Agudas Achim: Jewish Life in the Catskills

Spirit Dolls in New York Puerto Rican Homes

The Holocaust and the Catskills

Hittin’ the Streets with the NYC Transzformerz

The Spy Who Snubbed Me

YMCA Camp Chingachgook’s Centennial
From the Director

The New York Folklore Society has a long history of publishing, both in journal form and book-length manuscripts. As stated by the editor of New York Folklore Quarterly, Harold Thompson, on the occasion of the 10-year anniversary of the New York Folklore Society (New York Folklore Quarterly, Spring 1954), “If I understand the first Editor’s purpose, he [the first editor, Louis S. Jones], wished to acknowledge the fact that folklore is still in the age of collecting…. To be sure, the principal aim was to make all the pieces interesting to those who were not specialists in the so-called ‘science’ of folklore…. ” An additional aim, as stated by Harold Thompson, was that the journal would publish “good writing.”

The New York Folklore Society has continued this tradition of good writing, continuing to publish the journal (now Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore), as well as book-length edited collections such as Island Sounds in the Global City (University of Illinois Press, 1998) and I Walked the Road Again: Great Stories from the Catskill Mountains (Purple Mountain Press, 1994). The newest volume, soon to be released by the New York Folklore Society, is an edited volume of articles chosen by Elizabeth Tucker and Ellen McHale. The New York State Folklife Reader, soon to be published by the University of Mississippi Press, will be available for purchase beginning in October 2013. This edited volume presents some of the best writing about the folklore and folklife of New York State, as gleaned from Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore. Designed to be relevant for the classroom, it is also a great book for one’s personal bookshelf. Please reserve your copy today!

The articles appearing in the New York Folklore Society’s journals are currently available through academic databases, including ProQuest, EBSCO Online, and Elsevier. Individual articles can be ordered online and delivered to your email inbox via our own website, http://www.nyfolklore.org/pubs/publ.html. The board and staff of the New York Folklore Society are researching formats and modalities for better accessibility of our material, now and into the future. We will be devising new ways to access our publications. New publications and publishing formats currently being researched will include digital publishing, additional thematic compilations of published pieces, and an online “members only” portion of the website from which members can download Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore onto tablets, smart phones, and other portable digital media formats. We ascribe to Harold Thompson’s 1954 statement: “I believe that every high school in the State should be a subscriber and every public library, not to mention the colleges and universities. Can you do something about this?” (NYFQ, Spring 1954). We are hoping to reach each corner of the publishing world. Please join us as we discover new ways to “connect.” Finally, give us your thoughts and opinions of what you would like to see as a publication of the New York Folklore Society. Thanks!

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“However, folklore need not necessarily be oral in transmission. Where a degree of literacy prevails it may be passed on through literary media but this tends, while helping to preserve it, to crystallize it and thus destroys some of its ability to adapt itself to new situations.”

—Horace P. Beck, The Folklore of Maine (1957) p. X.

From the Editor

I just had to pick the green beans this morning before heading off to work. With last night’s rain and the promised sun of the day, the beans would grow a bit too big for my taste by evening. The summer’s bounty is upon us in upstate New York, only hinted at a few months ago as winter turned to spring and I was first drawn back to the kitchen garden to look for the first bits of chives or chervil, arugula or dandelion greens.

My Dad was a gardener, too. A good one, I’m told, whose vegetables he grew as a teenager won 4H ribbons. He followed the then new methods taught by Cornell Cooperative Extension, like using commercial fertilizers for bigger yields and hot water canning for safer storage. I’m told he also followed the old ways, like always planting your peas on Good Friday; salting and fermenting pickles and corned beef in stone-ware crocks in a cool basement; knowing the value of cow manure for the best tasting sweet corn. His summer bounty was essential for feeding the family, where summers were spent growing, canning, butchering, and freezing to ensure food for the winter. He built a cold storage room in the basement of our ‘50s ranch house for the crocks and canned pickles, jams, and jellies. He also relied heavily on the new American Harvester chest freezer for homegrown beef, chicken, and vegetables. I remember

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Cover: Benjamin Halpern’s parents, Belle and Walter Halpern, at the counter of Sorkin’s Department Store. December 1987. Photo by Benjamin Halpern. See article on p. 3.
finding his green beans at the bottom of the freezer years after he had passed.

When my sister and I rediscovered gardening and canning as teens, my Mom couldn’t understand our fascination with this work. She associated these activities with long, hot summers, some when she was very pregnant—work that had to be done for the family. Sue and I did it for the satisfaction of producing our own home-grown pesto or chutney or jam, perhaps as a connection to our past, but not necessarily to feed our families.

I enjoy eating green beans from my own garden but don’t have to rely on it. Raising my own family these past 25 years in an old house in the upper Hudson Valley of my father’s youth, I’ve taken to rediscovering the old ways by indirect means. Thanks to the efforts of an association like Terre Vivante and their book, Preserving Food Without Freezing or Canning, I have access to traditional techniques and recipes collected from the gardeners and farmers of rural France. I continue to freeze and can (easy to find in cookbooks), but have also learned to preserve my harvest with salt, oil, sugar, vinegar, and alcohol. I’ve tried my hand at butchering with my younger brother, who has learned to cure and smoke bacon and makes an amazing lonzino.

This access to the knowledge of our elders reminds me of a recent discussion with a Native American friend, who appreciates the efforts of earlier collectors so that he could rediscover his people’s stories and make them his own. I don’t have my Dad’s recipe, but I’m told by the elders in my family that my garlic dill pickles taste just Dad’s.

I could blanch and freeze those green beans I picked this morning, but I may try something new. Since they were caught a bit on the young side, I may blanch and then dry them for an alternative to potato chips. I think Dad would approve.

Todd DeGarmo
Voices Acquisitions Editor
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Livingston Manor is a small hamlet, located about 120 miles northwest of New York City, in western Sullivan County. The village was located above the confluence of the Willowemoc, Little Beaverkill, and Cattail Creeks, known, regionally and beyond, for their abundance of fish and wildlife. In 1905, the New York, Ontario and Western Railroad had just completed its double-tracked main line, providing the southern Catskills with what was then considered a high-speed link, by rail, to the mid-Hudson region and the bustling metropolis of New York City.

A new station had just been opened in Livingston Manor, which by then had become a busy village defined by the industrial presence of the railroad itself, as well as by the factories that made many products from the hardwoods abundant in the region’s forests, and by the dairy farms in the surrounding hills that brought their milk to the depot for shipment to New York City. Livingston Manor had a vibrant business district, a school that incorporated all levels from first grade through high school, and three churches surrounding the downtown. In January 1909, Max Schwartz, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, brought his family to Livingston Manor. He opened a butcher shop on Main Street, and his family thus became Livingston Manor’s first Jewish residents. In April of that same year, my grandparents, Mottel and Manya Sorkin, along with...
their infant daughter Leya, also settled in the village and opened a tailor shop. Other families soon followed. Livingston Manor was now on the way to becoming a multiethnic community, but not without some bumps in the road.

My grandfather, also a Russian Jew, first settled in Brooklyn's garment district and worked in a factory that was owned by my grandmother's brother. In 1908, their daughter Leya was born. Like many who lived in the crowded conditions that defined immigrant life in New York City, Mottel contracted tuberculosis. Fortunately for him, his condition began to improve, and he was sent to a farm near Liberty to recuperate. Such relocations were common, and many were coordinated by a network of Jewish organizations with a Socialist appeal, such as the Workmen's Circle. During one of her visits upstate, my grandmother decided that she wanted to raise her family in the Catskills, and she and my grandfather sought the opportunity to set up a business in Livingston Manor. Even though the village needed a tailor, only one businessman would rent to them, and their presence was met with skepticism, as most of the residents had no previous interaction with Jews. Livingston Manor, like many communities of that period, had its share of bigotry and a reluctance to accommodate people from different cultural backgrounds. The Ku Klux Klan was quite active in Livingston Manor until the mid-1920s. Despite these obstacles, and the harsh winters and floods that frequented the downtown, more Jews came to the community, and by 1920, there was a sizable Jewish presence in and around Livingston Manor. By 1920, my grandparents’ business had evolved into a small dry goods store, known as Sorkin's Department Store, and they had three children. Their youngest daughter, Belle, would, one day, become my mother.

Jewish businesses began to flourish within the village, but the Jewish farms outside the village faced a different fate. The soil and climate were not conducive to raising crops to feed animals, and those who tried to establish themselves as farmers found the going very tough. Some left their land to find other occupations, either in the village or in New York City, and others held on by accepting summer guests, who were also Jewish immigrants in search of a reprieve from the summer heat and uncomfortable conditions in New York.
City. In time, the number of people seeking summer refuge grew large enough to support small businesses that catered to these visitors. Farmhouses became boarding houses; workers’ cottages housed summer tourists, and, in time, opportunities presented themselves that led to the construction of small hotels and bungalow colonies that catered to working class Jewish immigrants and their families.

Most of the Jewish immigrants were characterized by their strong will to succeed and to create opportunities for their children—opportunities that would not have been available had they not come to America. The Jewish settlers proved to be strong members of their new community, and in time, the mutual tolerance that characterized their early years in Livingston Manor...
Announcement for High Holiday Services, written in Yiddish and Hebrew, in 1924. Yiddish was the primary language spoken by the Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia.

son—who were carpenters and devout practitioners of Orthodox Judaism. The building is reminiscent of synagogues in Eastern Europe and Russia; it achieved the ritualistic separation of men and women through the construction of a balcony to accommodate women, while men over the age of 13 participated in the service. The Orthodox Liturgy, entirely in Hebrew, was followed during worship. Although most of evolved into a sense of mutual respect between the villagers and their Jewish neighbors. At home, and with each other, most Jews spoke and read Yiddish, a language common to most European and Russian Jews of that period.

Children, growing up in Livingston Manor, however, were encouraged to learn English and often excelled in their studies. Jewish families, though, also sought to preserve and exercise their spiritual and cultural beings, in their new surroundings.

By 1913, a Jewish benevolent society, known as Agudas Achim, or Society of Friends, had been organized, and a cemetery was established two miles east of town.

Religious services were held in a private park pavilion, located on the site now occupied by Livingston Manor Central School. The desire to educate children and adults, alike, about their faith and culture gave rise to a new community center, known as the Shalom Aleichem Schul, named in honor of the prominent Jewish writer. In 1923, Congregation Agudas Achim was incorporated, and in 1924, a synagogue bearing that name was erected. The synagogue was designed and built by Max and Izzie Brooks, Polish Jews—father and

AGUDAS ACHIM SYNAGOGUE

Greets All Its Friends and Members on the Occasion of the NEW YEAR 5725 and Invites All To Come and Worship With Us

S’Lichos - Midnite, August 29th
Rosh Hashana - ‘New Year’ Starts at Sundown Sunday - September 6th
Kol Nidre - Tues. at Sundown, Sept. 15th
Yom Kippur - ‘Yizkor’ Wed., Sept. 16th

Admission To The Synagogue Will Be By TICKET ONLY
Tickets For The High Holy Days Are On Sale Now- All Seats Will Be Reserved In Advance

Tickets Are On Sale At The Following Stores:

CENTRAL PHARMACY
SIEGEL’S DEPT. STORE
NELSON’S GROCERY
SORKIN’S STORE

Announcement for High Holiday Services, written in English, in 1964. By that time, English had become the primary language spoken by the children of immigrants, and a fluent secondary language for the immigrants themselves. Ca. 1996.
these families identified themselves, culturally, as Jews, many did not practice Orthodox Judaism at home.

After World War II, many children of Jewish immigrants began to leave the rural setting of Sullivan County in pursuit of jobs and education. My mother, Belle Sorkin, however, returned to Livingston Manor, following her employment by the War Department. Soon, thereafter, she married my father, Walter Halpern, who came to the area from New York City after the war. My father worked as a laborer, for the City of New York, on the construction of the massive network of tunnels used to transport potable water from the newly constructed reservoirs in the central Catskills to the City. From the time they married in 1953, until my father's
passing in 1995, my parents owned and operated Sorkin’s Department Store, the dry goods business started by my grandparents.

I was born in 1958 and spent the first 18 years of my life in Livingston Manor. Among my fondest childhood memories are the walks to schul (synagogue) on Shabbes (Saturday) with my Zeyda (Grandfather) Sorkin. The services were still conducted entirely in Hebrew, and my grandfather would often explain to me what was taking place. Being in that synagogue, in the presence of my grandfather and other members of his generation, gave me the sense that I was indeed in a holy place with some very special people. Sadly, my grandparents and members of their generation would not be with us much longer. My Zeyda’s passing, in the summer of 1968, created a void in my life, but our friendship for my first 10 years, and the time we spent in the synagogue, gave me a strong foundation on which to build my life.

By the time I reached adolescence, much had changed. My grandparents and most of their peers had passed on. Many of the boarding houses, hotels, and Jewish businesses were closing, as a younger generation either sought other forms of employment or moved away. Finally, the once flourishing, Congregation Agudas Achim, that gave me such a sense of fulfillment as a child, was now facing the bleak possibility of extinction. Only a handful of Jewish children remained in the community, and the Congregation could no longer afford to maintain a full-time rabbi or even a part-time educator. Preparation for Bar Mitzvah required our being transported to classes held in nearby Liberty, which still had a vibrant Orthodox congregation. By the mid-1970s, it became nearly impossible to attract the minyan of 10 males, over the age of 13, necessary to conduct Orthodox services over the High Holidays. The synagogue was falling into a state of disrepair, and by the time I left for college in 1976, the Congregation was on the verge of collapse. Since then, a turn of events, brought about largely by a group of dedicated and determined individuals, gave rise to a resurgence of Jewish activity that was about to take place in the historic setting of Agudas Achim.

Between 1970 and 1985, a number of young Jewish families moved into the region from the New York metropolitan area, and a few young men and women who had grown up in the Congregation had returned. The new families and returning members wished to retain their Jewish identities, but did not wish to affiliate themselves with an Orthodox congregation. Also, there were several families who were descendants of the founding members of the Congregation who, for various reasons, wished to break from the Orthodox traditions. Under the leadership of Robert and Lynne Freedman, the Congregation became affiliated with the Reform Movement and joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1986. While this new Congregational identity appealed to this group of people, change did not happen without controversy and division among the more devout and traditional members. In an effort to appease some of these members, the Congregation saw to it that a portion of the traditional Orthodox liturgy and music were incorporated into its services for the Sabbath and High Holidays, albeit with the egalitarian worship and English translation that characterize the Reform service. For some, this gesture helped assuage the division, but for a few families, the wounds caused by the break from tradition would never heal.

When asked why the Congregation became affiliated with Reform Judaism, Mr. Freedman, still the President of the Congregation, replied that there were three primary reasons for doing so, that he hoped would enable its survival in the long term. First, this
new group of congregants possessed an overwhelming desire to conduct services in which men and women would play equal roles, including the leadership of the service, itself. Second, there was an equally strong desire to conduct services in which the primary language would be English, with Hebrew being secondary. With relatively few members fluent in conversational Hebrew, this would enable those in attendance to identify more directly with the modern liturgy, much as their ancestors, who spoke Hebrew, had done, several generations earlier. Finally, Mr. Freedman pointed out that many Jews who had moved to western Sullivan and eastern Delaware Counties, either as year-round or seasonal residents, also identified with Reform Judaism, and for them, Livingston Manor would be the nearest Congregation. The Reform Congregation always reached out to and welcomed these new residents as members.

To the credit of the members of Agudas Achim, their determination and hard work have paid off. The temple was restored and is now recognized on the National Register of Historic Places. Shabbos services are once again held, though now on Friday evenings, on a monthly or semi-monthly basis. All the major holidays are now celebrated, and religious education for children and adults is once again offered at the synagogue. The Congregation was blessed with the charismatic presence and spiritual leadership of the late Ellen Singer, a Jewish educator of international renown, who served its membership from its re-chartering in 1986, until her recent passing in June 2013. Under Ms. Singer’s tutelage, many young members became B’nai Mitzvah, and many congregants began to learn more about the true meaning of Jewish life. Ms. Singer also led a wide array of community service and outreach programs that continue to meet the needs of many people, particularly women, who live within the lower Catskill region.

