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Mamaloshen at Hopkins: The Education of Marc Caplan

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Born On The Bayou:
Dr. Marc Caplan was born and raised in Alexandria, La., a town of about 100 Jewish families.
The first professor of Yiddish at Johns Hopkins University sits himself down in his home library, a cup of tea in hand, eyes twinkling like a latter-day leprechaun, his voice lilted with a soft but unmistakable Southern twang.

The accent comes naturally to Marc Caplan, whose life story to date could be one of those "only-in-America" biographies — this one combining traces of Twain and Sholom Aleichem, the Deep South and Old England, gumbo and the *mamaloshen*. The twang is the least of the incongruities that have lined the path of his ascension from the backwoods of Louisiana to the fledging *Zelda* and Myer Tandetnik Professorship in Yiddish Language, Literature and Culture at Hopkins.

Born in Alexandria, La. — pop. 50,000, three hours northwest of New Orleans — where *cochon de lait* (barbecued suckling pig) is the standard holiday fare, Dr. Caplan's was one of the town's approximately 100 Jewish families. Few of them kept kosher, none were Sabbath observers.

Marc and his two brothers knew that they were different, but not by much; though neither their father nor their grandfather had a *bar mitzvah*, the Caplan boys did, in the town's Reform temple, in a Friday night service.

"When I was 13, the rabbi called me in and gave me the blessings to learn. I came back the next week and said that I had learned them. He was chagrined. 'But that was supposed to take you months!' He had no desire to teach me anything more."

Dr. Caplan's abiding interests as a child were storytelling and classical music. "The male members of our family were all good storytellers, and I was one of them, from the time I was 5 years old. Mine were usually autobiographical tales, but embellished into elaborate Rabelaisian adventures."

There he was, a juvenile Brother Grimm from the Cajun heartland. In the fourth grade, when he was 9, the young Dr. Caplan was given an assignment to write about the image of an invisible dog on a leash. He conjured up the ghost of a pet he once had.

"The dog brought me to a mansion where Mozart was playing the piano. It was sort of a crypto-Faustian story, where Mozart taught me the secrets of writing classical music. The dog was the conduit between the earthly world and the spirit world — as I say, heavily dramatized autobiography, because I did have a dog, but I never learned the secrets of classical music. I read the story to the class and they applauded, which was very unusual with that tough crowd."

He continued in the public schools of Alexandria until he was 16. "I wasn't an especially good student, and they didn't know what to do with me, so they sent me off to a public boarding school."

That turned out to be the Louisiana School for Math, Science and the Arts in Natchitoches, 240 miles away in the north central foothills, and it ended up the "best educational experience of my life." While most of his classmates went on to LSU or Tulane, he did well enough at Natchitoches to be accepted at Yale.

Dr. Caplan came to New Haven, Conn., to attend Yale in 1965, an Ivy League English major on the surface but a country boy, and Jewish at that, at his core. At Yale, he had few if any Jewish experiences either academically or socially until he took a semester abroad, at the University of London.

"I met a girl from Wellesley, and we both felt more Jewish in England than in the U.S. She once asked a storekeeper for Passover food and he said, 'You mean like bagels?'"

When he returned to Yale, Dr. Caplan took a course taught by Professor Benjamin Harshav titled, "Transformation of the Jews in the Modern Era."

"He had a strong Yiddish accent. For me, the only people who had Yiddish accents were, like, tallis and tefillin vendors or deli store owners. And I thought that here was one of them, who just happened to have an interest in the structuralist poetry of Jewish literature. What I couldn't get over at the time..."
was the idea of an intellectual with a Yiddish accent. But he taught the course on a very high level. So that was a great stereotype-shattering moment for me."

A combination of factors sparked Dr. Caplan's interest in Yiddish: the exposure to Professor Harshav at Yale, recognition that the great majority of Yiddish writers had never been translated into English, a preoccupation with the politics of the Diaspora, and the love of folk tales — all of which motivated him toward graduate school.

