

A daughter's afterword

Dos epele falt nit vayt fun boym.
The apple does not fall far from the tree.

Yiddish proverb



Self-portrait with parents and brothers

I began interviewing my father in 1967. Is this the way to talk to a parent? If interviewing is “listening with love,” I have been listening with love for almost four decades.¹ Not that I was not listening before I began interviewing. As a child I listened to detailed explanations of everything from combustion engines to where babies come from. “The womb is a pear-shaped object,” my father would begin. “Do you know how a car works?” he would ask. “What about the stock market?” And, so it would go, especially during the drive from his paint and wallpaper store in downtown Toronto to our home in the suburbs. I still listen to my father’s explanations. While driving across the Brooklyn Bridge during a recent visit to New York, he launched into an excursus on the engineering of suspension bridges, followed by another on military bridges.

Something happened in 1967, however, that was to change the course of our conversations forever. That November, during the Thanksgiving break, I came home with Y. M. Sokolov's *Russian Folklore*, which I was reading for a course. Sitting at the kitchen table, I read aloud from the chapter on funeral ceremonies: “In order to protect themselves from the return of the dead man, they would lay him out on a table or bench...invariably with his feet toward to

outer door...In the window, water was placed in some kind of vessel, and a towel was hung up, so that the soul of the dead man might wipe itself.”² “Jews did that too,” my parents remarked. Thus began the interviews that I was to conduct, with both my parents, for the rest of our lives.

My parents were born in Poland during World War I. My father grew up in Opatów (Apt in Yiddish), a small provincial city near Kielce, and my mother, Doris (Dvoyre) Shushanoff lived in the city of Brest-Litovsk (Brisk in Yiddish, Brześć nad Bugiem in Polish, and Brest, capital of Belarus today).³ Doris immigrated to Toronto with her family in 1929 and Mayer arrived in 1934. They met in Toronto and married in 1940. I was born two years later, during World War II, during which my father served in the Canadian army. He was stationed in the Northwest Territories; that’s where he learned how to build a military bridge. Because restrictive quotas during the twenties severely restricted immigration to the United States, Jews leaving Eastern Europe after that point settled elsewhere, many of them in Canada. Jews from my father’s region concentrated in Toronto, where they formed hometown societies, or *landsmanshaftn*, and bought cemetery plots so they could be buried together. The immigrant neighborhood in downtown Toronto, even as late as the fifties, was reminiscent of the Lower East Side decades earlier.

That was where we lived from 1947 to 1955, amidst a host of Jewish institutions. Immediately across the street from our home on the corner of Cecil and Ross Streets were the *Moyshvev zekeynim* (old folks’ home) and the *Folksfareyn*, a charitable organization that received and resettled recently arrived “displaced persons,” as survivors of the Holocaust were known then. Their kids—I remember one little boy in a brown velvet outfit, with white ribbed stockings, his long curls not yet shorn—spoke only Yiddish, and that was the language in which we played. Up and down the street were *shtiblekh*, little prayer houses, in the converted ground floor flats of brick houses. At either end of Cecil Street were grand synagogues: the *Ostrovster shul* and the Henry Street *shul*. A few blocks away was the Kensington Market, with its Jewish bakeries, dairy stores, kosher butchers, fishmongers, and produce stalls.

Down the block from our house were Jewish schools, among them the *Farband shule* (Labor Zionist) and the *Perets shule*, a secular Yiddish school named for the great Yiddish writer Y.L. Peretz. A few blocks away was the D’Arcy Street Talmud Torah, a modern orthodox school that admitted both boys and girls—and still inflicted corporal punishment.⁴ These schools met five days a week, Monday through Thursday, from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. and Sunday, from 10:00 a.m. until noon. I moved from one to the other and wasn’t happy in any of them. The best part of Orde Street Public School, also a short walk from home, was night school, which my father and I attended together; while I learned to sew pleated skirts and reversible vests, he took a landscape painting class.

As I approached adolescence, my parents thought it best to move "up north" to Downsview, a brand new suburb. Our house was still under construction when we first visited it, and the streets were still unpaved. This was another world altogether, too quiet and remote for my liking. The moment I could, which was during my second year at the University of Toronto, where I was an English major by default, I moved right back downtown and rented a room within a block of where we had lived when I was child.

It was at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1965, that I found my calling. This occurred quite by accident, when I enrolled in Introduction to Folklore, taught by the legendary Alan Dundes, to fulfill a breadth requirement in the social sciences. Here at long last was a discipline that would let me bring all my interests together. Here was a field that valued what was extraordinary in “ordinary” people, celebrated the oldest members of a community, and

appreciated their accumulated wisdom, deep memory, and creative capacities late in life. This is how I discovered my own family and came to prepare for their aging.

That day at a suburban kitchen table reading passages from *Russian Folklore* led to a survey of Yiddish folklore in Toronto for the Centre for Folk Culture Studies at the National Museum of Canada (now the Canadian Museum of Civilization) and a doctoral dissertation on traditional storytelling in the Toronto Jewish community. As I learned more about the history of my chosen field, I found myself staring into an abyss. An entire generation of Yiddish folklorists had perished in the Holocaust. I decided to dedicate myself to bridging that chasm through my research and teaching.

