

Preface
The Girl Who Fell to Earth

"All art is autobiographical. The pearl is the oyster's autobiography."

—Federico Fellini

It's really surprising what goes through a little Jewish girl's mind as she's falling to the ground from two and a half stories up. Time seems to stretch like salt-water taffy and the brain tends to focus on tiny details in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the sheer horror of the moment. At least that's what it was like for me — a seven-year-old Jewish girl living in Depression-era Coney Island — as I tumbled head over hush puppies towards the ground below. I had lost my balance and plunged from our family's balcony that everyone called "the porch." My best friend and I had been chatting when, for no particular reason, I elected to climb up on a folding chair that was leaning against the railing. As I placed my weight on the seat of the chair, it de-

cided not to open, but rather to flip back shut suddenly, propelling me over the rail and into the sweltering summer air.

I recall hearing my friend's terror-drenched voice as she screamed hysterically for my mother: "Mrs. Helfman! Mrs. Helfman! She fell off the porch! Pearl fell off the porch!"

"Yes, that's me," I thought as I plummeted earthward. "I'm the girl they call Pearl."

But then I thought: "What an odd name when you think about it. Why on Earth did my parents ever name me Pearl?" Even at that young age, I knew that pearls came from oysters and that oysters, along with clams and lobsters and all sorts of shellfish, were strictly trafe. Trafe means "Not Kosher." So why would they name me after something that comes from trafe? I pondered this as the ground rose up ever closer to meet me.

Years later, I learned the truth behind my name and my namesake. Pearl, as it turns out, was the name of my father's mother. I know little about her except that she, like me, was very stubborn. When her 16-year old son (my father, Irving) made up his mind to leave Warsaw for the "Goldeneh Medinah" of America in 1919, my grandma Pearl insisted that she would not join him. She was religious and believed that even the cobblestones in America were trafe. Pearl was staying put and nothing Irving could do or say would ever change her mind. But in a way, my grandma Pearl did arrive to America. Shortly after I was born, in 1927, her son, Irving opened the Pearl Ladies' Hat Company. It was perhaps a desire on Irving's part to bring his mother to America that prompted him to name not only his American millenary business after her, but to also to bestow his late mother's name on his first-born child. That child, of course, being me. More about Dad a little later.

Fast forward seven years to 1934 as I continue my descent from the balcony. That era was, of course, known as the Great Depression, although I never understood what was so great about it. Most people, including us, didn't have two nickels to rub together. But if you only had one nickel, you could still buy a knish

or a delicious kosher hot dog at Nathan's. Nathan's owned the boardwalk. They undercut the competition by offering five cent frankfurters and advertising them on red and white signs plastered everywhere. In fact, the entire stretch of Coney Island beaches, amusements and eateries became known as The Nickel Empire. This moniker was mainly due to the five cent fare charged by the newly opened subway line that transported New Yorkers by the hundreds of thousands to Coney Island on sticky summer weekends during the Boardwalk's 1920s heyday.

The heart of Coney Island, in those days was a narrow strip that ran from Feltman's Restaurant to an area called Steeplechase. A congested clump of cheap amusements and nickel peepshows, the Bowery stayed open till 2 am, long after the more respectable establishments had closed their doors. But by the mid-1930s, the Bowery had descended into a hobo jungle, filled with Skid Row flophouses filled with winos, rounders and the dregs of humanity. Even the giant roller coasters — Coney Island's once-mighty landmarks — stopped running after Luna Park went bankrupt in 1933, leaving behind shoddy wooden skeletons silhouetted against the night sky.

But our end of Coney Island was far removed from both the frivolity of the Boardwalk's Golden Age as well as its decrepit descent into its current shabby circumstances. We lived "Beyond the Boardwalk," outside the realm of the Nickel Empire in what was merely another Brooklyn neighborhood, filled with schools and tenements and Kosher butcher shops and colorful crowds of Eastern European immigrants of all flavors, struggling to keep food on the table and the wolf from the door.

It was into this hearty stew of ethnicity that I was rapidly descending. A vertical journey that was about to end. Just before hitting the ground, I became anxious because I knew what was awaiting me there. Directly below our "porch" there lay a heap of just plain junk. All sorts of discarded building materials, metal paint cans, scrap lumber, lead pipes and the God knows what. For some reason there was a five-foot diameter clear patch

amidst all the ruin and rubble. Incredibly, as if guided by an invisible hand, I landed my tush right on that spot. Although the wind was knocked from my lungs, I appeared to be otherwise unharmed. As I regained my breath, my mother and a group of neighbors came running to my side only to discover that I had somehow survived a twenty-five-foot free fall entirely unscathed.

"*Mein Pearleleh! Mein tayer tokhter!*" my mother cried as she examined me from head to toe for signs of injury. "She's okay. She's okay," she kept announcing to the assembled gawkers, many of whom responded with "*keineinehora*," which is a cross between "congratulations" and "knock on wood (to ward off the evil eye)."

The incident had a lasting effect on my young psyche. It led me to believe that I was somewhat impervious to the hazards and happenstance of life. The influence of that fall's benign outcome no doubt contributed to my increased willingness to take chances and my lifelong high level of risk tolerance. In a way, and for the first time in my life, it began to toughen me up. But it would not be the last time that I would be required to overcome one of life's major obstacles or minor irritants. Each instance, as you will read about in this book, served to shape my character and to propel me even more passionately down life's highway. Without those experiences I would not have become the person I am today. And just like that non-kosher mollusk, who takes an aggravating grain of sand and turns it into a cherished thing of beauty, I soon learned the meaning of the expression: "No grit, no pearl."

Along the way, as a result of these varied experiences, I managed to learn a thing or two about life. They call this "wisdom" and one such bit of wisdom that I have picked up over the years is the difference between wisdom itself and knowledge. Knowledge can be transmitted — from parent to child via the spoken word or from generation to generation through the written word — but wisdom cannot. Wisdom means applying the knowledge you have gathered and putting it to good use. I have always at-

tempted to share whatever wisdom I have been able to garner with my family members, friends and others. This book is an extension of that practice. In its pages I have tried to imbue my story with words of wisdom drawn from my life's experiences. It is my hope that these bits of "Pearl's Wisdom" will serve to benefit you as you strive to overcome the grit and create the pearl of your own life's journey.

Chapter One
Family of Origin

"I had always hoped that this land might become a safe and agreeable asylum to the virtuous and persecuted part of mankind, to whatever nation they might belong."

