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When Faiths Diverge, Seek the Ties That Bind

Janet Silver Ghent

On a Passover afternoon, I sat on my front porch helping my granddaughter, then 7, with a sewing project. Since we were about to have an abbreviated seder, I wondered if she knew the story behind the holiday. She mentioned something about Jesus performing a miracle.

"Well, not exactly," I said, launching into a mini-recap of the Exodus: A long time ago, the Jews were slaves under an evil man called Pharaoh, and they fled Egypt. Passover is a celebration of their escape into freedom, including the freedom to worship as we choose.

She looked at me with big blue eyes and said, "But you have to be the same religion as your parents!"

"That's true," I replied. "But your parents are free to worship as they choose."

Whew!

Then I got an e-mail from my daughter suggesting that I may have crossed the line. In the future, she asked me to avoid talking to her children about religious topics. She also pointed out that there are lots of things her daughters like to share with me, from music to crafts to gardening to cooking. Given that, avoiding religious discussions shouldn't be too difficult.

I responded that as a Jew, I value shalom bayit, peace in the home. Christianity, I wrote, is your family's foundation, just as Judaism is mine. I do not wish to undermine that foundation. She seemed to be satisfied with my response.

But curious children have a way of asking questions, and they crop up unexpectedly. In the middle of reading my granddaughters a bedtime story, the younger one, age 6, asked, "Are you Jewish?" When my husband and I answered in the affirmative, she asked why. I said we were born Jewish. She didn't think that was a good reason. "Christian is better," she said. I just smiled and hugged her.

A couple of years ago when her older sister was playing with Fisher-Price Little People, she lined them up and said, "Okay, we're going to church." Then she pulled a couple out of the lineup and said, "You two can't go. You're Jewish." Now she knows that Jews can go to a church, particularly for a celebration, but that's not where we worship.

These days, after a blended marriage at midlife—the first Jewish one for both my husband and me—we're the only Jewish grandparents to four young children who are not being raised Jewish. Because of the compromises that often occur in interfaith marriages, my husband and I did not raise our own children as Jews. In my own case, although I was born Jewish, I had no religious upbringing. When we moved to California in 1974 and my daughter wanted to go to Sunday school, I joined the Unitarian Church.

Later my daughter became an evangelical Christian, and that's how she and her husband are raising their children. They're happy to spin the dreidel at Hanukkah and search for the afikomen (hidden matzah) at Passover, but we don't worship together. The situation is different with my husband's daughter, a single mother who lives nearby. While her two children are not technically Jewish, she is happy to have us take them to services and share our celebrations.

But to both sets of grandkids—and perhaps their parents—we're the odd couple. Ours is the house with the ramshackle sukkah in the fall. Instead of Santa Claus, we get a visit from the Hanukkah cow (my husband loves to dress up). Instead of the Easter bunny, we welcome Elijah, who puts a rag mop cover on his head and re-enters the house at the end of the Passover seder.
We say “Ah-men”; my daughter's children say "Ay-men." We say Adonai; they say Jesus. We chant in a foreign language and light Shabbat (Sabbath) candles; they want to blow them out. When all else fails, a sense of humor saves the day.

Not that there weren't tears along the way. Particularly when my daughter was baptized as a Christian during her first year of college, just as my first marriage was ending.

Years later, when I discussed my daughter's conversion and my Unitarian past with a Jewish official, she responded, "If you don't mind me saying so, you didn't create a very good example."

I did mind her saying so. It was not guilt or shame that brought me to Judaism. It was rediscovery and enlightenment. And it's not guilt or shame that's going to bring other Jews back. As long as Jews in interfaith marriages are given the message that they transgressed, they're going to be lost to the Jewish community just as I was, and so will their children.

These days what we try to share with all our grandchildren are the ties that bind us—respect for the planet, good music, and good food prepared with love. Although we don't label them "Jewish," we also share our values, particularly the Golden Rule. Helping kids to become good people is not such a bad goal.

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For more information, visit our Grandparenting Resource Page.

Sharing Secrets With My Grandson

By Milton Davis

My parents and grandparents were immigrants who came to this country from Eastern Europe in the early 1900s. They all spoke Yiddish at home but discouraged us from learning to speak anything but English.

My grandfather built a house in Dorchester, Mass. Our neighbors were Armenian, Greek and Irish, but we remained the only Jews. My childhood was full of rich experiences with an ethnic diversity not found in many places. My neighborhood friends all went to church. I remember once even going to Confession with my best friend, because he thought it would be a good idea considering our frequent shoplifting activities at the corner candy store.

There was anti-Semitism, but not from our local neighbors with whom we shared many good times. But I was aware at a very early age that we were the only Jews in the area. During World War II, there were often times when being a Jew was frightening. As a young boy I overheard family talking, in a whisper, about the atrocities in Europe, while they sat around my grandmother's dining table on Shabbos (the Sabbath).

Perhaps because I grew up with non-Jews, and because of the war fears, my two brothers and I all married Christian women. My sister was the only one to marry a Jew. My family originally opposed our marriage, as any God-loving Jewish family did then. They wrote to me, they cajoled me, they threatened not to attend the wedding. But in the long run they came to love my wife, who over the years became more Jewish, in many ways, than they were. She lights the candles and says the prayers at the seder, and is a much better Jewish cook than my mother. She even makes hamantaschen for Purim.

My wife's family was even more hostile to our marriage. The first fight my wife and I had occurred on the night before our wedding because I was upset that my wife's sister wore a cross around her neck to the rehearsal dinner. We got beyond this, and a couple of years later, I overheard my mother-in-law tell a friend of hers, "We love him even though he is Jewish."

Today, my wife loves the Jewish holidays and cooks and bakes holiday foods. I think she would convert if I were religious at all. We are more likely to attend a synagogue function than a church function. I would say that half of our friends are Jewish, and half Christian.

Growing up, our own children were offered a choice of going to a church or a synagogue. We suggested Sunday schools. We bought them books of Bible stories when they were young. But it appeared that neither of our boys wanted any part of formal religion. Big surprise, given that neither my wife nor I did, either.

We always celebrated Hanukkah and Passover, as well as Christmas and Easter, with wonderful meals and theatrical productions around the Passover seder. We are cultural Jews. We rarely go to services. Not too long ago we went to a Purim reading of the Megillah. Another time we went to a Friday night service because the rabbi is a good friend.

So guess what happened? Almost according to Mendelian genetics, one son became more identified with Jewish tradition, and the other with Christianity. Our older son was married a few weeks ago under a huppah (wedding canopy) and stomped, along with his non-practicing Christian spouse, on wine glasses, and everyone shouted "Mazel tov." They asked me to officiate at the wedding. Our younger son, who I think regretted not having formal religion in his life, married a United Church of Christ minister and became very involved at their church.
Our grandchildren go to church, but my 10-year-old grandson, at one point, told me that he wanted to be Jewish, like me. The two grandchildren don't like going to church, but go, they tell me, because it's their family tradition.