The Congregation has also been blessed with the leadership of several dedicated rabbis, whose spiritual presence and sensibilities allowed them to reach out to and include Jews of different backgrounds in their services. Danny Maseng, an Israeli national and cantorial soloist, known worldwide, served the Congregation from 1994 through 1999. I had the privilege to take part in a High Holiday service in 1995 that was led by Mr. Maseng. Danny’s uncanny ability to communicate through music and his ebullient warmth as a person created a service that was both a spiritual awakening and a true homecoming. It was particularly meaningful to me, as this was the first service I had attended with my mother following the passing of my father earlier that year, and it is one I will never forget. Danny Maseng is now Director of Music and Cantor of Temple Israel in Hollywood, California, and is also recognized internationally as a leader in Jewish education, musical composition, and musical performance. The current rabbi, Fred Pomerantz,
The members of Congregation Agudas Achim of Livingston Manor would like to invite you to join them in a celebration of one hundred years of friendship and service to the Jewish Community in western Sullivan County, and beyond. The event will take place at 1 p.m., on October 13, 2013, at the synagogue, located on Rock Avenue (Old Rte. 17) in Livingston Manor. We would, especially, like to invite anyone with a personal connection to the Jewish community in the village, or the Congregation itself, to come and share with us their stories and personal memories that tie them to this special group.

who has served the congregation since 2004, is well known in his own right, as a charismatic leader, a counselor, and a scholar of the modern Reform Liturgy. Rabbi Pomerantz has a unique ability to relate to everyone in his presence, and he communicates his message through art, music, and poetry, woven into his liturgy and sermon. His services are truly uplifting, and Congregation Agudas Achim is very fortunate to have Rabbi Pomerantz on its bema.

As an adult, I have had many opportunities to return to the Temple, sometimes alone and other times with my own family. Often, I sit in the same seat where I once sat, next to my Zeyda, some fifty years ago, on a Shabbos morning. I recall the morning light peeping through the glass windows, the generational presence of those who came seeking a better life, the solemnity of the day, and the feeling that I was part of a tradition that is rooted in millennia past. I have been able to show my wife and children that Judaism still lives in this sanctuary. On one visit, in December 1993, my daughter Sarah and I visited the Temple. On that day, I decided that I was going to photograph the building, in its entirety, and in the broader historical context of the Jewish community of Livingston Manor. On this and many subsequent visits, I photographed the *shul*, the cemetery, and the village, and have decided to share with you a sampling of these images.
Congregation Agudas Achim invites you to visit Livingston Manor this fall, amidst the beautiful autumn colors, and to join them in celebration of the rich history that defined their first hundred years. For more information, and directions to the Temple, you may visit the Agudas Achim website, www.congregationagudasachim.org or contact its president, Mr. Robert Freedman, either by phone, 845-439-5708 or e-mail, president@congregationagudasachim.org

Benjamin Halpern is currently employed as a freelance photographer in Champaign, Illinois. He has developed a strong interest in American history and folklore, which he strives to record and depict through his photography. Ben grew up in Livingston Manor, a small hamlet in New York’s Catskill Mountains and graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and the University of Illinois in 1980 and 1982, respectively, with Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in electrical engineering. From 1982 to 1987, Ben worked as an electrical engineer at the University of Illinois’ Urbana-Champaign Campus. In mid-1987, after nearly 15 years as an amateur, he decided to pursue photography as a full-time career.

Some of Ben’s professional assignments include the photo documentation of the Engineering and Agricultural Campus historic districts for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the photo documentation of the historic district at Chanute Air Force Base for the Historic American Building Survey, and the Bagnell Dam Osage Power Plant for the Historic American Engineering Record of the National Park Service. In addition, Ben has worked extensively photographing buildings for architectural firms around Illinois and New York. In 1987, Ben was commissioned by the Erpf Catskill Cultural Center in Arkville, New York, to photograph historic architecture and landscapes in the Catskill Mountains for the traveling exhibit, “Catskill Architecture: An Irreplaceable Heritage.” In 1996, he was commissioned under a grant from the New York State Council for the Humanities to produce a slide presentation of historic synagogues in the western Catskills.

Ben’s exhibits include three studies of the railroads in East Central Illinois, a photographic study of his hometown, Livingston Manor, and a documentary on farming in east Central Illinois. He has also exhibited a set of photographs of the historic synagogue in Livingston Manor at the University of Illinois under a grant from the University’s Committee on Jewish Culture and Society. Ben is currently working on two documentary projects: one, with the New York Folklore Society, illustrating the heritage of the dairy industry in the lower Catskill Region, and the other with the Public Library of Steubenville and Jefferson County, Ohio, showing what remains of the once mighty steel industry in the Upper Ohio Valley.
Coming Home, Fifty Years Later!

BY VARICK A. CHITTENDEN

For one long-awaited weekend, beginning May 30th, they came—from Albuquerque and Albany, Boise and Brooklyn, Wiscasset and Watertown. Those travelling farthest flew in from Alsace, the Channel Islands, and Alaska; others are as close as Potsdam, Madrid, and Canton. The 50th reunion for St. Lawrence University’s Class of 1963, my own class, was a great homecoming.

Of the 307 who graduated 50 years ago, 85 classmates and about 40 guests came. Most have lived rather ordinary, predictable lives—as lawyers, dentists, doctors, financiers, ad men, bankers, and teachers. But there was a geophysicist, a physical therapist, a B&B innkeeper, a travel agent, a nuclear engineer, a children’s book author, and an interior decorator among us. Some have enjoyed more celebrity: Steve Bull was a personal assistant to President Nixon in the White House; John Bennett Perry has acted on stage, television, and in movies (in the 1970s, he was the clean-shaven sailor in Old Spice commercials and is better known today as actor Matthew Perry’s father!); and Ron Mason, now retired as Michigan State University’s athletic director, became the winningest head coach in college hockey history. Most are and have been active in their communities. Many brought photos of their proudest achievements—children, grandchildren, even great-grandchildren—to share. And everyone had stories to tell.

There were fond recollections of Professor “Doc” Delmage and Shakespeare class; hockey and baseball coach George Menard, a strict disciplinarian and great role model for young men; and the Laurentian Singers’ conductor and mentor “Poppa G” [Richard Gilbert] and the chorus’s trips to perform around the country. There were funny stories about Dean of Women Doris Stout’s strict curfews and dress codes for freshman women, of sneaking trays out of the cafeteria for sledding down Library Hill on wintry nights, and of “boonies”—off-campus parties with blankets and six-packs on weekends. A very successful private equity fund manager (and, recently, a University trustee) recalled going to Connie Barr’s bar and grill on Friday nights where local farmers bought him a sandwich and Carling Black Label beer because he was so poor when he was a student. A city girl from Philadelphia described her first ever ski lesson from classmate and champion skier CB Vaughn. A fraternity man and star athlete remembered “watching some of the toughest men I have ever known get emotional on graduation day as they said goodbye to brothers and friends.” He added, “I, of course, remained cool and detached!”

With all the good times, and even hilarious moments, there were solemn moments, too. The optimism of our youth has been tempered with unplanned experiences: divorces, deaths of spouses or children, failed careers or businesses, and other tragedies have come too many. We learned that 42 of our classmates had died, some very young. At least three, with lives full of promise when we first knew them, died much too soon by suicide. A significant number of men served in the military, some with several tours of duty in Vietnam. One, Air Force Captain Terry Forbes, was killed in action in 1967, at 26, when his plane was shot down. And too many have suffered disability and life-threatening diseases, including dementia and other mental illnesses. But the human spirit usually triumphs over loss and suffering, and that surely was evident on our Reunion weekend.

There is something very special about 50th class reunions. Many of us hadn’t seen one another in a long time and, who knows if we will ever see each other again? Unlike our 10th reunion when we were just getting started in real adult life, or our 25th when we had chalked up some experiences but had years ahead to look forward to more, this was different. Consciously or not, we are now more aware of our own mortality and that of those around us.

The four brief days of our reunion was a time for genuine celebration and reflection. We renewed friendships first made in the curious, even isolated world of college life—as sorority sisters and fraternity brothers, teammates, lab partners, or roommates. Strangely enough, we also saw, in a new light, people we had barely known, and came to appreciate them more for who they are now. Despite our different the paths traveled, I think I can speak for all of our gratitude for a good liberal arts education that prepared us for the world, for interesting and committed professors, coaches and mentors to show us the way, for Canton and the North Country to call home (at least for four years), and for friendships that will continue to enrich us for the rest of our lives.
Not long after I moved to New York in 1981, I met the pioneering folklorist Alan Lomax at a party. He seemed interested in talking with me as a newcomer to the field. “I discovered Lead Belly and Muddy Waters,” he said to me out of the blue. “Who have you discovered?” Holding a glass of wine, I was nonplussed, flustered, rendered speechless by the question. I felt I hadn’t yet discovered myself, let alone anyone else.

The Beatles were fond of saying that their manager Brian Epstein didn’t discover the Beatles, as he often claimed. It was the Beatles who discovered Brian Epstein. I would love to have suggested to Alan something to this effect: “Perhaps you didn’t ‘discover’ Muddy Waters, perhaps Muddy Waters discovered you—and I imagine you both discovered something of yourselves in one another.” Many of the singers and storytellers that folklorists claim to have “discovered” are themselves folklorists of sorts, who have, in turn, collected stories and songs their whole lives. And there is often a deep, almost spiritual connection between the folk musicians and the folklorists who documented and promoted their careers—between, for instance, Alan Lomax and Lead Belly, John Cohen of the New Lost City Ramblers and Roscoe Holcomb, folklorist Ralph Rinzler and Doc Watson.

In my work as a folklorist, I have long realized that we are not so much studying the folks we interview and celebrate, but rather documenting their work and partnering with them. They are not our “informants,” a sorry term often used in the discipline, but our collaborators. We are not “studying them,” but learning from them. Much of my work as a folklorist involves documenting cultural forms, but much of it, too, is about connecting with kindred spirits from other walks of life, and collaborating with them to find creative ways to give out-of-the-mainstream art forms and individuals the attention they deserve.

The folk characters I’ve gotten to know in my work, many of whom have passed on, come back to me in dreams and stories. I discover repeatedly what the folklorist Sandy Rikoon narrowed to three words: “People are smart.” They are my teachers. My relationship with them is a testament to what the writer and teacher Jack Tehen calls solidarity and connection across difference. I am not denying the differences in our stations and walks of life, and I am not trying to be them any more than they are trying to be me. I consider them kindred spirits.

Here is some of what I’ve gleaned from these remarkable individuals. From the Reverend Robert Butler who with his mother, then a blues guitarist in her 70s, ran an informal ministry of song, visiting the sick and infirm in New York City, I learned: “Black folks have all the sayings. White folks got all the money.”

From Moishe Sacks, a retired baker and the unofficial rabbi of the Intervale Jewish Center, the last synagogue remaining in the South Bronx: “Death doesn’t matter to me. I don’t think I’ll know death. I know only two things, the present, how to live.” Interviewed for the documentary film, The Grand Generation, which I coproduced with Marjorie Hunt and Paul Wagner, Moishe Sacks taught me a lot about how to live:

“I love to braid a Challah, I love to bake a cake… When I was working I had a weekly schedule. Monday a cake called Apple Ness, Tuesday strudel, Wednesday babkes, Thursday this – but at the end of Sunday evening, I was happy, because, by Monday, it went back to Apple Ness. I accomplished what I set out to do. Therefore, I was happy.”

I met the homeless man, Tony Butler, at the Broadway-Lafayette stop on the F train. Soon after, I saw him playing a game of solitaire, sitting on one of the benches and dealing out the cards. “The problem with this game,” he tells me, “is that there’s an overabundance of losing combinations.” In the weeks and years that followed, I realized that his observation pertained not only to solitaire, but life itself. According to Tony, “too many things go wrong, and not enough things go right. When you take right and wrong, and you go like this”—he used his hands as a balancing scale to demonstrate—“there’s just an overabundance of wrong, there’s just a little right. Wrong is actually what makes the world go round. Wrong is king. Wrong rules. Wrong dominates. The world is actually geared to go wrong. There’s too many ways for things to go wrong, and it’s impossible for everything to go right.”

I met Civil Rights activist and wife of a Pullman porter, Rosina Tucker, when she was 104. My friend Paul Wagner, along with folklorist Jack Santino, introduced me to her when we filmed The Grand Generation (currently streaming on folkstreams.net). “Once, a young man asked me,” she said, “what was the world like in your day?” You know so often when a younger person will talk to an older person, especially a very old person, they seem to have in the back of their minds that those people are still living back in those days. I wanted to let this young person know that I wasn’t living back then. ‘My day,’ I told him, ‘My day? This IS my day.’

“I feel that everybody has a purpose in life,” she said, “whether they carry or know that purpose or not—there is a purpose to every life—and I think there is a purpose for my life, and I will live until that purpose is fulfilled.”

I can think of no greater purpose in life than to sing the praises of these great spirits. Moishe Sacks, Rosina Tucker, and Tony Butler are iconic. Folklore, as a form of great nurturing, is palpable in their presence. Many of the individuals who worked closely with me have passed on. I carry them with me, these luminous souls who have immeasurably enriched my spirit.
Spirit Dolls (Muñequisas) in New York Puerto Rican Homes: Engaging with Saints and Ancestors

BY EILEEN M. CONDON

Introduction

Forms, functions, and meanings of altars in Puerto Rican homes on the island or the US mainland are already well documented in association with Espiritismo and Santería, two forms of Caribbean religious belief and practice. Ethnographic descriptions of the roles that dolls play within these contexts of belief are less common. In the New York Puerto Rican homes in which I was welcomed between 2004 and 2007, as a participant observer in Puerto Rican Espiritismo, altars decorated with flowers, food, water offerings, and statues of the saints co-existed with mesitas and other doll displays. Mesitas are little tables, set with offerings for the dolls who sit beside them. The dolls sitting at these tables were mass-produced as well as handmade. The costumes and colors of the dollies were traditional and bore meanings related to Espiritismo and Santería.

In this article I report beliefs and practices that I observed and collected via interviews related to muñequisas/muñecas de trapo (dolls/fabric dolls), as they were called by my friends in Dutchess and Orange Counties, New York, and relate these findings to the work of Raquel Romberg (2003), Margarite Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (2003), David Brown (2003), Kay Turner (1999), and Robert Farris Thompson (1983) in this area. The displays of muñecas created sacred places in the home, apart from and alongside

Jacinta’s “Spanish lady” ancestor doll, seated at her living room mesita, across from her African ancestor doll, “La Negrita” (shown below). Jacinta honored her African and Spanish ancestors at the same mesita. All photos by Eileen Condon. The first seven photos here are courtesy of the Dutchess County Arts Council (soon to be Arts Mid-Hudson).
the home altar, where deceased loved ones, ancestors, and saints (in the Catholic as well as the African Orisha sense in Santería) are not only honored, but expected to come and play—literally, as well as symbolically. Photos of doll displays in three Puerto Rican homes in New York are included, and contextualized within the beliefs and practices of the doll owners, members of a group practicing Espiritismo and Santería (something like what scholars Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert and others have described as “Santerismo”), across several in-home settings in Dutchess County, Orange County, and the Bronx, New York. One member of this group also made some of the dolls. The dollmaker and the doll owners expressed their beliefs in their often playful interactions with these items but also in their stories about how loved ones, ancestors, and the saints communicate literally and symbolically through the dollies which honor them in these homes. The names of these tradition bearers have been changed, at their request, to enable the group members to continue to keep their participation in these communities of belief largely private.

Fieldwork Context

Over the course of my work as folk arts program director at the Dutchess County Arts Council from 2004 to 2007, I developed a number of soul-nourishing friendships with a group of Puerto Rican women. About three months after I had met Rita, on the way to a work-related meeting, we stopped for lunch in a diner, and I shared with her my longstanding interest in saint lore (legends and other stories related to Catholic saints, especially the traditional genre of stories of receiving favors from St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the modern-day Carmelite saint known as the Little Flower). This piqued Rita’s interest right away. She commented that her husband had a great devotion to this saint. In typical modesty about what I would later learn to be her facultades, or gifts as an espiritista—a medium and advocate for healing within her community—Rita commented very offhandedly that she had seen Saint Theresa about 10 years before. Over my chicken soup, I tried to register what Rita had just said. There was a pause. “You saw Saint Theresa?” I queried.

