

The Autobiography of David Roskies narrated February 17, 1992

Today is February 17, 1992, and flying over here from New York to Seattle I decided to devote some time to recording my autobiography for you, Shoshanah, to try to compensate you in whatever way I can for the terrible disappointment and shock of your last trip.

So let me begin by trying to conjure up for you what growing up was like in Montreal, and I will try to anticipate and incorporate some of your questions to me. You have to imagine a two-story house on a hill, the street is Paganawello, presumably named after one countess of Paganawello, which I am told means handkerchief in Spanish. We live in a big brick house, thirteen rooms, finished basement, sunporch, dining room, breakfast room, etc, etc, very large living room, grand piano, fancy furniture, and many, many, many paintings. This in the fairly spartan fifties where the majority of Jews in Montreal are either working class or just barely beginning to show signs of upward mobility. Now it's true that once upon a time in Europe my parents had been fabulously wealthy, but that is really a wealth that they prefer not to talk about; and furthermore we children are sent to a Yiddish school which has a kind of Labor-Zionist-Socialist bent to it, though the word Socialism was never mentioned in all the years that I can remember at school. So in comparison to all of our friends and my classmates we were very well-off. This was never a particular problem for me. I know it was for my sister Ruth. She was always very embarrassed by her wealth, and I think has been doing life-long penance for it. But I was the youngest and as the m'zinik took things in stride.

And that's been more or less my strategy all along. I think the theme of this first chapter or tape or segment, if it has a theme, is why would anyone want to leave home, if home was as compelling a place as I remember it to be.

You have to picture first of all a house that's dominated by my mother and by another shadowy presence of one Fradl Matz, my mother's mother who died in Vilna in 1925, and after my own mother was the second most palpable powerful figure in our lives. So that already gives you an indication of what growing up was like, being the thrall of my mother's imagination and her extraordinary ability to bring the past to life. Fradl Matz's portrait has been described much better than I can [do it] by my sister in the only lyrical, truly lyrical, piece she has ever written in her life. [It appeared] about ten years ago in Commentary, a piece called "The Most Beautiful Woman in Vilna." It's a tribute to my grandmother whom none of us ever knew of course. So Fradl Matz's portrait hangs over my parents nuptial bed to be euphemistic. Another one of those things that I never thought twice about until my sister and I once began talking about it and musing what it would be like to sleep with one's spouse under our own mother's portrait [laughs], and as soon as we figured that into the equation it seemed absolutely grotesque, the very idea, that my father somehow agreed to the fact that this huge picture of Fradl Matz should be there over their bed. In fact, in a kind of cinematic way it was quite fitting, because Fradl Matz's ethos, at least in so far as my mother was able to convey it to us, dominated our lives, our moral behavior, our philosophy, etc. My mother is a very talkative woman and an

inveterate story-teller. But the stories she tells are all autobiographical. I would estimate that the entire repertoire of those stories, let us say, could be broken down into, say, 250 narratives; it's probably more than that, but let's say 250 narratives; but she was able and still is able to recycle those stories and recombine them in so many surprising ways that sometimes you don't even realize you've heard them before, or you never thought of them in that particular light, because they are kind of her sacred text, her Talmud; they are the proof texts of her existence, the measure of reality. Most of [those stories] end in 1940. The most powerful of [them] have to do with her life in Vilna, which ended in 1930 before she joined my father in the south of Poland, in Krosno. These are stories about Fradl Matz and her children and her second marriage to Yisroel [Velcher ??] and the only off-spring of that second marriage being my mother, and growing up in this house on Zavalna Street corner of Torke [??] being the only child of this love marriage and being saddled with all of these stepbrothers and stepsisters who apparently detested their stepfather. Really the stuff of a long, long Russian family saga. The names of some of the sisters sometimes get confused and their spouses and their trials and tribulations and disappointments in marriage are sometimes hard to get straight, because you have to remember that none of us ever knew these people; they all perished. They were also part of the ongoing story of our own lives. Analogies were very often brought. In fact I now realize my mother typecast her own children in the light of her childhood and had decided that each one of us was a

reincarnation of her half-brothers and -sister so that the Greek tragedy is playing itself out.

A house in Montreal where the spoken language was Yiddish. Now I remember telling you in the restaurant that this was a direct result of their immigration. That even though my parents were Yiddishists in their student years and [Yiddish] was the language that they fell in love in and spoke to each other in, by the time they began to raise children in Czernowitz, my brother was born in 1931, my sister Ruth in 1936. There was another child born in between who died at the age of three. It seems that German and even some Polish were the lingua franca in the home. The children had governesses and they grew up speaking these other languages and -- this was Czernowitz -- the Jews, the upper middle class Jews, naturally assimilated with the German cultural minority. Nobody spoke Rumanian; very much like the situation in Quebec for that matter.

Had the War not broken out and had they stayed in Czernowitz it's a real question as to the depth of the Jewish education that we would have gotten, that's assuming I ever would have been born. Since my sister discovered, for instance, that the parents probably didn't make their own sedorim. There was the famous seder that my grandfather convened in Bialystok, Pesach 1938, to which all the references were probably be made, but I don't think my parents would have had sedorim of their own. And these were things that happened in Canada once they knew. They were members of a Zionist group in Czernowitz called Masadah, made up of doctors and professionals, and apparently my mother even performed at their special benefit con-

certs singing Yiddish songs. But this was not a Yiddishkayt of day to day.

However, on moving to Canada and following ... they were not the very last family members to come across, but they were among the last. There was already a part of the family that was ensconced in Westmount and that was - even though my parents moved there initially -- my mother decided that she needed in order to survive distance between herself and my aunt Mandy. It was just too close for comfort. These were not the people that she wanted to be compared to. So first they moved to a fairly working class neighborhood part of Outremont and then, I think, in 1952 they bought this house on Paganawello, a steep hill part of Outremont where French Canadians lived and a fair number of Jews, not our kind of Jews, but Jews who were on the way up in the world. It is now, by the way, almost completely French and the Premier of Quebec, Borasso, lives just up the block. It's a very desirable neighborhood.