My relationship with my grandson Andrew is very special. We live in Maine and he lives in Connecticut. For some period of time we have talked on the phone every day. We discuss baseball, school, how he has been doing with his Karate lessons, Runescape (a computer game we play over the Internet together), piano lessons, Little League, the family, when we are going to see each other again, and then we have secrets. My grandson is passionate about baseball, and recently my son, grandson and I went to Fenway Park to eat peanuts, hotdogs, and watch the Red Sox win.

This past spring we all got together for a Passover seder. The grandchildren participated in the reading of the haggadah, and had a look of wonder on their faces as hail, locusts, and vermin fell from the ceiling, thanks to their magical uncle who can also make water turn into blood. Our 10-year-old grandson read the four questions, and his 12-year-old sister tasted everything, and with a smack of her lips, managed to say, "This is not too bad at all." The next day we celebrated Easter and had an Easter egg hunt. Our granddaughter always discovers most of the hidden eggs. And, of course, we had another fabulous meal that we all cooked together.

I know that both grandchildren are looking forward to Hanukkah because every year my wife and I wrap eight presents for each of them, and they light the menorah every night before they open their gifts. I think they light the menorah and say the prayer to honor me. And I do feel honored.

Milton Davis is a retired psychiatrist living in Maine. He and his wife just celebrated their 47th wedding anniversary. They have two sons, one son-in-law, one daughter-in-law, and two grandchildren. For each of them family is valued very highly.
Tradition! Tradition?

By Joan Millman

My three granddaughters, age 5, 8, and 11, attend a Montessori School. Set in bucolic woods, the glow of the white wooden buildings is like nothing I ever experienced in any school, or could give my own four children. A classroom there is a wonderland of discovery. Caring adults circulate as guides, while the students choose from a smorgasbord of brain-stretching activities.

This particular school specializes in musical performances. The children make the scenery, as much of the costumes as they can with adult help, and assist backstage with the makeup.

Of course "Fiddler on the Roof" provided a rich array of colorful sets, clothing, accents, music, dancing, hate, forgiveness, exile, pathos, pity.

How many times have I seen this show? By the best talented actors, on the stage, in film. Ah, Zero Mostel! It never fails to move me. I think of my own heritage, ancestors who live in stories told by my parents. The bitter word "pogrom" gags in my mouth. My own forebears ran away from Eastern Europe to escape these horrors.

As in any well-run elementary school, the school itself offers no sign of observed religion. One Asian classmate, adopted from Beijing, told me she is half-Jewish and half-Chinese. She wears a Star of David. Though my daughter also wears a Star of David, my grandchildren wear no religious signs around their graceful necks.

Mike, one of the teachers, is Jewish. On a "Special Persons Visiting Day," I watch him gather the 10-12 year olds for a story. His story is about Tevye. He goes into it in depth: why Tevye forbids his daughter to marry out of the faith; how he comes to forgive her anyway; how the Cossacks ransack the poor villagers; what the Jewish symbols mean. He is teaching them a story about immigration, common to us all.

Thus, when these children arrive on stage to perform "Fiddler," they are not merely mouthing their memorized lines. They recall and identify with all the persecuted European Jews, whether their own ancestors or not.

When my grandchildren were born to a mixed set of parents, I had no way to know how or if they would learn our side of the equation. Of course I want them to know and identify with their paternal family. Such fine people, these relatives of Irish ancestry! The little girls go to them for Christmas and Easter. They hide eggs and trim a tree. We send Hanukkah gifts, while our counterparts give Christmas presents.

My grandchildren have been to funerals of both faiths. When their great grandmother was laid out for her wake, with an open casket of course, she was so lifelike, one of the little girls climbed up and practically got in with her. She stroked her cheek. Grandma clutched a rosary and cross in her hands. I doubt my granddaughter would have given this special notice.

Another time my grandchildren went to my brother-in-law's funeral. The presiding rabbi wore a plain black suit, nothing to strike their attention.

But I am relieved to see how, through their amazing school, they are discovering, in small part, what I have so wanted them to have.
There was no huppah (wedding canopy). No uplifted dancing chairs. No broken glass. Would there never be any Judaism?

But, more than a mere vestige, a gold Star of David adorns my daughter's neck. She has worn it since childhood, and wears it still.

Joan Millman is a longtime journalist, award-winning author of a Jewish-American story collection, and graduate of The Writing Program at Brown University. She has four children and eight grandchildren.
The Grandparent Clause

By Julie Wiener

April 27, 2007

Reprinted from The (New York) Jewish Week with permission of the author.

This Passover, as my 3-year-old daughter Ellie gleefully ran around my grandparents' Queens house with her cousins--playing restaurant in the basement and plunking out "music" on the out-of-tune piano--I remembered doing the exact same things here with my older sister.

For more than three decades, Grandma Gert and Grandpa Sam's home has been an oasis of familiarity. And an unmistakably Jewish one at that. The kitchen is usually stocked with bagels, lox and Mandel bread. Chagall prints and assorted Jewish tchotchkes adorn the house. The mail table is covered with appeals from Jewish charities, while the end tables feature Philip Roth novels, Jewish history books and The Jewish Week (which they subscribed to long before they could proudly foist my bylines on innocent guests).

My grandparents often intersperse Yiddish, which they call "Jewish," in their conversations with each other. Grandma buys only kosher meat, not because she observes dietary laws, but because she insists (so often and so vociferously that it has become a family joke): "Kosher meat tastes better."

With its first-generation, ethnic quality, one forged in part by anti-Semitic quotas and restricted real estate, theirs is not a Jewish identity that I can continue. And traditionalists would have a field day critiquing it. Nonetheless, my grandparents' immersion in Jewishness--combined with the fact that I visited them often as a child--instilled in me a strong desire to figure out an authentic and meaningful way I could incorporate Judaism into my life.

I'm hardly the only person to recognize the importance of grandparents. In their new book, Twenty Things for Grandparents of Interfaith Grandchildren to Do (And Not Do) to Nurture Jewish Identity in Their Grandchildren, the Jewish Outreach Institute's Rabbi Kerry Olitzky and Paul Golin write that grandparents play a key role in shaping a child's religious identity. (Full disclosure: I'm on the Institute's women's advisory board.)

The book is an answer to the many people who call the Institute when an adult child intermarries, eager for future grandchildren to be raised Jewish yet nervous about appearing meddlesome. My friend "Leah," whose brother recently married a Buddhist woman, tells me that her mother feels so awkward that she frequently tries (to her daughter's annoyance) to make Leah a go-between, asking her to "remind him that Rosh Hashanah is coming."

