

Forward

WEEKEND READS

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News

The rabbi's husband from West Virginia is running for U.S. Congress

By Benjamin Cohen

MORGANTOWN, W. Va. – Barry Wendell was standing on the banks of the Monongahela River, a serpentine waterway that winds its way to Pittsburgh, 75 miles north. Here in West Virginia, one of the reddest states in the entire country, Wendell is swimming against another tide: as a liberal, gay, Democrat running for U.S. Congress.

Wendell, the husband of Rabbi Joe Hample, who helms Morgantown's Reform synagogue, exuded a soft calm underneath layers of outerwear as he invoked the Talmudic sage Hillel to sum up his quixotic bid: "If not now, when? And if not me, who?"

By any measure, he is the longest of long shots. Former President Donald Trump won 68.6% of West Virginia's votes in 2020, his strongest showing except for Wyoming [69.9%.] But Wendell, whose only prior political experience is two terms on the Morgantown City Council, has never shied away from a challenge.

Indeed, his Congressional aspirations are at once surprising and on point. Wendell, now 72, has worked for the government before – first as a substitute teacher in Baltimore, then in Miami as a claims agent for the Social Security administration. "They were looking for someone bilingual," he likes to joke, "and I spoke Spanish and Yiddish."

He moved to Los Angeles in the mid-1980s. There, he took acting classes, auditioned for countless commercials and made it onto an episode of "General Hospital," where he had one line. "I was a maintenance mechanic at the airport," he recalled. "And I was terrible."

He pivoted to singing, a lifelong passion, and applied to cantorial school. He didn't get in, but began working freelance as a High Holiday service leader at local synagogues.

A heart attack in 2003 made him rethink his priorities. "I thought: I really can't be alone

anymore,” Wendell recalled. “I need to have somebody in my life and I prayed that somebody would show up.” As if on divine cue, one Friday night while leading services, he noticed a man looking over at him. They bonded over Gershwin and went to a piano bar on their first date. They’ve been together ever since.

A blue bubble in a red state

As luck or fate or pure coincidence would have it, Wendell and I moved to Morgantown on the exact same day 10 years ago. We both arrived from bigger cities, following our spouses to new jobs here. My wife took a professorship at West Virginia University, the city’s largest employer, and Wendell’s husband, known to the locals simply as Rabbi Joe, was the new spiritual leader of Morgantown’s Tree of Life Congregation.

Rabbi Joe was, not that long ago, just Joe. He was working as a systems analyst for Wells Fargo until he had a midlife crisis, realized banking wasn’t his calling and enrolled at Hebrew Union College in 2004, at first in Jerusalem and then to their Los Angeles campus.

By the time Hample was ordained in 2009, it was the middle of the recession, and very few synagogues were shopping for a 52-year-old rookie. A congregation in Cheyenne, Wyoming, dangled a pulpit, but it was only a part-time gig. So Rabbi Joe took a job as chaplain at Pelican Bay State Prison, a supermax facility in the northwestern-most corner of California.

Rabbi Joe honed his pastoral skills and, in 2012, interviewed at more than a dozen synagogues. Before the Morgantown shul offered him the job, they asked to talk to his husband. The search committee had some concerns about Wendell’s blog and Twitter feed, where he was not shy about his anti-Republican views. He must have allayed their concerns, because three months later the couple was driving across the country to their new home in Appalachia.

West Virginia consists of two major cities – Charleston in the south and Morgantown in the north. In between are more than 100 miles of small towns dotting the I-79 corridor. There’s Burnsville and Strange Creek and Weston, a town whose claim to fame is that it’s home to the Civil War-era Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum. (Several TV series about ghost hunting have filmed there.)

There are about 2,300 Jews scattered among the state’s 1.8 million residents, according to the American Jewish Year Book, down from a peak of 6,000 in the 1950s. Several hundred Jewish students attend the local university, where there is also a Hillel and Chabad on

campus.

We live in a college town, a progressive bubble in the middle of Trump country. Morgantown is the bluest area in the state. [President Joe Biden won the city by more than 40 points.] Because of the university, it's a melting pot of a community where you could easily bump into a poetry professor or a Muslim doctor at the grocery store. Or Wendell. Although he avoids the Kroger near campus. Like that joke about a lone Jew on a desert island who builds two synagogues – the one he goes to and the one he'll never step foot into. ["Too many students at that one," Wendell explained of the Kroger he won't go to.]

