

Prologue

The girl in the photograph had huge blue eyes that stared at infinity. She must have been three or four years old when the picture was taken, but now she lived in a gilded frame over my parents' bed. She wore a hand-knit sweater and had a big white bow in her curly blonde hair. To get a closer look, I often climbed onto the flat top of the headboard, just wide enough for my four-year-old feet, and I would stand there for long minutes, balancing myself against the wall, looking through the glass. I tried to stare the girl down, but she never blinked.

My father ran an auto wrecking yard in The Bronx. It was physical, demanding labor, and he often came home aching. He used to thrill and scare me by sitting me on his lap at the kitchen table, handing me an old paring knife, tensing his bicep, and asking me to pierce his muscle. "Go ahead, Preevaleh," he would say, but I couldn't do it. My mother and I were always quite concerned about his muscles. She kept an ice bag and a heating pad handy in case he came home in pain. After one of those grueling days, he would take his shirt and lie on the bed, and my mother would hold my hand as I walked back and forth over his back, feeling with my toes for where the knots were. When I walked toward his feet, I could see three people in the mirror on my parents' dresser opposite the bed: my mother holding my hand, me from the shins up, and the girl behind me in her gold frame. When I turned and headed back up toward Daddy's neck, the girl could see my approach until we were eye to eye.

"Oy, good, Preevaleh. Step there, crack my neck," my father would say, oblivious to the staring match going on above him.

Sometimes when I looked at the girl on the wall, I shivered. Perhaps it was from the breeze that blew through our eighth-floor Bronx apartment in Tower Gardens Building One — "planned for cross-ventilation," my mother would say with pride, and built so solidly you couldn't hear your neighbors, unlike where we had lived before, where my aunt upstairs would practice her accordion at night and I would wake up and start babbling along with her.

Our new building was magic. It had a storage room for strollers and prams. There were meeting rooms, a bulletin board where the co-op minutes were posted, and a milk machine. It was a big step up from the rickety tenement five blocks away on Wheeler Avenue, where we had lived on the first floor. My old room was six feet wide at most and never got much light.

There was plenty of light in our new two-bedroom. I spent a lot of my early childhood looking through glass. On clear days I could see the Goodyear Blimp anchored one borough over, in Queens. The windows had huge panes with small casements that opened outward, and if I looked out from my bedroom to the right, east, I could see the Hunts Point wetlands. In summer, the fireflies that bred in those marshes flew across Bruckner Boulevard to land, blinking, on the privet hedges of the Tower Gardens playground, where I would catch them in empty Wise potato chip bags.

The living room windows faced west. Because our apartment was higher than the others we had a panoramic view of the neighborhood and the sunset. I could follow the light of Little Alan Shepard's space

capsule as it moved across the sky and past my mother's rose begonias on our metal windowsills. I would run through the spacious rooms until I stopped to twirl — spinning around and around until I was dizzy and collapsed onto the cool linoleum tile. There were corners where, if I hooted, my voice bounced off the walls, all of them bare except for one picture my father brought with him from Munkach, his old town in Europe, and the portrait of the girl in his bedroom. My mother said we didn't have any more pictures than that because every time we put a nail in the wall, we would have to pay to take it out when we left.

"Who is she?" I would ask my mother of the girl on the wall.

"Ask your father," she would say.

"Daddy, who is the girl in the picture?"

"That's your sister," he'd say, and that's all he would say.

It didn't make sense to me. I would have loved having a sister. Being an only child meant a room full of toys but no one to play with. I had a bicycle, an easel, lots of books and art supplies. I had a Barbie with outfits for her, plus a bookcase that served as her duplex apartment, with a staircase for her I had made out of building blocks. Still, I was alone. I could not find this sister anywhere — not under the beds or in the closets or in those echoing corners into which I crept — so I asked my father again.

"Daddy, where's my sister?"

"There," he said, pointing to the wall.

My father was a man who never cried. He had been a soldier in Europe and in Palestine, and prided himself on his military bearing. So after he left the room quickly, choking back what sounded to me like a sob, I learned to stop asking.