"There's a general sense of not knowing what to do and feeling paralyzed," Rabbi Olitzky says, noting that the new book offers "optimism," as well as concrete suggestions. Those include throwing "the best holiday parties ever"; fostering a positive relationship with your grandchild's parents and, if possible, offering to help pay for things like Jewish summer camp or other Jewish activities.

In tandem with the book, the Institute is designing a grandparents' program, something that--like its Mothers Circles for non-Jewish women raising Jewish children--would be part class, part support group and part social network for grandparents, who tend to feel more isolated than they really are.

In many communities, says Golin, there are "tons of grandparents of interfaith grandchildren, and they don't know who the others are because they're embarrassed to talk about it."

While I sympathize with the legions of beleaguered grandparents and share their desire to
keep Jewishness alive, at times reading Rabbi Olitzky and Golin's book made me uncomfortable. I kept picturing a well-meaning grandparent clumsily trying to implement some of the suggestions and coming off more like a missionary or Official Jewish Emissary than a loving relative.

And as a parent, I felt a little squeamish about grandparents consulting such a book, wondering how I would feel if I found my mother-in-law (who thankfully seems quite supportive of all things Jewish) reading a book on nurturing Catholic identity in grandchildren.

Golin and Rabbi Olitzky are definitely sensitive to these issues and urge readers to tread carefully, especially when the grandchildren are actively being raised in another religion. They repeatedly remind grandparents to make Judaism a part, but not the totality, of their connection with grandchildren. "If you haven't developed a full relationship with your grandchildren, the questions you ask or suggestions you offer about being Jewish might make you come off as a caricature," they write.

The book's best advice, I think, is to "be the best Jew you can be." You can't share a passion you don't actually have, and the more you immerse yourself in Jewish life—whether lighting Shabbat candles, studying Talmud or volunteering for the local federation—the more substantive and meaningful your Jewish identity is going to be. Plus, even if it doesn't influence your grandchildren, it just might enrich your own life. I will never share my grandmother's enthusiasm for Yiddish jokes or whitefish salad, but I'm glad she gets pleasure from them.

Despite all the gloom and doom we see published about intermarriage, bringing in gentiles sometimes actually strengthens a family's Jewish ties, by forcing them to think hard about why Judaism is important to them.

Rachael Freed, a Minneapolis grandmother of seven, says she "took Judaism for granted and was quite secular" until her son married a Methodist. Her daughter-in-law's constant questions about Judaism "made me conscious of what being Jewish was about," says Freed, who went on to take classes at her Reform temple. She is now a regular at weekly Torah study and chair of adult learning there.

And her Methodist daughter-in-law? After nine years of marriage, she converted to Judaism.

Julie Wiener is a copy editor and freelance writer. Her column on interfaith life appears in The (New York) Jewish Week the third week of the month. You can reach her at julie.inthemix@gmail.com. For past columns, visit Wiener's blog In the Mix.
For more information, visit our Grandparenting Resource Page.

Making Your Home a Place Where Your Children's Children Want to Go

By Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky and Paul Golin

Excerpt from 20 Things for Grandparents of Interfaith Grandchildren To Do (and Not Do) to Nurture Jewish Identity in Their Grandchildren by Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky and Paul Golin (Torah Aura Productions, 2007).

Model a welcoming attitude toward all.

Abraham had it right—at least, as Jewish tradition and the Bible like to tell it. He left the flaps of his tent open on all sides so that he could see visitors coming from afar, regardless of the direction from which they came. Then he would go out to greet them. When people come to visit us in our homes, we anticipate their visit in various ways. If it is nighttime, we may leave the front light on. Regardless of the time of day, we make sure that there are no obstacles in their path. And we frequently go outside—even in foul weather—to welcome them in, often before they reach our front door. Some friends, referred to as "backdoor friends," feel so much at home that they don't use the front door (considering it too formal) and may even just walk inside without knocking. Once inside, we offer our guests food and drink and make sure that they are comfortable in our homes. We may use our best dishes, reserved only for special guests. Each of us probably has some way of distinguishing how we treat guests and visitors as compared to how we interact with the members of our family or those who live in our homes. When we treat our guests well, they will want to come back and visit often. (Unfortunately, we also know how to treat people when we don't want them to come back and visit.) We can also be assured that our guests will share their experience of our hospitality with others.

At this point you may be saying to yourself, "What does this have to do with making sure that my grandchildren will identify with the Jewish community?" It's actually a rather simple formula. The approach we take for honored guests in our homes (and all guests should be honored according to Jewish tradition) should be extended as a model of welcoming into our synagogues and other Jewish communal institutions as well. For these institutions are extensions of our homes and of ourselves. Likewise, why would your grandchildren want to be part of a community that excludes them, or at least excludes one of their parents?

When your grandchildren see that you are indeed welcoming to all, welcoming to both of their parents, and particularly the parent (and his/her family) who is not Jewish, your grandchildren will want to emulate your inviting approach to visitors. In particular, your adult child's non-Jewish partner needs to feel unconditionally welcome. As a result, you will reduce the tension between your adult child and his/her partner. Share well-kept family recipe secrets. Invite them to participate in sports and social activities with you one on one, without your child or between your adult child and his/her partner. Share well-kept family recipe secrets. Invite them to participate in sports and social activities with you one on one, without your child or between your adult child and his/her partner.

Try to be as flexible as you can with your time, and always keep the kind of atmosphere to foster in your home for your grandchildren. Don't make them feel especially for Shabbat or holidays, without a warning. And once they left for college, they were happy that they are there, with you.

For example, Kerry's kids always knew that they could invite their friends for any meal, especially for Shabbat or holidays, without a warning. And once they left for college, they would bring their friends—and their friends' laundry—home for extended periods of time. This is the kind of atmosphere to foster in your home for your grandchildren. Don't make them feel that they have to make extensive arrangements if they want to visit. Be prepared to change your plans on a moment's notice for them. Don't fuss about where they sit, how they are dressed or where they leave their things. This is not the time to teach them those things. Just be happy that they are there, with you.

The same thing goes for your adult children. Unwittingly, when our adult children come to visit, we sometimes regress to the parenting roles that we had when they were young. If they are

encouraged to bring their “childhood baggage” back into the house when they visit, such tension will color the interfaith tensions that may simmer under the surface of their visit and can inhibit your ability to nurture your grandchildren and their religious identity.