Morgantown is also where Wendell first ran for public office – winning a seat on the seven-member City Council in 2017, and reelection in 2019 [he opted not to seek a third term last year].

During his tenure, he helped hire a new city manager and passed a gay rights law. He was on the urban landscape commission and is particularly proud of how his efforts led to the saving of cherry trees in a town park that were set to be torn down during renovations. His name is on a plaque in front of the trees.

All politics is local

With West Virginia losing one of its three seats in the House of Representatives in the upcoming election cycle due to a declining population, Wendell saw not exactly an opening, but something of an opportunity. The new districts cut the state into two slices – one in the south, and one in the north, anchored by Morgantown, which has 30,000 residents plus the 30,000 university students.

If he wins the new district's Democratic primary – he is one of two candidates running – he would likely face either David McKinley or Alex Mooney, the two incumbents whose current districts include the area. Wendell calls them "climate change deniers" and "full-on MAGA," respectively.

McKinley is from Wheeling, in the western panhandle, and has been serving in Congress since 2011 and state politics since 1980. He is a former chairman of the West Virginia Republican Party and, at 74, the oldest of the state's three House members and two Senators.

McKinley does not always vote with his party line. For example, he was one of 35 Republicans who joined all the Democrats in establishing the commission to investigate

the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Mooney hails from Charles Town and has been in Congress since 2015. He previously chaired the Maryland Republican Party. Last year, Mooney supported a failed attempt to overturn the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Former President Donald Trump recently endorsed him.

Prof. John Kilwein, chair of the political science department at the university, does not give any Democrat much of a chance even in the redrawn district, never mind a liberal like Wendell.

His advice? “Copy what Senator Manchin does,” Kilwein said, referring to Senator Joe Manchin, the Democrat who has, notoriously, abandoned his party (and the president) on key votes. “Stay close to the center, and even cross over to the right. Focus on economic issues and avoid social issues because this is a conservative state.”

Wendell supports Biden’s stimulus package that is now stalled in the Senate (because of Manchin and Arizona’s Kyrsten Sinema). He’s in favor of a child tax credit and wants to ensure that benefits remain for coal miners suffering from black lung disease. “I’m also adamantly pro-choice and obviously pro-gay,” he added.

Another important issue for him is immigration. “As the grandchild and great-grandchild of immigrants from Europe who left luckily early in the 20th century before the Holocaust,” he said, “I understand why people need to go to a safe place.”

If Wendell loses, as expected, he will go back to volunteer-teaching classes about the history of rock ‘n’ roll at a local seniors group. At the synagogue’s annual Purim shpiel, he and Rabbi Joe will continue their tradition of making up showtunes about the Book of Esther.

“I’m not sure that a bi-coastal 72-year-old queer Jew is the right person for this job,” he acknowledged of the Congressional seat. He paused and smiled. “But I think maybe I am the right person.”

Benjamin Cohen is the News Director at The Forward. Follow him on Twitter @benjamincohen .

News

Sweeping Amnesty ‘apartheid’ report solidifies human rights consensus on Israel

By Arno Rosenfeld

A lengthy report by Amnesty International Tuesday accusing Israel of apartheid may complete the term’s transition into the mainstream discourse around the Jewish state. Once made only by the most strident activists, the claim that Israel is ruling over Palestinians in a manner similar to how white South Africans dominated that country’s Black majority has now gained the imprimatur of major human rights groups inside and outside Israel.

Amnesty International’s report, released Tuesday, follows a similar Human Rights Watch finding last spring that aligned the two leading international rights groups with eight Israeli nonprofits and most of Palestinian civil society in accusing Israel of imposing some degree of “apartheid” on millions of Palestinians.

“There’s been an incredible shift in the conversation,” said Omar Shakir, the Israel and Palestine director at New York-based Human Rights Watch who authored its April report. “There is certainly a consensus in the international human rights movement that Israel is committing apartheid.”

The growing adoption of the term may help fuel the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement aimed at Israel and modeled after the campaign that helped force apartheid South Africa to eventually accept majority rule. It also challenges the framework that liberal American Jewish institutions and many human rights groups have long used to describe Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza: as a stain on an otherwise liberal democracy.

The charge of apartheid goes to the heart of Israel’s character. For many of the country’s supporters, it’s an attack that attempts to undermine Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state – albeit one that comes from a sector that has long clashed with Israel without

achieving policy changes. “It’s basically an attempt to tarnish Israel’s brand,” said Eugene Kontorovich, a professor at George Mason University who regularly defends Israel against accusations it has violated international law.