— George Washington

The Year of Aught-Three

Jewish women have been stirring things up in New York since the beginning of the 20th century. In 1903, a boycott of high-priced Kosher beef in New York prompted the suffragette leader, Jane Addams and others, to found the Women's Trade Union League. That same year saw the very first World Series played between the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Boston Americans (soon to be re-named the Red Sox). Boston won. Henry Ford introduced the Model A that year and, not long after, the Wright brothers flew the very first airplane at Kitty Hawk. The newly minted twentieth century, soon to become known as the American Century, saw the emergence of an optimistic and upbeat zeitgeist. But a half a world away, in the Jewish communities of Poland, 1903 was hardly a year of sky-high dreams and social progress. In fact, it was a time of oppression, of brutal pogroms, of quotas and *numerus clausus,* of forced conscription into the

Czar's army, and a time of virulent church and state-sponsored anti-Semitism. It was into this world, in the year 1903, that both of my parents were born.

My Father's Story

My father, Irving, was born in the once and future Polish capital of Warsaw. The city, at the time, had the largest Jewish population in the world. By the end of the 19th century, nearly 80% of the world's Jews lived in Poland. With most of the country under Russian rule during those years, Jews were restricted, by law, to living in what was called "The Pale of Settlement," where, with few exceptions, they lived in dire poverty in isolated communities called *shtetls*. In order to escape the crushing poverty, many Jews, including my grandparents, Pearl and She'ela Helfman, were drawn to Poland's urban centers. Soon Warsaw's population was more than one-quarter Jewish.

After Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, Jews across the Pale were subjected to murderous pogroms that succeeded in causing millions to flee, many to America. This first wave of eastern European immigration brought many of the forebears of today's American Jews to our shores. But most stayed behind, including my grandparents who sustained themselves with a small millenary enterprise in Warsaw. If you've seen Fiddler on the Roof and recall the scene of a "blessed event" that turns out to be a Singer sewing machine, then you can appreciate how my grandparents brought their machine with them to Warsaw and set up shop making fur hats in the Jewish quarter.

When they had sold enough of these *shtreimels* and saved up the profits, my grandparents were able to purchase a second

Singer on consignment and later a third one. Operating out of their home, they were eventually able to build up their production to include twelve electric Singer sewing machines. Naturally this meant hiring operators to work the machines. My grandmother, Pearl, would make a hearty soup each day for the workers and at noon the machines would be shut down so everyone could eat lunch. Afterwards, the electricity was turned back on and everyone worked for the rest of the day. And on Friday each worker received his pay along with his soup. In this way, my grandparents, as well as their sons, Irving and his younger brother, Chaim, managed to survive through the dire years leading up to the Great War.

The decision to leave Poland was made by my grandfather in 1912 after a humiliating and harrowing encounter with a Polish Jew-baiter. My grandfather's name was actually Yehoshua, but everyone knew him as "She'ela." It was She'ela's job to carry the week's production of fur-lined hats down to the market square and display them on a blanket for customers to peruse and hopefully purchase.

On this particular market day, my grandfather, along with his young son (my future father, Irving) had laid out his wares when a Cossack on horseback approached them. Without saying a word, the rider leaned over and, with his riding crop, picked up one of the fur hats and flipped it up into his hands. Next, the sneering cossack opened his canteen and filled the upturned hat with water which he then proceeded to present to his horse to drink. Of course, using a fur hat as a horse's water bowl succeeded in ruining the expensive chapeau. Young Irving, age 9, became enraged and began to open his mouth to object. Fortunately, my grandfather grabbed his son's arm. "*Shtill, shtill*," he admonished the boy in Yiddish. "One word from you and he'll

bring that riding crop down hard across your face and you'll wear it for the rest of your life." My grandfather held the boy's hand and held his own tongue as he was forced to stand in utter humiliation in the eyes of his son. That did it. My grandfather, She'ela, decided, right there on the spot, that he had had enough and it was time get out of Poland.

But it wasn't merely the rising level of anti-Semitism that persuaded my grandfather to emigrate. It was also the growing exposure he was facing of conscription into the Czar's army. As the European nations became increasingly militarized in the years running up to the Great War, young Jewish men, between the ages of 14 and 45, were being rounded up and forced to serve. She'ela no doubt felt the hot breath of the army breathing down his neck.

As conditions became increasingly hostile, She'ela came to the understanding that opportunities to emigrate were quickly drying up. He had to act fast. He begged his wife to pack up the two children and join him in the wave of Jews bound for the New World, but Pearl, unlike her sisters, would not hear of it. She would never leave Poland. So She'ela decided to go it alone. His stated plan, like that of many immigrants of that era, was to arrive first to America and establish a beachhead, Then after he had found a job and had a bit of bankroll, he would send for the rest of his family. But that is not how things worked out.

Grandpa She'ela faced a serious problem. Gelt. Money. Passage to America on a steamer, even in steerage, was beyond his means. Out of desperation he made a monumental decision. He would sell the Singers. All twelve of them and use the cash to underwrite his travel costs. The fact that he did not technically own these sewing machines — they were given to him on consignment —did not deter him. He realized, of course, that selling

equipment that he did not own was a criminal act. Not only that, doing so would put his family out of business. It would leave them destitute and without a stitch. Nevertheless, She'ela did what he felt he had to do. He took the money and ran. And so, one fine spring morning, when my grandmother Pearl opened the workroom door, she discovered that the sewing machines as well as her errant husband had all vanished. This was devastating since, without a means of livelihood and with the breadwinner having flown the coop, the remaining family — my grandmother, Pearl, her son, Irving and his younger brother, Chaim — slid deeper and deeper into poverty during the coming Great War years.

The creation of the democratic independent Polish nation after the war, under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, gave hope to the Jews of Poland, as well as other minorities, that conditions might improve. But by 1919, they had not. A new threat reared its ugly head as Polish nationalism took hold and the first people it took hold of were the Jews.

New discriminatory laws were passed and Jews soon understood that they had gone from the frying pan into the fire. Word of the renewed pogroms in Poland reached even Washington, where President Wilson dispatched Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, Sr., to Poland investigate the treatment of Jews. The resulting Morgenthau Commission Report recounted how members of Poland's Blue Army, returning from France, roamed the streets of Warsaw assaulting and murdering any Jew they could lay hands on after falsely accusing them of collaborating with Poland's enemies. In the face of such widespread and toxic aggression, many Jews decided to leave, joining the second great wave of Jewish immigration. Among them was my 16-year old father, Irving.