Rita explained the circumstances of her vision. Having no concept at that point of her status as a healer and never having even heard the word espiritista, I resolved to interview Rita about this story at a later date if I got the chance. That exchange created a bond within our developing working relationship. Eventually, I shared a meal with Rita at her home. Once again, over a meal, I sensed that some new (to me) form of spiritual practice, one for which I had no name as yet, seemed to be beckoning. “You’ll have to come downstairs and see our altar,” Rita said. “We’ll let you do that some day. Just don’t tell Father.” That half-joking remark marked, for me, the beginning of my relationship of discovery with Rita and friends. I spent most Fridays over the next two years at “circle” (also known as white table, misa spiritual, or velada) at Rita’s house. I enjoyed the old-time recordings of Celina and Reutilio, applying cascarilla, cigar smoke, and perfume to my head and hands, being whacked on my shoulders and back for my spiritual health with bandanas and freshly picked local plants, and above all, listening to what Rita, her husband, other espiritistas, and the occasional visiting santera (priestess in Santería) might advise me and others, in matters practical and spiritual. Later during this period, I also joined some members of the group on trips to “toques” or drumming/dance/trance
sessions honoring the Orishas or West African deities, at a Bronx casa de santo. Fieldwork feels like the wrong name for this adventure in my life—it was extremely fun and very nourishing to me, personally. Perhaps, it was just folklore fieldwork at its best.

Overview of the Dolls and Their Place in the Homes

As a way of introducing the narrower focus of this article—muñecas or dolls in these friends’ homes—I will share some of the photographs I took in my three friends’ homes. None of these women consented to having their primary home altar photographed for this piece (which was originally presented as an American Folklife Society conference paper in 2006). However, none objected to my photographing her dolls. The table on the next page presents facts about the doll owners and the dolls themselves in a comparative manner. Most of this information was gleaned from semi-structured interviews with each doll owner during the fieldwork period. Based on these facts, I offer, further in the table, some general observations and further comparisons to relevant social science literature.

Placement of the Dolls in the Home

Although the placement of dolls in these homes was very varied, there did seem to be some general rules governing the dolls’ locations. Dolls were not to be placed upon the home altar. Jacinta, Maria, and Rita kept and attended complex home altars, peopled by statues of Jesus, Mary, Catholic saints, syncretic saints (such as San Lazaro, who represents the Orisha Babalú Ayé), Orisha images (such as a rooster representing Changó), Negritas, Negritos, and Indios, freshened with offerings of food, fruit, water, wine, rum, and flowers. However, the dolls were always seated or displayed elsewhere. Maria placed her mother’s smaller dolls above her altar on a closet shelf, and placed two on or near a rocking chair in the room’s opposite corner. Her mother had passed away in this chair.

Jacinta seated her dolls at what she called her mesita, which holds water and coffee offerings, Spanish cards, fans, and other items she believes the dolls may appreciate. Rita’s dolls were located in the living room, next to her son’s conga set. Her son knew to pull “La Negrita” nearer to his drums when he played for guests. He knew he was playing “for” La Negrita or what she represented (an African ancestor or spirit guide). Rita’s Negritas were also moved to a chair in her basement during a velada, that is, a fiesta in honor of a saint, such as San Lazaro/Babalú Ayé. Therefore, another “rule” seemed to be that although the dolls would not be located upon an altar, they could be and would be moved or relocated to other areas where some form of spiritual celebration might take place in the house.

The dolls were never relocated to Rita’s altar room, despite the fact that she “works” there in prayer. Rita’s explanation was that the dolls are “too material” to be appropriate there. By contrast, two dolls graced the altar room at the Bronx casa de santo that this group frequents. Is there a different rule? Are those dolls “pre para’d” (prepared, or empowered) in such a way as to cast their protection over all who pass through that altar room into the room where the toque, drumming/dance celebration, is about to take place? Since I was not in a position to ask that question while I was visiting that casa de santo, I have searched instead for some possible answers in the literature on Espiritismo and Santería.

The use of tables dedicated to ancestors (bóvedas) and ground-level Egun (ancestor) shrines with similar offerings is well known in relation to a spectrum of Afro-Cuban religious practices (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 184). Rita was familiar with the word bóveda and said she had sometimes put up a bóveda with cups of water and a crucifix for “peace and tranquility” in the home. Her dolls, however, would not sit at a bóveda, she said. Jacinta’s greater familiarity with Cuban and Puerto Rican Santería in the Bronx could provide the context for her familiarity with and recreation of a mesita for her dolls. The concept or purpose of a mesita for these women was therefore not quite synonymous in their minds with a bóveda or an altar.

Generational Gaps in Transmission of Doll Beliefs/Practices

The doll owners I interviewed did not maintain their doll displays from childhood onward. Rather, and interestingly, they came back to their beliefs and practices related to
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doll Owners</th>
<th>Jacinta (PR, Catholic, attends Mass regularly, dollmaker, aspiring medium, formerly aspiring Santería initiate, participates in Espiritism prayer circles, long-term experience with Santería as an uninitiated observer, consulted santera to understand dolls)</th>
<th>Maria (PR, Catholic, attends Mass periodically, daughter of espiritista-santería, attends Espiritismo prayer circles, recently learned significance of dolls through consultation with local santera, childhood experience with Santería, unintinitated in Santería)</th>
<th>Rita (PR, Catholic, attends Mass regularly, working espiritista, daughter of espiritista, runs prayer circles, introducing children to Espiritismo and Santería, learning significance of dolls through consultation with local santera, unintinitated in Santería)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># Dolls</td>
<td>3 (A-C)</td>
<td>6 (A-F)</td>
<td>4 (A-D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of dolls</td>
<td>&lt;10 years old</td>
<td>Circa 40 years old</td>
<td>&lt;15 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provenance</td>
<td>One from friend, one from son, one self-made</td>
<td>Inherited from her mother</td>
<td>Gifts from friends and husband’s cousin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material—doll body</td>
<td>Cotton and synthetic cloth, plastic</td>
<td>Plastic</td>
<td>Cotton and synthetic cloth, plastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material—clothes</td>
<td>Cotton/synthetic</td>
<td>Cotton/synthetic</td>
<td>Cotton/synthetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference term or name(s) for doll</td>
<td>Muñequita, muñeca, muneca de trapo, B’s spirit name not yet revealed, once revealed would be private, La Negrita</td>
<td>No personal names; dolls, muñecas “Prepared”?</td>
<td>Twins (C-D) have personal names only she knows; otherwise, muñequita, muñeca, La Negra, La Madama, Mis Negritas (A-B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handmade or mass-produced</td>
<td>2 hm, 1 mp</td>
<td>6 mp</td>
<td>2 hm, 2 mp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maker/manufacturer—doll</td>
<td>Self (B), unknown</td>
<td>Uneeda Doll Co., Inc. (B), unknown</td>
<td>Jacinta (A), Venezuelan dollmaker (B), unknown (C-D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maker—clothes</td>
<td>Unknown, self, mp</td>
<td>Self, L’il Dolls, misc. children’s clothing companies</td>
<td>Jacinta and Venezuelan dollmaker (A-B); mp (C-D); alternate hats crocheted by R’s daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color—doll</td>
<td>2 black fabric, 1 light brown tone plastic</td>
<td>2 brown tone plastic, 4 fair tone plastic</td>
<td>2 black fabric, 2 fair tone plastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colors—clothing</td>
<td>A=pink-blue floral; B=white/red, C=blue and yellow</td>
<td>Highly variable (yellow/white, all white, purples, pink/white, other)</td>
<td>Blue/yellow gingham (A), green/white (B), purple/yellow (C), and blue/white (D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doll meanings</td>
<td>“Spiritual symbols” through which you can learn about a spiritual guide/ancestor (distant), whose name may be discerned by a santera or in a dream; protection if prepared (many ways of preparation, stuffing not mentioned)</td>
<td>Can “symbolize” various possible “entities” (more or less enlightened), connected with the parent’s guides passed to child, protection if prepared (meaning many things, not familiar with stuffing)</td>
<td>“Part of a tradition—my mother had one” but “anybody can own one.” Akin to Feng Shui or mezuzot—protect the home and family. Can be “baptized,” prepared in many ways, including being stuffed with herbs in middle and symbols of saints in arms, legs, head, an “African” way; twins are also “doctors” in the Church—Cosmas and Damian—good to have in home with children; make R feel “comfortable”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothes meanings</td>
<td>Colors represent any of the saints, colors and designs for B’s red and white clothes came in J’s dream</td>
<td>Colors may represent the saints, colors and designs for 2 purple outfits came in M’s dream</td>
<td>Colors represent saints or just colors owner likes, especially son’s guardians Babalú &amp; Yemayá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locations</td>
<td>Living room, bedroom, mesitas, shelves, chairs, any table in home</td>
<td>Standing on floor against wall or sitting on rocking chair in bedroom, on shelf over altar in bedroom closet, in living room on chair for a prayer circle</td>
<td>Living room on floor near congas or on living room chair, on chair in basement for special occasions (white table, saint’s days, misa espiritual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believed to move</td>
<td>Yes but “when I’m not looking”</td>
<td>Yes, but not from room to room</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed to have moved</td>
<td>No—“If they move, I move—I run!” Yes (&quot;They go from standing to sitting, and sitting to standing, yes.&quot;)</td>
<td>No, but it’s possible—well, La Negrita did, (A), just once.”</td>
<td>&quot;No, but it’s possible—well, La Negrita did, (A), just once.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offerings</td>
<td>Glass of water, tiny mug of black coffee, cards, fans, cigars, candles</td>
<td>Red wine, rum in small glass</td>
<td>Rum, wine, black coffee, water in small glasses, music (drums)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of offerings</td>
<td>Mesita, floor, altar, any table in home</td>
<td>Home altar</td>
<td>Home altar or bookcase in basement, congas in living room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolls “Prepared”?</td>
<td>“Not yet” (may or may not mean stuffed)</td>
<td>Yes (but not meaning stuffed)</td>
<td>“Baptized” (“I baptize all my dolls!”) though not presently stuffed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Decorative Dolls in Home</td>
<td>A few</td>
<td>A few</td>
<td>Extensive collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other things dolls believed to like or santera said they would like</td>
<td>Jewelry (earrings and necklaces)</td>
<td>Jewelry (anklet, earrings, necklace), take socks and shoes off, being taken outside house</td>
<td>Crib with handmade crocheted blankets, changes of clothes (C-D), being moved around house (A)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For nine months, sank and blackened immediately. For this reason, she has continued to honor Ochún/Caridad del Cobre and has passed these practices on to her son and his wife to protect her grandchild. At the same time, Maria confesses ambivalence about Espiritismo. A proactively helpful person in her family and in her workplace, Maria said she often felt passive at these gatherings, not yet comfortable with actively participating as a medium in Espiritismo. She also felt uncomfortable with waiting to receive advice from mediums at the table. Therefore, Maria attended veladas periodically and widened her spiritual practice by incorporating Reiki and other forms of alternative healing, which she actively practiced outside this circle.

**Bridging the Generational Gap by Consulting a Santera**

All three women had consulted with a younger Puerto Rican santera, who was part of this social/spiritual circle, in order to understand the meanings of the dolls they inherited, were given, or were inspired to create. Muñecitas seem to be used in relation to both Espiritismo and Santería. In the Bronx casa de santo with which this group was affiliated, there were two muñecas on

*Two mass-produced spirit dolls in Rita’s living room, twin dolls that she associated with the Orishas, Babalú Ayé and Yemayá.*

Muñecitas close to the age of 50. In regard to practices of Santería, there were some breaks in the direct transmission of these beliefs from parents. The relative secrecy of the traditions (concealments from clergy or persons believed to be unsympathetic) is not, however, the reason these women provided to explain the gap. Jacinta, who was about 60 years old, started making dolls only 10 years before. She made some for herself, four for another friend in this group, and gave one to Rita.

Rita got interested in spiritual dolls when various friends gave her some. She had also been a lifelong collector of dolls of all kinds. Although Maria, who was in her early 50s, was the daughter of an initiated santera-espiritista, she did not begin to explore the meanings of her mother’s dolls until after her mother’s death, a few years before our interview. She expressed regret that her mother never explained the practices she was exposed to as a little girl at “Doña Anna’s” storefront church of Santería in El Barrio (Spanish Harlem, New York City, where Maria grew up). Maria retains vague memories of being able to “see” (spirits) in childhood and regrets that these abilities were not cultivated further. I asked Maria why her mother didn’t explain her practices. Maria said she didn’t know. Later in life, Maria credited her mother’s prescription of an offering of pumpkin and honey to La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre (Ochún) with saving her pregnancy. At the end of a high-risk pregnancy, Maria went into labor and the pumpkin, which had remained oddly intact for nine months, sank and blackened immediately. For this reason, she has continued to honor Ochún/Caridad del Cobre and has passed these practices on to her son and his wife to protect her grandchild. At the same time, Maria confesses ambivalence about Espiritismo. A proactively helpful person in her family and in her workplace, Maria said she often felt passive at these gatherings, not yet comfortable with actively participating as a medium in Espiritismo. She also felt uncomfortable with waiting to receive advice from mediums at the table. Therefore, Maria attended veladas periodically and widened her spiritual practice by incorporating Reiki and other forms of alternative healing, which she actively practiced outside this circle.

*Dolls which Maria inherited from her mother’s altar when she died. A santera, that Maria consulted confirmed that these dolls had been “prepared,” or empowered, and should be treated with due respect in her home.*
The Meaning of Empowered Dolls

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of understanding the meanings of muñequitas came through exploring the stories I had heard group members share about spirits communicating through the dolls. The doll owners frequently described how dolls and other objects could be “prepared” (prepara’o or prepara’a) to protect oneself, one’s home, or family. All three women use the term “prepared” or “prepara’a,” and all three believe dolls can be animated by spirits—with or without “preparation,” and with God’s permission. As I will discuss in relation to the literature, “preparation” can entail many ways of interacting with a doll or another object. These women believe objects can be prepared in many different ways, for many different purposes.

Related Perspectives in the Literature

While all of the clothing the dolls in this study wear seem to have meanings related to Orishas among the Seven African Powers, especially Yemayá, mother goddess of the sea, and Ochún, river goddess of love and marriage, the owners say that the spirits primarily associated with their dolls, literally or symbolically, are not simply the saints themselves but are actually their spirit guides—una “Negrita” or “Una Española” in Jacinta’s case. The spirits believed to be inhabiting and/or symbolically associated with the dolls seem to correspond to some of the broad “spirit guide” categories in Espiritismo (such as La Negra, La India, El Gitano, etc.). These associations do not exclude additional meanings related to Santería, though, or more individual meanings and ideas.

Maria and Jacinta, for example, believe it possible that the spirits associated with their dolls could be “enlightened” or “developing” spirits, of persons formerly alive now advancing their spiritual development by assisting others. This classification of los muertos (spirits of the dead) is well documented in relation to Kardecián and other varieties of Puerto Rican and Cuban Espiritismo (Romberg 55, 58, 147; Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 175 and 190–191, citing Harwood 1977), and not inconsistent with the orthodox Roman Catholic understanding of the intercessory role of saints and other dead in the afterlife (e.g., the proclamation of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, that she would spend her time in heaven doing good for people on earth, sending down a shower of roses as the fruit of her ongoing intercession for humans after death).

Whereas Rita’s and Jacinta’s dolls seem to represent spirit guides who are ancestors in a general sort of way (rather than muertos or muertas known in life), Maria’s dolls are inhabited by her mother’s guides. She experiences them, she says, as a sign of her mother’s ongoing, caring presence. The “maternal
legacy” of daughters inheriting their mothers’ dressed statues, altar assembly techniques, and other ethnic and personal spiritual practices and beliefs was documented by Kay Turner in her study of women’s altar traditions (1999, 42–59). It is as if the dolls are an extension of Maria’s mother’s ongoing love—and vice versa, a sign of Maria’s ongoing desire to know her mother after her death—to better understand her mother’s life as an espiritista and santera. When Maria dresses the dolls, she is honoring her mother as well as her mother’s guides, who, as the consulting santera confirmed for Maria, do still inhabit the dolls.

