

## Storehouse of Memories

I was named after my great grandfather Mayer Makhel Gutmakher. Everybody in town had a nickname. Mine was Mayer *tamuz*, Mayer July, because July was the hottest month of the year. Mayer *tamuz* means Crazy Mayer. People get excited when it is hot and I was an excitable kid. I was always on the go. I was very smart and very hyperactive. Of course, they wouldn't call me Mayer *tamuz* to my face. They were afraid to do that. There were a bunch of Mayers. So to tell them apart each had a nickname. Which Mayer do you want? Mayer *tamuz*? Mayer *treyger*—Mayer the Porter? Or, Mayer *droybe*—Mayer the Goose Carcass?

I was just different, odd, to say the least, and still am to my contemporaries. Once I was a bit older, I stopped wearing a hat, which was pretty rebellious, as a Jewish male is supposed to cover his head. I spent quite a bit of time by myself doing whatever I was interested in. I used to fool around on the meadows, catch tiny sunfish in the creek, and try to derail trains. Khamele Vaynberg and I were the only ones to play in the carp pond in a punt. I would cover miles running with my hoop around the whole perimeter of the town in the evening after school.

What little free time I had was very precious. My school day was eight or nine hours long, six days a week. Even Saturdays and Jewish holidays were not completely free. We got two months vacation from public school, but only two weeks off from *kheyder*, the Jewish religious school. I finished the seven grades of public school and attended *kheyder* until I was about fourteen. I failed one grade of public school because I played hooky. I was too busy watching everything that was going on in town. I would spend hours on end observing the blacksmith and the tinsmith, the rope maker and the cooper, the mills and the carp ponds, and the town square on market day, when all the peasants came to town.

I was always an avid reader. My fondness for reading helped me learn English when I came to Canada in 1934. But books don't give you the kind of details that I remember—where people would go to the toilet or how we would wash. However much I learned in school or from books, it is my fate that almost everything in my life I had to learn by myself, including how to paint.

I started painting in 1990, when I was seventy-four 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 fiftieth wedding anniversary, when she came to see me in Toronto, I had painted my mother's kitchen in Apt. By then my wife had been urging me for ten years to paint. My daughter's husband is an artist and he kept buying me art supplies.

My wife had signed me up for a painting class, a life drawing class, at our local YMHA, Young Men's Hebrew Association, where we do 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 could not finish the drawing. Then, when I was in Florida, they were giving art lessons, still life. I drew a lot of green peppers. I call this my green pepper period. 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 YMHA or in a corner of the health club, I'd get together with my buddies. Most of the people are Holocaust survivors. Within five or ten 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 was 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 my memory. I also paint stories I heard from my Apt friends or read in the Apt chronicles, the memorial book for my town. Regrettably I have very little imagination. I don't dream or, if I do, the dream it is nothing I can paint. I can only paint what I lived through. I can only paint what is in my memory and in my head.

I paint these scenes as I remember them as a child—as a little boy looking through the window. That's the reason why, in my early paintings, the rooms are so huge and I am so small. What I am trying to do basically is not to glorify myself, but to portray life as it was. I hope it gives you some idea what life was like. We were living in very crowded conditions--we had two rooms--and we were considered middle class. I don't really remember any illustrated books or pictures on the wall at home. I don't remember ever going to a museum or seeing the great masters. But I did have a good art teacher in public school and he took us to the church to draw the windows, doors, and carvings. I also saw the painted walls of the synagogue.

The first painting that I did was my mother's kitchen. I did this theme because my daughter asked me. She's a folklorist and she wanted to know what my mother's kitchen looked like in the old country. I kept telling her over the years what things were like. After doing the kitchen, I painted other scenes from inside my house and then I painted what happened outside my house with other people. I never intended to get into this full time. When I saw the picture I did I saw I could do better, so I immediately painted another one, the same thing. It was a little better. I have painted several themes many times—the synagogue interior, *Simkhes toyre*, the Purim play, scenes in the *besmedresh*, Passover at my grandfather's, and the wedding. I want to improve on these particular subjects and I did improve.

When I am about to start a new painting, I think about it. I dream about it. I lie down and daydream about it. Memories keep flooding in and I just keep going. I sometimes have a hard time getting started. I'm afraid. I can't sleep at night. Every so often, I go down to my painting room and have a look. Did I do it right? Did I do it wrong? But, once I start I can't stop. I just wonder what's going to be next. How will it turn out? I think to myself, "Can I do this better?" I hesitate to rub out something that I've done. If I do away with it, will I be able to do it again. Once I've finished a painting, I bring it up to the living room, lean it on the couch, and look it for a while. Once I'm finished with it, I'm done. Then I forget about it and wonder what I am going to do next. In 1998, I tried lithography for the first time.

At first, I would just go directly to the canvas and lay out the painting with a charcoal pencil. Today, I have been making drawings on paper before going to the canvas. As I paint I cover the charcoal. I use the charcoal drawing as a guide so that I know where to put everything. I do not outline everything. I paint the background. Then I add the streets and the figures. Sometimes I have to paint over and over again on the same canvas to get it right.

