

1. TWO INTERTWINED LIVES: THE MEMORIES OF BEATRICE AND NATHAN

In this memoir there are undoubtedly many errors. We will be grateful for any you point out and any improvements you suggest.

Note that insofar as the accounts that are literally our memories, they cannot be in error. No one can correct what we describe from memory. (Logicians know this fact as "the incorrigibility of the first person statement.") All we formally claim is that we set down the events and people as we remember them and no one can say we don't remember them right.

But we want to go beyond such formal truthfulness and write what actually happened. So if you see discrepancies, please tell keyfitz@netscape.net.

Birth, Stayner Avenue, Westmount, Quebec, 1913

According to my mother I was born at 11:00 p.m. on Saturday June 29, 1913. This is as far back as I can go, though some cultures date the person at conception, 9 months earlier. And Lawrence Stern's Tristram Shandy refers to an event that occurred on the night of his conception. At the critical moment his mother asked his father whether he had remembered to wind the clock!

Starting the day

A doctor whom I respect prescribes a miracle drug that can help build muscle, avoid disease, stave off bone loss, lower blood pressure and improve mental health. It takes 20 minutes to self-administer and is repeated before each meal.

The "drug" is exercise. I do it before breakfast on the stairwell of the apartment where I live. The scene is gloomy; the stair well is lighted only enough to enable fleeing tenants to make their escape in a fire. I raise myself with right leg to the first step, lower myself, and then do the same with the left leg. This I do repeatedly, for the 20 minutes that my physiotherapist has ordered, the equivalent of climbing 25 stories.

A bleak scene and a grim task, you will say. Not so, for I have closed my eyes, and I am somewhere else. My mind is loosed from the strenuous exercising of my legs. It is in a classroom in which Professor Heffernan is lecturing on James Joyce's Ulysses. He is convincing enough that I think it is June 16, 1904 and I walk the streets of Dublin with Leopold Bloom.

After finishing this course I can go on to lectures on the 19th century British Romantic Poets, or new movements in philosophy in the 20th century. Or 30 or so other subjects, all on disks that I

buy from the Teaching Company. Any of them keep me stepping (before breakfast) or tread milling (before lunch), or rowing (before dinner), with my mind occupied so that rather than boredom I experience the excitement of learning on subjects of my choice.

At the end of the 20 minutes my body and my mind have both been strengthened.

Now on to whatever I recall or have been told about my infancy, childhood and parents.

Nathan's family of origin, Montreal 1912-36

My father, Arthur Keyfitz, (1875-1953) came from Mogilev, a good-sized city in White Russia (Belorussia) and there he completed Gymnasium, which corresponds to the European Classical College -- a school intermediate between the modern American high school and college. For the time and place that was a lot of education-secular education at that. His father, Nathan Keyfitz (1835-1912) after whom I am named, was a rabbi. But the poor community could not afford a full-time rabbi, so he also was a surveyor, in which capacity he was appointed by a hierarchy that reached up to the Czar himself. A not unimportant post, since whenever a house or other real estate changed hands the official surveyor was called on to establish the boundaries of the property.

I mention all this because it shows extraordinary liberality that my rabbi grandfather should have supported his son's attendance at a secular institution rather than at a Yeshiva. I am afraid my father followed through in maintaining a certain distance from Jewish institutions.

My grandfather, his wife and some seven of his children came to Canada about 1900. Grandfather, by then in his sixties, never learned English, did not seek a post as a rabbi. Apparently he thought he was too old to adapt to America. He died in 1912, so permitting me (and at least two cousins, Nathan Levinne and Nathan Pivnick) to take his name in 1913.

My parents fully partook of the immigrant yearning for education in English. The 11th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, the plays of Shakespeare and the novels of Dickens are among the books that I remember in our home. Plus some of the novels of the time that would have an interesting plot and incidentally teach immigrants how they should act in their adopted country.

My father was unusually adaptable. Starting as an itinerant vendor barely able to speak English, with his stock carried in a pack on his back, it was not many years before he had transformed himself into the urbane and well-spoken person that I remember from my earliest years. He instilled confidence and was an irresistible advertising salesman. He dressed to support this effect. Every few days I had to run over to the Chinese laundry a few blocks away, either to hand in or to collect a batch of stiffly starched collars; these were part of the costume that made him

invincible. He also had a somewhat husky voice that strengthened the impression of sincerity when he talked.