The response from Israel and mainstream American Jewish organizations to Amnesty’s report was swift. The Israeli foreign ministry decried the Amnesty International report as “antisemitism.” And other defenders of the nation pointed to the surge in apartheid claims as further evidence of bias against Israel. “It will only serve, like previous similar prejudiced reports, to fuel the fires of antisemitism under the guise of political correctness,” Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress, said in a statement.

Amnesty’s claim that Israel is guilty of apartheid against Palestinians living in both Israel, the occupied West Bank, Gaza and even abroad, was more sweeping than the accusations leveled by Human Rights Watch and came following a year when activism aimed at Israel reached new heights. The country faced one of its first major boycotts by a popular consumer brand – Ben & Jerry’s ice cream – and a Jewish Electorate Institute (JEI) poll revealed that nearly half of American Jews believed Israel was committing apartheid or might be doing so.

Kenneth Bob, president of the liberal Zionist group Ameinu, said he was alarmed that the Israeli government did not appear primed to change its treatment of the Palestinians in response to mounting international outcry.

“I can go through and dissect the words,” said Bob, who said he rejected the claim that Israel was guilty of apartheid within its 1967 borders. “On the other hand, I think what American Jews should do is point out to Israel that the problem is the policy and not the words.”

Bob said that in coming years younger American Jews, who hold overwhelmingly more critical views toward Israel than their parents and grandparents, will take leadership positions at synagogues, Jewish day schools and other institutions and shape perceptions of Israel based on what they see taking place on the ground. In a July poll by JEI, 38% of American Jewish voters under 40-years-old said that Israel was guilty of apartheid and an additional 15% were unsure, compared with just 13% of those over 64 who said the same.

A term hard to ignore

A host of Israeli NGOs led by B’Tselem, Yesh Din and Adalah have accused the government of apartheid over the last two years, largely citing the longevity of Israeli rule in the West

Bank and its varying degrees of control over Gaza, which these groups claim requires Israel to extend greater rights to Palestinians who have lived under Israeli rule since 1967.

Those who apply the term “apartheid” to Israel argue that it brings moral clarity to what has long been seen as a complex and intractable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

“Calling out in the way that Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch and many other respected institutions are doing is helping to build that chorus – and build that demand for accountability – to a point where the Israeli decision makers can no longer ignore it,” said Yousef Munayyer, a fellow at the Arab Center Washington DC.

Critics in turn argue that the application of “apartheid” to Israel is part of a pressure campaign that is divorced from the reality of Israel’s occupation of the West Bank or discrimination against Israel’s Arab citizens. They point to language in the Amnesty report that traces the alleged roots of Israeli apartheid to the establishment of the state in 1948, which occurred under the auspices of the United Nations.

“This system of apartheid originated with the creation of Israel in May 1948 and has been built and maintained over decades by successive Israeli governments across all territories they have controlled, regardless of the political party in power at the time,” the Amnesty report stated, detailing forced expulsions, property seizures and other abuses against Arabs who were living in the region during the war that led to Israel’s creation.

London-based Amnesty International did not respond to repeated requests for comment on the report.

Kontorovich said the focus on Israel’s origin suggested the apartheid claims were simply the latest iteration of longstanding attempts to undermine the premise of a Jewish state, which he dated back to the 1975 United Nations vote declaring that Zionism was equivalent to racism.

“When you have an ‘apartheid state,’ you don’t just reform certain policies,” said Kontorovich, “‘apartheid’ is saying that it’s fundamentally wrong – the very creation of Israel, its very identity as a Jewish state – which means you need to end this notion of a Jewish state.”

The American Jewish establishment was nearly universal in its condemnation of Amnesty’s report. The Reform movement, the largest and most liberal major denomination in the

United States, blasted the document as “replete with discredited and inaccurate allegations,” even as it acknowledged “the occupation as a moral travesty.” David Harris, head of the American Jewish Committee, called it “nothing short of a canard, a libel.”

The various organizations that have accused Israel of apartheid have couched their claims differently. Yesh Din, for example, found that “the crime against humanity of apartheid is being committed in the West Bank,” while it did not address the treatment of Palestinians in Israel. B’Tselem examined Israel’s treatment of Palestinians across the entire territory it controlled and found: “This is apartheid.” Human Rights Watch likewise found discrimination against Palestinians across the territory Israel controls, but based its finding that Israel was guilty of apartheid primarily on human rights violations that occurred in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, while Amnesty applied the term to Israel more broadly and said it was even being perpetrated against Palestinians living abroad who were barred from returning to their former homes in Israel.