"I knew I wanted to compare Yiddish and African literature, and to study the former in Yiddish. I thought, the Yiddish writers and the African writers don't know it, but they have a lot in common with one another, there's really a dialogue here. I was like the dog in my fourth-grade story — the conduit between these two worlds, two cultures that come to modernity at a very late stage in their historical development."

"Dr. Caplan sips his tea and ratchets up his earnestness. He tends to talk in full sentences, which more often than not settle themselves into articulate paragraphs. Yiddish literature is a matter of expertise now, and it fuels his enthusiasm even as the academic voice kicks in."

"A Yiddish writer at the beginning of the 19th century or an African writer just after World War II is adapting modern literary forms — poetry, the novel, the short story, autobiography — partly as a means of assimilating his culture to modernity, partly as resisting the coercive or demeaning aspects of imperial domination. They're both fashioning a literature of resistance, which cuts two ways — against the idea that the imperial mode of life is the best, and against the idea that "Your father was a fisherman or a shoemaker, then you're a fisherman or a shoemaker."

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— Dr. Marc Caplan

In 1994, Dr. Caplan, freshly energized by his enlightenment at Yale, entered New York University's graduate program in comparative literature. While there, he worked part time at the Anti-Defamation League and taught a core-curriculum course called "Conversations with the West" — Aristotle and St. Augustine and various works of Western philosophy and Nietzsche and Darwin.

And he began to study Yiddish.

It was around this time that he met Beatrice Lang. She was from Cambridge, England, had studied at Oxford, and had come to America for a doctorate in Yiddish at Columbia. She also wanted to immerse herself in the Jewish world of New York — an environment quite different from that she'd known in England, from the tiny shul on Thompson's Lane in Cambridge to the cloistered secularism of Oxford and the stolidly British United Synagogue liturgy.

"We met for the first time at the Workmen's Circle, a society mostly for blue-collar immigrants. It was the first lecture I ever attended in Yiddish, and it was a geriatric demographic — we were the youngest there by a magnitude of approximately 60 years. She immediately began speaking to me in this mellifluously fluent Yiddish, and I had no means linguistically of responding to her and I stammered out my name and said, 'I don't speak Yiddish.' That was profoundly disturbing to me."

Beatrice was eager to recruit him to the cause of the language, so she effectively became his second Yiddish teacher. They took a poetry class together, where the text was taught in English but read in Yiddish. ("That was the first time we had a level playing field, where she was not the teacher and I was not the student.") Then, he went to a summer program in Yiddish sponsored by the YIVO Institute, and took additional classes at the Jewish Theological Seminary. By the end of that summer, he could read Yiddish in the original.

In 1997, having seen Beatrice at various Yiddish events around the city, he and she found themselves taking the same class at Columbia University.

This one was taught by Dan Miron, a formidable Israeli scholar with an intimidating presence, and Dr. Caplan was at once mesmerized and totally committed.

"I was determined to write the best paper of my graduate career for him, to pull out all the stops. The next semester — I remember this vividly, it was in early January — I was at home studying Hebrew, part of my graduate obligations, and the telephone rang. It was Dan Miron. I said 'Hello', and he said, 'Mark?' and I said 'Yes?' and he said, 'This is Dan Miron', and I said 'Kvii' [Hebrew for yes], I mean 'Yid' [Yiddish for yes], I mean 'Yes' — as if it were completely normal for the great professor to be calling me at home, and I'm trying to act completely collected, cool, confident. 'Yes, yes, let's talk, Professor Miron, what do you have to say?'"

"And he wanted to talk to me about my paper, which he thought was a good one. But at that moment, on the phone for the first time, it was like my talking to Beatrice for the first time, I was completely without words."

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In his last year of graduate school, Dr. Caplan said he realized no one was looking for a specialist in Yiddish and African literature.
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arc and Beatrice took to studying together over tea. About a year later, he said to her, "There are only so many times you can go to Starbucks with somebody before you have to consider it a date," and she said, "Well, all right, maybe it is a date."