When this kind of welcoming attitude is also embodied by Jewish institutions, your grandkids will feel included there as well. They will see it as part of the tradition of Jewish community, a community of which they will proudly want to be part. Obviously, you have much more control over expressing a welcoming attitude in your home than in the Jewish institutions to which you may belong. But that’s not to say you have no control over those Jewish institutions. Even if you are just a “regular” member, not serving on a board or a committee, you can still make your voice heard. Your opinions matter, and your actions speak even louder. Almost every Jewish institution has one or several members who take it upon themselves to be the most welcoming, most friendly souls for the newcomers who walk through the doors. Even if you are not an outgoing type, if you are a “regular” at an institution and you see a new face, a simple “Hello, how are you, I like it here, I hope you do, too” will go a huge distance in making a newcomer feel welcome. Don’t let people sit alone during services or programs or stand alone during receptions.

Whatever the issues are that you might seek to change within a Jewish institution, odds are strong that you are not alone in seeking that change. Sometimes written policies are a barrier, but more often it’s the unspoken attitudes that make a Jewish institution less welcoming than it could be. After all, an institution is really only a composite of its membership. And we know that you can find like-minded allies among the other members in your quest to make a beloved institution more welcoming toward your intermarried children and your grandchildren and all intermarried families. Together you can work to create a more welcoming community.

Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky is Executive Director of the Jewish Outreach Institute.
Forbidden Love: Anti-Semites Who Loved Jews... And the Jews Who (Sometimes) Loved Them Back

By Mandy Katz

Reprinted with permission from Moment.

June 2007

In an oddly overlooked in the annals of human love, it has come to light that Adolf Hitler once loved a Jewish woman. Or, at least, he thought he did. As a moody teenager in Linz, Austria, the future Fuhrer's youthful prejudices paled in the face of his crush on a local golden girl, Stefanie Isak, the litle and well-dressed daughter of a widow. According to Hitler's childhood friend and biographer August Kubizek, both young men and were also based on her last name, Isak was Jewish. Kubizek said he once so far as to protect his friend's reputation by keeping Isak's name a secret throughout the Nazi era. In his 1953 memoir, The Young Hitler I Knew, Kubizek said he once mum out of "discretion."

Already enamored with Richard Wagner's operas, Hitler romanticized Isak as a Valkirye with a soaring voice. He composed undelivered love poems that typically featured a damsel in velvet riding "a white steed over the flowering meadows." Isak who, as it turned out, was not Jewish at all, barely knew Hitler existed. Still, the young man was sure his love was secretly returned even though, since he never spoke to her, his courting strategy resembled stalking. Every evening, he watched as she visited the town's main plaza to flirt with handsome army officers. Isak's tormented admirer nursed dark fantasies of kidnapping her, according to the loyal Kubizek. And, appalled by her love of dancing, he devised elaborate plots of murder-suicide even as he planned for their marriage.

If the Great Dictator himself could dream of marrying a girl he thought was Jewish, then it should come as no surprise that fellow Axis leader Benito Mussolini had similar tastes. Unlike Hitler, Mussolini did more than fantasize: The comely and fiercely intelligent Margherita Sarfatti--a Jew from a wealthy Venetian family--served as his mistress as well as a trusted political advisor who helped pave her lover's way to power.

When they met in 1911, Sarfatti was 31, married to a Jewish lawyer and making a name for herself as an art critic and salonista while writing for Avanti, the Socialist party organ. Mussolini, then 28, was its new editor, bursting onto the Milan scene with a three-day growth of beard and what Sarfatti called the "glint of fanaticism in his eyes." The rough-hewn, self-educated son of a blacksmith, Mussolini may have sensed that Sarfatti's social confidence and connections--her husband, Cesare, once served as mayor of Milan--could prove valuable.

There was nothing particularly strange about their cross-cultural affair at the time. Italian radicals during and after World War I regularly fraternized with Jews, socially and politically, and many Jews migrated to fascism from Socialism and trade unionism. Sarfatti was one of these and spent the following two decades helping hone Mussolini's message. She wrote a fawning biography and ghost-wrote articles under his byline for America's Hearst Newspaper Service. She also enjoyed easy access, for afternoon liaisons, to his personal quarters. Mussolini's uneducated wife, Rachele, sensed early on that Sarfatti stood apart from her husband's hundreds of other conquests. "Of all your father's women," she told her son Romano Mussolini, "I was jealous only of those who had a place in his mind."

Sarfatti must have approved when, at first, Mussolini openly dismissed Hitler's racism as "scientific nonsense." She remained at the heart of Il Duce's world until the early 1930s, when he dropped her. Her fading looks played a role, but Sarfatti was also becoming a source of embarrassment; as Mussolini sought to project an increasingly muscular persona, deferring to an opinionated Jewish woman no longer fit his image. In 1937 he expunged all mention of Sarfatti from the political diary he had been keeping, with her help, for posterity. (Some of the pages were even in Sarfatti's hand.) As Mussolini lowered his hammer on the Jews in 1938--banning intermarriage, for instance, and restricting Jewish property ownership--Sarfatti fled to Argentina. Ultimately, her former paramour and his German allies would deport some 20 percent of Italy's Jews, among them her sister, who died en route to Auschwitz.

The affinity of so-called pure races for Jews was not limited to men. German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl never officially joined the Nazi Party but she made her career by glorifying Hitler and the Aryan ideal in party-funded documentaries like Triumph of the Will. Riefenstahl, who
died in 2003 at the age of 101, spent more than half her life downplaying her Nazi ties, claiming total ignorance of the Final Solution and defending herself with lists of "Jewish friends." But in a recent biography, _Leni: The Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl_, writer Steven Bach finds she was an onlooker, albeit a shocked one, at a 1939 German Army massacre of Jewish civilians in Konskie, Poland. Bach also demonstrates that she knowingly used enslaved Gypsies from a nearby concentration camp as extras in her feature film, _Tiefland_.

The narcissistic Riefenstahl was a member of Hitler's inner circle and, when it suited her craving for publicity, was delighted to hint that she had given the Fuehrer himself a little "Stefanie Isak" during the war. Whether or not she slept with him—and Hitler's purported impotence makes it unlikely—the two were mutually worshipful.

A cunning knockout, Riefenstahl collected a Mussolini-like list of lovers, some of whom were Jews. One was a slender Austrian Jewish currency trader named Harry Sokal. A bon vivant and casino habitué, Sokal could have entertained few illusions about Riefenstahl's sympathies: Once, sitting opposite him on a train, she thrust Hitler's _Mein Kampf_ under his nose, calling it a "beautiful book" and declaring its author "the coming man." Seemingly good-natured in his gambling ways, however, Sokal pursued his alluring "ingénue" for years, lavishing her with fur coats, paying for her dance debut and bankrolling movies that might advance her career.

Riefenstahl accepted his gifts while rejecting his occasional proposals of marriage until their passion (or her tolerance) flamed out. Sokal nevertheless continued investing in her projects and socializing with her as a neighbor in Weimar Berlin, almost to the day he fled Germany in 1933—a path taken by many of Riefenstahl's other so-called Jewish "friends."

