

# Family Photos

By Becky Schoener

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## The Yiddish Words Defined

*Chassid*, pious one, young rabbinical scholar.

*chutzpah*, courage, daring, audacity, defiant, nerve.

*forverts*, ahead, forward. *Forward* is the name of a current day Yiddish publication

*gelt*, gold.

*haimesheh*, *heimish*, consistently just right, homey, down to earth, no frills.

*Ich farshtey a bissel Yiddish*, I understand, speak a little Yiddish.

*ingeleh*, little one, an endearment.

*Mama liebe*, mother dear, loved one, an endearment.

*mamaloshen*, Mother, ancestral, noble, as in Motherland, an endearment.

*Mamele* and *mameh*, loving mother, an endearment.

*Mayn scheyner*, my dearest, my little darling, my sweetness, my pretty, an endearment.

*Mentsch*, a fellow human being, person of high quality with a “good soul,” upstanding citizen, a solid, dependable member of the community, designation of honor, respect, someone trustworthy, a friend to Jews.

*mish-mosh*, an eclectic combination, collection or mixture.

*Mishpocheh Kinderlach* Kindred Family of Little Children, of very deep relation, kin, endearment.

*mitzvoth*, good deed, blessed act, donation, ultimate form of giving.

*nu*, implies incredulity, as in, no? really? Michael Wex, writing in the Yiddish publication, Forward.com, 2/20/2008, said that this simple two letter word is so versatile it “can mean a small lexicon of things” including *what are you doing here? what have you got to say for yourself?* or *so, how’s it going?*

*nudzh*, numbskull.

*ruuble*, *groshen*, money.

*schlemiel*, an oaf, goof, loser who has bad luck.

*schlimazel*, a comical oaf, clumsy, inept, fool.

*shoin fargessen*, almost forgotten, soon to be lost.

*shtetl*, Nazis implemented mandatory segregation of Jews into Jewish only areas, Jews lived in enforced ghettos before and during Nazism. Jewish property, homes, art, businesses were robbed. Possessions of great worth and value were stolen, including fine art, antiques, treasure, confiscated, re-appropriated, destroyed. Jews were rounded up and forced to live in a designated, partitioned area of a city or town. Here they were forced to work for very little or no pay and live in squalor with poor, little or no food, under horrific conditions. The *shtetl* established an imposed state of exclusion, penury, poverty and misery, situations that were not a condition of natural occurrence for Jews.

*takeh*, indeed, you don’t say? Really?

*tsuris*, troubles, problem, woe, heavy, worrisome burden, but deeper, heavier, more worrisome, a uniquely Jewish burden.

*yeder mentsh hat zein eigeneh pekl*, every individual carries their own particular package, everyone gets their chance, each person is responsible for their own unique burden, good and bad luck are spread out to everyone, random distribution in a universal spread

I don't know where this idea originally came from. Now, I feel quite certain, that I have always *had* this idea. There it sat, just waiting for the perfect moment. This idea has always been mine. This idea *is* mine. It was an idea born from the marrow of my bones. Perhaps the thought was in me for years, growing and forming, shaping and becoming. It could have been a very *old* idea. It was part of an old feeling that came with my birth, that flowed in my blood.

This blood of mine *is not*, according to some, Jewish. No, not as directed by Orthodox law, nor Conservative rules. I am a Jew only since decreed in 1983 by Reform standards. But what if on certain days it truly feels to me that my blood is 100%. We could say that truthfully it is technically really only 50%, but where do you draw that line? How can I be 50% Jewish? And what if I feel 48% on Mondays and 54% on Wednesdays, 99% on Sunday and 100% Friday at sundown? Or 95% on Passover and 110% on Christmas? Or 92% when traveling in Austria and 99.9% in New York City? What part *is*, what part *isn't*? Do I have a Jewish arm and a gentile leg? A Jewish head and a *goy's* heart?

Either you are, or you aren't.

That's what they say.

So, then I am not, by some standards, Jewish. Why? Because one parent was and one parent wasn't. Specifically, my mother was *not*. And that's how they figure it. I might wish that I could claim my Jewishness to be all of me, but then, for the sake of some, I can only produce one Jewish parent, the wrong one. Therefore, to them, that Jewish part, I have it *in* me, is not valid. It is a part of me and it makes the whole of me, it makes me who I am. This part of me contributes to making *all* of me. Truthfully, then, how can they say I am not Jewish?

So, lately I am very tired of the irritating torment of being categorized as a non-Jew. I am sickened by the "you (they're talking about me) can have some

connection, but really not a genuine one.” I am not, as they state by Orthodox Law, Jewish; so accordingly, they tell me, I have no authentic claim.

*But now I do.*

During one brief moment, I went backwards in time, to a place far away. For that instant, I was a Jew. And that was enough.

It started with an idea.