Most groups have stated that they are not drawing a direct comparison with South Africa, but rather referring to apartheid as it is described in international law. Amnesty has also accused Myanmar of apartheid for abuses committed against its Rohingya minority.

Apartheid analogy has ‘broken through’

The question of whether Israel can free itself of apartheid accusations by ending its occupation of the West Bank go to the heart of Kontorovich’s contention that the pressure from human rights groups is not intended to change any specific policies but rather to condemn the Jewish state to permanent opprobrium.

Shakir, with Human Rights Watch, said it was impossible to determine whether Israel would still be guilty of apartheid if, for example, it reached a peace settlement that created a sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.

“It’s difficult to answer a question about the hypotheticals because you would have to look at the totality of circumstances,” Shakir said. “We don’t think through the policy lens.”

American Jews have a fraught history with the apartheid, dating back to its origins in South Africa. While Jews were overwhelmingly opposed to South African apartheid – in which roughly 5 million whites used a legal regime to dominate nearly 30 million Blacks and other racial groups – some shied away from the anti-apartheid movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s over concerns related to Israel.

Many activists leading the movement were upset that Israel had forged a close relationship with South Africa's white government, including offering to sell it nuclear weapons, and even at the time some compared Israel's rule over the Palestinians to apartheid, according to Marjorie Feld, author of "Nations Divided: American Jews and the Struggle Over Apartheid."

Feld said that while the analogy between Israel and apartheid South Africa has been made for decades, it is only in recent years that the claim seems to be penetrating within the Jewish community.

"I don't think it's a question anymore if people are going to start using the analogy more often," said Feld, who is on the advisory council of Jewish Voice for Peace. "It's broken through and it's here."

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Opinion

What did Whoopi do wrong? Let's break it down – and really talk about Jews and race

By Rishona Campbell

Before anything else, let me say that I have no intention of “canceling” Whoopi Goldberg. I think she adds an interesting perspective to ABC’s “The View.” That said, I definitely do not agree with everything she does or says, just as I don’t agree with most celebrities who opine on serious subjects in popular media.

Goldberg made a grave mistake in saying that the Holocaust was “not about race,” but rather about “man’s inhumanity to man.” The response from the Jewish community was quick. The ADL got involved and she has since been suspended from The View for two weeks.

There is so much to unpack here that it’s necessary to break it down into a few issues:

1. Whoopi’s comments demonstrate the destructiveness of “post-racialism”

I really believe that Goldberg spoke out of ignorance, not malice. The initial discussion was about a school district banning the graphic novel “Maus,” an action she disagreed with. She is not denying the Holocaust or how horrible it was. But to frame the Holocaust in vague terms like an injustice against humanity is an understatement at the very least. Just as American slavery was unmatched when looking at the instances of slavery throughout human history, the Holocaust stands out as being uniquely horrific in terms of genocides throughout human history, and that’s bearing to mind that none have ever been remotely acceptable.

Goldberg’s response rings the same as saying “all lives matter” when talking about Black Lives Matter, which is a common refrain of conservatives. Likewise, Goldberg seems to be coming at it from the conservative post-racialism argument that society focuses on race too much. People are people, they maintain – to which Goldberg adds “Except for Black

people,” who are still the primary victims of racism. To me, this is maddening to listen to because while race is a false construct, it still is very much used against all types of people and as a tool to fragment our society.

2. Does ignorance excuse appropriation?

I really don't know much about Goldberg's personal life, which is the same with so many celebrities we think we know. I was surprised to find out that at one time, she considered herself to be a Jew. Maybe she still does, and if so, that's fine. I am not in the business of saying who is Jewish and who is not. But if she does put herself out there as Jewish, then how could she be so ignorant about Jewish history? The Holocaust occurred mainly in Europe, where for centuries, Jews were positioned as outsiders. They were not just white people who happened to attend synagogues instead of churches. They were subject to very strict social limitations and worse for thousands of years.

Our media today do not give a platform to the most knowledgeable people, but instead to celebrities and people on the fringes and guaranteed to spark sensationalism. Yes, we have cancel culture and folks even get fired sometimes, like Roseanne Barr. But for the most part, our media reward sensationalism and the celebrities that grab people's attention. And I think Goldberg knows how to work for her paycheck.