During those years, the late sixties, my mother was more responsive to my questions than my father, who was busy running a business, six days a week, ten hours a day. He was younger then than I am now and he had precious little time to pursue his own interests—bushwhacking and sailing—let alone answer my questions. He was generally exhausted by the time I got to him at the end of the day and proved an unenthusiastic, though not uncooperative, "informant." Besides, I was competing for his attention with my two younger sisters, Elaine and Anne.

In 1975, Mayer suffered a serious illness that was to change the course of his life. He was only fifty-nine years old. Fearful of the responsibilities that would land on my mother's shoulders were he to fall ill again, he sold the business and retired early. He was now at loose ends. He collected clocks; we said he was hoarding time. He repaired and refinished antique furniture. He and my mother bought dining room sets at auctions; Mayer fixed them up and Doris resold them. Nonetheless, Mayer sank into a deep depression, which was unusual for him. This one lasted three years. We were very worried. I continued to interview him.

I also started encouraging (and then imploring) him to paint what he could remember of his childhood in Poland. But, despite my pleas and those of my mother, he refused. When I first started interviewing Mayer, he was not only busy, but also, he insisted, Poland was a bad memory, so much so that he would not join me when I made my first trip to Poland in 1981. A few years later, he had a change of heart and we returned to Poland together. As we approached Apt, towards the middle of our itinerary, it became clear that Mayer was apprehensive. He had planned on one roll of film for the entire trip and allowed fifteen minutes for Apt. Whereas during my first visit, his house was still standing, although I never drummed up the courage to enter the courtyard, this time we were too late: his childhood dwelling had been demolished and a new building was under construction.

For the next several years, the campaign continued. My husband, Max, who is an artist, supplied Mayer with paper, pastels, brushes, paint, canvas, and easel. These were his birthday and Father's Day gifts for almost ten years. But to no avail. The supplies accumulated in a closet, untouched. My mother was unrelenting. In desperation, she signed Mayer up for art classes at the local community center. When he protested, she told him flatly that since she had already paid for the classes and the fees were not refundable, he had no option. He attended the first few classes, but was unhappy: the nude model in the life drawing class changed poses too quickly, and the still life class was dull. His sketchbook is filled with charcoal drawings of onions and green peppers and the occasional sketch by the instructor, the sort of thing one might find in "how to draw" books. Mayer refers to this phase as his green pepper period. The results were disappointing and he was frustrated.

I continued to urge him simply to paint from memory without worrying about "technique." I knew that he could do it. I knew, not only from the interviews, but also from my childhood, that he was endowed with an unusual visual intelligence. When words failed, he instinctively turned to pencil and paper. With a quick diagram, he would clarify a spoken explanation. I also knew that he was artistic. There were the two little landscape paintings from that night class he took in the fifties at my public school. There were his interior decorating skills: he knew how to stencil walls and make any surface look like the wood of your choice—I once watched him grain enormous church doors. The beautiful bedroom that I shared with Elaine was the result of his handiwork: he painted the walls a deep royal blue and sewed the bright yellow curtains and matching bedspreads (the quilted tops had a circus pattern and the flounces were the same fabric as the curtains). He was just plain good at making things and we were the beneficiaries. He made me wooden educational toys. He showed me how to stencil Valentines and how to use toothpicks to make a scale model of an Indian village for a class project. But when it came to painting from memory, he was filled with doubt.

The turning point came in 1990. We had been touring New Zealand in a rented car, Max driving, me beside him, Mayer and Doris in the back. Max is a New Zealander, and we had always dreamed of taking my parents around the country. While driving in torrential rain through a gorge, with the road falling away, our hearts racing and our knuckles white, I overheard Doris 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 temperate 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.

As soon as we returned home, Mayer made a watercolor and then an acrylic painting of the kitchen. A few weeks later, Elaine and I catered a party for our parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary in her home. Mayer brought his easel and propped up the watercolor. Buoyed by the many compliments and his own amazement at what he had done, he began painting in earnest. He converted a room in his split-level bungalow into a studio. The moment he completed a painting he brought it into the living room and looked at it for several days. Gradually, he covered almost every wall of the house with paintings. As paintings accumulated, he converted another room into a storage area and built racks to hold the paintings. The bedrooms that Annie, Elaine, and I had once occupied were now full of paintings.

Doris encouraged friends and family to come to the house to see Mayer's paintings. She would serve tea, coffee, and cookies she had baked, and Mayer would take the guests from room to room and narrate the paintings. These little salons were her way of building Mayer's confidence, she explained. In short order, Mayer was exhibiting his work and giving slide lectures for schools, synagogues, community centers, hospitals, nursing homes, and senior centers, as well as for university classes and Yiddish cultural programs.

