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## BOOK REVIEW

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Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 411 pp.

In the 1930s, Poland was home to the largest Jewish community in Europe, forming 10% of that nation's total population, with an almost 1000-year history reaching back to the beginnings of Poland itself. A substantial number of Jews inhabited bigger urban areas, primarily working in trade, manufacturing, and craft cottage industries. Most, however, resided in smaller towns and villages where over the centuries they created a unique kind of community, the *shtetl* (Yiddish diminutive for *shtot*, or town), living alongside the largely Catholic population, many of them peasants. "Morally and spiritually, the two societies remained resolutely separate, by choice on both sides. Yet they lived in close physical proximity and...familiarity. In the shtetl, pluralism was experienced not as ideology, but as ordinary life" (Hoffman 1997:12).

Reading *They Called Me Mayer July*, one gets a sense of what such a life was like in interwar *Poyln*, as Poland was known to Yiddish-speaking Jews. Through his recollections and stories, illustrated with over 200 paintings and drawings, full of remarkable details of daily communal life, Mayer Kirshenblatt offers us a unique window onto a world that no longer exists. And it is this latter fact that also makes this book an important contribu-

tion to our understanding of the Holocaust and the degree to which it succeeded in erasing a life-way, a culture, a history, a community.

At the very start of the book, Kirshenblatt explains how he was drawn to this project, when he taught himself to paint at the age of 73. He would get together “in the steam room at the gym or in a corner of the health club” with his buddies, most of whom were Holocaust survivors.

Within five or ten minutes of any conversation, whether the topic was politics, women, this or that, we would be back in the concentration camps, on the march, in the railroad cars, in the bush with the partisans. It was as if there were no life before the war, so overshadowed had their memories become by the pain they suffered. I lost many members of my family in the Holocaust, but God spared me from living through that horror myself. He also blessed me with a wonderful memory (p. 2).

With the help and encouragement of his daughter, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, anthropologist, folklorist, and co-author of this volume, he set out to recapture that prewar life, creating a visual and textual memoir of his childhood growing up in the rabbinic town of Apt (its Yiddish name, Opatów in Polish), which in 1931 had 5,436 Jews out of a population of 9,512.

For many postwar Jews, the *shtetl* has become the site of Jewish authenticity and a metaphor for loss, according to Eva Hoffman. For some it conjures up “poignant, warm images of people in quaint black garb, or Chagall-like crooked streets...For others, it means pogroms and peasant barbarism. Yet while it existed, the shtetl was neither a utopia nor a dystopia, but a coherent, curious, and surprisingly resilient social formation...closely interwoven, reassuringly familiar” (Hoffman 1998:11–12). Kirshenblatt manages to capture this latter image without diminishing either the nostalgic or tragic elements that characterized his own life, as well as that of his family and his neighbors.

Previous books have documented the diversity and vitality of pre-Holocaust Jewish life in Poland and other East European regions, based on photographs, historical documents, family letters and diaries, and testimonies of those who survived the war (e.g., Eliach 1998, Kacyzne 1999, Vishniac 1983). In fact, one of these, a photographic history titled *Image Before My Eyes*, is coauthored by Mayer's daughter, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett with Lucjan Dobroszycki (1977).

What makes Kirshenblatt's project unique is the combination of illustration and wide-ranging narrative—created out of forty years of interviews done by the daughter “listening with love” to the father (p. 359)—each contextualizing the other. The result is an in-depth picture of familial, communal, economic, and religious life in Apt/Opatów from one person's perspective (a child's eye tempered by the adult's experiences), that goes beyond memoir to create a version of what my colleague Alisse Waterston and I (2007) have termed intimate ethnography.

The first part of the book describes the town, its history (Jews settled in Apt in the 1500s) and layout, particularly those areas that formed the center of Jewish communal activities. He uses anecdotes to convey aspects of Jewish and Christian religious life, food preparation, and the bustle of the marketplace, where neighboring farmers brought their produce and animals and Jewish artisans set up stalls.

