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WEEKEND READS
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Culture

‘What I felt at the time, I still do not understand’: A 17–year–old’s interview with a survivor

By Nathaniel Schmidt

Ruth Hass Meissner is my uncle’s mother. She is 94 and lives in Kiryat Tiv’on, a town near Haifa in the north of Israel. She is a Holocaust survivor – she spent three years in the Theresienstadt Ghetto, a concentration camp where some 33,000 Jews died and many more worked as slaves before being sent on to extermination elsewhere. She eventually became a nurse and moved to Israel.

Throughout my life – I am only 17 – I have been fascinated by the bits of Ruth’s story that she shared with me and my siblings during our summers visiting relatives in Israel. But with the number of Holocaust survivors like Ruth dwindling every day, I wanted to hear the full story, record it and write it down, and share it with as many people as possible.

Ruth’s diary has previously been published in Hebrew, and she has given interviews in Czech. But this is the first time her story will be documented in English. (I translated it from Hebrew, which is my first language – my parents are Israeli.)

We spoke at Ruth’s home, for about 100 minutes. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How would you describe your life prior to the Holocaust?

I had a normal life. Well actually my childhood was not that normal, as my mother passed away when I was 8 years old. I was born in Czechoslovakia. When I was 10 years old, we already had to leave home to run away from the Germans.

I came from a very rich family and we had a very nice home. My mother was very beautiful. She was red-headed and won a beauty contest when she was 18.

How did being Jewish impact your life at the time?

I grew up with two languages. At home, I spoke German because my mother didn't speak Czech and at school, I spoke Czech. The region I lived in was very mixed, as there were people who spoke German and people who spoke Czech. It's like here in Israel, you have people who speak Hebrew and people who speak Arabic.

But I asked my father once, are we Czech or are we German, and he told me that we are neither and that we are Jews. He told me to never forget that.

How did your home and school life really begin to change when the Nazis conquered Czechoslovakia?

We had to leave home. We got a yellow star to put on our clothes. They shut down our school and Jewish kids were no longer allowed to attend any school.

I was only 10. I was still a child. We lived as refugees. At this age, I still didn't understand.

I had a problem with wearing the yellow star, because I was blonde and had blue eyes, so everyone on the street would always stare at me. I did not look like a Jewish girl. I looked German, like the German girls in the Nazi posters. You know, the picture of the hideous ugly Jew that people had in their minds, I didn't fit that picture, so people would always stare at me.

When I was 13, one day, my father did not return home, and that was it. I didn't see him again. On Yom Kippur, they simply took him on the street....This was very very hard for me because he was the only person I had to take care of me, since my mother had already died, and my grandmother was very old and didn't really understand things anymore. She was only 80 years old, but at that time, that was like being 120 years old today.

Did you understand what had happened to your father?

I understood and did not understand. I understood what a child could understand at that time. It was clear that he wasn't there anymore. And it wasn't that much time anyway before they took us to the concentration camp. Around half a year after they took my father, they took me, my sister, and my grandmother to the Theresienstadt Ghetto.

Can you describe your experience being brought to the concentration camp?

I had no idea where I was going. We went because we had to go. People always ask why did we just go along when they told us to, but you have to understand that at this time we had nowhere else to go.

In this era, at every corner they asked for your papers. At every corner. This was a strong dictatorship. We were not free people. It's hard to explain this to people who grew up in the ways you grew up. And we had to go everywhere with the yellow Star of David.

Also, the culture was to obey. If you were told to do something, you would do it. It's not like today. You don't always accept everything you are told, right? We were not taught that way. And I raised my children very differently from the way I was raised.

Anyway, we were gathered inside this large area that was surrounded by these massive walls and a few bridges. No one could leave. There were huge military buildings and they put us where the horses used to be kept. They separated the men and women. For half a year, I was in this, what was like a prison.

I met this one girl, who currently lives in the U.S., her name is Lexi. I was 13 at the time, she was 15. We became good friends. I had no one else and she had no one else left, too.

Can you describe your daily life there?

So we were in this crowded area with bunk beds. It was very very cold. There was no heating and we each had one blanket. We didn't have proper clothes and when our shoes became too small for us, we had to cut off the front.

