Weekend Reads

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Forward

First Person

Why I bought a headstone for a Holocaust survivor I never knew

By Stuart Rojstaczer

I asked the monument salesman how long the letters on the gravestone would last. “They’re guaranteed for 900 years,” I recall him saying. “If the letters start to fade after 450, get back to me. We’ll work something out.”

Maybe the guy joked with his customers all the time. Or maybe the tone was because he knew I was buying a gravestone for a man I didn’t really know.

The dead man’s name was Josef Hamerman.

He’d been gone for decades, since 1986. His grave was unmarked. I only knew of Hamerman because my mother had tried to get a collection started for a gravestone back in 1999, when she was dying of pancreatic cancer and trying to tie up loose ends.

Hamerman, like my mother, was a Holocaust survivor who lived in Milwaukee. He probably had been with us at the survivor Sunday summer picnics in Lake Park. Mom was 70 in 1999 when she started calling the old gang to try and rustle up $2,000 for a monument to mark the grave.

“I’ll give $300,” I remember her saying on the phone. “You give whatever you want. Joe Hamerman was one of us. I don’t care what he did. It’s not right that he doesn’t have a stone.”

My mother, born Rachela Erlich in Poland, survived the wrath of Hitler and Stalin as a child. She married the love of her life, and ran a construction business in an era when no women ran construction businesses. But her effort to get a stone for Joe Hamerman came up empty.

‘He was no good’

“I won’t give a penny,” one person said. “He was no good,” responded another. “He deserves what he got.”

After a half-dozen calls, my mom was crushed.

Who is Joe Hamerman? I asked. He was a greener, she explained, adding that he had helped my grandfather in Germany after the war.

Greener is Yiddish, and literally means “green ones.” It’s a term for any neophyte, and in this case meant people fresh off the boat like my parents and their friends. Helping my grandfather probably meant that he helped my mother’s father, Frank — Fajwel in Polish or Yiddish — run guns for the Haganah from Czechoslovakia to Italy.

Maybe he drove a truck; my grandfather was a terrible driver.

“He married a Jewish girl here, an American,” mom said. There was a negative assessment in her tone. The most consistent insult and admonishment my parents ever threw my way was that I was “thinking like an American.”

“Then he went crazy, divorced her, and married a Krist,” mom continued, using the Yiddish for Christian. When Hamerman died, she said his Christian wife stiffed the funeral home, and moved to Florida with her husband’s money.

Was it a lot of money? I asked.

Hardly any, she said. But it should have been enough to pay for a funeral.

‘We’ll split the cost’

My mother died six months later. We buried her next to my father beneath a shared stone of red granite.

I didn’t hear the name Hamerman again until January 2022, when mom’s kid brother, Josef Erlich, called from Milwaukee. Uncle Joe was born in Tomaszów Lubelski, Poland, in 1938, and understood that his survival during the war was miraculous. Growing up, I sensed he was convinced God had done everything possible to kill him as an infant, given up in exasperation, and would never touch him again.

But when Joe called in 2022, he’d just gotten over a horrible bout of COVID and, for the first time, was talking about his eventual demise. Then he blurted: “We need to get a stone for Joe Hamerman.”

It took me about two seconds to remember the name. Did he realize mom had tried to get a stone for Hamerman 23 years before?

He did not.

“She tried to get a collection going from the greener,” I told him.

“Those schnorrers?” he snorted. “She didn’t get anything, did she?”

She did not.

“I know what they said. ‘A shlekhter, farhayrat mit a Krist. Im? Fardinen gurnisht.’ Am I right?” My uncle did, indeed, know his people well.

This was our usual way of speaking. We are the last of the Milwaukee Yinglish speakers — or, as my uncle says not infrequently, “the last of the Mohicans.” What he’d imagined the old gang saying was that Hamerman was a lazy, untrustworthy ne’er do well who married a Christian and didn’t deserve anything.

Now that he knew my mom had wanted to get Hamerman a stone, he was all in. “You and me,” Uncle Joe declared. “We’ll split the cost.” My uncle was a businessman through and through, someone who had turned his father’s junkyard into a large metal recycling facility. He knew how to cut a deal.

Two weeks later, a UPS envelope arrived at my home in Palo Alto, California, containing 100 $20 bills. I was in for another $2,000 — if the stone cost less than $4,000, he told me, give the extra to charity.

It was my job to procure the stone as well. First, though, I had to find out where Josef Hamerman was buried.

The geller and the greener

In the six years after World War II ended in 1945, a few hundred Holocaust survivors settled in Milwaukee. They formed a community on the city's West Side that had four Orthodox synagogues, three kosher butchers, a place to procure Shabbat candles or a bar mitzvah tallit, a Jewish nursery school and a Jewish burial society.

That's where I was born, in 1956. For what it's worth, Gene Wilder grew up in the same neighborhood and his father, a Russian Jew who emigrated long before the war, still lived there when I was a kid. Most people I knew spoke a rapid-fire mix of English and Yiddish, frequently peppered with Polish, Russian and Hebrew.

If you didn't speak two or three of those languages, you'd often and intentionally be left out and lost. I had two-and-a-half: English, Yiddish, and a childlike Polish. As time went along, I picked up a bunch of Hebrew.

The established community of Jews in Milwaukee shunned newcomers like my folks, fearful that their old-world ways and heavy accents would somehow harm their own efforts at assimilation. We called the already-settled Jews der geller, the yellow ones — they were like ripe bananas. My parents and their friends were proudly der greener, the green bananas.

My uncle is one of the few Milwaukee survivors alive today. Almost all of them are buried in Beth Hamedrosh Hagodel Cemetery, which is more or less across the Interstate from the city's Major League Baseball stadium.

I visit the cemetery every time I'm in Milwaukee. My parents and grandparents are there. All the parents of my childhood are there, and also my childhood rabbi, Jacob Twerski. I try not to go during rush hour. Between the boom-boom from the strip club next door and the cars whizzing by, it can be hard to think clearly.