Chapter 1: They're in the Phone Book

My father was an adored mystery. He looked like Tom Selleck, tall and strong, with dark brown hair, strong jaw, a face tanned dark by years of working outdoors, and eyes that my mother called "the color of a leaf under ice." His hands were big and hard, and his fingers had little black lines of grease caught deep in the scars of the cuts and cracks that came from working with car engines, metal, and sharp tools. He owned and ran what today would be called a chop shop, buying and towing broken and abandoned cars from the driveways and roadsides of New York, and dismantling them for parts. He stockpiled and sold the good ones to use for repairs, and sold what was left to Bronx Iron as scrap. It was a good business but hard work. My mother washed his clothes with lye to get the grease out, and he wore a funny kind of underwear, very thick with stripes, to keep from getting a *killeh*, or hernia. Later, I learned it was an athletic supporter.

We lived so close to “the place,” his business at 640 Hunts Point Avenue, that if the roads were closed for snow — it happened several times in the mid-’60s — he could walk to work. He insisted on starting each day at first light and returning after 6 pm, which was sometimes after sunset, taking only Sundays off. I had usually eaten my dinner and was doing homework by the time he got home. The only times the three of us all sat and ate together as a family were Friday nights and on a few Jewish holidays. My parents both came from much bigger and more crowded tables — in Europe, my father was one of nine siblings born between 1909 and 1924 (six survived the Holocaust), while my mother was one of six growing up in The Bronx, all them born between 1909 and 1930, five of whom lived.

There were two cohorts of children in my mother’s family. The first three were born in Russia to an arranged marriage of my mother’s parents. When my grandfather journeyed to the United States in 1915 to make his fortune, he sent for his family five years later, and my mother was the first child born in the States, in 1925. Her oldest brother, Itzik, had died the previous year after cracking his skull on the ice during a fall, so perhaps my mother was a “replacement baby.” If she had been a boy like Itzik, her life would have been easier, but she became the focus of her mother’s general unhappiness. Close on my mother’s heels came my uncle Haim; like most Jewish boys, he was treated like a prince.

In my family, I was *de kleine*, the little one. They spoke of me that way over my head in Yiddish. When my father spoke to me directly, it was to tell me a story: about how he knew I recognized him from the beginning because I made a face at him from my hospital bassinet; or how he had jumped motorcycles or raced cars or horse-traded two gallons of alcohol for a roomful of tires; or the one about how he became a Russian soldier on a whim. His stories were far more interesting than the picture books on the shelf by my bed.

On Fridays in the summer, when the days were very long, my father and I walked to synagogue together. I would hold his hand and take steps in cadence with him. “Left right, left right, *leftright*, left left left right,” he would say, marching steadily except for a little hop now and then to break the rhythm and make me pay attention. The three short blocks and two long ones to the synagogue on Webster Avenue always passed in a flash.

The game continued once we got there. “Tell them what your name means,” Daddy would instruct me. In my earliest memory of this routine we had, I am four, wearing a green velvet jumper with a flowered blouse, and I hated reciting my story to the crowd of squat old men with pomaded hair and hairy necks, men who spoke languages I did not understand with gravelly voices while hawking phlegm into handkerchiefs. Daddy was the storyteller, not me.

The synagogue had two places for praying. One was a cozy, everyday sanctuary downstairs, all grey wood with the *bimah* in the center of the room. Women sat very close to the men in the side row of pews, separated from them only by a gauzy curtain. I liked that place very much. It was warm. When I went with my aunt, my father’s sister, we sat in the women’s section together, but since I was only a little girl, I could choose to sit with my father and feel the vibrations of his voice going through both of us while I played with the fringes of his *tallit*.

On Friday nights, services were upstairs in the main sanctuary. It had high ceilings and stained glass, and a mezzanine for the women that looked down on the pews where the men sat. Upstairs, it was always cold. It echoed. The *bimah* was at the front of the room, and the rabbi, who sat on a beautifully carved chair, did not lead prayers. He sat there regally in his white beard and satin coat, only speaking when delivering the *dvar Torah*, a 20-minute speech in some language I could not understand. Worse, once the service began I had to leave my father and go up to the mezzanine by myself. Sometimes I was the only child there, looking down at a sparse crowd of hardly more men than the ten required for a minyan.

Because we'd be separated there, my father always brought me early so he could talk to his friends and show me off a little: "Preeva, explain your name." I would straighten my dress, focus my eyes dead ahead on nothing, and recite:

"When God created man, on the sixth day he said to him, *Pru u'rvu ee melu et ha'aretz*, be fruitful and multiply and develop the earth. From that comes *Pruva*, which we pronounce here in America, Preeva." I was embarrassed at having to perform, and I knew there must be something funny about my name because the men would cough into their handkerchiefs and poke each other when I made my speech.

