

Review

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Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 411 pp. ISBN 978-0520249615

“I started painting in 1990, when I was seventy-three years old, at the urging of my daughter and my wife. They kept cracking the whip. My daughter would say, ‘My daddy can do anything’” (p. 2).



The colourful book is interspersed with Mayer's paintings (photo by David Ward)

With these words, three parallel stories begin; all of these stories play themselves out simultaneously in the pages of *They Called Me Mayer July*. First, there is the obvious subject of the book: the story of Mayer Kirshenblatt's personal recollections of his childhood in Opatów, or Apt, a small town in south-eastern Poland which Kirshenblatt and his family left in 1934. The second is the story of Mayer's paintings and their capacity to illustrate and interpret a place which no longer exists, except in his memory. And lastly, there is the important story of how these memories of Opatów, and the politics of remembering them,

are negotiated collaboratively by Mayer Kirshenblatt and his folklorist daughter, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlett. From Kirshenblatt-Gimlett's initial cajoling of her father into painting scenes of his childhood for her, to their eventual co-authorship of this book, everything about how Mayer Kirshenblatt tells his story to us, the reader, is influenced by his personal and professional relationship with his daughter. Narrated mostly in the first person, this is nevertheless the story of a family coming to terms with its collective stories. As Kirshenblatt-Gimlett puts it herself, "to say that *They Called Me Mayer July* is 'entirely in Mayer's voice is not the whole story because the text is anything but a monologue. Quite the contrary: it is profoundly dialogic, but without our forty-year conversation appearing as such in the text" (p. 368).

The narrative of Kirshenblatt's childhood in Opatów is funny and folkloric:

I used to chum around with Khamele and his sister Ester. Every time I went to see Ester, she was a different person. She always acted out the characters of the latest book she was reading. One day she was Anna Karenina, another day she was the heroine of *War and Peace* or *Les Miserables*. I was a handsome young lad with blond hair and blue eyes. You wouldn't believe it, but I had beautiful curly hair. The parents of some of my girlfriends objected to their daughters going out with me because I didn't wear a hat. So we were already a bit assimilated. Ester's father didn't like me because one day he saw me bareheaded on the street. So he discouraged Ester from seeing (me?) him. Whenever I wanted to see her, I had to make sure that he was not home. He always came home for lunch. Even from the street I could hear him slurping his soup. One day while I was visiting, he came home unexpectedly. We heard him coming up the stairs. Ester pushed me out to the balcony. They lived right next to the ancient city gate along *Ostrovts'er veyg* and were neighbours with the Trojsters, who were harnessmakers. After about five minutes out there, it suddenly started pouring and I got soaked. We were more careful after that (p. 48).

Personal stories are constantly interwoven with the physical and conceptual geography of the town, and Kirshenblatt seems well aware of the charming appeal of his childhood. While the book is peppered with accounts of poverty, community politics, personal tragedies, and sometimes harmonious, and at other times tense Jewish-Polish relations, the majority of these anecdotes have a whimsical nostalgia to them. Kirshenblatt illustrates these tales not only with colourful paintings of scenes from his childhood, but also with instructions on how to build makeshift whistles, maps of the town, and other such relics. Much of

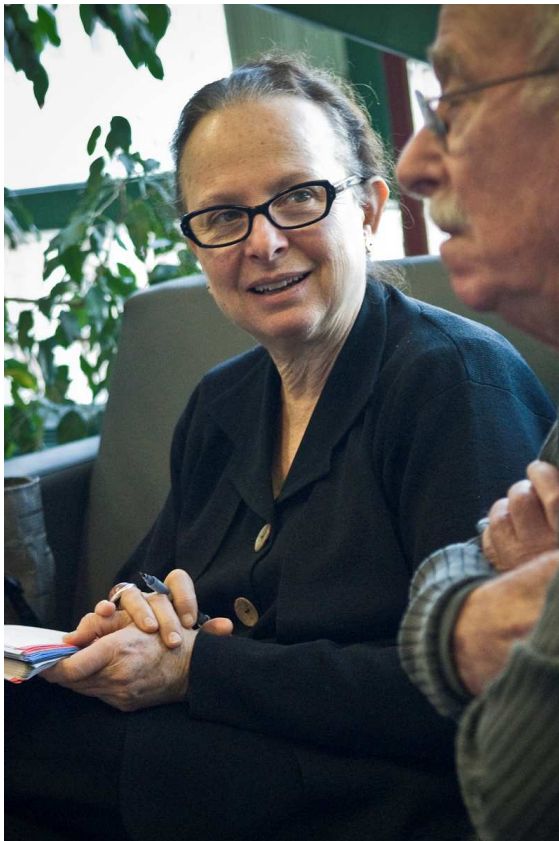


Whimsical language and images complement each other (photo by David Ward)

the strength of this book lies in Kirshenblatt's ability to weave an engaging tale; it seems clear that it emerged out of a father-daughter collaboration, as the tone feels fatherly and comforting, like a good Yiddish folktale. There is mischief and adventure around every corner. One might wonder what the tone of Kirshenblatt's writing might have been had he not been writing for his daughter; his choice of whimsical language seems to fit this particular dynamic both because he is speaking to his daughter, and because his daughter is a folklorist. The intergenerational dynamic is also affected by the transnationalism of immigrant families such as the Kirshenblatts, as father is speaking of a place that is far, far away from daughter's own experience, imbuing it with the magical quality of a faraway land across the ocean (and back several decades).