Bach convincingly speculates that the only person Riefenstahl truly loved besides herself was her mother, Bertha Scherlach Riefenstahl—who may very well have been Jewish. Bertha's mother died after giving birth to Bertha, her 18th child, prompting her widow to marry the children's nanny. That the filmmaker recorded the nanny's name—and not her true maternal grand "Proof of Descent" form has given weight to contemporary assertions that Riefenstahl was aware that she was of Jewish descent.

While Riefenstahl was criss-crossing the Reich making movies, a young Jewish law student from Vienna fled a slave labor camp and came to Germany with fake Christian documents provided by a friend. The 28-year-old Edith Hahn Beer was living under the name "Grete Denner" and working for the Red Cross when she met Werner Vetter on an art gallery bench on a hot August day in Munich in 1942, she recounts in her memoir, _The Nazi Officer's Wife_. The tall, blonde Vetter, a vacationing Nazi Party member from Brandenburg, bore the swastika on his lapel but he nevertheless charmed her with his wryly heretical observations on art and cultural patronage under Hitler.

To her surprise, Beer found herself spending the following week with the art-loving Nazi. And when Vetter returned to see her in November, he proposed. "Werner was ready to jump on the train to Vienna and ask my father for my hand in marriage," she wrote. "Where was I going when Vetter returned to see her in November, he proposed. "Werner was ready to jump on the train to Vienna and ask my father for my hand in marriage," she wrote. "Where was I going when Vetter returned to see her?"

Beer pulled him close and whispered the truth about her Jewish heritage. "Why, you little liar," he grimly replied.

It was a heart-stopping moment for Beer, but Vetter's equanimity quickly returned, along with his determination. "Let's call it square and get married," he decided. Over the following weeks, he pressed his case long-distance and Beer finally gave in. It was a fortuitous time to tie the knot: she feared a pending reassignment by the Red Cross would require paperwork that could expose her identity. "Here was this white knight in Munich, who came to me fearless and adoring, and he offered me not just safety but love," she writes. "Of course I accepted."

Beer hid from her enemies in plain sight as a good Brandenberg hausfrau married to an unemployed—his marriage quickly dissolved. Grete, his hausfrau, was now Judge Beer, and he deplored his daughter's "Jewish blood." He left them and returned to his first wife.

Anti-Jewish sentiments—which existed long before the Third Reich was a gleam in Hitler's eye—were present in the religious stew of first-century Rome, which also produced its own curious crossover relationships. Probably the most famous is that between Poppaea Sabina and Nero. Officially, Poppaea was not Jewish. When she left her first husband to marry the emperor in 62 C.E. at age 32, she was a member of the Judaistic cult known as "God-

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fearers"--a movement whose followers recognized and worshipped the Jewish God and were permitted to mingle with synagogue worshippers but were not generally expected to become full Jews.

Though Poppaea never converted, that didn't stop her from acting on behalf of her "fellow" Hebrews. Josephus, the Jewish historian, urged her to intervene with Nero on behalf of a group of Jewish priests imprisoned in Jerusalem, and she did. She could do little, however, to protect the Jews from her husband after he was blamed for Rome's disastrous Great Fire of 64 C.E. and cast about for scapegoats. While charges that he "fiddled" while the city burned were false, Nero was responsible for the punitive "blazes" that followed. As the historian Tacitus wrote of the emperor's Jewish-Christian victims, "Dressed in wild animal's skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight."

A pregnant Poppaea herself died a year later, either from a miscarriage or an angry kick from her husband, according to competing legends. Nero gave her a state funeral, then went on persecuting Jews.

The modern era has seen its share of Jew-haters--be they commanding armies or wielding pens--who have loved Jews. Among the many cultural icons are Henry Miller and his June, née Smerdt; Fritz Kreisler and his Harriet; Alma Mahler and her two or three Jewish husbands; and Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt. While the intensity of their bigotry is destined to be debated, few contest the anti-Semitism of a lesser literary light of the 20th century, horror writer Howard Phillips ("H.P.") Lovecraft.

A neurasthenic Yankee blue-blood, Lovecraft lived until age 30 with his remote mother and austere aunts in a small Rhode Island town. When he met Sonia Greene at a 1922 writer's conference, he had never kissed a woman. A Ukrainian Jew seven years his senior, Greene was a divorced single mother of charm, intelligence and independent means, blessed with what her friends called "Junoesque good looks." A hatmaker, she was a Donna Karan of her day--a Jewish girl making good in the rag trade. For fun, she dabbled in writing, a hobby which led to her encounter with Lovecraft.

They fell in love through words--chiefly Lovecraft's, whose letters could go on for as many as 20 pages. Marrying two years later, they settled in Brooklyn, where Greene opened a hat shop. Lovecraft, however, soon objected to sharing crowded city streets, "where white men once moved" with immigrant Jewish hordes--"a loathsome Asiatic stock broken and dragged through the dirt for centuries." Greene would interrupt his rants with gentle reminders that she, too, was a member of the tribe, but her chastising appears to have done little good. Lovecraft may have been even blunter in his letters than in person. "The only thing that makes life endurable where Blacks abound," he wrote, "is the Jim Crow principle, and I wish they'd apply it in New York both to Niggers and to the more Asiatic types of puffy, rat-faced Jews."

Greene, who famously described her second husband as "an adequately excellent lover," must have tired of his tirades. Although they never officially divorced, their union lasted only two years. In 1926, she burned Lovecraft's letters and left for the Midwest while he returned to the aunts up north.

Lovecraft's opinions about Jews were temperate compared to those of 19th-century German writer and political agitator Wilhelm Marr. When this self-styled "patriarch of anti-Semitism" began his first anti-Jewish campaigns in the 1860s, however, he couldn't have been called "anti-Semitic" because he hadn't yet popularized the term. Until the day of Yom Kippur 1879, when Marr officially formed Germany's Anti-Semitic League, Jewry's enemies of all stripes--nativist, blood libelist, politically radical from left to right--had operated without an identifying label.

Throughout the 1840s, Marr had actually enjoyed friendships and alliances with many Socialist and atheist Jews on the radical fringes of Germany's Restoration politics. He even had Jewish business partners. But financial setbacks and disappointment in his political allies gradually led him to a studiedly anti-Jewish platform.

In 1854, before this ideological transition, a 35-year-old Marr married Bertha Callenbach, who was half-Jewish. Money appears to have sweetened the match for Marr, who later complained that his "soul knew no peace" in their time together. That he stayed with her for 20 years may have been related to the fact that their divorce required him to give up a comfortable allowance of 1,000 talers a month.

