



A MEMOIR OF MEMORIES

Sidney David Markman

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by

Sidney David Markman

For His Children

Sarah Dinah, Alexander Jacob and Charles William

and their children

Nirmala, Karuna, Eva, Nathaniel,
Eliot and Gregory

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Preface

A year ago, in February 1994, I started writing down remembrances and some of the stories my grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts told me, or which I heard them tell others, during my childhood and when I was a grown man. The stories of their lives and those of the lives of their forebears who lived before I was born are links in the chain of the generations – past, present and future. It is now my turn to hand these remembrances over to you. To do this is especially urgent when I realize, not without some trepidation and awe, that I am the last of my generation, the connecting bond between you and your progenitors whose genes you carry, but of whom you have no knowledge at all, as if you were like Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who "jest growed."

Not everyone accepts ancestral history as relevant to the the present, let alone the future. What came before we were born and of what will follow after we die is of little significance in the day-to-day decisions and choices we make. Like Satre's existentialism, one is free to do as one wishes, but at the same time responsible to one's self for one's acts. But neither you nor I are like Topsy, nor are we free to do as we wish though we are responsible for our acts. We are what we are because of those who preceded us and to whom we are joined in a DNA chain.

I have written this memoir of memories for you because I firmly believe that my every thought and deed has been shaped by those who preceded me and made me **who** I am so that I could make of myself **what** I am.

Why should I want you to know what I have heard about those who preceded me and also preceded you? You have grown up here in Durham in isolation, insulated from the past that shaped me, a past which is yours as much as it is mine. You have not had grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and other relatives nearby as I was so fortunate to have. It was not difficult at all for my grandparents and parents to fulfill the commandment regarding "telling your children and children's children" of their personal Exodus from nineteenth-century Russia.

The "Exodus" from Russia was part of a mass movement of people from the little towns and villages to the growing cities, in their case, cities thousands of miles distant from home and across a wide and unknown sea. The world-view with which I was brought up was one that had been transplanted from a small town in eastern Europe to one of the largest, impersonal and dehumanized cities in the world. In Brownsville and East New York in Brooklyn, as in Nemirov, my grandparents and their children and grandchildren lived not far from each other in space. They still

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retained many of the mores of pre-industrial nineteenth-century Russia they carried with them in "their baggage" when they left for America.

In a sense, they were not much different, in degree at least if not in kind, than the majority of Americans who left their farms and came to live in the cities. The movement of immigrants from far-off Russia was generated by the same forces as the movement of farmers from downstate Illinois to Chicago or from upstate New York to New York City. When I was a child during the first World War, when so many young Americans were in the army and sent to France to fight the Germans, a popular song succinctly summarized this phenomenon of the mass movement from the country to the city, "How'ya gonna keep'em down on the farm after they've see Paree?"

I do not know the statistics exactly, but the impression I gathered from reading about the phenomenon of change from an agricultural to an industrial society, is that when I was a child perhaps more than 50% of the population of the United States eared a living farming, and that before the Civil War it was much greater. The rate of industrialization accelerated after the Civil War resulting in the movement of people to the cities, including immigrants from Europe. Even before the Civil War, successive waves of immigrants began coming to the United States. Louis Adamic, the novelist of Yugoslav origin, once wrote something to the effect that between 1840 and 1940 some twenty million non-Anglo Saxon immigrants arrived in the United States. The earliest groups of immigrants were mainly from Ireland, Germany and the Scandinavian countries. They settled in the mid-west in large numbers – Swedes and Norwegians in Minnesota and Germans in Wisconsin, the Dakotas, Iowa and Nebraska. The Irish, though also from small villages in the countryside, as the Jews later on from small shteytlekh in Russia, went to the large cities, principally Boston and New York.

After 1880, the majority of the immigrants were from eastern Europe, mainly Jews, and from the Mediterranean countries, Italy for the most part. The stream continued to flow unabated right up to the outbreak of the First World War. The change-over from the nineteenth-century labor-intensive agricultural economy to the twentieth-century capital-intensive industrial economy was consummated during this period.