Somehow managing to scrape together the money needed for passage, Irving said good-bye to his younger brother and his mother —who again refused to consider leaving Poland —and went off to seek his way in the world. His first stop was in Paris where Irving found lodgings with one relative after another. Unfortunately he found no employment. Finally, his aunt informed him that she could not afford to put him up any longer, and so Irving said "adieu" and set sail for New York harbor.

Once in New York, Irving attempted to connect with his father, but he learned that She'ela had remarried and now had no interest in helping his former family members.

Back in Poland, my grandmother Pearl and her remaining son, Chaim, found they were unable to fend for themselves during the difficult years that followed and succumbed to literal starvation. Although Irving was unable to bring his mother to America in person, he did manage to do two things in 1927 that represented a symbolic effort to transport Pearl's spirit and memory to these shores as best he could. The first was to designate his first-born child—that being me—as her namesake. At roughly the same time, Irving gave the name Pearl's Fine Ladies Hats to his new millenary factory. While the hat company only lasted two years, until the crash of 1929, as of 2019, I have endured some ninety years beyond that— so far.

My Mother's Story

My mother, Yetta Hirschenhorn, arrived to the States before the Great War with her family when she was a child of nine. She had few memories of the old country and did not tell me very much about the details of her life in Lublin, the city where she was born. I do know that somewhere between Lublin and New

York City, the family lost a syllable from their last name. It morphed from Hirshenhorn to Hirshhorn by the time they arrived to America. I suspect that the name change was prompted by a desire to sound less Jewish.

Yetta's father, my grandfather, Hyman Hershenhorn, was motivated to immigrate to the US by many of the same forces as had propelled thousands of other Jews from the Pale of Settlement and the large communities of Eastern Europe, including my other grandfather and my father: an escape from antisemitism, a quest for economic opportunity and a fear of being drafted into the Czar's army. Hyman, in fact, went so far as to engage in self-mutilation in order to make himself undesirable to the roving bands scouring Lublin for young Jews whom they could kidnap and turn over to the military for a handsome bounty. He had taken an axe and chopped off the last joint of his right index finger — his trigger finger — making it impossible for him to fire a rifle. When he learned that this ploy was no longer effective as a draft dodger tactic, he, like millions of others, decided it was time to sail away to the USA, taking along my grandmother, Rifka Necha, my mother, Yetta, and her little brother, Sidney. A third child, Joseph, was born shortly after the family arrived in America.

My parents met and were wed because of the stork, but not in the way you may think. Let me explain. It seems that on one particular day in 1925, my 22-year-old single mother was visiting her married friend, Edith. When Yetta arrived at the door, Edith's mother, who was the neighborhood midwife, informed her that Edith was upstairs in bed about to have her first baby. Naturally, my mother pitched in to help. She came in the door and offered to do whatever she could to assist with the delivery. Just then a young man named Irving also entered the front door. Irving was

a boarder living at Edith's house and had come home to eat his dinner. He quickly saw the flurry of activity going on all around and told Edith's mother: "You're all busy here with the baby. Why don't I go down to the tavern and have my dinner there?" Yetta heard this and immediately objected. If Irving went elsewhere for dinner, he would not have to pay Edith for that night's meal. Yetta did not wish for her friend to lose the revenue so she quickly popped up and said:

"Sit down, mister. I'll make you dinner," and she marched straight into the kitchen and whipped up a delicious meal for the handsome young man. While he was eating, Yetta looked around for some other way to help out. "What about the laundry?" she thought. "Just because there's a baby on the way doesn't mean we can stop washing the clothes. The baby should arrive to clean sheets, towels and pillowcases all bleached and neatly folded."

So, as her friend and her friend's mother, the midwife, dealt with contractions and labor pains, Yetta was in the basement washing and wringing out the linens and the laundry. Mixed in the pile were a collection of men's shirts that Yetta neatly starched and ironed before placing them on wooden hangers. As it turned out, the shirts belonged to the man in the kitchen eating dinner: my future father. In addition to room and board, he received laundry service in consideration of his $3 per week rental fee.

"Who ironed my shirts so nicely?" Irving wanted to know, once he spotted them emerging from the basement. When he was told that it was the same industrious young lady who had prepared his dinner, Irving was deeply impressed by Yetta's domestic skills. She was able to whip up a delicious meal on a moment's notice and did an exquisite job on his dress shirts. And not only did she possess these homemaking skills, she had a cer-

tain sparkling presence that Irving found very attractive. Yetta was likewise impressed with Irving's take-charge personality and his old world manner. Despite the fact that, coming from Lublin, she was less modern and more traditionally Jewish than he was, they hit it off and soon began seeing each other regularly.

Of course, Irving was not well-schooled in all the niceties of courtship. Basic things, like how to go about asking a girl out on a date, eluded him. One day, not long after their first encounter, he appeared at Yetta's door holding two tickets to the local movie theater, explaining that he wished for them to go see the movie together right away. Irving felt that he was obliged to repay her kindness for the dinner and the shirts. But beyond that, he also was interested in spending some more quality time with this very charming young lady. Her response, however, left him displeased.

"I'm very sorry to disappoint you, Irving, but I wish you would have told me sooner," she said. "I've made other plans for today." My future father had never been told that it is customary to ask a lady in advance before taking her out on the town…or even to the movies. But he was learning. He returned the tickets and, after consulting with Yetta in advance this time, purchased more tickets and the couple did find their way down the aisle of the movie theater…and not too long after, down the aisle to the chuppah.

By the way, Edith had the baby just fine and she and my mother remained close friends for the duration of their lives.

Our Little Family

Irving and Yetta found a modest home in the Bronx, near Yetta's father's neighborhood grocery store and they lived what

might be called a secular Jewish lifestyle. This meant, among other things, that they refrained from eating non-Kosher food. Not so much for religious reasons, but because they did not trust "trafe" to be as clean and properly prepared as Kosher food. They were convinced that if a Jew ate just a single mouthful of pork sausage, for example, it would prove fatal.

My father continued toiling in the same vineyard in which he had been brought up, the fine art of making hats. Despite the fact that he was, for a time, the owner of what some might call a "sweatshop," — Pearl's Ladies' Hat Company— Irving remained, throughout his life, an ardent champion of the working man. He was a member in good standing of the American Labor Party, which had split from the Socialist Party in the 1920s and operated exclusively in New York. It was part of a liberal social democratic movement that was patterned after the British Labor Party and strove to promote the "dignity of the working man." The party evolved into the New York Liberal Party in the 1940s and in the 1970s, John Lindsey was re-elected mayor of New York City as the Liberal Party candidate. My father, Irving, was, not surprisingly, also a card-carrying member of the Textile and Millenary Workers Union of America.

