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BOOK REVIEWS

MAYER KIRSHENBLATT AND BARBARA KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT

They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust

(University of California Press, 2007)

Carol Zemel, Reviewer

Like Herman Melville's "Call Me Ishmael," the salutary title of Mayer Kirshenblatt's *They Called Me Mayer July* sounds a ringing introduction to the figure who will guide us through a lively personal and cultural history. Though this is the story of a man looking back (Kirshenblatt was 91 when the book was published), the tale is told through the character of an adventurous, hot-headed (hence the nickname, after July's heat), and inquisitive adolescent—just the sort of guide the reader/viewer wants. Sub-titled *Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust*, Mayer's story encompasses a fixed but varied terrain, with 200 images of Jewish life in Apt (Opatow, Poland)

in the interwar period, which unfold in tandem with a textual narrative. As painted memories, the pictures are central to the book, and they go well beyond mere illustration. Starting with the cover image, the energetic design of *Purim Play: "The Krakow Wedding,"* bulges with social information in its depiction of a host family at their table, *purimspilers* (actors) and musicians crowding into the room, ancestral portraits observing from the walls, and a group of onlookers watching the festivities through the window. Not only community, but its several generations are gathered into a setting and centered on home, ritual celebration, and spectacle. Mediating youthful experience through adult

recall, pictures like this invite careful perusal and discovery, and so demonstrate the importance of images in the formation of memory and memoir.

The twinned tales—pictorial and textual—are expertly juxtaposed. Images appear on almost every double page, and the conversational text, like the pictures, is encyclopedic and pleurably dizzying in its detail. We benefit from Kirshenblatt's curiosity, when, at the price of a failed year of school, he spent his days roaming the town, studying how every artisan, merchant, and institution of his world worked. Graphic side-bars also punctuate the narrative; hand-drawn and labeled diagrams, they explain what Mayer learned of local technologies: how to make a shoe or a tin-whistle, the cross-section of an oven, how to bind a book. The combination of pictures, text, diagrams—all cheerfully verbose—ensures wide access for both a scholarly and a popular audience. The only comparable book I know is Toby Knobel Fluek's visual narrative *Memories of My Life in a Polish Village, 1930–1949* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), a slim volume where pictures are the main event and whose range, though chronologically longer, is nevertheless a narrower focus than *Mayer July's* encyclopedic ethno-memory.

The Eastern European *shtetl* [small town], embodied here by the town of Apt, is a familiar *topos* of Jewish history and culture, though it is more often represented in print than in pictorial form. From the Yiddish stories of Sholem Aleichem, to pictures by Chagall, and the theatrical fantasy of Broadway's *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), *shtetl* life has been homogenized in popular imagination as an unchanging folk culture—quaint and pious, resourceful and wise. In fact, by the first half of the 20th century, *shtetl* society was giving way to the pressures and tempta-

tions of modernity,¹ and, even as they set the terms of the genre, many classics of Yiddish literature cast a critical eye on its types and traditions. The result has been a contradictory cultural legacy. The idealistic hope of Jews who emigrated to America was permeated with anxiety and guilt about their abandonment of family, community, and habits of the past. And, as if to justify those departures, North American Jewish children were often told, especially after the *Shoah*, that, despite the pleasures of *shtetl* community, Jewish life in Eastern Europe was one long bout of poverty and pogrom. From its earliest history, then, *shtetl* representation has served as a major vehicle of both nostalgia and ambivalence for Jews.

Of course as sweetened memory, nostalgia is always a management or papering-over of melancholy and loss. But, it is also a survival strategy, one that Svetlana Boym has described as “off-modern,” because it side-steps strict attention to modern progress in favor of collective “reflection and longing, estrangement and affection.”² We might understand accounts of *shtetl* culture in such “off-modern” terms, with the ambivalence and nostalgia of leaving it behind exacerbated in this case by the Holocaust and survivors' guilt. With *shtetl* culture robbed of its future or its own “natural” shift into modernity, post-war accounts of that society—even at their most cheerful—are shadowed by catastrophe. Indeed, among his contemporaries, Mayer writes, “within ten minutes of any conversation...we would be back in the concentration camps.... It was as if there were no life before the war, so overshadowed had their memories become with the pain they suffered” (p. 2). In that corrective spirit—and after considerable uncertainty, recounted here, but about which we can only speculate—Kirshenblatt took on the project to paint prewar *shtetl* life. *Shoah* references oc-