At some point, since they had already moved to Outremont, my mother got the idea of sending her children to a school, the Jewish People's School, and as I mentioned in my article, the first graduating class of the seventh grade of the entire seven grades of the day school only graduated in 1940, the year that my parents arrived. What that means is that seven years before, when the decision was reached to establish an independent Jewish day school, the Folkshule did not yet have accreditation from the Protestant school board. So it was a kind of leap of faith and it was not until they had completed a full seven years and they had a first graduating class that the Protestant school board decided that the English curriculum re-

ceived at the Jewish People's school was equivalent to one in the Protestant school board, and that therefore Folkshule graduates could go directly into any high school of their choice. That's what I meant by the first graduating class. My brother was not in that first class, but he was enrolled. Actually it was soon thereafter that he did graduate because he was already about twelve years old -- let me think, he was eleven when he arrived; so I guess he got two years, maybe a year and a half of Folkshule, but he was among the very first to graduate; and then all of us were sent there, which in and of itself was a very powerful thing, because we had the same teachers. My home room teacher in the seventh grade had taught my brother, and remembered him very very fondly, and made it quite clear to everyone in the class that my brother had been the best student that she had ever seen and so on and so forth. There was, I guess, come to think of it, a kind of sibling rivalry. But I think, as I experienced it, it was that I was already basking in the glory of my illustrious forebears all of whom had made their mark in the school by the time that I set foot there.

So the Folkshule became a focal point of our Jewish self-expression and a very important outlet for my parents as well, because the teachers in the school became their friends. So growing up you also socialized with people who were also your teachers, and that was a very powerful combination.

In the early years in Montreal my mother was also active in a Yiddish amateur theater group. There was a famous actress Chayele Grober, formerly of the Habimah, who ended up in Montreal and I think tried to organize a Yiddish theater troupe and my mother was

involved in that. I don't remember that activity. But I can say that our own interest in theater, of the three youngest -- except for my brother, I don't think he never did any theater -- we were all enamored of theater, and I think that was multi-determined. One reason was that I am sure my mother encouraged us in that endeavor. That was a source of vicarious pleasure for her since all her life she was attracted to Yiddish artists. In fact, therein lies a story. When she was engaged to be married to my father, at some point before the wedding, my paternal grandmother exacted only two promises from my mother. Hodel Roskies said to my mother: There are only two things I want you to promise me. One is that you'll keep a kosher home and the other is that you won't associate any longer with Yiddish actors. So apparently my mother promised and then promptly violated both promises throughout the rest of her married life.

So actors and theater played a very important role for us growing up. My sister Ruth was in children's theater in English and I remember listening to her on the radio on Saturday mornings. Children's theater broadcast its plays live on Saturday mornings. And more often than not she had a speaking role. Should you ever ask her about this she could repeat the whole rehearsed beginnings of each of these children theater's segments [which] began the same way. She remembers all of that certainly much better than I do.

So there was the theater in addition to the Jewish People's School. And then there were the writers whom my mother supported. Before my time the most important figure was J. J. Segal, a Yiddish lyric poet whom I do not remember at all, but Ruth does. He was a

permanent fixture in my home. When he died his place was taken by Melech Ravitch, whom I remember very vividly, and his companion Rochele Eisenberg, a communist. Rochele and Ravitch were both, let's put it this way, very frequent visitors on our home. Ravitch tutored my brother for a time, also something I don't know. I mean I know about [it] but never witnessed [it]. They were always at our family's seders and of course whenever there was a literary soirée Ravitch and Rochel were present.

Those literary soirées loom very large because as I mentioned to you in the restaurant, from a fairly early point I began to dream of some day being a Yiddish writer, and being able to sit among these luminaries and read my own work. Yiddish culture for us was always something that we looked up to, that we aspired to be a part of. It was a highbrow literary culture. It was never anything that we stubbed [?] our noses at, that was some kind of mere immigrant vestige. On the contrary it represented that which was most vibrant and vital in our upbringing. These gatherings were quite fancy affairs. My mother prepared a very lavish spread which she [had] catered or had our Ukrainian maid prepare. Usually [it] involved people reading poems or essays. In addition to the teachers from the school, Shimshon Dunskey, the vice principal, Shloyme Weisman, the principal, I also think sometimes Chosid [??] would come, and some others I don't remember quite as well; there were Ravitch and Rochel, Rochel Korn, the poet, a very fine poet, and mother of our family doctor to this day in fact, a young writer from Lodz, Chaver Rosenfarg [??], as I said J. J. Segal was already dead by the time I



could recall or understand what was going on. These were the mainstays of my mother's soirées.

My father was also active in the Jewish People's School. He served as president of the school and even when he wasn't [president] he was very much involved in the school's activities. Add to that a unique institution, the Jewish Public Library, where you could attend lectures and different cultural programs; and an amateur Yiddish theater company of which I became a part at the age of thirteen, directed by Dora Wasserman and housed originally, at least during all the years that I was in Montreal, at the Jewish People's School, then you can begin to see why this home was a place, that is the combination of home, school, and street, was a place that one would not want to leave because all your spiritual, cultural, artistic needs could be met without walking out the front door [chuckles]. That, I guess, was both a blessing and a curse.

Let me try to describe what the confluence of home, school, and street was like. In our home one did not hear any curse words. It was only much later in literature that I ... and in works of folklore that I was able to discover the underside of Yiddish, that which for most people is synonymous with the Yiddish language, shmuck and ... , goodness, I don't even know the words to conjure up right now ... but Yiddish as a vulgar street language was something that we had absolutely no exposure, in fact not in the home or in the school or in the street for that matter. Many languages were heard in our home: Yiddish was the language we spoke to our parents in exclusively; although I think my father would occasionally speak to us in English. But basically we spoke in Yiddish. But among

ourselves, the siblings only spoke English. And I remember telling you in the café that there is something peculiar about Canadian Yiddish that we were not alone in this. Many other native speakers of Yiddish from Canada grew up speaking with the English 'r'. And with other linguistic interferences. It is hard to explain why that should have been so. So that we had to work long and hard to overcome that linguistic handicap when we became self-conscious Yiddishists. In fact, neither my sister nor I to this day can really pull it off. So there was English and Yiddish; between themselves my parents would either speak Russian or Polish when they didn't want the  $\text{דער וועלט}$  to understand. Though I think that we became fairly adept at figuring out what it was that they were saying when they were talking about us. I think other children could tell the same story about Yiddish as the secret language.