He finally forsook the income when he fell in love for real--this time with a completely Jewish woman whom he pursued through letters. Marr described his second wife, the 38-year-old Helene Behrend, as "not rich, not young, and not pretty," yet she was his dream woman. He was devastated when she died from a miscarriage in 1874, just 19 months after they married. Being a newspaper writer, Marr eulogized her publicly and reader response brought him--again through letters--to wife number three. In Jenny Kornick's condolence note, she described herself as a 28-year-old widow with problems of her own, which she enumerated in great detail. Marr apparently found this alluring, and their correspondence led to a wedding just seven months after Behrend's death.

The match immediately proved a mistake. Kornick had lied in her letters--for starters, she was divorced rather than widowed--and proved in person volatile and mean-spirited. It's not clear
what she told Marr initially about her background, but Kornick, like Callenbach, was half-
Jewish. They split within two years but only after a son was born, rendering the divorce costly
for the eternally strapped Marr, who never regained solid financial footing.

By age 59, Marr had finished with Jewish women altogether. To share his coming material
ruin and quarter century of physical decline, he settled on a pure Aryan from the working class
26 years his junior. As he aged, the man who defined anti-Semitism for the modern era
applied his "scientific" theories of eugenics to his own marital experiences, struggling to
reconcile his ideology with his past loves. He concluded that the key difference between the
beloved Helene Behrend and his two half-Jewish wives was simply that Behrend was a
"pureblood" Jew. An unmixed inheritance, he reasoned, even if Jewish, would always come
out on top.

This explanation, devised to rationalize the wiles of Marr's (Jew-loving) heart, is likely to
impress neither Jews nor Jew-haters. Still, it is a fascinating attempt to marry love and
loathing.

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The Jewing of Ryan Braun

You could easily write a doctoral thesis on the sociological reasons why so many Jewish people, especially Jewish men, are fixated on Jewish athletes—finding out who is Jewish in the top athletic ranks and "claiming them."

The main reason, I believe, is that the existence of top-flight Jewish athletes is a counterpoint to the stereotype that Diaspora Jews have concentrated on the life of the mind to the exclusion of physical excellence. Jewish Diaspora athletes are the equivalent of the tough Israeli soldier so heralded in the Jewish press. An athlete is a far cry from the stereotypical bookworm "ghetto Jew" who got by on his wits rather than taking on the world of anti-Semites with his fists.

The reality is that Jews are not underrepresented as top rank athletes in terms of their percentage of the population. As a matter-of-fact, considerably more Jews have won Olympic medals than one would expect based on the world Jewish population.

Overall, however, Jews are certainly not as overrepresented in the top tier of athletics as they are in so many other prominent fields of endeavor. This fact alone makes top Jewish athletes "prized" among many American Jews.

Although Jews (including half-Jews) have won one quarter of the Nobel Prizes ever awarded to individuals, nobody is putting together a "card set" of Jewish Nobel Laureates. But a card set of every Jew who ever played major league baseball, put together by Martin Abramowitz, under the auspices of the American Jewish Historical Society, has been selling briskly for several years.

Last July, I mentioned Milwaukee Brewers rookie sensation Ryan Braun in this column. I said:

On May 25, outfielder Ryan Braun was called up from the minors to play for the Milwaukee Brewers. Born and raised in Southern California, Braun was drafted No. 5, overall in the 2005 draft. A great hitter, he hit the cover off the ball on the Brewers' spring training squad, but was sent to the Triple-A Nashville Sounds to work on his rather weak fielding skills.

Braun's fielding still isn't great, but he has been tearing up the league with his bat since being called-up. He was named National League Rookie of the Month for June, with a .382 average, six homers, and a .716 slugging percentage. As I write this, his average has "slipped" to a mere .350 and he has 11 home runs.

Braun's father is Jewish and his mother is not Jewish. Although raised in no faith, he is clearly proud of his Jewish background as you can see in this recent interview with the The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle.
My statement that Braun was raised in "no faith" was based on information I received from the editors of the Jewish Sports Review, the most reliable and authoritative source on the Jewish heritage of athletes. They had received this information from Braun's college coach, who had got it from Braun, himself.

My piece was firmly grounded in the facts. Yes, I was "claiming" Braun, but nothing I wrote was based on information not from a good source.

But the word was out getting there in Internet land that a new Jewish athlete was on the scene. Already, Wikipedia, the user-created encyclopedia, was building a special "Jewish section" within Braun's entry with a lot of information of dubious validity. (It still doesn't mention that Braun's mother is not Jewish).

Enter Irwin Cohen, a writer for The Jewish Press, a Brooklyn-based Jewish newspaper that primarily serves the Orthodox Jewish community. Cohen, in an Aug. 8 article entitled, "Greenberg to Green to Braun," praises Braun as the heir to Jewish baseball great Hank Greenberg and N.Y. Mets outfielder Shawn Green. It appears Cohen's only source is Wikipedia, for if he had bothered to do some simple journalistic fact-checking, he would have found out that Braun's mother is not Jewish. Therefore, almost all of the readers of his newspaper, being Orthodox Jews, would not even consider Braun to be Jewish.

But Cohen didn't check, and he probably didn't want to check, because he wanted to "claim a Jewish athlete" and entertain his readers. Checking would mean confronting the real possibility that Braun was of interfaith background, something a lot of Orthodox Jews would simply not like to hear about.

Cohen, with no source cited, says that Braun's nickname is "The Hebrew Hammer" and "he [Braun] is cool with that." I have found no source but Cohen's article in which Braun said he is cool with, or even likes being called the Hebrew Hammer. Ironically, Wikipedia cites Cohen's dubious article as its source for claiming that Braun is "cool" with being called the Hebrew Hammer. One bad source reinforces another.

Then, on Aug. 28, USA Today Sports Weekly had a profile of Ryan Braun. About his Jewish background, the profile says:

Diane [his mother] has a much stronger connection to the major leagues than to her job. She grew up in the home where Detroit Tigers slugger Hank Greenberg once lived.

There was a connection, too, considering Greenberg was Jewish and Braun is half-Jewish. Joe Braun was born in Tel Aviv, Israel, and came to the U.S.A. at age 7. Diane was raised Catholic in Van Nuys, Calif, Ryan was not raised Jewish and never had a bar mitzvah, but suddenly he's hearing from Jewish organizations claiming him as their own.

"He's totally not Jewish," Diane says, "I heard some organization started called him, "The Hebrew Hammer." I said, 'Oh no.' My mother would be rolling over in her grave if she heard that."

"Ryan [Diane says] is proud that people want to claim him now, but where were they before? You know how that stuff works."

I was concerned enough about Ryan's mother's comments to question whether I had got Ryan's background right. I contacted the author of the Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle interview with Braun, Mitch Nelles, who also writes for ESPN. He told me that Braun told him, as he wrote, that he was proud of his Jewish background.