Positive and Negative Associations with the Dolls

Raquel Romberg’s detailed descriptions of botánica supplies in modern Puerto Rico, her informants’ altar displays, and the various items they used in their work include, surprisingly, practically no reference to dolls, apart from one cautionary mention. By contrast, the women I interviewed affirmed that with her then-madrina in Santería to see if she should create a doll based on the dream. Maria dreamed of two purple outfits and similarly consulted a santera to ask whether the dream outfits should be applied to her mother’s dolls.

Romberg comments that “iconicity—or rather, the excess of iconicity in Afro-Latin worship—has a long colonial history in Latin America, now being recharged by the global commodification and circulation of images” (82–83). Without elaborating further on the meaning of the word “inhabit,” Romberg speaks of “the power of the entities that inhabit icons” and which Puerto Ricans honor by clothing statues and offering them flowers, food, and drink. My friends in Dutchess and Orange Counties reminded me of the continuum that exists between a statue and a doll—one which is also evident in photos of dressed Infant Jesus statues in Kay Turner’s 1999 study of Latino and multicultural women’s altar traditions (45, 48, 49). As Maria put it, she sees the movements of her dolls as a “manifestation” which can arise by any person’s intention, in the same way that the statue of a Virgin might be seen to cry water or oil through the permission of God.

Romberg’s study presents the terms brujería and brujo/bruja (witchcraft and witch) as terms that her informants applied to themselves rather freely, indicating a range of often simultaneous practices of Espiritismo, Santería, Palo Monte, and Catholicism. My experience with this group, with whom I socialized weekly for two years, indicates that the word “bruja” is used rather differently. I have heard this term employed jokingly in reference to self or others—with some of the pride and empowerment that Romberg describes as common, in some social circles, in Puerto Rico. However, I have only heard the term used among friends here in New York. The group does not use this term frequently or publicly, though, and neither as a serious accusation, nor in the presence of Roman Catholic clergy. To indicate a person who practices trabajo malo or negative work, this group would use the phrase “works with both hands.” This was not a compliment, but it also fell short of an accusation of working with the left hand alone. The phrase signifies an extension of el trabajo—the good work of God, the saints, and those gifted by God with facultades—into something different. Working with both hands was said to make “both hands dirty.” Trabajos malos were said to come back threefold or even tenfold upon the practitioner, within and after his or her lifetime. Rita distinguished between work for general “protection” (to protect the home or the family from negative influences or acts), but not specifically as an undoing of a particular person’s bad works. The hypothesis of removing the bad work of another by despojo or other traditional cleansing practices was present, but I never heard a particular person named as the source of or doer of bad work. In other words, brujería could be joked about, but only to a point, within this social circle, as far as I could tell in the two years I spent with them, at least.

Romberg mentions that she asked one of her informants in Puerto Rico why she “did not sell fabric dolls used in trabajos malos
at her botanica” (142–43); the informant answered, “I have a clean cuadro” (a clean set of guides). This detail would seem to suggest that fabric dolls are associated with trabajos malos in Puerto Rico. Romberg’s store owner (143) told her that her cuadro would not allow her to sell anything that could be used for harm. This is problematic, given the concept of “preparation” of objects, which appears to be pervasive and mostly positive, in the vocabulary of the group I came to know. Anything can be prepara’o, for any reason.

Of the women I interviewed, one of the three had received a suggestion from an older African-Puerto Rican espiritista to stuff one of her twin dolls with herbs in the abdomen and with saints’ symbols in the head, arms, and legs to enable it to protect the home and the family. I asked whether this preparation would attract a spirit to the doll, which would then protect the home. The answer was no, that the preparation itself might provide protective energy to the home, similar to the use of mirrors in Feng Shui. Spirits were not necessarily involved—but Rita added that she does ask the statues of saints in her house to “keep an eye on the house” while she is gone.

African and African-American art historian Robert Farris Thompson (1983, 117–131) provides an illustrated annotation of Kongo minkisi containers—charms composed of medicines that embody and direct protective spirits. The medicines are concealed within vessels that vary greatly but do include wooden images and statuettes. The inhabiting spirit may be believed to be an ancestor, coming back to assist the owner. Thompson’s photographs (plates 75 and 76) serve to demonstrate the importance of the cords and ribbons that, he claims, emphasize the protective forces bound within. Thompson states that “Kongo-Cubans of the nineteenth century made minkisi-figurines to mystically attack slaveholders” (125) and cites Lydia Cabrera’s description of “Magic doll-like figurines about 50 centimeters high, carved in wood…with magic substance inserted in a small cavity” in Cuba (125, citing Cabrera 1948, 248–49).

Although this group’s beliefs are shaped by Espiritismo, in large part, and by exposure to the traditions of African-Cuban babalawo and santeras at the Bronx casa de santo which they visit, Rita and others do recognize the African roots of some of their spiritual traditions, as well. I wondered whether the sashes that most of these New York dolls wore around their waists—whether or not they were stuffed or prepared in any way at all—might still echo, structurally, the cords and ribbons formerly used to bind spirits into the Kongo-derived and creolized African, Haitian, and Afro-Cuban minkisi figures that Thompson discusses. When I shared Thompson’s book, Flash of the Spirit, with Rita, she expressed interest, and said she knew the recipe an older African-Puerto Rican espiritista had shared with her, for preparing her doll by stuffing it, was an African tradition.

Raquel Romberg’s work seemed to suggest that fabric dolls can have some negative associations in Puerto Rico. While Jacinta acknowledged that dolls could be put to negative use, like one’s cuadro (spirit guides) or one’s facultades (spiritual gifts), most in this group regard dolls as neutral in themselves, as any other man-made or natural object would be. Just like a rock, a bracelet, a statue, or a
candle, a doll may be subjected to negative or positive intentions and preparations for good or evil. Overall, the uses and meanings of the muñecas owned within this group seem to be positive, empowering, guide-related, and ancestor-oriented.

I was thrilled to discover in Santería scholar David Brown’s work two photographs of muñecas (plates 21 and 22), one which he had seen during fieldwork in Havana in 1999, held by an older Cuban woman in a church procession on the feast of the Virgin of Regla or Yemaya. During the procession, Brown reports, the women and men dressed in blue and white, and the women carried female dolls similarly dressed (238, note on 359). Brown observes that the doll is likely to represent an ancestor who honored Yemaya rather than just the saint herself. Though as recent scholarship on creolized/syncretized traditions has observed—creolized expressions tend to “deny” etic categories and resist outside analyses (Baron and Cara 2003, 4)—I think David Brown is onto something that applies in New York as well: that a doll dressed as a saint does not necessarily represent the saint, at least not directly. “The dead come before the saint,” as the saying goes.

Just before revising this piece for Voices, I was delighted to see and to be able to photograph, a display of a number of dolls dressed in the colors of the lwa, at a Haitian celebration of Bwa Kay Iman in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, in August 2013. Bwa Kay Iman is the anniversary of the slave social gathering that began the Haitian Revolution in 1791. A participant in the celebration set up the dolls facing outward in a circle upon a red cloth, upon the stump of a large tree in the park, at lakeside, off to the side of the altars set up for the day’s celebration. As with the dolls in Cuban and Puerto Rican settings here in New York, these dolls had mass-produced plastic bodies, but their costumes were homemade.

Citing the work of the Cubanist Fernando Ortiz (1920), Brown reported that such dolls were called “Anaquillés” in Cuba in colonial times (Brown 359, citing Ortiz [1920] 1960, p. 40, his fig. 9). Brown also documents the use of muñecas in Cuba at toques and in Cuban New Jersey in the late 1980s, as parts of a “hybrid Palo Monte” throne assembled for an October 4th celebration in 1987. Following folklorist William Bascom’s observations about the concealment functions of the saints’ skirts and mantles (1950, 65), Brown points out that the skirts of the muñeca at a 1989 toque in Cuba concealed the sopera (the vessel used to contain the Orisha’s stones, shells, and emblems) (Brown 238, 246, 359). Brown argues that skirts and mantles achieve more meanings than just concealment, however.

In conclusion, muñecas, or spirit dolls, have an intriguing history and a complex present involvement in Caribbean-American spiritual practices, in their many new homes in New York and beyond, which should be further studied. They are a bit spooky, at times, even to their owners and their makers. Sometimes they move around when you are not looking, it seems, or when you are out of the house. And they seem to have ways of making their wishes known. These dolls can inspire fear in an exciting and a lovable way. Like the ghosts of the beloved dead, they are a part of the family. For these women, and for visitors like me to their homes, muñecas signify the culture that is theirs, through their ethnic and spiritual heritages. The dolls also point toward the existence of God and the saints—Catholic and African, the ancestors, the afterlife, and a world unseen. They stand for the value of protecting family and home from harm. They remind their owners that their spirit guides, their deceased loved ones, and even more distant ancestors surround them in daily life. The dolls call up their owners’ affectionate and respectful memories of parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends—people who have moved on but who still communicate their traditions and their loving, protective care, symbolically as well as literally, through the dolls.

**Works Cited**


Upstate and downstate, New Yorkers can find bars with reputations for being haunted. New York City has more haunted bars than any other metropolis, but there are haunted bars all over the state. Something about bars invites ghost stories, especially when the bar is in an old building. When people drink and hear stories about the dead, strange things may happen.

The association of alcohol with “seeing things” is an old one. A traditional cure for the common cold suggests that you can recover from your cold quickly if you have a four-poster bed, a top hat, and a bottle of whiskey: Put your top hat on one of the posts at the bottom of the bed, climb into bed, and start drinking. When you see a top hat on both bedposts, you can go to sleep. The next morning, your cold will have vanished.

Both ghosts and alcohol are sometimes called “spirits,” and people have questioned whether seeing a ghost after having a few drinks constitutes a true supernatural experience. Is such an encounter actually a hallucination? While some hasten to say “yes,” others insist that bars are ideal places to find ghosts.

One of the most famous haunted bars of New York City is the White Horse Tavern on Hudson Street, where the celebrated poet Dylan Thomas enjoyed spending time. Stories about his last day of life note that because he had had 17 or more drinks at the tavern, he had to go to Saint Vincent’s Hospital, where he died. After his death, people working in the bar sometimes found a beer glass and a shot glass on his favorite table. Thomas’s spirit was never unfriendly, these folks commented; he just wanted to spend some more time with fellow drinkers in his favorite bar.

Another allegedly haunted building in the Big Apple is the Chelsea Hotel in lower Manhattan, where Dylan Thomas resided until his untimely death. Sid Vicious, a member of the Sex Pistols, allegedly stabbed his girlfriend in one of the Chelsea’s rooms in 1978. Servers in the Chelsea Hotel’s bar have seen lights go on and off, heard weird noises, and found furniture rearranged inside locked rooms. Hotel staff members do not identify this restless ghost as Dylan Thomas; apparently Thomas prefers his familiar table at the White Horse Tavern.

Anyone who wants to learn more about Thomas’s alleged bar haunting can sign up for a commercial tour organized by Ghosts of New York, “Phantom Pub Crawl of the West Village, Starring Dylan Thomas.” This is just one of their many tours, including “Peter Stuyvesant and His Ghostly Friends of the East Village,” “Edgar Allan Poe and His Ghostly Neighbors of Greenwich Village,” “Ghosts of Times Square,” “Ghosts of Brooklyn Heights,” and “From Ghost Busters to John Lennon: The Ghosts of the Upper West Side.” There is even a tour suitable for rainy days, “Indoor Ghost Walk: The Ghosts of Grand Central,” which introduces tourists to Poe, Stuyvesant, and their “legions of wispy, wailing, wasted wrath friends” (http://www.ghostsofny.com). Whether these friends have become “wasted” because of bar-hopping is not specified.

The oldest New York City bar with a reputation for being haunted is the Fraunces Tavern on Pearl Street, where George Washington said farewell to his troops in 1783. Built as a residence in 1719, the Fraunces Tavern has a long history of deaths: five people and two cats have perished there. In the late 1700s, a man stabbed his wife to death in the tavern. At the turn of the 20th century, two beloved cats named George and Martha Washington died there in a fire, and in 1975, a bomb exploded, killing four people and injuring many more. Late at night, visitors to the tavern have heard doors slamming, keys rattling, and footsteps going down the hall. Members of the Sleepy Hollow Paranormal Society have tried to determine these sounds’ origin, but with such a long history, it is not easy to find one explanation.

Upstate New York also has its share of haunted bars. The Hotel Utica, which was built in 1912 and renovated in the early 21st century. The hotel’s bar, the Lamplighter Pub, is one of the most comfortable parts of the hotel. Visitors and staff members claim to have heard spectral conversations and caught glimpses of an eerie figure called “Tuxedo Man.” They have also heard sounds of a big party emanating from the hotel’s ballroom. Like the Stanley Hotel in Colorado, which inspired Stephen King’s novel The Shining, the Hotel Utica has earned its reputation as a place that party guests never want to leave, even after their deaths.

Other upstate hotels have gotten reputations for being haunted because of tragic fires. At the Holiday Inn Grand Island near Buffalo, guests talk about the ghost of a little girl who perished in a fire on the site where the hotel was built. Running, playing, and giggling, the little girl reminds people of the happy days before her house burned down. She is not a difficult or dangerous ghost, just a playful young person who does not want to go away.

This little girl ghost at the Holiday Inn Grand Island has much in common with ghosts in New York bars. Lively, engaging, and loyal to their favorite places, these bar-hopping ghosts heighten visitors’ enjoyment of a night out drinking in a historic place. People who are imbibing and talking may find that ghosts give them a momento mori, a reminder of the preciousness of life and the inevitability of death. Whether they are famous or virtually unknown, these happy, socially active ghosts of bars add resonance to the term “good spirits.”

My parents took their honeymoon in 1946, at the Nevele Country Club in Sullivan County, New York. The Catskills beckoned the young couple, as they had welcomed tens of thousands of Jews, young and old, American and immigrant, families and singles, for decades. Like my mother and her family, the Jews vacationing in the Catskill Mountains came primarily from New York City. In this city, and this America, it was expected that my mother’s friends’ parents—like her own—had thick foreign accents, spoke fluent Yiddish at home, and worked hard to succeed. One sign of success was the ability to take a summer holiday in the Catskill Mountains. Families and close friends or neighbors might share the cost of a rented van for the two-hour ride from Brooklyn to Sullivan County, and then rent rooms or cabins at the same bungalow colony or kuchalyn (boarding house). My mother remembers her first kuchalyn, in Ellenville, as a large farm with chickens and hayrides, and her father—like the other fathers—coming up only on weekends.

The American and immigrant Jews, who had made the many hotels, bungalow colonies, and farms of Ulster and Sullivan counties their summer retreats year after year, were always looking for family, for landsmanshaftin (society of immigrants from the same town or region), for a home away from home. As a second home to generations of Jews, the Catskill Mountains became a place where a Jewish family could bond as a Jewish family—that is, they could practice the culture of Judaism without the pressure to assimilate. Families spending summers together with other Jews could anticipate re-creating—and recreating with—these Jewish friends year after year. The Jewish threads of their winter lives might seem to be slowly unraveling through their increasingly secular lives, but the Catskills remained essentially a subculture that they renewed each year, as yet another summer of Jews were beckoned there.

Because the Catskill Mountains summoned one with the promise of prolonged engagement and deeply felt connections—replacing the congestion of the city for the wide open spaces of the Mountains—children and adults mingled in acts of community: feeling nachis as the children paraded their gifts through the weekend talent shows, cooking meals together in the common kitchen of the kuchalyn, meeting for card games every evening. For the parents, each day must have been another rare and wonderful moment when time stands still amid the deep well of family love, safely netted by a sense of community so complete it seemed impossible to find elsewhere.

