

Life Not Death in Venice: The Transmission of an Endangered Tradition by Barbara Myerhoff

Barbara Myerhoff has been Professor of Anthropology at the University of Southern California since 1968. She directed the "Life Not Death in Venice" project in 1980, and conducted the fieldwork for the film Number Our Days.

The "Life Not Death in Venice" project was produced and coordinated by Mr. Vikram Jayanti, and sponsored by the Center for Visual Anthropology of the University of Southern California Department of Anthropology, Professors Alexander Moore and Timothy Asch, Department Chair and Center Director.

In 1971 I began an anthropological study of "Ethnicity and Aging," part of a larger project entitled "Social Contexts of Aging." Funded in part by the National Science Foundation it concentrated on a community of very old immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe, the focus of whose social life was the Israel Levin Senior Adult Center in Venice, California. Throughout my work there a singular and dominant theme was apparent: the invisibility of older people in today's society.

Among very old people, deprived of natural intergenerational continuity and unable to transmit their ethnic culture or personal histories to their progeny, the problem of social inattention is especially serious. It became clear to me working among these elders that they were intent on presenting themselves to the world, being noticed, interpreting the meaning of their history and culture to a wider outside world that would remember them after they had died, and possibly transmitting something of their lives to younger people. Many of their struggles were intractable, but their invisibility was not inevitable. Over time, the old people taught me to see them in their own terms, and it grew evident that they appreciated every attempt that anyone made to depict and convey their folklore and histories to the outside world. Above all, they craved audiences for, without attention, they and their culture faced oblivion. In every way they could, they tried to capture witnesses, so over time, I began to make additional efforts to enhance their visibility, to outsiders as well as to themselves.

I had long known that these elderly Eastern European immigrants were naturally self-dramatizing, introspective, and eager to find ways to transmit their knowledge and experience to younger people and outsiders. Acutely aware of themselves as bearers of a dying culture — the world of *Yiddishkeit* — they felt a mission to pass on their immediate memories and perceptions. They were known for their verbal portraits of their lives and were consummate storytellers, steeped in the oral tradition of Hassidism and Talmudic debate. Gradually, I discovered that a great many of them were also visual artists, completely self-taught, having overcome the religious tradition which forbade portraiture and depiction of images. They were painters, carvers, sculptors, draftsmen, as well as tailors, weavers and tinsmiths. They talked about and brought in paintings and art objects they had made. One of their most intriguing works was an immense mural they had completed along the entire wall of the Israel Levin Center: a collective portrait of their history, from the Eastern European *shtetls* (towns) of their childhood, through their middle years spent in the east-

ern cities of America, to their final destination as elders in Venice, California. Within the portrait was a set of “empty” figures, merely outlined, which I had assumed were simply unfinished. Then I was told that they were “ghosts” meant to indicate that they were still growing, because “No matter how old you are, you are always changing as long as you are alive.” Their work was not at all self-evident, despite its seeming simplicity and rough technique. They were portraying a vanished world and a personally-felt vision.

During this period, students in my Life History class at the University of Southern California were directing their semester’s work towards locating elderly artists and storytellers and documenting their lives. The young people gathered the elders’ life histories and at the same time trained them to interpret their art and experiences to the unfamiliar audience of outsiders that we hoped would attend an exhibit we were planning. The search was not too difficult; local teachers in senior citizens centers and classes were able to identify seventeen people between the ages of 60 and 92, all of Eastern European background. With one exception all of them were self-taught and non-professional. The more than one hundred art pieces gathered and displayed represented a great range of styles and media, but all depicted some of the commonalities of the culture of Eastern European Jewish life, in the Old World and in America.

In spring 1980 we held a series of all day workshops at the University of Southern California, devoted to traditional storytelling, intergenerational journal work and intergenerational dramatic improvisation. Young and old people enrolled, as well as some volunteers and relatives and friends of the artists; others joining were university students interested in art, anthropology, history, Jewish studies and social work.