Finding the unmarked grave

I called the director of that cemetery and asked: Is Josef Hamerman buried there in an unmarked grave?

He paused to look through a list of names on his computer. No, came the answer.

I wasn't going to give up that easily. How many people have unmarked graves? I asked.

Thirteen, he said.

I asked him to read me their names. The cemetery man was an agreeable sort, and apparently not in any rush. One of the names was Joseph Hamilton. Hold on, I said, thinking: What kind of Orthodox Jew has "Hamilton" as a last name?

When was Joseph Hamilton born? I asked.

He did not know.

When did he die? 1986.

It had to be my guy.

A hustler and a lost soul

Twenty years ago, maybe even 10, proving that Joseph Hamilton and Josef Hamerman were one and the same person would have taken a lot of work and might have been impossible. But today, everybody seems to

have at least one relative interested in genealogy who has posted information online. I typed “Josef Hamerman” and “Joseph Hamilton” into a search engine and a link to a family tree came up instantly. Its creator was Hamerman’s ex-wife’s nephew.

I emailed the ex-nephew and asked if his Josef Hamerman and Joseph Hamilton were actually one person — and if Josef/Joseph Hamerman/Hamilton was a Holocaust survivor who had lived in Milwaukee. He emailed back that same day: Yes.

Apparently Hamerman had married and divorced his first wife twice. The first wedding was in Milwaukee in 1951, the second in the Chicago suburbs in 1957. (The divorces were in 1956 and 1966.) I couldn’t find records for when and where he married his second wife; by then he’d changed his name, and there are too many Joe Hamiltons in the world.

The ex-nephew sent a group photo from a family wedding in which Hamerman, short and in a dark suit, looked like a pudgy version of the Hungarian-American actor Peter Lorre, who himself fled Europe when Hitler came to power.

I called my uncle and asked what he remembered. Apparently Hamerman used to come to dinner at the family’s apartment. “Your grandpa took him in,” Uncle Joe said, “thought he was a lost soul.”

This I found interesting. My grandmother was the worst cook in the world. My zayde had taught me how to surreptitiously toss the food she cooked for dinner — he would often come to our house to make up for missing calories. Hamerman must have been awfully lonely to sacrifice his taste buds in exchange for company.

Uncle Joe also remembered that Hamerman had bought a popular restaurant near the apartment at 13th and Cherry. “He ran it into the ground,” Uncle Joe said.

I asked the ex-nephew for more information and to see if any other relatives of Hamerman would talk to me. A month later, another relative of the ex-wife sent this via the ex-nephew, asking to remain anonymous: “Joe was a hustler and did any job that he could get. He tried and usually failed at many business opportunities, including the restaurant.”

This had to be the guy with the unmarked grave.

Plucked from the fire

My uncle wanted to get Hamerman a fancy tombstone, with an etching of Josef’s face. But that sounded expensive, and the one photograph I had was of poor quality. It also seemed altogether too Russian. I had learned that Josef was born in Boryslaw, Ukraine, in 1926. Back then, Boryslaw was part of the Polish Second Republic. Like my mother, who was born three years later, Hamerman had probably grown up speaking Polish; my mother didn’t learn Yiddish until she and her family were shipped off to a Soviet gulag in 1941. Josef was a Polish Jew. He needed a Polish Jewish style monument like the ones my family had. Simple, made of red granite.

I went online and dug up more information. Hamerman had changed his surname to Hamilton in 1955, according to a Los Angeles U.S. District Court document; no reason was given. I wanted to put his

father's name on the stone, and found it by asking someone in Milwaukee's City Clerk office to look up Hamerman's first wedding certificate from 1951. Yitzhak.

My uncle wanted the monument to say that Hamerman was a Holocaust survivor, which I thought was odd because none of the gravestones for our family had such information. I consulted the son of my childhood rabbi, Michael Twerski, who is also a rabbi. He suggested a biblical phrase, from Zechariah, "Ud mutzal me'eish," which translates to a "brand plucked from the fire."

I liked that. I'd seen the same phrase on a tombstone of one of my parents' friends. Like every other tombstone of the greener, the only English words would be his name. But which name?

Did you ever hear him use the name Joseph Hamilton, I asked my uncle.

He had not.

We went with Joseph Hamerman: the Americanized spelling of his first name and his original, immigrant surname.

'These Americans think like babies'

I'd gone down the internet rabbit hole to read the memorial book of Boryslaw. It included personal narratives from the ghetto where Hamerman lived after the Germans invaded Russia in 1941.

Boryslaw's Holocaust story was similar to the one I knew well from Volodymyr-Volynsky, 140 miles north, where my father, Lazer — Leon in Polish and English — is from. My father, like Josef Hamerman, lost his entire family in the Holocaust.

The handful of survivors from the mass murders in Boryslaw between 1941 and 1943 were shipped off to Mauthausen, a concentration camp in Austria. Josef Hamerman was among them, along with one of his relatives who died in the camp.

Many Americans have a bare-bones and distorted knowledge of Holocaust history. They've heard of one camp, Auschwitz, and of one survivor, Elie Wiesel. Maybe they've met a few people with tattooed numbers on their arms. They seem obsessed with silver linings about the Holocaust: people saved, gentiles behaving bravely.

I used to snarl inside when I heard people talk about the great wisdom of survivors they had met. Now I understand they were simply trying to show their humanity and kindness. My mother used to get exasperated about these sentiments too and say to me, "Giloibt tzi Got! These Americans think like babies."

No magical wisdom from suffering

I grew up around Holocaust survivors. I saw them at shul every week. They were my parents' friends. Few had serial numbers because systematic tattooing was only done at Auschwitz. There are no silver linings. There is no magical wisdom gained from suffering and losing your grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles and siblings.