Nelles said that it was his very clear impression that Ryan was not raised in any faith. Nelles told me that that Braun, understandably, was flattered by the attention from Jewish fans and Nelles thought, like I did, that Braun's mother's comments to USA Today Sports Weekly were "a bit over-the-top." After all, what did she expect Jewish groups to do for her son before he hit the majors? (Not to mention the fact that the sports-obsessed have been "claiming" Braun since nearly the moment he was drafted.)

On Sept. 6, an article appeared on the JTA newswire by Martin Abramowitz titled Jewish Rookie Makes History: But Will He Sit Out on Yom Kippur? This article was republished in many Jewish papers.

Abramowitz sets out the drama in his first paragraph:

As baseball season heads into the home stretch and the High Holy Days approach Ryan Braun is supplying a double dose of suspense: Will the Milwaukee Brewers' slugging third baseman become the first Jewish player to be named Rookie of the Year in either league? And does he plan to take a day off on Yom Kippur in the tradition of Hank Greenberg, Sandy Koufax and Shawn Green?
I respect Abramowitz for his hard work on the Jewish baseball card set, but this article was close to journalistic fraud. Marty knows Jews in baseball and he had to know that Braun's mother is not Jewish—it says so in the *Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle* piece he cites. He knows the editors of *Jewish Sports Review* and could have got their insight on Braun's religious background, as I did. He could have easily found my column item on this site.

Instead, Abramowitz doesn't even tell his readers that Braun's mother is not Jewish. He just "claims" Braun and sets up a false drama: how likely is it that Braun, who was raised in no faith, with one Jewish parent, would sit out on Yom Kippur?

Frankly, I was angered by this piece, as were other people I know. It only set up observant Jewish fans to be disappointed when Ryan Braun played on Yom Kippur, which, as this item goes to press, he says he will. However, if Jewish fans knew his background, they could still be proud of Ryan, while understanding "where he is coming from" in terms of Yom Kippur observance.

On Sept.14, MLB.com reported:

Last call: Yom Kippur, the Jewish holiday of the Day of Atonement, begins just before sundown on Sept. 21, and some wondered whether that meant Brewers third baseman Ryan Braun would sit out two games. He cleared it up on Friday. "I am half Jewish, and I am not Orthodox," Braun said. "So I never grew up celebrating the holidays. I'm going to play."

During all this, I had discussions about Braun with an editor of *Jewish Sports Review*. Again, I was troubled by his mother's comments and thought it just possible Ryan was raised in his mother's faith. The editor contacted the Brewers' PR guy in early September. He checked with Ryan himself. Ryan said, again, that he was raised in no faith.

Sometimes a marvelous thing happens when the Jewish community fetes a Jewish athlete: the athlete enjoys the attention and becomes "more Jewish." He thinks of himself as a role model for Jewish kids and is drawn into the sphere of the Jewish community. Such a thing happened with Hank Greenberg, Sandy Koufax and Shawn Green, none of whom were really religious Jews. But all became strong cultural Jews and good role models, overall.

There is nothing wrong with Jewish fans having a special regard for Ryan Braun. As Marty Nelles said, Ryan seems to like the attention; it makes him feel a bit special. Maybe the attention will make Ryan Braun more of a cultural Jew and will do some Jewish cultural or charity events.

Still, there is something almost sad about some Jewish fans and Jewish journalists consciously avoiding the fact of Ryan's interfaith background and writing about him like he is the second coming of Moses.

**Epilogue**: As expected, Braun played on Friday, Sept. 21, going 2 for 4 with a run scored in a 4-1 win against the Braves.

**See Sydney White, Hold the Popcorn**

The college comedy *Sydney White* is loosely based on *Snow White*. Joe Nussbaum, the film's director, tells me that it is different from almost all the teen-oriented film comedies that have opened recently. The humor, he says, is appropriate for the whole family and *Sydney* centers around a young woman rather than adolescent guys. Playing the title role is Amanda Bynes, 21, who was mostly recently seen in *Hairspray*, the hit movie musical. In July, I interviewed the interfaith actress.

As the movie begins, the beautiful but evil president of Bynes' snooty sorority has Bynes expelled. Playing the sorority president is Sara Paxton, 19, who made a "splash" as a lovely mermaid in the 2006 film *Aquamarine*, a surprise box office hit. Paxton's mother, who was born in Mexico, is Jewish by birth. Her American father is a convert to Judaism. Not surprisingly, Sara was raised Jewish.

After being expelled from the sorority, Sydney (Bynes) moves in with seven dorky guys, two of whom are played by Jewish actors: Samm Levine and Danny Strong.

The dorks want to end control of the student government by snobby frat boys and sorority girls and they eventually enlist Sydney in their election campaign. The dorks reach out to every.
disenfranchised minority on campus, including a group of Hassidic Jewish students, and there is a fun scene in which Sydney White watches the Hassids dance. (The Hassids, Nussbaum says, were played by members of the Jewish Student Union at Central Florida University).

Sydney White is Nussbaum's first major film. He's the rare Hollywood director who is an observant Jew who keeps kosher. Nussbaum had no say in the film's opening date (Sept. 21, Erev Yom Kippur), but he wanted do something special because of this awkward scheduling. So, he created a special fun film trailer for the Jewish community that highlights the fact that five of the cast members are Jewish (including pretty newcomer Libby Mintz in a small role).

Nate Bloom writes a column on Jewish celebrities, broadly defined, that appears in five Jewish newspapers. If you have any comments or wish to republish parts of this article, please contact Bloom via editor@interfaithfamily.com.
Kalooki Nights' Unhealthy Obsession

By Helene Dunbar


I was meant to like Howard Jacobson's Kalooki Nights. I was meant to find this ninth book by Jacobson, which was a finalist for the prestigious Man Booker Prize, to be funny, deep, and insightful, if the high-brow reviews are to be believed.

Instead, as I plodded through the story of Max Glickman, a Jewish cartoonist, growing up in 1950s England, I had the same feeling that a convicted person must feel as they enter a prison to serve a multi-decade sentence.

What bothered me so fervently through this entire book is that every character, from Max, to his atheistic father, card-playing stereotypical mother (the book's title comes from her "Jewish" card game—can a card game be owned by a religion? Kalooki), Orthodox neighbors, and loathing ex-wives, define themselves by their Jewishness, their non-Jewishness or their opinions about the Jewishness of others.

The Holocaust is so omnipresent in this book that you might have thought the book was set in a camp, instead of the English suburbs, and perhaps it would have been a more interesting book if it had been. An adolescent Max sees his first nude woman in a photo of camp prisoners walking to the ovens in a book called Scourge of the Swastica. His "great" work, a graphic novel titled Five Thousand Years of Bitterness and subtitled "The F*cking of the Jews," is pretty indicative of how I felt reading this convoluted story about characters I never connected with or felt anything for.