People started asking to buy paintings. Mayer was heartened by the interest, and Max stressed the professional satisfaction that would come with sales. I insisted that the collection had to stay together forever, and, to prevail, I proposed that Mayer make limited edition prints that he could sell. Max made arrangements at the Printmaking Workshop in Manhattan, established in 1948 by the visionary African American artist and master printmaker Robert Blackburn. Mayer came to New York for a week and, with a minimum of technical advice, made lithographs and engravings on his favorite themes: Purim, shaving the corpse, the water-carrier, the porter, and even a pair of lovers under a tree. He would later hand color some of the prints. He was intrigued

by the printmaking technologies, just as he had been fascinated by the goldsmith and watchmaker in Apt.

As Mayer continued to paint and print—he later made engravings on his own in Toronto—and as we continued to talk, our way of working started to change. Not only had he become more receptive to being interviewed. What had started out as my project was finally becoming his project. I soon realized that most of our interviews had been recorded before Mayer started painting and began taping his slide lectures—in English, Yiddish, and Polish. Then, in 1995, when we were in Cracow together for five weeks, we embarked on a new set of interviews. This time, with snapshots of the paintings before us, we talked about each and every painting that he had done.

Another turning point came in 1994, when Mayer exhibited his work in a solo exhibition at the Koffler Gallery at the Bathurst Jewish Community Center in Toronto and we needed to prepare captions quickly. It was impractical to do this from New York, as I needed to interview Mayer in front of the paintings. He soundly rejected the proposal that he just talk into a tape recorder to himself. Elaine, who was helping him with the exhibition, had the inspired idea of asking him to write the captions himself, which he promptly did. These little written versions of his stories had a charm of their own and, from that point on, I encouraged Mayer to write down what he could, however brief, even on topics we had already covered in interviews.

I would take a stack of paper, twenty or thirty sheets at a time, write a keyword on each sheet—railroad, electricity, poppy seeds, goose feathers, laundry, radio, cars, clocks, water, shoes—and ask Mayer to free associate and write down what came to mind. These concise texts often contained a little diagram or sketch—the flag that the Communists used to throw so it would wrap itself around the electrical and telephone wires, the little trough in which the goldsmith melted metal, or the belt with which his *kheyder* teacher Moyre Simkhe beat him mercilessly. So memorable was this beating (it left blue welts on his back) that Mayer included a little drawing to show precisely how the leather was attached to the brass ring that made the welts.

As I began to compile the manuscript from the transcribed interviews and Mayer's pithy writings, I decided that the text for *They Called Me Mayer July* would be entirely in Mayer's voice and that its structure would arise from an internal logic, yet to be discovered, in the tangled network of stories and images that he had created. What resulted is more picaresque than *Bildungsroman*. *They Called Me Mayer July* is made up of spare anecdotes told in the "realm of living speech," digressions into the practical workings of the world, and loose associative links. It is through their "chaste compactness" that these stories achieve their amplitude. This is Walter Benjamin's art of the storyteller: "the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story."

Once the manuscript was organized, I asked Mayer to read it and to mark whatever needed fixing. We then sat at the dining room table, day after day, going through the text page by page. Mayer would fill in gaps, puzzle over inconsistencies, clarify points, or elaborate descriptions. Sometimes he would dictate and I would take down his words; other times he would write a paragraph that I would incorporate and read back to him. Or, we would simply do another interview. When Mayer was uncertain, he would telephone his Apt friends in Toronto and New York. Sometimes they would come by the house and reminisce together.

Not everything that Mayer told me became a painting. He started with the kitchen because that was the room I was most interested in and, initially, he painted it for me. "After

doing the kitchen,” he explains, “I painted other scenes from inside my house and then I painted what happened outside my house with other people.” He moved from there to the courtyard, the street, the marketplace, the river, the countryside, and to other towns—Hża, his father’s birthplace, and Ostrowiec, the nearest train station. The geography of his painted world expanded to include school outings to historic sites in the environs—the twelfth-century Benedictine abbey at the top of Święty Krzyż mountain and the imposing ruin of Krzyżtopór, a seventeenth-century castle—and a famous porcelain factory in Ćmielów.

Mayer also worked in series. After doing the shoemaker, he went on to all the other trades; he did the same for the holidays and life cycle events. Or, he organized his subjects in sequences. Having shown Jadwiga washing the laundry in a wooden tub, he painted each subsequent step: rinsing the laundry in the stream, stealing the laundry, redeeming the laundry from the local mafia, and pressing the linens with a mangle. He painted episodes within a story: one painting showed a young man driving a stake into a grave in the cemetery at midnight on a dare and a second one showed him dead, slumped over the grave, the next morning.

As Mayer exhausted the memories that first came to mind, his search for new subjects took him to the orchard, where teenagers would gather on a Sabbath afternoon in nice weather and to intimacies that fathers do not generally share with their daughters. But I was now older than he was when I first started interviewing him in 1967 and no subject was off limits, neither in his paintings—whores appear in several market scenes—nor in his accounts of adultery, promiscuity, and his own early sexual experiences.

