

## We can run away. Or we can fight back

March 2019

Last week I went to Belarus to visit the Jewish community.

Here's why.

This, among others, is the story of Meyer Suchowljansky, born in Grodno, Belarus, in 1902.

In the long-established Jewish community of Grodno, Max and Yetta Suchowljansky called their firstborn son Meir, a bringer of light. Grodno, like all of today's Belarus, has changed hands many times over the years. Sometimes it was in Russia, other times it's been Polish or German. At a conservative count, if you're one hundred years old and lived in Grodno all your life, you've been the citizen or subject of at least twenty different countries.

Nearly 70% of the population of Grodno was Jewish when Meir was born, almost everyone spoke Yiddish. There were over 40 synagogues, a Jewish orphanage, a Jewish theater and a Jewish hospital.

Meyer Suchowljansky grew up in Grodno. He went to *cheder*, the religious school, where he learned his prayers and the Hebrew alphabet.

But the warm and textured life created by Jews in the five centuries they had lived in Grodno was collapsing. New laws prohibited Jews from buying land, from going to university, from changing their names to non-Jewish ones. All Jewish identity passes were marked with the word *lbray* - "Jew."

Worst of all, the czarist government approved of pogroms against Jews. They said it was the Jews' fault for exploiting ordinary Russians. When Meyer was five years old there was trouble in nearby Bialystock, and Jews fled by the hundreds to Grodno with stories of rape and murder.

So: what was special about Grodno? Grodno was one of the first – and one of the only – eastern European communities where the Jews met violence with violence. There were some tough Jews around there. They formed a self-defense organization, hiding weapons in their homes. They fought

back against policemen who helped their persecutors. They assassinated the Russian police chief who had organized the Bialystock pogrom. Grodno's endurance earned it some reprieve from the worst effects of anti-Semitism, but the odds were not on its side. After centuries of life here, Jews were starting to contemplate their options.

They're the same options that they have today.

One direction was aliyah. As early as 1851 a Grodno *kolel*, a religious community, was set up in Jerusalem. By 1902 it was a small township outside the city walls with 2000 Grodno Jews.

Another option was America, a different kind of *goldene medinah*. And tens of thousands of Belarussian Jews started to move there in the late nineteenth century.

Max, Meyer's father, set off for America in 1909. Within two years he had saved enough money for his wife and children to join him. They reached Ellis Island in April 1911. Ten-year old Meyer was so skinny and malnourished that he was redefined as an eight-year old by American immigration officials.

He was also given a new birthday, July 4<sup>th</sup>, since he was now "made in America." Growing up, he fell into occasional street violence on the Lower East Side, petty crime and street gangs. "I never got on my knees," he said proudly. "We had the choice. We could run away, or we could fight back."

There were Jews who fought back. Jews in Belarus and Jews from Belarus.

Jews like the Bielskis, an organization of Jewish partisans who rescued Jews from extermination.

They fought against the Nazis and their collaborators in the vicinity of Lida, now western Belarus.

Under their protection, 1,236 Jews survived the war, living in the forests. It was one of the most remarkable rescue missions of the Holocaust.

Some of these partisans are alive today. Our Jewish Federation brings them food, medicine, home care – and a connection to the community that will never be forgotten. I needed to see that. They're alive today because,

although their state pension won't cover her medicines and her basic food needs, we do. Our Jewish Federation.

There were other Belarus Jews who fought. Jews like Menachem Begin, born in Brest. Like Yitzhak Shamir in Ruzhany. Like Shimon Peres in Vishnyeva. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and Chaim Weitzman ... and countless others. Born in what is now Belarus. Because in Belarus we created the foundations of the Jewish State.

In Belarus, the Jewish community created vibrant, beautiful Jewish art. With Jewish artists like Moishe Segal, born near Vitebsk, who later changed his name to Marc Chagall.

And in Belarus, we created the foundations of the American Jewish experience. With Belarussian-born Jews like Irving Berlin and Louis B. Meyer; and the children of Belarussian-Jewish immigrants like Kirk Douglas, and Ralph Lauren.

And immigrants like Meyer Suchowljansky.

Fifty years after he fought in his street gang in the Lower East Side, Belarus-born Meyer Suchowljansky stood in the lobby of a beautiful hotel that he had built. It was New Year's Day, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1959.

He had kept his first name, he was still called Meyer. But he had changed his last name to Lansky.