By the time my mother’s modern Orthodox family took their summer holidays in Ellenville, or Monticello, or Woodridge, staying at chicken farms or rooming houses, it was already a
I

A new kind of Jewish immigrant community was born from and after World War II, and they, too, purchased or leased colonies together. They, too, were looking for family and a home away from home. They, too, shared a past—but their past was in a lost and now vanished world. They were stressed not only from the terrifying and exhausting act of losing their homes and families; they were traumatized from experiences that defied comprehension. For the most part, each survivor had undergone uniquely horrifying traumatic experiences during the war years. They may have survived in concentration or work camps, or in hiding—either literally or with an Aryan identity—in ghettos; they may have escaped to a safer city or country. But wherever they were, they were hunted by Nazis or their collaborators, marked for death because they were Jews. This community lost everything, yet citizens of that segregated world. Lost was the innocence of the Founding Father’s declaration that “All men are created equal.” Jews were restricted from participating fully in American society in a number of ways— they experienced professional bias and discrimination by hotels, country clubs, and resorts; neighborhoods and cities limited or denied access to Jews hoping to purchase houses or land. Influential Americans, such as Henry Ford, were publicly denouncing Jews as either international financiers intent on world domination or godless Bolsheviks who undermined American policy and morality. Americans tuning into their radios during the 1930s might hear Father Coughlin’s weekly anti-Semitic broadcasts from his Detroit pulpit; they might open their Dearborn Independent and read “Mr. Ford’s Page” with its anti-Semitic commentary (Shandler 1999). Those Jews who returned each year to the Catskill Mountains—primarily from New York, but also from Detroit, Philadelphia, or Baltimore—were seeking escape not just from the thick heat of another urban summer; they were hoping to escape from the darkening forces of the era’s anti-Semitic proscriptions.

II

In the first years after the war, 140,000 European Jews immigrated to America. Where they settled was usually not their choice, as special agencies had been created to deal with the onslaught of new refugees, or DPs, and their housing and employment needs. The Truman Directive facilitated certain shifts in procedures for dealing with this enormous surge in immigration, such as allowing organizations, in addition to individuals, the right to provide affidavits for DPs. The American Jewish community created the United Service for New Americans (USNA), a national agency, and the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA) in New York City, to direct the resettlement process. So, in addition to quotas and other restrictions imposed upon the immigrants, they had to deal with newly developed agencies whose workers, although well intentioned, had no experience treating such monumental financial, legal, emotional, and physical needs.

Where did these 140,000 new immigrants (they were not called “survivors” until the 1960s) settle? What was this resettlement process like? Were they happy in their new homes? Public perception was that, in fact, the new refugees were happy to be given a second chance and adjusted relatively easily to American life. But accounts by survivors themselves, and case studies from the early years of their new lives by social workers and others, suggest otherwise. Holocaust survivors tried to adjust to what might be considered “normal” family life, but attempts were colored by the intensity of the trauma, which did not disappear with the end of the war and the liberation of the camps (Cohen 2007, 173). Although more than half of the refugees settled in New York City—which already hosted the majority of American Jews—over 40 percent settled elsewhere in the US, either voluntarily or more likely because of the mandate of the Displaced Persons Act, which hoped to avoid a large concentration of refugees in major urban areas (Cohen 2007, 174). Within the Jewish community itself, there were tensions between the established American Jewish population and the newly displaced persons. Years earlier, American Jews worried about the large influx of Eastern European Jews and their
“greenhorn” ways; these new immigrants posed similar problems with language, clothing, food, and other “old country” habits. American Jews felt sympathy and compassion for their brethren, but feared that too many Jews would provoke more anti-Semitism. Thus, it was with ambivalence that many American Jews hoped the displaced persons would settle elsewhere, perhaps in Palestine (Cohen 2007, 175).

Many survivors characterize the tension between survivors and American Jews in this way: they know, as the French writer Charlotte Delbo wrote that “Auschwitz is so deeply etched in my memory that I cannot forget one moment of it” (Delbo 1990, xi). They have no choice but to return to the war years, watching conversations meander to that place time and again, feeling the loss each and every time. They could tell horrific stories of those years as if they were commonplace, as if escaping death was a trip to the corner store for milk. Who could better understand the need to talk about the terrors than those who also still lived with those terrors?

By their very act of living, survivors tell us that they survived. “All of us are born,” they say, “but we survived.” When you lose your family, you make friends with those who are like family, who have experienced the same loss and seek the same comfort. Survivors are a culture, a people who share a deep sense of gratefulness without forgetting for one second all that they have lost. The pleasure in being with other survivors was to be able to feel the loss and then to speak it and share it, and in some ways, to revel in their difference from the others.

Still, the public face of the postwar immigration surge has long shown the happy state of refugees settling in the US after their terrifying experiences. Americans, in general, were under the impression that bringing these displaced European refugees to our democratic republic was enough, and that once settled here, they could quickly return to being father, mother, wife, husband, son, daughter. But this attitude sadly contradicts the reality of life for most, if not all, of these survivors. For they were survivors, and being survivors meant they had had to leave their many dead, mostly murdered relatives, friends, and neighbors behind—graveless, and without mourners. They had witnessed the worst atrocities humans were capable of committing. And then they had to go on living.

Survivor Ruth Klüger, author of the 2001 memoir, Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered, writes that when she first came to the US as a displaced person, her American aunt told her, “You have to erase from your memory everything that happened in Europe. You have to make a new beginning. You have to forget what they did to you. Wipe it off like chalk from a blackboard” (Klüger 2003, 177). Klüger rejected that invitation to forget, as evidenced by her widely successful memoir, published first in German as weiter leben: Eine Jugend (1992), and selling over 250,000 copies in Europe before being rewritten by the author in English for a specifically American audience. The widespread belief was that survivors were better off leaving the past behind—neither thinking nor talking about what happened in Europe. It would also be better for Americans—Jews in particular—to have the Jewish refugees start over as Americans, leaving the baggage of the European disaster at the door of importation.

But even as family, friends, caseworkers, and others urged the survivors to forget the past and what was lost, we know now that it was not possible for victims of such trauma to simply leave everything behind and start over. Survivors tried to tell their stories to fellow Jews, but found little sympathy and little interest among them in hearing about the atrocities, which some found too gruesome and others simply could not believe.

Perhaps even more startling were the social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists who treated the survivors’ traumatic experiences and symptoms as if they were within the normal range of human experience. There were a number of reasons why people in the helping professions didn’t or couldn’t address the particular mental and physical health issues of survivors, and why the American Jewish public was equally resistant to offer the kind of help they needed. Among the reasons were 1) guilt over being safe in America while the Jews of Europe were being murdered; 2) the first workers’ responses in the displaced persons camps indicated a triumphant physical survival of even the most war-torn individuals—but without regard to these survivors’ emotional fitness;

Sylvia Levitsky in 1945 in the Catskills.
3) the professional norms of the time in the healing professions were Freudian in nature—which meant any mental health diagnosis was filtered through the patient’s childhood developmental difficulties, and thus treatment would include the analysis of concepts pertaining to the survivor’s prewar personality—and absurd in retrospect; and 4) an inability to confront the depths of the Holocaust’s destruction. All of these reasons facilitated a gulf between the American Jewish community and its professionals and the survivors (Cohen 2007).

Moreover, countless studies have shown that the massive physical and emotional disruption of the lives of Holocaust survivors have continued to affect them to the end of their lives. Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer refers to their present lives as “a life after ‘death’ called survival, and a life within death for which we have no name, only the assurance of witnesses…” (Langer 1991, 35). Clearly, the trauma of the Holocaust caused an irreparable rupture in the memories of survivors and became the focal point for their identities.

III.

The gulf continued to widen over time, as survivors tried to tell their stories but found little sympathy and little interest in hearing about the Holocaust. And so, for several decades after the war ended and the refugees had settled into their new homes, they looked for ways to replace what was lost. They turned to American culture, which seemed so successfully to shape identity, to tell them how to become more part of the American victory, and less part of Jewish victimhood. If they tuned in to their televisions on May 27, 1953, they might have seen survivor Hanna Block Kohner unveiled as the honoree on one of the most popular entertainment programs of the 1950s: This Is Your Life. They would have heard the host, legendary Ralph Edwards, muse that Hanna seemed more like a “young American girl just out of college, not at all like a survivor of Hitler’s cruel purge of German Jews.” She was an American hero, washed clean of any Jewish particularism. They might also have watched their televisions with great interest in 1961, as the Eichmann trial unfolded in Israel, preparing to hear the totality of the final solution against the Jews emerge, story by story. Instead, when they opened their New York Times or watched the CBS Evening News, the American press coverage presented the Holocaust as a universal tragedy, using the trial to raise, in a general way, moral questions about responsibility and the nature of evil.

How did they replace what was lost and essentially irreplaceable? How did they go on with their lives, in the face of this vacuum? For the survivors of Hitler’s Europe, there was no way to replace all that had been taken from them. Indeed, in trying to recover their lives in this new land, they faced misunderstanding and frustration. The American and earlier immigrant Jews had a difficult time understanding the extent of the survivors’ loss, since they either didn’t know the world of Jewish Eastern Europe before the war, or left before it became a graveyard. How could the survivors’ friends and neighbors, Jew or gentile, understand what it had been like to survive under those circumstances? In the lives of post-war American Jews, who were fearful of calling attention to themselves as Jews, conformity became the new religion. If assimilation cost them their identities, it was worth it not to stand out and face tacit, overt, and even deadly forms of anti-Semitism that the Jews had faced in Europe.

Even if they were not religious, conformity to American national identity—whatever it looked like at any given time—did not comfort the survivors. Each survivor had a harrowing and unique story about what they lost. And although what was lost differed from person to person, the imperative to tell the tale of that loss was common to most survivors. Reclaiming their lives meant seeking a community within which they would find affirmation and comfort, and some found that community in the Catskill Mountains, where together with other survivors, they could retreat from the (sometimes creepy) post-war cultural patriotism of their American brethren. They could be with those who were like family, friends who shared the worst moments of their lives together, in the same concentration camps, resistance units, and hiding places. They had escaped death and were still escaping, taking these summer holidays together as a way to elude the stares and questions and silence that surrounded them when their summer clothing revealed the tattoos, or when the past was inevitably brought up for

The author with other children at play outside the bungalows, Sullivan County, late 1950s–early 1960s.
re-tellings of their stories, they found family, and home. The Catskills offered many Jewish European survivors of the Holocaust a world of their own within a larger world, for them without home.

On the East Coast, the Catskills’ resorts that catered to survivors were destinations that might have mirrored the holidays of their former lives, save their stories of suffering and loss. They might have escaped the Nazis with nothing or almost nothing of their former life intact, but their pre-war lives had been rich with family, friendships, religion, culture, school, work, and holidays. If they had lived in Poland (not unlikely, since Poland’s pre-war Jewish population of 3.3 million was the second highest in the world), they might have taken summer holidays in the quaint village of Kazimierz Dolny on the Vistula, or winter trips for mountain hiking and skiing to Zakopane in the Tatra Mountains.

Together in the ghettos, camps, and in hiding, survivors shared innumerable experiences that made them what one might call intimate strangers. They shared the hardships of hunger, thirst, disease, infestation, horrifying and cruel living situations, torture, the witnessing of atrocities towards others including loved ones, random selections for death or loss of liberty and uncertain future, and for most, loss of family, home, belongings, hair, clothing, and for the younger survivors, loss of childhood as well. In the bedlam of that world, tightly bonded friendships formed. It is not surprising that the survivors who survived together, or who were from similar areas, pursued life together afterwards.

How can those of us who were not there imagine the complicated and ongoing effects of the trauma on the postwar life of Holocaust survivors? From their early days as misunderstood DPs, the survivors found comfort in one another’s shared experiences. The impulse to be together in the Catskill Mountains—or in social groups or landsmanshaftn—came from the same desire for comfort.

Together, survivors talked about the past, sharing their darkest moments in the camps or in hiding, but also sharing details of their pre-war lives. Other survivors would know what it meant to have been born in the Polish towns of Bilgoraj or Lututów or the big cities of Lodz or Warsaw, and that their lives did not begin as Jewish victims of Hitler, but as human beings who were loved and wanted.

IV.

A survivor from Krakow, the cultural center of Poland, might have had something of a life not terribly unlike my mother’s. Perhaps this survivor’s European surroundings were a little more elegant, her friends more diverse, her interests and travels more sophisticated than my mother’s first-generation American Jewish upbringing. Still, she would have watched Loretta Young and Greta Garbo at the movies and read Gone With the Wind. Her mother might have been glamorous—not old-fashioned, like my maternal grandmother. Like my mother, she might have had a sister and a brother, though her childhood might have been more privileged, with well-educated, modern parents, not immigrants who could barely speak the language and were superstitious. This survivor would have had housekeepers who cooked and cleaned for the family, beautiful clothing, holidays in the Tatra Mountains. My grandmother would have spent all day in the family’s small kitchen, preparing gefilte fish and baking mohn cookies or mandelbrot, like
her many neighbors, and then taken their holidays together at a chicken farm in Sullivan County.

What was the survivor thinking as she moved from the ghetto to Plaszow and then to Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, losing her family, friends, and home, and growing from child to young woman? The long days of swimming, hiking, and tennis and the winters of ice-skating, skiing, and sledding were replaced by endless days of inconceivable hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and the fear of random beatings or death. She might have witnessed a girl her own age in unimaginable torment, as her mother was shot by camp commandant Amon Goeth. She might have watched her life from Dr. Mengele. She might have been presented as so forceful that it has the power to calm even a fevered soul. Cradled by the setting in the Catskills—their dramas and resolutions, their war and pre-war lives—are played out on its landscape; its boundaries—geographically but also emotionally—safely cushion the ride. You know you are safe because of those boundaries. In this bungalow colony, or lodge, or hotel, with these friends beside you, you can stretch yourself a little further, dance a little harder than usual. And you may return to your house and neighborhood the same person, but you will always have these friends in your heart—they will be your lost father’s wide arms, your murdered husband’s loving embrace. And, in time, family becomes a place in your heart that you carry with you always, even when the end comes. Even when you’re on the other side, and the photographs are a postcard from a ghost story you once knew. Even when the rituals remain only in memory, revealing a place no longer there.

Nineteen forty-six was a popular year for weddings, and the Nevele was filled to capacity with newlyweds that post-World War II April. My parents moved west to my father’s native Detroit, but during magical summers of my childhood, we drove in our borrowed station wagon to meet my Brooklyn cousins and aunts and uncles who continued to rent a bungalow each year. Our extended family would take meals together at a resort nearby. Always, there would be daylong activities for the kids and long lazy days for the grownups. Mothers would sit by the lake or the pool with their hair tied up in shmatas, smoking Kents, and playing Canasta or Spite and Malice or Michigan rummey, and fathers might take their sons out fishing, or more likely, take a long, hard summer nap. It was a world that seemed as if it would continue forever, a landscape larger than life itself. On that canvas sat the Yiddish-speaking alte cockers, the family tumblers, the smartypants cousins, all real then, all ghosts now. The clear, quiet lakes upon which rowboats held the promise of young love—or lost virginity. The elderly couples helping each other walk carefully to the next card game. In my mind, this multi-generational, self-enclosed Jewish subculture, full of loving, abundant, exuberant life, should have continued forever. Yet it no longer exists. It was, after all, another world. Was that era a flash point, always signaling its own demise? Perhaps it was.

The wealth and breadth of testimonial and imaginative responses to Jewish life and culture in the Catskills stand as a testament to the power of nurturing such worlds in memory. These shared memories offer lessons about the challenge of aging, the comfort of old friends, the power of memory, and the importance of embracing joy even in the face of mortality. This legacy is also the broader Catskills legacy and gives us an opportunity to dwell in that world again. In All’s Well That Ends Well, Shakespeare identified the need we all have to hold in memory that which was loved and lost: “Praising what is lost/Makes the remembrance dear,” even as that loss is absolute and all consuming (Shakespeare, V, iii, 20).

REFERENCES

Dr. Holli Levitsky is the director of the Jewish Studies Program and a professor of English at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. From this essay was born her current book project, *Summer’s End: The Holocaust, the Catskills, and the Literary Imagination*, which will be published in 2014.

The New York Folklore Society gratefully acknowledges Tara Kitchen
431 Liberty Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
www.tarakitchen.com
for their generous support of the Peggy and Pete Seeger concert fundraiser, Sunday, May 12, 2013, at Proctors Theater, Schenectady, NY.

THANK YOU
History Buried: Baseball’s All-Star Game of 1858

In 2013, Citi Field hosted the All-Star Game, the first time the home of the Mets had held this honor since 1964, when the site was the brand new Shea Stadium. Most fans can tell you that baseball’s first Midsummer Classic was held in Chicago in 1858 (even if there is not a soul alive who attended it). Yet precisely 75 years before that, there had been another, even by that time forgotten All-Star Game. Its location, within walking distance from Citi Field, is today unknown to all but a handful of baseball experts.