The ordeal was worth it only for my Daddy's company. On the way home we would march again, and if the moon were rising we would talk to it. "Halloo, Mr. Moon," Daddy would say. "Mr. *Mooo-oon*," I'd warble. I never expected an answer, but the moon looked friendly to me.

The rest of the time my world consisted of me and my mother, alone together in the apartment. I woke to the sound of my mother's newspaper rustling in the morning as she sat and read with a cup of Sanka that had a spoon in it "to keep the glass from breaking." The spoon always stayed in the cup until it was empty. She talked to herself as she read the news, which back then was all about urban renewal and other great government projects she did not care for. "That's what people are like today," she would grumble. "Hooray for me and screw you." She hated Robert Moses in particular for building the Cross-Bronx Expressway. She hated hypocrisy, could smell it like a bloodhound. If my mother described someone as "a real up-front guy," it meant she smelled a rat, someone with a personal and avaricious agenda behind a façade of bonhomie.

Insurance salesmen fell into this category. So did salesmen of penny stocks, mutual funds, corporate bonds, investment pools, and any get-rich-quick schemes of which my mother had seen plenty, both as the daughter and the wife of small businessmen in working-class neighborhoods. "I don't need to hear how great someone has done in the market, what do I care if he's done well? He'll sell you a bill of goods and go on to the next guy. Hooray for me and screw you." She sometimes despaired of her husband's vulnerability to such salesmen. "Anyone can buy your father with a good word," she would say, shaking her head.

One of her deepest held grudges was against my Uncle Imi, who had dissolved a three-way partnership with my father and my Uncle Willy because, according to my mother, he did not want to support my father in his old age, and my father never should have become the father of an infant at age 47. "He threw your father out of the business with a wife and a 2-year-old at home," my mother grumbled. "Your

father got nothing but a corner lot on Hunts Point Avenue that was a big hole in the ground.” Then she would tell me how Daddy had flagged down trucks with landfill to dump and diverted them to his lot, gradually filling that hole until the property was level and he could set up his business.

My mother was not much of a housekeeper. She was more of a reader, always with a cigarette in one hand and a book in the other. I would do my crafts projects at the kitchen table, because if I went into my room to read or draw, Mom would yell out “PREEVA!” every half hour, panic in her voice.

“WhAAaaT!” I yelled back.

“Just wondering where you were.”

Where would I be? I couldn’t go out without her permission, even if it were just down the hall to play with Ellen Judah, or one floor up to look at Butchie Bisgaier’s aquarium. When I got permission to go OUTSIDE, even then my territory was restricted to the playground or our immediate block, where Mom could see me through the kitchen window.

It was my mother’s quest to make sure I never forgot. She never let me forget that I did not breastfeed when I was an infant, or that I gave myself gingivitis by putting things I found on the street in my mouth, or how after she caught me sharing my lollipop with a puppy on the street she had to put me in a harness and keep me on a leash to control me. She always kept me close. For a long time I wasn’t allowed to leave the apartment without her, so I learned to immerse myself in what was available indoors — records I would listen to over and over, and the miracle of books. By the time I was in second grade I tested at a fifth-grade reading level. When I asked my mother what that meant, she said, “You were not particularly interested in learning to read until you understood that there were such things as books. Then there was no stopping you.”

If I did something bad, like breaking something or trying to lean out a window or not wanting to dress myself in the morning, my mother would swat me with a slipper. She sprained her wrist once trying to swat me, so she changed tactics: “Sit in the corner of your room and think about what you did wrong until you are sorry.”

“Fine!” I yelled at her. “You can’t stop me from thinking what I want.”

She never let me forget that one, either.

Sometimes I heard her crying in the next room after we fought, and I knew it must be because I frustrated her. She admitted to me years later that she did not know how to make me feel sorry when I did wrong, and that it pained her when she saw me apologize without feeling truly sorry. She always watched carefully to see what I liked, so she could withhold it when I misbehaved. When I was four, we came back from a trip to the country with an orange tomcat I named Princess. On the way to the vet to have him neutered, my mother told me that Princess was a boy, so we renamed him Sam Katz. Sam Katz and I spent hours chasing each other around the apartment, but he had been raised in the country. He was a hunter. He hunted our roast chicken off the kitchen counter and dragged it across the floor.