My father never forgot that he had been living in a boarding house when he had first met my mother, and, as a result, the couple always maintained a wide-open door policy, forever welcoming strangers into their home. In 1927 a new little stranger began living with them. It was their first child and that child was me. As explained earlier, I was named Pearl in memory of my late grandmother who had perished in Poland. My father's millenary factory, Pearl's Ladies' Hats, opened its doors not long afterwards.

The Corner Grocery

Sadly, when the stock market crashed in 1929, Pearl's Hats went right down the tubes with the rest of the American economy. With the onset of the Depression, my father's reversal of fortune forced our little family to find new lodgings. Being unemployed did not leave him many options. We wound up living with my grandparents, the Hershhorns, not far from my grandfather Hyman's little corner grocery store.

Some of my most pungent and powerful childhood memories were forged in that little hole-in-the-wall establishment. Of course, in that pre-supermarket era, everything was done by hand. Nothing came prepackaged. There was a Saturday night ritual I remember that was called "Cutting the Butter." The butter, which arrived from the dairy farm in the form of a huge 10 lb. cube, would be lifted from the tub onto the marble countertop where my uncle Joe would do the honors. Taking a large butter cutting knife and, after scoring the block in two dimensions with vertical and horizontal cuts, he would replace the whole thing back into the tub. Now, when a customer requested a block of butter, the clerk could reach into the tub with a knife and quickly make only the necessary final cut. This freed the block and it would pop out and was then wrapped in wax paper and weighed on the scale.

Cream cheese was dispensed in a similar fashion, although it arrived to the store in a wooden box. I remember how the neighborhood boys would always be interested in how much cream cheese was left in the box. When the level got low, they would ask my grandfather: "Mr. Hershhorn. May we have the box when it's empty?" It was just the right size to make a soapbox derby

style race car once you were able to find four baby carriage wheels.

I loved the mixture of all the grocery store aromas and flavors and it was understood that whatever tidbits fell off the scale or onto the counter belonged to me. I consumed untold quantities of non-FDA approved cheese, of unpackaged candy, of unpasteurized milk and I never once became ill as a result.

Of course there was no cash register, so all payments went directly into a rusty metal box. In addition to being in charge of the butter-cutting ritual, my Uncle Joe was also the controller of the prices and served as the human adding machine. When a customer had assembled her week's shopping items on the counter, Joe would take a paper bag and a pencil and add everything up. Most typically, this amount would not be paid on the spot. Instead, it was charged to the customer's account in a ledger book that Uncle Joe maintained. People simply didn't have much disposable income in those days, so credit was extended — interest-free. I would often see Joe record the sale of two cigarettes or a single egg into the credit ledger. I don't recall any shoppers every buying a dozen eggs at one time. Whenever a customer would come into some cash, such as on payday, they would come in and make a payment against their account. But some never did so and the store would suffer the losses.

Uncle Joe had one more assignment that none of the customers knew about. He was the keeper of the sour cream. When the sour cream arrived to the store from the dairy in a four-foot high metal container, Uncle Joe would never open it up inside the store. Instead, he would carry it to a clandestine backroom spot where, all alone, he would pry off the lid. This practice allowed him to secretly skim off the ugly green mold that accumulated at the top of the sour cream. Once so sanitized, he would

bring the pure white delicacy back into the store to display before customers. The metal container was placed through a hole in the wall that allowed the sour cream to be scooped out while the container stood inside of a primitive outdoor refrigeration system. It was a simple insulated wooden box that sat along the outside wall of the store. At one end, the box held a block of ice positioned in front of an electric fan. The fan blew chilled air around inside the long box and this is where my grandfather kept perishable dairy and a few produce items from spoiling. Of course, during the winter months, no ice was needed.

Large burlap sacks, filled with beans, rice, grains and sweet-smelling spices — bags that had to be rolled down as they were depleted — littered the floor of the store. And of course, let's not forget the pickle barrel and the cracker barrel. I could usually be found running among those bags and barrels chasing down the store's cat who was a prodigious mouse-catcher, but very ugly. I think it was my dislike of that cat that accounts for my antipathy towards felines to this very day.

The bread and baked goods were stored in a special wooden cabinet where customers could help themselves. No bagels. No bialys. No slicer. Just whole loaves of rye bread and assorted dinner rolls. The lower area of the bread cabinet was always white because the flour that coated the bottom of the loaves and rolls would flake off and collect there, making something of a mess on the floor. It was my job to sweep it up. "*Aoyskern, aoyskern*!" my uncle would always say, handing me an old broom that had turned white from sweeping up all the flour. And eventually, I also became as white as the Pillsbury Doughboy.

Although the store was not advertised as a "kosher" market — we called it a Jewish market — I recall that my grandfather sold no trafe. You could not buy any pork products or shellfish,

that was for sure. But I would say that this restriction was carried out for business reasons, more than for religious ones. Almost all of the store's customers were Eastern European Jews who, for the most part, observed the dietary laws. So even if my grandfather had one day decided to start selling shrimp, there would have been no one to purchase it. There were a few gentile customers who patronized the little Jewish grocery. I recall one such Christian lady who, every year on Palm Sunday, would bring my grandfather a palm leaf after church. Grandpa Hymie would thank her sweetly for this gesture, but once she went out, it went out…into the trash. "*Vos zol ikh ton mit dem zakh*? (What am I expected to do with this thing?)" he would ask me.

To tell the truth, my grandfather Hyman was not a particularly pleasant man. He was gruff and not very sociable by nature. The only person he seemed to be friendly with was me. He actually seemed pleased and would almost squeeze out a smile whenever I would come to the store. For some strange reason he would always call me Pauly. Not Pearly and not Pearleleh, but Pauly. "Why does Grandpa Hymie call me Pauly?" I recall asking my mother.

"Leave him alone," she replied. "He thinks he's calling you Pearly. Like Pearly White." This was a reference to the silent film star known as the "Queen of the Serials," who had been popular when Hymie was a young man.