The adage that there is “nothing new under the sun” certainly applies to baseball, for which an earlier date may generally be found for any phenomenon, recent or distant, for which someone proclaims a “first.” To the historian, the Performance Enhancing Drug scandals of 2013 will recall the ingestion by Hall of Fame pitcher Pud Galvin, in 1889, of a monkey-gland serum designed to boost strength and endurance. But the shade in which baseball’s all-star game had long languished was a particularly grievous state of affairs.

On July 20, 1858, nearly 10,000 fans gathered at the Fashion Race Course in Queens to watch what may have been the most important game in all of baseball history. That is a bold assertion, so let me back it up. In 1858, competitive baseball was barely a decade old. Despite rumors of payments or favors to some key players, baseball was governed by the rules and practices of an amateur association formed only the year before. Although this body called itself the National Association of Base Ball Players (NABBP), in truth, the new game was an exceedingly local affair, little played outside what is today the New York metropolitan area.

Indeed, New York City at that time consisted only of Manhattan. Brooklyn was a separate city, and it as well as the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island were not to be unified as New York City for another 40 years. We cannot identify an individual (like Arch Ward in 1933) whose bright idea it was to set the best (“picked”) nine of New York against the best nine of rival city Brooklyn. But the idea won immediate backing from the NABBP. A neutral site was selected not far from Flushing, at the recently established Fashion Race Course, where a ballfield was laid out within the enclosed grandstand area. The Fashion Course had been the property of Samuel Willets; fans going to the 2013 All-Star Game by elevated subway arrive at the Willets Point station.

The match (a series of three games with one each in July, August and, if necessary, September) was to be played for civic bragging rights. It became clear that to cover expenses, admission would have to be charged—to that point all games could be attended for free—with surpluses to be presented to the widows and orphans funds of the fire departments of the two cities.

Today, little is left of the city that was, let alone its favorite game. Shea Stadium and the House That Ruth Built are gone, as are Ebbets Field, the Polo Grounds, and several other sites of big-league games. A baseball-history tourist in New York walks in four dimensions rather than three, the fourth being that of stories and stats.

The Fashion Course began life as the National Race Course, in 1853. In that year, the Flushing Railroad established a station at what is today’s Corona stop on the Long Island Rail Road, at 45th Street and National Street (named for the original race course, a fact known to few). In 1856, ownership of the race course changed hands, and the grounds were renamed for the horse Fashion, who in an intersectional race of 1842 had defeated a horse from the South named, oddly, Boston.

Then as now, the selection of players was a delicate matter. Several initial picks were not seen after the first game, as the cast of characters changed from game to game. The underdog New York stars—who in a prior exhibition contest had lost to Hoboken’s finest—won the first game by a score of 22–18; among the winners was future Hall of Famer Harry Wright. For the second game, played on August 17th, Brooklyn moved pitcher Matty O’Brien to third base. Frank Pidgeon, the Brooklyn shortstop, had thrown 198 pitches in game one, came back to toss 270 in a losing cause. Pidgeon threw 290. (Wide balls would not count against the pitcher until 1864.)

For the third and deciding game, played on September 10th, Brooklyn was the heavy favorite, based on their easy triumph in the second game. Yet New York won handily, 29–18, with the Eagles’ Joe Gelston hitting a leadoff home run that was followed by six more runs before the side was retired. Of Pidgeon’s eventual 436 pitches (!), 87 came in this first inning alone.

Among the firsts in baseball history that the opening Fashion Course game might claim were: first All-Star contest, first paid admission, and first baseball game played in an enclosed park. In the third (rubber) game of the series, umpire Doc Adams of the Knickerbockers called three men out on non-swinging strikes, the first time that new rule was applied.

How do we locate the site of the grandstand entrance of the Fashion Race Course? Streets have been rerouted and their names have changed over the years, but the lordly brick entrance to the race course was at 37th Avenue and 103rd Street, a mere 1.5 miles from Citi Field. 

Edward Green “Ned” Harrigan was born October 26, 1844, in the Corlear’s Hook section of Manhattan. His father was a native of Carboney, Newfoundland, a former first mate on the New York–Liverpool packet ship run; his paternal grandfather was a fisherman in County Cork, Ireland. His mother’s line was likewise well connected to the sea. Harrigan’s maternal grandfather was a gunner, fatally wounded aboard the Chesapeake in her celebrated 1813 battle with the Shannon, and his grandmother ran a boardinghouse for sailors. Corlear’s Hook was a largely Irish neighborhood, home to New York’s shipbuilding industry during much of the 19th century. Harrigan’s father worked in the yards at Corlear’s Hook, and found his son a job there as a caulker. Working long hours, tediously pounding tarry hemp between the planks of leaky ships, Ned Harrigan labored for four years, but he wanted more… a life on the stage.

Ned took to the sea as a teenager, first to Gulf Coast ports, later to California, where he found work as a caulker in San Francisco Bay shipyards by day, moonlighting as a singer, accompanying himself with the banjo. Eventually, and with strong support from many maritime trade-workers there, he became a full-time entertainer. Back in New York as a well-established performer, Harrigan began to stretch vaudeville skits into full-length plays. They were anything but static pieces. He refined, added to, and reintroduced them frequently. When he expanded a skit, Old Lavender’s Water, to make a one-hour play and it didn’t achieve the success he had envisioned, Harrigan lengthened the comedy again in 1885, adding, among other elements, “Get Up, Jack, John, Sit Down.” The play was one of his finest, and “Get Up, Jack, John Sit Down” remains one of his most successful songs—but only a handful of the many people who sing it today know its origin.

Oh, ships will come and ships will go as long as waves do roll; Each sailor lad, like his dad, will love the flowing bowl. Afloat, ashore they do adore a lass that’s plump an’ roun’; When the money’s gone ’tis the same old song, Get up, Jack, John, sit down.

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For almost four decades, b-boying, otherwise known as breaking or break dancing, has been a staple of New York City street life. B-boying is an artistic and improvisational mode of non-verbal communication and competition between individuals and groups, usually in relationship to music. It arose out of the streets of the South Bronx in the early 1970s and, at times, became an alternative to gang fighting: that is, a non-violent resolution to the problems of the street through the creative use of the body, mind, and space without weapons. As b-boying developed, it gained legitimacy as dance and, today, many consider it a sport. B-boying continues to be used to assert rights, defend turf, mediate conflict, build community, entertain, garner attention, and gain respect.

In the context of street performance in Manhattan, b-boying has been a means of socializing and earning some extra cash for b-boys, such as Zone TDK of the NYC Tranzformerz, since the mid-1970s. From its roots in the materially grounded turf wars among gangs of teens in the 1970s–80s, to the metaphoric “turf” of dance-space domination between b-boying crews, to commercial viability in the “break dance” phenomenon of the mid-1980s, b-boying is a successful form of street commerce today.

Zone TDK, aka Mark Schell-Pickett, grandson of musician Wilson Pickett, is a street hitter—a breaker who works the street. An original b-boy from the first wave of breaking in the early 1970s, Zone began b-boying when he was nine years old, learning it on the streets of the South Bronx where he grew up. Zone was one of the first b-boys to hit in Manhattan. He is one of the few original b-boys who still do.

You may have never heard of Zone, though you most certainly have seen him. A lot. His career in hip-hop began with the Bronx-based “performance gang” TRNa-tion (Talented Rascals Nation), a transition between street gangs and b-boy crews. Later, he toured with the Bronx Floor Masters crew, reconfigured and renamed the NYC Breakers by promoter Michael Holman of Graffiti Rock fame. In addition to breaking, Zone has made a living as a writer of rap songs, commercial jingles, and children’s songs for Sesame Street. In 1989, he formed the duo rap group, The Next School, with Ali Dee. In 1990, they released the album Settin’ an Example with the popular single “Prophets of Unity.”

Not a brand name notable, Zone is nevertheless credited by many New York street hitters, past and present, as instrumental in keeping b-boying alive. Countless breakers insist that Zone is always “keeping it real”
by “bringing it back to the streets.” B-girl Ana “Rokafella” Garcia said it best. During a live celebration of street dance at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 2009, Rokafella paid tribute to Zone and to other early, formative street hitters:

Normally when you think of breaking or popping or New York City dance, other names come up in your mind.

Never the names of the Tranzformerz, the Breeze Team, USA, the Float Committee… But after today, we hope that we have done our job by bringing them here to impress upon you that they were a part of the NYC dance history like no other. They never stopped believing in hip hop. [Garcia 2009]

Zone TDK is looked up to as a tradition bearer and a leader of the community among b-boys invested in their cultural and artistic heritage.

Zone established the NYC Tranzformerz crew in 1985, with the aim of building a lasting community, a family of b-boys. The crew performs street showcase break dance, an aesthetic outgrowth from breaking’s origins in gang, then crew, battle. Street showcase, a genre conceived by Zone, is team b-boys organized around integrated segments of dance, which include individual solos as well as group work. More than dance, the crew provides an entertainment event: a variety show of comedic bits, staged acrobatic routines, and audience interaction and participation.

The crew is unique among New York street hitters. Mirroring the heterogeneity of the City, they are a multiracial, multicultural, and multinational crew. Zone also includes women, or b-girls, in his crew, a rarity in the male-dominated genre, especially among street hitters. Also unusual, the crew consists of classically trained dancers who came to b-boying later in their lives, as well as those who learned their craft more traditionally—on the street.

The core of the crew, Zone, Professor Pop, and Rasheem are African American men who share the experience of growing up in the ghettos of New York, specifically Harlem and the Bronx. They came together through breaking and have stayed together two decades. During the summer of 2007, when I began research with them, the crew was filled out by Reflex, of Puerto Rican descent and from Spanish Harlem; Sicilian Tommaso; and b-girls Nadia, from Italy, and Ill Jill, from Michigan, who are also classically trained ballerinas and aerialists. In 2012, most of them remain. Nevertheless, and true to their name, the crew’s composition is always transforming while remaining familiar, as b-boys come and go and return again. Zone welcomes former crew members, new b-boys, and friends of the crew to sit in, or hit, with them, a testament to the familial community that Zone encourages and demands.
I have been watching the NYC Tranzformerz since the early 1990s. I was immediately drawn to their skills as dancers and the way they used the environment. They don’t just work on the street; their work is made of the street. Whether it is cops, cars, or the cantankerous, the crew takes it and makes it part of the show. The crew jokes, flirts, and sometimes taunts pedestrians as they invite and encourage them to stop and join the fun. They are especially good at incorporating children, who love them, and who seem unable not to dance. The work of the NYC Tranzformerz is an important part of what makes the big city sometimes feel like a small community.

Community is the key to their philosophy. For Zone and the crew, b-boying is a way of life, centered on community and teaching—stay together, remember where you come from, pass it on, and give something back. So, while the crew does private gigs, Zone keeps bringing it back to the street—“so people can see it”—where he considers breaking should be seen and how it should be experienced. Live, face-to-face, community-oriented interaction grounds b-boying in its traditional context as it allows the crew to present it and to teach it to others who might not otherwise have knowledge of b-boying.

Each b-boy/b-girl has his/her own motivations as well. Up close and personal, Pop aims to make you laugh. Rasheem wants to astound. Jill and Nadia are invested in bringing art to the streets where it is freely accessible to everyone and at a price anyone can afford. The crew as a whole hopes to inspire, to spark our dormant creative potential—if not in breaking, then in the simple ways we go about our daily living.

Working the street, the crew gets free rehearsal space, a place to be sociable, and, of course, a way of making some cash. They are typically out seven days a week, from early afternoon until the sun goes down, or
The NYC Tranzformerz extend their community to anyone who is interested and incorporate the audience into the show, encouraging children to participate. Columbus Circle 2007.

when pedestrian traffic slows. Rest assured, the crew will continue to entertain as long as there is an audience willing to donate money. Donations are important—for some b-boys, street hitting is their major source of income. For others, it is supplemental. Either way, b-feeding on the concrete is really, really hard work.

New York City is distinguished by the life of its streets. The people who stop to watch the NYC Tranzformerz are native New Yorkers and the recently immigrated, as well as tourists from the US and abroad. The general consensus among them is that street performance, in quantity and quality, sets New York apart from other cities around the globe and is integral to the vitality of the city. They also agree that the NYC Tranzformerz provide some of the finest performance on the streets today.

This is important. Public space in New York City is increasingly policed. Street art is monitored and controlled by city officials, because they believe they have the right to decide who we should see, what we should value, and how we should interact. But the life of the street is a gift we of the city give ourselves. That shared life needs to be cultivated. The gift deserves protection. So let’s tend to the beauty of the street, our streets, and support our fellows as they co-create our city with us and for us.

Seek out our street artists, like the NYC Tranzformerz. From early spring until the advent of winter, the NYC Tranzformerz can be found performing throughout the city. Look for them at the South Street Seaport, Columbus Circle, the New York Public Library, and Times Square, among other locations.

Stop and watch. Participate. And don’t forget—“It’s never too late to donate.”

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WORKS CITED

On the street, we get to meet our superheroes face to face and give them a fist bump. The streets of New York have been understood as a zone of entertainment since at least the early 1800s. The NYC Tranzformerz are an important part of that long tradition. Columbus Circle, 2007.
Established in 1913, YMCA Camp Chingachgook is one of the oldest children’s camps in America and is presently celebrating 100 years of operation. Over 350,000 children have participated in Camp Chingachgook programs in the last century.

Started by the Schenectady YMCA as a summer camp for boys, the first campers arrived by steamboat to the Pilot Knob, NY wharf for a few weeks of outdoor education and recreation. The camp served about 90 boys the first summer, with college students serving as counselors and a military-style camp program that was
A big milestone is making that first dive headfirst into the water. Over and over, for 100 years, Chingachgook’s campers have successfully faced that personal challenge. These photos show the continuity of experience that campers have had for 100 years. Top: Diving tower, 1923. Bottom: Diving, 2010.
typical during that time period. The boys slept in army tents on cots, with mattresses stuffed with straw, and ate in the large mess tent at the top of the hill. Their day was filled with swimming, boating, archery, hiking, campfires, and chores to keep the camp clean and organized.

In 1922, the Boy Scouts also started using this campground in the summer with the support of the Schenectady Rotary Club. The Scouts stopped using the Camp Chingachgook site during World War II, when it was closed for a few seasons.

Chingachgook wilderness adventure trips were organized, beginning in 1966, to travel to Canada and across the northeast. Today, the adventure trip program serves about 250 teens each summer with kayaking, rock climbing, white-water rafting, sailing, and hiking programs throughout the country, teaching leadership and outdoor living skills. In 1976, Chingachgook became a co-ed program, and today it
serves 300 campers each summer session, half boys and half girls. The sessions last one or two weeks.

School outdoor education programs, first offered in 1983, were created in the spring and fall as a service to students and teachers with lessons in ecology, map and compass usage, team building, hiking, and pioneer and colonial history. Today, the YMCA Camp serves over 4,000 students each year, partnering with over 60 local and regional school districts.

In the past 25 years, the Camp’s programs, facilities, and infrastructure have dramatically strengthened compared to the early summers of tents. Over $7 million have been invested in water and septic systems and new buildings and structures, including a new dining hall, program lodge, hike center, climbing tower, docks, and 30 cabins. Today, Chingachgook serves over 10,000 children and adults annually in year-round programs on Lake George in the Adirondack Mountains.

George Painter has spent the last 47 summers involved with YMCA Camp Chingachgook on Lake George as a camper, counselor, unit director, outdoor education director, and executive director. He has led the small summer camp in the Adirondack Mountains to become a year-round outdoor education center with over $7 million in new facility and program improvements and over 10,000 guests per year in summer camp, school outdoor education, and family retreats.

The Camp Chingachgook Alumni Association and the Capital District YMCA have spearheaded a year of centennial celebrations and a $1 million centennial capital campaign to make needed improvements to position the Camp for its next century of service to youth. A centennial exhibit will be on display at the Crandall Public Library Folklife Center in Glens Falls, NY, from July 19 through December 2013.

For more information, contact YMCA Camp Chingachgook, 1872 Pilot Knob Road, Kattskill Bay, NY 12844, 518-656-9462, chingachgook@cdymca.org. Press inquiries can be directed to recently retired camp executive director George Painter at 518-361-3826.

