



Video Story Transcript

A Yiddish King Lear

By: Storyteller Judith Heineman
www.storytelling.org/heineman

Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNKvTWndRTs>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, I'm Judith Heineman. Did you ever want something so badly that you were willing to give up everything for it? This is an excerpt of a longer piece about my grandfather called, "A Yiddish King Lear."

When I was eight, I played Snow White and the prince refused to kiss me. I lay there waiting, my heart palpitating, "Psst. Kenny you're supposed to kiss me, now." I lay there on a hard, narrow, wooden bench taken from the seating area in the social hall. "Psst, Kenny, now."

Well, I may not have known what the word "improvised" meant, but I arose from my poisoned slumber and I chased Kenny Eppstein, the cutest 9-year-old in camp, around the wishing well. My Prince Charming was not escaping without a kiss and he kissed me on the cheek. This Snow White took place in a summer bungalow colony, in the Catskills, in New York. And my grandfather, Oscar Markowitz, who was about 75 at the time, was taking care of me. My mother worked in the city and came up on weekends. We lived in the first bungalow, a tiny unwinterized, rented cabin. And we came home for lunch. And after rehearsal, I was so excited that I ran into the house and I said, "Grandpa, Grandpa, when I grow up, I am going to be an actress."

He turned from the stove with a blackened frying pan in one hand, a dish rag in the other. And he just looked at me, with the strangest look. He didn't say anything. And then he turned back to burning my lunch.

That weekend my mother came up to see me as Snow White. And I said, "Mom, when I grow up I'm going to be an actress."

“What do you want to be an actress for? You'll never make any money as an actress. Forget this narish, this foolishness, and do something practical. Be a teacher.”

Something must have penetrated because I did become a teacher. I became a high school English and journalism teacher in New York City. And I was teaching near the East Village, in the West Village. The heyday of the off, and off, off Broadway movement. So, I would teach during the day, and I would audition after work. And I would perform in strange places, in storefronts, and black boxes, and sub-sub-basements. And so, I would perform and I would think, “Why am I doing this? This is so difficult. Why am I hitting my head against the wall? I have no role models. There's nobody in my family who is an actor. What's possessing me like a dybbuk or a demon or something, where I have to do this?”

And there I was on Second Avenue, New York City, going into a sub-sub-basement of an experimental theater, and my foot froze on the stair. How could I have forgotten? How could I have forgotten? And his voice came flooding back to me. My grandfather, Oscar Markowitz, he of the burning lunches, wasn't always Oscar Markowitz. He was Oschar Marko, an actor in the Yiddish theater from Romania. And he wasn't just any actor, he was a very good actor. He had to have been a good actor because he was sponsored by the Rothschild banking family, the banking family that dominated all the capitals of Europe in the 19th century. The Rothschilds were sponsoring Jewish actors to escape from Romania, to travel across Europe, and come to the United States. And it wasn't just an international tour. No. They were helping them to escape the religious persecution, the poverty, and the bloody pogroms that were plaguing Eastern Europe and Romania at that time, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, a bloody pogrom, a government sanctioned race riot against Jews.

What kind of future did he have? And in 1893, when he was 12 years old, laws were passed that said no Jewish child can have a public education anymore. And then, as if overnight, new laws were passed, that if you didn't have government rights, and Jews didn't, the men couldn't pursue careers. And 40 percent of them lost their jobs. But even still, how could he possibly leave everything that he had known, his family and his country for an uncertain future? But he was an actor and he came to the United States and finally found his way down, down, downtown to Second Avenue, New York City, the home of the Yiddish theater.

And his voice came flooding back to me singing in a language that I didn't understand. And he said he was singing King Lear in Yiddish. Now, you have to understand, this was not Shakespeare's King Lear. This was a Goldfadden King Lear. This was a guilty King Lear. This was a suffering King Lear. This was a Jewish King Lear. And when immigrants came to the theater, they didn't sit back to just be entertained. Oh no. The theater was a temple of learning, this was education. They would grab their children and they'd say, “See, see that man suffering on stage? That's what you're doing to us, you ungrateful first generation American children. Can't you respect us? Respect the old ways? Respect our traditions?”

And there, on the Lower East Side, he met a landsman, a neighbor, a friend. Her name was Dora. And they fell in love and he asked her to marry him. And she went to her father and said, “Papa, Papa, this is Oschar Marko and he's asked me to marry him. He's an actor. A very good actor. An actor in the Yiddish theater.”

And curses in Yiddish spewed forth from her father's mouth, and he said, “An actor! No daughter of mine is going to marry an actor! An actor is a gun of a thief a no-goodnik! The lowest of the low! The devil!” “And you,” he said to my grandfather, “if you want to marry my daughter, you have to get a respectable profession!”

What could he do? How could he choose between his acting that had saved his life and the woman he loved? That would be the only family he would know in this new world. Would King Lear have to be silenced? And he chose. And he became a respectable and often unemployed house painter. Adorning other people's dreams while designs for his own lay tattered in a Sienna portfolio, a still life unframed with forged signatures. And he was bitter and frustrated for the rest of his life except...when he would sing to me in a language I didn't understand. And I would sit by his knee and he would hold court in his third floor, rent controlled, Bronx apartment. And I would sit at his knee. And his chest would rise and he would sit on his throne, a gray brocaded armchair with fringes along the bottom, and his chest would rise, his hands would rail to the ceiling, still steady in his 90's. And he would become a young man of 19 again in the year 1900. The dawn of a new century with all the promise of anything he could have imagined before him. And he would sing all the frustration and pain and sorrow of King Lear. And, although, I did not know what each word meant individually, his song still sings inside me in mame loshn, a mother tongue, and needs no translation.