

Interview with Sharon Lebewohl on Abe Lebewohl's Second Avenue Deli,

Stars, Yiddish Theater Walk of Fame, 08/08/17

Sharon Lebewohl [SL] is Abe Lebewohl's oldest daughter; Abe was the founder and owner of the Second Avenue Deli formerly located at 156 Second Avenue. The interview by Elissa Sampson [EJS] took place at Elissa's apartment located near the Deli's original location.

This interview was transcribed by Elissa Sampson [EJS] and edited by her for length and clarity.

[EJS] So I'm sitting here in my apartment with Sharon Lebewohl who is an accomplished chef [and] the daughter of Abe Lebewohl, the owner of the Second Avenue Deli. [Abe] managed to set Second Avenue on fire, in his own way, with the Stars of Yiddish Theater that he memorialized in granite, in front of his store. Sharon and I will be talking about Abe and the Stars. So Sharon, hello.

[SL] Hi, thank you so much for doing this;

[EJS] Vice versa. Let me start by asking you a question. As you know the Stars are getting older; ...they have been walked on; they have been admired; they have had rain; they have had snow. A whole group of people is working together, and I understand that you are one of them, to replace them so that they live on. Can you talk a little bit about why you are interested in doing that?

[SL] This was really important to my father. He believed in the Yiddish Theater. He valued the fact that that's where it happened, ... in that neighborhood. It was devastating to me to see that they were worn, that they were damaged; you could no longer even see the names on them. So I was very thankful to hear that there were people who wanted to do something about that.

[EJS] There will be a film opening on September 6th, [The Golden Age of Second Avenue by documentarian Morton Silverstein, made in 1969. The showing is sponsored by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation and other Lower East Side / East Village institutions]

[SL] And I'll be speaking about this; it's a film about the Yiddish Theater. There will be a couple of people speaking, and I'll be one of them. Hopefully it will get the word out.

[EJS] Why do you think Yiddish Theater was so important to your father? Your father was born in a town near Lemberg [Lviv], a smaller town known for baked goods, Kulikov [Kulykiv, Lviv Oblast], and he came to America after the War. Why do you think Yiddish Theater became a symbol for him... because if I understood your uncle correctly, he [Abe] spent much of his youth in Kazakhstan, a place not known for Yiddish Theater.

[SL] Yiddish was his primary language. Yiddish was how he communicated with his parents, with his brother. He was really enamored with the neighborhood because of the fact that Jews, when they came to America, were living there and the fact that the Yiddish Theater was there. He felt that [the Lower East Side] was such an important venue for people that they didn't have to worry about persecution, about poverty, about censorship, and that was really important to him.

[EJS] And the Theater in some ways, epitomized

[SL] it epitomized all that. Yeah. And so he chose that even though the Yiddish Theater was pretty much almost gone then, he chose that. The Café Royal is where the entertainers and the Jewish intelligentsia

would meet and speak; the Café Royal was on 12th Street and Second Avenue [190 Second Avenue]. And that was one of the reasons he really liked the location; he wanted to name the Deli “The Royal Deli.” The owner of the Café Royal wanted two thousand dollars in royalties. But at the time that could have been like two million dollars to my father so that was out of the question and he called it the Second Avenue Deli.

[EJS] Your father was not a deli man in Europe. His life was literally interrupted by the War: his parents having survived the War, his own survival was hardly something to be taken for granted. He is on the Polish side of the border when Hitler [first] attacks, and your family makes it into the former Soviet Union. Do you want to describe what happened to your father’s family at that point when Lviv in effect becomes a front?

[SL] Well my grandfather was arrested as a capitalist and he was sentenced to ten years of hard labor in Siberia. And then all the families were transferred to Kazakhstan; they were put in cattle cars and transported to Kazakhstan. And when they finally made it there, my grandmother struggled to find any kind of food for my father. In fact, I remember once cutting fat off of a piece of meat and she got very upset and was crying. She said “if I had a little piece of fat in those days to put on a piece of bread for your father, life would have been good.” When the family was reunited—the [Siberian] prisoners were released because they needed them as soldiers—the family went back to Lvov hoping to find family members and everybody was gone. They were all sent to the [concentration] camps, cousins, brothers, sisters, grandparents, everybody was gone. And they made their way to Italy to a D.P. [Displaced Persons] Camp. And that’s where my uncle [Jack Lebewohl] was born.

Then they made their way to America. But my father worked as a soda jerk in Coney Island, he was learning how to make dentures: anything to make a living. But when he worked behind the counter serving soda, he would wash the floors, he would go to the back and see what was going on, he used it as an opportunity to learn. And then in 1954 he finally scraped together enough money with two partners to open the Deli.