Which makes you wonder: Is she as ignorant as she seems? Look back a few years and you find her defending Mel Gibson despite his very clear antisemitic actions. And before that, she stood by her man (at the time) Ted Danson when he pulled his blackface antics right in front of her. There seems to be a common thread here, that this is not a woman preoccupied with cultural sensitivity.

3. The thorny “Are Jews white?”

What is very frustrating to me as a Jewish Black American woman is in discussing antisemitism, there are different definitions of what a Jew is. Antisemitism, especially how it was perpetrated by the Nazis, was based on the falsehood that there is a Jewish race. And too many Jews also buy into that definition.

For example, a common battle cry put out by many Jews who are not of color is “Oh, I am not white, I am Jewish.” That's an interesting claim to make when there have been books published about Jewish assimilation and the transformation of American Jews into white Americans. In this regard, Goldberg did say something I agree with: That if the KKK is marching down the street and she is standing there next to a Jew (not of color), the Klan is

going to target her because how would they know that the Jew is a Jew?

Yair Rosenberg wrote a great article in the Atlantic, where he said the following:

“Goldberg is not an anti-Semite, but she was confused – and understandably so. In my experience, mistakes like hers often happen because well-meaning people have trouble fitting Jews into their usual boxes. They don’t know how to define Jews, and so they resort to their own frames of reference, like ‘race’ or ‘religion’ and project them onto the Jewish experience.”

If you look at American society, you cannot dismiss white Jews from being the beneficiaries of white privilege in this society. And if you propose that there is a Jewish phenotype of sorts – where you believe you can tell a Jew just by how they look, then you’ve effectively subscribed to the Nazi approach of defining who a Jew is. Why would someone do such a thing?

4. A continued lack of communication and understanding between Blacks and Jews

A discussion between Blacks and Jews from 1969 that has surfaced on Youtube recently that did not involve celebrities or those being deliberately provocative gives a fascinating view of how they saw racism and antisemitism. In it, they pretty much conclude that they knew very little about their respective unique experiences in American society.

I am struck by how little progress we’ve made in 50 years, with so many misconceptions and assumptions and unresolved anger and hurt. On average, do Jews and Blacks today live lives that intersect in any sort of meaningful way? If not, then the ignorance will continue. And Whoopi Goldberg will not be the last celebrity to brush off the role of the Holocaust on Jewish history.

Rishona Campbell is a Black and Jewish mom of three boys. She works in nonprofit finance and blogs from Harrisburg, Penn.

News

The downhill duo: Skiing siblings to represent Israel at Winter Olympics

By Louis Keene

There's a rivalry brewing between the two skiers competing for Israel in the Winter Olympics – a sibling rivalry.

Barnabás Szöllős and his sister Noa Szöllős, born in Hungary, raised in Austria and trained by their Hungarian-Israeli father, will hit the slopes next week wearing blue and white.

Both will compete in all five individual alpine skiing events, which includes downhill and slalom races. And while men and women compete separately, whoever places higher will certainly take home bragging rights – currently held by Noa, 18, who beat Barnabás' seventh place finish at the Youth Olympics by snagging bronze and silver medals in 2020.

“We can support each other and we will have the competition between each other,” Barnabás, 23, said in an interview. “Who is going to score the best result?”

Accompanying them to the Games is their father, whose grandmother was an Auschwitz survivor. Peter Szöllős made aliyah from Hungary in the early 1990s to race for Israel's national team, which he also coached from 1995 to 2004.

The kids inherited their father's Jewish identity – though Barnabás said the family did not practice Judaism growing up – and his passion for snowsports.

He put his three kids on skis virtually as soon as they could walk – there's a YouTube video of Noa's first time on skis as a two-year-old – and moved the family to Austria when they were still children so they could be closer to the slopes.

“He decided to make ski racers of all of us,” Barnabás said.

After Israel sent 90 athletes to the Tokyo Games last summer, its delegation this year is only six athletes – none of whom were born in the country. The other four Olympians became Israeli citizens through the country’s Law Of Return, which allows Jewish people of any nationality to immigrate; Barnabás and Noa inherited their father’s citizenship automatically. But they took the scenic route to compete for Israel.

The siblings Szöllős [pronounced zo-lush], who were born in Budapest, initially skied for Hungary. But after the national team director had a falling out with their father, Barnabás, Noa and their older brother Benjamin – who barely missed qualifying for Beijing – found their path to competition blocked. Israel offered them a way to keep competing at the top of the sport.

