

sion, and you know how it is, “Who are you looking for?” and away we go with the conversation. The special part is that this fellow attendee then spent a considerable amount of time researching and teaching me new tricks.

That’s the power of an in-person conference. Thanks so much to the organizers!

I had a great time at the conference because of these discoveries

and a great time sharing them with my mother.

I am planning a field trip to my mother’s family’s cemetery plots on Staten Island in October with a friend whose family’s plots are in the same cemetery. Thanks to an excellent session on reading Jewish tombstones, I feel better prepared.



Update: My field trip on October 14th was wonderful. The stones were all in very good condition, and I was able to later show pictures to my mother. ❖

Amy became seriously interested in researching all sides of the family about 2014 but didn’t spend too much time on it until her retirement in July 2019. By using Ancestry Library Edition from home during the pandemic, she was able to learn a lot about all sides of her family as well as her now late husband’s family. Even though he is now deceased she is still motivated, in part for her son, to find out as much as she can about his family. She really enjoys sharing mutual interests and the friendships she’s made at JGASGP.

Amy is researching: GOLDBERG from Zarvanitza (formerly Austria), now Zarubyntsi, (Ukraine); KLEINFELD from Bolsowce, (Ukraine) (formerly Galicia); SCHMALL from Stry, (Ukraine) (formerly Austria).

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BUBBY’S SHOELACES

by Steven Weisberg



The two-tiered escalator glided smoothly, offering a panoramic view of the bustling activity at the Sheraton Center. People seemed familiar, but I couldn’t recognize a single person. This was my first ever Jewish genealogy conference, but strangers were talking my language.

I had come looking for the backstory of a Tolner Aid Society to which my maternal grandfather had belonged. Since the dates for the 44th IAJGS conference in Philadelphia coincided with the celebration of my mother’s older sister’s 100th birthday, I took this as a sign it was *bashert* (meant to be). The conference would thus become an additional agenda item along with my aunt’s celebration.



At the celebratory gala dinner among virtual strangers, conversation flowed easily of family stories and what brought us to Philadelphia. As we lifted glasses of wine for the blessings, I said a silent *motzi* (blessing over bread). On the evening of my aunt’s 100th birthday, it seemed counter-intuitive to spend it at a banquet for genealogists.

I had never heard of Arthur Kurzweil the Magician before that evening. If he ever appeared on “Ed Sullivan,” “The Hollywood Palace,” or as a guest with Joe Franklin on New York’s WOR-TV, Channel 9, I might have remembered him. His numerology and chicanery with playing cards was impressive; his keynote presentation was captivating. I may have been hypnotically under his spell. He spoke to me directly as he wove the divergent threads of his own personal story. His presentation entitled “The *Mitzvah* We Do as Genealogists” illuminated why it was *bashert* that I was here.

As Kurzweil observed, “It’s a principle of Jewish tradition to find those two ends of a rope that broke, and you tie the ends together.” This struck me as the core reason for undertaking genealogy research. Discovering loose threads in our stories and tying those threads together in the study of our families was the essence of his talk. Tangled as life is, to understand context and make sense of how things came to be is to honor our families through the *mitzvah* of study and remembering.

The metaphor of threads resonated with me and my family’s threads and connects me to my people, my tribe and *Ha-*

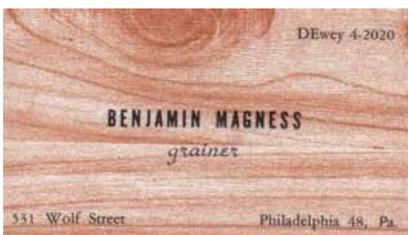
Shem (literally, “the Name,” i.e. G-d). I may have been a Hebrew School dropout after my Bar Mitzvah, but I believe that the stories we write of family in their time, and in our times, and of what we have learned, get compiled in one’s unique autobiography, aptly titled the Book of Life.

Kurzweil spoke eloquently of spiritual rope and threads in Jewish genealogy. It was a profound observation and a wonderful takeaway of the evening. As I watched the gathering exit the ballroom, my mind marinated on the metaphor of ropes and threads and of the connections they make. I followed that connective imagery to the story of my bubby’s shoelaces.

Rose Zeft (“Bubby”) arrived in Philadelphia in 1911 from Kiev Gubernia. two years after Beryl Magnesen’s (“Zayda”) arrival from Romania. Both lived in South Philadelphia, three blocks apart. She shared a room with her older sister, her brother-in-law, and the couple’s first-born child; he lived with his mother and younger brother. When they married in 1913, she was living at 732 Emily Street; he at 510 Hoffman Street, a mere 3/10 mile apart.



Zayda’s occupation? Painter. Climbing ladders and balancing on scaffolds, he mixed his own paints and solvents. He toiled indoors and out, working through harsh Philadelphia weather during all four seasons; through illness and injury; through the Depression, World War II, and its aftermath.



What distinguished (now renamed) Benjamin Magness’ house painting business was his gift for graining. Painting plaster walls with the look of natural wood was merely another technique in the palette of a housepainter. Zayda created this illusion by painting with his fingernails. This talent, this gift, provided the source of support for his wife, four daughters, and the extended family that included his Jewish community around Mifflin Park.