Holocaust survivors watched over me when my parents were busy in the family business, originally called Lee-Rae Builders, after my parents, and later changed to RPS Builders, for my mother, Rachel, brother Paul and me, Stuart. (I was named for the

ship my mother arrived on at Ellis Island, the U.S.S. Stewart, but the nurse in the hospital told mom that “Stuart” was spelled with a “U.”)

Survivors educated me when I wasn’t in school. Many fed me, especially Elenor Salomon — whom my mom first met in Germany, where both were refugees after the war ended and both lived until about 1950 — and her husband, Otto, who owned Regina’s Bakery.

I am who I am — a retired Duke University professor of geophysics, a novelist and memoirist —because of their collective attention. It took an Americanized shtetl in the wholesome yenne velt — Yiddish for nowheresville — of the Midwest to make me. For 44 years and counting, my wife has teased me about my self-confidence. I know its roots are in this remarkable group of people who constantly told me that I could do anything I wanted — and that I better do something significant to make up for all those lost in the war.

Places full of kvetching and intrigue

Milwaukee’s West Side was one of more than 100 communities of Holocaust survivors across North America. As a kid, we traveled frequently to Chicago’s Rogers Park, and I spent a week in the Fairfax District of Los Angeles when I was 7 — they felt a lot like home. Even Sheboygan, the Wisconsin town where my father first settled upon arriving in the U.S., had a tiny shtetl of survivors.

These were vibrant places full of gossip, kvetching and intrigue, with men and women possessing boundless, twitchy energy. Most were eager to hear and tell a good joke, and all had an eye out for danger.

Many of these communities thrived until the 1970s, when their residents started to die off or move to more prosperous neighborhoods where only English was spoken. What exasperates me is that these American shtetlach have largely been forgotten. We may remember the Holocaust. But we are casually and maybe willfully forgetting the post-Holocaust lives of those who survived.

These people, including my parents, had flaws undoubtedly exaggerated by their experiences in the Holocaust. But the admiration I had as a child for the people in this community remains. They tended to be smart and quick. They took care of their own with an intensity I’ve never seen matched.

So, yes, I felt I owed it to Josef Hamerman, to the greener, to take one person off that list of unmarked graves.

The monument was finished and installed in October. I had wanted to have an unveiling ceremony. But Uncle Joe was in Phoenix for the winter. I hadn’t lived in Milwaukee in 50 years and knew hardly anyone; so I found myself in Beth Hamedrosh Hagodel Cemetery by myself on a Sunday morning. At least the strip club was closed.

It was a cloud-filled, damp day — sweater weather. I started at my parents’ graves. Moss obscured their monument’s lettering. It felt surprisingly satisfying to get on my knees and, with the scrub brush I’d brought and a gallon jug of water, see the moss peel off with every stroke.

While my parents' monument dried, I walked to the grave of my father's decades-long enemy, Marv — in Yiddish, Mendel — Tuchman. They had come from the same Polish town, of course. They had both been builders, and had briefly been business partners. That two out of the 100 survivors from Volodymyr-Volynsky had refused to say a word to each other for years was as essential a part of Milwaukee's greener community as the daily acts of kindness and generosity I observed.

I had asked the cemetery staff where, exactly, Hamerman was buried and hadn't received an answer. But from my many visits, I knew where graves from the 1980s would be located. I found the new monument inside of two minutes.

It was made of red granite, similar but paler than the monuments for my family.

The final monument

As I stood there, I thought about another monument — a massive, raw, and uncarved, save for the presence of a large Star of David near its maximum height, block of rock in the Jewish cemetery of Tomaszow Lubelski, the birthplace of my mother. Erected in 1993 by the community's survivors who live in Israel, it honors both those buried in the cemetery and those who were gassed in Belzec.

Jews no longer live in Tomaszow Lubelski. That block of rock is the community's final Jewish monument. Almost all the prewar tombstones from that cemetery — including those of my mother's relatives — are missing, taken by the Nazis to pave local streets.

I placed a pebble on Josef Hamerman's grave, chanted the Hebrew memorial prayer El Malei Rachamim, and recited the Mourner's Kaddish. There were no tears from me, just an odd sense of a job well done. Then I looked around for the grave of Elenor Salomon, my mother's friend who owned the bakery. I couldn't find one.

The last time I had gone to Elenor and Otto's bakery was in 1999. I was with my nephew, Alex, who was 8 years old and lived in Maryland. We walked around the old neighborhood and he took it all in as if we were visiting the real-life version of the TV show The Wire.

'You came for the cheesecake, right?'

Milwaukee's West Side is a mostly Black neighborhood now, where working-class families have gone from good union paychecks to lousy hourly wages. There is still a Jewish day school, and a few Orthodox Jews sprinkled around, including some who have moved to the suburbs but maintain a house where they spend Shabbos. There is only one shul now, Beth Jehudah, run by the younger Rabbi Twerski.

The neighborhood was rundown: masonry mortar was missing, bricks had fallen off houses, paint was peeling off wood siding. As I thought back, I realized it had been pretty rough when we lived there, too.

I'd buzzed the door of the bakery. As Elenor let me in, the glass in the aluminum door rattled. She gave me a kiss that I knew left a big mark of lipstick on my cheek, and shouted to her husband in back to come see me. Elenor was disappointed to hear Alex was not my son, but buoyed when I told her I had a daughter.

"I have cancer here," she said and pointed to the back of her neck. "I'll probably be dead in a year." This was so typical, hearing real news mixed with chitchat. Her husband, Otto, came to the front of the bakery with a piece of mandel bread, which he threw to my nephew. The boy was getting an education.

"You came for the cheesecake, right?" Otto said to me. "You always liked the cheesecake." There was nothing better on this planet.

The suitcase she carried

The Salomons were married in my parents' Milwaukee apartment in 1952. They didn't have money for a formal wedding. The apartment building was torn down long ago, and is now an empty lot next to a freeway. The two-flat where my parents lived when I was born was torn down long ago, too.

