

# At Hanukkah, remembering Mula Jasny

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*And the melodies that preserve the bonds among generations.*



Sam Jasny with his son Max in his arms, as they made the voyage to the United States. – Photo courtesy of Max Jasny

When Shmuel “Mula” Jasny was 14, he lied about his age in order to be permitted to work outside the ghetto in his hometown of Sosnowiec, Poland. He got a job as an icer in a bakery. One day on his way home, soldiers stopped the trolley he was riding, and took him along with all the other Jews off to Nazi labor camps. Many months later, Shmuel was sent on an errand to get nails, and

vodka for the officers. He took the opportunity to sneak off and visit his family. It was the last time he ever saw his parents, David and Freymeta, his younger brother Menachem Mendel, and older sister Regina. They all eventually died in Auschwitz. Sam, as he was later called in America, survived. He survived years in labor camps. He survived the notorious forced death marches. He survived Dachau concentration camp, and the typhus he contracted there. He was “a survivor.”

Today I look around his apartment in Florida. It is small but very clean and bright. An elegant crystal chandelier hangs above the dining table but the big mirror on the wall behind is draped over with a sheet. We are observing the Jewish mourning practice called sitting shiva. Almost everyone in the room is a survivor, or the child or grandchild of a survivor, and everyone is telling stories. Mostly in English but if you sit quietly for a while you will hear Yiddish, Polish, Hebrew, maybe even a little Russian.

The remaining survivors are in their eighties and nineties now, their group gradually dwindling away, but the “young” people, those in their fifties and sixties, have taken on sharing their parents’ histories, helping each other fill in the gaps. I became part of this group 25 years ago when I married Sam’s eldest son, Max, who likes to say he was born in a resort town on the edge of the Black Forest in Germany. In reality, it was a Displaced Persons Camp where his father went after liberation to recover, then stayed to work for UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. It was there he found Leokadia, the cousin of his best friend from childhood.

I find a pre-war picture of her in a photo album. “This is grandma Lola,” I show my children. She is with her friend Stasia. Not long after the picture was taken, she, Stasia, and Stasia’s sister would jump off a train bound for Auschwitz and run for the woods. Stasia and Leokadia would make it to the safety of the trees but Stasia’s sister would be shot down as they ran. I look at the elderly women sitting around me, their stiffly coiffed hairdos, costume jewelry, and heavy make-

up. As they reminisce fondly about Sam, or chatter about mundane things, it is hard to imagine what they endured in their youth.

At Sam's funeral, as each family member and friend spoke, the same theme prevailed. What a loving man he was. How family meant everything to him. How he never said an unkind word about anyone. Remarkable. Later, at the apartment, there would be more stories, of his accomplishments, but also of his human foibles. There would be more laughter. But there, at the cemetery, as the rabbi chanted the ancient melodies and the Hebrew prayers drifted over the simple pine casket, it felt as if we were saying goodbye to all of Eastern European Jewry, to a world and a culture that had once been vibrant and thriving, but had been obliterated in what this group still refers to simply as "The War."

The truth, however, is that Eastern European Jewish culture has been undergoing a revival. The effort to keep memories alive has moved from remembering the tragedy and loss of the Holocaust to also preserving and reviving Yiddish literature, language, and music. For me, it has always been about the music, those aching minor melodies, the way a klezmer violin can laugh and weep at the same time.

Klezmer. The word comes from the Hebrew "kley," meaning vessel or tool, and "zemer," meaning song. Klezmer in Yiddish originally referred to a musician but eventually came to mean an entire genre of celebratory music. Rooted in the traditional melodies of the synagogue, as Jews moved around Europe, klezmer also took on some of the styles of surrounding cultures, including influences from Ukrainian, Bessarabian, Romanian, German, and Russian folk music, and later from American jazz.

By the time this is published, we will have returned home to continue the week-long ritual of sitting shiva. I will cover the mirrors in our house. Each night friends and family will come say the mourner's Kaddish with us. But we will also have

begun the eight-day celebration of Hanukkah starting at sundown Tuesday. The story has been told for thousands of years, how Judea was occupied by the Seleucids (Syrian-Greek) forces of the tyrant Antiochus in 168 B.C.E.. How a small group of Jews, the Maccabees, fled to the hills and fought, rather than submit to forced conversion or assimilation. How the Maccabees eventually won their battle for religious freedom. The word Hanukkah means “dedication” and refers to the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after reclaiming it from the Seleucids.

Sam was a survivor. The Maccabees were survivors. The Jewish people have had lots of practice restoring our culture after one tyrant or another has tried to destroy it. On Friday evening December 19, the Martha’s Vineyard Hebrew Center will hold a community Hanukkah celebration from 5:30 to 7:30. All are invited to join as we light menorahs, eat latkes and sufganiyot (jelly donuts), play dreidl, and dance to music provided by two members of the internationally renown Klezmer Conservatory Band, an ensemble founded in the 1980s by Hankus Netsky, that has been at the forefront of the Yiddish music revival. I can hear Sam, who never lost his heavy accent despite 60 years in America, nodding and smiling and saying “very good, veerrrry good.”

*Michelle Jasny is the Visiting Vet columnist.*

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