What plot there is revolves around Max's obsessive childhood friend Manny, his repressed Orthodox neighbor. In killing his parents (three guesses as to how he does it, but think concentration camp), Manny takes the only action that fleshes him out as a character. Manny's brother Asher however, whose forbidden love affair is at the heart of the novel's central story (as well as to the mystery of why Max killed his parents), is intriguing. An obedient Orthodox son until he falls in love with the half-German daughter of his parents' cleaning lady, his life is turned upside down when his parents' refusal to even consider acknowledging the relationship drives the girl away. As luck would have it, we never actually get to hear from him—we only hear about him in Manny's words and veiled through Manny's distorted view of the situation.

Max himself has been married three times. His first two wives, Chloé and Zoë, follow a string of other similarly named non-Jews. "What does it say about me that the only people with whom I am able to enjoy intimacy must have diaereses or umlauts in their names?" he asks. They are not only not Jewish, but they are vile creatures, whose only frame of reference to their husband is in terms of his role as a Jew—"one asks him to get a nose job and the other tells him on their wedding night, "You'll burn in hell whether I pray for you or not." But Max doesn't fare any better with Jewish women. His first girlfriend gives him crabs and his third and only Jewish wife, Alÿs, is "depressed every day." Max, of course, does not think she might need counseling, or medication, or perhaps a change of job or scenery. Instead he offers to marry her because he thinks that her acceptance would signify a belief in the future. "The bells would ring, the gates to all the camps and ghettos of Eastern Europe would fly open, and the Americans would be there with Hershey bars." Of course it doesn't work, but then we never really get an indication of the roots of Alÿs' depression, which, to Max, all comes down to her Jewishness.

Even his sister Shoni's Irish husband Mick is caught up in a type of Jew-envy. "It upset him,"
according to Max, "that there were elements of Judaism he was never going to master." Not even the Irish sailor is allowed in this book to be happy with his lot in life without defining himself by his Jewishness or, in this case, non-Jewishness.

Jacobson's greater point seems to be some perverted version of "those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it." Every one of his characters, in either their embracing of the suffering of the Holocaust or their denial of it, relives the pain and persecution of an entire race on a daily basis. Perhaps this was the case for many people in 1950s England. I can only guess though, that some people attempted to make sense of the horrors by living their lives and trying to focus on the outside world.

The only one who comes close to this—although he's like the person who tells himself not to think about snakes but then obsesses about snakes—is Max's father, who did not have Max bar mitzvahed. Who "believed that Jews bore a special responsibility not to be special, so he hated Israel for existing, then hated it for not existing well." In that he is probably a reflection of many who lived through an unimaginable time only to turn away from the complexity of the pain and cultural coping mechanisms that remained.

There is no doubt that this is important subject matter and yes, I'd admit that Jacobson's prose is well-crafted. But in trying to sum up an entire guilt-ridden generation he creates a twisted piece that is agony to read. "Jew, Jew, Jew. Why, why, why as my father asked until the asking killed him, does everything always have to come back to Jew, Jew, Jew," asks Max. Strangely enough I had the same question.
Memories of the Wall

By Alizah Salario

Review of *The Invisible Wall* by Harry Bernstein (Ballantine Books, 2007).

The Wall—whether speaking literally or figuratively, standing between Israel and Palestine, the U.S. and Mexico, East and West Germany, or two sides of a narrow street in Lancashire, England—is a site of resistance, transition, trauma, and change. Walls, borders and boundaries are no man's lands where identities are tested and shaped.

*The Invisible Wall*, Harry Bernstein's powerful memoir of his formative years in pre- and postwar England, documents life in a working-class mill town in Lancashire. The invisible wall refers to the impenetrable force field that existed between Jews and Christians living on opposite sides of the unassuming cobblestoned street of Bernstein's childhood. From its ephemeral existence sprung a hard-wired sense of identity for Bernstein that gave meaning and substance to a life shaped as much by hope and love as struggle and loss.

In a literary era dripping with syrupy memoirs about dysfunctional childhoods, Bernstein's raw and unpretentious tale comes as a welcome surprise. With clarity and charm, this coming-of-age story moves beyond the self-indulgence of lamenting the past to capture the true reason why we are compelled to create narratives of our lives: to make sense of them, to find meaning in them, to bear witness to the past and to find clarity in the future. His voice resonates with vivid imagery to create colorful tableaus of English-Jewish life, while simultaneous imprinting on reader's minds a grainy black-and-white photo of a forgotten era.

Readers are instantly transported to 1930s England, where we have the voyeuristic sense of peering into Bernstein's parlor room as he sits by the fire and delicately peels off the tough skin of a life shaped by poverty, war, and loss to reveal the sweet seeds of hope and potential that lie within. Although Christians and Jews lived freely side by side, it was perhaps the physical proximity and minimal outright hostility that made the subtle undercurrent of fear and bias all the more apparent. Jewish children did not go into Christian homes or stores. Although Harry and his brothers had to watch for the “batesemas” (Christian bullies who beat up Jewish kids) in the streets on the way home from school, Christian neighbors across the way left the door open so the entire street could enjoy a free concert from their gramophone. Such contradictory behavior demonstrates both the irony and the social necessity of the invisible wall.

Both Harry--the wise old man looking back on his life--and ‘arry--the boy with ragged knickers and a dirt-streaked face--are keen observers, perceptive judges of character, and courageous enough to tell the story of a life as it was, not how they wish it could be. The sound of clogs on cobblestones at sunrise, Harry's trembling hands as he brought afternoon tea to his volatile, emotionally distant father at his tailoring shop, and the "fire goy" that came to the house to light the stove on Shabbos (the Sabbath), resurrect a distinctive time and place. Such contradictory behavior demonstrates both the irony and the social necessity of the invisible wall.

In the era of the "invisible wall," a Jewish girl who married a Christian boy was considered dead to her family. As his sister's confidant and his mother's little boy, Harry is mired in a...
moral quandary. As both Harry and his sister negotiate the line between allegiance to one's family and one's own desires, readers see the evolving relationship between families on both sides of the invisible wall. Bernstein offers readers lessons of hope couched between coarse anecdotes of war and struggle that make the lessons all the more powerful. He manages to embed universal life lessons in his own story without ever sounding didactic or preachy.

Overall, Bernstein has the remarkable ability to snatch up a memory with the innocent curiosity of his 5-year-old self, while tempering his naiveté with the nostalgia and insight of a 96-year-old. It is through this rare combination of innocence and wisdom that we get both a bird's-eye perspective and a down-in-the-trenches view of Jewish life in 1930's England, World War II, interfaith romance, and the coming of age of a boy growing up in a world that was neither hospitable or kind. There is a sense that the story has been gestating for decades, and only after sufficiently marinating in distance and perspective was Bernstein able to share it. The Invisible Wall was burning to be told.

Alizah Salario is a freelance writer now living in Turkey where she teaches English.