At the core of life at Camp Chingachgook is the tent or cabin group. Up to 9 campers of about the same age and a counselor, usually a college student, assistant counselor, and counselor aide live in close quarters for the session. This intense first experience of group living outside family forms bonds that can last a lifetime. Top: Tent group, 1948. Bottom: Tent group, 1981.
Occupational Folklore: The Focus of the New York Folklore Society’s 2013 Annual Conference

BY LISA OVERHOLSER

On March 2, 2013, New York Folklore Society hosted its annual conference at ArtsWestchester in White Plains, NY. The theme centered on occupational folklore. While the current economic crisis has drawn much attention to the need for strategic and sustainable economic development, this conference was a great opportunity to highlight folkloric aspects integral to the economic machine in New York State.

At the heart of the conference was the maritime exhibition, “From Shore to Shore: Boat Builders and Boat Yards of Westchester and Long Island,” an exhibition co-curated by folklorists Tom van Buren of ArtsWestchester and Nancy Solomon from Long Island Traditions. The exhibition was ongoing in the Peckham and Shenkman Galleries of ArtsWestchester and provided an informative visual display of the folklore of work. Highlighted were master maritime craftsmen of the Hudson River and Long Island Sound, the tools of their trade, and the landmark boatyards where they work, all which have been documented and researched by van Buren and Solomon. Chronological displays, boat models, and actual boats punctuated the exhibition, giving a good contextual background. [More information, exhibit history, and current exhibit locations, can be found at the ArtsWestchester website, www.artswestchester.org and the Long Island Traditions website, www.longislandtraditions.org.]

After a co-curator’s talk by Nancy Solomon and Tom van Buren at 1 p.m., two subsequent panels focused attention on occupational folklore. Robert Baron, director of the Folk Arts and Music Programs at the New York State Council for the Arts (NYSCA), led the conversation about “The Apprenticeship Model in Professional Development and the Revival of Traditional Trades,” and posed questions to Maxwell Kofi Donkor (former NYSCA apprentice and Ghanaian musician residing in Westchester county), Eric Cantemessa (stonemason and another former NYSCA apprentice), and John Remson (a Long Island boat builder whose work was featured in “From Shore to Shore”). Across various cultural and occupational backgrounds, the model of master and apprentice has been a constant in helping to sustain traditional ways of life.

Guest folklorist Nancy Groce, Folklife Specialist at the American Folklife Center, led a discussion with a panel consisting of past and present recipients of the Archie Green Fellowship, the award for public folklorists specializing in occupational folklore.

Discussants included the NYFS’s own Ellen McHale (“Stories from the Backstretch of the Thoroughbred Racetrack”), Steve Zeitlin (“Erie Canal Stories”), and Hannah Harvester (“The Changing Relationships of Dairy Farmers and Farm Workers in Northern New York”). New York State was well represented in the realm of occupational folklore research, a testament to the crucial link between folklore studies and the economic landscape in the Empire State.

The invited keynote address, “The Teaching of a Traditional Craft,” was given by Adam Green, founder and executive director of Rocking the Boat, a community-based Bronx organization that works with youth to use boat building as a means of community revitalization and developing individual skills. Although not a practicing folklorist, Green has had quite a bit of training in folklore with a sophisticated understanding of it that informs his work. He wrote his undergraduate thesis at Vassar College on the storytelling process, including an in-depth analysis of the “Ramapo Salamander” tale, and believes that process is essential to his focus at Rocking the Boat. “It’s about process,” he says in a recent interview. “You do things, and things happen as a result of you doing them. I like to think of it as a narrative. Everything relates to everything else we do, and it’s got to tell the larger story. Our kids are building something real and learning all the skills they need to do that, and it can take them places.” The idea is perhaps summed up best in Rocking the Boat’s memorable tag line—“Kids don’t just build boats at Rocking the Boat, boats build kids.”

The highly successful boat building organization that Green launched in 1996, as a volunteer youth project in an East Harlem junior high school, is also a model for finding relevance to many different sectors of society. Rocking the Boat serves the youth of Hunts Point in the Bronx, and in the mix are kids from many different races and cultures. Most have one
thing in common—they and their families struggle with often severe economic, educational, and social conditions. Many of them have never had the opportunity to build anything or experience the outdoors of their own environs. So, in one sense, Rocking the Boat is a social service organization, providing practical hands-on job skills training and opportunity.

They are also an environmental organization, however, carrying out very real environmental research and restoration projects along the Bronx Riverway. These projects are often carried out in conjunction with corporate or governmental partners. Current projects include: a wetland monitoring project for their Bronx Riverway neighbor, ABC Carpet & Home, in conjunction with landscape artist Lillian Ball and environmental engineers at eDesign Dynamics and Drexel University; a wading and shore bird foraging survey with the New York City Audubon Society; an American eel monitoring project to study eel populations that come up from the Sargossa Sea in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean; and a Bronx River Oyster Restoration Project in conjunction with NY/NJ Baykeeper and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Green says: “We want to do things that are real. Our excuse for building boats is that we need boats in order to do environmental research along our waterfront. This is real science, in the context of larger scientific purposes.”

Because they build boats that historically were used in the local waterway system, they are also a historical entity. They build in the traditional fashion, using traditional materials rather than modern materials that define most boats made today. They work with Historic Hudson Valley, allowing them to delve more deeply into the historical recreation process in presentations there. Of the roughly 45 boats that Rocking the Boat has built since incorporating as a non-profit in 2001, a number of them have ended up at Historic Hudson Valley and at the Adirondack Museum. Green suggests that the way boats are designed and shaped are very related to their use; you can learn a lot about past ways of life based on their design. For example, a dory is a traditional fishing boat that he says is “tippy and tender.” It has a lot of what he calls “freeboard,” the distance between the water line and the top of the boat. For a fishing boat, this allowance was necessary for heavy loads. Whaleboats (they built one of these for the Mystic Seaport Museum) are a distinctive double-ended boat, with no front or back. This design feature reveals the necessity for flexibility—when you harpoon a whale, you never know which way the whale is going to swim.

A standard kind of boat that they have repurposed (and the boat featured in their logo) is the Whitehall boat, a boat historically used in the New York City harbor to transport people and goods from ship to shore. Green explains that function to the kids in his classes. To emphasize the point, he jokes with them: ‘Say, it’s the 1850s in Manhattan, and you want to go clubbing. How would you get there?’ ‘The answer is with a Whitehall boat.’ Though no Manhattan nightclubs are involved in Rocking the Boat’s Whitehall boating, they do haul kids back and forth, so the essence is the same.

As with any work or labor culture, Green recognizes the great variety of folklore that is present in their own organizational day-to-day life. A great example is when they complete a boat and go through the ritual of naming and launching the boat. The whole community typically shows up as they march the boat from the shop to the waterfront. They wonder, “Well, let’s see if she’s going to float!” and christen the boat not with a bottle of champagne, but with a jug of Bronx river water, a variation on the traditional boat-Christening scenario. Additionally, there is a symbolic handing off commemorated in various ways as the boat passes from the Boatbuilding program to the On-Water program.

There is also lots of storytelling that happens as kids work on the boats, something that Green says is not intentionally incorporated but is nevertheless there. In fact, he wishes he could focus more on this. He would love to be more involved in inter-generational storytelling, for example, or to share the stories of those who originally come from water- and island-based cultures outside of the US, particularly as they reflect some of the youth that Rocking the Boat works with.

Conference participants were able to browse through the “From Shore to Shore” exhibit at a public reception, sharing ideas and thoughts raised throughout the day. Annual conferences of the New York Folklore Society are always thought provoking and stimulating. For NYFS, this conference was not only a chance to reach out to new audiences, but also to remember the connection of folklore as a discipline to various other sectors of a cultural economy.

Lisa Overholser is staff folklorist at the New York Folklore Society, where she manages the Mentoring and Professional Development program and contributes to many other projects and initiatives. She holds a PhD in folklore and ethnomusicology from the University of Indiana.
I
n 1981, I discovered the joys of James Bond.

I was shy teenager, on a date to see For Your Eyes Only, with a dashing blond I would later marry. We loved the film so much that we methodically went through every Bond film yet made, VCRs having just become affordable. I then, just as methodically, read every Bond book, a budding feminist with a love-hate relationship with misogynist thriller writer Ian Fleming.

If you’ve never read a Bond book, I’d invite you to pick one up. Fleming was a keen observer of both physical details and the human condition, and if his characters hadn’t been made into such icons of pop culture, my opinion is that he’d be critically more revered. Like Dorothy Parker or F. Scott Fitzgerald, he has an efficiency of words, and his heroes/antiheroes are similarly exaggerated.

On a personal note, as a teen, I’d never gone farther from my hometown of Glens Falls than to Rutland, Vermont. In Fleming’s books, I could live the good life, explore Istanbul or Paris, play 21 in noisy casinos, dive in the warm salt water of the Caribbean, eat fabulous soft-shell crabs swimming in butter, and solve mysteries with my trusty Walther PPK. It was at odds with my Catholic schoolgirl upbringing, but I devoured the adventures, and then it happened: I read The Spy Who Loved Me.

If you know the movie with this title, you know nothing about the book. The book is the only attempt Fleming made to write from a female point of view, and he was so unsuccessful that Fleming not only never tried this approach again, he refused to allow the book to come out in paperback. Although Fleming was well known as a roué, he must have been a terrible liar, for his introduction comes off as so much nonsense. He claims he found a manuscript on his desk, which he was glad to publish for the woman who left it there, a woman who had had an affair with Bond. Even at 16, I could see through that, but picked it up anyway. As usual, I was delighted to be taken away—to London, to Montreal, to Lake George.

Lake George? Ian Fleming famously wrote about places he had actually been. My antihero had been to Lake George?

How much time Fleming spent here I have not been able to ascertain, but clearly, he was here. He sets The Spy Who Loved Me somewhere between Glens Falls and Lake George, in the Dreamy Pines Motor Court, where our heroine tries to hold off but is unable to escape the thugs until James Bond shows up. The “Spy” is Bond himself, not a Russian woman Bond gets mixed up with, as in the movie.

Fleming tried to write as though he were a young woman writing, just after having her heart broken, and speaking as someone in first love when I read it, he did a surprisingly good job. The giddiness, self-absorption, and myopic good spirits of early romance are uncomfortably familiar, and everything is portentous: “Before I met Kurt, I was a bird with one wing down. Now I had been shot in the other” (her take on her failed affair) (Fleming 2003, 53). “Yes, this was a man to love” (an hour or so after meeting Bond) (149).

However, she’s neither the glamorous “girl” in a casino nor an ingénue on an island; she’s middle class. Hers is the Lake George of tour boats (“harmless steamers that ply up to Fort Ticonderoga and back” (62)) and of Storytown (“a terrifying babyland nightmare which I need not describe” (63)), not of Millionaires’ Row.

Fleming was known for his vivid description and offers a better look at Lake George than my own diary entries in 1981. The Adirondacks are described in their wonder as Viv takes her Vespa down Route 9 from Montreal: “...there was hardly an old fort, museum, waterfall, cave or high mountain that I didn’t visit...” I just went on a kind of sightseeing splurge that was part genuine curiosity but mostly wanting to put off the day when I would have to leave these lakes and rivers and forests and hurry on to the harsh Eldorado of the superhighways, the hot

Likely this has nothing to do with James Bond, but it is a lake halfway between Glens Falls and Lake George. The author was photographed by Rosalie Carlsen. Photo courtesy of the author.
flamed here and there like shrapnel-bursts” (3)).

He also tells us about things that seemed forever at the time but aren’t any more: the now-gone amusement park Gaslight Village has “real gas lighting,” the motel has toilet paper in pastel colors to match the walls (still available when I furnished my first place in 1987), and she makes her way “through the Red Indian country of Fenimore [sic] Cooper” with maps and materials from Esso (61).

Where, exactly, was she? Fleming provides us with a map, showing the Dreamy Pines Motor Court on the west side of a road with Lake George to the North and Glens Falls to the south. (He must have thought the Adirondacks were exotic indeed, as Fleming provides no such guide for adventures in Switzerland or Jamaica.) The map puts her on Route 9, but the text puts her approximately in Lake Luzerne, since she says she is “ten miles west of Lake George” (3). She can’t be in Lake Luzerne, though, because the text also says she has taken “this wandering secondary road through the forest, which was a pleasant alternative route between Lake George and Glens Falls” (6). She says that halfway is a small lake called Dreamy Waters.

While there is no route west of Lake George that takes us to Glens Falls, there are two such roads to the east, Bay Road and 9L, and about halfway on Bay Road is a road leading to Lake Sunnyside called Dream Lake Road. There is also a route west of Route 9, which leads to Saratoga, without, however, passing through Glens Falls. This is 9N. I really couldn’t fault Fleming for getting 9L and 9N mixed up, as even the natives do. Since Bond finds her on this “secondary” road on his way south from Lake George to Glens Falls, one can assume they are on Route 9L, and that Fleming got his compass points confused, or that he deliberately altered the landscape in order to make his heroine more in need of rescue.

Fleming doesn’t describe Glens Falls in detail but, again, he was here. At one point a minor baddie, the manager of the motel, is vulgarly putting the moves on Viv within his wife’s hearing, and the older woman snaps, ‘Come on, Jed,…You can work off those urges on West Street tonight’ (7). The locals know the area of ill repute has long been South Street. However, newspaper articles of the thirties describe brawls in brochels on West Street (now Broad Street), and local legend says the brothels were still there in the 1960s, when Fleming was writing.

If you are wondering where James Bond is, so did Fleming’s readers. Bond doesn’t show up until two-thirds of the way through, seen through the worshipful eyes of Viv. Here’s where the book makes its fatal turn, the one that made readers hate it: when Bond arrives, he provides no romance.

I don’t mean physical relations; there, he succeeds. But Bond shows up at the worn out motel, identifies the bad guys, announces that he’ll save the day, has his victory romp, actually does save the day, and leaves. The falling action has a captain of the Glens Falls police warning Viv that the top operatives, whether FBI men, gangsters, spies or counterspies, are all “cold-hearted, cold-blooded, ruthless, tough, killers,” and she should steer clear of this type of man whose house in London had no trees.

The almost comically pastoral names given by proprietors to their businesses. “Dreamy Pines” Motor Court could be a real place. We have Do-Rest, Twin Birches, Whispersing Pines. Then, as now, the tourist season ended at Labor Day, or at the very least mid-October (‘…wild maples

While most authors have no control over their covers, Fleming was known to pay for his own out of pocket, as he did with this one. Photo of the original cover taken by the author.

Dog stands, and the ribboning lights of neon” (62). The village of Lake George is described as “…the dreadful hub of tourism in the Adirondacks that has somehow managed to turn the history and the forests and the wildlife into honkytonk” (62).

Viv isn’t entirely impressed by the great outdoors. “I hate pine trees. They are dark and stand very still and you can’t shelter under them or climb them. They are very dirty, with a most un-treelike black dirt, and if you get this dirt mixed with their resin they make you really filthy…The only good thing about them is their smell, and, when I can get hold of it, I use pine-needle essence in my bath” (5). I happen to love pine trees, but I can’t fault the description, and for a man whose house in London had no trees around it, they must have been intimidating. I’m not bothered by the assessment; that’s her opinion. Or more likely, his.

Fleming describes the Adirondacks’ less changeable features well, such as the pines, the sensible “picnic areas” off meandering routes, the almost comically pastoral names given by proprietors to their businesses. “Dreamy Pines” Motor Court could be a real place. We have Do-Rest, Twin Birches, Whispering Pines. Then, as now, the tourist season ended at Labor Day, or at the very least mid-October (‘…wild maples

All clear now? Phew! This simple little drawing, which illustrates more how remote Fleming thought Lake George was than anything about the area, is left out of later editions of the book. Note the abundance of those hated pine trees.
VOICES: The Journal of New York Folklore

have no right to be in Chicago!"

his host heard this outburst, “Those pictures hiking in the High Peaks—all activities which Arts. His first reaction was one of awe at the breadth and quality of the work he saw. Later, his host heard his outburst, “Those pictures have no goddamned right to be in Chicago!” (Lyceet 1995, 263).