However, by the time I was studying my *Haftorah* (selection of passages from the Hebrew Bible’s Prophets section that is read in synagogues after the Torah reading), Zayda had retired and pursued his lifelong desire to paint canvases. He traded rollers and synthetic paintbrushes for

the smaller, more precise sable hair brushes of a fine artist. Paint cans were replaced with tubes; ladders with an easel.



His first painting was an homage to youth and its promise for new life and new opportunity in the New World. A simply garbed man and woman stroll arm-in-arm under a gas-lit lamplight as a horse-drawn carriage passes by on a cobblestoned street.

Zayda labored at the painting. As a Bar Mitzvah boy, I watched him struggle to bring that story to life: the strength of the dignified horse in mid-gait bearing the full weight of the wooden carriage, its driver, and the aristocratic couple occupying the coach. Zayda painted and repainted, never quite satisfied with his work. Skilled as a house painter but untrained as an artist, he confessed to my mom that he didn’t know how to paint a horse from memory and needed a picture of one to help.

My mom sourced the only image of a horse she could find in the house, in the red, cloth-bound, hardback edition of *Webster’s Dictionary*. More representative of a racing thoroughbred than



a working-class carriage horse, it would have to suffice. Thus, Zayda completed his first ever attempt of an original oil painting.

On the day of the long awaited and highly celebrated unveiling of his labor of love, my mom’s older sister stood back and surveyed it through a critic’s keen eye.

“Pop, you got it wrong!” she commented. “It’s the man who walks closer to the street than the woman; not the other way around. He’s the one who protects her.”

Shortly thereafter, as I remember, Mom returned home

from grocery shopping to discover the painting on top of the trash cans outside our row home. Before Philadelphia sanitation workers fed it into the hydraulic jaws of their trash truck, Mom snatched it back.

“Pop, why did you throw out the painting?” He was comfortably resting in our living room sofa chair, reading *The Jewish Daily Forward*. Looking up from behind the newspaper, his reading glasses slipped down his nose to the tip. He peered over them; furrowing his brow, as his eyes widened. “I couldn’t get it right.” “Well, I’m keeping it and that’s that!”

(By the way, if the fountain in Zayda’s painting looks familiar, here’s a photo of the Eakins Fountain near the Philadelphia Art Museum.)



Zayda’s painting is also a memoir. Arm in arm, he and Rose Zeft stroll Philadelphia in the sweet bloom of youth - before marriage, children and family shared the narrative. True to their story, Zayda portrayed himself in his hat, and his Rose in the telltale, unmistakably clunky, ladies’ orthopedic shoes she had to wear to compensate for bad feet that bothered her for a lifetime.

And the shoelaces? As the story goes, Ben Magness met Rose Zeft at a Jewish social some time in 1911-12. Working as a house painter, he had saved up a couple of pennies and asked her out for ice cream.

He called on her at her home on Emily Street. He waited patiently at the top of the marble stoop. When it opened, she held it wide enough for only a portion of her face to be seen. “Bennie, I can’t go. I’m sorry.” “Why? What’s the matter?”

“I don’t have shoelaces. My sister probably did this. She’s not home. I looked but I can’t find them, and I can’t walk in my shoes without them.” Her face was turned downward to avoid looking into his piercing eyes and having him notice her tears. She didn’t want him to see the shame of her immigrant poverty.

Two copper Indian head cents jangled together in his pants pocket as he stepped from the front stoop, the door closing behind him. A short time later, he returned. He knocked again. When it cracked open, Bennie handed Rose a pair of leather shoelaces. He couldn’t afford both shoelaces AND ice cream. Instead, they walked and

talked throughout their newly adopted city in America arm in arm, she in her clunky orthopedic shoes; he in his Stetson fedora.

In the poverty from which they came, neither one of them could have fathomed the possibility of a better life which now appeared before them. Time stopped. They paused for a moment, feeling the cool mist from the splash of a fountain. I can imagine Zayda saying: “Someday, Rosie - maybe someday”.



The connection of Zayda’s painting with the story of Bubby’s shoelaces was inspired by the magic of Arthur Kurzweil and his Talmudic level divinations regarding threads in the tapestry of life.

I grew up with Zayda’s painting in our Oxford Circle row home. I care for it now from my home in Florida. All my life, Zayda’s painting has remained untitled.

Given my first Jewish genealogy conference and what I learned of threads in family genealogical lore, Zayda might have called his first painting: “Where We Lived” (also the theme of this conference). ❖



Born in West Philadelphia and raised in Oxford Circle, author Steven Weisberg carried lights and cables for filmmaker, documentarian, and theater director, Frederick Wiseman, when he filmed “High School” (1968) at Northeast High during his senior year. This influenced him to study theater arts and broadcasting at Penn State and pursue a troubadour’s career in television promotion and programming. Now retired, he incorporates genealogical research into writing his life stories.

Surnames he is researching are: WEISBERG; SILEWSKI; LIVERANT from Augustów, (Poland); MAGNESS from (Romania); MAGENEIZER; ZEFT (SAFT) from Kyiv Gubernia, (Russia).

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