

Geoff Kirsch

90 CONSECUTIVE LIFE SENTENCES

“And G-d said unto Abraham, know of a certainty that thy seed shall be strangers in a land that is not theirs.” —Maxwell House Haggadah, Deluxe Edition, 1962

The night they buried Grandpa Meyer, Aaron Spitz headed southward through the city where the very first Spitz set up shop some 90 years earlier.

Every Passover, Aaron’s mother Mitzi doled out the same battered blue prayer hymnals, printed and distributed compliments of Maxwell House, from which his father led a service chock full of lukewarm, coffee-based witticisms.

In the beginning, our ancestors were idolaters who dwelled on the other side of the river, and G-d took Abraham to the land of Canaan, and there multiplied his seed; and He gave unto Abraham, Isaac; and gave unto Isaac, Jacob; and gave unto Jacob, twelve children; and they all went down to Egypt and sojourned there, and there became a nation, great, mighty, and numerous, generally curly-haired, bookish, and not too good at sports.

They really came out of the woodwork for his grandfather’s funeral, Aaron thought, surveying the assembly at Mt. Ararat Memorial Park, and it worried him—all those Spitzes in one place spelled trouble.

“In the beginning,” Douglas Spitz would read, after his customary mock blessing over the Sanka, “our ancestors were idolaters who dwelled on the other side of the river,” which, young Aaron believed, was why they never invited the New Jersey contingent to Seder.

Some Spitzes Aaron saw at every holiday, and some he knew mostly by the non-denominational seasons greeting cards his mother displayed on the china hutch.

Vietnam left a lasting imprint on both Mervin Spitz and his right hand: the two ceased owning a middle finger sometime in '72.

An effort to reconnect, was Cousin Gersh's explanation for the black woven yarmulke he began pinning to his skull the day he saw *Yentl*, but everyone took it for what it really was—an inexpensive solution to a freshly forming bald spot.

And the Egyptians afflicted us, laid heavy bondage upon us; and the Eternal heard our cries; and with a strong hand and an outstretched arm brought us forth from the land of Egypt; and, after watching us wander and wander, hither and thither, into and out of a homeland from which we were repeatedly expelled, He spread us to the winds; and we all (well, many) went down to Europe and sojourned there; and there established villages, learned trades, fiddled on rooftops, and multiplied according to the scripture: fruitfully.

Some Spitzes died while Aaron was very young (if not before).

Papa Louie, it was said of the great Spitz forefather, wore cuff-linked shirts and fine wool blazers, removing them only on Sundays to landscape the family burial plot.

Exempted from military service by extreme obesity, Great Uncle Solly spent the War years and a good deal afterward driving a meat truck on Staten Island.

Little was known about Mama Beylke, save a lifelong distrust of American grocery stores and that she washed all her eggs by hand, perennially declaring "you never can tell about those chickens."

Great Uncle Sender contracted fatal salmonella poisoning during the Korean Conflict.

Some Spitzes Aaron saw at the funeral for the first time in years, slugging back Scotch to the old man's memory.

Cousin Delilah had two life ambitions: to shoot a perfect game in Atari bowling, and something she mentioned only as "for

me to know and you to find out, once I shoot a perfect game in Atari bowling."

It's against Jewish law to name a baby Junior, the family told Cousin Mitchie and his wife Elyssa, so they called their son Christian; that was that for them.

Cousin Billy, who many Spitzes regarded as dark, peculiar, and nothing like his older brother Jacob, gained acceptance to a prestigious fashion institute, where with his wiry build and Mediterranean complexion he fast became the toast of Chelsea.

And some Spitzes, Aaron realized as he crossed 72nd Street, he'd probably never see again, because of geography, circumstance, and Cousin Gersh, or perhaps more accurately, Cousin Gersh's cream-colored Buick Le Sabre.

Clinically depressed and ardently thrifty, Cousin Frieda saved thousands on professional therapy by joining the Catholic church, where she worked out her issues free of charge, in confessional.

Great Aunt Miriam suffered from lupus, migraines, and hyperthyroidism; indigestion, arrhythmia, and hysterical blindness; ADD, the DTs, and type one or two diabetes (whichever proved more serious), but her most profound ailment stemmed from excessive free time and a dog-eared copy of the *Physician's Desk Reference*.

And the Europeans afflicted us, laid pogroms upon us (and, later, far worse); and again the Eternal heard our cries; and with a strong hand, an outstretched arm, and a steerage-class steamer ticket brought forth from Lithuania an apprentice tailor named Lyubov Spz

According to Grandpa Meyer, not only was cabbage delicious, it also lengthened your life—would he steer you wrong?

Cousin Mervie had Jacob and Billy run military drills in their backyard, chanting such creatively self-penned cadences as "Push-ups, push-ups, we love push-ups" and "If I die on the VC front, ship me home in a wooden box."

And G-d delivered Lyubov Spz to Ellis Island, where an immigration officer domesticated his first name, crammed a vowel into