There were, of course, the few rich, such as Layzer Mandelbaum, who had the biggest residential building in town and owned several factories; there were many more who lived in poverty, eight or ten to a room, in places like Yarmye's Hotel, “a rabbit warren of tiny rooms in two stories;” and then there were the rest, like Mayer's family, who managed to struggle from day to day. Most Jews in Apt were tradesmen, shopkeepers, and artisans, and there are accounts about the butcher, the baker, the printer, the shoemaker, the rope maker, the tailor, the wig maker, the brushmaker, and so on.

Many of the anecdotes are tinged with humor and come to life in Kirshenblatt's colorful paintings. It seems that everyone in Apt had a nickname. There was the porter, Khiel *mister* (“so named because he had been to America—hence “Mister”), Mendel *blakhosh* (Tinsmith), Mordkhe *fatset* (the Dandy), *der blinder* (Blind) Yosl, and of course, Mayer *tamez* or Mayer July (the hottest month; “people get excited when it is hot, and I was an excitable kid”). Harshl *kishke's* (*kishke* was made “by filling a cow's intestine with flour, fat and spices and roasting it”) well with its cold, fresh water supplied half the town and also served as gathering place. There one would find hired water-carriers as well as women who saved a few pennies by fetching their own, lingering to gossip a bit. “Even the prostitutes used to frequent Harshl *kishke's* well in search of customers” (p. 29).

The second part of the book focuses more on Kirshenblatt's immediate and extended family and events that defined their lives: the birth of children, running the household, treating illness, daily and religious rituals, and relationships with neighbors. The difficulties of making a living in a

town like Apt led his father to immigrate to Canada in search of work when Mayer was twelve. The third section of the book deals more directly with Mayer's youth, his schooling, the social and political activities that he and his friends were involved in and the games they played, and culminates with his departure from Apt in 1934 with his mother and siblings, to join the father in Toronto.

Consistent with his intentions, Kirshenblatt focuses on "life before the war," but the shadow of the Holocaust remains, often catching the reader by surprise. He'll be describing some romance or escapade of a relative or neighbor, or the work that a particular family did in the community, and then he'll add: "a sister who had survived Auschwitz" or "the rest of the family perished at the hands of the Nazis" or "upon being liberated, he returned to his hometown and was shot by Polish people he probably knew" (p. 133, 145, 159). Thus, we are reminded of the reasons why this collaborative father-daughter project is so important.

Kirshenblatt devotes only a few pages to brief accounts of the fate of family who remained behind in Poland. An open ghetto was established in Apt in 1941 and in October, 1942, thousands of Jews "were forced to march to the train station in Jasice and were transported to Treblinka" (p. 171). Four of his paintings depict heart-rending scenes: the execution of his maternal Aunt Mania's family because she refused to be separated from her children; the shooting of his grandmother, who could not keep pace during the march out of town; and "Slaughter of the Innocents, I and II," the execution of his father's entire family, when the Germans discovered that some of the men were aiding partisans hiding out in the nearby forest.

Mayer returned to Poland twice in the 1990s, and concludes the book with the sad observation that "after five hundred years of Jewish habitation in Apt, there was not a single sign that Jews had ever lived there" (p. 354). The informative afterword by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett gives us a fuller picture of her father and also serves as a methodological and epistemological postlude on the nature of this collaborative project. From my point of view (as someone working on a related project, documenting my mother's life in Poland, in the Nazi camps, and beyond), her decision to have the text be "entirely in Mayer's voice and that its structure would arise from an internal logic...in the tangled network of stories and images that he had created" was inspired and absolutely correct. The result, she notes, is "the voice of our collaboration," following the perspective developed by anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (p. 368).

*They Called Me Mayer July* is an extensive, engaging historical and artistic contribution to Jewish culture and Polish history, as well as the ethnography of memory and the art of narrative. It also reminds us that the (seemingly hopeless and yet critical) task of “never forgetting” demands that we understand the entirety of what came before and what gets wiped out through the suffering, injustice, and inhumanity wrought by genocide and war.

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