The second phase of the project was a folklife celebration — a series of weekly performances designed to accompany and interpret the art work. It was a strategy to gain a captive audience of people who would not ordinarily pay attention to the artists or folk art of the kind we had assembled and displayed. The events consisted of presentations by well-known scholars, artists and performers whose interpretations were drawn from the original Yiddish sources portrayed by the elderly folk artists. These expressions were transformations of indigenous Yiddish themes, portrayed in films, stories, readings, concerts, lectures and plays, and, as such, were readily available to audiences unfamiliar with the *shtetl* tradition. The folk art exhibit and the cultural events juxtaposed origins and



In June, 1927, a member of the Israel Levin Senior Adult Center was struck by a bicyclist on the boardwalk. The elders organized a protest march down the boardwalk bearing placards saying “Life Not Death in Venice.” The protest, a victory for the elders’ visibility, grew out of their increased knowledge of themselves as vital members of society and their insistence on being recognized by an unconscious world. Photo by Nick Myerhoff, age 11.

Suggested reading

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Coming of Age*. New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1973.

Myerhoff, Barbara. *Number Our Days*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978.

Zeitlin, Steven, Amy Kotkin and Holly Cutting Baker. *A Celebration of American Family Folklore*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

Suggested film

Number Our Days, by Lynne Littman. 30 min. color sound. Direct Cinema Limited, P.O. Box 69589, Los Angeles, California 90069.

interpretations, actual historical experiences of the elderly, and the assimilated and imaginative versions of those experiences by people who had directly lived them, briefly as children, or indirectly, through their parents' and grandparents' memories and stories. The performances were wide-ranging and eclectic, showing the immense richness and variety distilled from the Yiddish heritage. Abba Eban opened the art exhibit. Isaac Beshavis Singer told stories of his family life in pre-Holocaust Poland; Lee Strassberg reminisced about the *klezmer* music of his childhood; Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett showed home movies of Poland between the wars; Jerome Rothenberg read poetry from his anthology, *A Big Jewish Book*; "Mickey Katz and His Octogenatians" offered Catskill and vaudeville music together with American humor and music; the Traveling Jewish Theater performed stories of the Hassidic master, Reb Nachman of Bratzlav; Tillie Olsen read "Tell Me a Riddle," her novella about an aging, dying couple in Venice, Georgie Jessel and Baruch Lumet each gave comic and dramatic readings in English and Yiddish. The Israel Levin Senior Adult Chorus opened and closed the series.

Audiences were large, enthusiastic and diverse. Many were composed of young people, astonished at finding themselves for the first time amidst so many old people. "I never dreamt they had so much energy!" was a commonly heard remark. "Where have they been hiding all this art work?" was often heard. "Grandma, you never told me you could draw!" "You never asked," was the reply. The exhibit was full of discovery and surprise.

The experience showed clearly that there are elderly people all over America, waiting only to be asked about their stories and folk art. Their memories and works are stored in boxes in cellars, in trunks, in attics; their poems are locked in drawers, needing only a witness to bring them to light, a recipient to complete the interchange that is requisite to all cultural transmission.

In our time we have come to realize that the concept of "image" is not a shallow or trivial affair. Images are the coinage by which we are known and valued by the world, and ultimately they are internalized; as such they become the basis for self-evaluation. Appearance becomes "reality" and non-appearance may be oblivion. Teaching disdained people how to control their images, how to shape a view of themselves and their culture, despite often contradictory images presented from the outside, gives them power and the means for self-determination. We have come increasingly to accept our multicultural, diversified world as richer than the once idealized homogeneous "melting pot." We deepen the total culture as well as the members of ignored groups when we aid them in "being themselves," publicly and powerfully.

Folk art is a means not only of communication across generations but at the same time assisting the elderly gain autonomy over their own images. By arranging for elders to present their own artistic works and interpretations of their culture in a context in which they see themselves as major figures, their self-worth and political empowerment are enhanced.

The "Life Not Death in Venice" project can serve as a model for utilizing the resources of the elderly, heightening our general awareness of them as contributors to the life of a community, and calling attention to the riches they provide in their role as repositories of history and vanished cultures. We must create such occasions, when young and old are brought together, to face each other in the giving and receiving of lives and lore.