The morning after visiting Hamerman's grave last fall, I went to the Jewish Museum Milwaukee, which wanted to create a display about my mother. I'd brought some of my mother's papers, and photographs of her. The thing they were most interested in was the suitcase she had carried with her from Europe in 1949.

It is aluminum, with her name and destination painted in large black script on the outside: Rachela Erlich, Jewish Family Service, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

I'd rescued the suitcase from my grandfather's basement when I was about 10 and he was threatening to dump it in the junkyard he ran. It was dented and broken, but I knew it was important. My mother carried it with her from house to house until shortly before she died, when I took it to my home in North Carolina, and later, when I retired, to California. Now it was going to be in a museum.

Most of the exhibits at Milwaukee's Jewish Museum, not surprisingly, showcase der geller, the Jews who came to town well before the war and mostly shunned my parents and other survivors. Most of the memorabilia and biographies feature men. Now there was going to be a display devoted to my mother, a greener and one of very few women of her day who ran a successful business in town.

The display, which will eventually include a video of me telling my mother's story, is to my mind, an act of defiance. My mother not only survived the war, but thrived in Milwaukee.

And what of Josef Hamerman, a failure and a hustler? His monument in the local cemetery says that he was a vital part of the community too.

Opinion

The White House antisemitism plan is full of good ideas. Will it actually help Jews?

By Laura E. Adkins

A realistic goal must be three things: specific, measurable and achievable.

Will the proposals outlined in the White House's first official strategy to counter antisemitism, released with much fanfare this week, pass this test? Or are they more political pablum?

The report, which followed conversations with more than 1,000 community leaders, distills the challenges American Jews face. It is a thoughtful and comprehensive effort that should be applauded.

But understanding a problem and fixing it are two very different things. And reducing antisemitism will require deep societal changes, something no decrees from on high — save maybe the Torah from Mount Sinai — can ever hope to accomplish.

A 'Battle for the soul of this nation'

Combating antisemitism — and its insidious effects on our democracy — has motivated this administration since its inception. "Charlottesville, Virginia" were the first words out of Joe Biden's mouth in his 2019 campaign launch video. Vice President Kamala Harris's husband, Doug Emhoff, is famously Jewish, and was tasked by the president himself with making antisemitism a central issue of his portfolio.

The brazen white supremacist violence of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville taught Biden that we were "in the battle for the soul of this nation." The consequences of moral turpitude, of insisting there are "fine people on both sides," threatened to destroy everything this country stands for.

Americans seemed to agree. Biden won, and it wasn't close.

Many breathed a sigh of relief. We had closed a dark chapter of our nation's history, and it seemed that we had avoided the dystopia it threatened. Violence, societal unrest and demonizing minorities? "This is not who we are," the president often says.

But here's the thing: Often, it is.

The Nazis were famously inspired by the vicious cruelty of our Jim Crow laws. As our nation's challenges evolve, so too does our white supremacy: Blacks, Jews, Asians, Hispanics, Arabs, LGBTQ+ people, and virtually every immigrant and minority group has taken turns playing scapegoat.

Trump may no longer occupy the Oval Office. But uncertainty still preoccupies the world.

"As in previous eras, demographic changes, new technologies, economic disruptions and deepening socioeconomic inequality may be leading more Americans to turn to conspiracy theories that scapegoat Jews and other vulnerable communities," says the White House report.

Do the proposed solutions stand any chance of solving this?

What's in a plan

The second of the report's four-pronged strategy, on beefing up physical security, contains arguably the most important action items: making security grants easier for nonprofits to access, strengthening community-based violence prevention efforts and expanding both federal cybersecurity and physical security support for houses of worship, community centers and parochial schools. Many of these proposals are precise, come with a deadline, and fall within the executive branch's jurisdiction.

But the entire first section of the plan — proposals to "Increase Awareness and Understanding of Antisemitism" — and much of the rest of the report, relies on what the authors term "whole society calls to action."

These include enforceable mandates under the executive branch's control, like requiring federal agencies to update their anti-bias policies.

But they also include more general calls for local leaders to "speak out," for school districts to beef up Holocaust education standards, for sports leagues to hold players accountable for antisemitic comments, and for influencers to avoid stereotypical depictions of Jews.

While the values they invoke are essential, the heavy-handed generalizations and platitudes throughout are a bit much.

"We must tell the positive story of Jewish contributions to the United States and the world," the report states, in one particularly eyebrow-raising line. Americans already think 30% of the country is Jewish; surely antisemitism is not caused by a lack of awareness of Jewish achievement and prominence in certain industries, but often just the opposite.

So what, exactly, would this "awareness-raising" accomplish?

Holocaust education, another proposal mentioned throughout the plan, has long been required in most states. There's also no evidence it's actually effective.

"We must all say clearly and forcefully: Antisemitism and all forms of hate and violence can have no safe harbor in America," the report later adds.

In other words? More summits, more research, more talk.

It's a start

Overall, the strategy represents quite an accomplishment. It's rare that an administration lives up to its promises, and this White House followed through.

But antisemitism is insidious, and the executives' reach is limited. I've witnessed

and discussed — with Emhoff, Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, and various members of the White House team, over many months and on two continents — the deep work and reckoning each has done to understand these challenges and potential solutions. These are serious people who bring serious expertise.

But in many ways, their hands are tied. Many of the calls to action — like holding social media companies accountable for the antisemitism and hate speech that proliferates on their sites — would require congressional action.

And some proposals are downright cringe-inducing: The White House Office of Public Engagement, for example, plans to launch "the Ally Challenge," in which Americans can apply to receive an award for "their acts of allyship with Jewish, Muslim, or other communities that are not their own."

But even so, it's a step in the right direction.