When my idea came into my mind it began to call and whisper to me. I could not ignore it. If I had a yearning for a *Jewish* identity and I was ready to feel it, well, this was the perfect moment and the best way for me to finally make my claim. There was nothing to show for it when it was over. Nothing to be proven or authenticated.

This is what I feel, this is what I did, and it is different kind of truth. My Jewish identity had been whittled away and threatened and almost lost. I felt, once and for all, compelled to claim it.

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*I became a mother.*

What? Why?

Someone must take on the responsibility of caring for these *kinderlach*. Someone must keep them safe and warm, must love them and look after them. I have chosen this path. I will do it gladly. I make a little bit of *haimisheh* for them. I make a small place in my heart, and there they will find rest and peace.

They find *mamele*.

*Mameh* has her eye on them.

Fifteen friends. Dear little friends. All children that I know and love. They smile to me. They give me strength. Their life shines and burns bright. They live

with a glow that warms the parts of my heart that have grown cold and weary. I look in their eyes, I have a purpose, I gain strength. I am warmed and filled with love again.

*On my wall in my home I have fifteen photographs in fifteen frames and I have hung these there to be seen. To be felt, to be known, to be believed.*

The snow falls about her. She is dressed by hands that love her dearly, a charming cap just patted and carefully pulled down around her ears by *mother*. And as she steps lively to the door mother has called her back.

“Wait.”

Mother calls her back. To give her one more parting kiss. Wait.

“But *sweetheart*,” mother cries out, “your scarf! *Oy! Mayn sheyner!*” You must wait half a moment. Here, your scarf!”

And my dear child willingly submits to the tender gesture of having her throat wrapped snugly in her scarf. The ends are tucked carefully into her coat collar with protective love. And so, she can leave. And we part.

There was no money then, like we have today. Her coat is an old hand-me-down bought quite cheaply. But it is a warm thick wool, and loving hands have buttoned that top button many times.

Now, today, we have a different coat for everyday of the week. We have a coat to wear in the rain and a coat to wear in the wind. Each with a different fabric. And a different color. When a button falls off, there is no *lovinkg mother* to sew that button on. There is no *lovinkg mother* to darn the holes. And to wipe away the tears.

We don’t know what it is to be cold and hungry.

But we know what it is to be sad and lonely.

Today we have *tsuris* without reason, great *tsuris* without reason.

*These* beautiful children were cold. They were often hungry.  
But they were not lonely. They were dearly loved.

*These are the photographs of the children from the shtetl that hang in my stairwell. They hang as a testimony to love. To love unshaken. To love, to Mame liebe.*

*They hang as a statement of the love that withstood immeasurable hardship.  
And still that love held strong.*

This is a cruel world.

Too cruel and too sad to be without a mother's love.

These children were dearly loved. I know that. That is why I have brought them here. Their mothers are dead and I must care for them now. I watch out for them. I keep them warm and safe.

It is a cruel world, where even children are not safe.

That is why I must love them so.

They come from the old world. Not that long ago.

See the second girl, *ach what an angel!* She is beautiful. But also, she is wise like an owl. The one with big round luminous eyes. She is a girl but with wisdom and sight. She *knows*, she *sees*. She looks *forverts* into the future, to a brighter day. But she is alone. And you cannot deny the burden she carries.

*She* knows so much. A glimpse caught, a whispered sentence overheard, and she is bright, so she puts things together and she knows. Hush, hush, when she is near. Hush because such things are not meant for children. She has sharp ears. Hide your face when she comes in the room, for she can see the moisture clinging



there. She sees your tears. She is wise. And such bright, clever eyes. And there is very little you can hide from her.

Adults do not see these things, and will not see it coming. She has. But no, the adults do not understand. They do not.

*But she!*

*She, this angel owl child, OH! she knows what!*

Achh! She knows all.

The stairway was once bare. I believe it was always in my mind to do something there. Hang a picture, or a mirror. I was at one time quite determined to put up wall paper. But when I considered the angle at the ceiling, and the cutting out around the stairs, and lining up the pattern with the angle, well, I quickly talked myself out of it.

And yes, here is another child. Her face shines with that glow. See her beautiful, dear face? Look at how prettily her hair is braided. And she stands there with her little friend, hugging her friend and smiling. She has the wisdom that tells me what she knows. This smile, so serene, so calm. She is calm and tranquil. She stands as if she has met with death and does not worry. As if she has looked evil in the eye and comprehended. Her wisdom is beyond sadness. Beyond my own great remorse. She can see far off, she is also gifted with the owl eyes. She sees so much. Beyond the stars.

There is a twinkle of light there in her eye. And an other-worldly glow. A knowledge of eternal joy and peace that lives, of a place beyond the sadness. She has felt much and gone beyond. Beyond me and you. Beyond what *we* know. She holds the knowledge of what only a wise owl child can see, looking far into the future. Oh what she must know! Oh what she could know!