The level of religious observance in our home was I guess by American standards Conservative. We did not keep kosher. I told you that my mother's cri de guerre was what's treyf is not what you put into your mouth but what comes out of your mouth. We ate as treyf as treyf could be: bacon, ham, though I don't think we ever had pork sausages in our own home. But we would eat that out certainly. And shellfish we ate out. I don't think my mother knew how to prepare lobster or clams; but we certainly gorged ourselves on it every year on the Cape, whenever we went there for the summers.

Pesach was the only holiday that was strictly observed although strict is a relative term. My mother had another set of dishes in the basement that we would carry up and use only for Pesach, but that was one set of dishes [chuckles], so it was a kind

of personal halachah, I guess, that had evolved. In my sister's article "Between Two Passovers" published in Commentary a number of years ago, she points out that this Pesach observance was something that was picked up on after the War, that my parents had not made their own sedorim in Europe. But the family was always together on Friday night. I think that was sacrosanct. And that tradition has remained the same in my sister's home and certainly in our own that the family is together for a Friday night meal.

In fact meals were what the home was all about. I think back on one unending meal because so long as we were eating my mother had total control; and you weren't allowed to get up from the table until she had finished her monologue. And she talked at you. Now the lunch meals were entirely under her aegis. If my father was home, and particularly on Friday nights, the table became a debating society, where my mother had not all that much to say; although she could turn the conversation around and call attention to herself by saying something absolutely outrageous and provocative, a technique, incidentally, that my sister Ruth unconsciously has adopted. But normally meals meant that my mother was free to pontificate, to story-tell, to dominate. I know that there have been many celebrated descriptions of a Jewish kitchen dominated by a mother. One thinks of Delmore Schwartz's "O My America!" or Alfred Kazin's A Walker in the City. There is ... Those descriptions don't really convey what the experience was for me, because the focus of my mother's monologue was never the here and now, the present was only a spring board for her to reminisce about the past, the real story, the bedrock of memory was Vilna. And all stories, all roads led

back to Vilna. So if I were ever to try in a novelistic way to recreate meals at 17 Paganawello it would be long story-telling sessions about Zavalna gass on the corner of Troke [?] in Vilna between the years 1906 and 1930 with its huge cast of characters.

The school was an extension of that insofar as the Jewish People's School was established and led by teachers from Lithuania, the Litwak connection is absolutely essential here to understand Montreal and Johannesburg [which] are two examples of Jewish communities with a very strong educational network. The reason is that they were both set up at roughly the same time by Jews from Lithuania. If you compare that to places like Buenos Aires or other cities, Baltimore, I guess, I am just taking names out of the hat, you won't necessarily see the same kind of immediate concern for educational establishments. This is not my own theory, by the way, although it does sound like Lokalpatriotismus, it is born out by sociological studies. Be that as it may, the Litwak connection was very profound.

The two founders of the school, they didn't naturally found it, but in our day and age they were synonymous with the Folkshule, Dunsky and Weisman, were really very important in my own intellectual and spiritual growth. Shloyme Weisman, the principal of the Folkshule was a very close personal friend of my father's. They spoke on the telephone every day even after my father was no longer the president of the school. But it was really Dunsky who was my teacher and pedagogue. I told you in the café how at the age of twelve or thirteen, I think it was actually before my bar mitzvah, that my father hit on the idea of hiring Dunsky to be my private

tutor in Talmud. And that was the greatest gift my father ever gave me or could have given me, a teacher and a surrogate grandparent and someone who would take me under his wing at a particularly tumultuous, difficult time in my life, which was adolescence. There's no two ways around it, adolescence in America, I think, is just a horrible period, and it's one reason I would never want to relive my life so as not to have to go through that all over again. So Dunsky was a kind of lighthouse, a moral center, I realize now looking back. Those Saturday mornings walking to his house for five years to take a private lesson in Gemorah was the main source of continuity for me. He took me through the standard curriculum, as I told you. We started with Baba Metzia and we ended with Baba Metzia, we never really got further than three or four chapters. But I understood talmudic reasoning, I could understand what the Talmud was about and the interplay of halakhah and aggadah and I picked up a lot of other things along the way. Just one example: We studied in Dunsky's study, in his personal study. He would just pull out books from his shelf to look things up. And I remember first hearing the name of Sol Lieberman mentioned in awe when he mentioned the Tosefta kivshuta, and what an awesome piece of Jewish scholarship that was, something that Dunsky admired to no end. Now to be perfectly honest to this day I am not even certain what the Tosefta kivshuta is. I know what he did basically, but why it was such a tremendous scholarly feat I still don't know. But the name does have this aura for me because of Dunsky. And on another occasion the name of Abraham Joshua Heschel came up. I had not yet met Heschel and had not been exposed to the whole cult of Heschel and

Chavurah. But I do remember what Dunsky said. He said: התפעלות איד קען נישט פארטראגן זינען; that there was something about Heschel's writing, the highly charged prose that rankled in the mind of this Lithuanian rationalist. That word התפעלות was used negatively. This hyperbole, or as I later discovered, this poetic conceit, I would say, that Heschel cultivated in his style -- Heschel was primarily a poet, I think, and only secondarily a theologian -- that was something that Dunsky didn't ... had no truck with. And you see, I remember that. I remember what Dunsky said about different things. In my autobiographical piece that I sent you, I tell a third story about חמישה חמשי פרץ which also made a lasting impression upon me. Why Dunsky refused to collaborate on a project that would turn Peretz into a latter day Pentateuch. These were moral markers along the way, and intellectual markers as well, in terms of marking out a normative approach to Jewish thought and Jewish scholarship. Not to speak of the few times that he really gave me מוסר for my behavior, particularly in relation to a female classmate of mine, whom I was always making passes at. So he was not beyond calling attention to the fact [chuckles] that this was no way to behave. And the fact that he noticed was very meaningful to me.