This is very difficult to explain because what I felt at the time, I still do not understand. I always say that people should not have to go through everything they are physically capable of going through. Because it is practically unlimited what people can go through in order to survive.

The conditions were really horrible. We had to work long hours outside, in the cold and in the snow. We worked really hard from the morning to the evening. Every day in the morning, the SS with their dogs, took us to the fields and we grew food for the German army. This is what I did for three years.

We barely got any food. For three days, we got three slices of bread, a piece of margarine, and sometimes a little bit of jam, but this was only sometimes. In the morning, we got what they said was coffee, but it was really just black water. But it was hot, so it was good. For

lunch, we got soup. We always looked at it and thought about what was in it. If we were lucky, we would find vegetable peels inside. But ultimately, we were so hungry that we ate whatever they gave us.

You really can't explain what it is like to be really hungry. For dinner, it was, again, what they called coffee and a piece of bread. The truth is we were hungry all the time. They gave us just enough calories for us not to die. Just enough to keep us alive. This is how it was for three years.

We grew vegetables, so we tried to take some when we could. There was very tight patrol around us at all times with the SS soldiers and their dogs, but we always succeeded, because when you are really hungry, you can succeed. We were very creative with how we would steal and how we would hide it.

It's funny, my son used to come home from school and say he was hungry, and when I would offer him something, he would say he doesn't feel like it. So I said, so you are not really hungry, because when you are hungry, you will eat anything.

What are your darkest memories from the Holocaust?

The fear. We didn't understand what was happening. We were in this place that people were brought in and out of, and we had no phones or radios or any communications with the outside. The fear was because people constantly disappeared and people who tried to escape were hung. It is really a horrible thing. They would hang them and we would all have to watch.

The first time, I stood there and closed my eyes. I was so young, I was 14. So we were always scared.

The soldiers never had any problem. They would walk around with their dogs and rifles and if they didn't like someone, they would just shoot them without thinking twice. They knew how to put fear in us. And also they would always take people away and we didn't know where, but we knew it wasn't somewhere good.

I was also very sick there many times. Many people died, not because they were shot, but because of how sick they were. There were no medicines or anything. I remember also on the same carts that they would take all the dead people every day, they would bring in the bread. So I guess a normal person would not eat this bread, but we were so hungry.

There was also this one time when the Swedish Red Cross wanted to come to Theresienstadt to check on the Swedish Jews that were brought there, so the Germans had to change things to make it look nicer for the visit from the Swedish Red Cross. So they cleaned up certain parts of the concentration camp and built a pool and showers. It was all a show.

They made us put on these nice clothes and put on a show for this one day to show the Red Cross how good it is for Jews here. I remember they took me and other girls that were pretty and made us undress in the pool next to the soldiers and act as though we were enjoying ourselves. As soon as the Red Cross left, the pool and everything were all gone. Everything returned to what it was like before.

Where did you go after the war ended?

My older sister, who was four years older than me, came to me one morning and said to take everything I have, and that we are leaving. I didn't understand, really, but the Germans had been defeated and the war was over. The Russian army arrived at Theresienstadt and the gates were open. So I left with my sister and the only belonging I had, which was the diary I wrote.

We didn't have any money or any papers or anything. We were dressed in rags. The Russian soldiers took us on a truck and brought us to Prague. My sister remembered that we had an aunt in Prague. Apparently, we had a non-Jewish aunt who married my mother's brother and was German. So we found her and knocked on her door.

She was a small woman, and I never really liked her that much. She always gave us bread when we visited her and I used to think, you should give candies to kids, not bread. Anyway, we stood there and she didn't even recognize us at first because of how horrible we looked. She hadn't seen us for seven years. She brought us inside and told us to take showers. She burned our clothes in the oven and gave us new clothes to wear. She gave us food as well and beds to sleep on.

That night, I got in bed and it felt so weird because I was used to sleeping on hard wood for all these years. It was weird, because all of a sudden I was 17 years old and I had no idea what normal life was like.

The other thing that was really hard for me was that my sister reunited with her boyfriend, who was sent to Auschwitz and survived, and she completely forgot about me and left with him. So I was left alone in this big city, and I had to decide what I was going to do.