We adults have lost that knowledge.

I try to listen to all that she says. But it is whispered too late in the night while I sleep. Her hair is always so prettily braided. *Mother* braided that hair. *Mother* sings a lovely song and listen, perhaps *you* hear that song:

“La la dee la la lala”

Mother sings as she braids Owl Eyes child’s hair.

You might hear her song and feel *Mother’s* hope.

*Mamehle liebeh*, can you hear it?

Little Owl Eyes hugs her friend. She cares for her friend. She will always care for this friend. But she knows also what she cannot stop, and she knows it when it comes. Time is running out. The song tells her this, too. It will come. And when it comes not even Owl Eyes’ wisdom can stop it. Someday it will come. Soon, soon. *My darlinkg it comes so soon*. It will come, and when it does, it will take her friend. And kill her friend. She *knows*.

*Roman Vishniac, a great and famous photographer took these photographs between 1935 and 1938, in Eastern Europe, while time was running out. Mr. Vishniac secretly carried his camera into the Jewish ghettos, sometimes hiding it behind his coat. Some pictures were taken through a hole in his coat.*

*The song called out to Roman Vishniac in desperation.*

*“Hurry. Hurry.”*

And so until recently, the stairway was bare.

But see here, here is this *little charmer*. He has such an impish grin.

He is the little boy in the canvas chair.

He looks mischievous. “Rest here *my little one*.” His *mother* wraps him fondly in the blanket. It is a cool afternoon. He has energy and ideas and business that he must attend to. He should run and frolic, chase and covert to burn off the energy, the purpose. He squirms in his chair. *Mother* tells him to stay still.

*“Ingeleh, ingeleh... rest.”*

But with so much to do, and so little time, he must move. When will he do it, if not today? He squirms some more.

But not today.

Because today he is not quite as sick as yesterday, so he must rest a *wee little bit more*. He is a good boy, and he rests. But that little rascal will not fall asleep, so *mother* must bring him a bit of something to eat. A little pretzel. A little snack for the good little boy.

I had been in a wealthy woman’s house who could trace her ancestry back to among the first American white settlers. She was related to a Republican President. And *she* had family photos hanging in *her* stairway. Hers was a collage of momentous, grand and not so grand, some silly, some serious. And it was a display unmistakably of privilege and comfort. A collection of photos that only she, with her impressive background, and humorous air, could show with such unconscious pride and satisfaction. She was delighted by her presentation. It was a display that she was born to love and admire. Her attitude was warm and eager, so happy to explain the little stories about each photo to me.

*Roman Vishniac sent many of his photographs to the president the United States of America.*

*“Hurry. Hurry.” He told the President.*

*“Thank you for sending these photographs to the President.” Said the letter.  
He invited the president’s wife to attend an exhibit of these photos. Mrs.  
Roosevelt responded with a pretty letter. “Thank you for your invitation.”  
Hurry... hurry...  
And the song faded to just a desperate whisper.*

Shoin fargessen.  
Shoin fargessen.

The birth of *my* stairway photograph display could have been in the exact moment that I stood looking at the wealthy daughter of America’s photographs. Or perhaps it was sooner. Here was pride and satisfaction. Memories displayed and honored, as memories should be seen.

How could I help but admire the honest delight the wealthy woman expressed for her life and family? Some of her photos made me laugh. I asked her questions about this one, that one. I oooed and aaahed . Only, her memories, they look so shallow and false compared to *mine*.

My fifteen friends, these children, they are most certainly *so* much better.

When I had stood in her stairway of photographs, had I felt then the first itchings of my idea? No, it was long before that. I felt the need, certainly, and the urgent desperation to convey my loss. But I had I desired my own dignified display long before this. Oh but how could she believe that her ancestors would hang on her wall, and come away looking half as good as my special little friends? There she is with her silly beehive hair styles, sheath dresses, pearl necklaces, all hanging side by side with hippie maxi skirts and long braids. Where is the dignity in that? How can her pictures compare to mine? Old black and white photos of serious ancestors, bank presidents, civic leaders, honorary citizens, of course these should

command some respect, but not hanging near the brothers-in-law that are barefoot, wearing shorts, and the shaggy haired cousins, and next to those, the children's crayon drawings, and the blurry, out of focus colored prints from various trips. Charming, charming, but not poignant.

Her wall so quaintly, so smugly summarizes just how America's elite have prospered and flourished. Mindless, senseless display? It shows how Wasp America has conducted a summer vacation, a graduation, a wedding and a life. My wall tells more.

Why just look here, look at this noble young man. He is probably the oldest of the bunch. *And so intelligent!* He studies hard, and we are all very, very proud of him. He helps his parents with things too. We have not had it so easy lately. But we will not let him give up his studies for anything. We get by. We do. His learning must go on. No matter.

