

Jerome Liebling

A Family Photograph, Brooklyn, New York, 1942

JULES CHAMETZKY WAS FOURTEEN YEARS OLD in the spring of 1942 when this photograph of a family gathering in Brooklyn, New York was taken. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had occurred only a few months earlier in December of 1941 and the United States was now at war with Germany in Europe and Japan in the Pacific.



The family had gathered to visit and renew their bonds at this time of uncertainty. Their thoughts were for the family here in America as well as the many relatives and friends at peril in Europe. Many of the women are holding photographs of family members who could not be present at the gathering. These photographs enabled the absent family members to be present, at least in spirit.

Young Jules is at the upper right, standing next his father, Beny. His mother is in the row below and between them, holding a photograph of her eldest son Leslie, who at twenty-two, was a volunteer infantryman in the First Division of the U.S. Army. Probably unknown to them all at the time, the U.S. Army was preparing to invade North Africa in one of the first American engagements with the Nazi army. The Germans were at the peak of their power in 1942. They had been at war in Europe since 1939 and had conquered France, Central Europe, and Poland and had just invaded the Soviet Union with extraordinary initial success.

Jules' brother, Leslie, was part of the Allies' North African invasion and he was captured by the Germans at the battle for Hill 523, near Bizerte, in Tunisia. Luckily he was freed by American and British counter-forces, and, uninjured, was able to return to duty, including the invasion of Sicily in 1943. 1942 was the turning point for the Axis advances, for soon the Soviet and Allied victories began to change the course of the war. Could the little family gathering in Brooklyn with the inclusion of Leslie's photograph, and the hopes and wishes of all those present, have helped Leslie successfully complete the war without injury?

Jules is the only young person standing with the adults; perhaps he should have been sitting in front with his younger cousins, but with his brother Leslie in the Army and Jules now at Brooklyn Technical High School, he likely thought of himself as an adult. From now on, his adulthood would indeed begin.

What did this family know of the war and the dangers, pain and complexities of life in Europe, especially for the populations of Jews still living there?

They knew mostly everything.

Of the seventeen adult men and women in the photograph, sixteen were born in Europe and were part of the great waves of immigrants that came to the United States between 1880-1910. They had all seen the Statue of Liberty and been processed at Ellis Island. But their arduous and often wrenching journeys, and their need to establish themselves in a strange country with a new language and little money overshadowed the oft-mentioned symbols of the new land.

Why did they come?

The great loss of life during the American Civil War and the rapid industrialization of the United States following that war created a need for a vast new American work force. An extremely open immigration policy for almost all (except Asians) attracted many impoverished Europeans. The Jewish population of Eastern Europe, especially Poland and Russia, had lived extremely restricted lives. They had faced virulent anti-Semitism often resulting in state-sponsored pogroms. Most were forced to live in ghettos or other restricted areas. They had limited choice of occupations and faced lengthy military conscription. There was little schooling available, much poverty, and endless harassment. Stimulated by the availability of cheap steerage passage and stories of new opportunities, many made the decision to journey to America. Many millions of people scraped, saved and borrowed, sold possessions and even split up their families in order to make the passage to the New World in the hope of new and better lives. Sixteen of the seventeen adults in this photograph took the chance to emigrate.

How did they fare?

Many of Jules' family had come to this country by 1910, right at the peak years of immigration. By the time of the photograph, many had been in the country for thirty years. Their first necessity was to find jobs and a community that would support their religious and cultural needs. New York City had many religious and ethnic neighborhoods, as it still does today. The Lower East Side of Manhattan, Brownsville in Brooklyn, and sections of the Bronx were Jewish communities where customs and language could be maintained.

Slowly jobs, education, and the learning of English changed the opportunities available to the new immigrants. At the center of the photograph, however, are two bearded patriarchs, Jules' grandfather and great-grandfather who retained the orthodox traditions and dress, as did many other immigrants throughout their lives in America. Though Yiddish is their first language, most of the adults in the photograph are also fluent in English. For the many who still felt more comfortable with Yiddish, there were at least three popular Yiddish newspapers. The most popular, the *Jewish Daily Forward* was for many years edited by the very important and well known Yiddish writer Abraham Cahan. Over time the immigrants developed more familiarity with their new country and shed some ties to their past. Their names were Bessie, Anna, Beny, Esther, Isaac, Morris, Dora, Sam, Sarah and Max, and they were garment workers, salesmen, butchers, grocers, factory workers, and homemakers. Their children (born here) began to attend public schools and to find other occupations and careers.