None of society's woes — antisemitism very much included — will be solved solely from the top down. Healing a nation ravaged by divisive and anti-democratic politicians, the slow degradation of local communities, the COVID pandemic, and an internet filled with bigotry and lies will take time.

We're in the midst of an outright war for America's future, with book burners on one side and agents of chaos all around. And as the report notes, antisemitism — as always — is but one symptom of a society in existential crisis.

Real change will require deep economic, social and political effort. And that will start not with decrees from on high, but from social and civic relationships at the local level.

This may, ultimately, be what it all boils down to: "While we cannot require actors outside the executive branch to take on the roles envisioned for them in this strategy," the report's authors admit, "combating antisemitism is a truly whole-of-society challenge that demands a whole-of-society response, and we hope all will join our call to action."

As the report notes, "solidarity and mutual support across diverse communities of different backgrounds and beliefs is crucial." Yet "targeted communities are often too siloed in their experiences of hate and attempts to combat it."

Or as the American political scientist Robert Putnam put it in the introduction to his seminal book, Bowling Alone, "life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital."

If nothing else, it's certainly a start.

How ‘Some Like it Hot’ got to Broadway — and lost a very Jewish song in the process

By PJ Grisar

At first, Scott Wittman and Marc Shaiman weren’t so hot on the idea of adapting Some Like it Hot into a musical.

“The movie ended up being a double-edged sword,” Shaiman, the composer and co-lyricist, said over Zoom. “For all the people who have loved it, since the day they were born and the first time they saw it, there are people who just immediately classify it as just an old-fashioned, dated kind of comedy.”

What sold the duo, who’d already written a Marilyn Monroe musical for NBC’s Smash, soon to get its own Broadway treatment, was checking some of the baggage of the original 1959 classic, which mines a lot of its humor from putting men in drag and from Monroe’s performance as a ditzy singer likened to “Jell-O on springs.”

“We think that we’ve done what Billy Wilder himself would have done, if he had the chance to write it at this time with the culture being as it is right now,” said Shaiman.

In the show, with a book by Tony winner Matthew Lopez and comedian Amber Ruffin and direction by Casey Nicholaw, Monroe’s character, Sugar, is now Black, played by Adrianna Hicks, and has a richer inner life. The setting has been moved from the late 1920s to the early ’30s. Perhaps most pivotal are changes made to the character of Jerry/Daphne, originally played by Jack Lemmon, and now by nonbinary Black actor and Tony nominee J. Harrison Ghee, who, over the course of the show, while disguised in drag, discovers they are gender-fluid or possibly trans.

‘You could feel the theater shaking’

Adding Black characters and moving the show forward in time, away from flappers and the Charleston, allowed the songwriting duo, Tony winners for 2003’s Hairspray, to key into the Jazz Age, big band sound and wordplay they naturally gravitate to.

“We love the songs of that period and the fact that you can say everything without having to be nasty or dirty, which both Scott and I can be, but it’s just, it’s wonderful to write a love song or a song about longing that uses elegant phrases,” said Shaiman.

The “big band with strings” music of the ’30s is what Shaiman listens to in the car, and he often reflects on the joy of the tunes and their marked contrast with the times they

came out of, both the Depression and the rise of the Nazis that followed soon after.

"There's also the Broadway of it, because we come out of a Depression of our own, of COVID, and the idea of bringing people back into a theater where they could hear an 18-piece orchestra with a huge ensemble tapping — it just glorified everything Broadway was in a new, fresh way," said Wittman, who co-wrote the show's lyrics.

For the music, Shaiman's "Bible" was the era of classic MGM films, a 40-year period that allowed for some leeway between styles. Scat, jazz and even a ukelele-forward number all figure into the musical. The tunes would feel at home in the Great American Songbook, but they propel a story that, at least for the Shubert Theatre, feels somewhat radical.

Daphne's gender epiphany in the song "You Coulda Knocked Me Over with a Feather," is greeted with raucous applause — and not just from a young and liberal Broadway crowd, but the type of folks you might expect to come to a show based on a 64-year-old film.

"You could feel the theater shake from the response to it from every age group," said Wittman. "It's sort of thrilling in that way that we were able to do that, because it's actually a celebration of that moment for that character."

Since beginning work on the show, which came out following controversies surrounding the sensitivities of cross-dressing musical comedies like Mrs. Doubtfire and Tootsie, the musical met its moment at a time of anti-trans legislation.

"Their very lives are at stake now," Wittman who, like Shaiman, is gay, said of this new legislation. "We came up at a time, you know, in the '70s in New York, where people we knew, friends of ours from the sort of Andy Warhol crowd, were arrested for wearing high heels. It seems like it's going back to that. So, if on Broadway, we have a chance to maybe change one little mind in the eighth row, I'm all for it."

Billy Wilder 'would have loved it'

Some Like it Hot, nominated for 13 Tonys, covers more ground than the original film or its 1972 musical adaptation Sugar, addressing racism, sexism and gender identity. One thing it doesn't quite get to is Yiddishkeit, though there are winks and nods for those in the know.

The character of Joe (Christian Borle, Tony-nominated in a role made famous by Tony Curtis) now pretends to be an Austrian screenwriter, a not-so-subtle sendup of Billy Wilder's thick Viennese accent.

"Spielberg came to the show, and he was a very good friend of Billy Wilder and I think I asked him, 'Do you think he would have approved?'" said Wittman. "He said, 'He would have loved it.'"

Another dimension, sadly left off the stage, came from the character Bienstock, the Jewish manager played by character actor Dave Barry in the film. Bienstock was cut from the show, but his duet with Daphne, "Uptown Yiddishe Blues," speaks to the common musical language of klezmer and the blues, and the partnership of white Jewish and Black Christian musicians in the 1930s. The song has fun with a lot of music theory jokes, familiar Jewish melodies and more than a bissel Yiddish.

“We’ll bend the third, we’ll scoop the fifth,” the characters sing, “and it will be like Ethel Waters joined B’nai B’rith.”