His faith is very strong, for a young man. Very strong. He is *Chassid*.

His *mother* admires his deep faith, finding solace and inspiration, just looking at him, just knowing her boy. His faith can outshine even her despair. His profound faith sheds a light far beyond us all.

You see, nothing can shake that sort of faith.

He was once beaten very badly. *Hush, hush!* We don't like to talk about it. We really don't say much of that! *Hush!* But I just tell you now, a little word of it, between we two. A little word, not so he should hear me say it, but a little word in your ear. Just so you should know. He is quite fine now.

It really only made him stronger.

I tell you, just so you should know.

He has an unshakable faith, that boy.

He takes his responsibilities like a man. And some day, we know his learning and this strong, strong faith he has, this will take him far. Maybe one day, we will hear of him. Maybe one day, he will be a rabbi, and *then*, will his parents be proud!

*Roman Vishniac's daughter placed these assorted photographs in a book that she called, Children of a Vanished World.*

*I bought the book one day and brought it home.*

*But I had a sacred treasure that I did not know quite what to do with. The book held a living breathing world. When I opened it, I did not want to put it down. I could not bring myself to close it. I laid it carefully on the table.*

*I saw the faces, they were alive, and I hated to close the book.*

I picked up a magazine once, not long before my idea came to fruition. While I waited for someone or something I looked at this magazine. As I thumbed through the pages I saw the glossy colored photos created by decorators, designers, editors and photo artists. These were pictures of *really nice* homes. Big homes with soaring ceilings and expensive furniture. Spotlessly clean and perfectly decorated. Or ideas of what homes could look like. They told me how to make a home. How to fill it with beauty and charm, elegance and warmth. One article even cleverly suggested how I might copy the staircase display they showed in their photographs. The staircase shown in the article was sterile and controlled. It was large and opulent. Along the white wall from first floor to second were photographs displayed. They were family portraits.

The magazine didn't *give* me any ideas. Believe me, I was already there.

I'd always had my idea. Long before I'd seen the article *or* the rich woman's staircase.

I *already* had these special little friends before the arrogant, the beautiful and the privileged were trying to give me any ideas. Who gave me the idea, who said that they might take the credit for my idea? They thought they showed me how easy and simple it would be to do.

But I already knew.

See for yourself, look at those who are here. They are not too far gone for us to remember. *Shoin fargessen. Takeh?*

Come! Come here, and see for yourself.

So many beautiful and innocent faces. Some smile, and some do not. Some stand and some prance and skip. Some sit. Some hold books and others eat a snack.

This boy! Just look at him! The *clever one*, we call him!

He has *chutzpah*.

“You,” we tell him, “you, we know, are to be a lawyer!” *What else?* With that boy, it was a lawyer or nothing.

Look how he stands there. So clever, so bold. A little man.

He knows which end is up.

*He knows!*

He knows his way in the streets, up the alleys, down the alleys. Even as a child, he was telling me how it was. He tells me this, he tells me that. Oh he knows it all. Every day he was up to a new trick, a new scheme. Even as a child, he could outsmart me.

*“That little swindler!”* I always say!

Always with something up his little sleeve.

Always a coin, a rubble, a groschen, from *God only knows* where.

*And look at how clever. What cleverness. If they could bottle that chutzpah and sell it in the street, at the market, we’d all be as rich as kings!*

*Oy to be such a mensch.*

There are many ways to enhance and decorate the home with family portraits. Grand pianos were, and sometimes still are, used to hold silver framed photos of the family. I've seen this done. Wedding portraits, family reunion portraits, baby shots, these can all sit proudly on the shiny black lid. I didn't need to read about it in an article. A childhood friend had that on their family's Steinway. But along with the photos of the people displayed on their piano lid, they also had a remarkable portrait. This was a framed photograph of a house. It depicted a 1950's colonial mansion in all its stately and important glory. A shrine to materialistic status and a memento to once held glory. It held a capsule of the dream of a life they had left behind. The house sits in the affluent suburbs of Chicago. They could not bring the house when they moved, so they brought the photograph.

Their piano and photo display stood as the stark reminder of a lifestyle that had ended when they left that suburban trophy home behind. Before the move, the father had quit, or perhaps he was fired, from his father-in-law's company. That was the beginning of the end of their American dream. This move was the family's last and desperate attempt to save the parents' failing marriage.

Their piano and the photos sat, tightly crammed into a small and inadequate 1780 New England farmhouse living room. This was where they came for a new start. All that was left as proof of their former superiority was the photo of their old house. They thought that getting away to the country could save them. Perhaps in some ways it did. Two years later, the piano, the pictures, and my friend were packed up and moved back to the Chicago suburbs, without the dad.

Next is our dear little friend Selma.



She is our sweet Selma.