I wanted to be a doctor, but I knew this would be too difficult because I had barely spent any years in school. So I went to a university in Prague and told them I wanted to be a nurse. They gave me some kind of a test and somehow I answered correctly on everything and they accepted me. And this way, I started to learn. And when I finished learning, I went to Israel.

How did your experience in the Holocaust influence your faith in God and devotion to Judaism?

I lost my faith in God on the evening of Yom Kippur when they took my father. I didn't stop being Jewish, I will always be Jewish, but that was it for my belief in God.

Do you feel safer and more at ease living in Israel, a Jewish country?

I don't know that I feel safer, but I feel that I am at home. I feel that I belong. No other place in the world, and I have lived in many places, felt like home. I have always felt like an outsider. Only in Israel, do I feel like I am at home.

Nathaniel Schmidt lives in New York and is a senior at the Clinton School, where he is a member of the Jewish Student Union and co-president of the Sports Philosophy and Analysis Club. He is planning to attend American University in Washington, D.C., this fall.

Culture

"A Bintel Brief": I think my friend is a Holocaust denier. Do I have to intervene?

By Ginna Green and Lynn Harris

Dear Bintel,

This question has been on my mind for a long time. I have a friend of over 60 years — an Orthodox Christian. Growing up, we were inseparable, sharing many life events and adventures. We think similarly about many issues.

Years ago, my friend made a statement that shocked me. She radically downplayed the number of Jewish Holocaust victims and went on about other holocausts, which I agreed regrettably exist. She wondered why people in the Middle East don't just follow Gandhi's example. She never says "Israel," instead referring to the area as "The Holy Lands."

Recently, I expressed sadness at the steep rise of antisemitic incidents in this country. She replied that Jews are not the only ones who are persecuted. I said I recognize that other marginalized groups suffer hatred as well. We soon went on to another subject.

Years ago, I started to challenge her numbers, but stopped myself and didn't broach the sensitive topic again. I felt, as I do now, that the attempt would evolve into something negative that would hang over our heads or even pose a threat to our friendship. I had a bad feeling about going forward — that the dark cloud would intensify. Is my friend a Holocaust denier, or a numbers denier? (Are the terms equivalent? To me, the answer is yes.)

I felt bereft long ago and I'm still lacking a good solution. The easiest option is to drop it and avoid it at all costs. We live in different cities. Haven't seen each other for years. We have generally delightful talks about every few months. What are my other options?

D for Denial

Dear D for Denial,

Let's start with the "easy" part. That's the part where you ask how to classify your friend's behavior. What your friend is doing is called Holocaust distortion.

Holocaust distortion is intentional efforts to minimize or excuse the impact of the Holocaust: minimizing the number of Jewish victims, attempting to blame the Jews for causing their own genocide, casting the Holocaust as a positive event, or even blurring responsibility for the death camps by spreading the blame to other nations or groups.

Holocaust distortion is scary because it can be a sort of "wolf in sheep's clothing" form of antisemitism. When you minimize, you make something more palatable.

The language your friend is using sounds thoughtful: let's not forget that other groups have experienced cataclysm like this. But that is even more dangerous because it sounds less horrifying. Someone hearing that might not immediately respond the way they would to someone who sounds completely off the rails.

Moreover, we do not need to play Oppression Olympics. We all know that the experiences of Black people, Indigenous people, Latinx people, Asian people, Muslim people – any marginalized group – can be really disturbing in this country. We don't need to hand out a gold medal for suffering, and the suffering of any one group doesn't undermine or erase the oppression of another.

So your other question is, how are you going to respond?

In Deuteronomy, we read about an expectation of not looking away from something that you see is wrong. This means not pretending you didn't see it, or, as Rashi describes, not subduing your eyes.

There may be a cost to not looking away. Speaking up will often not be pleasant or comfortable. You may lose the friendship. But we think you already know that you can't let her words go. You wrote to us because you wanted encouragement to do the thing you already know you need to do.

So when we're educating people, how do we responsibly draw the connections that are appropriate, that actually illuminate the tragedy of the Holocaust and help connect people to it?

Boaz Dvir, founder and director of the Holocaust Education Initiative, says the best way to educate adults is through storytelling. We talk to him on the podcast, and he says that if you confront someone with the facts, you tend to go nowhere.