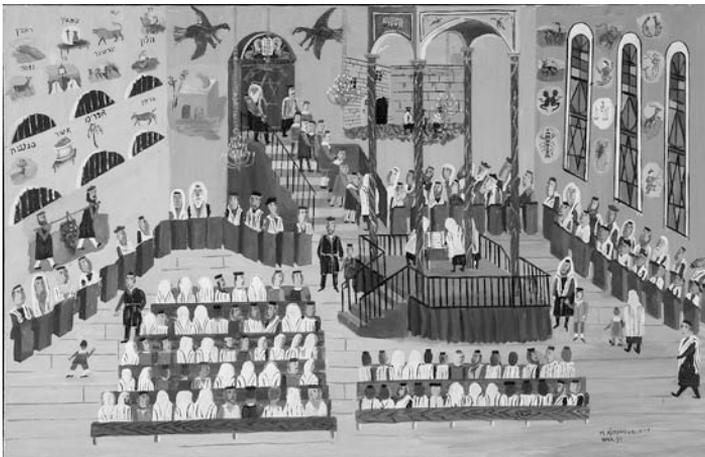
cur—starting with the book’s subtitle—but they do not overshadow the narrative with gloom or dread.

As if in recompense, accounts of the shtetl as cultural memory proliferated following World War II. The earliest forms are *yiskher bikher* [memorial books] dedicated to specific towns that detail the local history and subsequent destruction of the community. These, however, are documents of mourning; their purpose is to chronicle the tragedy.³ No less commemorative—but of a culture rather than a specific community—is Mark Zborowski’s and Elizabeth Herzog’s anthropological account *Life is with People* (1951). A publication of Columbia University’s post-war Research in Contemporary Culture Project, the study relies on immigrant and refugee informants, with an introduction by Margaret Mead that underscores the ethnographic approach. The book was enormously popular—though also much criticized for its reconstruction of the shtetl in abstract as a fixed and timeless cultural whole. After several re-printings, the study was republished in 1995 with a new introduction by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett that places *Life is with People* in its own historical

framework as an anthropological undertaking and an early example of Holocaust memory.⁴ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s analysis there seems a prologue to this father-daughter foray into a remembered Jewish culture.

“A Daughter’s Afterword” in the current volume describes Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s decades-long project of interviewing her father and their co-remembrance of his past. One can only envy this daughter’s good fortune in sharing a parent’s history in such vivid terms. Like her, we become eager listeners, but the immediacy and specificity of the narrative evokes a special sense of address. The first-person voice of the book and its imagery tells Mayer’s story, but the shaping and presentation is his daughter’s co-operative and creative enterprise. As a scholar of folklore and material culture, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is sensitive to the pictorial mode of her father’s skills and memory. She characterizes his ability to remember as a mnemonic strategy, a capacity to understand the world and experience via its visual materiality. “Mayer’s home,” she rightly states, “is a vital space intensely inhabited.”

Mayer’s way of knowing the world may account in part for his ability to remember,





for there is something intrinsically mnemonic about his bodily engagement with an intelligent material universe. Its relational logic makes it memorable.

p.378

I am reminded of Frances Yates's account of ancient mnemonic practices: the ability to recall a lengthy oration by "placing" its paragraphs in an imaginary architectural palace;⁵ as well as Charles Darwin's astonishing visual record of all that he saw before him on the *Beagle's* voyage and his capacity to set these beautiful images in an explanatory system and structure. *They Called Me Mayer July* thus both sidesteps and accommodates the generalizations of the anthropological shtetl. Mediated by the particulars of one man's memory, in its own scale and measure, Mayer Kirshenblatt's project sets the shtetl's last phase before us.

The book opens with geography—a map of no less than 70 notable sites in Apt, all of which will figure in his account—and continues with sections titled "My Town," "My Family," "My Youth," and "My Future." The pictures are sce-

nic and colorful—stage-like in composition, with complex geometric perspectives and panoramic views. They generally present a view from some distance, and, in contrast to the personal voice of the narrator, they offer the scrutinizing view of an onlooker rather than close-up intimacies. The figures are rendered in a simple untutored style that is hardly primitive, for they are as carefully detailed and expressive as their surroundings. The first chapter devotes seven images to the rabbinic importance of Apt, thus introducing a community dedicated to Jewish tradition and practice. Among the synagogue views, for example, is a detailed view of a prayer house, where banks of men in white prayer-shawls fill a spacious interior (p. 51). At 24" x 36"—Mayer's preferred canvas size—the picture contains no fewer than 139 figures. While the overall geometry of the design suggests a certain order to all this visual information, a careful look even along one row reveals an orchestrated variation among the worshippers: three men with shawls pulled over their heads, beside two bearded faces in conversation, beside two more hooded,



then another looking around. The rhythm is both constant and syncopated, so that what at first seems a general pattern in fact delivers anecdote and difference. In pictorial counterpoint, the upper walls are decorated with frescoes of astrological signs and holy sites and a pair of rampant eagles, which, Meyer explains, reference rabbinical instructions to be “as light as an eagle” in carrying out God’s will. The elaborate décor belies the alleged an-iconic character of Jewish tradition and points to a considerable Jewish visual iconography. Rather differently patterned is the scene of *Dikhenen: The Blessing* (p. 55), where a crowd of men on Erev Yom Kippur are abstracted into white pillars, their prayer shawls lifted to enshroud themselves as they receive the high priests’ blessing. Set against deep blue walls and before the three awe-inspiring Kohanim, the crowd becomes a luminous otherworldly company.