On the other hand none of this armamentarium was worn in the home. An old pair of pants, a collarless shirt, a much less formal language, were good enough for the family. Yiddish was what he often talked to my mother, and he used colorful language. One much favored phrase sounded like "Chalaria soll er happen" that translates "May he get cholera," applied where a Gentile might have said "God damn him." For Jews, God is too sacred to bring into earthly quarrels.

Once we children got onto Yiddish, things we were not supposed to know were discussed by my parents in Russian. Often in later life, when traveling to the Soviet Union, I was sorry that I remembered barely a word of the Russian that was exchanged between my parents. One of many opportunities lost!

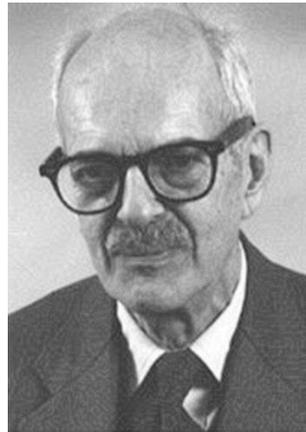


Photo of Nathan Keyfitz from his obituary in the Harvard Gazette. Source: <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2010/04/nathan-keyfitz-dies-at-96/>

My father demonstrated his professional skill to me, when I, seeking an ad for the West Hill High School Annual, went into a local store, told my story to the proprietor, was met with "It's not worth a hill of beans," and sadly withdrew. I recounted this to my family back home, and my father said, "Come with me". Back in the same store, my father told essentially the same story, and received the same answer. But unlike me, he did not withdraw and did not argue, but simply changed the subject, and from the new start slowly worked his way back to the main proposition. Purposeful, innocuous assertions were his specialty. After two more repetitions of this cycle the man began to agree, to the point where my father could take out his pen and get a signature on the dotted line.

My father had been on the regular staff of the Montreal Gazette for some 12 years, but in 1928 he decided that he could do better as a free-lance representative of smaller papers, with the substantial commissions that these paid. He would indeed have done better, except that it was

1929, and the Depression closed down on Montreal as on the rest of the world. Nonetheless he kept us eating (and paying college tuition) during the difficult 1930s. My mother never let him forget that in the move he had exchanged the assured salary of a metropolitan daily for the harried pursuit of commissions from small neighborhood papers.

Along with these were foreign language weeklies, and his knowledge of these was certainly a factor in his survival in cosmopolitan Montreal. His range of languages included accent-free Russian, English and Yiddish, excellent French, reading knowledge of Italian and Polish.

The life of an advertising salesman early in the 20th century is well known to readers of James Joyce, whose Leopold Bloom, the chief character of *Ulysses*, exercised that occupation some 30 years earlier. He and my father would similarly wander around Dublin and Montreal respectively in a seemingly purposeless fashion, but all the while looking at billboards, reading the newspapers, talking casually to acquaintances they happened to meet, and otherwise getting names of prospects on whom they could call.

At home my father innovated by using the telephone, then just coming into general use. He phoned his list of prospects and culled from the list those who, he judged from a phone response, were unlikely to be interested.

My father was truly masochistic. An example: every morning of the year he started his day by filling the bath-tub with water from the cold tap--and coming up from an underground pipe in the winter it was not far above freezing. Then he lowered himself into it. The recollection makes me shiver. Incidentally, he probably had never heard of masochism, just thought that what he did was healthy. I am afraid that some of his masochism passed on to me, though not the cold bath expression of it.

My father had a passion for education, and as it happened the Unitarian Church at the corner of Guy and Sherbrooke streets had a lecture series running through the winter, year after year. . Every Sunday evening there was a visiting lecturer, I remember John Cowper Powys, with his "Endure happily or escape" and Alfred Noyes *The Barrel-organ*, "Come down to Kew in lilac time, it isn't far from London". On another Sunday, Vachel Lindsay was the speaker, and I will never forget his energetic reciting of "The Congo". Says his biographer, "he performed melodramatically, chanting, shouting, gesturing and singing" In 1931, not too long after I heard him, , this son of Springfield, Ill, next in distinction only to Abraham Lincoln, discouraged by the decline of his fame and his creativity, committed suicide by taking poison. That was at the age of 52. Now aged 90, I may be the last person still alive to have heard him recite.