I mentioned to you as well in the café that later when I became a radical Yiddishist it was the knowledge that Dunsky and Weisman did not approve of making Yiddish into an end in itself that ultimately led me back to a more balanced, internally bilingual approach if you will to Jewish culture. And it is for that reason that I dedicated my anthology The Literature of Destruction to

Shimshon Dunsky. Now I should also say, parenthetically, with all of this glowing commentary and commemoration that they did not really create a school of disciples. There is a strong analogy between them and the Zionist movement. The first generation of pioneers, Ben Gurion and Golda, did not allow for strong figures to rise in the ranks. And the Folkshule was no exception. Though there were younger teachers there, Canadian-born, who were products of the school, they were kept under the heel of Weisman in particular. It was hard for a person of talent to really find a place for him- or herself in the school. If you were ever to discuss this with Ruth you will hear how she discovered early on that if she wanted to spread her wings she would have to do it on her own. Dunsky and Weisman ran the school the way they saw fit. They were not prepared for any change, for any deviation, for any real young blood to come in and to rock the boat. It was essentially their show. So that if I could fancy myself as a disciple of Dunsky, it's for a very simple reason, that I left town, that I could be a disciple from a distance, that I never became a teacher or an administrator in the Jewish People's School, or even within throwing distance to the school. So I was in a rather enviable position that I could take from them what I wanted, but I never had to exist [nearby] and depend on them for my professional growth.

So that was the school. As far as the street was concerned, I unlike Sacvan don't have very strong memories of the old Jewish neighborhood. By the time I was growing up the school, the folkshule was actually situated there on Waverly Street through the end of third grade. So we would take the trolley car to get there, but

I only remember that street and the corner store where we would buy baseball cards and bubble gum. And that on St. Lawrence there was the Jewish Book Store there. Kayless's [??] was also situated there, and we would pay very frequent visits there of a Sunday, particularly at the beginning of a school year to buy our text books. But fairly soon everything moved out of that neighborhood. The last major institution to move in fact was the Jewish Public Library because they made a very odd decision of building a building there at the very point when the neighborhood was already in decline, but having done that, they stuck around longer than almost any other Jewish institution. In fourth grade the Folkshule relocated to the new center of Jewish settlement, closer to the suburbs. Oh yes, there was also the Workmen's Circle that remained on St. Lawrence Boulevard. I didn't visit all that frequently; but for me going to that Workmen Circle building was somehow connected with a trip to the old country.

That's an important feature that through Yiddish we had working class connections and credentials, you see, even though my parents' vision of Yiddish was distinctly highbrow, the fact that they sent us to a farband school and the fact that they raised us speaking Yiddish meant that we had access to the folk, to the extent that there still was a Yiddish-speaking folk left. And in Montreal you could find taylor's and furriers and artisans, working class Jews and intellectuals speaking Yiddish. You can still hear today in the streets. I am not speaking now about the chassidic ... [knock at the door]



So this raises an intriguing question about adolescent rebellion; it's a topic that's close to your heart, incidentally we forgot to talk the whole idea, and I have a candidate for you, someone who could really deliver a brilliant lecture on Jewish adolescence, and that is Marcus Mosley, my colleague and friend who teaches now at NYU, but we will talk about him later. The question is how could one rebel in a place like Montreal where you are surrounded by people looking out for you, and everywhere you go there are Jews, Jews, and other Jews. And that I think is really the clincher. Because my experience was that even when you did rebel you ended up somewhere else within the Jewish community; and that is a very powerful model looking back upon it.

Now what happened was the following. Not only did my parents hook me up with Shimshon Dunsky, but for reasons which to this day I don't fully understand they decided at roughly the same time, at the beginning of adolescence, around thirteen, to send me to camp Masad, a Hebrew Zionist modern orthodox camp. Now it is true that my sisters and brother, even though my brother never went to Masad, he went to Pripstein's [??], but Eva had already gone to Masad, so there was that connection. But I had had no exposure to any of that previously. What's more, the year they decided to send me to Masad was the year that a Yiddish Bundist camp called Hemshech was ... [END OF TAPE / BEGINNING OF NEW TAPE] ... particularly in that it was established by people who my mother knew very well, Arthur Lerner and the whole Bundist group, which was probably the reason she didn't want to send me there. It was just too close for comfort. That was my mother's innate rebelliousness playing itself out.

אויף צלוחות [af tasloches] she wasn't going to send her son there, because it was the most obvious place for me to go. And that was also, looking back, a prescient decision on their part, because they threw me into an environment which I really had to sink or swim in. Now, just to illustrate for you how ill prepared I was for Masad, and I don't know whether I told you this story or not, if you've heard it, then forgive me. The first morning after we arrived our bunk, together with all the other bunks, was taken to the special auditorium for morning t'filah. I think it was a Wednesday or Thursday, I figured, well, this must be in honor of the first day of camp. I couldn't imagine why else we were going to daven [laughs]. The second day of camp, when we were also awakened rather early and rounded up to go to t'filah, it dawned on me for the first time that I was now in a camp where t'filah was obligatory every single morning. And this came as quite a shock. I was not yet bar mitzvah; I didn't have to put on t'fillin. So I couldn't really see the rhyme or reason for going to daven particularly since I was not a believing Jew. But that first year at Masad, I went along with it. It was part of the routine; what can you do? The second year I went back to camp and now I was already bar mitzvah so I was supposed to put on t'fillin. I put my foot down, I had already read Catcher in the Rye and I knew that phoniness was the greatest, most heinous crime there could be possibly be. Whatever else could be said of me, I was not a hypocrite; I did not believe in all of this; and wild horses weren't going to drag me to shul. I mean shabbes morning was bad enough. But every single morning? Absolutely no! I was not going to go to morning t'filah. And so for the first and

only time in the history of camp Masad, so far as I know, morning t'filah was decreed non-obligatory. And the head counsellor, a man named Boruch Marbeles, I think I did tell you this, come to think of it, a man named Boruch Marbeles [??] had morning sicha instead with me for forty-five minutes, every morning. He came up with some topic or other for my delectation in Hebrew of course. Now, none of this was ever part of my cultural baggage, speaking Hebrew, Zionism, orthodoxy, but I did make some very good friends. In fact to this day, some of my closest friends are people I went to camp with.