[EJS] Was it already a working deli?

[SL] It was a luncheonette, and at the time when he created it, it had 10 seats. And that was it.

[EJS] And no meat.

[SL] No, no.

[EJS] And your father’s ability to cook came from?

[SL] My grandmother. Also he would love to go out to eat and try to figure things out. I remember once he came to visit—I was living in Brooklyn—and my daughter said “Oh grandpa, you smell, where were you?” He went dumpster diving

[EJS] because he wanted to know exactly?

[SL] I think it was French fries; he wanted to find out what type of potatoes they were using, what kind of oil they were using, he literally went dumpster diving

[EJS] and he was curious about how people did things.

[SL] Right.

[EJS] And he knew how to make things with his hands.

[SL] Right. Curiosity, that's how you advance in life, by being curious. By asking, by finding out any way you can.

[EJS] And he was one to just take things into his own hands and do it.

When I spoke to your uncle Jack, I very much had the impression of someone who knows his older brother's experience of Second Avenue is absolutely formative in terms of his encounter with Yiddish theater. It's not a European encounter.

[SL] Right. It's in America. My mother who when there was a Yiddish performance—my mother didn't speak Yiddish—he would take her with him to the theater, and she loved it. She didn't have to speak Yiddish. She laughed when everybody else was laughing; she could tell that it was hysterically funny; she cried when other people were crying; she could tell that it was incredibly sad: she loved it as well.

[EJS] And your grandmother was a big fan I understand of both Yiddish theater and radio.

[SL] They listened to WEVD, all the time

[EJS] Eugene V Debs, "the Station that spoke your Langvich"

[SL] Exactly.

[EJS] So when your father arrives in this storied place this corner of Second Avenue, at this luncheonette..., it's two blocks away from the Jaffee Theater where Maurice Schwartz, Molly Picon and many others played; [and] he's two blocks away from the Café Royal... He starts going to theaters and hearing about productions because there are off-Broadway productions in the area, and there were Yiddish revivals, and we still have the Folksbeine. And a lot of the characters from Yiddish Theater are still in the neighborhood.

[SL] And they frequented the Deli so he spent a lot of time speaking with them. The Yiddish Theater was dying; it upset him a lot [and] he wanted to do something to pay tribute to it. So in 1984, it was his second remodeling, he opened up the Molly Picon room. Molly Picon came to the party, all the local politicians came to give her a kiss, and she gave all of her memorabilia to my father to hang up in the room. And she used to joke around that Helen Hayes may have had a Broadway theater named after her but she [Molly Picon] had a room at the Second Avenue Deli and that was so much better.

[EJS] That's a good one. And I'm sure Helen Hayes was jealous. [SL] Exactly.

[EJS] Now your father started attending productions as well... I attended a production with Jonathan that your father sponsored, [SL] oh really! [EJS] and it was called *Tsvishn Tsvey Veltn*, or Between Two Worlds, which is the Dybbuk, at something called the National Yiddish Theater Company, I think a one-shot deal [1982]. But there was a big statement from your father in Yiddish and in English about how the future of the Yiddish theater was going to be reshaped. And it was a fantastic production in part because it had actors like Zvee Scooler and he played the Messenger. It was devastatingly beautiful and far more powerful than anything I had expected. There was nothing nostalgic about it; it was a real arts

production... meant to be really scary when they pulled out the stops. So he certainly got to know a number of these people.

[SL] After he opened up at the Deli the Molly Picon room, he wanted to do something to pay tribute and he decided to do this Hollywood-like Walk of Fame. And he had 58 granite plaques put into the sidewalk [in 1984], two actors per star, and a lot of these people, actors came to pay tribute as well. Molly Picon was there; Mike Burstyn; I didn't know the reason you told me why Fyvush Finkel wasn't there. It was really quite exciting. It was a wonderful way to pay tribute.

[EJS] Yes. In part because some of those people were living... [and] it says that [Yiddish Theater] was important and remembered. And well worth teaching others about.

[SL] I think the only one who has a star now who is still alive is Mike Burstyn.

[EJS] And Daniel Libeskind, which is a little bit of a different story about how he got into Yiddish Theater [that is given a Star] because of architecture....

[EJS] It's nice to hear that some of those people from the Hebrew Actors Union came out to the dedication ceremony. Were you at that ceremony?

[SL] I was. I came in, I was very tired, I had two children at the time and I was living in Israel, and I flew in just for this. I flew in, it was that night, and then I flew out the next morning so I barely remember it.