He hunted dishes off the table and broke them. He pounced on my toes and woke me up at night. My mother said Sam Katz had to go, that he was going to a house that had mice. I tried to change her mind but was treated to a litany of the cat's sins — which sounded suspiciously like many of mine — and the conclusion that Sam Katz did not belong in an apartment.

Without Sam Katz, now there was *really* no one to play with. I had one friend on the floor of my building, but I was afraid of the kids in the playground who were bigger, faster and louder than I was.

I didn't play well with others. When I was four I was kicked out of a neighborhood summer program for biting another camper. One of my lifelong string of therapists later told me “only angry children bite”; after meeting my mother, she said she understood.

What I did not know those times I heard my mother crying in the next room was that it had nothing to do with me. She had been trying, and failing, to conceive. My father was the type of man who would never see a doctor about something so private, and they were too old to adopt and never had the nerve or resources to take in a foster child. “Every time I had my period, it was like sitting shivah,” my mother told me when I was much older.

And so I remained an only child, except for the girl on the wall.



Those were the days of the shopping cart and the string bag. We took them when I went with my mother on errands such as getting “photostats” at Woolworths and buying fruit, meat and fish in separate stores. The other merchants on Westchester Avenue formed a wonderland of delis, a kosher baker (pink boxes with red and white string), a kosher butcher — all sorts of meats and organs wrapped in paper, a band saw, sawdust on the floor, and always a free slice of bologna for me — and the photography shop that had wondrous things, like a glass bulb in the window with a black and white doodad that spun when the sun shone on it.

We walked from there almost every day to see Zaide — my grandfather, Morris Kaufman, a retired fur matcher. Even on Shabbos, I asked him to let me watch my cartoons. “No, Pa, don't let her, it's Shabbos,” my mother would argue, perhaps chagrined that the first thing I did at home when I got up on weekends was to turn on the TV. “*Losseh, losseh,*” let her, let her, my Zaide would say.

Any time I defied my mother, she would remind me she was not her father. “When I talk, you listen to me.”

She didn't talk a whole lot, my mother. But when she did, I could not escape that voice, a deep alto that followed me around the apartment. She was not the best listener. It took her a year of watching evening TV with my father, making comments about the programs while she knitted him new socks, to realize why my he never answered her. He could sleep with his eyes open, and for over a year had fallen sound asleep every night in front of the TV. In her defense, my mother did not marry him for his conversation.

My mother had a troubled childhood. She dropped out of school, got an equivalency degree, helped

the war effort by working on a farm in Pennsylvania, did a stint at the Post Office, nursed her mother through a long and degenerative terminal illness, tried changing her life by moving to Israel in 1950, and ended up back in The Bronx in 1953 with her father and sisters. She was working behind the counter of a candy store on Barker Avenue when my father walked in to buy a pack of cigarettes and fill his lighter. He walked out with her heart, or so the story went. “I laid eyes on him and thought, ‘That is the most beautiful man I have ever seen,’” she used to say.

They were married in the courtyard of the Young Israel Synagogue across from where my mother lived, and set up an apartment on Hunts Point Avenue close to my father’s workplace. She listened to his stories of the war in Europe and how he had seen people die, and how he had saved people’s lives. There were some wild stories about what he did in the war. “I met a man on the streetcar in Prague,” he told me one day, “and he said he knew where my brothers were, and I pulled out my gun and made him take me right there.” There were other stories that involved tanks, Germans, Russians, trading, and yellow diamonds hidden in a radio. As I said, his stories were better than anything on my bookshelf.

One day, my mother got fed up with his stories. “Your father told me he created a shelter for a bunch of Jews during the war in a garage he was maintaining for the Germans,” my mother told me years later. “He took the wheels off a truck so the body could not be moved, and they hid near there or behind the truck until the war was over. I told him, ‘Hershi, I don’t believe you, what happened to these people you saved?’

That day, a Sunday, she gave him an ultimatum. “Okay, if you did all this, prove it,” she said.

“Fine,” he shot back. “Look them up. They’re in the phone book.”

My mother hauled out the doorstopper phone book and looked up the name of the family he gave her. They were listed in Brooklyn.

She called them on the telephone.

“We’re having a party, please come!” they told her. Right then, right that minute.

When we got there, they were in the middle of a birthday party and they welcomed my father like the hero he always claimed to be.

My mother never doubted my father’s stories again.

All I have of that day is a memory of a slice of cake with writing on it, and the general impression of a leafy street lined with brownstone houses. The family’s apartment was on the second floor. It had a tree outside the window, and a carved wooden chest of drawers.