In any event, one morning in my second year of camp, at one of the sichot, Barry Marbeles described to me a ladder of perfection on the top rung of which were Jews who were observant, Zionist, and Hebrew speaking; and then as we went down the ladder the Jews became less observant, less Zionist, and less Hebrew speaking; and at the very bottom rung was somebody who was a Zionist but wasn't very frum and didn't speak Hebrew at all; and that was the end of it. I remember going back to my bunk wondering vu bin ich? And here my whole life, my whole self-definition was Jewish, everything that I was was Jewish, and I didn't even figure on the bottom most rung of the head counsellor's description of the possibilities and varieties of Jewish experience and expression. And this occasioned a real identity crisis. I was fourteen years old. And may this not be a light matter in your eyes; this was really a crisis. I remember lying in my bed and sobbing I was so distraught. It was as if someone had declared me an illegitimate bastard. I couldn't imagine what to do with myself. And so I wrote a letter to Shimshon Dunsky telling him of my problem and asking for guidance. And I received

pretty soon thereafter in camp a fifteen-page handwritten letter from him which I subsequently lost. I held on to it for many, many years. I hope maybe someday if we ever sell my mother's house the letter will still show up, because I kept it as a talisman. I can't tell you any longer what the details of the letter were. But basically he reiterated the philosophy of the Folkshule, what it was that we had learned and what we stood for. And basically telling me that I was a very good Jew and not to worry and just to keep plugging a long. But that was not my answer. I decided that I was going to chuck it all; that if he, Barry Marbeles, was going to define me out of the system, I was going to rewrite the rules and create my own ladder of perfection. And that is when I became, at age fifteen, a radical Yiddishist. It seems a little to pat as a biographical sequence; but as I remember it this is exactly the way it happened.

As I was casting about for for something that I could believe in passionately, and when you are an adolescent in the throes of an identity crisis you have to believe in something passionately. I hit upon Yiddish. At the age of fifteen I wrote a letter to Afn Shvel/ אין שוועל the official organ of the Freeland League, the Yiddish territorialists, to somebody I knew there, a family friend, Michel Astor. It was a fan letter, about how much I loved the magazine and its anti-Zionism and its modern orthography and its critical stance towards all those Zionist assimilationists. The letter was [laughs] was published anonymously. But the Yiddish world was so small that my teachers in Folkshule figured out who it was who wrote it. Who could it have been after all? I don't recall it

anymore. I have it in my scrapbook if you are really interested in it. I could look it up whether it said somebody from Montreal or not. It probably did; identified me as a fifteen year old from Montreal. But even if it hadn't, they could probably figure it out. And one of my teachers was quite upset. It wasn't Dunsky, it was someone else, Leah Rubinoff, that I had written this because it was so anti-Zionist. But that was the beginning of my radical break and my adolescent rebellion; and as I said, the forms of that rebellion were Jewish. Because where could one go? There were no other options.

Yiddish then took the place of my religion, my Zionism, my language to be certain, and that year, as I was gearing up to becoming a prophet of Yiddishism, I sat down with Uriel Weinreich and with that sentence that you found on page 48 of College Yiddish ["In Yiddish every preposition requires the dative."] I was able to retool and I began to memorize di, der, and dos, the gender of nouns which I had never given much thought to and learning how to put together a correct Yiddish sentence and not to fake it anymore. It was during that year, the fifteenth year of my life, that I met a young fellow by the name of Gabi Trunk who was a year younger than me; or was I already sixteen and he was fifteen? No, I think I was fifteen and he was fourteen. It took us a year to get our act together. He visited me and he was one of the young up and coming Bundists. And went to camp Hemshech, as did my very best friend in Montreal whom I haven't even mentioned yet, Chaskel. I have to come back to him. That's an important feature of my life, the kinds of people that became my best friends, and Chaskel in particular.

because he came from a working class Yiddish background and was a native speaker of Yiddish whose Yiddish sounded native unlike my own. So Chaskel went to Hemshech. I can't recall any longer how it came about that Gabi Trunk visited me, how he got my address. But anyhow, we spent the day together, and we were both enthralled to have met one another. We were two true believers in the cause. He, by the way, is the son of Isaiah Trunk, the historian, the man who wrote the book on the Judenrat. So he came by his Yiddishism as honestly as I did. After he left it occurred to me that the two of us should start a journal [laughs] and why sell ourselves short? a youth movement. I wrote him a letter and he brought this letter to his class at Yiddishe Lererseminar in New York. His teacher was Mordechai Shechter. The letter was read aloud and Shechter and the class decided to take up the challenge and to set up Yugentruf inspired by my cri de guerre. And that is really how it happened. It's been recorded in the official annals of Yugentruf, so there is corroborating evidence for this. In fact the power behind the throne was and remains to this day Mordechai. Without him how could we pisherlach ever have gotten the whole thing off the ground. But the idea came from me and was conveyed by Gabi Trunk.

So for the next couple of years I threw much of my formidable adolescent libidinal energies into Yugentruf; and as I said in that piece of mine, I discovered that one of the missing links was that you couldn't seduce somebody in Yiddish, which was always a serious drawback. Later I discovered that I would be seduced, well, by Yiddish and that was my undoing. But at that early stage, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, when I was so desperate, Yiddish

availed me very little. [laughs] So you had to do something with that libidinal energy, you had to go some place. So I channeled it into my typewriter instead. Day after day, week after week, [I] churned out letters to Toronto to Sidney, Australia, to Buenos Aires, to Israel, wherever there were young Yiddishists willing to heed the call, I was there to rouse them to action, not to speak of letters to the Tog-Morgenjournal and to the Forverts, and to Singer and to Glatshstein and of whoever else I could rally to my cause. And as I said in the speech, they had to believe in us, because they had failed in terms of their own children, so they had to believe that we would be their heirs since there weren't any others.