You hear her name being called up and down the corner. All day! Her name rings out like music, like the chorus of a song whose lyrics are the busy sounds of the street: “Seelmaa. Oooh my dear Seelma? Oh Seeeelmaa!”

Selma is the only one whose name we know. She is a *dahrling*. Here she has a pot of soup and a bottle of milk. The pot of soup you hardly know is there. She hides it so cleverly under her shawl. She keeps it warm there. Or she warms herself that way. I like Selma for that bit of ingenuity. Warm the soup and warm yourself! *Why not? Who does it harm, this little brightness?*

How bright she is!

*Who does she harm, this little brightness?*

*Roman Vishniac’s photographs are stunning and poignant.*

*I have carefully cut fifteen photographs from the book that his daughter published, the book I could not close. She chose to include children’s songs in her book, along with the photographs. These songs are printed in the mother tongue, in Yiddish. And also each song is in English translation.*

I do not speak Yiddish, but I would like to learn.

*Ich farshtey a bissel Yiddish. A bissel... mamaloshen... mame-loshen...*

My Grandfather and Grandmother Schoener both came from Lithuania. But Schoener you will say is a German name. And it is! But none the less they came from Eastern Europe. And they spoke Yiddish.

Grandmother Ida was born in America. But Grandfather Harry was a not. He came over when he was a young man. Maybe fourteen. Getting out of Europe by desperation, cunning and daring. He came at about the time Mr. Vishniac took these

photographs. Crossing borders at night and crawling under barbed wired fences, was the story I recall hearing.

*I lovingly placed each one of my photographs of the little shtetl children each in its own frame, like giving each child a warm clean bed for the night.*

*A bed of safety, a place of protection and peace.*

*These are my children.*

*They are safe and warm in my care.*

Grandmother Ida's maiden name was Finkelstein. But the really funny thing is, that I was told that her father changed the family name from Samovich to Finkelstein while standing in line at Ellis Island, waiting to become an American. They spoke to one another in Yiddish.

*"So, Abe," says his friend, "here you are in America!"*

*"I am here!" says Abe Samovich, "I am indeed in America."*

*"Here you are, finally in America!" says his friend.*

As old friends from the old country, they stand close. They are nervous and excited together, and as Abe's friend speaks, he is patting Abe warmly, confidently on the back. Their nervousness and excitement makes them giddy. Abe Samovich's friend, he pats Abe, sometimes even a little too roughly. He pats him and saying to him, to the friend that is named Abraham Samovich,

*"At long last, Abe, you are about to become an American!"*

*"At long last," says Abe, "we are both about to become Americans!"* and he laughs at his own wry wit. They laugh together.

“So, Abe,” says his clever friend, and they both feel so distinctly that they are just two Greenhorns from Lithuania, “*now that you are to become an American, why not change your name?*”

“*Change my name? Nu! Change my name for what?*” exclaims Abe Samovich.

“*My dear, dear friend,*” and again he warmly pats the back of his friend Abe, patting a bit too vigorously, as they eagerly await their turns in the long slow moving immigration line at Ellis Island, “*change your name Abe... change your name from Samovich.*”

“*Change my name from Samovich, for what?*” asks the bewildered and outraged Abe.

“*Fool! Change your name to an American name,*” hisses his friend.

“*An American name!*” cries Abe Samovich.

“*An American name!*” echoes his clever friend, looking brightly at Abe Samovich, the Greenhorn, as they wait together for their turn to become Americans.

Abe Samovich strokes his beard slowly, wisely.

Abe Samovich’s friend strokes his own beard thoughtfully.

“*Ah, my friend, you are right!*” says Abe, “*Now that we are no longer in the Old country, what do I need from a name like Samovich? A name like Samovich that comes from the Old country is for a man that lives in the old country.*”

“*Yes, yes, my friend, Samovich is no name for a man who is getting his start in the New country.*” says the friend of Abe Samovich.

“*But what,*” asks Abe Samovich, stroking his beard, “*what is a good American name?*”

*“My friend,” says the friend of Abe Samovich, “a good American name...would be...”*

And Abe Samovich’s friend strokes his beard awhile.

They stroke their beards together, Abe Samovich waits as his friend pauses.

But then, *“Finkelstein!”* he cries out, *“Finkelstein is a good American name!”*

And so it was that my great grandfather, Abe Samovich came to America and changed his name to Finkelstein.

Now here we have the two little gigglers.

These two girls share a joke!

So much bubbling joy and delight in such a bleak world gives me pause.

They can hardly stop their silly laughter for just a brief moment. Giggling and gurgling. Hopping from foot to foot, laughing and joking. Hugging themselves in their delighted silliness.

“How can you find life so utterly, joyously funny, in that crumbled down wretched ghetto you call your village?”

We do, we do. Hear our laughter?

*Mother’s* love has not forgotten their laughter.

And off they go. Running away, still laughing.