That’s all I have. I feel like it’s a personal failure of mine that I can’t even remember that family’s name. I was the one with the mind like a steel trap, they said, famous in the family for my memory. My mother kept reminding me that I never breastfed, that I shared a lollipop with a puppy, but I failed in the end to remember what was most important.

There is an old Hassidic tale they tell. (A Hassid is a member of a huge branch of Judaism that organized itself around a man called the Baal Shem Tov in 1650.) It involves a rabbi who could ask God for miracles by going to a special place in the woods and repeating some magic words. When this rabbi died, the story goes, his successor had only to go to the special spot in the woods and ask God for miracles, invoking the name of the old rabbi, and that was enough. When that rabbi died and *his* successor did not know the words or the place in the woods, he would sit in his study and say, “God, I don’t know the words or the place in the woods, but I know the story, and that has to be enough.” And it was enough. Because God might not love man or Jews in particular, but God loves *stories*.

The only miracle I ask is for my father back, and that is impossible. But I have a few of his stories, and that is going to have to be enough.

Chapter 2: Falling Into Place

Our kitchen table had rounded corners and was made of black Formica with white streaks. I would sit there with my back to the room and look out the big windows at the neighborhood while my mother cooked or sat with her newspaper spread out. We talked about the stories in the paper or how Mrs. Shlackman’s cat had survived an eight-story fall by landing on some hedges and merely breaking a leg.

My mother called me her “lonely only,” and while she spoke of adopting or taking in a foster child, and loaded up my Scholastic book orders with stories of adoptive and foster children where the heroine wins the heart of her new parents with honesty and hard work, she must have known that I would be her only chance at raising a successful citizen. She took my teachers’ edicts as law, and treated their homework assignments as commandments from Mount Sinai. That’s how I got stuck with an hour a day of penmanship practice in first grade.

Sitting at the table made it easy to listen in when my mother was washing dishes at the sink while on the wall phone to her friend Vicki, another mother from the Kinneret day school I attended. Vicki had the self-assurance of a woman whose eldest child was a model student and whose youngest had not yet gotten into any trouble. Since Vicki also worked part-time at the school, she was an invaluable resource, privy to the reasoning that went into the mysterious flow of homework assignments. My mother hung on Vicki’s every word.

According to Vicki, the school existed to serve parents that had very specific requirements: They wanted the best education possible for their children. Just as important, they wanted to stay in The Bronx but out of its public schools. Kinneret was always scrambling to match other, richer, out-of-borough schools in terms of curriculum and materials, but they never seemed to have enough money. The burden of providing an education that matched elite private schools or accelerated public schools thus fell on the teachers, who sometimes managed to pass the buck to the parents and students in the form of odd and woeful homework assignments. Resistance was futile. My mother was bigger, stronger and smarter than I was, there was no place to hide, and she had been such a bad child herself (so she claimed) that “there

isn't any excuse you can give me or trick you can pull that I didn't try." I spent hours in Mom's shadow, dutifully filling sheets of yellow paper with crooked letters, trying to write in the direction that the arrows on the example page pointed. Sometimes I succeeded; more often I cried while I struggled. My mother told me how lucky I was that I had a pencil and not an ink pen; how when SHE learned to write, from a much more demanding teacher, SHE had to balance a penny on her wrist and draw progressions of perfect circles that looked like a Slinky.

Another battle over my presumed lack of educational proficiency took place in second grade. Aviv Goldsmith, a new student who transferred into our class in October, was more than halfway through a 300-page arithmetic textbook while the rest of us were barely 20 pages into it. Our homework: Catch up to Aviv Goldsmith. I stayed up late one night with only a break for dinner, and I did it. I caught up to Aviv Goldsmith.

Other than that, my lack of interest in schoolwork or reading reached a crisis point in fourth grade, when Kinneret decided we should all learn Yiddish. I whined and threw tantrums, and got no sympathy from my mother.

"Ma, another language, it's not fair!" I said. It was a late afternoon, the time when you turn on the lights in the kitchen but don't need the lights over the table.

"You can learn as many languages as you need to," she said. "Your father speaks so many, I've never counted them."

"How many, do you think?" I asked, deciding that now was as good a time as any to unravel this family mystery.

She folded her newspaper, fetched a pencil from the can on the counter, and opened a fresh page of her notepad.