The exception to all of this whimsy is found in his repeated references to the Holocaust, a subject which sneaks up on the reader in the midst of otherwise innocuous passages. These often emerge as a means through which Mayer may explain what happened to a particular character or feature of the town; for instance he tells a story about a girl to whom he almost lost his virginity, noting that he later found out that she had converted to Catholicism during the war, and never admitted that it was out of fear of persecution. Mayer Kirshenblatt does not directly know the Opatów of the Holocaust, as he was in Canada when the

community of his childhood was decimated. But nevertheless, its memory looms large, and the narrative often transitions sharply, such as a section where Kirshenblatt goes from describing his visits to his grandfather's village to descriptions of reading his father's letters after the war that describe his family's demise. He shares dark and haunting paintings of his imaginings of these atrocities which he does not himself remember, and which sit alongside paintings of his actual memories. Actual memory is thereby influenced by indirect memory, and both interact in the pages of this book. In this way, the nostalgia evoked by his descriptions of everyday life in Opatów are hopelessly political - they are at once about a time before the Holocaust, but at the same time they are very much about the Holocaust, and specifically about resisting the erasure of memory of Jewish life in Poland. This is more subversive than it may initially appear. And continuing on the theme of father speaking to daughter, he is describing to her a demise which he did not see, of a place which she did not see. The gaps in both of their memories are interacting here.



Father and daughter at Concordia University in November 2008 (photo by David Ward)

It is no coincidence that among Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlett's other projects, she is one of the pivotal figures putting together the exhibitions at the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews, which is slated to open in Warsaw in 2011 (<http://www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/>). I heard Kirshenblatt-Gimlett speak about this museum in two different contexts this past fall, and she has a keen interest in finding ways to start discussions about Jewish history in Poland, both within the shadow of the Holocaust, but not defined by it. The lengthy history of Polish Jewry should be about more than their status as victims, especially if we are interested in reversing the erasure of memory that began with the Holocaust. Nostalgia and folklore, in the context of *They Called Me Mayer July*, are a means of resistance, by serving as an antidote to the wartime destruction

of heritage, as well as the postwar silence of Polish Jews, too pained by their experiences to be willing to remember that there was a Jewish Poland before they were hit with catastrophe. According to his daughter, Kirshenblatt himself originally refused her exultations to paint pre-war Opatów, because “Poland was a bad memory” (p. 362). Here, it is again clear that the stories, paintings, and reflections in the book are a product of forty plus years of dialogue between a father and his daughter - a father struggling to contextualize his memories due to their abrupt interruption and the pain that followed, and a daughter interested in finding ways to express those memories as a means of developing a more nuanced and ethical relationship between Jews, Poland, and the Holocaust.

I saw Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlett present the book last fall as part of the same series through which I heard about her work with the museum, organized by Concordia University’s Centre for Ethnographic Research and Exhibition in the Aftermath of Violence (CEREV - <http://cerev.concordia.ca/>). With a slick PowerPoint presentation consisting of short vignettes from throughout the book, Kirshenblatt-Gimlett narrated the context of each painting, and then handed it over to her father to explain



Performing the book at the CEREV talk (photo by David Ward)

particular paintings or recite particular anecdotes. Like the book, the presentation was charming and evocative, and thoroughly performative. Kirshenblatt-Gimlett tried to keep her father to the script, while he repeatedly interjected to correct her anecdotes or make another point. I left the presentation wondering about the ethics of father-daughter co-authorship particularly in the context of an academic working with an artist. Kirshenblatt-Gimlett appeared to be form, while her father appeared to be content. She provided the structure that his stories needed to fit into. Was this how it worked?

I listened to their talk and read *They Called Me Mayer July* with interest, not just for the evocative portrait of Jewish Polish small-town life and the politics that this portrait raises, but also for these questions about the problematics of such a co-authored text. As the daughter of Polish Jews who immigrated to Canada in the 1960s and 1970s, I have long had ambitions of a similar project myself, but I have trouble separating the various stories; first, the story of my family's life, death, and exit from Poland, and second, the story of negotiating a past which is not mine but which has nevertheless had a clear impact on my life. How can I help my father, for instance, write his own story without acknowledging my role in it? At the same time, how can I avoid the narcissism of a second generation child assuming ownership over experiences that she is so distant from? How does one co-author in those circumstances, and is real co-authorship possible? At first I found the almost singular focus on telling Mayer's story, without reference to who was organizing and editing those words, disingenuous, especially given the experience of having seen the duo present in public together. But reading Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlett's afterword – that seems to self-consciously be an afterword rather than a foreword – I began to see her reasoning; she states that she has made a conscious decision to avoid writing a book like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (Pantheon Press, 1986), where the story is about writing the story. Aiming for a more subtle form of self-reflexivity, and in the interest of putting Kirshenblatt's paintings and memories in the spotlight, his daughter happily relegates herself to the afterword. Nevertheless, it is still significant that Kirshenblatt-Gimlett is the one making the choice to be the afterword; again, she is form, while he is content. Perhaps these are the limits of co-authorship? Or, I wonder if I find myself overanalyzing the family dynamics at play here - if father and daughter are comfortable with this arrangement, which is certainly respectful to both of them, then perhaps it is not as problematic as it may initially seem. When co-authorship and familial relationships come together, it seems clear that collaboration will never fit some textbook model, but rather as long as each author has their space and is transparent about the process of negotiating it (which both of them certainly are throughout this work), then perhaps we needn't worry. The interaction of both authors is clearly pivotal to the texture of this work, whatever its difficulties.



Chatting after the talk (photo by David Ward)

All in all, *They Called Me Mayer July* is both an interesting contribution to a rich Jewish tradition of folklore and storytelling, as well as a thoughtful means of reflecting on a heritage that was mostly lost. It is also a means of starting a conversation about a heritage which has been taboo until recently; the conversation happens between father and daughter, between Polish Jews and North American Jews, between Holocaust survivors and non-survivors. While struggling with the limits of co-authorship, its creation, which emerges out of an intergenerational familial dialogue, is nevertheless evident, and it is stronger for it.