New topics for paintings and interviews continue to arise. A severe Toronto winter prompted us to note that the eternal season of Mayer’s Apt is spring and summer. We needed some winter paintings for the winter stories in the book. The result, in late 2004, was a series of lyrical winter scenes: skating on a frozen pond, sledding down a steep street, and riding in a horse-drawn sleigh. Soon after, in 2005, Mayer completed a painting of the annual arrival of a gypsy caravan in Apt, another of Buchiński’s inn, where gypsy musicians used to play, one about the Polish Boy Scouts, and two about Tishe b’Av, a day of mourning when Jews visit the graves of their relatives—and mischievous boys throw burrs at the girls. Next, he just told me, are a painting of the circus that used to come to town and another that will show his uncle’s corpse lying on the wooden washing board as it is being cleansed for burial.

Mayer has yet to paint his summers at Połaniec and Niekłań, where his family was in the forestry and timber business, or the abandoned glass factory in Ruda-Opalin, where he attended a two-week training course for young Zionist leaders. Despite his vivid stories and my urging, he has still not tackled the ship’s passage to Canada, though he has made his very first paintings set in Canada, all of them nature scenes from his army days in the Northwest Territories and his fishing expeditions in Northern Ontario.

It is to Apt, however, that he always returns. Thanks to the paintings, the Apt of memory was acquiring scale and light and, above all, that intangible quality of lived space. Until Mayer’s paintings all my images of Jewish life in Poland were black and white because all of them were from photographs. I had the privilege of working with the collection of 15,000 photographs of prewar Polish Jewish life at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research during the 1970s, when I collaborated with the late and beloved Lucjan Dobroszycki on *Image Before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland, 1864-1939*. That world, thanks to Mayer’s paintings, was now emerging in vibrant color.

For Mayer, Apt had become a memory palace. On an imaginary walk through the streets

of Apt, Mayer would call forth the memories attached to each of the city's topographical features: the old city gate, the church bell, the World War I monument, the market place, the military latrine, the synagogue, his father's leather store, his grandmother's grocery, the cemetery. As he literally filled in the picture, painting after painting, I started to feel myself inside the town, walking down its streets and entering its rooms. I needed to orient myself as a walker in the city and to ensure that the reader would be able to do the same. Mayer drew maps and took me through each street, house by house. He brought me into the courtyards, and together we moved from one apartment to another, precisely locating people and events.

There was another map at work as well, a map that children improvised when they ran around town with their hoops, floated paper boats in the gutter after a rain, and sledged down an icy street. In the absence of playgrounds and toys, besides the ones he made for himself, the entire town and its environs were there for the playful taking. Mayer's account of the Opatówka River, which runs around three sides of Apt, includes not only the water mill and the shallow area where women rinsed the laundry, but also the *shlizhe*, where boys slithered down a mossy wood slide along a steep drop in the riverbed, the *kanye*, a deep pool in the bend of the river where they swam, and the opening to the carp millpond, where they used to catch minnows.

Above all, Mayer's maps are about where things were done. While he had elaborated on the "doing" in our interviews, it was not until he began painting that the "where" emerged in all of its dimensionality. The stories now occupied space in a way they never had before. What had been locations indexed in a kind of shorthand—the cemetery, the military latrine, the *kheyder*, the market, the inn—were now spaces, and they were filled with objects and people and activities and information, much of which had never made it into the spoken stories.

In this way, we built a scaffold that became the conditioning context for remembering. The paintings became our compass, putting things in relation to one another in space better than spoken descriptions could. When someone's name came up, Mayer could now say, "You know, the kleptomaniac, they lived near the mill," as if I too had grown up in Apt.

How did Mayer come to know so much about his town and everything that went on there? How was it that he could describe in exquisite detail how to bridle a horse, press bed linen with a mangle, or make a brush, a barrel, or rope? How did he learn all about tanning leather, inflating cow bladders, extracting oil from rapeseeds, or harvesting carp? Not until I noticed a discrepancy between the seven grades of school he completed and his age at graduation—he was one year older than he should have been—did I understand. With a little prodding, Mayer confessed that he had failed a year of school. Though an avid reader, proud of his command of Polish, and obviously intelligent, he had never considered himself a particularly good student. "You failed a year of school?" I exclaimed in disbelief. "Yes," he retorted, "How do you think I got to know about everything in Apt? I played hooky! That's how I know all about the blacksmith, the chimney sweep, and the mason. That's how I know how they bred livestock, put out fires, and paved roads."

Mayer has a way of knowing the world that is breathtaking. He is my Diderot, Melville, and Rabelais. Roland Barthes, writing about Diderot's great 18th century *Encyclopédie*, remarked that the optimism of this prodigious work—the idea that everything about the world could be known and contained within its seventeen volumes of text and nine volumes of illustrations—derived at least in part from the transparency of an artisanal and mechanical universe about to be transformed by the industrial revolution. One could actually see how things worked. The same could be said of Mayer's town—a small world intensively observed—except that it was not industrialization, but the Holocaust, that ultimately transformed Apt. Today Opatów is a quiet

bedroom community of commuters whose occupations are no longer to be found in the workshops, small factories, and once bustling marketplace, but in nearby cities and the countryside. The economy of the region continues to depend on agriculture, industry, and small and medium businesses, while rural occupations and traditional handicrafts are now the focus of heritage tourism initiatives intended to revive the local economy. In 2000, an environmental partnership launched what they hoped would be an Opatów Fair featuring local products and specialties from along the “Amber Trail.” This effort to reinvigorate an historical trading root is imagined as a return to Opatów’s more vibrant economic past: “So let Opatów's Warsaw Gate welcome visitors, merchants, traders, farmers from far and wide and let Opatów once again be known for its famous Fairs.”⁵