At best, they dismiss them or offer their own alternative facts. At worst, you encounter the backfiring effect, where the more convincing you become, the more you are triggering the fight or flight response in the other person, which leads your conversation partner to actually get entrenched in their belief. You're strengthening their position.

So to avoid that, Dvir recommends telling a story from your own life, maybe around an experience of antisemitism, Holocaust education or your experience as a Jewish person. Try to frame it so it feels like a story and not an attack. Talk about how that experience influenced your identity and your trajectory as a person.

Go in with no expectations and no judgment. Tell a story and see what comes out of it. Good luck!

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News

30 years after L.A. burned, two Latino Jewish immigrants bring hope to ground zero

By Rob Eshman

Near the corner of Vermont and Manchester avenues, someone created a huge mural consisting of a single word: “HOPES.”

It’s been there for a while, and Michelle Clark, who lives nearby, sees it as a cruel joke.

“Look around,” said Clark, 59, who was pushing a shopping cart full of recyclables. “It’s more like ‘The Walking Dead’ out here.”

Clark was born and raised on 92nd Street, a few blocks away. She said when her parents moved from Little Rock, Arkansas, to L.A., the area was nice and safe, full of mom-and-pop stores that eventually were joined by shopping centers and bigger retailers, like Payless shoes.

She was in the neighborhood when civil unrest broke out following the April 29, 1992, verdict by a Simi Valley jury not to convict any Los Angeles Police Department officers for the beating of a Black man, Rodney King.

“Everything burned,” she said. “We had nothing after the riots.”

That was 30 years ago Friday, and from where we were standing it was hard to see signs of improvement. The area has L.A.’s highest violent crime rate. Last September, Clark’s 36-year-old nephew, James Lee Clark, was shot and killed while sitting in his wheelchair a few blocks away. Even the Payless sign above the lot where the burned and razed shopping center once stood remains blackened by fire.

But there was one sign of hope, literally: two banners announced the imminent construction of the $76 million Evermont development, which will have 180 units of

affordable housing, grocery and retail stores, a school, a transit plaza, and a mass transit training facility.

The developer is Primestor, a company that focuses on large projects in underserved and minority areas.

“Our activism takes shape in real estate,” Primestor co-founder Arturo Sneider, 53, told Hispanic Executive magazine, “because we think that we can create, in the built environment, a very tangible, distinct, positive change – and in some small way, make people’s lives better.”

Sneider and co-founder Leandro Tyberg, 50, are Jewish immigrants who are reshaping the city’s most troubled neighborhoods even as they reshape the narrative of ethnic relationships in L.A.

Jewish shopkeepers had left South Central L.A. long before the 1992 civil unrest that left 63 people dead, 2,383 injured, and caused more than $1 billion in property damage. Jews worked with Blacks, Latinos and Asians in occasional political coalitions and interfaith groups, but in a city that had become increasingly segregated by race and income, there was less and less meaningful interaction.

In the aftermath of the unrest, the Jewish community, well-organized and well-resourced, took a lead role in reconciliation and rebuilding. The late Rabbi Harvey Fields joined Black church leaders to organize “Hands Across L.A.,” which brought together 15,000 people of all backgrounds to show solidarity by standing along a 10-mile stretch of Western Avenue.

But those efforts faded over time. As Steven Windmueller, a former head of the Jewish Community Relations Council, wrote at the 25th anniversary: “A period when Jewish community leaders served as ‘connectors’ to other civic groups and individuals has ended, and with it, valuable personal relationships and organizational connections.”

Now come Tyberg and Sneider, who see their development method, which draws on community feedback and emphasizes local employment, as a way to create connections, trust and progress among L.A.’s diverse communities.

Sneider immigrated in 1986 from Mexico City. Working as a dishwasher with other Mexican immigrants, he saw that many of their struggles arose from a lack of opportunities and services. Primestor, which he and Tyberg founded in 1992, now operates in four states and is worth more than $750 million.

Tyberg, who immigrated to L.A. with his parents from Argentina in 1977 and grew up attending Stephen S. Wise Temple, said in a 2017 interview that Primestor's biggest challenge was getting bankers, lenders and retailers to see minority neighborhoods as vibrant and promising.