The relationship intensified, as did his adoption of Jewish observance. "Beatrice fostered my interest in becoming Orthodox. I complained a little at first, but I thought if I was going to become part of her life, I would have to become more committed."

They were married in 1998, in New York — with two rabbis, one of whom gave a drasha under the chuppah in Yiddish — "the first time he had ever done that." It was also the first time the two families had ever met.

"We really tried very hard to bring all of our different worlds together. The rabbi was from Central Casting — he was the head of the West Side Kollel; you don't get more Orthodox. We were a little worried, because we were coming from the left wing and we were pushing the boundaries. For example, Beatrice presented me with a ring, and women were speaking at the wedding. We were worried that this might be off-putting for the rabbi. But it wasn't — he was a great good sport about it."

As they had hoped, the British were very polite; the Southerners equally genteel. "The mahasenim [parents-in-law] don't really see each other very often, and when they do get together, I think they're rather surprised at their commonality. While Cambridge and Alexandria are very different places, geographically and culturally, being Jewish in these places is very similar, where Jews are a negligible demographic minority, and very close-knit. These places are inhospitable to being Jewish, and our families persevere in that very seriously, and very much on their own terms."

The multi-layered cultures were reflected as well at the reception that followed. Beatrice's brother-in-law and sister, who are professional musicians, played a flute-and-piano concert, for which Marc chose the music: "Summerland," by William Grant Still, a 20th century African-American composer, a medley from If I Could Be With You, and a baroque sonata.

Afterward, the rabbi said to Marc, in Yiddish, "You know, my wife knows that I go to weddings practically every Sunday, and she's not mad when I leave her at home. But if she finds out that I went to a concert, well, that would upset her."

From that point, Marc Caplan's career assumed an upward trajectory, although not without the familiar bumps and grinds of academic politics along the way. It took him nine years to traverse the path to a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at NYU, where he finally received on Sept. 22, 2003, his birthday.

He dedicated his undergraduate dissertation to his two grandmothers, "for their respective gifts of memory and storytelling."

In his last year of graduate school, he had applied to dozens of universities and colleges to find work.

"I was eager to start teaching, but nobody was hiring — nobody wanted a specialist in Yiddish and African literature. I was the only one at the time — I think I still am. I was very depressed, thinking that I was going to have to stay in graduate school for still a year. Indiana University was looking for someone to replace their specialist in African literature with the same focus I had, but the job never materialized.

"Then, they called back, offering me a position in a world literature program. So we went out to Bloomington. That was a great victory for me, because I was the only member of my graduating class at NYU to start out in a comparative literature program."

In 2004, the Caplans moved to Philadelphia, where Marc had accepted an appointment as a full-time Yiddishist at the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies. It was there that their daughter, Zipporah, was born.

"We had been expecting her in Bloomington, but you know, "Der mensh nakht un Gvit lakt" (Man thinks, and God laughs) at what man
The obvious question to many non-academics, Jewish or otherwise, might be: "Why study Yiddish, at Hopkins or elsewhere, in the 21st century?"

For Yiddish scholars, however, the renewed interest around the country comes as no surprise.

"This is an existential question, why do you do what you do?" Dr. Caplan says. "I think the answer is complicated. The resurgence of Yiddish in the American academy, as well as to a limited degree in Europe and Israel, is something that's remarkable. Twenty years ago, there were no positions in Yiddish literature or culture. But since about 1992, when the Yiddish chair was created at Harvard for Ruth Wisse, you see more and more colleges and universities adopting Yiddish as part of their curriculum. Why?"

Dr. Caplan answers his own questions by citing a three-tiered evolution described by Max Weinreich, perhaps the foremost scholar of Yiddish studies in the 20th century.

"There was the immigrant generation, which comes to America but wants to get as far away from Yiddish as possible because it is associated with a variety of bad memories, so they reject everything of their past that they can. Then, the children of that generation grow up in a vacuum, where Yiddish was simply not an option — not spoken except to keep secrets from children, who are exposed to the necessity of assimilating to American culture."