Shaiman was sad to see the song go, but recently played it at 54 Below, as part of an evening of cut songs.

“It celebrated the thing that is maybe the most important part of my life, Lord knows musically, and culturally: my love of the Black community and Black culture,” said Shaiman, who grew up Jewish in Scotch Plains, New Jersey. “I like to think it’s not about cultural appropriation, but the fact that both these groups of people have been oppressed for thousands and thousands of years, and through that, somehow came up with such a similar musical vocabulary to express all that.”

Shaiman and Wittman, who also did a song for a Captain America musical for Disney+’s Hawkeye, soon to be an attraction at Disneyland, and for Mary Poppins Returns, are thrilled to be nominated 20 years after their win for Hairspray. With the prospect of victory, another Jewish thread reveals itself.

Did they prepare speeches?

“Kine hara,” said Shaiman, puh-puhing the evil eye. “My mother turns 95 two days after the Tonys and she’s schlepping up from Florida and she’s in no shape to be doing that but she’s like, ‘I want to be there when you win that Tony for my birthday!’ So now I not only have the, you know, will we win, will we won’t, but now I’ll ruin my mother’s 95th birthday if we don’t win! I keep telling her, like, ‘There’s this show called Kimberly Akimbo,’ but she doesn’t want to hear it.”

She was the most famous Jewish actress of all time — can we still say she was the greatest?

By Benjamin Ivry

On the centenary of her death in 1923, the French Jewish actress Sarah Bernhardt is being honored with a new book by film historian Victoria Duckett examining how Bernhardt transcended her humble origins to become a still-remembered superstar.

As Duckett notes, Bernhardt was the "daughter of a Jewish courtesan" who nevertheless "catapulted herself to international fame and respectability."

Part of this respectability, as a new exhibit on view at the Petit Palais museum in Paris through Aug. 27 demonstrates, was lavish glamour. Bernhardt epitomized a universal aspiration to cultural expression which audiences took to heart internationally.

Bernhardt's penchant for playing male roles made her one of the few touring actresses to portray both Portia and Shylock the Jew in excerpts from Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice.

A 1916 review in The Brooklyn Eagle implied that Bernhardt made no attempt to humanize Shylock in any philosemitic way, deeming her incarnation of the money lender "a fiendishly cruel and vengeful Jew … It glares with diabolic hatred at the Christian merchant, eyes glistening … in anticipation of his gory vengeance."

Earlier, in 1905, in Racine's Esther, she opted to play the role of King Ahasuerus. The eponymous heroine, a Persian Jewish princess, saved her people by marrying the king.

Bernhardt was proud of her Jewish origins, perhaps because they were intimately linked to women who were important in her life: her mother and Orthodox Jewish maternal grandmother. In 1869, Bernhardt invited her grandmother to move into her Paris apartment to help with childcare.

And during early career upheavals, for a time Bernhardt followed the professional path of her mother as courtesan. Bernhardt took on a series of paying male paramours, including Jewish banker Jacques Stern and Charles Haas, the French Jewish dandy who inspired the character Charles Swann in Marcel Proust's novel In Search of Lost Time.

More publicly, Bernhardt was also a staunch advocate of Capt. Alfred Dreyfus, the French Jewish officer unjustly charged with

treason, whose trials impacted modern French history.

In addition to political activism, Bernhardt, mostly celebrated for splashy classical roles, dreamy symbolist fantasies and tear-jerking melodramas, could demonstrate interest in plays with social significance. In 1897, she premiered The Bad Shepherds by Octave Mirbeau, about striking factory workers.

Her stance in the Dreyfus Affair may have aggravated latent antisemitism in French audiences. As literary historian Sharon Marcus observed, Rachel Félix, a French Jewish actress of a prior generation who served as inspiration for Bernhardt, did not face the same degree of public obloquy that Bernhardt braved.

As a result, in 1871, after the Franco-Prussian war, Bernhardt felt obliged to address rumors that she was a German Jew. Her reported response: “Jewish most certainly, but German, no.” To a journalist from Le Figaro, she added: “All my family come from Holland. Amsterdam was the birthplace of my humble ancestors. If I have a foreign accent — which I much regret — it is cosmopolitan, but not Teutonic. I am a daughter of the great Jewish race, and my somewhat uncultivated language is the outcome of our enforced wanderings.”

A memorable 2005 exhibit at New York’s Jewish Museum included caricatures from the French press of Bernhardt with a hooked nose, although her nose was in reality straight. She was also shown standing on gold coins, in another stereotype of acquisitive Jews.

Memoirs of Sarah Barnum (1883) a scurrilous novel by a rival actress, claimed that the character inspired by Bernhardt, “like a true daughter of Israel, was filthy.” Further age-old antisemitic stereotypes could be found in Sarah’s Travel Letters From Three Continents by Ottokar Franz Ebersberg, an Austrian journalist.

This fictitious correspondence, cited by literary critic Sander Gilman, depicted Bernhardt as plotting with other leading international Jews, including British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, to dominate the world. In one letter, this specious Sarah reflects to Disraeli that the essence of Jewish womanhood is to pose a mortal threat to non-Jewish males, as in the story of Judith and Holofernes.

Regardless of this vituperative discourse, Bernhardt’s far-flung world tours included trips to places where Jews were mistreated. Only rarely did she confront angry Jew-hating mobs objecting to her heritage, as during one tour to Ukraine in 1882, coinciding with antisemitic pogroms there.

When she returned home, Bernhardt was ever-ready to collaborate with Jewish colleagues, like author Marcel Schwob, who translated Shakespeare’s Hamlet for Bernhardt to perform the title part (theatergoers will recall the 2018 Broadway staging of Theresa Rebeck’s play Bernhardt/Hamlet, which featured Janet McTeer).