Apt’s markets are vividly remembered in Mayer’s paintings, as are the techniques for making many of the things that were sold there. Like the plates of the *Encyclopédie*, Mayer’s paintings offer a tableau of the total scene, whether the workshop of the tailor or the smithy, and like the step-by-step illustrations in the *Encyclopédie*, Mayer’s drawings show each stage in making a shoe or casting a lead *dreydl*. Just as Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* enumerates the many trades, so too does Mayer in his descriptions, drawings, diagrams, and paintings of how to make cabinets, harnesses, barrels, bricks, rope, and wigs. He learned some of these things in school: how to bind a book, how to draw perspective, how to make a coat hanger. He learned other things through apprenticeship: how to install electricity. Most things he learned from close observation of craftsmen at work: the cobbler who lived next door; his school chum Maylakh, who inflated cow bladders and stretched animal skins; the Troysters, who upholstered furniture and repaired saddles in their front yard when the weather was nice. When his father ordered a bedroom set, Mayer watched the carpenter at each stage of the process.

“It is perhaps among the artisans that one should go to find the most admirable proofs of the sagacity, the patience, and the resources of the intellect,” writes Jean Le Rond d’Alembert in his “Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot.” This too was Mayer’s philosophy. With the town as his classroom, Mayer pursued a self-designed curriculum of gestural knowledge,⁶ embodied intelligence, and know-how connected to tools, materials, processes, and workspaces. Such informal learning is in the best tradition of soft mastery, which proceeds by watching and doing, trial and error. Soft mastery is the opposite of knowledge abstracted into textbooks and transmitted in the classroom through systematic instruction. Yet, when this inquisitive boy appears in the paintings, as he often does, it is always in his blue “uniform,” a reminder of the hard mastery of the school classroom—even when he is playing hooky. Today, in the unique world created by his paintings, the boy in blue who helps the smithy with the bellows or watches the brush makers through a window, has also become a child witness to a remembered world.

Above all what Mayer knows, he knows in relation to people. What he presents are not simple facts. They are *felt* facts. The tailor is no generic tailor, but *der amerikaner shnayder*, the American tailor, because he spent some time in America and brought the latest fashions back to Apt. But that is not all. He had a hunchbacked daughter whose wedding, moments before she was about to give birth, is another story and another painting. The cobbler is no typical cobbler. All his sons died at birth except the last one, who was dressed in white pajamas—until the day the Nazis took him to his death—because they hoped that the Angel of Death would be fooled by the white clothing, which looks like a burial shroud, think he was dead, and overlook him. The brush-maker had a callus the size of a silver dollar on his chest from a lifetime of pressing his body against the boring machine. And, while Mayer remembers in detail how the watchmaker repaired timepieces, what he recalls most vividly is his phobia of cats. This is a world not only to be known, but also to be felt. It is the affective charge that gives to memory its luminosity.

Unlike the *Encyclopédie*, Mayer has not taken the world apart at its joints to create an inventory and alphabetical catalogue. True, he has made drawings of objects—a tin whistle, a willow *shoyfer*—in stages, from start to finish. More often, tools and processes and things are embedded in a densely textured social world, one that he remembers associatively and that opens up like a flower with each telling. Thus, *Boy with a Herring*, a self-portrait, occasions an anatomical description of each element of Mayer's public school "uniform," starting with the hat, proceeding to the collar, the plus fours, and finally to the red ski boots with their brass eyelets and yellow laces and the two pairs of socks, one pair rolled down. But, the boy in this uniform is also carrying a herring, which prompts an equally detailed account of everything from the preciousness of newspaper to recipes for making a piquant sauce from the herring's sperm. But, that is not all. It was in this outfit that Mayer, on his first day in Toronto, chased a fire engine. He gave up after about a mile, when it dawned on him that Toronto must be bigger than Apt.

Jennifer Romaine, a wonderful theater artist who has collaborated with Mayer on a toy theater, *The White Pajamas*, based on his stories and paintings, commented that Mayer's minutely detailed descriptions—how, after the kitchen floor was scrubbed so many times with a special cleanser, it acquired the sheen of burnished ivory—reminded her of *Moby Dick*. There was nothing about the great whale that did not fascinate Ishmael (and Melville), and there is nothing about Apt that does not fascinate Mayer, whether it be how to make mortar or cure hides. The first chapter of *Moby Dick* opens with Ishmael instructing the reader to "circumambulate of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon" the island of Lower "Manhattoes," precisely the place where I am writing these words. What will the reader find? "Mortal men fixed in ocean reveries." Mayer, who for many years used celestial navigation to sail the Great Lakes, crosses an ocean of time. The reveries of his childhood world also include a whale, the Leviathan of the Messianic banquet, which is the subject of several of his paintings.

