

Exploring Jewish heritage through oral history and fine art

BY SUSAN WEINBERG

*"Shrayb es arop –
write it down."*

WE SPOKE JEWISH: A LEGACY IN STORIES explores the stories of three waves of Jewish immigrants of the 20th century. As a writer and artist, I was drawn to these stories by my interest in family history. My grandparents were immigrants and I was intrigued with where they came from and their experience building a new life in America.

Through my conversations with administrators at Sholom, a St. Louis Park residential facility for elders, an idea took root. I'd interview elders and their families and create artwork to accompany their stories. A partnership with both Sholom and the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest (JHSUM) followed. The project focused on people who grew up in early immigrant communities, Holocaust survivors who came to the US in the 1940s and '50s, and immigrants from the former Soviet Union who arrived later in the century.

The interviews were archived in the Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives. I recognized that these were important stories to preserve, not just for historians and archivists, but for the larger community. That called for a book – to create context for these rich stories, framing them in a way that reached out to the community from which they came.

I partnered with JHSUM to publish the book and received support from State of Minnesota legacy grants. The book combines multiple elements, oral histories capturing the interviewee's voice, artwork interpreting their story through a visual lens, and the broader historical context in which the story resides. When it came time to settle on a title, I remembered an expression I'd heard from several interviewees: "we spoke Jewish."

"Speaking Jewish" was often used to describe the Yiddish language and in the community of Eastern European Jews of the 1920s, virtually everyone spoke Jewish. Many of the subsequent immigrants spoke Jewish in different ways. Survivors spoke the Jewish of remembrance, carrying with them the memory of once-thriving Jewish communities and the people who populated them. Jews living in the former Soviet Union could not openly practice Judaism. Despite these restrictions, they spoke the Jewish of culture, carrying their heritage forward through song, food, and of course, story. Collectively they used language, memory, and culture as vehicles to convey important aspects of identity.

After completing the interviews, I began to create artwork on the stories. The artwork gave the stories wings. Meanwhile many of the interviewees passed away. Most had been in their 90s when interviewed. I went to a lot of funerals.



Fire, Light, and Legacy, from the story of Fannie Schanfield.

[My mother would always say] "Es shoyrn, es – Eat, listen to what I say, and then shrayb es arop – write it down."

I said, "uh huh, uh huh," and I'd go be busy eating my caramel roll and drinking my coffee, and she'd keep me for about an hour, and when she was all through talking, she'd say, "Go out to play."

Well, I didn't shrayb es arop. I didn't write it down.

And one day I came home – she was staying with us – and she was burning all kinds of papers, citizenship papers, a whole bunch of them . . . on the floor in a bag. And she was destroying them.

And I yelled, "What are you doing?"

All of Fannie's stories related to fire, light, and legacy, so that became the name of the painting. I made the background the color of fire. Many of her stories included legacy in a tangible form, be it candelabras or Sabbath candlesticks. I pulled out the suggestion of the candelabras in the background and incorporated an image I had of her mother as the central figure holding the flaming papers of her legacy. A candle in the 200-year-old candlestick symbolizes the passing of time.

I had thought creating the artworks would be the easy part. I soon discovered it required many decisions. How was I going to tell these stories in paint? Each painting was a discovery, a story whose center I had to find. Some stories were more laden with emotion and hence easier to imagine and paint. Often I found my way in by writing poetry from the perspective of my interviewees, imagining their experiences on both physical and emotional levels. What started as word pictures led to visual imagery that formed a painting.

Over the course of this project, I came to a deep appreciation of my interviewees. Many were articulate and forceful. They were strong personalities, outspoken individuals, and extraordinary storytellers. For others, their soft-spoken tales belied the difficult challenges that had required considerable courage to confront. Their stories were often visually rich, deeply moving, and sometimes painful. Collectively, they represented the life experiences that create Jewish identity and the legacy of our broader community.



Sleeping with the Chickens, from the story of Shirley Sussman.

I remember . . . my grandmother had a one-bedroom apartment. It was upstairs. . . . She had a mattress — must have been about that thick [holds hands a few feet apart] all feathers, you know — and a stool to get up. Time to go to bed, I crawled in to get into bed to sleep with her. . . . Next to the bed my grandmother had two live chickens in a box, and I was deathly afraid of chickens, and that's where I had to sleep that night, with the live chickens there.

This was the first painting in the series because I could picture it so easily. I imagined Shirley as a young woman nervously watching the chickens. The gaze between her and one chicken was the focal point and I let the feathers fly!



Body and Soul, from the story of Dorothy Brochin Wittcoff.

My father was one of the founders of the Jewish community here . . . and he had the first kosher grocery store, which took up half of the store, and the other half was devoted to Jewish books and talmism and things of that type because there was absolutely nobody who was taking care of that particular need.



When I turned to painting, I was struck by the importance of Dorothy's family history. Her roots ran deeply into the fabric of the Jewish community. Her family was proud of their history and their stories had been oft-told. I decided to focus on those roots through a painting of Solomon Brochin, Dorothy's father, holding a Yiddish newspaper in his store. I wanted the painting to show that one side of the store sold groceries, while the other was for religious articles and Jewish books and newspapers.

Susan Weinberg is a writer, artist, and genealogist, and frequently speaks on immigration, storytelling, artwork, and identity. She's president of the Minnesota Jewish Genealogical Society and serves on the board of JHSUM. She creates art in her studio in the California Building in Northeast Minneapolis.

For more information:
wespokejewish.com
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