"Then, the grandchildren of the Yiddish immigrants grow up where Yiddish is a great mystery, and they realize that they unlock something about their own past that had never been provided to them before."

"For me that was a process for my great-grandparents — all four of my grandparents were born in Louisiana. People of my generation look to Yiddish for clues to a past that had itself been marginalized and denigrated, and we realize that it was much more complicated and sophisticated and interesting than what our parents and our grandparents had been led to believe." Dr. Caplan shifts his wiry frame and adjusts his glasses. Other scholars who have emerged in the past 15 to 20 years have come to Yiddish from a variety of Jewish perspectives: linguistic, anthropological, historical, literary, religious, secular, political.

"His is somewhat unique. "When people ask me, 'Why do Yiddish?,' my first response is: 'All knowledge is useful.' But knowledge of Yiddish is particularly useful in connecting the problems of contemporary Jewish culture to a larger problem of the Jewish interaction with modernity. And that's why I do what I do."

"But one should not misinterpret the academic interest in Yiddish with the revival of Yiddish as a language. Most of the people who are engaged in Yiddish studies do not have a mission to speak Yiddish to their children or to create a Yiddish-speaking society. I speak Yiddish with Beatrice, we speak Yiddish with Zipporah; she speaks Yiddish with us, but this is very exceptional!"

Nonetheless, he says, one should not refer to Yiddish culture as dead, because the language is flourishing today — at least in the Hasidic world, where there are 600,000 to 700,000 people speaking Yiddish daily. That number — three-quarters of a million people — is growing because their birth rates are higher.

"And they're committed to speaking Yiddish, not because they love Sholom Aleichem and klezmer music, but because Yiddish is integral to their identification as Jews. So the Yiddish language will take care of itself. It will continue to exist among the ultra-Orthodox. But the Yiddish literature of Sholom Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer and the music of Mickey Katz and the Klezmatics and political parties like the Bund and the Labor Zionists and the Workmen's Circle and a whole host of activities and publications and ideologies and cultural products — that world of Yiddish modernity that flowered from 1864 to 1939 — that world is very embattled right now, on the verge of disappearing."

"And it's only through scholarly interpretation and re-creation that we will have any memory of the tremendous and profound and almost completely positive impact that that world has made on the development of Jewish modernity."

For his part in reviving the culture, Dr. Caplan is developing a course in Jewish humor that he plans to offer at Hopkins in the spring of 2009.

In a different incarnation, perhaps Dr. Caplan could have been the Uncle Remus of the Borscht Belt, but now he's putting an intellectual Yiddish spin on contemporary culture. He just finished writing an article where the opening paragraph quotes an episode from "The Simpsons," and is followed by a detailed narrative of a Yiddish novel written in 1873 with a work of German philosophy published in 1944.

Knowledge of "The Simpsons," he says, enhances his knowledge of Yiddish.

"I watch 'The Daily Show' and 'The Colbert Report' as a nightly ritual — it's as essential in my ritual of going to bed as davening mah'zor."

In addition to his academic commitments to the study of Yiddish literature, Dr. Caplan writes a regular column in Yiddish on popular culture for the journal Af khlime. He also is developing a book-length project that will explore Yiddish literature written in Weimar Germany, considered in comparison with contemporaneous German literature, theater, and film.

Yiddish aside, what has he been like moving from Reform Judaism in the Deep South to Orthodoxy in Baltimore?

"Being Jewish in Louisiana require that you be comfortable with your status as a minority, and being Orthodox among academics is a means of maintaining your status as a minority."

"I don't want to live in an Orthodox world and in an academic world that is hermetically sealed from one another. I want to bring them together constantly. I want my daughter to grow up in the simultaneously. I want her to be able to negotiate the series of demands these two worlds place upon you."

Marc Caplan sits up in his chair, his tea finished.

"Becoming religious for me didn't mean secluding myself from the rest of the world," he says. "It meant being a to tell better stories."

Kenneth Lasson, a low professor at the Union of Baltimore, is a regular contributor to the BALTIMORE JEWISH TIMES.