And as cultural historian Jonathan Freedman asserted in The Jewish Decadence, Bernhardt was passionately supportive of the young Jewish dancer/actress Ida Rubinstein.

Amid this Yiddishkeit, perhaps paradoxically, from her childhood on, Bernhardt identified as a Catholic. She

received her first communion in 1856, attended Notre Dame du Grandchamp, a convent school near Versailles, and aspired to be a nun. As an adult, Bernhardt observed the Catholic prohibition of divorce to the point of remaining wed to an estranged, morphine-addicted husband.

So apart from her still-thriving legend, what traces of Bernhardt's artistry can Jewish admirers cherish now? Like immortal Yiddish theater tragedians whose greatness cannot be ascertained from technically primitive films and recordings left to posterity, Bernhardt's power as a performer is best taken on faith or from written descriptions.

Her silent films are marred by melodramatic gestures and her primitive sound recordings betray an overdone vocal vibrato. Instead, documentary footage of her funeral procession through Paris captures a sense of her importance to contemporaries, and the loss and grief they felt at her demise.

One devotee, Sigmund Freud, wrote in 1884 that he "believed immediately everything" she said onstage, but this verisimilitude cannot be found in her onscreen appearances. When filmed speaking in 1915 to colleague Lucien Guitry in what was apparently intended as an unguarded, behind-the-scenes moment, Bernhardt seems ill at ease and affected.

And in her very last role in 1923, taken at the request of Lucien's son Sacha Guitry, she overdoes a deathbed scene even by silent film acting standards, despite the fact that she was genuinely close to death at that point.

So to truly understand the importance of Bernhardt, it is essential to examine her impact on others, including those who loathed her. Less than two decades after thousands of acolytes crowded the streets of Paris to pay homage to the dead diva, in Nazi-occupied Paris the Jewish actress' name was unceremoniously removed from the theater once named in her honor.

Although the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt temporarily regained its name after the war, it has gone through a series of renamings since then, most recently to the generically uninspiring Théâtre de la Ville. No French cultural official considers it a priority today to restore Bernhardt's name to what was once her theater.

Indeed, amid ever-increasing Gallic antisemitism, French civil servants might consider it far too provocative to have such a central cultural landmark named after a performer of Jewish origin.

In this way, Sarah Bernhardt's majestic and ever-fresh persona, inextricably linked to her Jewish identity, continues to startle and unsettle culture mavens.

Opinion

What Jewish life is really like at a 'hotbed of antisemitism'

By Rabbi Gil Steinlauf

I am sometimes asked what it's like to serve as a rabbi and Hillel director on an Ivy League campus that is a "hotbed of antisemitism."

It's an important question, to be sure. But it's also a question that comes almost exclusively from people who are not at Princeton and sometimes have no connection to my community on campus. It's a question that almost never comes from the students I actually serve.

These students live a life far removed from the headlines and social media posts that paint their school, the Ivy League and college campuses as unsafe places for Jewish students or supporters of Israel. A large number of them tell me they don't feel hemmed in as a victim group. And, even with the challenges we face, they don't live in a perpetual state of alarm over Jew-hatred.

Some students say the biggest challenge to campus Jewish life is not the rise in antisemitic incidents (which is absolutely real) or efforts to marginalize Israel (also real). It is the public animosity that those with different political views display towards one another, often turning important campus discussions into sound bites in broader cultural battles.

These observations — shared with me this past semester over a series of lunches at the Princeton Center for Jewish Life — should be a call to Jewish leaders to create spaces where students can have conversations across differences and honestly talk with each other instead of at each other. We should be a place where everyone is "safe enough" to encounter perspectives radically different from their own and where conversations happen around a family table before they happen through an Instagram feed.

When I was an undergraduate at Princeton 35 years ago, it was emerging as a campus where students could learn, grow and explore their Judaism in different ways as it overcame its long history of Jewish marginalization. An assortment of separate Jewish programs would soon come together as the Center for Jewish Life/Hillel in the spirit of Princeton's mission "in the service of humanity."

Last July, I returned to my alma mater after years as a congregational rabbi to become the executive director of the Center for Jewish Life.

I came back with warm memories of my transformative Jewish experience at

Princeton, which had unexpectedly set me on the path toward the rabbinate.

But I'd also heard about — and soon experienced — increased incidents of antisemitism and anti-Israel activism on U.S. campuses. In the past 18 months, our Hillel has responded strongly to a student vote tied to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement; attacks on an entrepreneurial-focused trip to Israel, and an academic department unapologetically inviting a Palestinian author whose rhetoric veers into hate speech. Our Princeton Jewish community has wrestled internally over hosting a far-right speaker and celebrating Israel at Friday night religious services and dinner.

These episodes frequently generate protests, counter-protests, and dueling opinion columns. Sometimes, they draw condemnation from off-campus actors who take to social media with messages like "Jewish students are at risk at Princeton University."

They also prompted me to host my lunches with Jewish students so I could listen to their perspectives on antisemitism and understand how to support them best. These students came from a diverse array of backgrounds, political perspectives, levels of religious observance and connections to organized Jewish life.

Even among this diverse group, there was remarkable agreement on this most salient point: Being Jewish at Princeton is an overwhelmingly positive experience.

They feel supported and heard. They have ample opportunities to learn and grow through classes, affinity groups, activism, Israel programs, Shabbat and holiday celebrations, and — of course — eating.

The students offered a wide variety of viewpoints on hate on campus. But many simply don't report experiencing antisemitism in their daily lives.

The recent episodes on campus angered many of them. But they were not surprised, scandalized or left feeling like they lived in a generalized environment of hatred.

These Gen Z students approach the world differently from their parents. They take conflicting perspectives in stride. They are comfortable learning and living with others who have radically different views. And they recognize that free speech and open dialogue can be ugly.

Several students told me they are most concerned by the dynamic that emerges around these episodes.