"He speaks English, right?" I said, starting the ball rolling. "And Hebrew and Yiddish and Hungarian and Czech and Russian and German."

"That's right," said my mother, taking notes. "He also speaks Spanish. He learned it in the business and speaks it to Garcia." That was the man who replaced windshields and rented space for his business from my father. "Your daddy also knows some Romanian, Polish and Ukrainian from when he lived in Munkach. Oh, and he also speaks Romany, the language gypsies use."

I only knew about gypsies as characters in black-and-white movies: men in embroidered vests, women who wore spangled scarves on their head and played tambourines.

"Daddy used to talk to them in the concentration camp," my mother added.

"Gypsies were in the camp too?" I didn't know any gypsies, but I knew plenty of Jews who were concentration camp survivors. My father had a number tattooed on his arm. So did my uncles Willy and Imi, and my aunts Blanca and Petya. Every year in school we had assemblies, sang songs, and sat through

ceremonies to remember the people who died in the camps.

“That’s what your father told me,” my mom said. “Oh, and he also speaks Italian.”

“Where did he learn that?”

“Maybe from business.”

Hunts Point had all sorts of businesses, run by all sorts of immigrants — like Bronx Iron, the big scrap-metal yard that sent bundles of compressed metal onto barges to the ports of New York and New Jersey before heading overseas. My father did a good business shipping used parts to South America, where broken-down American cars still ran on my father’s recycled parts and the ingenuity of local mechanics. On Commerce Avenue, my father leased a plot of land next to a firm called Industrial Acoustics. The Spanish food company Bustelo had a big factory in The Bronx. So did Hebrew National and bakeries like Stella D’Oro and Wonder Bread.

“So,” said my mom, counting. “That’s thirteen. Satisfied? Now go do your homework.”

Not that my father spoke English particularly well. He called pounds and ounces Libs and OZs, like their abbreviations. He switched his “w’s” with his “v’s,” and Hungarian and Yiddish influenced the cadence of his English. One of his favorite expressions was “*Who the hell you thank you are?*”

I loved to repeat the mash-up phrases my father taught me, nonsense like “*Igen, migen, hopp de fliegn,*” Yes, I dunno (Hungarian), catch the flies (Yiddish, I think). I could also say “*Nem to do madjaru beselnyi*” (“I don’t speak Hungarian”) in such a perfect accent that Hungarian speakers didn’t believe me and started chattering away in that UPandDOWN way they had of speaking, while I stared blankly.

Or a few phrases in Russian: “*Kak po zhe vay it cheh, tovarish?*” (How are you, Comrade?)

“*Ocheen kharasho, nichivo.*” (Pretty good, I don’t know.)

One day I overheard my father exclaiming “*A zopahd pitchok meen da nedet!*” When my mother heard me repeat it, she stopped what she was doing.

“Preeva, where did you learn that?” she asked.

“Daddy said it.”

“Hershi-ee!” my mother called. “A little girl should not say that.”

“Say what?” I asked. “*A zopahd pitchok meen da nedet?*”

“Don’t say that again!” my mother yelled.

“Why not?”

“Never mind,” she said. “Just don’t.”

We lived in many languages. Each morning, my mother and I would kiss my father on his way to work

and say a few lines of mixed Yiddish and Hebrew as a goodbye blessing. *Gay gezint, und kim gezint, adonay matzliach darkehcha*. Go out well, come back well, and may God send you luck on your path. On Sundays, we listened to the Yiddish station WEVD, “the station that speaks your language.”

My parents spoke Yiddish to each other, even though they used different dialects. My mother spoke the Litvack dialect, named after the region around Vilnius. My father spoke something closer to Galitz Yiddish, used by the Jews of Poland and Galicia. Like toMAYto versus toMAHto, the difference lay in a vowel sound. Was it “a” as in “yay” or in “eye”?

“Litvak!” my father would exclaim. “*Du rest nish kine richtigier Yiddish.*” You don’t speak proper Yiddish.

“Galitzianer,” my mother would shoot back. “*DU redst nish KAYN richtiger Yiddish.*” Mother called Father one of the “*vasser polyacken*,” water-Polish, who had supposedly taken barges from Poland through Transnistria, past Munkach, and down to the territories on the river where they lived a rural life until they returned to Munkach and back out to Budapest, Prague and elsewhere to make their fortune.

Both my parents’ hometowns are now considered to be in Ukraine. So much for national loyalty.