Fleming was well known for dismissing whole nationalities and giving a particular example a disfigurement for good measure. Here, one of the gangsters lacks body hair. And I cringed with embarrassment reading the gangster names, Horror and Sluggsy, and the lines Fleming supposed were gangster “lingo.” A crudely named American without body hair and with bad grammar has got to be the lowest of them all.

For a good part of the book, Vivienne Michel is the best ever “Bond Girl.” so naturally, she’s Canadian, not American. Viv is from Quebec and had a Catholic education; her convert “...proudly owns the skull of Montcalm” (15). (Another example of Fleming’s attention to detail: General Montcalm was in the Lake George area at one time; he defeated Colonel Munro at Fort William Henry in 1757, and the fort is one of the few things about Lake George that Fleming has Viv admire.)

She’s uncommonly independent, saving up money by working for a newspaper and then exploring the US on her own. She’s the only Bond Girl with a good back story, which is most of the book, and is resourceful enough to make it believable that she has a respectable number of “shots on goal” before Bond arrives. Bond does rescue her from her attackers, but it’s her wit and cool head that enable Bond to foil their larger, more nefarious scheme. And the dialogue between her and “James” gets closer to that of two equals than between Bond and most of his (for lack of a better word) partners.

It wouldn’t be honest to end her without discussing the sentences that make this book notorious. Waking up, Viv reflects, “All women love semi-rape. They love to be taken. It was his sweet brutality against my bruised body that made this act of love so piercingly wonderful” (148).

At 16, I reacted to that much as I did the pine tree segment, with a shrug of: ‘That’s her opinion. Probably his.’

It is significant that here Fleming drops his façade of first person writing by saying “they” love to be taken, rather than “we.” As an adult, I can barely reread this and have to add opposing quotes from the same author in Questions Are Forever: James Bond and Philosophy: “If consent and mutual satisfaction are the measure of success—not to speak of prowess—then Bond seems to be doing very, very well indeed,” and “This passage is, in fact, profoundly regrettable and revolting ” (South and Held 2006, 101).

In my final assessment of The Spy Who Loved Me, I’m grateful to Fleming. I enjoyed the book, and I think of that speech I have to give when people ask me where I live. “In New York? You mean Manhattan, right?” “No, upstate.” “You mean like Poughkeepsie?”

Ian Fleming, for all his faults, had the awareness to say, “...the Adirondacks—that vast expanse of mountains, lakes and pine forests which forms most of the northern territory of New York State” (Fleming 2003, 3). How I wish this book were popular enough that I could say, “I live near Lake George, you know, where The Spy Who Loved Me was set.”

Somewhere on 9N, or 9L, or Bay Road, but anyway, biking distance from my house in Glens Falls, Ian Fleming looked around and sneered. In his honor, I’ll sip some Virginia Gentleman Bourbon, the tipple of choice in this book and sneer back in a form of friendship.

Some parting shots on Fleming:

On the BBC show Desert Island Discs, Fleming tried to explain away Bond’s satyriasis. “Well I write one book a year and he has one girl [sic] per book.” But then he changed course and said, “I envy him.” Although biographers indicate that for sheer numbers, Fleming’s experiences compare favorably with Bond’s, maybe he did have reason to envy his creation: Fleming was occasionally turned down.

In this same interview, Fleming refers to “kind friends” who wrote with corrections on Bond’s guns, drinks, or locales. One was “an American librarian.” In spite of the fact that Fleming accepted this person’s help, or perhaps in spite of this, James Bond never took a librarian to bed.

Through reasons “other than merit,” Fleming was a Commander in the British Secret Service. Although he sat behind a desk rather than chasing villains, he was believed to be excellent.

It’s commonly known that Fleming named his character after the ornithologist who wrote Birds of the Western Caribbean. It’s less well known that Fleming was ahead of his time environmentally; he wrote to his wife a
letter that read in part, “Can you imagine such an adventure...?” to describe his participation, in 1956 in the Bahamas, in the first flamingo count since 1916 (Lycett, 1995, 287).

Fleming had something of a prudish side, marrying Anne Ruthermere, in a large part, because of her pregnancy. Although that was fairly typical for the time, in Fleming’s own family, it did not go without saying. When Ian’s mother got unexpectedly pregnant, she left town and came back pretending to have just adopted. That daughter, Amaryllis, became a prominent cellist, and Ian was proud enough to have a cellist bearing her name in one of his later novels.

Fleming died at the age of 56. Hard living had caught up with him by his late 30s, and it is difficult to believe that Cecil Beaton’s photographs in the year of his death are of a man so young.

References


Frieda Toth is a librarian, co-author of Warren County: Its People and Their History Over Time, and, like Ian Fleming, a certified scuba diver. The author is grateful for the assistance of Erica Burke and Todd DeGarmo of Crandall Public Library’s Folklife Center in preparation of this article.
After Sandy

“After Sandy”

“...We started moving items upstairs little by little, kind of sitting back, wondering if we should take this seriously. We kept thinking it’s late October and we’re not supposed to be worrying about hurricanes now: The Atlantic is cool—that should be a plus on our side. But everything shouldn’t be what it turned out to be.”

— John and Michael Toomey, boatyard owners, Amityville.

Fishermen and boaters have a long history of contending with Mother Nature. Alongside them are boat builders and boatyard owners, who are entrusted with protecting their customers’ vessels, recreational and commercial alike. After Superstorm Sandy there may be some important lessons to be learned from these tradition bearers.

“...Probably 98 percent of the boats that stayed in the water didn’t sustain any damage. They were all fine. There was not near as much damage as the boats on land—basically the boats on land sunk on land,” recall the Toomey brothers, Danny Schmidt, owner of Davison’s Boat Yard in East Rockaway, had a similar experience: “My first thoughts were—how do you prepare for it, hope it doesn’t hit you and if it does, you don’t want to think of it. Reality—when it happens—you go along putting everything back together. It’s not a matter of we’ll never survive it or we can’t fix it. We went from being six feet under water to within days having equipment and trucks running. There is stuff you do to prepare—turn electrical off, tie up certain items—boats here and there. We prepared for a lot of storms in the past but nothing like Sandy. It was crazy with the tide. The building saved our boats—because everything stayed inside the buildings. A lot of the other yards—they don’t have buildings and their boats are outside. Once boats are lifted off their chocks, they go the way of the wind. Only had a few boats damaged from that part of it—very little physical damage—but a lot mechanically because they sank on land. It wasn’t until January that we got boats off the ground.”

As Betty Arink of the Bayles Boat Shop in Port Jefferson reflected, “Boats belong in the water.”

Further down the coast in Far Rockaway, the historic bungalows along Beach 24–26th streets, recently listed on the National Register of Historic Places, also have important lessons for us. Shortly after Sandy hit, I feared that the bungalows would be devastated and destroyed, given all the bad news we heard about the Far Rockaway peninsula. I was pleasantly surprised and somewhat shocked that there was minimal damage, but then quickly remembered why they survived many other storms over their 90-year history. The modest frame homes were set back from the beach behind a protective dune. After the 1938 hurricane, also known as the “Long Island Express,” the Army Corps of Engineers began building a series of jetties, including one at Rockaway Inlet just to the east of the bungalows. According to bungalow owners, this jetty helps protect the homes adjacent to the inlet. The bungalow owners and local residents also began a dune stabilization...
project in the past decade that helped protect the bungalows. The bungalows, like bay houses, are set on locust posts that allow water to travel underneath the wood frame structures. The modest height of the bungalows also protects them from strong winds and gusts.

When we think of storms and the built environment, we often expect that public works projects will have the best minds examining the problem and developing solutions. Fortunately, many government workers now recognize the value of the knowledge of local tradition bearers, sometimes referred to as “Local Ecological Knowledge” or LEK. During the past six months, officials from FEMA and other agencies have actively pursued bungalow and bay houses owners, boat builders, and other maritime tradition bearers in the hopes that their knowledge will help others in coastal communities. As Ellen McHale wrote in her column in the previous issue of Voices (38:3-4), community residents have an intimate understanding of their region’s waterfronts, whether it’s located in the Schoharic and Mohawk valleys or on Long Island’s barrier beaches or bays. As advocates for traditions, we cannot forget the practical knowledge that generations of coastal residents have acquired and that can benefit others.

So the next time you hear of an approaching storm, ask the person in town whose livelihood depends on the weather how to prepare and what to expect. They have many lessons and words of advice to share. As fisherman Tony Sougstad recalled in a recent interview: “The best tool we had was local knowledge passed down from fisherman to fisherman, and the barometer. If the glass rises, the weather is going to be fair; if it rises too fast, we’re going to have westerly winds; and if the glass falls, we’re going to get nor’easters.” If you have a tradition relating to weather events, let us know. Your knowledge can help others.


The Holocaust left an indelible imprint on Mark Klempner’s family, and has always maintained a presence in his own life. His maternal grandfather left Hungary in 1936, only to later have his parents and 10 brothers murdered by the Nazis. His father escaped Poland at the age of 11 on the last boat to leave the country in 1939. And as a boy, Klempner himself can recall looking through timeworn photo albums with his father’s mother. He describes one such incident in the introduction to The Heart Has Reasons: “[She] once sat me on her lap and, turning the pages of photo albums from the old country, showed me wedding pictures, sepia-toned young couples, smiling women, and plump children in their little white shoes. ‘Hitler took them all,’ she said” (v).

Even so, the Holocaust was never spoken of in Klempner’s home. This silence lent it a distinct presence (like the proverbial elephant in the room), but also kept it frustratingly just beyond his reach. It was only natural, then, that Klempner would try to find some way to personally connect with the Holocaust. His opportunity came when he received a grant in college from the Cornell Institute for European Studies. For his project he chose to interview Dutch men and women who risked their lives to save Jewish children during the Holocaust. This research grew into The Heart Has Reasons, and the book itself is a treasure. It captures and preserves rich stories of heroism that would otherwise be lost to the march of time, and at the same time provides readers with a powerful source of inspiration by demonstrating that goodness can thrive even amidst the most evil circumstances.

The Heart Has Reasons profiles 10 rescuers with whom Klempner met, and the book’s greatest strength is that—in true folk spirit—it allows each rescuer to tell his or her own story. Klempner doesn’t filter or paraphrase anyone, and there’s no reason he should want to. After all, these are feisty, colorful individuals who defied Nazi brutality to save the lives of Jewish children. They possess unique voices, full of humor and anger and life; being able to hear each one is a privilege, and this makes the book an engrossing and enjoyable read. Take, for example, the priceless way rescuer Clara Dijkstra describes a confrontation she had with Nazi thugs who objected to her wearing a pin adorned with an image of the Queen: “He took me by the arm, and dragged me into a building full of Nazis. They all screamed at me, and I screamed back at them. After about twenty minutes, they kicked me in the butt and threw me out the door. I was back on the street, but they’d ripped off my pin, and I had a sore butt” (83). This isn’t the dry history of so many textbooks, but is rather history as a series of stories told by the people who were actually there. As such, it positively sparkles with life and humanity.

Other anecdotes in Klempner’s book are obviously far less amusing than Ms. Dijkstra’s. There are stories of parents and children being separated, often never to see one another again; of brave people being betrayed to death; and of the zeal with which the Nazis went about their atrocities. Ultimately, though, these dark deeds are overshadowed by the selflessness and bravery of the 10 rescuers profiled by Klempner—men and women who risked their lives to defy the seemingly invincible German war machine and rescue Jewish children. This is their book, and it serves as a shining testament to the fact that there was more to the Holocaust than the savagery of Hitler and the cheering masses who supported him. There were also goodness and valor and grace from ordinary people like Hetty Voute, who describes the simple philosophy that she and many other rescuers shared: “Sometimes people would tell me, ‘The Germans are unstoppable. Whatever you do won’t matter.’ I answered, ‘It will matter to the children we save’” (22). We should be thankful that people like her existed during the darkest days of the Holocaust, and thankful as well that Mark Klempner has preserved their stories for us and for future generations.

—Kevin Rogan

Reference Librarian, Crandall Public Library
Æ—Eva Salina Primack and Aurelia Shrenker

INTERVIEW BY ELENA MARTÍNEZ

This 2010 CD by the duo called Æ, comprised of Eva Salina Primack and Aurelia Shrenker, is a treasure of women’s voices. If you love groups like De Boca en Boca or compilations such as Wizard Women of the North, you’ll love the harmonies on this CD. It is primarily an a cappella work with some accompaniment by Primack on accordion and Shrenker on panduri (traditional three-string lute from eastern Georgia), with violinist Jesse Kotansky on two tracks. The 14 tracks feature Georgian, Albanian, Greek, and Ukrainian songs, with two old-time songs from this country, “Across the Blue Mountains,” and “Wind and Rain,” as well as a Corsican song.

How does this mix of Eastern European, American, and Corsican fit together? Eva explains the Corsican song came from the time they were on tour in Europe and had a week of rehearsal on that island. She heard traditional songs from there, and “when you start listening to polyphonic music from one tradition, it is a gateway to other polyphonic music.” So she wanted to learn these songs, too. Eva and Aurelia learned these songs in three and four parts but wondered where were the songs in two voices? The piece on the CD, a hymn to the Virgin Mary from the 12th century, is the only one in two voices they ever heard. Describing the entire CD, Eva comments, “They are all mountain songs—Balkan mountains, Corsican, Appalachian mountains. They are not that dissimilar. That’s the idea of these songs that weave together.”

The title of the group and CD, Æ, works on many levels for the duo. It is a Celtic rune that joins the sounds A and E together, pronounced “ash,” and means a dual nature—exactly two. For the duo of Aurelia and Eva who perform the music of the old and new, this is perfect symbol to represent what they do.

Eva and Aurelia

Eva grew up in California, and by seven years old, she had started going to the Balkan camps there. For the last several years, she has taught at the camps. She sings in Serbian, Bulgarian, Albanian, Macedonian, Romani, and Ukrainian. While working on a BA in Ethnomusicology at UCLA, she met Aurelia who had moved out there from Massachusetts for school. Aurelia had grown up listening to old-time songs and playing the mountain dulcimer with her family, but at a young age she became very much interested in the Georgian music scene. Within a few months of meeting, Aurelia and Eva were singing together. They realize they have come to this music from the outside, but because of their dedication they have become integral parts of the communities they perform with—Eva is considered one of the preeminent singers and interpreters of Balkan vocal music, and Aurelia went to Georgia on a Fulbright scholarship. They conducted workshops and performances together as Æ, and continue to perform solo gigs. Aurelia is currently based between Paris and Caucasus Georgia, where she has been researching traditional folk singing. Eva Salina is based in New York City, and you can find out more information about her performing and teaching work at www.evasalina.com.

To contact Æ, visit: www.aesings.com For more information, visit Eva’s website: http://www.evasalinaprimack.com/music/ash-ae

The Æ CD was the December 2011 featured selection in the New York Folklore Society’s CD-of-the-Month Voices in New York membership program. For more information about the duo, check out the New York Folklore Society’s directory of traditional artists: http://www.nyfolklore.org/tradarts/music/artist/ae.html

Elena Martínez received an MA in Anthropology and an MA in Folklore at the University of Oregon. Since 1997, she has been a folklorist at City Lore, where she works on various public programs including the Bronx Rising! series through the Bronx Music Heritage Center, and is the director of the City Lore Documentary Institute. She co-produced the video documentary, From Mambo to Hip Hop: A South Bronx Tale, which aired on PBS in September 2006 and won the NCLR’s (National Council of La Raza) 2007 ALMA Award for Best TV Documentary.
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Edited by Elizabeth Tucker and Ellen McHale
University of Mississippi Press, forthcoming in October 2013

This volume contains selections from Voices and New York Folklore. Reserve your copy today by calling NYFS at 518/346-7008.

From the Introduction: “This book honors the diverse voices that have made New York’s traditional culture so rich and intriguing...Through this volume, we hope to share the journals’ insights with a larger audience.

New York and its folklore scholars hold an important place in the history of the discipline of folklore. Folklorists in New York are found both within academia and within public benefit institutions such as libraries, museums, and arts agencies; and many maintain dual appointments. In this volume, the works of New York’s academic and public folklorists are presented together, since the two trunks of our discipline’s growth are closely intertwined...”

—Elizabeth Tucker.