The paintings I make today are a lot different from when I started ten years ago. First and foremost, I do not thin out the paint as much as I used to. The colors are more powerful. I use more primary colors. I also use a lot of earth colors—raw sienna, burnt sienna, raw umber, burnt umber. I also try to avoid painting flat. I try to give my pictures more depth and perspective. I put more distance between people in the front and people in the back. I make the ones in the front bigger and the ones in the back smaller. The faces are more detailed. There is more contrast. Basically, I am most comfortable with a canvas that is 24" by 36", although I have painted on larger and smaller canvasses.

To this day, I am not happy with what I do. When I see what other people do, I feel humbled. Maybe I should have gone for art lessons. But I got a lot of encouragement, so I didn't get discouraged and I liked the recognition. No matter what I did, I tried to be good at it. When I came to Canada, I worked in a tailor's shop for about six months. I was seventeen. So I said immediately that if I am going to be a tailor, I will go to school and I will learn to be a designer. I went to night school and I still know how to take measurements for women's pants. That career came to an end when I fell asleep and ran my finger under the needle of the sewing machine. I had been up late with my friends. Then I became a house painter. Again I immediately tried to improve myself. I went to night school. I was already married. I rushed to school three or four times a week with a bicycle. Sometimes I didn't even change my clothes. They taught me how to mix colors and wood grain. I am a very proficient grainer. I can imitate any kind of wood. I can take that white door and make it look like chestnut, walnut, oak, mahogany, as you wish.

This is how I came to paint Jewish life in Apt. When I say Jewish life in Apt, I should explain that I don't differentiate very much between Jewish and non-Jewish life. I had a few friends who were not Jewish, although they were not my very closest friends. When we met, we had a good time. We would chitchat, walk around for a couple of hours, and discuss different things, from politics to schoolwork. These friends were not anti-Semitic or hateful. I used to play music with a Christian boy, but that's where it ended because he belonged to one side of town and I belonged to the other side. That said, more than two-thirds of the population of Apt was Jewish: in 1921, there were 5,462 Jews and 2,365 Christians. We considered Apt a Jewish town: a Jew could live out his whole life in the Jewish community, and many never went beyond the town's boundaries.

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



In this painting, I am wearing the unofficial uniform for boys from non-Orthodox homes who attended the Polish public school. Only the hat was compulsory. It was four-cornered with a patent leather peak. Religious Jews didn't want to wear those hats because the seams on the top of the hat formed a cross. They wore the Jewish hat, a peaked cap, and long dark coat. We wore a navy blue jacket, gray plus fours, and a white shirt with a Słowacki collar. The plus fours were wide enough to look like a skirt. When we stood in a row, it looked like the whole line was wearing one great skirt. The wide collar was named after Juliusz Słowacki, a nineteenth-century Polish national poet who wore that kind of collar. He was a contemporary of Adam Mickiewicz, whose poetry I had to memorize at school. Sporty fellows like me had red ski boots with brass eyes and wide yellow shoelaces. My red ski boots were my favorite shoes. They were *sportowa*, sporty, but they were not made in Apt. We wore two pairs of white socks, knee socks and a second pair that folded over the shoe like a collar. We looked pretty smart with those nice shoes and knee high socks.

You can see me coming home with a herring. Mother sent me to my grandmother's store to buy a herring. They did not wrap herring in paper as paper was in short supply, and even newspaper was precious. One newspaper would be shared among several families, rather than each family buying their own. The shopkeeper wrapped a little piece of newspaper around the middle of the herring, just big enough for my hand to hold it. That's how precious even newspaper was. Brine would drip from the head and tail of the herring. On the way home, I would lick the drops of brine.

A herring was an important part of the diet. A woman could make a whole banquet from a herring. When purchasing a herring, you always asked for a male. After washing the herring and opening it up, mother would remove the milt or

*milekh*, a long sack of semen. She would open the milt and scrape the semen away from the membrane, which she threw away. To the semen she added minced onion and a little vinegar and sugar to taste. This sauce was called a *krats borsht* or scratch borsht because the milt had been scraped. Everyone got a little piece of herring, a small piece of bread to dip in the *krats borsht*, and maybe also a boiled potato. That was supper.

In Canada the head of a herring or fish is discarded. In the Old Country, it was considered a delicacy. It was reserved for the head of the family. Sometimes the head was thrown onto the hot coals of the stove and roasted. Then you ate the head and sucked out every tiny little bone. A few boiled potatoes, bread, and a piece of the herring, made an excellent meal for a poor family. My mother had to be a gourmet cook to make a herring into a meal for the whole family. One herring would feed a family of four or five. Many people did not even have that and went to bed hungry.

This is also the outfit that I brought to Canada in February of 1934. I awoke to a very cold morning on my first day in Toronto—it was the coldest winter on record—and went out in these clothes to explore the city. As I walked along Spadina and College Street, people looked at me like I had arrived from the moon! A fire truck came rushing by. I thought to myself, "How big could a city be?" and started running after the fire truck. A mile down the road I gave up. Toronto was definitely bigger than Apt.

You can see me in many of the paintings. I am wearing this outfit and observing what is going on.