Meyer Lansky was standing in the lobby of the Riviera Hotel in Habana, Cuba. Fulgencio Batista, the Cuban dictator, had boarded a plane at 3am, escaping Castro's rebellion and fleeing to the Dominican Republic. By 4 o'clock, news of Batista's departure had begun to spread.

People started to leave their homes and gathered cheering in the streets, honking their horns.

But the mood quickly turned angry, there were clashes between the police and the rebel militia, who were coming out of hiding in Habana.

There was a wild shoot-out at the Parque Centrale hotel. Years of frustration were bubbling over, anger was mounting and directed at anything and everything that symbolized the Batista regime: the parking

meters, the slot machines. And most of all, the hotel-casinos that had sustained the dictatorship for all these years.

And the greatest symbol of the hotel-casinos was the Riviera, built by Meyer Lansky. In an act of revolutionary anger, campesinos brought into the city a truckload of pigs and set them loose in the lobby of the hotel and casino, squealing, tracking mud across the floors, and doing their business all over Lansky's pride and joy, the beautiful lobby of the Riviera.

As dawn rose on the new Habana, there was dancing in the streets, The workers at the Riviera deserted their jobs to go out and celebrate, and Meyer Lansky, limping on a swollen knee, worked personally in the kitchens to give out food, free of charge, to the bewildered guests. Teddy, his wife, poured some vinegar into a bucket of water, took a mop, and started to wipe up the Riviera's lovely marble floors.

Many times these past years, sitting in the same beautiful lobby, looking at the same marble floors, I've compared the nature of Jewish life in Belarus and the former Soviet Union to that in Cuba, with Jewish federation missions.

I'm not the first to make these comparisons. Many of us have done the same.

And what surprises people is that, like in Cuba, every Jew in Belarus can leave. They don't need our help in getting out. Every Jew in every country around the world can leave. From anywhere.

They don't need our help in getting out. They need our help in bringing in.

And in Cuba, like in Belarus, like in Russia and Ukraine and dozens of other countries, the challenge that we face is twofold. Because in so many of these countries what strikes us is hunger and thirst.

Make no mistake. There is real hunger in the Jewish world. Hundreds of thousands hungry, needy. They need food, and medicine, and homecare.

But there is also thirst. A real thirst for Jewish identity, for belonging, for community. And that's why we work so hard to develop leadership programs, youth engagement, community outreach. It takes time, and energy, and precious resources, to rebuild, and restore, and renew. And we

did it with your help. Because at the end of the day, every single Jewish Federation program, at home, in Israel, and in every country around the world, is rooted in the core value that we all share: that *kol yisrael arevim ze bezeh* – that all Jews are responsible one for another. Every day.

That's not just a nice abstract statement from the Talmud – (*masechet Shavuot, 39a*).

It's a business plan.

No one gets left behind.

Every Jewish community can stand on its own feet. In New Jersey. In Israel. In Belarus.

We have a global Jewish commitment that defines us. It enriches our sense of community and Jewish identity.

Even if it's hard. Even if it takes time. We do this because we want our Jewish community to have meaning. Because we want our children to be proud of us. And because we love the Jewish world and all that it entails: the good ... and the not-so-good ...

The Belarussian author, S. Ansky, of Vitebsk wrote a beautiful song, called "The Emigrant Song."

It's our song. "Wanderers, wanderers we are." And who was Shlomo Ansky? He was the author of *The Dybbuk*. And he subtitled his masterpiece, "Between Two Worlds." Those two worlds were the story of his Belarus. A story torn between the past and the future. Between the dirty, daily struggle ... and the noble aspirations that we all share.

It's the story of Meyer Lansky, who was so flawed ... yet worked with the OSS, the predecessor to the CIA, to help in the Allied invasion of Sicily and broke up Nazi rallies and spy rings in New York.

It's the story of Marc Chagall, who moved from Belarus and worked as an art teacher in a Jewish-Federation partnered school near Moscow in the 1920s.

He wrote a beautiful autobiography, *My Life*. It's one of the most extraordinarily inventive and visually striking autobiographies

you'll ever see. The text is accompanied by twenty plates which he prepared especially to illustrate his life story. In the book, he writes, "In our life there is a single color, as on an artist's palette, which provides the meaning of life and art. It is the color of love."

That's why I went. That's why our task is so sacred, so important, so filled with love.

Because this is our Jewish story.  
It belongs to all of us.  
And that's why I went.