My father and I went to the church independently and it was crowded. How would I find my father? That was easy. He had a habit of clearing his throat every minute or two. By this I was able to locate him.

We never had allowances, not because my father could not afford them, but because he feared they would be used to no good purpose. Anyone who knows what New England Puritans were like around the 18th century would have a pretty good idea of my father, even though his ancestry was very different. For him as for them life was a no-nonsense matter, to be devoted to work, education, health, marriage and children. O yes, and the virginity of his daughters until they were safely married. Nothing else. Certainly little room for fun.

One kind of fun enjoyed by most adolescents is masturbation. My father was horrified by it. When my mother reported to him that there were signs in the bedclothes that it was going on he asked me to sit down on the front porch after dark one evening, and solemnly went into the matter. Among the other things it would lead to was total loss of memory, blindness.

It tells something that while we never had even a quarter to do what we liked with, my father offered me the astronomical sum of \$10 each month that I came first in my class. (Report cards carried a rank in that far-off time so that the student knew where he stood among his fellows) The money was to accumulate in a nearby branch of the Montreal City and District Savings Bank; it was mine in some very obscure sense that did not include it being spent by me. Anyhow having a bank account even nominally appealed, and from being just about last in the class at the start I worked myself up to first or second. My teachers wondered what had happened.

My father insisted that we be home before nine o'clock, and I had many a reprimand and once a beating for not being home by then. The constraint that would compel me to leave my college chums so early stimulated thought, and I found a solution. Returning late from roistering with fellow-students I would shinny up the post supporting the back porch, climb over the railing, then go through a window into my bedroom that by good fortune faced on the porch. You can see how repression stimulates the mind--maybe we Jews as a whole have similarly benefited from our long history of repression.

Years after I had finished school and college, and was proposing to buy a house with the income from my first job, I was short the \$2,000 down payment that the seller, Major Carter, required. A kindly man, he gave me time to raise the money. I asked my father whether he would lend it to me for the two or three years it would take to save up that sum and repay it. It was not a large sum in relation to his savings, but he said no, he wouldn't do it -- I ought to stand on my own feet. I was sadly telling this story to a friend Grace Holmes, and she spontaneously offered to do it. (Her father, Jabez Eliot, then recently deceased, had been a highly successful Toronto doctor and she was the only child to receive his inheritance.)

And yet my father really was tender hearted. In the early 1950s I was headed east on one of the ill-fated BOAC Comets. We left Beirut headed for Karachi. At just about the same time another Comet on a test flight with crew but no passengers flew out of Beirut on the same route and almost immediately crashed. Beatrice, hearing the news that I was on a Comet called the airline and got the good news that it was not the plane I was on that crashed. My father heard only about the crash, and he phoned Beatrice in terrible agitation. He was crying, and he couldn't stop on Beatrice assuring him that I was all right. Beatrice thinks that could have hastened his death a few months later.

My mother was Anna Gerstein (1879-1956). She came from Lithuania and was small and very beautiful, a type the French call petite, which we call cute. I am far from sure that 1879 was her birth year, since she refused to tell us how old she was. Trained as a pharmacist, once married she never worked outside the home. Her English was fluent--extremely so--but even after 50 years in Canada and extensive elocution lessons it never got to be accent-free. This was surely one of the reasons my father looked down on her. Often when she pronounced on some subject my father would retort with the rhetorical question "What do you know about it?" And my mother gave back as good as she got. Despite an angelic appearance she wasn't going to be pushed around by anyone, least of all by her husband

My mother read a good deal, not reading for pleasure so much as for information. And having the information, she liked to communicate it, she liked above all to instruct--ourselves her children, her husband and anyone else who came within range. Beatrice noticed this tendency at their first meeting, and while she does not ordinarily like to be instructed by me, yet she came to admire my mother enormously.

