Painted Memories:  
A Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust  

Mayer Kirshenblatt  
Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett
Lest future generations know more about how Jews died than how they lived, Mayer Kirshenblatt has made it his mission to remember the world of his childhood in living color. In paintings and words, this extraordinary book captures Jewish life in a small Polish city before the Holocaust as seen through the eyes of an inquisitive boy. Mayer Kirshenblatt was born in 1916 in Apt (Opatów in Polish), where he completed seven grades of school. He left for Canada in 1934. At the age of 74, Mayer taught himself to paint what he remembered of his childhood. His daughter Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has been interviewing him since 1967. The text for *Painted Memories* has been created from these interviews to form a continuous narrative in Mayer’s voice. This book is the result of an unusual collaboration of father and daughter over a period of thirty-four years.

At once encyclopedic and uncensored, *Painted Memories* roams the streets and courtyards of Apt, capturing the details of daily life and the personalities of those who lived and worked there. The book begins with a walk through the town, from the ancient city gate to the town square and along the river. Mayer then takes the reader from the Jewish Street, as the Jewish part of town was known, to the city hall and the market place. The second section of the book focuses on Mayer’s family—his mother’s family in Apt, his father’s family in Drildz, and his own family. The third section of the book is about school, play, youth movements, and early work experiences. The final section deals with his departure from Poland and his reflections on the process of creating this book. The book concludes with "A daughter’s afterword." We will solicit a foreword from a recognized literary figure.

*Painted Memories* recalls a lost world in exquisite detail through a seamless integration of words and image. We envision a layout that offers the reader two ways to enter the book--either as a continuous read or at random. The reader should be able to open the book at any page, discover an image, and shift seamlessly to the place in a flowing text that narrates the image. The manuscript (about 120,000 words) is complete. We will select images from over 200 paintings and hundreds of drawings, lithographs, and drypoints. Critical to the reader’s experience of being inside a lost world is the unprecedented fullness with which *Painted Memories* figures that world forth.

**Marketing**

*Painted Memories* is unique in its focus on a single town as remembered in two modalities by someone who is of the last generation born and raised in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust. The direct language, vivid images, and personal perspective of *Painted Memories* should appeal to a wide readership, from young readers to adults. Our marketing plan, which is attached, identifies ways to reach both general and specialized audiences. The Museum of American Folk Art is currently considering a traveling exhibition of the paintings to coincide with the book’s publication.
There is already a video documentary about Mayer Kirshenblatt and his work, *Shtetl*, suitable for broadcast.

*Painted Memories* speaks to the current fascination with autobiography, memoir, and oral history. Such works offer a personal perspective on history as it was actually lived. *Painted Memories* will complement professional histories of Jewish life before the Holocaust, as well as autobiographies written in Eastern Europe before World War II. There continues to be a strong market for such books and Jewish autobiographies, in particular, are currently enjoying a surge of interest.

*Painted Memories* differs from related books (please see attached list) in the following ways. Most memoirs of growing up in Eastern Europe lack images. The few books devoted to self-taught Jewish artists are usually picture albums with captions. They tend to be modest in size and undistinguished in design. Almost all of them are out of print. Black-and-white photograph albums, often without substantial text, dominate the market. They give the impression of a colorless past. Given the lack of books on Jewish folk art and the audience for a growing number of books about outside, naive, and folk art, *Painted Memories* will fill a void. While *Painted Memories* is primarily a trade book, it also has good textbook potential, as indicated in our marketing plan.

**Authors**

**Mayer Kirshenblatt** is a self-taught artist living and working in Toronto. Born in Apt (Opatow in Polish) in 1916, he arrived in Canada in 1934 at the age of seventeen. After apprenticing to an electrician and cobbler in Poland and working in a sweatshop in Toronto, he painted houses and eventually opened his own wallpaper, paint, and floor-covering store. He retired in 1977. In 1990, he began to paint everything he could remember about his hometown and his childhood there. Since then, he has exhibited his work in several solo, as well as group exhibitions, including one organized by the Smithsonian Institution and another at the Canadian National Exhibition. *Shtetl*, a video documentary about his work, was broadcast several times on such networks as CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), Bravo, and Vision, and shown at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1996. Please see attached resume.
Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett began interviewing Mayer in 1967 and has continued to do so until the present. She holds a PhD in folklore from Indiana University. Since 1980, she has been Professor of Performance Studies at New York University and is affiliated with the Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies. She has been associated with the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research since 1967, where is she is currently on the editorial board for a book of autobiographies of Jewish youth in Eastern Europe written during the 1930s, the period of *Painted Memories*. Her books include *Image before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland, 1864-1939* (with Lucjan Dobroszycki) (first published in 1977 by Schocken Books) and most recently *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (University of California Press, 1998), among others. She is the recipient of several honors, including the Guggenheim fellowship. Please see attached resume.
Contents

Foreword
They called me Mayer July
I
From the ancient city gate
Along the river
The Jewish Street
Opatów
Competition was keen
Getting around
II
Dominoes, cheesecake, and cigarettes
A turkey as big as a calf
Rivke the Cossack
The soup pot never left the stove
The courtyard
Going bankrupt
III
Robbed of my youth
Teasing snails from their shells
A place to belong
No future in Apt
IV
A cold and stormy crossing
Storehouse of memories

A daughter's afterword
They called me Mayer July

I was named after my great-grandfather Mayer Makhl 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 Meyers. 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 Carcus?