*“Don’t run with that food in your mouth, you will surely choke !”* I cry out after them.

*“Chew carefully and swallow carefully!”* I shout as they run off.

*Ach, children! They know only the moment they live in and nothing more. We should be grateful for this, I tell you. Yeder mentsh hat zein eigeneh pekl!*

Hopping from foot to foot in their delirious humor. Their laughter is contagious and finally, I cannot help myself, and I must smile and laugh along with them.

The sons and daughters of Abe Finkelstein went on to be proud and productive American citizens. They in turn had children, this one a doctor, that one a lawyer. A professor, a writer. A famous artist who, God knows couldn't get anywhere with the name of Finkelstein, so he made up his own name, to suit his needs, just like his father did. He called himself Zorach.

Some Finkelsteins were more moderate. They changed their name too, but to shorter more modern abbreviations of the original. By taking the name Finkelstein, they kept pieces of it, changing it to just Finkel, or Finkle, and Fink. I had relatives with more last names than I could keep track off. What a *mish-mosh* of names and relations! Relatives that were all derived, at one time or another, from Herr Finkelstein.

*Why the tears my little one?*

I see a big sloppy coming from your runny nose. I reach to wipe it clean and dry. Ah, now that is much better is it not?

*Come, come sit on mother's lap, my little one.*

*I will dry your tears, and wipe your nose today, just as I have done every day.*

*Just as I have done every day.*

*You are a sad little boy today, but we will not forget you.*

*We will never be able to forget you.*

*The sweet little one in this photograph.*

I had some distant relatives that went on to further Americanize their names, and themselves, beyond even Abe Samovich's wildest imaginings.

These relatives, who were named the Brown's, had achieved the ultimate. As twentieth century American Jews they could assimilate themselves and live the poor Eastern European Jew's greatest dream. They were Americanized! Yes, and they were true Americans, born and bred on American soil. Mainstream modern and assimilated beyond the old Jew's grandest dreams. They looked American, they sounded American and they smelled American.

But more than that, they were rich Americans! They had *gelt* in every pocket, filled to overflowing. They had the blessings of health, happiness and middleclass American wealth.

Their name was Brown.

*Child, come here! Come here my dear little one. We have a new sweater for you today. Poppa found it for a bargain. And a nice hot potato pancake for your dinner. Happy, happy birthday my darling! Latkes, delicious and hot!*

*This young man, oh he is young, but so much of a young man.*

*Just a child, but growing every day, his clothes grow small, while he grows quickly. Look at him, yesterday a child, today a young man.*

He wears his nice new warm sweater now every day to school. We see that in this picture. He has his sweater on for school, sitting here at his desk. The room is cool and we are glad he has his sweater. He smiles for us with big healthy white teeth. His stylish new sweater zippers up to the neck. No old fashioned buttons here. Such a modern boy.

He is just turned nine.

He likes his new school, and his grades are good. We thank god we have the money for the sweater and to send him to stay now where we know he is safe.

We love him so, and so, we keep him safe, praise be to god.

He misses us.

But we keep his picture near.

The Brown family realized the hope Abe had cherished for himself. They had captured the American dream life of prosperity and riches, with all the trappings.

My father's cousin, Joanie Fink had married a fine Jewish man with the name of Dick (Richard) Brown. *He* was a sometimes thorn in my father, the intellectual's, side. He drove my father nearly crazy, the *nudzh* of his worst nightmares. Cousin Dick had his own airplane and he could "fly in" for the day to irritate my father with his surprise visits. Dick Brown was no more and no less than a successful money making braggart. He had done well, came into his money midlife. And had what we all knew was a lot more money than brains.

But he earned it himself, working and growing a business he started by himself with a home photo studio and small photo lab. His small business, a one man operation, grew larger over the years and then, one day, enormous. He handled hundreds of Midwest public school year photo accounts, responsible for spewing out the glossy colored sheets of tacky photos proud parents cut along the lines themselves to send to relatives around the country, and even the world.

*You two little rascals! Where have you been?*

Come here, come here! Ah, yes, up to more of your mischief, I see!

And what do you eat all day, when you are out and about, scampering here, and scampering there, you two little trouble makers? *Come in, come in. Eat. Come to eat.*

Out on the errand, and where have you been all this time, with me watching for you every minute?

Scavenging for food or crumbs? This is no way to go about your meals.

Come, come. This will not do. Not in the least.

I have a fine cabbage soup hot and ready for your dinner. And where were you while the soup was hot? Nowhere to be found. And lucky for you there is soup left, and still hot!

Come here my fine young scoundrels.

Off on your business, you say. Ha! I know your business. Mischief and fool's errands. And beggars and scavengers you are not. Scamps on the town, while your hot soup sits and waits your pleasure. And off talking to strangers, you tell me. A fine gentleman from the city, you say, with rich clothes and a *what? A modern contraption for taking portraits. Baah!*

Well, enough is enough. Come here! Come here!