One of the first principles adopted by Yugentruf was that we would speak only Yiddish to one another and to other Jews who spoke Yiddish. Now that was easier said than done [chuckles]. Like Eliezer Ben-Yehuda we discovered that we lacked some very basic terminology to discuss everyday life. Sex was the least of it. We didn't even know the parts of the body in Yiddish [laughs], but how to talk about science, literature --well, literature we actually could talk about, that was a topic that we discussed in school -- movies, technology, cars, we had to learn a lot of terminology. That was another thing that Shechter was particularly good at. He invented terms. He still does. He makes up all kinds of technical terms in his make-belief world where everybody speaks Yiddish. So I learned how to go to a garage and to tell somebody tsu farshtain dem tormos, to ... gee, what's the English for that? Something about the breaks; I don't know the English equivalent. I knew that a shockabsorber was a sburzhi[??]-armortisator; and other such useful

phrases. We really were very consistent. So that to this day even after all the revolution has long been lost, Chaskel and I will only speak Yiddish to one another and Gabi Trunk, if I ever see him, or all those people from Yugentruf days, Rakhmiel Peltz, for instance, who is now a professor of Yiddish at Columbia. We speak Yiddish as a natural part of our lives. But, obviously, in the first years it was anything but natural. So that I think was no mean feat to create a counterculture in Yiddish, through Yiddish and still manage to be rebels against our own parents whose mother tongue after all was Yiddish as well; so the only analogy I think is to the youth movements in interbellum Poland. That's another reason why I am particularly fascinated by your topic of Jewish adolescence; I think a lot more work, lot more work has to be done about the Jewish youth movements and what they contributed to the modernization of the Jews. We really recapitulated that phenomenon though our parents were also products of that youth rebellion in their own day. That's who they were after all. They spoke Yiddish, but they created a secular Yiddish culture in marked defiance to their own parents. We managed somehow to distance ourselves from our own parents through Yiddish. And yet to coexist within the other youth cultures. So I maintained very close contact with my friends from Masad. And in 11th grade in fact I joined a group which was Masad-based, well an off-shoot of it, called -- are you ready? -- Shomrei Ha-Umah [שמורי האומה]. It began as a study group with David Hartman. We met on Wednesday nights with him for an hour and then hung out for another couple of hours in his basement and started our own mimeographed journal. And I was the resident Yiddishist of the group. So I



guessed in fact that my religious, my spiritual search began earlier than what I had told you. In fact to piece it together, Shomrei Ha-Umah was really the beginning of it, because at that time these were all shul-going people. As it happens I am the only one of the group who still goes to shul [laughs]. All of the others have become rank apikorsim. My cousin David Roskies was in there, David Kaufman, George Weiss. These are not names that would necessarily mean anything to you; Shelley Shrader [??]; but they were my buddies; they were my chevrah.

So that I already had a kind of double life. I had Yugentruif which never really got off the ground. I had to be chief cook and bottle washer all the years that I was up in Montreal; and even when I went up to Brandeis I felt I had to pull strings from a distance to make things happen. I was never very good at delegating responsibilities. Nor do I frankly think there was much to work with. It was my thing; and so long as I was there to organize these programs they happened; and when I left things basically fell apart.

But I learned that I could be equally comfortable in different Jewish setting in Montreal and that people respected me for what I stood for; which meant eventually that I had to learn more about what it was I was supposed to stand for; people always assumed that I knew much more about my subject than I actually did. That became a problem that took me many years to resolve till I finally caught up with my own image. I won't even tell you when that was, but it took many, many years to accomplish.

That was really an exciting time to be fifteen and sixteen because one could enjoy a great deal of freedom and diversity. It's

only now that I can look back upon it and understand how fortunate I was. First of all in comparison to my own son, Ariyeh, raising him in New York where I don't know he is going to be allowed out of our sight until he is twenty-five years old. Children have to be watched every hour, every day, every minute; but even more to the point, comparing notes with Sheyna, who moved to Montreal in 1960 and lived literally and figuratively on the other side of the tracks, had no mobility whatsoever; she couldn't even ride her bicycle on the street that they lived on, which was a deadend street. [She] was never driven anywhere, so she could never avail herself of everything that Jewish Montreal had to offer, and grew up detesting the city, the suburbs, and couldn't wait to get out of there. I, at exactly the same time, and I knew many of the same people she went to school [with] in Herzeliyah; my cousin David Roskies was in her class as were many of my friends; but she didn't move in any of those circles. The only outlet that she had was B'nei Akiva, a religious youth group. And that was it. She had no freedom of movement. I on the other hand could come and go as I pleased. And I must say to my mother's credit that she let go of me at just the point where I was ready to spread my wings. In fact I remember her telling me, was I fifteen? I can't remember. But her actually saying to me, you know, you are a free agent now. I trust you to act responsibly, you don't have to account for your comings and goings, just take care of yourself; and I remember thinking, gee, that was easy [laughs]. Of course it wasn't till many years later and many years of therapy also that I understood that I had never really cut the apron strings. I remained mama's little boy; and to

some extent I still am. So that she had me in palm of her hands anyway, so it wasn't ... she never really did let go. The emotional control she had she never really <sup>reli<sup>n</sup></sup>quished. But as far as my physical mobility went, I really was free to live my own life.

It was an extraordinarily active life. Theater became an outlet for me as well as for my siblings. So that not only was I a member of the Yiddish theater group run by Dora Wasserman from the age of 13 till 16; and went to rehearsals till all hours of the night; but after school was part of the Drama Society at Outremont High School, and by my senior year played Macbeth in Macbeth; so that took up an enormous amount of time; in addition to my parents' taking us to concerts and lectures fairly frequently. I know this because I kept a journal, a diary, for two years in high school. When I read it I am amazed at how much I could do in one day, in one week. It is just unbelievable how many activities were crammed into that period of my life. I could organize Yugentruf activities, hang out with my friends, and belong to Shomrei H-Umah, and do basically whatever I wanted, as long as I got my homework done. So there was really an enormous amount of scope for finding oneself. And trying on different roles. And that really stood me in good stead later, because I always knew where home was. I know now that I have been feeding off those first sixteen years of my life ever since. Ever since.