I was just different, odd, to say the least, and still am to my contemporaries. Once I was a bit older, I didn't wear a hat. I used to fool around on the meadows, catch tiny sunfish in the creek, and try to derail trains. Khamale Vaynberg and I were the only ones to play in the carp pond in a punt.

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. Even so, I spent quite a bit of time by myself doing whatever I was interested in. I would cover miles running with my hoop around the whole perimeter of the town in the evening after 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 ropemaker and the cooper, the mills and the carp ponds, and the city 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. Those intimate details are very seldom described in books. Whatever I learned in school or from books, it is my fate that most everything in my life I had to learn by myself, including how to paint.

God blessed me with a wonderful memory. I made it my project 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 for a couple of hours, and discuss different things, from politics to schoolwork. They 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 half the population of Apt was Jewish--during my time, there were about 6000 Jews in Apt--and 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.

**Boy with a Herring**

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 Slowacki 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 Slowacki, 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. 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.

I am 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 daily paper. The shopkeeper wrapped a little piece of newspaper around the middle of the herring, just big enough for my hand, so I could 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 dripping 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. Some people added a little oil. 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, a slice of 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 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 running after it. 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.
Marketing Plan

General Audience

1. We are planning a touring museum exhibition to coincide with the publication of the book.

2. We plan to create a website to promote the book, exhibition, and Shtetl, a video documentary about Mayer Kirshenblatt and his work.

3. The authors are available for media appearances, illustrated lectures, and intergenerational workshops. Both of them are experienced public speakers and have conducted numerous workshops in the past.

4. We propose to market the book not only in the United States, but also Canada, where there is a strong market for the book. Mayer Kirshenblatt lives and works in Canada and has shown his work in several solo shows there.

5. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett succeeded in reaching a general audience with Image before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland before the Holocaust (Schocken Books, 1977), which she co-authored with Lucjan Dobroszycki. This book, which accompanied an exhibition and feature-length documentary film, remained in print for over twenty years and is considered a classic. As a known specialist in East European culture, she can reach the Jewish market. As past president of the American Folklore Society and board member of the Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies at the Smithsonian Institution, she has access to an extensive folk art network. As an experienced museum curator, she is also in a good position to develop the exhibition in relation to the book.

Jewish Market

1. The Jewish Book Council sponsors National Jewish Book Month and National Jewish Book Awards. We will submit the book for an award and will make appearances during National Jewish Book Month. The many Jewish book fairs, Jewish arts festivals, and Jewish book clubs throughout North America afford rich opportunities for marketing the book. The Virtual Shtetl lists many such events.

2. The book can be promoted through Jewish film festivals that include the video documentary Shtetl.

3. The book would be suitable for Jewish bookstores, giftshops in Jewish museums, synagogues, and community centers, and Jewish libraries. Libraries can be reached through the Association of Jewish Libraries and the Church and Synagogue Library Association. Jewish museums can be reached through CAJM Council on American Jewish Museums.

4. There is an extensive Jewish press, where announcements, advertisements, reviews, interviews, and excerpts from the book can be placed.

5. Painted Memories has good gift book potential, particularly in relation to life cycle occasions, including birthdays, but especially bar mitzvahs, confirmations, and graduations, as well as calendar year holidays such as Hanukkah. Because Mayer Kirshenblatt has created a series of paintings on the holidays and on the life cycle, from
the cradle to the grave, the images also lend themselves to calendars, greeting cards, and postcards. Some images have already appeared on posters and t-shirts in connection with various Jewish folk arts festivals as well as on a calendar and a greeting card.

6. *Painted Memories* also has good textbook potential. The book would be appropriate for courses in East European Jewish studies, Yiddish Studies, Holocaust Studies, Jewish folklore and ethnography, and Jewish literature (as a genre of autobiography).

7. *Painted Memories* would complement several important Jewish autobiographies now becoming available, including the one by Pauline Wengeroff about her life in Russia in the nineteenth century, another by Yekhezkl Kotik, which was first published in 1912 in Warsaw, and a unique collection of autobiographies written by Jewish youth in Poland in the thirties in response to a series of contests organized by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Most of the young autobiographers perished during the Holocaust. It would be fruitful to read them alongside *Painted Memories*, which deals with the same period (Mayer was an adolescent in the thirties), but from the perspective of someone who escaped the Holocaust and was blessed with longevity.