Wash! Wash for dinner. Wash before you sit down at *this* table. We are a respectable house. Wash! And hurry before it gets cold.

*Oy! Oh! Oh my! Those two will find trouble.*

*Schlemiel and schlimazl!*

Dick and Joanie Brown had two children, whom they proudly named Daniel and Amy. The daughter Amy, when I had last heard, had gone to Florida State to get a suntan and a rich husband. Her brother Daniel was called Danny. And if only Abe Samovich could have been at Danny Brown's Bar Mitzvah, he would have danced the longest and happiest! He would have sung the loudest and the proudest in the synagogue! His joy would have been most profound. He would have jumped up to the Bimah, grabbed the sacred Torah, and shouted his thanks to God! He



would have flirted at the reception with all the ladies half his age and never felt an ounce of shame, just pride.

Abe Samovich would not have been offended, as my father was, by the Anglicized modern ceremony and the lifestyle of his great great grandson! Nor would he have felt awkward and excluded as I felt. Or strangely misplaced when the Torah was read aloud by Danny. I didn't understand a word.

He would have celebrated and rejoiced at the Bar Mitzvah, delighting in the splendid food and display of riches. Like me, he would have been very happy to put on tennis shoes, as good as the best of the *goyem*, and play racket ball at the country club that was reserved by the Brown's for the Bar Mitzvah's guests.

But my father, Jew that he was, was sometimes a bitter man. With bitter memories and bitter burdens to carry. He never had a Bar Mitzvah of his own because his mother Ida was too poor to afford the fee that year to send him to Hebrew school. Or she was too angry at the synagogue for something. These were the reasons given to me.

Brother and sister stand on the corner, pausing in a moment, for the rich man from the city. He takes their portrait with his modern contraption.

She is older and taller than her brother. Both have lovely curly blond brown hair.

Hers is braided in two long pigtails, the lovely bits sneaking out to make little curls. He has his hair short, with ear length sidelocks that curl too.

*Smile for the man, I tell them.*

Little brother has on his sweater, with its small holes, buttoned crooked, but no matter. We didn't have a chance to fix it. There will be a time not long, where such things are nothing. His grin is wide and joyous, a child's tooth missing, adds to the charm.

Not long, not long.

My father's older brother *was* Bar Mitzvahed. And tragically it was a waste, a strange mistake.

Oddly enough, he went on to marry a Protestant, and converted to the Christian faith. My father referred to this brother as an anti-Semite, and it was true. Whenever we ate at their house, they said a Christian "grace" before the meal. The silent moment that followed the Christian "prayer" was one of the strangest and most uncomfortable family memories I have. Being Jewish was not a point of honor to my uncle. It was something to be converted from and forgotten. Something his wife greatly disliked.

But for my father, it was a point of bittersweet and intense importance. And great, passionate pride.

Sadly, I did not have a happy childhood.

My parents were not always kind, or gentle, good or loving.

I was sexually abused by my father with my mother's knowledge.

When I tell this fact, I feel that I betray more than my own secret.

In some ways I must betray my own Jewish ancestry, because it was my father who raped and beat me. When I visited the Christian uncle, my father's brother, I told him what my father had done. He only said, "What can I do? He's my brother."

Not all families are good.

My father felt an unspoken anguish and torment in being a Jew. He grew up in the mid-West, served in the army, attended Yale University after the war at a time when there were not many Jews there and he became the sum of a man who had been personally persecuted, whose race had been nearly massacred by the

Nazis, and he then realized the lifetime dream of living and working in New York City. As an adult professional, at the height of his career his world came apart, a big piece of that tragedy was that he was attacked and condemned by the Jewish community for a mistake that was called an anti-Semitic slur. He went on with his life, shaken, a part of him broken for ever. While he did not believe in God, and did not care for religion, he held tightly to his Jewish identity and the bitterness for the lost opportunity of missing his Bar Mitzvah and that professional tragedy. He was a Jew who had no God, no religion, and no faith to carry him forward. He spent his life in a confused desperation, a Jew to the core, who was simultaneously excluded from and immersed in Jewish identity. I speak of this man, my father, in the past tense. He is indeed deceased now. Although I now know he is not living, he is still alive in my broken heart. And when he was still living, for more than almost thirty years of separation from my parents, he was dead to me. But I now have made peace with my parents.

Not all families are good. Or perfect.

This is a cruel world.

Too cruel and too sad sometimes to be without a mother's love.

What makes it right for me to be termed a non-Jew, and my uncle, who was given the opportunity in full to be a Jew, to throw it away?