"Don't think this was an easy journey that anyone could have pulled off," he said. "We felt like we were trying to break down barriers of perception, to educate partners about the real power of our inner cities. Not many listened."

But people are listening now. Perhaps a new generation of Jewish leaders will emulate Sneider and Tyborg, putting their money and feet on the ground in communities that, 30 years later, could still use hope.

I showed the sign announcing Evermont to Michelle Clark, who hadn't heard of the planned development.

"Well," she said, "It's about time."

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News

Memoir recounts sex abuse at Jewish summer camp

By Arno Rosenfeld

A new book alleges that several major Jewish institutions, including the UJA-Federation of New York, failed to protect children against a prominent employee who abused them in the 1960s and 1970s.

Stephen Mills writes that he was abused by the director of Camp Ella Fohs in Connecticut beginning in 1968, when he was 13-years-old. Mills recounts that Dan Farinella, the director and a social worker at a local high school, performed oral sex on him repeatedly over the course of two years. Farinella died in 1993.

“We’ve got four respected, Jewish social service agencies that over at least 26 years employed a serial child predator,” Mills said in an interview. “How did that happen?”

Farinella left Camp Ella Fohs to lead a Berkshires camp in 1971, before being hired by Jewish Council for Youth Services in 1972 to run Camp Henry Horner. Ten years later, he was hired to run youth programming for the Pittsburgh JCC, as well as their summer camp in West Virginia, according to Mills’ account in the book, “Chosen: A Memoir of a Stolen Boyhood,” which Macmillan published on Tuesday.

The book is a searing, personal account of an issue that Jewish institutions have been grappling with in recent years, with several organizations opening sexual misconduct investigations and victims exposing prominent leaders as predators. Mills said he hopes that groups working with children will adopt the kind of best practices that can reduce and eliminate abuse.

“Until they are compelled to face this chapter of recent history, conduct thorough investigations, and apply the lessons learned, they will be ill-equipped to safeguard the children in their care,” Mills, 66, writes in the book.

Mills said that he reported Farinella to Pittsburgh law enforcement in 1986 but the case

stalled and Farinella was allowed to resign from his post at the JCC. He ran a restaurant in Pittsburgh until his death.

Mills took advantage of a temporary extension of New York State's statute of limitations on sex crimes to sue UJA-Federation and the YM/YWHA of the Bronx, which ran Camp Ella Fohs, last June. The federation has denied most of Mills' allegations in court filing for the case, which is ongoing, but did not respond to a request for comment.

The Riverdale Y, formerly known as the YM/YWHA of the Bronx, did not respond to a request for comment about the lawsuit.

Calling out abuse

The revelations featured in the book come amid a reckoning in several Jewish institutions over how they handle both sexual harassment and abuse. The Union for Reform Judaism released a report on sexual misconduct within its camp program in February, and the Conservative movement began an investigation into its youth program last year. The Orthodox world has also been rocked by sex abuse scandals in recent years, including the case of Chaim Walder, a children's book author who killed himself in December after allegations that he abused several teenage girls.

But despite alarming revelations, the Jewish community has so far been spared the kind of major scandals that have engulfed the Catholic Church and secular youth organizations like the Boy Scouts, where evidence emerged demonstrating that leaders systematically covered up child sex abuse for decades.

Still, Mills cautions that his experience should serve as a warning that Jewish institutions may not be immune from some of the same forces that shielded predators in other communities.

"I don't believe anyone can read my book and come away feeling like you know we Jews have got this covered," Mills said. "At a minimum, you have to say, 'What the hell happened here?'"

The URJ report found 17 incidents of sexual misconduct by adults against children across its 15 summer camps since the 1970s, and many of the most egregious violations detailed in the document occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, although critics have assailed the investigation as incomplete. The Conservative movement launched its own investigation last year after three adults who participated in United Synagogue Youth programming as

teenagers filed lawsuits alleging that Ed Ward, a USY divisional director, had abused them. Ward did not respond to a request for comment from the Times of Israel last year.

A child's nightmare

Mills writes that Farinella repeatedly took him on trips to the Ella Fohs property when camp was not in session, and also brought him on his own family vacations, brought him pornography and repeatedly performed oral sex on Mills.