When I was four, my mother and I took a taxi to the Jacob Shiff Jewish Community Center where I was to begin in the Kinneret Day School nursery (pre-K) class. It was in one of two big, airy classrooms on the top floor strewn with toys and blocks to play with. The teacher was a kindly woman named Deena. On that first day, she showed me where the bathroom was and told me the Hebrew words for soap and water. I played happily until she said it was time for my mother to leave.

Naturally, I cried. I could not imagine being anywhere my mother was not. I grabbed my mother’s skirt with two hands and also with my teeth, and held on so hard they had to take us to a nearby meeting room, brightly lit and with a splintery parquet floor that smelled of overheated wood, where they asked me to let my mother go.

“Noooo,” I howled, which allowed my mother to snatch her skirt out of my teeth.

I kept crying, first into her skirt. When that didn’t work I turned around and cried into Deena’s flowered apron. Mom left anyway, and I finally entered the big echoing classroom with the high ceilings and gray-purple light, but that year I managed to come down with a lot of strep throat infections and stayed home from school as many days as I went. When I did go, I failed naptime. The teachers said I stayed awake for too long, and when I finally fell asleep they couldn’t rouse me until it was time to go home.

After I had my tonsils out and was over the case of mumps I got from the kid in the next hospital bed, I started kindergarten. Thereafter, I did not get sick quite as often — although I continued to nap out of sync with everyone else, waking up only when it was time to bundle into my coat and get on the bus for home.

By third grade naps were no longer an option, and I played with my classmates even when I ended up at

the bottom of a pile of bigger kids on the gymnasium floor. It was the year my mother had to take me to an ear doctor in the middle of the day because, while pretending to be Lt. Uhura from *Star Trek*, I put a pen in my ear and the chewed blue stopper on the end of it fell off and got stuck in my ear canal.

My class was distinguished in the history of the school for having the smartest kids, the smallest class (by fourth grade, we were down to 12), and the most behavior problems. In the years since then, gossip has it that a few of my former classmates went on to have nervous breakdowns. One was arrested for carrying drugs in the Middle East, and his mother had to sell everything she had trying to get him free. Back then, all I knew was to be careful not to touch the radiator pipe because it could burn me, but that it was also quite useful for melting Crayolas. I would see what the streak of melted magenta looked like running down the pipe next to the streak of melted aquamarine. When the heat was off, a fingernail in the right place could chip off the pipe's paint and give me a window on painting history. I could count six layers of colors: white, sea foam, mocha, green-yellow, robin's egg, tan, and a reddish base coat.

I spent two years next to those melted Crayolas learning Hebrew in that room. In fact, my main job in fourth grade was to learn Hebrew and Yiddish with Mar Borovic, have lunch, and then go upstairs for long division and parts of speech with Mrs. Alshutz.

That was also the first year a teacher gave me a note to bring home to my mother. The note came from Mar Borovic — Mar is “mister” in Hebrew.

I always felt a kinship with Mar Borovic as he raised his hands and made shushing noises and looked very sad as everyone ignored him, throwing paper balloons and airplanes around the room. He had blue eyes and a brown comb over. He usually wore a blue suit, and had a very soft voice that matched his character. He wrote Yiddish poetry and sang songs in Jewish cafes around the city. My mother later said he was more suited to teaching college kids than us “wild animals.”

On the day Mar Borovic brought in his mandolin, I paid more attention to the mandolin than the man. The strange instrument was beautiful — a wooden teardrop inlaid with dark and light wood, with a mother-of-pearl inlay around the sound hole and on the fret board. It sounded nice, too. When he sang the Kaddish for us, I forgot about melting crayons or putting objects in my ears. “This is the song we sing to honor our dead,” he said in a quavery voice. “I remember my mother, my father and my sister.” Did Mar Borovic have a sister like mine — who, though unseen, had the power to make men cry?

“*Yisgadal v'yisgdash, shmey robbbo,*” he sang in his soft tenor, covering his eyes and rocking back and forth.

At that moment, he seemed to be somewhere else. The class got very quiet.

After the day of the mandolin, I began to pay more attention to my books, and to my teacher. The next week, I collected crumpled paper from the floor for the trash and offered to run errands. I raised my hand before speaking and volunteered to read from our Yiddish textbook. One day, Mar Borovic gave me a note to bring home, addressed to Mrs. Adler.

“What's this?” my mother roared when she saw it. “A note home from a teacher?”

I braced myself. A note home from school is never a good thing.