Here are some examples of what I mean. From the introduction of Against the Apocalypse you already know that attending memorial gatherings particularly of the lantshanshaftn of Vilna and Bialystok became really formative experiences, and in fact while still in high

school. I already organized my first Yom Ha-Shoah commemoration. The story behind that is as follows. It must have been 1963 or so that my parents took me to one of these communal wide commemorations which were mass gatherings the same as virtually anywhere with a large Jewish population from Eastern Europe. What was so particular about that gathering, it suddenly hit me sitting in this auditorium with hundreds of other Jews that the program that had been put together was totally irrelevant. Irrelevant because inviting a big name speaker to give a harangue and a chasn to deliver an el moley rachamin were simply vacuous, and besides the people who were there were Holocaust survivors themselves and they didn't need to be reminded of what they had lived through. What was needed instead was some kind of interpretive program that would bring the Holocaust alive as it were to people who had not been present, who had not borne witness. A very simple truth but one that I had basically to experience myself before it hit me. So what did I do? Fifteen years old or thereabouts; I wrote a letter to the Canadian Jewish Congress to the man responsible for the programming complaining about the fact that these programs were meaningless. I still have the letter I got back. Very pleased that a young person -- you know the way they are so patronizing -- should take interest in all the goings on in the community; and then he said in the end, do you think you can do a better job? And that was the key phrase, because I realized that of course he didn't think I could do a better job, but I knew that I could. So in my last year of high school I got together my friends from the various youth movements from Hashomer Hatsair and my Masad friends and my Yiddishist friends. As a collectivity we

decided to put together a youth commemoration at the YMHA that we would write and perform and produce. This is what we did. We sat down together over the course of many many weeks with different sources and hammered out a program. Given that we were all fifteen and sixteen years old, the program necessarily focused on the theme of resistance. It was in fact quite inspiring to us that so many of the leaders of the resistance were people not much older than ourselves.

But coming as I did from a Yiddish background I also had access to other sources, to poetry and to liturgical sources. I remember one of my friends, Moshe <sup>Denberg</sup> ~~Dember~~ [22], who was a rabbi's son, did an el moley rachamim and that together with a recitation of Yiddish poetry and calls to arms and historical documentation from the Holocaust became what the program was. And we staged it in a very interesting, spare but modernist way; and it was done for Yom Hashoah. Montreal had never seen anything like it. In fact I doubt whether any youth group anywhere in the world prior to that date had done a Yom Hashoah commemoration of its own. Melech Ravitch was there and wrote it up for the Keneder Odler. I think it was somewhat lukewarm. But it was written up in the Yiddish press. I no longer remember what it was that I took exception to; somehow I thought he should have been more enthusiastic [laughs]. But in our own jargon of today we would say that it was an empowering event, because I realized that I could do something by dint of my own effort and creativity; and that it could be a lot better than anything that my elders would ever conceive of putting together.

I also learned that working by committee was not very efficient. It was extremely time-consuming and that if you really wanted to put a program together you had to do it yourself, which is basically what I did in the years that followed, when I went off to Brandeis. I and my roommate, Hillel Schwartz, collaborated year after year after year on Yom Hashoah commemorations, which were incidentally the first that had ever been done at Brandeis, [telephone or alarm clock] and probably for that matter at any secular university.

### Night Words

So Montreal gave rise to ~~nightwords~~ [??] and Holocaust commemoration. My mother's stories clearly have fed into the work that I am doing now on Yiddish story telling and on the ability of acculturated Jews to reinvent themselves as story-tellers, that whole ambiguous relationship that first generation of moderns had to their shtetl past. I remember telling you in the café of my conversation with Kenneth Silverman about Sholem Aleichem and my realization that the reason ... actually I didn't tell you the whole story about Kenneth Silverman. So let me fill it in now since I have already digressed in that direction. Mine was the last presentation for the biography seminar, and I more or less admitted that I had not begun to write the biography of Sholem Aleichem. I didn't go so far as to say that I had attended the seminar under false pretense, but I had something to show them anyway that I had published on the subject. But for the presentation I worked up a thesis on Sholem Aleichem as a narcissist, a narcissitic personality, that was based on his correspondence and on the way that he manipulated people. First of all his extraordinary insecurity vis-à-vis the intellectuals of his day,

the way he would use people to gain access to other people that he thought were important for him, that he looked up to, and the way in which he thought himself the center of the universe of his family, of the family of writers, almost of the Jewish people as a whole. And what a powerful, organizing principle that narcissism was. At the final lunch that we had, when we all went out after the last seminar, I was sitting next to Silverman and we were going over my presentation and he said that my thesis rang very true to him. And I said, yes, I know that I am right, the reason I know that I am right about Sholem Aleichem is that he is just like my mother. At which point Silverman burst out laughing and said you know you are absolutely right, the only thing, when one studies other phenomena, that one can really study is that which you already know, which you already recognize, which of course was the theme that I was pushing all along, the hidden agenda of all of my classmates for choosing the different subjects that they had chosen to write biographies about.<sup>1</sup> So that he confirmed this hunch on a methodological level but you recognize narcissism because you have lived with it; and then he went further and said this peculiar double identity of people like Sholem Aleichem who were Yiddish writers but spoke Russian at home; who were they? They didn't raise their children

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<sup>1</sup> But then how do we learn anything new? It is true that we are preoccupied with or fascinated by what we recognize or already know. But when we look more closely we recognize also that the resemblance is only superficial; that really there is no resemblance at all or very little) because circumstances are different. At that point we learn something new: by seeing the difference between instances apparently so similar or even identical. It is at that point that the writing of a biography becomes fascinating: in the exploration of difference since this is the only way to expand one's knowledge of the world sympathetically and on a psychological level near the core of the writer's self. [Editor's comment]

speaking Yiddish, so what did it all mean to them? And it was that kind of double, triple identity and ambivalence that of course I detected in my mother who grew up in a Russian speaking home and only learned Yiddish as an adolescent, but for all her Russified background and her piano lessons and her gymnasium education and her French, [she] was also a shtetl Jew, deeply, very superstitious woman, believes in a God of Vengeance, quotes proverbs, sayings in several languages, her speech is peppered with almost as many folk sayings as Teyve der Milchiker's. So my work now on story-telling and conceivably the biography that I am going to write on Sholem Aleichem will be a direct result of those formative, even the chapter I am working on now on the folklorization of songs in mid- and late nineteenth century is based on my mother's song repertoire. She was one of the informants for the YIVO folk song project run by Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett. My mother was one of the informants and recorded some two hundred songs in five languages.