[EJS] You did this because you loved your father

[SL] because I loved my father and I knew how much this meant to him.

[SL] The whole Yiddish culture was so important to him; it's odd, now that I'm trying to learn Yiddish, it's odd that it was so important to him but I never learned Yiddish as a child. He only spoke to his parents in Yiddish; I don't think I ever heard them speaking English unless I was involved in the conversation. He spoke to his brother in Yiddish. But my mother was American and didn't know Yiddish, but it surprises me that I never learned Yiddish as a kid, maybe if my parents had spoken Yiddish to each other I would have learned.

[EJS] Then it would have been the secret language that you'd try to crack.

[SL] Exactly.

[EJS] Which is also a typical generational experience. I think it's interesting who your father shared Yiddish with and who he didn't. Also... immigrants have something we'd call Yinglish, and who he's comfortable doing that with.

[SL] There were a lot of words that I assumed were Yiddish that were actually Yinglish. Or, that I assumed were English, but weren't proper English.

[EJS] That's why one becomes an adult, to figure out what one's parents actually said.

[SL] ... my Yiddish name is Sheindel, if he called me Sharon I always knew that that I was in trouble. If he called me Sheindele then I knew everything was OK.

Even today I recently met someone who pretty much in my opinion had very little connection to Judaism. Every once in a while she would throw in a Yiddish word, and that made her feel very close to the religion. She was trying to show me how Jewish she was.

[EJS] It's interesting because you just used the word religion and I would say for New York Jews at least, religion and ethnicity are highly fungible categories. It's identity. Clearly there are people who use a Yiddish word or two and they are not Jewish; something like *glitch* [from the Yiddish verb to slip] has gone into the general vocabulary and clearly vulgar expressions for body parts. But having said that, using a bit of Yiddish can be one of the ways that you signal [that you are Jewish]. And this neighborhood is still very good at that.

So I hear you that this is an extremely important part of your father's world. And there are ways that he took that into the business world. And he took the theater world, and made it his personal world.

[SL] He very much felt that he owed back; he owed back to New York City, he owed back to his community. He definitely felt that just like he was saved after the War, New York saved him ...and the Jewish community saved him as well, and that he needed to pay back.

[EJS] He got brought over from the D.P. Camp by HIAS [the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] so your family was [nearby] on Lafayette Street for a while. [HIAS was located at 425 Lafayette Street, now the home of the Public Theater.]

[SL] In his life, he used to joke around that he never made it far. He used to live at 10th Street and Broadway. The Deli was on 10th Street and Second Avenue. So he never got far....

[EJS] from his "roots" on the Lower East Side.

Did he get to meet the people from the Public Theater like Joe Papp who did some work in Yiddish Theater?

[SL] It's funny because it just came up. My son-in-law recently said "Did you know that there was a connection between Joe Papp and the Yiddish Theater?" ... I have no idea; Jack would probably know that.

[EJS] ...The connection with Papp was quite real; whether it was with Avi Hoffman's mother and the production of [Itzig Manger's] *Leider fun Gan Eydn* [Songs from Paradise]. People used to call [Papp] a *malach*, an angel, and his interest was deep. But also because he had seen productions when he was younger.

[SL] I don't know if he actually met him.

[EJS] They probably at least tripped over [some of the] the same people, the same families, whether it's the Hoffman family, the Burtstyn family or anybody else.

[SL] Right, if you don't know a particular person, you know somebody that knows them.... [SL and EJS bantering back and forth]

[EJS] Which is also the way that the theater world works...

[EJS] So your father managed to see some productions as well as know the people who found their way into the Deli.

[SL] It's funny that he was so into it because my mother would always try to get him to go to the movies, or see Broadway shows, and he was always so tired that he used the opportunity to sleep. So it's interesting that he was anxious to go to those [Yiddish] productions.

[EJS] Jack remembers your grandmother taking him to productions at the Anderson... I asked him why and he said "it's entertainment."

[SL] It's entertainment that they could identify with....

[EJS] Clearly she loved the stuff and Zvee Scooler. And that made an impression on your father.

[SL] I can see him in my mind Zvee Scooler....

[EJS] He was in Fiddler... [and other productions in Yiddish and English].

If I think of your father and Yiddish theater, the first to come to mind is not Seymour Rechtzeit, but Molly Picon. Do you know how your father ended up meeting her or how she became [a focus] of his ... passion for Yiddish theater?

[SL] I honestly don't know. I think it might have also had to do with the fact that she was in general entertainment not just the Yiddish Theater...