“Don’t move while I read this,” she warned me. “You’re lucky I’m not MY mother. She would have hit me first, opened the note second.”

After reading the note, my mother looked up.

“Preeva,” she said, her voice uncharacteristically soft. I was still waiting for the slap or the slipper, but she had me read it myself.

“Preeva has been an excellent student today,” I read aloud. “She has paid attention in class and been very helpful and respectful.”

“Yeah, I was good today,” I said, looking up.

“Why?” my mother asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, fidgeting. “Can I go read now?”



When I was nine, they sent me off to Habonim Camp Naaleh, a Socialist Zionist summer camp where we spent the days playing volleyball and making lanyards, and talking about Israel, class and wealth.

Habonim is a worldwide youth movement that was founded in the 1920s. In 1967, it had a camp in Red Hook, in upstate New York. The camps were modeled on the Israeli kibbutz. They were less religiously observant than many such camps, more observant than others. At Naaleh, we used the PA system and did arts and crafts on Shabbat, although we kept the kitchen kosher as a symbol of our commitment to being inclusive of all Jews — even the ones who believed in strict adherence to the laws separating men and women at prayer, and the ones that insisted married women cover their hair and that all women dress modestly. Tell that to the counselors running around in cutoff jeans and bandannas for halter-tops.

We learned Hebrew by using individual words for everyday summer things, like flagpole raising (*mifkad*), doing a couple of hours of menial labor after breakfast (*avodah*), arts and crafts (*melachah*), scout craft (*tzofnut*), along with reading mail (*doar*) after lunch (*aruchat tzohoraim*) in the dining room (*hadar ochel*) during rest period (*menuchah*). The *tzevet* (staff) scheduled the *sichot* (discussions).

I had no talent for jumping jacks or skipping rope, so my activities consisted of reading books I brought along from home. One day at camp, I was up a maple tree reading *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. It was peaceful and wonderful up in that tree, where the leaves shaded me from the outside world and cast a cool green light on my Modern Library edition. I was almost crying, though, because the story was so sad. Esmeralda — dragged through the streets in a tumbrel, stoned by the rabble after being tortured — was about to be hanged as a witch. Quasimodo was up at his usual perch in the bell tower, howling with grief. Poor Esmeralda! Poor Quasimodo!

Meanwhile, it was time for *sicha*, Discussion Group, an annoying activity that took place every day at

2:15 p.m., despite my dogged lack of participation. Hidden in my leafy perch, I was planning to read right through until the afternoon snack. Stupid groups, I thought.

Some of the older kids, maybe thirteen years old, plopped down in a semicircle at the base of my tree. The counselor, around twenty, leaned against the trunk.

“Who here knows what social class is?” he asked them. My ears perked up.

“Uh, a place where you learn about social studies?” one of the campers suggested.

I leaned out over my branch to see and hear more clearly.

“Not quite,” said the counselor. “Think about the song we sing, *Arise, ye prisoners of starvation*.” Slowly and stealthily, I began to climb down to hear better. “Remember how it ends with ‘The international working class will be the human race?’ Class is a big group of people who are alike. It has more to do with who has money and who doesn’t than with school.”

“Hey, I know!” I said, finally jumping to the ground. “If you have a place to live and enough to eat, you’re middle class or upper class. I was just reading about it,” I said, pointing to my book. “The priests and noblemen are upper class, and the people in the middle who have stores and stuff are middle class.”

“Well, what class are *you*?” the counselor asked me.

“Upper middle class,” I said with pride. “My father took us to Israel when I was six, and I got an English Racer bicycle for being brave when I got my shots.”

The counselor seemed to think this over. Then he nodded and invited me to join the discussion.

Finally, something I was happy to discuss.

About the Author



Preeva Adler Tramiel is a writer, stand-up comic and community activist involved in Jewish, women’s and educational organizations. Her eclectic career has included writing a weekly column for the Bay Daily News, reporting on a family trip to Poland for a scholarly journal, being president of the South Bay Chapter of the Women’s Alliance of the San Francisco Jewish Federation, coaching the school soccer team, and appearing as a contestant on the TV game show *Win Ben Stein’s Money*. She is an active alumna of Barnard College, now preparing to take over the presidency of her synagogue, the independent Congregation Etz Chayim.

She and her husband, a pioneer in the computer revolution, live in Palo Alto, California, and have two grown sons. “The Girl on the Wall” is her first full-length work.