"He trapped me," Mills recalled telling his therapist. "Then he tore my heart out."

Farinella went on to run a camp in western Massachusetts called Wim-o-Weh before taking a job overseeing Camp Henry Horner for the Jewish Council for Youth Services in Chicago. The JCYS sold the camp to another Jewish group in 2019. After leaving Camp Horner in 1982, Farinella took over the Jewish Community Center of Pittsburgh's Camp Emma Kauffmann in West Virginia, and ran youth programming in the city.

The JCC of Greater Pittsburgh did not respond to a request for comment about Farinella.

In a statement to the Forward, Barbara Haworth, chief of the Jewish Council for Youth Services, called the allegations in Chosen "deeply troubling" and said they "include many assertions that we are learning of now for the first time."

"There have been no substantiated allegations of misconduct by Mr. Farinella of which JCYS is aware," Haworth said, noting that records from the period were limited. "JCYS continues to review and take steps to do everything possible to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children in our care."

Mills began tracking down other victims of Farinella and after striking out reporting the abuse to state agencies, contacted the FBI, which opened an investigation in 1986. The case stalled after the JCC agreed to push Farinella out.

Mills, a nonprofit consultant, began work on the book in the late 1980s but said he was unable to make much progress until recently. He previously coauthored a nonprofit book about chimpanzees with scientist Roger Fouts.

He said he hopes that the memoir serves as a wake-up call for the Jewish community to become more serious about detecting and combatting child sex abuse.

“I more than anything hope that it will help focus the Jewish community on this problem so that we can do better going forward at protecting our kids,” Mills said.

Chosen was released by Henry Holt and Company, a major New York publisher owned by Macmillan. Junot Diaz, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist who has written about being raped when he was 8-years-old, called Mills’ memoir “a work of shattering, almost unbearable radiance.”

“This is a book that will save lives,” Diaz said in a quote featured on the cover.

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Culture

Why Audrey Gelman's pastoral fantasy doesn't make sense for Jews

By Irene Katz Connelly

Almost two years after stepping down as CEO of The Wing, a women's coworking space accused of mistreating staffers of color, Audrey Gelman has resurfaced with a cottagecore "country store" in one of Brooklyn's most bucolic precincts – Cobble Hill.

Tucked behind a quietly trendy green storefront, The Six Bells sells a legitimately appealing selection of household goods many of us thought we'd learn to make during quarantine: embroidered gingham napkins, earth-tone taper candles, ruffled throw pillows. On the store's artistically weathered shelves, floral dinner plates and marble rolling pins share space with vintage cookbooks and tea tins. When I visited, only one other shopper was browsing, maybe because it was a gray weekday afternoon, or maybe because a terracotta planter can set you back as much as $115. I humiliated myself by asking the very kind store manager whether plates cost $45 each or as a set. (You know the answer.)

So far, so not-that-different from the average Cobble Hill fare: after leaving The Six Bells, I wandered into a boutique down the block and tried out some $52 "hand serum." (Regrettably, my hands remain just as dry and plebian as ever.) What differentiates The Six Bells from its competitors is its very unique origin story.

One wall of the store features eight portraits of "townspeople" from Barrow's Green, a fictional English village of Gelman's creation from which The Six Bells "takes its inspiration." Once across the store's threshold, shoppers are meant to forget the brownstones and bistros of Cobble Hill and find themselves in "a little world far away." Barrow's Green, the store's website explains, is "a small civil parish with 640 residents." Online, you can find an interactive map of the town with descriptions of such spots as the courthouse, the village green, stately homes named Raven Hall and Cranbrook Manor and – wait for it – a synagogue.

Yes, uncharacteristic as it seems, this olde towne houses a veritable cadre of Jews. The map states that 14 families attend services, and one of the eight featured townspeople is Rabbi Haskel Frumkin. The learned rabbi's biography states that he enjoys watching cricket and "often joins with the town's Vicar for interdenominational services."

Little demographic information exists for Barrow's Green, but from the available numbers we can conclude the Jewish community there is unusually robust. If 14 families go to synagogue, and the average British household is 2.4 people, then there are 33.6 individual Jews living in Barrow's Green, or 5.25% of the population of 640 people. Considering that as of 2016, Jews made up about .5% of the overall British population, that's a lot of chosen people for one little village.