They are frustrated when those at both ends of the political spectrum amplify their concerns by attacking one another publicly — often while claiming to speak on behalf of a broader group instead of themselves. This turns a campus conversation into a cable news-ready battle. It misrepresents the positive lived experiences of other Jewish students.

Some see this dynamic as an overly politicized obsession within our community. It makes them want to engage less in organized Jewish life than when we focus on areas like community-building, learning, or Shabbat meals.

The solution, of course, is not to ignore very real episodes of antisemitism or fierce disagreements about Israel. We must

continue to engage and stand up for our values. We must empower passionate students to share their views so they can effect change on campus and after they graduate.

The solution is to bring them together for face-to-face communication, no matter how uncomfortable, just as Jewish families have done around the Shabbat table for generations.

Moving forward, we must foster a culture and redesign space both at Princeton, and on college campuses nationally, so students can communicate civilly around difficult issues in the Jewish tradition of machloket leshem shamayim, or “disagreeing for the sake of heaven.”

Along with other Hillels, Princeton’s should be a center where students have conversations across differences; a center for myriad ideas, outlooks and individuals to emerge in one shared (if messy) narrative of Jewishness that looks inward even as we face outward.

This intentional approach will give me the best answer the next time I am asked what it’s like to serve as a rabbi at an Ivy League campus: It’s an honor to be at a place where we tackle hard questions together and where Jewish life thrives in the service of humanity.

Bintel Brief

How do I get my control-freak husband to back off?

By Beth Harpaz

Dear Bintel:

My husband and I have been together almost 25 years. For 20 of those years, we worked together in broadcast media, although mostly in different capacities. He then retired to pursue an adjacent profession. He constantly offers me professional advice, based on his own experiences — which, while valid, no longer relate to the Way Things Are Done Now. Also, I've been working in this business for more than 40 years myself, and have been the main breadwinner since 2001. (Which I try very hard not to bring into the conversation.)

If I try to explain that things are different now, I'm told that I'm invalidating his experiences. If I don't take his advice, he says it's just because it's from him. If I need his assistance with a project, it has to be done his way, or not at all. And he insists that he has to control the recording equipment — because it's his.

It's at the point where I've turned down work because I know I can't get clients what they need. This has been going on for awhile, but it's worse now, with advancing years and fewer opportunities.

And it's not just about work. It's about health, money and almost anything else that might cause friction between two people who live together.

I'm just trying for peaceful coexistence, to be able to live — and work — without tearing my hair out. Any thoughts?

Signed,

ManSprained

Dear ManSprained:

We get it — and probably so do most women who've been in the workforce as long as you have. We've been talked over, underpaid and overlooked. We put up with it, worked around it, ignored it, worked our butts off anyway and quietly built our careers despite the mansplaining — or as you put it, the "ManSpraining" (not a typo, we know).

Of course, most of us don't have to share a home with the male colleagues bigfooting us at work. It must feel like there's no escape from your husband's relentless drive to dominate. However intolerable the situation sounds, I assume you want to keep the marriage going since you don't indicate any interest in walking away. Have you considered couples therapy? It doesn't

come cheap but it could help. Here's hoping your stubborn hubby might agree to it; if not, consider a few sessions on your own.

In the meantime, I consulted Kate Mangino, author of Equal Partners: Improving Gender Equality at Home, for advice on how to achieve the "peaceful coexistence" you seek.

She didn't mince words. She called your situation "demeaning" and said that while it's not your job to fix your husband, she understands your urgent need to improve things.

It all boils down to setting boundaries for what he can and cannot do or say in connection with your work.

"One new boundary could be that the husband is free to offer advice — but ManSprained is not under obligation to take that advice," she said. Another boundary could restrict conversations about work to the home office — and ban them from the kitchen, living room and bedroom.

Develop those boundaries "the way a client would treat a consultant." For every job, make clear what help is and isn't needed.

If hubby oversteps, Mangino continued, tell him the next step will be for you to outsource his role. Point out that if you have to hire someone with the equipment he now provides, that's less profit overall for your business and household.

Imagining these scenarios brought to my mind an old Yiddish saying: "Hak mir nisht kin tshaynik" — quit banging the teakettle! Or in plain English, "Buzz off!" It's what my dad would say to shut down kibitzing and kvetching if someone was nagging him. Not exactly a high-minded response to a conflict, but it sends the message.

Mangino wondered whether your husband also tries to micromanage cooking, housekeeping and every other aspect of your lives together, or whether he mostly fixates on business. She was curious to hear his perspective: "Why does he smother his wife with advice?" What's going on in that my-way-or-the-highway head of his?

Men are often socialized to feel "they are not 'real men' if they do not provide for their family financially," she noted. Might your husband feel like a failure because you bring home a bigger paycheck? Maybe he's trying to compensate by offering unsolicited advice. Is he just a control freak, or is he struggling with his role in your relationship?

He might be reluctant to open up. Questions like, "What pressures are you facing?" could be off-putting to someone whose self-esteem is running low, Mangino said.

To give that discussion the best chance, you should both agree to begin statements with "I" — "I feel this," "I want" — and avoid accusations and name-calling.

Mangino acknowledged that having an honest discussion with your spouse about his feelings adds an exhausting dimension to your game plan. "When you're the one 'doing all the things,' the last thing you want to do is sit down and ask your partner: 'So, how do you feel?'" she said. And all too often, managing and repairing relationships — "emotional labor" — falls on women.

But if you can bring yourself to ask with genuine concern and interest, and give him a little time, maybe he'll let his defenses

down and begin to examine why he can't let you run your business as you see fit.

Whether he's capable of introspection or not, you owe it to yourself to set those boundaries and ask hubby to respect them. If he doesn't, "hold him accountable. Dig your heels in," Mangino said.

And realize, ManSprained, that ultimately, it's not in your power to change him. See how far empathetic listening and boundary-setting get you. Then you decide whether you can live in that place with him or not.

Signed,

Bintel