War often broke out between my parents. They never used physical violence, just violent words. When the two were locked in the heat of battle, and my mother feared she was being worsted, she deployed her ultimate weapon. That was to march upstairs, enter her bedroom, and slam the door shut. She would not emerge without an apology. It might take most of an afternoon to subdue my father, but dinner had to be cooked, and other essential work done. No one was more conscious than he of the need to have an operating household. So within a few hours my father was brought to his knees. He apologized and things got moving again.

I remember very often going out for an after-dinner walk with my mother. In winter she was clothed in a Hudson seal coat, and carried a muff rather than gloves and I felt great affection.

I remember many of her ways. How she was fond of cooking, and searched for recipes in the newspapers that were brought into the house by my father to search for advertising prospects.

When she found one that looked promising and tried it out and we praised it at the dinner table she would jab the recipe onto a spike file that hung just outside the pantry door.

That same pantry was a target for some gnashing when mother was upstairs, perhaps having a post-prandial nap. There was nothing wrong with her hearing, and she would call down, "Close the ice-box". The 25 pound block of ice had to last 24 hours until the next delivery. My job was to empty the tray under the ice-box-25 pounds of ice turned to water had to be removed if the pantry floor was to be spared an overflow. In spring and fall we did not need ice every day, and a card would be placed in the window to signal the ice-man (or his horse?) that they were to stop there.

Most of the ice supply came out of the St. Lawrence River, and was stored underground in layers separated by sawdust. But there was one exception, the Manufactured Ice Company, that was not only mechanized in the production of the ice but in its delivery-it had a truck.

My mother always bought fish for Friday dinner, not because of any leaning towards Catholicism but because for Fridays our fish retailer had a fresh supply. For the other six days of the week she called a kosher butcher, and the meat as delivered and cooked was tougher than most human jaws could masticate. Unless it was ground to make hamburger it was hardly eatable, and whenever I was available I was mobilized to turn the meat grinder, moored to the edge of the kitchen table with a strong vise.

My other job was the dishes. Sometimes I would wash, sometimes dry, but was never excused.

We went to the Temple Emanuel on the eve of Rosh Hashanah (New Year), fasted on Yom Kippur and celebrated Passover. Passover was the holiday in which my family participated most fully and most enthusiastically. We would run back and forth between the kitchen and dining room, carrying dishes and cutlery. I remember once going round a corner carrying a fork in front of me, and my father rebuked me angrily, saying that I could spear a sister coming the other way.

The first evening of Passover once a year, and guests perhaps a dozen times a year, were the only occasions on which the dining room was used. Other days we ate in the kitchen, for which my father had bought a square table, made to order by Eaton's Department Store to his own design, big enough for two chairs on each of three sides, with my father sitting majestically alone on his side, leaving no doubt by his commanding presence who was the head of the family.

We were especially excited by the exotic foods in the Passover ritual-gefillte, (stuffed) fish, challah (bread made with eggs and braided), tzimmes (mixtures of vegetables and meat), matzos, horse radish, chicken soup, honey cake. . We children got a little impatient in the lengthy readings, and when our impatience was manifest there was some abridgement of the holy text.

That was one of the few evenings of the year when we seemed like a close-knit, even pious, family.

There was no money for frivolities like movies, but my mother scraped enough from the grocery money to skip out to the Empress Theater once a week, "To get away from your father," she would explain to us children.

She never demonstrated love for her children--in fact not doing so was a principle that she often reiterated. When she was in bed and I was talking to her and sat down on the edge of her bed she shooed me off, saying that I was breaking down the mattress. She just did not want me that close. That and similar manifestations came up in my psychoanalysis 30 years later.

My mother had brothers who loved and admired her, and periodically one of them would send the fare so that she could take the overnight train to New York for a visit. I am not sure just where they lived, but believe it was Far Rockaway, then not yet on the subway line, so owning a car was a requirement for living there. The three brothers, Harry, Frank and Abe, were closely tied together; not only did they share the operation of a factory making bias bindings, but they played golf and socialized together, and when my mother came down they entertained her together. I can imagine the scene--half a dozen people in the same room, and all talking simultaneously, each louder than the others. In any case after about two weeks of such intense socializing my mother returned home, as hoarse as a crow. It took her weeks to recover her voice.

