A Father Tells His Story

By Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEXANDER AKSELER

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett began formally interviewing her father, Mayer Kirshenblatt, 40 years ago, while taking a folklore course. He had grown up in Poland, before immigrating to Toronto in 1934, and he had many stories of Jewish life in his small Polish town before the war.

When he retired early, at age 59, after a serious illness, his daughter—who by then had written her doctoral dissertation on traditional storytelling in the Toronto Jewish community—began encouraging him to paint what he could remember of his childhood, to bring to life the detailed scenes he had been describing to her for so many years. He responded, trying instead hobbies like collecting clocks and repairing and refinishing antique furniture. But nothing held his interest, and he became depressed.

Ms. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes a turning point in 1990, when she and her husband, Max Gimblett, and her parents were touring New Zealand. "While driving in torrential rain through a gorge, with the road falling away, our hearts racing and our knuckles white, I overheard my mother murmur: 'Mayer, why don't you paint the kitchen? Do it for Barbara. She'll use it in her work.' Doris knew that, of all the scenes Mayer had described to me over the years, my favorite was the kitchen. Little did we suspect that for the rest of the trip through New Zealand's alps and fiords and tempestuous rain forests, without saying a word to anyone, he was imagining, in his mind's eye, exactly how he would paint the kitchen of his childhood. "The floodgates opened, and he started painting his memories of life in Apt.

As he painted scenes of the house where he grew up, the people he knew, the town's synagogues, streets, marketplace, and surrounding countryside, he and his daughter—by then a professor at New York University teaching courses on Jewish performance, folklore, and ethnography—continued to talk. The book that would become They Called Me Mayer July was emerging. "The voice of the text is the voice of our collaboration," Ms. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes in the book's afterword:

"As I began to compile the manuscript from the transcribed interviews and Mayer's pithy writings, I decided that the book's text would be entirely in Mayer's voice and that its structure would arise from an internal logic... in the tangled network of stories and images that he had created. What resulted is more pictoresque than bildungsroman, They Called Me Mayer July is episodic. It is made up of sparse anecdotes told in the 'realm of living speech,' digressions into the practical workings of the world... This is Walter Benjamin's art of the storyteller, the man who could let the week of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story."

... I started painting in 1990, when I was 73 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." She is a folklorist, an anthropologist, and she would beg me: "Would you please, please paint what you remember?"" What do you mean, paint?"

"Paint, just go ahead, Daddy, and paint. I know you can do it. Please do it."

So, on my 50th wedding anniversary, when she came to see me in Toronto, I had painted my mother's kitchen in Opatów (Apt, in Yiddish), the Polish town where I grew up. By then my wife had been urging me for 10 years to paint. My daughter's husband is an artist, and he kept buying me art supplies.

In 1981, we were in Boca Raton, Fla., for the winter. We were staying in Century Village, a huge complex, which was mostly for seniors. There were lots of activities: movies, lectures, swimming, and stamp collecting. I was bored, so I wandered into an art class. There were about 10 or 12 people and an instructor. She put a few things on the table, and we would draw. I drew a lot of green peppers. I call this my green-pepper period.

A few years later, my wife signed me up for a painting class, a life drawing class, at our local Jewish Community Center, where we did aerobics four times a week. She said, "It's paid for, whether or not you attend." So, I went, but I didn't last long because the model moved so quickly from pose to pose, I couldn't finish the drawing. My daughter told me to forget about the classes and paint from memory. The teacher also encouraged me to work on my own.

At the same time, in the steam room at the gym or..."
in a corner of the health club, I'd get together with my buddies. Most of the people there are Holocaust survivors. Within five or 10 minutes of any conversation, whether the topic was politics, women, this or that, we would be back in the concentration camps, on the march, in the railroad cars, in the bush with the partisans. It was as if there were no life before the war, so overshadowed had their memories become by the pain they suffered. I lost many members of my family in the Holocaust, but God spared me from living through that horror myself. He also blessed me with a wonderful memory.

I consider myself a storehouse of memories. My project is to paint pre-war life in a small Jewish town in Poland. That's what really interests me. The way I paint is important, of course, but the most important thing is to get a subject. I have to get a subject. I think about it. I remember. It just comes to me. The subjects I decide to paint are those that have a story to tell. I draw mainly from memory. I also paint stories I heard from my Agt friends or read in the Agt chronicles, the memorial book for my town. Regrettably, I have very little imagination. I can only paint what is in my memory.

The places I remember exist no more. They are only in my head, and when I die they will disappear with me. I paint these scenes as I remember them, as a little boy looking through the window.

Mayer Kirshenblatt is a painter, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is a professor of performance studies at New York University. This essay is an excerpt from their book They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust, to be published next month by the University of California Press and the Judah L. Magnes Museum, Berkeley. An exhibition of Mr. Kirshenblatt's paintings will be at the museum from September 9 through January 13, 2008.