Hard Times

The period that little our family (Yetta, Irving and I) lived with my grandparents ended abruptly due to an overly splendid breakfast. One day, my mother decided to fix my father a special, rather hearty, morning meal, taking the ingredients, as she usual-

ly did, from her mother's pantry. Yetta did not feel particularly guilty about doing this since her father owned a grocery, he bought all his food at wholesale. But when Hymie saw the lavish potato pancakes and knishes, he took his daughter into the next room.

"Since when does a man with no job need such a fancy-shmancy breakfast?" Hymie intoned in Yiddish.

"I wanted to cheer up Irving. Anyway, you buy all the food cheap," answered Yetta.

"I knew it," said her father, his voice getting louder and more irritated. "I knew that supporting you two would fall onto my hands."

My father, Irving, finishing his breakfast, heard all this and decided that he had had enough. He left the house, telling my mother he would be back by evening and she should pack up all of our belongings. He spent the day visiting "the Aunts." Irving's mother, my namesake Pearl, had four sisters. All of them, except for Pearl, made it to America. By this time Pearl and her youngest child had perished from starvation in Poland. But Pearl's sisters, Irving's aunts, were all doing just fine. In fact, they all lived long lives with several reaching beyond the age of 100.

Irving returned to the Hershhorn house that evening and collected Mom and me.

"We're getting out of here," he told us. "We're going to live with *Tanteh* Annie." And, feeling a bit like gypsies folding our tents in night and moving on, that's exactly what we did. Aunt Annie was a wonderfully warm woman who soon became my surrogate grandmother. During the lean years of the Depression, she rented out rooms to her relatives, creating something of a family boarding house. There were eleven people, including the

three of us, all related, all living at *Tanteh* Annie's, all under one roof. Everyone paid what rent they could and this provided Annie with her *parnassa*, her livelihood.

The relationship between my father, Irving Helfman, and his father-in-law, Hyman Hirschhorn, was always rather tenuous and strained at best. This episode pushed it to the breaking point and the two men became estranged. Over the ensuing years they seldom spoke. This frigid friction had far-reaching effects in term of our family dynamics. The most dramatic and devastating effect was that it made it very difficult for my mother, Yetta, to carry on a normal relationship with her own mother, Rifka. Yetta essentially did not see her own mother for nearly eight years.

One day, around the time I graduated from middle school, we received a visit from Yetta's Uncle Willie, Rivka's brother.

"Your mother is dying," he soberly told Yetta. "She has liver cancer and they don't give her much time. There's just one thing that's keeping her alive. She's waiting to see you before she dies." My father, hearing the news, agreed. "Yes. You must go see your mother," he instructed her.

Yetta was greeted with open arms by her mother who embraced her in a tear-filled reunion, chanting the name of her prodigal daughter over and over. "*Meineh Yettasel! Meineh Yettasel!*." Two days later my grandmother Rivka died.

Chapter Two
The Early Days

Irving eventually found work as an assembly line laborer with one of the few surviving millenary houses in New York where he worked faithfully for the next fifty years. My father was a cigarette smoker—up to a point. When in his early fifties, Irving went into a coughing fit and coughed up something large and highly disgusting. After one look, he threw away his remaining pack of cigarettes and swore he would never smoke again. He was as good as his word and managed to live another forty years. But after a lifetime of inhaling fabric fibers and chemical fumes at the hat factory, my father eventually succumbed to emphysema at age 92 and a half.

My memories of my father are of a warm and affectionate man who always called me his girlfriend, and often said I was the best thing that ever happened to him, As a father, he was never stingy with his hugs and kisses. He resembled a slender Edward G. Robinson, but better looking. By comparison, my mother was not what you'd call a touchy-feely

person. She was more, shall we say, formalized. Not particularly affectionate, but highly dutiful. She did what was expected of her and seldom revealed the feelings in her heart. This attitude perhaps accounted for the fact that her other two children arrived late in her life. It also explained why I was so excited when I was finally, at age 12, rewarded with a sibling.

My sister Rhoda arrived a few days before the massive German anti-Jewish pogrom called Kristallnacht, a nightmare event that marked the beginning of that darkest of times, the Holocaust. But to me, Rhoda was a beam of pure sunlight, warming everyone's hearts and souls. Having Rhoda around made me feel really grown up. I became my mother's little helper when it came to caring for the new baby. I carried out or assisted with all the usual chores, from washing diapers to preparing the formula, despite the fact that I received zero praise or encouragement from my mother.

Nevertheless, I was an exemplary student at P.S. #60 elementary and middle school, an all-girls academy where we were required to wear prim uniforms, which included woolen knee socks that had to be worn during the hot months of the year. It's funny the things that stand out in one's memory. I proudly graduated from P.S. #60 in 1939 as the Salutatorian of my class. This distinction allowed me to be the only student permitted to wear a white skirt and a white ribbon in my hair to the commencement ceremony. Another thing that stands out in my memories of that time

is the fact that my father was unable to attend the event and hear me proudly deliver my address to the class. I was heartbroken, but I understood how it was when Dad explained it to me the night before the ceremony: "*Meineh Pearleleh,* I want to be there with all my heart, but it's during the day and I have to be at work. If I take off work, I don't get paid and I may lose my job. So that's out of the question. You'll tell me all about it tomorrow night and I'll be very interested in hearing your speech, just the way said it in front of the entire school. I am very very proud of you." As I said, my father was an affectionate and compassionate parent and, although I desperately wanted him to be there, I fully understood and I forgave him. But the pain of his absence on that day has stayed with me to this day.

On the other hand, my mother's personality seemed to harden over the years and she became very strict about how things had to be done precisely her way or else. She was something of a martinet and as a result, I found myself gravitating towards my father, counting the seconds till he arrived home and anticipating the private moments we shared before bedtime as he would tell me all about the news of the day at the hat factory, at the union hall and around the world. I recall how we would together go through all the stories in each day's issue of the Advocate newspaper that he read religiously. As a result of his influence, I became something of a mirror image of him. I grew interested in politics because he was interested in politics. And I believe that I am today also a touchy-feely type of

person thanks to my close childhood relationship with my father.

It was due to Irving's practice of keeping me up-to-date on what was going on in the world, that I vividly remember the events of September 1, 1939. I was aware, at the time, that Hitler had selected Poland to be the first nation he would subjugate, but I did not comprehend exactly why. It would be years later before I came to understand that Poland contained the world's largest Jewish population and therefore had attracted the genocidal attention of the Third Reich. My father could not utter the word "Polish" without first preceding it with the word "damned." I came to understand that Poland was a land filled with Jew-haters who had driven both my parents from their homes. I recall my father telling how he had to endure vicious beatings at the hands of club-wielding Christian boys on his way home from school each day. To hear my father tell it, every Christian Polish baby was suckled with anti-Semitism along with its mother's milk. He really wasn't too far off the mark. The other reason that Hitler found Poland such an attractive target was that he was relying upon the willingness of Poland's non-Jews to gladly assist in doing away with their Jewish neighbors. And, in that regard, he was entirely correct.