Thus, my parents and their families are among the myriads of people who swelled the stream of immigrants flowing from the village and farm to the city, the metropolis. However, the metropolis itself, during the course of the twentieth century, evolved into a new and hitherto undreamed urban form – the megalopolis. The monstrously dehumanized megalopolis continues to swell and grow like a cancerous tumor even today at the end of the twentieth century, in ever expanding circles in the hinterland engorging millions and millions of people like a vacuum cleaner sucking

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up dirt from a rug leaving the countryside almost as it was at the time of the Discovery of America.

This phenomenon which began with the Industrial Revolution in England is coming to an end with the rise of the "Information Age" when all that is needed is a wire or a radio wave for people to be in contact with each other. I still remember Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village" which I read and recited so many years ago when I was in high school. "Sweetest Auburn on the plain" and "a chest by day, a bed by night" are the sum total of the poem I still retain in my memory.

The point of this digression into the history of immigration to the United States is to underscore the fact that I am truly a "marginal man." I was nurtured by people with nineteenth-century mores who transmitted to me their remembrances with a nostalgia for their youth more than for a return to the life they had left behind. They were quite sanguine about the present and full of hope about the future, a future which for some, like my grandfather Shaiyeh and my mother and father, turned out to be bitter-sweet, sometimes more bitter than sweet.

The generations that came before me opened a way for me in this wonderful New World where my life has been full of inner satisfaction and contentment. Both my mother and father believed, so do I, that the next generation is always better than the one just past. The meaning of the word "better" for my mother and father always meant a broader life, a life not confined to petty needs, but motivated by transcendental goals far beyond the grubby needs of daily life.

Immigrants came to America seeking a better life, and so were better. I remember once someone asked my father if he would like go back to Nemirov. He replied saying something to the effect that the question was absurd. He may have had nostalgia for his youth and love for the home where he was born, but to return to Nemirov and Russia was remote, unthinkable and beyond the pale of his imagination.

So I have decided to tell you what has been told me. I am like the Pacific salmon returning to spawn at the headwaters of the Columbia River. The salmon struggle their way upstream against the river currents, leap up over waterfalls, and even swim through tunnels in the Bonneville Dam before reaching home. There they lay and fertilize their eggs which hatch to become the next generations which will, in turn, swim down river and out into the wide Pacific. In the end, they will return to bequeath their genes and instincts to the generation that follow. They will continue to do what they have been done before, continue to add links to the ever enduring chain of life.

Memories of memories!

I have just realized that this book is a recounting of *my memories* of the memories of my forebears which they passed on to me and which I now pass on to you. The title of this book describes its contents and is truly a *A Memoir of Memories*.

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The chapters are arranged by generations, chronologically it would seem. However, the material in each chapter does not follow any specific chronological order. Each chapter can be read independently *ad libitum*.

As is fitting, for you will want to know something about your mother's forebears, I have concluded the book with some recollections of Malvina's family. This section, except for the period after our marriage in 1945, is based entirely on the stories her mother and father have related to me.

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SCHEME FOR TRANSLITERATING YIDDISH

It is difficult to reproduce in writing the actual sound of spoken Yiddish without recourse to the use of the phonetic alphabet or pronunciation symbols which appear on page 32a, of my copy of the *New Collegiate Dictionary*. (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1976.) Unfortunately these symbols are not to be found on my word-processor and so I must fabricate a scheme of my own.

As a matter of fact, I remember that while I was still a graduate student at Columbia University in 1935 or 1936, I became engrossed with the problem of establishing a latinized (English alphabet) orthography for Yiddish in order to make the literature in this language available to the thousands of young American Jews who spoke Yiddish, after a fashion, but were unable to read it because of their unfamiliarity with the Hebrew alphabet. I was indeed moved by idealistic hopes refusing to recognize and accept the living fact that Americans, be they of German, Scandinavian, Polish, Italian and even Chinese descent, leave off speaking the languages of their immigrant parents and grandparents.