**Folk/Outsider Art Audience**

1. There is an extensive outsider and folk art network that can be accessed through [Outsider Pages](http://outsiderpages.org), TAPnet (Traditional Arts Program Network), [Intuit: Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art](http://www.intuitusa.org), and the [Folk Art Society of America](http://www.folkartsociety.org).

2. Museums dedicated to folk art include the [Museum of American Folk Art](http://www.mofa.org), [American Visionary Art Museum](http://www.americanvisionaryart.org), [Museum of World Folk Art](http://www.worldfolkartmuseum.org), [San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum](http://www.craftartmuseum.org), and the [Museum of International Folk Art](http://www.mia.si.edu).

3. We will request that the Museum of American Folk Art include the book on their bookstand at such events as the annual [Outsider Art Fair](http://www.outsiderartfair.com) in New York City.

4. Announcements, advertisements, reviews, interviews, and excerpts from the book can be placed in such magazines as *Raw Vision*, *Folk Art*, and other publications in this field.

5. *Painted Memories* has good textbook potential for courses in folk and outsider art. See, for example, the [folk, outside, and self-taught art](http://www.mofa.org) course at the University of Rochester and New York University's program in [Folk Cultural Studies](http://www.culturalstudies.org).

**Gerontology Audience**

1. The field of gerontology (the study of aging) had grown enormously with as people live longer and the elderly population increases. Books dealing with development, and creativity across the life course and particularly among the elderly are of special interest. We would reach this audience not only by means of general marketing, but also through the American Geriatrics Society, American Society on Aging, and the Gerontological Society of America. The GSA's Humanities and Arts Committee "encourages creative intellectual and artistic contributions...that highlight the personal, the qualitative, the historical, artistic, philosophical, and literary perspectives on growing older...."

**Text Book Sales**

*Painted Memories* would be suitable for text book adoption in courses in all the above fields, but
especially in East European Jewish culture, Holocaust, folklore and ethnography, folk art, autobiography, oral history, and culture and aging.

1. We can reach teachers who might adopt the book for their courses through such learned societies and professional associations as the College Art Association, American Folklore Society, and Association for Jewish Studies, Oral History Association, National Association for Ethnic Studies, and the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) among others. The book could be announced, advertised, and reviewed in their newsletters and journals. It could also be exhibited at their conferences. The authors are prepared to speak at conferences organized by these associations. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is a recognized scholar in several of these fields.

2. K-12 educators can be reached through Cultural Arts Resources for Teachers and Students.

**International Distribution**

We believe there is an international market for this book, particularly in Germany, Israel, Poland, Australia, South Africa, South America, and the United Kingdom. See the British Jewish Book Council. We have access to information about Jewish communities, museums, and festivals where the book could be marketed, as well as to an international network of outsider and folk art constituencies. We would be interested in exploring the possibility of translation, particularly into German and Spanish, and co-publication in order to reach an international market.

**Children’s Market**

Painted Memories lends itself to a series of small, focused children's books. We believe that once Painted Memories has established itself, a series of picture books for young readers will not only do well in their own right, but also will maintain the visibility of Painted Memories.
Related Works

While there are numerous memoirs and photograph albums dealing with Jewish life in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust, very little has been published on Jewish folk art and almost nothing is in print. In contrast, there is proliferation of books on outsider, naive, and folk art, which suggests that a substantial and handsome book by a Jewish self-taught artist would fill a void.

Jewish Self-Taught Painters


Jewish Folk Art


Lost Worlds


*Intergenerational Collaborations*

Orlove, Benjamin S. 1995. *In my father’s study*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Mayer Kirshenblatt

**Address:** 181 Brighton Avenue, North York, Ontario M3H 4E3  
**Telephone:** 416-633-3623 / **Fax:** 905-731-5582  
**Born:** 1916, Opatów (Yiddish: Apt), Poland  
**Married:** 1940, to Doris Shushanoff; 3 daughters (born 1942, 1946, 1952); 4 grandchildren  
**Citizenship:** Canada--immigrated 1934

**Education:** Poland--public and Jewish primary schools; Canada--Central Technical School  
**Occupation:** 1977. Poland--shoemaker’s apprentice, electrician; Canada--sweeper in sweatshop, tailor’s apprentice, housepainter, wallpaper hanger, wood grainer; owned a wallpaper, paint and floor covering store for 30 years in Toronto.  
**Languages:** English, Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, German

**Solo Exhibitions**

1993  
*Jewish Community Centre*, Bloor Street Y, Toronto--part of the Yiddish Film Festival, sponsored by the Ontario Gallery of Art  
*Barbara Frum Library*, Toronto  
*North York Library*