There is hardly a snowsports culture in Israel, a country with only two ski resorts [one of which relies on artificial snow]. Neither sibling has skied there. But both siblings felt indebted to Israel for giving them a chance their home country didn’t.

“I really hope I can make a lot of people proud with this, because I’m extremely proud to represent Israel,” Noa said. “And it’s a really nice feeling that even though we’re not that deeply connected, they’ve taken us in with such kind hearts.”

The siblings both enjoy hurtling downhill at speeds approaching 100 miles per hour. Barnabás’ favorite event is downhill – “it’s fast and fun and big jumps.” Noa’s is giant slalom.

“Making the perfect turn in giant slalom, I think there’s no better feeling in the world,” she said.

And at least over the phone, Noa is ebullient; Barnabás [who Noa calls “Barni”] more reserved. But both are confessed adrenaline junkies who listen to heavy metal to psych themselves up for the downhill plunge.

That’s where they diverge from their father, who Noa says sticks to jazz and soft rock. “He can’t drive with us,” Noa said.

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Opinion

My family's worst moment is captured in 'Maus.' Its ban gravely disappoints me

By Edo Steinberg

Have you ever discovered an incident from your own family's history in a famous work of art? I have.

As a child, my mother would tell me stories about our family's experiences during the Holocaust. Some of them had happened to her parents, Chaya and Mendel, who had fled to the Soviet Union after the Nazi invasion of Poland.

Most of the stories about our extended family were conveyed to my grandparents, uncles and mother for the first time in the late 1950s when my grandmother's sister Leah came to visit them in Israel. A survivor of Auschwitz, she had emigrated to France after the war.

The most horrifying story was about Chaya and Leah's first cousin Hela. On Sept. 1, 1939, the day Germany invaded Poland, she and her husband were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean on their way to New York's World's Fair. They had left behind a teenage son and a young daughter and were now powerless to help them.

Their son, Leon, survived Auschwitz and joined his parents in the United States after the war. Their daughter was not as fortunate: the aunt taking care of her and two other children, Hela's sister-in-law poisoned the kids and herself when it became clear that the Nazis were about to kill everyone.

For most of my life, I thought our family tragedy was only told among ourselves. In 2010, that all changed.

I had long planned to read "Maus," Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir about his family's Holocaust experiences as conveyed to him by his father, Vladek. I had already read Spiegelman's excellent "In the Shadow of No Towers," his personal account of 9/11, but

hadn't gotten around to reading his most famous work.

A wave of renewed press coverage in Israel due to the publication of a new Hebrew translation prompted me to pick up "The Complete Maus" in English and finally read it.

As I started the book, I noticed that Spiegelman's family was from Sosnowiec, my grandparents' hometown. I wondered if I would recognize any of the characters, but that seemed like a remote possibility, considering that Sosnowiec is not so small – before the war, approximately 30,000 Jews were living in the town of 150,000.

But on page 76, I encountered a familiar story: Vladek mentioned a woman named Hela who had traveled with her husband Herman to New York's World's Fair leaving behind a son and daughter, Lolek and Lonia.

Were my relatives featured in one of the world's most famous Holocaust books? The story was too specific to be about somebody else. Any lingering doubts disappeared about 35 pages later when the most tragic occurrence in my extended family's history – the poisoning – was depicted in cartoon form.

I emailed my parents, who were on a trip in the United States at the time. My mother immediately went out and bought a copy of "Maus" to read for herself. She also bought copies to bring as gifts when visiting American friends and family on my father's side, those who were not related to the characters.

It was a grim gift, yes, but a very personal one. My parents regularly visited Hela in Pennsylvania in the 1970s when they lived in New York. Hela also spoke fondly of her talented nephew, an illustrator – my parents even recalled seeing an illustration of an ant, captioned "to my favorite ant," hanging on the wall.

Until my email 10 years ago, my parents hadn't made the connection that the nephew was Art Spiegelman.

Finding literal family members in the stories described in famous memoirs is rare. However, I did grow up reading books and watching movies and television shows that told stories about families like mine. Depictions of the Holocaust reminded me of my mother's family. In "An American Tail," that other famous but less grim movie depicting Jews-as-mice, Fievel Mousekewitz immigrated to New York from Russia at about the same age as my paternal grandmother did.