I was not deterred and did devise a latinized orthography for Yiddish and tried my best to have it accepted. I was in touch with a Mr. Stark (or Starkman, I have forgotten his first name) who was an editor of the newspaper *Der Tog* [The Day]. He did not discourage me, but could do nothing more than lament the fact that Yiddish in America was declining in use day by day. Little did I know or imagine, that he was foretelling what was to happen in Poland and Russia during the Hitler years, when the Yiddish-speaking population was almost totally exterminated.

I also remember bringing my ideas to the YIVO, Yidisher Vissenshaftlikher Institut (Jewish Scientific Institute), which was then located on 4th Avenue just below Union Square. After the meeting, I went outside accompanied by one or two others. We stood talking for a while. One of the men said to me, not without some

hopelessness and resignation in his voice, that we Jews no longer have the right to decide who is a Jew and who is not. Hitler decides who is a Jew.

I also went to see the great Yiddish actor Maurice Schwartz who was acting in a play, the name of which I no longer remember, in the Jewish Art Theatre on Second Avenue. I met him backstage and showed him some short pieces I had written in Yiddish as samples of the use of my latinized Yiddish orthography. He was, without doubt, one of the most talented dramatic actors in the United States on both the English-speaking and Yiddish-speaking stage.

He was more than a little impressed with what I had done. But he too accepted the reality that Yiddish would never be as commonly spoken in America as it still was in eastern Europe at that time. I remember he rolled the word I used for theatre curtain, *zahnyvest*, around on his tongue with some pleasure instead of the Germanized version, *forhahng*. Truly a Yiddish word betraying its origin in Russia or the Ukraine. He also preferred my use of the word *tsy'vok* [nail] rather than *noogl*, *nagel* in German.

The pronunciation or accent of the Yiddish used in the Yiddish theatre was that spoken in the Ukraine including Podolia. But the literary language was that common in the region known as the "Lite," not Lithuania alone but including Belarussia, that is the regions around Vilna, Minsk, Pinsk, Grodno and Bialystock. And a version of this speech is now taught in Yiddish language classes in American universities. Regardless of the pronunciation, all versions of Yiddish accents or pronunciations are spelled alike in the Hewbew alphabet, but vowels are sounded differently depending on the place of origin of the speaker. The problem of what pronunciation to teach in Yiddish classes has become entirely moot, as moot and as irrelevant as an attempt to reproduce the pronunciation of Latin during the time of Augustus in ancient Rome.

It is a matter of no small regret and sadness to me that Yiddish has become a dead language. Even Isaac Bashevis Singer who wrote his works only in Yiddish, rarely ever saw them published in that language. For the most part, they were translated into English prior to publication. In a sense, a very real sense, Singer is an American author.

So here is the orthography I will use to transliterate the Yiddish I heard as a child and the first language I spoke simultaneously as I was also learning to speak English. In short, I was bilingual from the day I matured into speech. The Jewish children on the block where we lived from 1917 to 1926 (Essex Street in the neighborhood known as East New York and contiguous to Brownsville in Brooklyn, there were no gentiles there at all) employed a simple test to find out where in Europe one's parents had come from by asking how we pronounced the words "bread and butter" in Yiddish. If the reply was "breyt miht poot'ter" then one's parents were Litvaks; if the reply was "broit miht pit'ter," then one's parents were from the Ukraine

The basic differences then rested on the pronunciation of the vowels.

I remember not long after I began to go to Hebrew School, or more accurately when a melamed (elementary teacher) was employed to teach me to read Hebrew so that eventually I would study the Khumash (Pentateuch) and learn how to read the siddur (prayer book), my paternal grandfather –Yahnkel – had me read to him, and with utter shock and even displeasure remarked "Er daw'vent'zikh vi a litvak!" [He is reciting the prayers like a Litvak!] I was saying "borookh ataw," whereas he would say "booreekh atoo," for the Hebrew. In the Sephardic manner, now the official pronunciation in modern Israel, is bahrookh atah etc.; that is, the Spanish or Italian vowels are employed.

