

***They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust.* Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 411 pp.\***

Reviewed by Jeffrey Veidlinger

*They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust* is a stunning and gripping volume. The book is difficult to categorize: part art book, part memoir, part ethnography, part history; it defies and transcends conventional genres. It promises to stimulate attention across a wide array of interests and demographics. Some will flip through the book, admiring Mayer Kirshenblatt's evocative paintings of Jewish life in interwar Poland. Others will study his meticulous instructions on subjects ranging from how to harness a horse to how to make a *dreydl*. Still others will peruse the author's recollections of his early education in Apt, or of his emigration by steamship to Canada. My four-year old daughter, whose readings I never thought I would be referencing in an academic book review, loved the painting "Boy with Herring" and marveled at the idea of carrying home a fish wrapped in newspaper with brine dripping from the head and tail. Two generations removed, my parents both picked up the book and read it cover to cover during their week-long visit a few weeks ago. I can think of few books that could garner this much attention from such diverse readerships.

Mayer Kirshenblatt was born in Apt (Opatow), Poland in 1916, where he was known by his nickname Mayer *tamuz*, translated here as Mayer July. In 1934 he emigrated to Toronto, where he opened a paint and wallpaper store and became known as Mike Kirsh. During retirement, he was persuaded by his family, particularly his daughter, folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, to take up painting; he found inspiration for his art in his childhood memories of Poland. The result is a stunning collection of 381 illustrations, mostly acrylic on canvas, that are being exhibited in galleries from Berkeley to Warsaw, and that are reproduced in the volume under review. The illustrations are accompanied by extensive text, organized episodically and thematically in 19 chapters, and grouped together in four parts: "My Town," "My Family," "My Youth," and "My Future." While written in first person, the text is actually the collaborative result of some four decades of interviews that Barbara has conducted with her father. "The voice of the text," she writes in her afterword, "is the voice of our collaboration" (p. 368). It is, she writes, "more picaresque than bildungsroman. *They Called Me Mayer July* is episodic: it is made up of spare anecdotes told in the 'realm of living speech,' digressions into the practical workings of the world, and loose associative links" (p. 368). The result is a compelling and fascinating read that contributes not only to our understanding of daily life in interwar Poland, but also to the relationship between art, story, and memory.

The chapters are ostensibly centered on a theme, but in fact, meander and digress in the mode of storytelling. The chapter on market competition, for instance, includes sections on Mayer's

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mother's recipe for *tsimes*; an anecdote about Bashe Rayzl, who cheated her customers by slaughtering their chickens herself rather than taking them to the *shoykhet* (ritual slaughterer); descriptions of various delicacies ranging from calf's-foot jelly to bulls' testicles and the means of preparing them; reminisces of local personalities, like *der koltn*, who bought milk from the peasants and acquired his nickname from a corruption of the Hebrew greeting *kol tiv*, which he used to say all day; a story about the thief who offered a woman twenty zlotys to suck on her breasts as a remedy for his toothache, only to steal the money she had hidden in her bosom; and finally portraits of the town's two prostitutes: Jadzka, who would get drunk and "show off her overworked wares" (p. 122) and Świdorska, who "was very tall and statuesque," "looked like Marlene Dietrich," and "was a little classier than Jadzka" (p. 123). Paralleling the text in this chapter are paintings of market day, ropemaking, a man and his horse, a porter, *shoykhets* slaughtering chickens, Bashe Rayzel, the custom of *shlughn kapures* at which chickens are swung over one's head on the eve before Yom Kippur, goose-feather pluckers, geese being force-fed, the livestock market, a butcher carrying a calf, a butcher inflating cow bladders, a cow being slaughtered, gypsies arriving in town, a gypsy performance, a woman bringing milk into town, two images of market thieves stealing wood and eggs, and two images of the town's prostitutes. An illustration of how to make a tin whistle is also embedded into the chapter. The narrative weaves around the paintings, sometimes elucidating the images and at other times elaborating upon them in a manner reminiscent of rabbinic midrash.

The detail of Mayer's memory is striking. He often notes that as a child he was far more interested in wandering around town and watching the various craftsmen at work than attending his school. He is also less interested in the youth movements, political parties, and other forms of organized Jewish life that inform many other memoirs of the period. He is able to describe his surroundings in great specificity, though: he spends four pages and two illustrations, for instance, describing how the cobblers in his town used to make a pair of shoes (pp. 249-252). Although Mayer's mind always seems to return to the practical, he also makes note of common beliefs that informed the life of his town. The instructions on shoemaking, for example, are followed immediately by a story about a boy who wore white pajamas his whole life in order to fool the Angel of Death into believing that he was already deceased. In this manner, the practical and prosaic intersect with the otherworldly.

*They Called Me Mayer July* is a major contribution to the larger scholarly and popular interest in memories of Jewish life. The subject of Jewish autobiography has recently inspired several scholarly books: a volume has appeared anthologizing Jewish autobiographies written in interwar Poland; memorial books of Jewish communities destroyed during the Holocaust have become popular reading material both in print and on the web; and numerous books and documentary films (among the best of which are the book and film *Image Before My Eyes*, which Kirshenblatt-Gimblett co-wrote) have examined memories of Jewish spaces in Eastern Europe through interviews and photographs. *They Called Me Mayer July* has taken these explorations to altogether new aesthetic levels.

## References Cited

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1977 *Image Before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland, 1864-1939*. New York: Schocken Books.

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1985 *Image Before My Eyes*. New York: Almi Home Video.

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