What I wasn't exposed to enough as a child and teenager, however, were depictions of the hardships and traumatic experiences of families that weren't similar to my own. Growing up in Israel and the United States, I rarely read books written from the perspectives of other minorities in Western countries or watched movies made by nonwhite filmmakers from the global south about their lives.

I was not unique in that. And soon, many children will be even more cut off from one another's histories and traumas: unless they read it in their own free time, the children in McMinn County, Tennessee, will not be exposed to "Maus". The county's school board recently voted unanimously to ban "Maus" from the eighth grade curriculum, citing nudity and profanity.

With the growing backlash against the teaching of any uncomfortable facts about the historical and current treatment of people of color – often mislabeled as Critical Race Theory – "Maus" was bound to reach the chopping block eventually.

It's a shame. McMinn County is 92.5% white, according to the Census Bureau. It's a safe bet that its Jewish population is small, if it exists at all.

But the kids of McMinn should be exposed to Jewish stories. And Black stories. And Native American stories. And Asian stories. The goal is not to generate white Christian guilt but empathy, to humanize those whose religion, race and ethnicity are different from their own.

It's the same reason white Jews should be exposed to African American stories and vice versa.

Underrepresentation in media and literature means that people of color see members of the majority on screen, stage and page more often than they see themselves.

Let's read more of each other's stories, especially those told by the voices we don't hear enough. It will make us better people.

Edo Steinberg is a Ph.D. candidate at The Media School at Indiana University. His research focuses on satire in Israel and the United States.

Culture

He was ‘America’s greatest wit’ – so why doesn’t anyone remember this ace Jewish comedy writer?

By Michael Barrie

You know you’ve been around awhile when you can claim to have co-written a script with a guy born in the 19th century. Well, I have been and I did. The show was “Andy Williams Presents” and the writer’s name was Goodman Ace. Born in 1899, just under the wire, a year that also gave us Bogart, Cagney and Astaire. They don’t make years like that anymore.

In the summer of 1974, Jim Mulholland and I signed on as writers of a pilot for a weekly variety show hosted by Andy Williams. The producer, Bob Precht, was the son-in-law of Ed Sullivan, whose own weekly show had folded after 23 years. Precht now wanted to do the same show with a new host, though Sullivan’s body wasn’t even cold yet. (He was alive, but with Ed it was hard to tell.) The head writer of “Andy Williams Presents” was Goodman Ace.

Ace’s admirers included comedians Groucho Marx and Fred Allen, who called him “America’s greatest wit.” Their correspondence with Goody appears in the collected letters of both men: “Dear Groucho: I would have answered your letter sooner, but you didn’t send one.” In a Passover note to Groucho in 1951, Goody wrote that he was attending a seder “to which a nice lady invited us. She said they are going to ask the four kashos. So, I am asking the Five DeMarcos.”

We first met Goody at his midtown Manhattan office, a 1940s time-capsule, where he still wrote a column for Saturday Review. His elderly assistant, Manny – who Goody seemed to have brought along with him from the previous century – served coffee. Goodman Ace was 75 that summer, and not necessarily a young one. His vintage gray suit, with pallor to match, hung loosely on a boney frame. His posture was less than erect with a forward-leaning tilt. Though his circa 1970s hearing aid didn’t bode well for bandying jokes, we needn’t have worried. We asked if he’d worked with Andy before. He shifted the unlit cigar

stub around in his mouth and growled, “No, I only know Andy to say goodbye to him.”

Goodman Ace [Aiskowitz] began as a newspaperman in Kansas City, Missouri, where he married Jane Epstein, his high school sweetheart. Through happenstance, they ended up starring in their own radio show, “Easy Aces.” He wrote the scripts in which she was prone to malaprops --“You could have knocked me over with a fender!” -- and he mostly reacted.

The show ran from 1930 to 1945. Jane soon called it a career, and Goody went on to write for radio stars Ed Wynn, Jack Benny, Abbott and Costello, and Danny Kaye. Kaye wanted him so badly he let him produce his Los Angeles-based show from New York. As head writer for Milton Berle’s “Texaco Star Theater” and Perry Como’s variety show for 12 years, he was the highest-paid TV comedy writer of the era. At CBS, he trained future playwrights George Axelrod, Paddy Chayefsky and Neil Simon.