Mayer's capacity to describe in detail is matched by my own fascination with the fine grain of his memory. I am my father's daughter. As a teenager, I spent months teaching myself the intricacies of the card loom, ancient precursor of the Jacquard loom and the computer. I spent an entire summer learning complicated Inuit, Bella Coola, and Torres Strait Islands string figures. Until my very last year of high school, I contemplated a career in home economics—to the patient consternation of my father—because I thought, mistakenly, that I would be spending my days cooking and sewing, not doing food chemistry in a laboratory. Knowing how things work—and knowing how to make them work—is a joy that I share with Mayer, and some of the fine detail in *They Called Me Mayer July* has more to do with my obsessions, food being one, than his. But to take pleasure in *explaining* how things work, you need a partner. I was that partner. Together, we explored all the parts of the whale that is Apt.

"I always go to sea as a sailor," writes Ishmael. This could be said to be Mayer's philosophy. He has often said of himself that he is a doer, not a watcher; he likes to be a participant and active observer, not a voyeur. He says he has no imagination, by which he means that he is more interested in the "made" than in the "made up," although he has painted angels, ghosts, and mythical beasts. He describes himself architecturally as a "storehouse of memories," and while he says he can only paint what he remembers, his idea of memory is capacious enough to include legends that he heard as a child or read in the Apt memorial book about the Jewish consort of King Kazimierz the Great, the monk who encountered a stag in the forest with a fragment of the cross caught in its antlers, and the shaving of the corpse. He has also painted events he never witnessed, but only heard about, notably the execution of his parents' families by the Nazis, a subject he was only able to tackle after seeing Goya's *The Shootings of the Third of*

May, 1808, at the Prado. After standing in front of that painting for almost an hour, Mayer turned to Max and said, “I know now how to paint what happened to my father’s family.”

Mayer’s disclaimer notwithstanding, memory and imagination go together. His capacity to find the extraordinary in the ordinary is the form that his imagination takes. We might call this kind of imagination extrospective because it is more concerned with the palpable world than with interiority. What makes Mayer’s stories memorable is precisely that they do not force “the psychological connection of events” upon the reader (or the listener); this is a hallmark of the art of the storyteller as Benjamin understands it.⁷ When Mayer says, “What I am trying to do basically is not to glorify myself, but to portray life as it was,” he points to what makes *They Called Me Mayer July* an extrospective autobiography. It is a prime example of the “dependence of the self for wholeness on its surroundings,” in John Dewey’s words.⁸ Mayer’s account differs from the autobiographies that the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research had hoped to solicit from Jewish youth in Poland during the 1930s through a series of autobiography contests.⁹ What YIVO wanted were autobiographies that would yield insights of psychoanalytic value, the better to understand a generation that saw little hope for a future in Poland. The more introspective, the better. Mayer could easily have been a contestant; he was in Poland at the time and the right age to enter the contest. But would he have won a prize?

The distinction between extrospective and introspective, while useful, quickly dissolves, for the material world as lived has a way of exceeding its concreteness: “A house that has been experienced is not an inert box,”¹⁰ as Gaston Bachelard writes. The experienced house, however extrospectively described, has the capacity to “become the topography of our intimate being.” Notice the doorways and windows in Mayer’s paintings, which often lead to mysterious spaces, rather than to precisely defined locations in Apt, suggesting a psychic topography yet to be charted. For all its discomforts—damp walls, frigid winter nights, the outhouse, no running water—the house in which Mayer grew up is described in fine detail in painting after painting and story after story: the stenciling of the walls, construction of the oven, repair of the ceiling, and working of shutters and locks. By day and by night, whether viewed from the door or from the opposite side of the room, Mayer’s home is a vital space intensely inhabited. In Bachelard’s words, “by remembering ‘houses’ and ‘rooms,’ we learn to ‘abide’ within ourselves.”¹¹

Mayer’s way of knowing the world may account in part for his ability to remember, for there is something intrinsically mnemonic about his bodily engagement with an intelligent material universe. Its relational logic makes it memorable, whether the articulation of parts, the workings of a mechanism, the entailment of steps in a process, the arrangement of things in space, or the connection of a thing, process, or space to a vivid person. There is also something intrinsically mnemonic in his ability to see the potential for a good story in the vicissitudes of daily life and idiosyncrasies of those around him and to organize experience into crisp vignettes. Even his descriptions of things, tools, and machines are narratives, and they too are endowed with a poetics of their own—if we agree with Barthes, writing about the images in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*, “to define Poetics as the sphere of the infinite vibrations of meaning, at the center of which is placed the literal object.”¹²

I had heard many of Mayer’s stories many times. When you talk for forty years about the same subject, vast as it might be, “repetition” is inevitable. Children and folklorists prize repeated tellings. Trained to value all the versions and variants equally, I accumulated many tellings during our conversations over the years. When Mayer painted the same subjects several times, it was either to “replace” a painting that he had given to a family member or to “improve” on a previous version, contrary to the received wisdom that the work of self-taught artists does not change over time. But, when he told the stories over again, he was neither improving them nor simply

repeating them. He was performing them, each time in different circumstances. While such variations might disconcert the historian, they delight the folklorist, for the “truth” that I was after was the truth of Mayer’s way of knowing the world, his way of giving shape to his experiences in words and images.