The War and the Shuleh

As with most Americans alive at the time, my first real awareness of World War II arrived on a Sunday morning in

December of 1941. I was fourteen and I recall coming into the parlor and seeing my parents hunched around the radio. I went outside and saw our neighbors in small clusters on the stoops and on the streets, all wearing worried expressions. I could tell there was something going on and asked an elderly neighbor in Yiddish: "What is it? What's happening?"

She looked at me and all she said was: "Pearl Harbor."

"Pearl Harper?" I thought. "Who is Pearl Harper? Not me. I'm Pearl Helfman."

"*Nein*" I replied, shaking my head. "*Nicht Pearl Harper, mameleh*. *Nicht Harper. Ich bin Pearl Helfman.* Not Harper."

"Pearl HARBOR, not Harper," another neighbor, overhearing our conversation, explained."It's where they bombed us. The Japanese. They bombed all our ships and our planes and hundreds of soldiers at Pearl Harbor."

My first question was: "*Vo ist Pearl Harbor*? Where is this Pearl Harbor place?" I had never heard of it and neither had anyone else I knew. We finally had to pull out an atlas before we learned that it was in the Hawaiian Islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and these islands were part of America. And, since we were all patriotic Americans, we joined millions of our fellow citizens in asking: "How could they?!"

Being part of America was a big deal among the "*greeneh*" or members of America's immigrant Jewish communities. Although unlike my mother, many immi-

grants spoke with heavy accents, their pride and patriotism shone brightly through them whenever they would proclaim: "I'm Merkin." Of course, most Jews were not prepared to shed their roots entirely and become completely assimilated into mainstream American culture. My parents felt there was value in hanging on to certain aspects of our European way of life and that's why they sent me to a special school, called the Shuleh, that met for an hour and a half after regular school every day.

A big part of my life, between ages of eight and twelve, was the Shuleh. This was a children's Jewish education program, with classes held on the first floor of an old building in the neighborhood. While in class, we were required to speak only in Yiddish. If we let some English words slip in, our teacher would complain that he didn't wish to listen to any such "chop suey." I loved the Shuleh and in particular, I loved our teacher, Mr. Bass. The Shuleh was the only school I ever attended where I felt that the teachers really loved us, the students, and vice versa. It's here that I learned the value of building a strong teacher-student relationship. The type of connection that I always tried to create once I became a teacher myself.

While I did develop my Yiddish language skills at the Shuleh, I already spoke the tongue fluently before I enrolled there. The reason was my father. He recognized that there was an English language disparity between him and my mother and he was afraid that since my mother was teaching me the proper King's English, there may come a

day when he and I would not be able to speak to one another comfortably. This concerned him and so he made sure that I spoke a fine strong Yiddish so he and I would always be able to converse freely.

The Shuleh movement was, and remains to this day, the educational arm of the Workmen's Circle. This historically Socialist Jewish organization—known in Yiddish as *Der Arbeter Ring*—emerged from the period of explosive Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe that had delivered my grandparents to America. While the "*Goldeneh Medina"* offered its Jewish immigrants, like my family, religious freedom and economic opportunity, it was also a place of exploitative labor practices, blighted overcrowded tenements and ethnic rivalries. In response to these harsh realities, a group of Socialists from various European nations convened in New York in 1900 to form an organization designed to promote not only social justice, but also Jewish traditional cultural values. They stated that they were seeking: "*Ein shenere un besere velt far ale*." (A more beautiful and better world for all.)"

During the early twentieth century, the Workmen's Circle played a prominent role in the struggles of American labor, the fight for immigrant rights as well as the promotion and vitality of Jewish music, theater and the arts. And this is exactly what I received at the Shuleh. Large helpings of Jewish songs, literature and theater along with heavy doses of Socialist dogma issued in the "*mamalushen*," the mother tongue of Yiddish. Our teachers understood that in

America, the Yiddish language was an endangered species. By teaching this language of the diaspora Jew to children born in the USA, they were struggling to keep it from becoming a dead language. That struggle continues to this very day.

A word about Yiddish. It is the patois of the Ashkenazi (Eastern European) diaspora Jew. Just as Ladino, the vernacular of the Sephardi, or Mediterranean Jew, is a derivation of Spanish, Yiddish is based on the German tongue, although Hebrew characters, not Roman, are employed in written Yiddish. Of course, at the Shuleh, we believed it was the reverse…that it was Hebrew that used Yiddish characters and not the other way around.

There was precious little Hebrew or mention of our people's Biblical heritage at the Shuleh. Whenever a Bible story was presented, it was always in the context of the Labor movement. Moses didn't free the slaves from bondage in Egypt using God's miracles. Instead he was a labor union leader of the exploited Jewish workers and led them to overthrow the corrupt boss, Pharaoh, via collective bargaining and going out on strike. This mindset fit in very nicely with the religious orientation of our family and circle of friends. We were considered secular Jews. We were deeply immersed in the cultural trappings of European-style Judaism, without any of the actual religious ritual or observance. We never, for example, attended services at a synagogue. Twice a year, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, my father alone would attend High Holy Day services

at small storefront *shteibel*. Basically some chairs and a Torah Scroll. No rabbi. No Cantor. Just the bare minimum.

To us, Judaism was a very attractive lifestyle that served to keep us protected and insulated from the wicked wild world of New York. Neither God nor Torah figured into this picture. We observed *kashrut,* not because we were commanded to do so from on high, but rather because that was the way things were done. That chopped liver and kreplach is what defined us and differentiated us from the Irish and the Italians. Religion? Shabbos? Observing holidays? These were all left behind in the *shtetls* of Poland and Russia. We were the new, enlightened Jews, committed to progressive ideals of social justice. We were 100% Jewish and we were also 100% American.

Where did Israel, or rather a homeland for the Jews in Palestine, figure into all of this? It didn't. Zionism was viewed at best as some lunatic fringe obsession. In fact, many in our world were devout anti-Zionists. The names of Herzl, Weizman, Jabotinsky and Ben-Gurion were hardly revered. In fact, just the opposite. Instead, the heroes of our crowd were Rabbi Stephen Wise, Eugene V. Debs, Emma Goldman and David Dubinsky.

