

A gripping tale of courage as two members of Freud's Circle try to keep their loved ones safe.



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The Arts : Treasures from the Jewish Attic

August/September 2009

Keep track of those old photos, Manischewitz matza tins and sisterhood cookbooks. They may have a place in a museum, as part of the growing field of Jewish Americana.

It all started with a few turn-of-the-century rabbi postcards.

But Peter H. Schweitzer soon discovered that the world of Jewish postcards was so immense—one could own, say, not merely a card showing a synagogue but cards showing that synagogue in all seasons, weather, times of day or stages of



Seltzer Bottles, C. 1910-1940,

construction—that he decided to collect only American ones. Which led eventually, and perhaps inevitably, to his owning over 10,000 specimens of what is known in the field as Jewish Americana, or as American Judaica—from seltzer bottles to Yiddish typewriters to electric advertising clocks. He had 15 clocks, 11 of them promoting kosher hot dogs.

**Courtesy of the National Museum of
American Jewish History/
Peter H. Schweitzer Collection of Jewish
Americana**

In 25 years of collecting, Schweitzer, rabbi of the City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York, amassed the largest private collection of 20th-century Jewish Americana on record. In 2005, he donated almost all of it to the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia (215-923-3811; www.nmajh.org). In November 2010, when the NMAJH moves to its spectacular five-story glass, steel and terra cotta new home on Independence Mall across from the Liberty Bell and complete with its own subway station, you will be able to see Schweitzer's extraordinary hodgepodge of everyday objects, bringing to life the last century or so of American Jewish history. Of course, the rest of that 355-year history will unfold before your eyes, too, across 22,000 square feet of exhibition space.

The NMAJH's home in progress (watch it go up in 15-minute increments on the museum's Web site) is proof positive that Jewish Americana has finally come of age. It arguably began coming of age when the American Jewish Historical Society (212-294-6160; www.ajhs.org), whose holdings now include 20 million documents and 50,000 books, paintings and objects, set up shop in New York in 1892. But "the academic discipline had its origins in the post-World War II era," according to Josh Perelman, deputy director for programming and museum historian at the NMAJH. That was when Jacob Rader Marcus, who could be said to have invented the discipline, founded the American Jewish Archives (513-221-1875; www.americanjewisharchives.org), whose holdings amount to some 15,000 linear feet of temperature- and humidity-controlled space on the Cincinnati campus of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion.

"As the discipline has gained stature," Perelman said, "there has been a groundswell in the creation of knowledge, and that has filtered down to the public." Some pioneering museums—including the NMAJH, which originated during and because of the bicentennial celebration in 1976—were key in this filtering-down process

Grace Cohen Grossman, curator of Judaica and Americana at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles (310-440-4500; www.skirball.org), recalled that in 1983, "we were very lean on Americana. I said, 'We really need to start a collection.'" Today, Project Americana, begun in 1985 with a 1951 tin of Rokeach Scouring Powder found in La Porte, Indiana, accounts for some 5,000 of the Skirball's 30,000 objects. By the late '80s, regional Jewish museums began proliferating, sometimes because of individual crusades like Marcia Jo Zerivitz' years of treks in search of Jewish Floridiana. The results of her efforts are now preserved in the Sanford L. Ziff Jewish Museum of Florida, in Miami (305-672-5044; www.jewishmuseum.com), of which she's the founding director and curator.

Then growing numbers of lone connoisseurs began—as in one of Schweitzer's favorite folktales—discovering the pot of gold under their own hearth. "I deal mostly with books and manuscripts, and in the last five years there's been a huge uptick in Americana," said Sharon Liberman Mintz, senior consultant of Judaica at Sotheby's in New York, where one of five existing copies of the first American Jewish cookbook sold last December for \$18,000. "As the American community has matured, our own history has gained currency. It now has a value it hadn't achieved before. While there were earlier collectors of Judaica who didn't have a single piece of Americana, nowadays many people are interested only in Americana."

Fortunately for the budgets of those people, "the definition of what's acceptable as traditional Americana is expanding," noted Kerry Shrives, director of Judaica for Skinner Auctioneers & Appraisers in Boston. "You used to think 1860s, now it can be 1930s." Or later. "People are choosing quality over age. They'd rather have a real piece from the 1950s or '60s than a reproduction of something older. They're looking more broadly for things

that have merit, something regional, something by a certain artist, something that is the best of its type.”

At this point you may be wondering exactly what Jewish Americana is. According to Rabbi Gary P. Zola, executive director of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, there is no definitive answer. “We’re not dealing with something you can look up in Webster’s,” he said. “One way of defining it is that, broadly speaking, we’re talking about anything that’s either historically or culturally or socially a reflection of the American Jewish experience: a prayer book, a portrait, a speech....”