Jules, born in 1928, was the second son of Russian immigrants Beny and Anna. Calvin Coolidge was president, and, in the fall election of 1928, Herbert Hoover would be elected president. The stock market crashed in 1929 and the "Great Depression" began when Jules was just one-and-a-half years old. There were immigrants who by 1929 had finally reached some stability but did not have the resources to withstand the devastating effects of the Depression. For Jules and his brother Leslie, the Depression meant constant relocation as their father Beny struggled to keep a series of failing butcher shops afloat. Even with the boys and their mother working at the shops, the prospects were always bleak.

The Depression continued for twelve years but had finally eased by 1942 when this photograph was taken. The new prosperity resulted from the increase in military spending, and the thousands no longer unemployed who joined the armed forces. For Beny and Anna and other relatives, these began to be prosperous times.

For Jules, the Depression had been a time of growing up. Living in the extremely liberal New York City he was stimulated by the intellectual life of the City as well as the vibrant street

scene and friends he found in Williamsburg and Brownsville. The formal education he received in the public schools culminated in the stimulating political and intellectual experiences he had while at Brooklyn College. Because of the Depression, Jules, like others of his generation, did not experience the materialism that is so prevalent today. What seemed more urgent and important was a concern for politics and culture. Jules' first ambition was to be a playwright.

At this time New York City was at its most progressive; Fiorello La Guardia was Mayor (1932-46), Herbert Lehman, another progressive figure, was Governor, and of course Franklin Delano Roosevelt, creator of the New Deal, was President. Jules absorbed all the progressive cultural and political ferment of the times. In 1942 Jules was fourteen years old. In four years he would finish high school and enter college, the first member of his family to do so. It would take at least a generation before poor immigrant families would become part of the American mainstream and see their children partake of higher education. This was facilitated by the free tuition of the New York City colleges. Regrettably New York City colleges no longer have free tuition. Jules would go on to complete his Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota and later write a scholarly work on Abraham Cahan, the distinguished editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. In 1942 Jules might not have even known who Abraham Cahan was.

Adjustment to American society and making a living were often extremely difficult for immigrants and took all of their energy. Yet they never forgot their relatives and friends still in Europe. They never abandoned the "Old Country," and often collected money for religious and fraternal organizations that supported people still in Europe. They were eager for news, wrote letters, read newspaper reports, read books, and sometimes went for visits. The immigration laws became more restrictive in the U.S., and family members left in Europe sometimes had to immigrate to other regions such as Canada and South America.

Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933 brought new anguish as State-sponsored anti-Semitic laws grew ever more

threatening. A slow trickle of refugees arrived in this country who had been witness to oppression, confiscation, imprisonment, and death. Anne Halley and her family had arrived as refugees in the 1930s and by 1942, when Anne was thirteen years old, were living in Olean, New York and still adjusting to their new life in America. By 1942, Hitler had undertaken his "Final Solution" program which was his last attempt to eliminate all of the Jews in the territories he controlled. The 1942 photograph has ten Jewish men present, just enough for a Minyan; a sufficient body to hold prayer services. However, any attempt at prayer or pleading by the family gathered in Brooklyn could not halt the destruction brought about by the Nazis. Only the relentless pursuit by the Allied forces would end the Nazi terror.

In 1942 Jules, at fourteen, Anne at thirteen, though miles apart in New York State, were both part of two great displacements that were still ongoing. The U.S. had accepted the Jewish immigrants of the early part of the century and now had accepted a small flow of the refugees from Nazi Germany.

I cannot accurately describe what circuitous paths brought Jules and Anne together, in of all places, Minneapolis, Minnesota, as graduate students in the University English program. They not only finished their graduate work but were married there in 1953. They were molded by feelings of displacement and a need to find a place that would nurture their talents. The newly burgeoning university communities developing in the 1950s were to be their place. Their path together has always been one of honoring the intellect and fostering equality and justice. Though their families fled from Europe, Jules and Anne have spent many years there. They have lived, worked, taught, and visited throughout Europe. With their extended European friendships they have more than healed their families' anguished immigrant and refugee experiences. They have tried to make the world whole, and they know that that can only happen through deep friendships, generosity, compassion, free inquiry, and much travail.