As a youngster, I was more or less oblivious to the politics swirling around me at the Shuleh. I simply adored our teachers and loved the works of Solomon Rabinovich, better known as Sholom Alechem, who brought to life the romanticized world of the *shtetl*. A world filled with pathos, humor and wisdom. These works still enchant and fascinate

me to this day. That is the reason why some 80 years after having been introduced to Yiddish literature in the Shuleh, I could be found in the Great Neck Public Library, reading Sholem Alechem stories out loud in the original Yiddish for all who cared to listen. And to this day, it never ceases to amaze me, that I continue to meet people, some in their eighties and nineties, who attended a Shuleh where they not only learned the Yiddish language, but also where they forged their Jewish identities that have lasted them a life-time.

I am the keeper of very pleasant memories of my time at the Shuleh and it's interesting for me to note what I have managed to retain from those transformational years of my youth. One such memory morsel is a poem that I memo-rized. I share it with you here:

Finger aoyf meyn aoygn
A mild kul hinter mir.
Zogn. Ver iz dos, Moteleh?
Ikh vis nisht. Mayn aoygn zenen badekt.
Ver ken zogn aoyb ir ton nit nemen
Deyn hent avek.

Fingers upon my eyes
A gentle voice behind me.
Say. Who is this, Moteleh?
I don't know. My eyes are covered.
Who can tell if you don't take your hands away.

Thanks to my time at the Shuleh, I became imbued with a love of the Yiddish Theater. Although I was a bit too late to experience its Golden Age, the time of Boris Thomashefsky, this now-lost, but not forgotten art form was alive and well during my pre-teen years. We would often put on dramatic productions at the Shuleh that would see me in front of the footlights. For some reason, I was always cast as a boy. In addition to such amateur productions, we loved the legitimate stage and would, when our finances allowed, attend an off-Broadway Yiddish Theater production. I have only the fondest memories of what a big *metziah* it was for our family to buy tickets to go see a Yiddish play featuring the likes of Maurice (Moshe) Schwartz, Molly Picon and the great composer Sholom Secunda at the Irving Place Theater on Union Square. I'll always remember the particular Hebrew hubris of a sign posted in front of a Yiddish-language production of Macbeth: *"Shakespeare, Ober Beser!* (Shakespeare, But Improved!)" To us, this is what it meant to be Jewish. And I, for one, simply loved being Jewish, and I still do.

The Principles of Madison

After finishing at the Shuleh in eighth grade, I moved on to James Madison High School in Brooklyn. James Madison High, founded in 1925, was and remains one of New York City's finest public schools. It has produced seven Nobel Prize winners to date and scores of well-known musicians, authors, athletes and politicians including

Bernie Sanders, Chuck Shumer and Ruth Bader Ginsburg (no relation).

High school was a time when I learned the principle of strength in numbers. There was no school bus service in those days and I was required to walk the one plus mile to school every morning carrying my book bag, my lunch bag and my gym bag. One rainy afternoon as I huddled with my girlfriends in the doorway of the school building, dreading the long wet walk home, one of the brighter girls had a brilliant idea. “Let’s rent a taxi,” she suggested. “Oh, right,” I shot back. “Who’s got money for a taxi?” After checking our purses and pockets we discovered that each of us had a nickel. “Let me give it a try,” said my friend and then ran to the street to flag down a taxi. Once all five of us were in the cab, we pooled our nickels and gave them to the driver who had agreed to take us to a single destination, centrally located to all five of our homes, for only twenty-five cents. We thanked him as we got out and asked him to come by after school every time it was raining. And, sure enough, that’s what he did. And, by the way, we never told our parents about our rainy day cab driver since they might regard it as improper behavior for thirteen year old Jewish girls.

My high school years were when my life-long love affair with dancing was born. Every year, at the end of the term, Stuyvesant High School, in Manhattan, would put on a semi-formal dance. At that time the school was all-male and so they would invite the girls from a nearby high school to dance with the boys and help them put their social

graces into practice. One particular year, they selected our school, James Madison High. These affairs were not exactly debutante coming out parties, just some punch and music in the gym.

Stuy, as it was known, was the number one high school in the nation in terms of academic stature. With a heavy emphasis on math and science, Stuy permitted only students who could pass a battery of very rigorous academic exams created by Columbia University to attend. Stuyvesant opened its doors in 1904 in Lower Manhattan as the city's first manual training school for boys. By the 1930's it had become known as a "scientific" high school — another first of its kind anywhere. Located between 15th and 16th Streets in the Tribeca area, Stuyvesant enjoys a reputation to this day as one of the most elite high schools of New York.

There were about one hundred Stuy boys and one hundred Madison girls in attendance that evening. I had arrived with a "nice Jewish boy," but we were encouraged to change partners frequently and not just "dance with the one what brung ya'." About halfway through the evening a young man "of color," which was the polite term for African-Americans in those days, approached me and held out his hand, palm up. This was the accepted invitation to dance. I realized the fellow had been eyeing me, as well as many of the other girls, throughout the evening. Well, I had been watching this fellow as well and understood that he was one dynamic dancing fool. So when he asked to dance

with me, I simply could not resist. I took his hand and joined him on the floor without hesitation. The band struck up an uptempo number and he took off jitterbugging like crazy. It was clear that the reason he had selected me was that he was looking for a partner who could keep up with him and had decided I was the best of the bunch. Boy, did we "cut a rug," as they used to say. He was extraordinary, doing leaps and splits and complex gymnastic style moves reminiscent of the Nicholas Brothers. I held my own and kept up with him rather well, I thought, matching spin for spin and slide for slide. And I was loving every second of it! By the time the tune was half-over, every other student in the hall had stopped, stood stock still and was staring at the two of us swinging our way across the dance floor. Were they staring at us because they were impressed with our virtuoso over-the-top dance moves or were they shocked by the fact that we were the first interracial couple ever to dance at a Madison high school sock hop? I can't be sure, but I believe it was the former. These kids came from pretty forward-thinking broad-minded backgrounds — homes where Paul Robeson and Marion Anderson were considered virtuous heroes. None of the comments I received afterwards from my friends contained any racial references. They were all complimentary, with many friends saying that we looked like professional dancers.

The same was not the case when it came to my mother. Three days later she approached me and asked: "*Vos s vos ikh hern?*" (What is this I hear?).