Any casual misuse of English drove Goody up a wall. His then-latest peeve: “I watched Alan King’s show the other night. Alan said, ‘Last night I had the most heart-rendering experience.’ I saw Alan’s manager, Harry Adler, at the Friars Club, and I said, ‘I watched Alan last night. He’s killing the English language. He said he had ‘the most heart-rendering experience.’ Harry said, ‘He did, I was there!’”

During that hot New York summer, Jane was in failing health and Goody had just bounced back from illness himself. The topic led him to share conversations he’d had with his doctor. “A humorless man,” he said, “Always hangs up on me.”

“Remember the flu shot you gave me yesterday? Well, now I’ve got the flu. My temperature is a hundred and two.”

“Orally?”

“You want it in writing??”

The doctor said to me, “You’re 20 pounds overweight.”

I said, “Not according to this scale. It says I’m the perfect weight for a man six-foot-nine-inches tall. You’ve got to do something about my height.”

These exchanges could have fit into one of his old radio shows. Maybe they had.

Goody took us to the Friars Club for lunch. He raved about his favorite TV shows then on the air: “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” – “so believable and hilarious;” “The Rockford Files,” starring James Garner, and “NBC Nightly News” with John Chancellor. Nothing else for him was worth watching. One day he got into a kerfuffle with the Friars’ maître d’ and vowed never to return. Despite the efforts of some to broker a truce, I don’t know that he ever did.

The writers, who included Tom Whedon, wrote Andy Williams’s intros for the various acts, as well as “spontaneous” patter between stars -- always the high point of any production. It was a relief to write jokes for Redd Foxx, the show’s one actual comedian. The lineup was a real Sullivan-style potpourri: magician Doug Henning, singer Olivia Newton-John, lunatic Evel Knievel, and from Russia, the Moiseyev Dancers. [Apologies to the show’s many acts I’ve left out.]

On September 7, 1974 “Andy Williams Presents” was presented. It was no Sullivan show. For starters, it lacked a host devoid of charisma. It did not go to series. Its only distinction now is that it was the final TV gig for the great Goodman Ace.

My memory of Goodman Ace was of a gracious, erudite man who was funny without seeming to try. He was never “on,” he was not a comedy know-it-all. It was never “my way or the West Side Highway.” The headline of his 1982 New York Times obituary called him a “humorist,” several rungs above “gagman.” Most of all, he was a writer.

By way of illustration:

Groucho told Goody his doctor said there were three things he could no longer do. He couldn’t smoke, he couldn’t drink, and he couldn’t f–k. Goody asked him if it would be all right if he quoted him in his Saturday Review column. Groucho said that it was all right with him, but he’d never get away with it. They bet one dollar. Here’s how Goody phrased it in the magazine: “Groucho told me there are three things the doctor told him he can no longer do: he can’t smoke and he can’t drink.”

Michael Barrie was a longtime writer for “The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson” and the “Late Show with David Letterman.” His work with Jim Mulholland won a Writers Guild Award.

Opinion

A poem for my son, Daniel Pearl, on the 20th anniversary of his death

By Judea Pearl

The following is a poem by Professor Judea Pearl, originally published on the 10th anniversary of his son Daniel Pearl's death. On February 1, 2002, the 38-year-old journalist was murdered by terrorists in Pakistan. The poem is reprinted here with permission.

Come walk the road to lions' den
South of midnight, planet earth, Karachi, Pakistan.
They called it "nursery," some named it "shed,"
A "compound," "shack," the newspaper said.
I found it in my father's holy book,
"The lions' den" – the caption read:

Come touch the walls on which two eyes
with thousand dreams wrote songs
and fiercest battles, ancient wars,
for seven days, went on.

Never in the field of human conflict
Has there been a clash so total
so intense in charge and aim
Between two cosmic forces
so compressed in space

So opposed in vision
so rooted in conviction
Across so close a distance
Before so many eyes.

Never stood a son of Abel
so fiercely to the face of Cain
A giver – to the teeth of claim,
A curious – to the blinds of self.
A listener – to the deafening shrieks of zeal.

Alone!

Never pierced a ray of light
so deeply to the core of darkness
Music, to estrangement,
Principles to whims
Reason, to the impulse

Mankind, to Attila, the Hun

Never was this saga chanted
in so powerful a rhyme:
“My name is Daniel Pearl,”
Softly spoken from the den,
Softly, from Karachi, Pakistan

And when Daniel was lifted from the den,
So the Bible tells us,
No wound was found on him,
Because he stood his ground
‘Cause he stood our ground
So the Bible tells us.



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