An Israeli chewing gum wrapper with Jerry Lewis’s picture on it that turned up on eBay? No, Cohen Grossman said, even though it showcases a vintage American comedian, it speaks more of the Israeli experience and is therefore Israeliana. But a candy bar she found in Israel “as Patriot missiles were falling,” with a “red, white and blue wrapper that said ‘Patriot’ in English?” Definitely. That wrapper speaks of United States-Israel relations—and is in the Skirball collection.

We are also talking about a Victorian Valentine of a Rosh Hashana greeting engraved on a walrus tusk by a Native American artist named Happy Jack (Nome, Alaska, 1910) at The Jewish Museum in New York (212-423-3200; www.thejewishmuseum.org); the 1928 cookbook put out by the Los Angeles section of the National Council of Jewish Women that recently went for \$108.50 on eBay; the sterling silver salt cellars and snuffbox by Myer Myers, Paul Revere’s contemporary—and competitor—and his family Bible, both in the Beth Ahabah Museum in Richmond, Virginia (804-253-2668; www.bethahabah.org); a Hadassah canasta deck (c. 196 from the NMAJH; the fantastical carved and gilded Ark lions by Marcus Charles Illions of carousel-carving fame, at the Skirball; the silvered brass petticoat candlesticks my great-grandmother brought to South Philadelphia from Odessa in 1900; an 1896 quilt immortalizing Baltimore’s High Street Shul in patchwork by local tailor Samuel Harris (Jewish Museum of Maryland; 410-732-6400; www.jewishmuseummd.org); any item pertaining to Bob Dylan or that Bob Dylan ever touched; the poem “The New Colossus” in Emma Lazarus’s own hand (American Jewish Historical Society); and, at the Jewish Museum of Florida: the dress, gloves, cloche and stockings that one Fannie Moss created from local seashells and wore to the YMHA Purim party in Jacksonville 1918.

And every object tells a story. “Collectors like Peter Schweitzer,” said Perelman, “are inspired by the story and driven by a passion for making sure that story can be told. For them it’s an emergency, it’s got to be saved, no matter what the period.”

It does not matter if the object is made in the U.S.A. or brought here (immigration being a major story line), sacred or mundane, high art or low rent. It doesn’t even have to look Jewish. Jane Leavey, director of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum in Atlanta (678-222-3700; www.thebreman.org), said one of her favorite things in the Breman’s core exhibit is “the ordinary silver soup spoon a mother gave her son coming to the wilds of America in the late 1800s so he would have the proper utensil to eat his soup with.” Then there is the Guttenberg—a steamer trunk rigged to perform as a touring diva’s closet—in Chicago’s Spertl Museum. This particular Guttenberg was made by Carson Pirie Scott and belonged to Dina Halpern, a Polish star of Yiddish theater who debuted in New York in 1938. After the Nazis invaded Poland, she could not return home. Halpern—the only member of her family to survive the Holocaust—became a prime mover on the Chicago Yiddish theater scene and often performed in Israel, where her fans included survivors who had seen her onstage in prewar Poland.

The only two Jewish samplers Amy Finkel of M. Finkel and Daughter in Philadelphia has come across in her 25 years of sampler dealing look decidedly mainstream. “Only their names and histories tell us they were Jewish,” she said. One is a simple alphabet painstakingly stitched by 6-year-old Sarah Levy of Richmond in 1847. Finkel’s efforts to learn Sarah’s story led her to the American Jewish Archives. An April 1864 missive at the archives written by Sarah’s brother, Isaac, in South Carolina where he was serving in the Confederate Army described his Passover away from home. Isaac died four months later.

Then there are the objects that shout Jewish Americana. Some mix American and Jewish motifs, as in the 19th-century Torah binders embellished with American flags in the collections of both The Jewish Museum and the Skirball. Others apply American symbols to traditional ritual objects (for example, Mae Rockland Tupa's Statue of Liberty Hanukkah Lamp in honor of the statue's 100th birthday, an instant classic).

Sometimes an artifact alerts us to a strictly stateside tradition, such as the introduction of the American charity ball into Purim festivities, as shown in an 1877 magazine illustration in the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York's archives (212-678-8000; www.jtsa.edu) in which a throng of costumed celebrants (one came as a dreidel, another as a New York brownstone) are milling around beneath "Happy Purim" and "Charity" signs.

Could *ketubot* featuring pairs of clocks set at meaningful times also be indigenous? The JTS has one that was handpainted in Utica, New York, in 1863 with the little hand on 6 and big hand on 13, alluding to 613, the number of *mitzvot* in the Torah. The Spertus collection's 1864 Detroit ketuba shows two clocks with their hands at 12 and 3. Coincidentally (or not?), the Mishna upholding a widow's right to remain in her husband's house and be buried near him is Ketubot 12:3.