My work in Yiddish theater in Montreal obviously fed into my interest in becoming a movie director and the various media projects that I have done over the years; and clearly the Hebrew-Yiddish symbiosis that the Folkshule stood for and that Shimshon Dunsky inculcated gave rise to the concept of Jewish literature and of Proof-texts. The other side of Prooftexts is the YIVO ideology, the folkist agenda of Jewish scholarship in the service of the people. It came as a very rude awakening to me after two years of Prooftexts that there was no amcha out there, there was no educated laity, or at least not in vast numbers, interested in our work; that if Proof-texts was to survive as a journal, it would have to do it the way



every single academic journal in America survives, namely on institutional subscriptions, on libraries, the statistics are quite shocking, even the major journals in field, Modern Literary History, I guess, or Diacritics, or whatever, have a subscription base 90 to 95 per cent of which is libraries. When Prooftexts started it was about 60 to 40; 60 per cent individuals to 40 per cent insitutions, libraries. But individuals are very fickle in contrast to libraries, which once they subscribe will keep up their subscription over many many years; and not only that but are charged twice the regular price for doing so.<sup>2</sup> So in the back of my mind Prooftexts was not only fulfilling the larger internally bilingual or trilingual cultural agenda but was also scholarship for the masses. Somewhere deep down I think I still hold on to that notion.

A I am going to finish this tape by telling you about Chaskel, my best friend in Montreal, because there is an interesting pattern that played itself out over the years. I discovered Chaskele just

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<sup>2</sup> In the case of Prooftexts I could tell you why individuals lost interest in it: because its articles became increasingly academic and lost touch with what interests and fascinates a general educated audience. On the other hand it is important that Jewish Studies has a competitive cutting edge academic magazine on the market. That writers who are quite able to write competently for a general educated audience do not want to contribute to Prooftexts has to do (1) with the zero pay for any articles and (2) even more important the extraordinary lack of courtesy on the part of one of its editors. I, for one, will never again over anything to Prooftexts. Lacking enthusiastic young talent willing to write articles pour le roi du Prusse, as the phrase went in German, since the King of Prussia was known never to pay his bills owed to the folk, Prooftexts lacks articles of general interest and has become a forum in which rarefied academics commune among themselves. That there is an amcha of sorts out there the success of Tikkun has amply shown; even though this is acrowd I would not want to be caught dead in either. But you may console yourself with the thought that even an endeavor supported by Geoffrey Hartman, the Yale-based journal Orim, bit the dust after a couple of years.

at the age when developmentally you made your first real best friend. I was eleven years old and I remember the moment of mutual discovery. We were on the 129 bus going to my house; there was a kind of a declaration of love between us when we ~~now~~ realized we were no<sup>w</sup> going to be each other's best friends. We remained best friends for many years after that, well into college. It wasn't I think until I met Hillel. In my freshman year Hillel replaced Chaskel in my heart. I have already told you that when Yugentruf started Chaskele and I took a vow that we would henceforth speak only in Yiddish which we have kept to this very day. The pattern that was repeated between him and me in terms of the kinds of friends that I chose as my "best" friends was that Chaskel came from a deprived background. He was an orphan; his father had been killed in an accident; he was run over by a car when Chaskel was very young; and he lived with his mother in a doctor's offices and very much had a chip on his shoulder of being an orphan. His mother was a nurse but actually didn't get fully accredited as a nurse until many many years later, so she was really exploited as a nurse's aide even though she had had a nursing certificate from Russia and was more qualified than most of the nurses in the General Jewish Hospital where she worked. So Chaskel could sponge off me in a way because I lived on the hill and had all the conceivable amenities and toys that a child could ever want. All the things he was deprived of he could have through me; but the way that that got evened out was that Chaskele was my intellectual superior. Chaskel began reading at a very young age and was very precocious. It follows a certain pattern that because he was all alone and isolated and over-

weight he read a lot and was very bright and knew everything about everything; and was quite radical in his views even then, having grown up in a Bundist home. So he was always politically precocious as well as intellectually precocious so that I always felt that there was no contest between us. He was the more widely read; he was the intellectual, and I could just be a kind of satellite around him; whereas I had the fancy house and the toys and the tape recorder and the electric train set, etc. Now what's interesting about that is that he wasn't the only one of that group, the whole Yugentruf was made up of people like Chaskel who were children of Holocaust survivors and working class parents. We were all wunderkinder in the Yiddish world. We peaked very young and we were made a big deal of; and as I said in Against the Apocalypse we would be called upon to read poetry at grown-up gatherings and everybody took us very seriously. But what happened is that eventually I outgrew them all and I did because I left home. It was really leaving home that made all the difference, that I moved into a different circle where I had to prove myself and I couldn't coast on my reputation as a wunderkind. The problem with Chaskel is more complicated, we actually went off to college in Boston together, he to MIT and I to Brandeis, which was very unusual for people of our generation who were among eight students out of a class of over 200 that went to the State<sup>s</sup> for a university. But he got totally embroiled in SDS, in radical politics and that derailed him completely. He never realized his potential at all. He is now an instructor of mathematics, no more than an instructor, at the University of Toronto, and emotionally just barely developed beyond adolescence. He just

got married a year ago and I don't think he will ever have children.  
So there was really an arrested growth there and he remained a  
dilettant knowing many things but ... [END OF TAPE].