1994  

1995  
*Poslun Theatre*, North York

1997  
*Holy Blossom Temple*, Toronto  
*Community Gallery*, Ashkenaz: A Festival of New Yiddish Culture, Toronto

1999  
*John B. Aird Gallery*, Toronto--*Life Stories: Paintings by Mayer Kirshenblatt*

**Group Exhibitions**

1990 *Paine Webber Gallery*, New York City--*The Grand Generation: Memory, Mastery, Legacy*, group exhibition organized by the Smithsonian Institution  
1997 *Israel at Fifty Pavilion*, Canadian National Exhibition--*Echoes of the Past, Visions of the Future*


**Publications**


**Media**

Collections
YIVO Institute for Jewish Research
Canadian Museum of Civilization
Smithsonian Institution
Private collections: Toronto, New York, Ann Arbor, Tel-Aviv.

Slide Lectures (selected)
Cracow:
Center for Jewish Culture
Ethnographic Museum
Jewish Cultural Festival
New York:
Yiddish Folk Arts Institute (Parkville, New York)
New York University
Toronto:
United Jewish People's Order
Jewish Community Center
Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care
North York Public Library, Fourth Annual Jewish Storytelling Festival (1995)
Lincoln Place Nursing Home

Workshops (selected)
1979 Department of Folklore and Folklife, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
1986 Black Creek Pioneer Village, Ontario.
1986-1999 YIVO Yiddish Folk Arts Institute, Parkville, New York
1987 Teacher Retreat Program, Melton Research Center for Jewish Education, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York.
1987 Grade Five Class, Temple Sinai Religious School, Toronto.
1987 Religious School, Holy Blossom Temple
1987-1988 Bialik Hebrew Day School, Toronto
1989 Montessori School, Ottawa
1989 Camp Shalom, Gravenhurst, Ontario
1989 Museum of the City of New York
1990 Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa
1990 Senior Showcase--Cultural Diversity in Aging, Toronto
1991 Unionville Public School, Markham, Ontario
Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is Professor of Performance Studies at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, where she chaired the Department of Performance Studies for more than a decade. She teaches courses on the aesthetics of everyday life, world’s fairs, museum theatre, tourist productions, food and performance, and Jewish performance, folklore, and ethnography. She is affiliated with the Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies and serves on advisory committees for five interdepartmental programs--American Studies, Liberal Studies, Metropolitan Studies, Religious Studies, and Museum Studies. She serves on the advisory committee of the Department of Food Studies and Nutrition at New York University, where she is a co-convener of the faculty seminar *Feast and Famine*. She also co-convened, with Fred Myers, the faculty seminar *People and Things* (1998-2000).

Dr. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is the recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship and grants from the American Council of Learned Societies, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, and Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture. She was in residence at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio Conference and Study Center in 1991, a Getty Scholar at the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities in 1991-1992, a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar in 1995, a Winston Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1996, a University of Auckland Foundation Visitor in 1998, and a fellow at SCASSS (Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences) in Uppsala in 1998. In 2001, she will be a resident research fellow at the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

She served as President of the American Folklore Society from 1988 to 1992 and is a Folklore Fellow of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters. She serves (or recently served) on the following boards and advisory committees: Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies, Smithsonian Institution; Getty Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities; Stanford Humanities Center; Museum of Jurassic Technology; the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College; the American Center for Wine, Food, and the Arts; and International Center for Advanced Studies, New York University, Project on Cities and Urban Knowledge, among others. She also serves on the editorial boards of the *Encyclopedia of Food* (Scribners), *California Studies in Food and Culture* (University of California Press, *American Ethnologist*, *Tourist Studies*, TDR *The Drama Review*, *Jewish Folklife and Ethnology Review*, *Gastronomica*, and *Postmodern Culture*, among others. She recently served on the editorial boards of *Museum Anthropology* and *Cultural Anthropology*.

Her most recent book, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (University of California Press, 1998) engages lively debates about the production of heritage, limits of multiculturalism, social efficacy of the arts, and circulation of value in the life world. Her earlier books include *Image Before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland, 1864-1939*, with Lucjan Dobroszycki (Schocken, reissued 1995). *Image Before My Eyes* was accompanied an exhibition at The Jewish Museum and feature documentary film. Her other publications include *Speech Play: Research and Resources for Linguistic Creativity* (editor and contributor); *Fabric of Jewish Life: Textiles from the Jewish Museum Collection; Authoring Lives*; and numerous articles. Current projects include *Investigating Jews*, an intellectual history of anthropological interest in Jews, to be published by Indiana University Press; and *Exhibiting Jews*, a study of Jewish participation in world’s fairs from 1851 to 1940. She recently completed *Painted Memories: A Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust* with Mayer Kirshenblatt.