[EJS] She's a very interesting character in part because she's born in America. She gets her Yiddish polished in Warsaw. She's married to a famous Yiddish director, an actor [Jacob] Kalich, and she does something really wonderful and I was wondering if it might have made a very good impression in the best sense on your father. Right after the War, ... he [Kalich] and Molly Picon flew on a cargo plane into Warsaw and started doing theater in courtyards, even using sheets for curtains... And that might have really spoken to him.

[SL] That could very well be because he was so into outreach.

[EJS] And in doing stuff for the neighborhood. If I think of some of your father's activities for Jewish community or just generally for the neighborhood they include sending food to people constantly.

[SL] He once called me up to say that there was a woman who lived on 2nd Street between A and B. Now it's a wonderful neighborhood; it certainly wasn't then. He said to me that someone told him about her; that she was a shut-in and he wanted to send her food. He wanted me to go since he thought it would be nice if she could talk to someone, if I could talk to her, he didn't want to just send the delivery person. And he had the truck driver stay outside since it wasn't safe to go in by myself. And then it became an every Friday event... I remember, that I'd show up at the Deli on Friday and all the counter people knew: oh, you're here to pick up the food for Edna. Then when my twins were born, I went and got married in 1980; my twins were born in 1982. For a whole year I didn't go because I was living in Israel at the time. So my father would go. And it was just because someone called him to say that there's a woman who can't get out who needs food for Shabbes... Then when I came back, he arranged for me to have a police escort since it wasn't safe for me ...especially with a carriage with newborns. But it was very important to him that Edna would have her food and that she'd meet my children.

...A friend of mine was telling me that she was working on her PhD from NYU, and she'd sit in the Deli every day, have some chicken soup and just write for hours. And one day she wasn't there, and there

was a knock on the door. And it was my father; he was concerned because he knew that she came to the Deli every day to write, so he ... brought the chicken soup to her house.

[EJS] Your mother had her hands full.

[SL] Yes. Absolutely.

[EJS] [Laughing] "Abe you don't have to help the whole world."

[SL] But he felt that he did.

[EJS] And he knew what it was like not to have.

So that lesson was very salient. And he didn't take success for granted.

[SL] Not at all; not by any means. I remember he gave me this piggy bank and it had two slots. One was to save, and to save for my future: not for a toy or anything like that. But that money was earmarked for college. And the other one was earmarked for charity. Half went into each slot.

[EJS] Now with the Stars, clearly Molly Picon was more than pleased with getting her room if she donated her memorabilia.

[SL] She really was very proud of it.

[EJS] I remember a couple of years ago working with you and looking at some of the correspondence between your father and Molly Picon.... It's on stationary, the type that an older woman might have, and the Deli's stationary, and it's thank you notes, very polite,... thank you for sending this, ...

[SL] Yes.... in English. Very, very polite, very formal.

[EJS] Without being stilted in any way.

[SL]I know I have it since that was in one of the slides [YIVO Father's Day program June 17, 2007]....

[EJS] It definitely gave me the impression that he kept up with her productions in film.

Who else do you think he might have liked in terms of Yiddish theater and living actors?

[SL] He loved Mike Burstyn.

[EJS] Because he was the kid in Yiddish theater [along with] his sister?

[SL] He absolutely loved him. ... it's funny that he didn't include Fyvush Finkel in the Stars; [see interview with Jack Lebewohl as to how Fyvush won his Star]. There was a TV show ... in which Fyvush is a Jewish lawyer, and my father loved watching that show with him. I know he was enamored of Fyvush Finkel. [Fyvush Finkel won an Emmy in 1994 for best supporting actor in the TV series Picket Fences. Finkel also won an Obie in 1988 for his role in Café Crown, the Joe Papp production at the Jaffee Theater that recreated the former Café Royal.]

[EJS] I don't think he wanted to overrule Rechtzeit even though Fyvush was a friend who went to the Deli.

[SL] I remember talking to Fyvush at the Deli, it was his fiftieth wedding anniversary. And he said “How many stars on Broadway actually get to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary, fifty years with the same woman.” And it was so refreshing to see that this was a woman his own age, not a woman in her twenties.

[EJS] Not a trophy wife.

[SL]I don’t know if you know that I did a cooking DVD with Mike Burstyn; it was actually my father’s idea many, many years ago and I just put it on the back shelf. Then later on I thought that it would be a great idea. [In 2007, Sharon Lebewohl and Mike Burstyn made “A Sabbath Meal: In the Kitchen.”]

[EJS] It’s a nice video... It’s practical, it has things that have to do with the holidays and Shabbes cooking ...and there’s a good amount of banter back and forth.