I’ve always felt myself blessed to have been raised in an environment—the immigrant neighborhood of my childhood, my family, their friends—suffused with an East European Jewish sensibility and fed by a spring so close to the source. During the early years of my research, I interviewed not only my father, but above all my mother, whose repertoire of parables and proverbs, learned from her mother and deployed with stunning psychological insight, were a testament to her social grace.¹³ She was a treasure trove of traditional wisdom, and I recorded everything she could remember. I interviewed her younger brother, Motl, the best raconteur of all by acclamation. I interviewed my grandmother, Mayer’s mother. And, quite by chance, when Sylvia, my mother’s oldest sister, asked Marian Nirenberg, a cousin, to sing her favorite songs from the Old Country, I discovered an extraordinary traditional singer right in my own family and recorded all her songs.¹⁴ Although Mariam passed away, her voice still fills my parents’ kitchen, thanks to these recordings. My mother, who has lost most of her vision and much of her memory, finds it hard to follow a conversation, movie, or television program. But, when she hears Mariam’s voice, as she does most mornings at the kitchen table, she remembers all the songs and sings along, never tiring of the repetition.

At family gatherings, my father and uncles, many of them expert raconteurs, would regale one another with hilarious stories and jokes, many of them not in the best of taste.¹⁵ I had learned from Mikhail Bakhtin and Gershon Legman to prize the Rabelaisian for its imaginative energy and rebelliousness, for the world upside down. Even as a young girl, I was not sent out of the room when my father and his brothers told risqué stories. I heard everything. The spirit was down to earth and never prudish, though not all members of my family approved of the ribaldry. A constant stream of new anecdotes reached us from the salesmen and customers who came into my father’s store and from my uncles, who heard the latest jokes while on the road selling furniture or women’s fashions. Then there were the “classics,” largely stories about the immigrant experience that had stood the test of time and whose creative elaboration made each retelling an event unto itself.

Toni Morrison implores the blind old woman: “Think of our lives and tell us your particularized world. Make up a story. Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.”¹⁶ While Morrison beseeches the blind woman to “speak the language that tells us what only language can: how to see without pictures,” Mayer’s stories unfold in images and words, sometimes in parallel, sometimes complementing each other, sometimes independently. They chart the porous boundaries between himself and the world and, at times, his imaginative fusion with the town of his youth.¹⁷

Whatever their relation, the paintings and stories treat time differently. The Mayer of the paintings is almost always of the same indeterminate age, rarely younger or older, always a school boy in blue. True, Mayer appears as a baby in a cradle in the scene of his mother after she gave birth to his brother, but this is exceptional. Many of the paintings are inscribed “Opatów, 1934,” including scenes that occurred repeatedly over the course of many years, as if to say that the clock stopped in 1934, the point beyond which there would be nothing to remember. Virtually all of Mayer’s seventeen years in Poland seem to be compressed into the year of his departure; even a domestic scene that includes his father, who left Poland in 1928, is dated 1934.

Mayer's paintings of historical subjects, especially legends, occupy a deep undated past, while his holiday paintings mark recurring moments in the circle of liturgical time. It is when he speaks, however, that time has not only duration and recurrence, but also passage. The time of the spoken narratives is marked above all by the inevitability of leaving Poland for a better future elsewhere, and in that inevitability is the ultimate significance of the year 1934, which he keeps inscribing on the paintings. His approach to time is one of the ways that Mayer expresses who he was then in relation to what he hoped to become and became (and is still becoming). Those relations, implicit in the paintings, are elaborated in the spoken accounts.

Never self-sufficient, Mayer's paintings are quite literally conversation pieces. Mayer does not intend the paintings to stand alone. They are, each and every one, an occasion for a conversation between the artist and the viewer. Mayer comes to know himself—and we come to know him—through the stories he tells in conversation. Accordingly, *The Called Me Mayer July* is made up of spare anecdotes told in the “realm of living speech,” digressions into the practical workings of the world, and loose associative links. It is through their “chaste compactness” that these stories achieve their amplitude.

More picaresque than *Bildungsroman*, *They Called Me Mayer July* is episodic. It took considerable work to connect these luminous dots in what was for me still a dark landscape. Only as I was assembling the manuscript did I realize that seemingly unconnected cameos were about the same person or about people related to one another or that different events took place in the same location. It was as if Apt was in pieces and the pieces scattered randomly across the uncharted terrain of Mayer's memory. Romaine encouraged us to think of those pieces as “vibrants” of a world alive in memory, rather than as fragments of a lost one.