Vowels

The simplest system would be to use the European continental sounds for vowels, the Spanish or Italian a, e, i, o, u. But Yiddish vowels are pronounced in as many ways as there are regions in Poland, Russia, Rumania, Hungary and Germany. One's accent is the surest evidence of where one learned to speak. So the vowels I will employ are those that were used in Podolia, and more particularly in Nemirov.

a or ah – as in father. I tend to add the h to indicate this sound. When the h is absent, the pronunciation is still as in father.

ai – as aye aye sir – The sound could also be indicated by the use of the German diphthong, ei, like eisenglass or Eisenhower. I prefer the ai, then words like "fainer mahn" look Yiddish, in contrast to the German "feiner mann" which does not.

aw – like the English word "awe" but not as broad.

ay – as bay or gay, viz., "gay avek" (go away). The same as "ey" below.

e or eh – a soft e, like the "ea" in feather or weather. The "h" is added to show that it is "eh" and not "ee".

ey – like the ai in aint –vey iz meer (woe unto me) or eyns, tsvey, drai (1,2,3)

ee – like the double "e" in seen, queen, green or like the English diphthong "ie" as in field, gieb mier a biekh or geeb mir a beekh (give me a book).

i or ih – like the "i" in fill, finish.

o – like the "o" in often or the "au" in automobile but not as strong, "ofn pripitchik brehnt a fairl," (on the hearth burns a little fire), "hob a gietch vohkh" (have a good week). Sometimes I prefer "aw" to reproduce this sound.

oi or oy – like the "oi" in foil or the "oy" in royal.

oo – like the "oo" in spook, soon – sometimes replaces the "u" to indicate that the sound is akin to the Spanish or Italian "u".

u or uh – like the "u" in under. The "u" in Litvak Yiddish (unter yid'eles vig'ele) is often is replaced by an "i" in Podolian Yiddish (inter eed'eles veeg'ele).

Consonants

There are some consonants in Yiddish that approximate Russian and Ukrainian consonants.

ts – like the "ts" in bits, or limits

ly – very near the double "ll" in Spanish, but not as in Argentina where the "ll" in calle (street) becomes a "y" as is ca'ye. The "ly" is liquid almost like the "fl" in the French fleur. It is usually found in words borrowed from the Russian. My father, for example, carried this trait over into English. He always pronounced the word floor as "flyor." The word for prompter in the theatre, probably borrowed from the French, is "sooflyor."

Note! Nasal quality is also frequently found in connection with other consonants especially with "n." I shall use the letter "y" to indicate this nasalation .

ny – very much like the "ñ" in Spanish, like the Russian "nyet"

dy – "d" pronounced with the tongue on the roof of the mouth, not too common. Dee (you) in Litvak is dyee in Podolian

sh – like in shy, or the "ch" in machine

z – like in zone or raise

zh – as in azure, or jour or Jacques in French

kh – a guttural like the "ch" in loch which I prefer to "ch" which is sometimes causes confusion when sounded like the "ch" in church.

tch – like the "ch" in church, tchenovnik, natchalnyik

Introduction.

Who Am I? What Am I?

I am not so vain, not any more vain than all those who wish to be loved, as to think that my life is so interesting or so important that I must recount it for the enlightenment of my descendants; and if not for their edification, at least for their amusement. Regardless of whether apprised or pleased, I confess that it is not because of arrogant self-love, overweening pride or khutspah that I wish to relate to my progeny who I am and what I am before it will one day be said of me who I was and what I was; rather, it is because I wish to be remembered as a link in an ancient chain which I, with great fear and trepidation, must ensure that I shall not be the last.