My father was simply against pleasure--for himself as well as for anyone else. Though once, I remember, all of us went out to an amusement park (owned by the Trudeau family) in Cartierville on the North Shore of the Island of Montreal and several times went to visit their friends the Wigdors in Outremont, north of the mountain as the name tells. And several times my mother and I climbed the mountain. Always traveling by public transport; we never owned a car. In the early 1920s that would have been true of half of the middle-class families on our street.

Occasionally my father reflected on the valiant service he had had from my mother in the bearing of five children and day by day caring for them. Having descendants was terribly important, especially descendants who would carry the Keyfitz name, i.e. boys. He found the funds to send both my brother Irving and myself to college, him to the Faculty of Engineering and me to Arts and Sciences, both at McGill. In both cases we were day students--the thought that we might go elsewhere or live elsewhere than at home never came up.

Of course the services he had had from my mother were nothing comparable with services I had had from her. She carried me about for nine months ending on June 29, 1913, then nursed me for the usual period, and after that cooked for me and cared for me generally. And yet as I said, she

was never close to me, never kissing, hugging, fondling. She thought this would make me overly dependent on her.

Arthur and Anna Keyfitz had five children in all, myself (born June 29, 1913), Gertie (born May 27, 1915), Amy (born February 2, 1917), Irving (born February 19, 1919) and Ruth (born June 9, 1922)

Family Genealogy

Following is an excerpt from the family genealogy, showing just the descendants of my father and their spouses:

My father (Arthur Keyfitz 1875 – 1953) was married to my mother (Anna Gerstein 1879 – 1956) and had five children (Nathan Keyfitz 1913 -, Gertrude Keyfitz 1915 -, Amelia Keyfitz 1917 -, Irving Keyfitz 1919 – 1990, and Ruth Keyfitz 1922 -)

My three sisters, now in their eighties are alive and well; I am sad when I think that Irving passed away at the age of 71. He was always my father's favorite. I do not have the amiable and obliging temperament that my father demanded. I frequently had a spanking for some insolence; Irving, never. After his engineering studies at McGill he married Estelle Sable, had a series of jobs, ending up at the Westinghouse plant in Pittsburgh where nuclear reactors were made. We had many an argument on the pros and cons of nuclear energy.

My sisters and I always had a special affection for Irving. Alas he had a weak heart. On August 3, 1990 he was alone in the house, apparently felt ill and stretched out in bed and passed away peacefully in his sleep. When Estelle returned from shopping it was too late. I find it especially sad that Irving, who was so sociable, died alone.

Each of the five of us had two children, first a girl, then a boy, making 10 grandchildren for my father. A remarkable chance occurrence that made it easy for my father to keep in mind who was who. I will not stretch out this account of the family, except to refer to one of the 10 grandchildren. She is a person who best exemplifies the ideals that can save us from the bottomless pit into which the culture seems to be falling. Her name is Carolyn Singman, and she is a devoted and knowledgeable teacher. Not only is she capable of imparting the required lessons, but she exemplifies in her own life and in the classroom the highest ethical ideals, demonstrating to her Grade 6 pupils, at an impressionable age both pursuit of knowledge and integrity of conduct. She wrote me describing with pride and pleasure the variety of birthplaces of her current 6th grade class, including Africa, India, and China.

After I wrote the above I had the following letter from Carolyn.

Salut!

You recently made a comment in one of your e-mails to the effect that you thought the work that I do is important and that you were impressed by the way that I enrich my students' curriculum with an emphasis on the celebration of cultural diversity. I guess I felt that you were exaggerating my accomplishments and I dismissed what you were saying as the thoughts of a kind uncle.

To my surprise, others seem to agree with you because this past Monday, January 20, I was one of seven recipients of the Martin Luther King Jr. Award given by the MLK Legacy Committee of Montreal for outstanding contributions towards the realization of King's dreams for society. This was presented at an elaborate ceremony attended by politicians (including Israeli and Palestinian representatives), clergy of every major religion, and a large cross-section of the Black Community. I was especially pleased to be included with Irwin Cotler, a local hero of mine and others for the work that he has done to promote human rights around the world.

Just to let you know that you were in my thoughts that evening.

Best, Carolyn