"What do you mean, Mom?" She looked furtively side to side and then whispered:

"Ir hot dansing mit a shvartseh? (You were dancing with a black person?). Of course, I could not deny it.

"Mom, listen," I said soothingly. "It was only one dance. I don't know his name. He doesn't know my name. We only danced. We didn't chat. I'll never see him again. It was a one-time thing and you know what? It was fun and everybody said we were very good."

I'm not sure if what concerned her was the fact that I had danced with an African-American or that I had danced with a gentile, but she never mentioned it again and I like to believe she came away from that conversation with some new-found respect for her daughter, the new "Dancing Queen" of James Madison High.

Losing Rhoda, Finding God

Because of the large age difference, eleven years, between me and my younger sister, Rhoda, I often served in the capacity of her nursemaid and guardian around the house. Finally, when I had attained the ripe old age of seventeen, our mother deemed me suitably responsible and allowed me to take six-year old Rhoda with me to destinations away from home. Like Little Bo Peep, I soon began taking her along everywhere I went.

It was early summer, just after school had let out, that I and my two girlfriends made plans to visit the beach at Coney Island. This was something of a sentimental journey

for me since Coney Island was where I had spent my earliest years (see Preface), before our family had moved to the Bronx. It was only early June, but the weather was already warm and a bit humid. In the morning my girlfriends and I were required to attend one hour of school. In order to qualify for Federal funding, New York high schools had to be in session a minimum of so many days per year. In order to meet this requirement, our school had scheduled a few extra days at the end of the term. During these extra days, we were only required to attend school for one hour, first thing in the morning. We had the rest of the day free, so we decided to do as many of our classmates did and head for the beach. I had taken Rhoda with me to school that morning and now we were all ready to take the subway out to Coney Island for a fun-filled day. Taking Rhoda with us was just fine with my two friends who adored her. This was the first time my mother had permitted me to take her to the beach, so I was feeling particularly mature and maternal. I had promised Rhoda a fun-filled day so we were all excited and full of pep as we boarded the Coney Island-bound subway train.

We all carried lots of nickels with us, since everything from a subway token to a soda pop served in a crockery cup cost five cents at "The Nickel Empire." When we arrived to Coney Island, I was surprised to discover that the beach was not very crowded. It was a working weekday and most people went to the beach on weekends. So we found a wide open spot, spread out our beach towels and pitched camp. I

was chatting with my girls while stretched out enjoying the warmth of the sun while little Rhoda played in the sand with her bucket and pail nearby.

"Can I go get some water for my bucket?" she asked me and I said "Sure, honey. Go ahead." I had a clear view all the way from our spot to the beach and watched as Rhoda ran to the water's edge and stooped down in the surf to fill her pail.

"She is soooo adorable," one of my friends commented. I turned my head to face her and responded in agreement. An instant later I turned my gaze back to the water and — horror of horrors — Rhoda had disappeared!

I popped up in a flash and began running up and down the shoreline like a maniac. No sign of her. Panic gripped my insides as my heart raced as never before in my life. "If I have to go home without my sister," I screamed to my friends, "I am not going home. I'll kill myself right here at the beach. I mean it. I'll drown myself before I tell our mother that I lost Rhoda." One of the girls pointed to the life guard's high tower chair about one hundred feet down the shoreline. We all raced there at top speed and began yelling as we approached.

"Did you see a little girl? Did you see my six year old sister? She has a bucket and shovel and a pink bathing suit." The lifeguard lifted up his sunglasses, looked down on us and shook his head. He had not seen anyone. Terror gripped us all. Although none of us would say it aloud, we all were thinking the worst. Rhoda had wandered into the

waves and had drowned. I could feel the burning heat in my eyes as I tried unsuccessfully to hold back my tears. I could see our mother's face as the police inform her that her daughter had drowned. Just as I dropped to my knees, the lifeguard spoke to us from on high.

"There's a Lost & Found office about two blocks that way on the Boardwalk," he said as he gestured. "Why don't you check there?" We made a mad dash back to our blankets and quickly gathered up all our *shmattehs* and belongings. Clutching them, we ran like marathon sprinters to the office and burst in through the door.

There she was. Seated quietly by herself in a big wooden chair. I could see the tear stains on both her little cheeks and I rushed to her side. The hugging, the kissing, the laughter, the tears, the pure joy bubbled out of me, soothing the thirty minutes of true trauma that we had both just endured. After speaking with the lifeguard on duty at the Lost & Found office, we were able to piece together what had happened.

Rhoda went to the water and filled her bucket. As she tried to bring it back to our spot, she became disoriented and wandered off in the wrong direction. It was at it this point that I had turned my head for the moment she was out of my sight. By the time Rhoda figured out she had gone the wrong way, we were now out of her sight. She sat down on the sand and began wailing. A passing good-hearted bather soon spotted her. This good Samaritan — this Coney Island Angel — took Rhoda by the hand and said: "There's

a place here for children who get lost. Let's go." I was unable to ever locate this kind woman to thank her for saving not just Rhoda's life, but my own as well.

Riding home on the subway I had time to contemplate what had happened. I thought back to the time, some eleven years earlier, when I had tumbled off the second-floor patio to the ground and emerged without a scratch. Someone upstairs had been looking out for me then and that same someone had protected us today. I didn't realize it at the time, but it was this moment when my journey towards a finding a higher meaning in life actually began.

Afterwards, I swore Rhoda and my friends to secrecy. "If Mom finds out I lost you at the beach, she will never let me take you there again. Do you understand? If you want to come back to the beach, do not ever tell her what happened." And Rhoda never spoke a word about the incident again…until she did.

On the first day of class during Rhoda's senior year of high school, her English teacher asked all the students to write an essay or a story about the worst day of their lives. Rhoda decided to write about being lost at Coney Island as a six-year old girl. Evidently, she had carried the emotional scar tissue about that day with her for nearly a dozen years. She decided to write up the facts accurately, but to put it into the third person so it sounded like a work of fiction. Finding a bit of courage, Rhoda read the essay to our mother who listened patiently and then nonchalantly commented

at the end: “Hmph. Some sister.” Finding a bit more courage, Rhoda decided to come clean.

“Mom,” she said gingerly. “This story is true. The little girl who got lost at the beach was me. Her big sister was Pearl. This actually happened to us back in 1944.” Yetta’s face turned white as a piece of chalk. After getting over the shock, she decided none of us would ever speak of it again and, until writing about the episode on these pages, we have all honored that decision.