

Fulfilling Bubby's hopes

Cantor Shira Ginsburg performs her grandparents' story

By **ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN**

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Cantor Shira Ginsburg plays her grandmother in "Bubby's Kitchen." (Phillip Merritt)

Yudis Koszeinska and Motke Ginsburg fought with different bands of partisans in World War II, courageously overcoming unimaginable life-threatening dangers. Many of their family members did not survive.

Meeting after the war, Yudis and Motke married and eventually made their way to Troy, New York. They renamed themselves Judith and Marvin and raised four children on their dairy farm.

To Shira Ginsburg and the other nine grandchildren, this heroic couple were simply Bubby and Zayde.

“We were a very tight-knit family, with our paternal grandparents at the center of our lives,” she said. “After what they went through, they were very intentional about creating a family that stuck together through everything. My father was the eldest and the only boy, so he took over the farm, and I was in my grandmother’s house every day.”

Naturally, much of that time was spent hearing Bubby’s stories in the kitchen as she cooked up classic Jewish Eastern European fare like rugelach, babka, blintzes and matzah balls.

Shira Ginsburg, the senior cantor at East End Temple in Manhattan, therefore titled her one-woman musical show “Bubby’s Kitchen.” On January 8, she will present a concert version of the show at Temple B’nai Abraham in Livingston.

“It’s my passion project,” Cantor Ginsburg said.

She originally conceived of the show for her cantorial ordination recital at Hebrew Union College in April 2009 and rewrote it over the next five years, adding new music by her friend and fellow cantor Jonathan Comisar.

“The first performance was in 2016 at the JCC on the Upper West Side,” she said. “I’ve continued to tweak it because it’s my life.”

In the fully staged version of “Bubby’s Kitchen,” Cantor Ginsburg plays seven characters. She has performed the play on stages in Israel, England, and all over the United States.

“What is different about this show than other shows dealing with the Holocaust is that this is presented from the perspective of the third generation, and what we who inherit that legacy do with it,” she said. “It’s really me in the driver’s seat looking in the rearview mirror.”

An active member of the Jewish Partisans Educational Foundation, Cantor Ginsburg does a lot of Holocaust education in schools. She tells students that her grandmother was only 16 when she escaped from a line of Jews being marched to the trains bound for Majdanek and became a resistance fighter living in the woods.

“When I speak to teenagers, I want to imprint on them that they are powerful and their voice matters, that one person can make a huge difference, and not to turn a blind eye to antisemitism or any form of discrimination,” she said.

The play, however, is laced with humor as Cantor Ginsburg interweaves Bubby’s story with songs and stories depicting her own metamorphosis from selling Ginsu knives to becoming an actor and cantor, in some way trying to live up to the impossibly high bar set by Bubby and Zayde’s example.

“Jewish humor is a well-known entity, but the degree to which the humor is so intermingled with loss and sorrow may be surprising,” she said. “You’re laughing and crying in one moment.”

She credits director Schele Williams and musical director Rick Bertone, both well-known Broadway names, for giving the production professional polish.

This summer, after 18 years at East End Temple, Cantor Ginsburg will leave to focus on the show full time and to work on a television adaptation.

Although her Zayde died in 2004, her Bubby saw the play many times before her death last year, at 96.

Here’s a letter that Bubby wrote to her musical granddaughter after seeing the production.

“To my Dearest Shira,

“I am so proud of all of your accomplishments and I know that Zayde is watching you today and every day. I can feel him kvelling from all the naches you bring us!

“Words cannot express how humbled I am that you feel my life has had such an impact on yours. Thank you for seeing to it that our stories be told and our family remembered.

“I was hopeful after the Holocaust that my legacy would be my family and the good they would contribute to the world.

“You, my darling Shira, have fulfilled those hopes of mine!”

What: A concert version of “Bubby’s Kitchen” by Cantor Shira Ginsburg

When: Sunday, January 8, 1 p.m.

Where: Temple B’nai Abraham, 300 East Northfield Road, Livingston

Tickets: \$15 for the public, \$10 for Prime Time (55+) TBA members; buy them online at <https://tbanj.shulcloud.com/prime-time1.html>

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