It is not the history of MY life that I wish to record, but rather that of the chain or the train of life extending from the past (and with the help of the One Above) into the future. My life is but a station stop on the track where the living past has come to a halt for a moment before continuing on into the future, a fleeting moment, a brief visit granted me in this beautiful world. I seek the satisfaction of knowing that I have done what is right to add links to the ancient chain and that the living past will continue as the living future – my children.

Nature bequeathed them the genes I carry as an inheritance from those who visited here before me. And nature will also ensure that my children and their children will pass the DNA in the genes of our ancestors to the generations still to come. My forebears have gained immortality through me and I join them in that condition through my children.

Life goes on. I am an instrument of immortality for my ancestors as my children are for me. The body of flesh and blood, of my ancestors live on in me and in my progeny. But how do I pass on the non-material, the cultural DNA of my ancestors which shaped my being and my soul? How do I pass on the treasures of our people, the sons and daughters of Israel, the culture, the abstract elements of my being, the *materia* of my life experiences, of the history encapsulated in me? How do I assure myself that the station stop, my brief visit here on this wonderful world, is not the last stop, the terminus, the end of a bolt of cloth, a remnant from which little or nothing can be sewn?

Introduction

Who Am I? What Am I?

So I am full of trepidation and dread at the prospect that when man the creature dies, man the creator may also cease to exist; that only the creature will attain immortality in his offspring, while the man the creator and his culture will become extinct. It is for this reason that I choose to relate not so much the events of my life, as to tell who I am and what I am because of those who came before me.

This "autobiography" would be redundant if my children had grown up in an extended family, as I did, of three generations including grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and other blood and cultural relatives living in close proximity; where the wisdom, and even the nonsense, where the memory of good deeds and even bad deeds passes imperceptibly from one generation to next; where time is a circular continuum and where each new generation melds with and absorbs the former.

The family I grew up in as child in Brooklyn included four grandparents, the brothers and sisters of my mother and father as well as numerous cousins and other relatives through marriage of my parents' siblings. I even knew some of the brothers and sisters of my maternal grandparents and some of my father and mother's cousins and their children. And beyond the family, there were people who had come from the same town in Russia, the lawntslait (fellow countrymen, paisanos) from Nemirov.

I was almost in daily contact with my grandparents, uncles and aunts and was attentive to what they related. Stored in my mind are countless incidents which served to form me as a person with ties to my past and a certainty as to who I was and with a desire to make myself what I became.

Heredity and Environment. As a sophomore at Union College, in Professor Ligon's introductory psychology class I first heard this concept. And now at the age of 82 [February 1994] I repeat it with the same awe and wonder as when I first heard it in the Fall of 1931. Heredity and Environment. One is impossible without the other, the one cannot exist without the other. To be alive is to react to the physical ambient, to be alive is to be in the world, to be alive is to be hot in the sun or cold in the night. It is the environment that shaped me and which, unfortunately, I cannot pass on to my children along with my genes as I do the color of my eyes. My children were raised in total isolation from the environment which shaped me. They were raised without grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins in a place where I myself have been a stranger, a place which became home only they were born and raised here. The burden of passing on the past falls on me alone for there is no extended family from whom my children could have learned who and what we are, could have experienced the living past and become part of the wheel of time, of the generations which have circled by in the past and will circle back in the future.

What I propose to do in the pages that follow is not to burden and bore you with an elaboration of MY past, but rather an account of OUR past so that you may know WHO YOU ARE and know how you came to be WHAT YOUR ARE. Unfortunately the ties that bind you to your past are tenuous. It remains for me to

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strengthen them so they will not be broken. The stories and remembrances are "ancient history" for you. You may feel these ties to my past are not relevant because you are separated from past generations by a gap, an hiatus. It is for this reason that I am now attempting to close breach, to provide a connecting link between past and future generations.

The story of my momentary station-stop on the railroad track, an account of the brief visit on this beautiful world is not as important as serving as the link that binds you those who visited here before us and those who will arrive to visit later.