Other images show more arcane ritual events: *Shaving of a Corpse* (p.28), and *In the Oyel [mausoleum] at the Grave of Reb Mayerl* (p. 13) are two of several scenes of death and funeral customs that include the laying out and preparation of the body (p.150), the pro-

fessional mourners (p. 151), the tombstone carver (p. 153). For all the busy-ness of these pictured events, where members of the community perform their ritual tasks, death’s solitude appears in the stark and nearly empty, gray-white picture, *Der Blinder [Blind] Yosl is Dead* (p. 150). As much as they document customs, such scenes also denote the remembered curiosity of youth and a boy far from his own mortality. More than any photographic container of memory—with its indexical referent to reality—Kirshenblatt’s visual document stages more than a single instant of time, as it condenses and presents a young man’s Jewish consciousness.

Though Mayer opens one chapter with the proclamation, “I was robbed of my youth” (p. 261), he nevertheless includes several scenes of education in Apt. Six pictures in somber browns, greys, and dark blue represent the forms of male *leyenen*—learning and discussion—as performed in almost every Jewish *kheder* [school] in town. But, the chapter also includes accounts and images of genteel schooling, childrens’ games and excursions, and a good deal of mischief. This and other di-



mensions of life in Apt include conventional gender emphases on masculine work and religious study, in contrast to female domesticity. The memories, after all, are a young boy's experience, and, while Mayer may speak to his adult daughter, he does not necessarily accommodate her feminism or reshape his own sexual point of view. At 13, Bar-Mitzvah age, Mayer announces that he is too old to be bathed by his mother, as pictured in *Friday Afternoon Bath* (p. 222). Whether he imagined—or somehow saw the *Mikve: Women's Dressing Room* (p. 223); the facing page represents this scene with his usual detail—there are 21 figures in various states of bathing preparation and undress.

Not much is left out. The book also shows the town's poor, its low-life—menial labourers, market-women, prostitute and thieves. The entry for stealing in the index contains nine references. To be sure, much of the misdeeds and mischief is rendered picturesque, the pictorial sweetener that removes any sense of criminality. "Adultery," Mayer

writes, "was not much heard of in our town. By and large, people were too busy to adulterate" (p. 271). Still, opposite a dark blue interior of a study group where the beard of the dozing teacher has been glued to the table by dripping candlewax, Mayer does not fail to include an adulterer, *Caught in the Act* (p. 271), who is cast into the public square in his underwear, chased by an irate husband brandishing the culprit's hastily abandoned trousers. The accumulation of seasonal scenes of town and countryside scenes, ritual events, social and familial activities creates a panoramic sense of saga, and the reader gets to know the community characters as they move in and out of imagery and narrative.

Kirshenblatt's memoir stops in 1934, when he and his family joined his father, who was already in Toronto. Even though the young Meyer declares the shtetl world without a future, the book's ending is more adventure and emigrant idealism than escape. Perhaps his sense of the shtetl's limits is best figured by the report and picture of Meyer's



account of his favourite game: running his hoop around the edges of his town (p. 298). Discovering that such a running-hoop tour

was not possible in Toronto, the ever-curious and hot-headed Mayer July moved on to a less enclosed and less encompassed world.

NOTE ON PAINTINGS

Mayer Kirshenblatt's paintings are reproduced with permission of the artist and University of California Press. All paintings are acrylic on canvas.

p. 154: "Purim Play: 'The Krakow Wedding'"

p. 156: "Synagogue interior"

p. 157: "Der Blinde Yosl is dead"

p. 158: "Mikve: Women's Dressing Room"

p. 159 "Caught in the Act"

p. 160 "Boy with Hoop"

NOTES

1. Beginning in France in 1791, and in other European nations where they were emancipated, Jews debated the uncertainties of assimilation and loss of identity. Eastern European scholars like Simon Dubnow and Ahad Ha'Am wrote extensively on the potential of diaspora nationalism and the character of Jewish life, in Dubnow's phrase, "beyond the ghetto wall."

2. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xvii.

3. An ensuing generation of traumatized silence by survivors and Jewish communities was followed by Holocaust histories and memoirs. For the *yiskher bikher*, see Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, *From a Ruined Garden; The Memo-*

rial Books of Polish Jewry (New York: Schocken, 1963).

4. Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is with People; The Jewish Little Town of Eastern Europe* (New York: International Universities Press, 1952); and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Introduction," *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl*. New York: Schocken, 1995, ix-xlviii. The introductory essay is an invaluable account of the project history, the anthropological context, and the Jewish critique, as well as a history of Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe and the formation of the now conventional image of the shtetl.

5. Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).