It has been said that all portraiture is self-portraiture and *They Called Me Mayer July* is no exception. It is at once the portrait of a town, its inhabitants, a boy who delighted in their idiosyncrasies, and the man he became, and perhaps even the daughter with whom he collaborated. Many of Mayer's paintings are closer to what Richard Brilliant calls “ethnographic portraits,” because they exhibit a “narrow range of physiognomic variation,” but considerable detail of other kinds, like the rope around the water-carrier's waist, the red kerchief in his pocket, and the corners of his coat tucked under his belt so they are out of his way.¹⁸

While the water-carrier in this painting is unnamed and this painting is not strictly speaking a portrait—for an image to be a portrait in the technical sense, it must portray an actual individual—the image occasions spoken portraits of named water-carriers such as Ludwik. To compete with this tall Polish man, who ordered extra large buckets from the tinsmith, all the other water-carriers were forced to carry oversized buckets, even though buckets of the shortest ones, like Duvid *vaser-treyger* (David Water-carrier), almost dragged on the ground. When Ludwik does appear in a painting, Mayer has written his name on his shirt to distinguish him from the other water-carriers in the scene, as if to say that Ludwik is who is by virtue of his relationship to them. Once individualized, a type becomes a character, if not in the painting itself then in conversation.

Apt was a treasure trove of local characters with memorable peculiarities. Tshotshe Rosalya was a fashion plate who loved bold floral prints and big hats and is shown in all her finery. Malkala Drek (Malkala Shit), a lovely woman, acquired this unfortunate moniker (and her problems finding a husband) when she accidentally fell into the military latrine. In her portrait, Mayer escorts her home after a visit to his mother. The key to the portrait of Laybl Tule, a flour porter weighted down with a heavy sack, is the little boy in blue a few steps behind him: the story occasioned by this portrait is about what Mayer's mother did to stop him from following Laybl

Tule around. With the exception of one engraving—a self-portrait that includes his parents and three brothers—Mayer’s portraits are never heads or busts, but always full figures, almost always standing, often front and center. The one formal portrait he painted is actually a painting of a portrait: it shows *klezmerim* sitting for their photograph in front of a painted backdrop in the photographer’s studio.

That words are necessary is not a mark of the image’s insufficiency but of Mayer’s distinctive way of distributing the story across the many occasions of its telling, both spoken and painted. These portraits, like all of Mayer’s paintings, not only *tell*, but also ask *to be told*. Like the itinerant *patuas* of Bengal, who unroll their painted scrolls and perform the stories visualized on them, Mayer narrates his images, whether they are hanging on the walls of his home, projected on a screen, or captured in snapshots that can be passed from hand to hand. The paintings are not illustrations and the stories are not captions. They are not versions of one another. Rather, different parts of the story are told in different ways in different media to form a whole that is greater than could be achieved in words or images alone.

In a letter dated June 6, 1982, Mayer wrote to tell me that he had carefully packed the porcupine he made from an intact eggshell and toothpicks, and that he hoped this time it would arrive in one piece. He included a few Yiddish children’s rhymes in the letter and a P.S.: “This should make your day a happy day for you.” Indeed, it did. This book is the culmination of many such happy days.

¹ Dave Isay, the brilliant radio documentarian, defines

² *Russian Folklore* was published in 1941, the year that Sokolov died. The English translation from Russian appeared in 1950. Y.M. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore*, trans. Ruth Smith (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1966), p. 225.

³ On Apt, see: Apt yizker book, Hundert, Apt history book. Brisk was a more substantial city. Jews settled there from as early as the fourteenth century, the city was declared the capital of the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania in the sixteenth century, and it was part of Poland during the interwar years. The eponymous Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed there in 1918. Cite yizker book: *Brisk Edicion Aniversario*, Edited by: La Sociedad de Brest y alrededores, The Brisk Society, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1953; *Brisk de-Lita: Encyclopedya Shel Galuyot Brest Lit(owsk) Volume II*

The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora , Editors: E. Steinman, Jerusalem, 1958 (Y); **Brisk**, Lithuania

Encyclopaedia of the Jewish Diaspora

A Memorial Library of Countries and Community

Brest-Lita Volume

Edited by Eliezer Steinman

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In Yiddish. **Brzesc nad Bugiem (Belarus) .**

— *Brisk-de-Lita / ha-'orekh, Eli'ezer Shtainman*. Jerusalem, 1954.

— *Entsiklopedyah shel galuyot = Entsiklopedye fun di goles lender : Brisk de-Lita : oyfl. in Yidish / dershinen in Hebreish unter der redak. fun Eliezer Shtaynman*. Jerusalem, 1958.

⁴ Its name was Eitz Haim, which means tree of life.

⁵ Since 2000. On the history of APT SEE GERSHON HUNDERT.

⁶ Otto Sibum. *Journal of Technology Education Vol. 6 No. 1, Fall 1994* Diderot, the Mechanical Arts, and the *Encyclopédie*: In Search of the Heritage of Technology Education John R. Pannabecker1

⁷ p. 91 The Storyteller. Epigraph is pp. 108-109

⁸ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, NY: Perigee Books, 1934, 59

⁹ *Awakening Lives*

¹⁰ GBvii.

¹¹ GBxxxvii

¹² The Plates of the Encyclopedia, 34-35

¹³ Parable in Context

¹⁴ Nirenberg recording

¹⁵ Subject of my earliest work, citations

¹⁶ Morrison, The Nobel lecture in Literature, 1993. Knopf, 1994, p. 22. Also online at the nobel.org site

¹⁷ As Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps write,

¹⁸ *Brilliant*, p. 107