*So that is why, for one moment of one day, for the sake of these fifteen photographs of children I became a Jew. And I became a mother. I called myself a Jew, and I called myself a mother.*

*Why?*

*Someone must take on the responsibility of caring for these kinderlach. Someone must keep them safe and warm, must love them and look after them. I*

*have chosen this path. I will do it gladly. I make a little bit of haimisheh for them. I make a small place in my heart, and there they will find rest and peace.*

*They find mamele.*

*Mameh has her eye on them.*

I love the children's photographs that hang in my stairway. They come from a time and place that has forever disappeared. Many or all of them died in the murder that the Nazis perpetrated against the Jews. Perhaps not one escaped. But here on my wall they stand. They look quite charming there, at first glance, they are perhaps just family photos. But look closer and see their faces. Look at their clothes, their hair, their shoes. Where are these, now? Where are these children?

Each photograph captures a beautiful child.

I look at these photographs, seeing each child, I see her in her moment, and his in his moment.

The children remind me of myself. And for the sake of these children, whose survival was not a choice, I live. I have the extravagant privilege of deciding to make my life worthwhile. They did not.

My precious ones, I will care for you.

I will be your *mother*.

My father married my mother, a proclaimed atheist, of mixed Catholic and Protestant lineage, but of no religious persuasion. She always said that she was glad to marry a Jew. My mother was an enthusiast, willing and open to exploring all faiths, she said. Before she met my father, she had been attending synagogue alone by slipping in a sitting in the back. And she also always said that she thought she never would have to celebrate another Christmas. But my Grandmother Ida

saw it as her opportunity to play Santa Claus. She sent us all Christmas presents every year.

You, my lovely little child, you are an innocent a young Cheder boy.

What do you know of this world and its evils?

What can you say to me, to make it go away?

Your sweet brown eyes and precious little rosebud mouth are innocent and baby sweet.

You hold my hand.

You hold my heart in my hand.

But maybe I was even more *American* than Danny Brown. I was certainly never Bat Mitzvahed. The only time I was in a temple was for Danny Brown's Bar Mitzvah. Technically, I am not a Jew.

But I would like to be Jew.

I was never able to claim my Judeo ancestry. My mother was not Jewish, and therefore, technically I am not.

I would like to go back to Abe Samovich's Old world.

I will proudly be a Jew there.

I will go back to the Old world, and to do so, I travel across the sea, across time.

Rebecca Schoener goes there. Back in time, many years ago, out across the sea. She *is* a Jew then. With or without a Bat Mitzvah. With or without a Jewish mother. With or without a kind and loving perfect family. I go back there and my veins are filled with the hot red blood of being a Jew. For this one special moment, I do not need to be converted. I can be a Jew there, to be a Jew then. For one

moment, one instant, the gate is opened. I slip through to perform this one mitzvot.  
but not for my own selfish pride.

I go there.

I am found there.

I am formed there.

I am a Jew.

I am there again.

I go there.

I would like to be a person of power.

A woman of comforts.

For this world.

I would go to the synagogue then. I would sit downstairs, because in that sense, I am truly from the New world, too much of a liberal to follow the Old world's rules after all, and sit with the women upstairs. Downstairs I would sway and chant and sing to God.

I would be a prophet and foresee the future. I would be benevolent and bring riches to the poor. And most importantly, I bring a warning, and so I perform my mitzvot. I would take the children by the hand. I would lead them to freedom, wherever that may be.

I will find freedom for those children, and give it to them.

I'm not sure if it's found in America. Or if it could be found in the twenty first century. Or even in a synagogue. I will have to look.

But I surely would find a place for those Jewish children.

A place of safety.

Of warmth and comfort.

Their *mothers* would not mind if I took them in for that purpose.

Their good fathers would thank me.

I take them to where evil can never find them. They are safe where evil will not be able to harm them, or touch them. They cannot be harmed again. Not in the sacred place where I have found for them.

I place them where they will live and breathe, play and laugh.

For eternity, they are free, they are safe.

For these Jewish children I have found a home.

They stay on my wall.

They live in my heart.

For each child, I give my love, my care and my safe haven, I give them my fifteen frames, and they hang on the wall of my stairway.

I give them my heart as a safe haven. *Is it a Jewish heart? Or is it a Gentile's heart?*

This does not matter, because it is a true and genuine loving heart.

*If I could, for their sake, I would become a Jewish mother. If I could save fifteen children, what wouldn't I do? Would I convert? I do not know this yet. I have done what I can, and if needed, if asked, I will and I can do more.*

*Why?*

*Because someone must take on the responsibility of caring for the kinderlach. Someone must keep them safe and warm, must love them and look after them. I have chosen this path. I will do it gladly. I make a little bit of haimisheh for us all. I make a small place in my heart, and there we will find rest and peace.*

On a wall, in fifteen frames.

*We find mamele.*

*Mameh has her eye on us.*

This is the love I give.

Is it Jewish, is it non-Jewish?  
For these children, it is enough.