Unfortunately, as Cohen Grossman pointed out, few *ketubot* from that period survived. But there could still be one in somebody's basement. In attics? As Perelman said, "We have no idea what gems might still be out there

For those who want to start collecting, Schweitzer gives some tips. For starters, he said, there's no place like home. Or your parents' home. Or anywhere else you might find raw materials for your family archives. Schweitzer is now foraging in cartons of his family's documents and photographs where he has unearthed heirlooms such as his grandmother's 1918 diary. Make sure your treasures are well preserved and keep a record of them. In the case of photos, write on the back who all those people are. And throw nothing away! "What will happen if we don't get the information?" Schweitzer asked. "The world won't change. But on the other hand, it's a legacy. It's something to pass down to the children, the next generation, to record, to remember."

Before venturing into the wilds of eBay, however, "find a niche that interests you," he cautioned. Cookbooks from temple sisterhoods and Hadassah chapters are good. Or how about political memorabilia? Or Yiddish sheet music or vintage advertisements and trade cards from Jewish businesses in your neck of the woods or postwar Purim groggers...

You could even start with a few postcards. **H**

Americana Online

The Web brings ample opportunity to view the variety of art and objects that Jews have created in the United States. Start at the Library of Congress in Washington for the extensive "From Haven to Home: Three Hundred and Fifty Years of Jewish Life in America," www.loc.gov/exhibits/haventohome.

The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives in Ohio, www.americanjewisharchives.org, has text versions and facsimiles of documents. Exhibits include "Abraham Lincoln and the Jews," and there is an archive for Isaac Mayer Wise, founder of Reform Judaism in America.

The American Jewish Historical Society in New York, www.ajhs.org, offers the Hadassah Archives, the Molly Picon Papers and other digital collections.

On the site of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, www.jtsa.edu, go to Library, then Exhibitions, Present and Past, for highlights of "People of Faith, Land of Promise: In Celebration of 350 Years of Jewish Life in America," "Radical Visions: Graphic Satire in the Yiddish Press, 1894-1939" and "Past Perfect: The Jewish Experience in Early 20th Century Postcards."

Of the 600 objects from the Jewish Museum in New York's collection at www.thejewishmuseum.org, 217 are

North American. And you can send e-cards of many of the 112 items in the Highlights section, quite a few of which are American (including WeeGee's famous photo "Max is Rushing the Bagels to a Restaurant on Second Avenue for the Morning Trade").

Among the exhibits on the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia's site, www.nmajh.org are "Forshpeis! A Taste of the Peter H. Schweitzer Collection," "Still Home: The Jews of South Philadelphia" and "Sting Like a Maccabee: The Golden Age of the American Jewish Boxer."

The Jewish Museum of Maryland's online database has 40,000 objects, photos and documents, and you can participate in the "Chosen Food Survey," which will be fodder for a 2011 exhibit, www.jewishmuseummd.org.

The Judah L. Magnes Museum in Berkeley, California, has Jewish Digital Narratives, www.magnes.org, a series of exhibits including "Making Things Happen: The American Premiere of Darius Milhaus's Opera 'David.'" —*E.S.B.*



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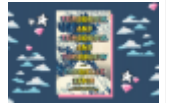
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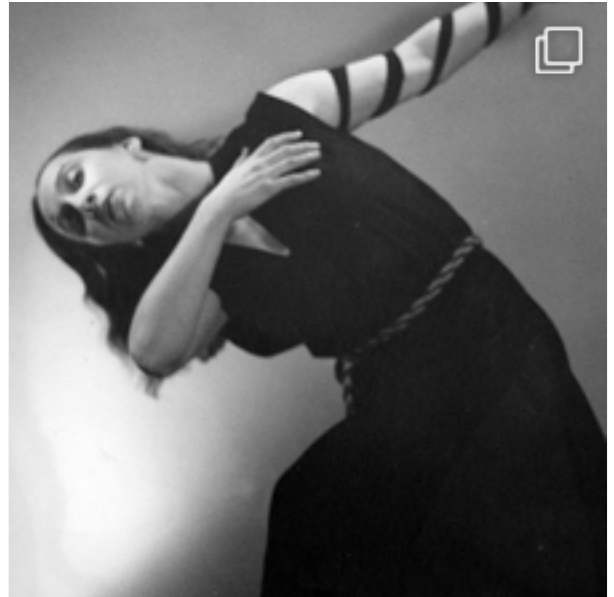
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