[SL] Yes. He likes to *kibbitz*.

[EJS] That makes a difference in [giving] a sense that something is happening, that it is a social thing to cook together, it’s not just about how to serve for others or how to be at the table.

[SL] And he knew so much about how things were done, and why things were done, and why we ate the food that we ate. He was so knowledgeable about that.

[SL] And in the Yiddish theater, they all identified with the kind of life my father led.

[EJS] If I picture your father right now, it’s in two different ways. One is behind the counter, making sure that everything is OK; that the line isn’t too long, the noshes are out there, the usual potchkying. The other is hanging out outside and *kibitzing* with people in the street, with the cigar store, the candy store, or anyone else.

[SL] He had his routine. Like going to the bank at 9am every morning. It was suggested to him that he get an armored service to take the money to the bank. But that would have altered his lifestyle so [much]; it was his social life. He loved going to the bank in the morning and seeing the same people. He loved going out for breakfast. He came with a different crew each day but he’d go to the same restaurants, he’d see the same people. He loved people. And yes, he was behind the counter; there wasn’t anything in the Deli that he didn’t do.

I remember him calling me once; I’d just come home from school, I was in high school. And he told me that the dishwasher didn’t come in that day; “would I come to the Deli?” And I said “I don’t know how to wash the dishes, I know how to do it by hand, I don’t how to use the machine.” And he said “Come, and I’ll teach you.” He knew how to do that; he knew how to slice the meat. There’s wasn’t anything that he wouldn’t do. So [that] was very important to him, but he loved walking around the Deli talking to people.

Someone once told me that she was sitting there, she was on a date and she had brought him to the Deli. And my father came over, started talking and he said about the French fries “that looks a little well done.” And he stuck his hand in her plate to taste the French fries. “It’s OK.” And her date couldn’t believe that she didn’t think this was bizarre.

People said that eating in the restaurant was like being in my father’s dining room at home. Either he was there or at night my mother was there. In fact, the night before Rosh HaShana he would work

around the clock. I remember that my mother called me to go into the bathroom and she said “Daddy just came home to take a bath. You need to sit there to make sure that he doesn’t drown.” Because he was so tired; he came home just for five minutes to take a bath. But he absolutely loved talking to people. He loved that.

...It’s funny; I was just talking to a friend of mine from high school, just this morning and she told me about a memory she had; I don’t remember this at all. She said that my father once had tickets to the track where you got this exclusive, you got to sit in the air conditioning where they brought you your food. And we sat there for about fifteen minutes and we felt like royalty. And then he made us go downstairs because he didn’t want us to glamorize that.

[EJS] and think it’s normal, and take it for granted.... Go up to the bleachers.

[SL] I had a dream after he died: Jack and I were talking about whether the Deli would stay open. That night I had a dream that I was on the Second Avenue bus and I passed the Deli; whenever I was on that bus I’d look in. And there he was on the phone. So I got off the bus and went into the Deli and I said “Dad, everyone thinks you died. What do you think you’re doing here?” And he said “Leave me alone; I have a business to run.” And I was trying to talk to him to understand where he’s been since everyone thinks he died; and then he starts walking around talking to people in the Deli totally oblivious to the fact that I have this question to ask him. And that was my first dream about him. First, he was behind the counter and couldn’t be bothered because he had a business to run, and then he ignored my question and walked around the Deli talking to people.

[EJS] There’s a way that Abe was larger than life and embodied literally the cultures that he represented. And when he took on Yiddish theater as his project he took to it with a zest. Much like the Deli—there must have been people who saw it as quixotic to open a Deli in the Lower East Side in the fifties—the Yiddish theater stuff was very real to him; the people he met, people he learned about, people who were talked about.

[SL] When he took on a project, he did it with a lot of passion. Like he wanted to open up the first kosher restaurant in Russia. In fact, he was going to call it Rishon. Because of all the bureaucracy he had to give it up, but he was so passionate about it. It was the same thing with opening the Deli; it was the same thing with the Yiddish theater.

[EJS] If you find yourself ...channeling your father about those Yiddish stars, what would you want a new generation of fans of Yiddish theater, or people who might not even know about Yiddish theater to know based on those stars?

[SL] That this existed; that this was a haven for Jews who were escaping so much. It gave so much solace to people. It was a way for people to come together especially people who had lost so many of their relatives and loved ones.

[EJS] It was a way of laughing and crying together.

[SL] Yeah.

[EJS] And creating something new, an art, in doing so.

Thank you very much Sharon.

[SL] Thank you.

[EJS] The pleasure is all mine, or perhaps Abe's.