As a former English major, I've spent plenty of time imaginatively wandering various fictional villages of that sceptered isle. I well understand the appeal of staring through mullioned windows onto the mossy heath, or serving high tea on bespoke dinnerware. And yet, it's difficult to imagine such a village welcoming a disproportionately large Jewish community.

After the aforementioned medieval expulsion, it was a few centuries before Jews were readmitted to Britain in 1656. For some time after, Jews [along with Catholics] were prohibited from holding public office – so, no jobs at the courthouse or post office for the Jews of Barrow's Green. The Six Bells website doesn't specify when Rabbi Frumkin and his compatriots are living. But based on the style of dress in their portraits, I'd guess we find them sometime in the interwar period. You know, that fun time when a literal English monarch traveled to Germany in support of Hitler and a pedigreed aristocrat founded a Nazi-style paramilitary gang.

It's understandable that Gelman would want to see Jews in Barrow's Green. If you're creating a fictional utopia, why wouldn't you carve out a place for your own ancestors? But looking for modern multiculturalism in a bucolic past is often fruitless – and not just for Jews. The National Trust, a prominent British conservation charity that owns and maintains hundreds of historic estates [the real life Cranbrook Manors], announced in 2020 that a third of its properties have ties to slavery or colonialism. Curators are just beginning to redesign tours of these beloved estates to reflect that legacy.

I thought of those houses as I examined a $38 set of measuring spoons, whose gold paint already seemed to be wearing off, revealing the dull nickel underneath. Pastorals, American or British, are often defined less by their inhabitants than by the people they exclude. When we scratch the surface, the past is often more sordid than we care to admit.

News

When this Cub walks up to the plate, 'Thank You Hashem' blasts across Wrigley Field

By Louis Keene

When Rafael Ortega stepped up to the plate for the Chicago Cubs on Sunday, a few Jewish fans at Wrigley Field couldn't believe their ears: the music Ortega had chosen to cue his at-bat was "Thank You Hashem," a song by a Haredi Orthodox recording artist that has become a staple at frum celebrations.

As video of the tune being played for a crowd of 40,000 spread on Twitter, people wondering whether the Venezuelan outfielder is Jewish found plenty of intrigue on his Instagram page.

In September, Ortega posted a picture of his children holding toy lulav-and-etrog kits alongside a banner proclaiming Happy Sukkot. He appended a hashtag proclaiming #BarujHashem – meaning Praise God – as he does in all of his posts. (Hashem is a Hebrew name used for God in non-prayer Jewish contexts.)

And the most recent post by Ortega's wife is a photo of matzo, a Spanish-translated chumash (Torah book) and Kedem grape juice!

Open-and-shut case, right? Not so fast.

A closer examination of the Ortegas' posts reveals that they embrace many of the tenets of Messianic Judaism, a religious movement that incorporates elements of Jewish practice into evangelical Christianity.

Messianic Jews believe that Jesus is the messiah, so they are generally not considered Jewish by other Jews. The most famous constituent Messianic Jewish group is the "Jews for Jesus" movement, which has been shunned by mainstream Judaism because it overtly tries to convert Jews to Christianity.

But because they celebrate Jewish holidays, refer to the Torah and even wear Jewish ritual garments like tzitzit (which Ortega is seen wearing in his Sukkot post), Messianic Jews can look Jewish – and when "Thank You Hashem" plays as Ortega takes his final practice swings, they can sound Jewish, too.

The giveaways in Ortega's case are his references to "Yahweh" – the name Messianic Jews use for God – and, if you look hard enough, "Yeshua," which is what they call Jesus.

Whether or not he was familiar with Ortega's religious background, Yosef "Joey" Newcomb, the payyos-wearing singer who released "Thank You Hashem" as a single in 2019, seemed to appreciate the spirit in which the left-handed journeyman used it. Newcomb posted the video to his Instagram story Sunday afternoon with the comment, "Keep thanking Hashem!!!"

Ortega reposted Newcomb's story with a response: "Always."

Ortega did not reply to a message on Instagram sent Sunday night. The Forward reached out to Newcomb for comment Monday afternoon.

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