They Called Me Mayer July

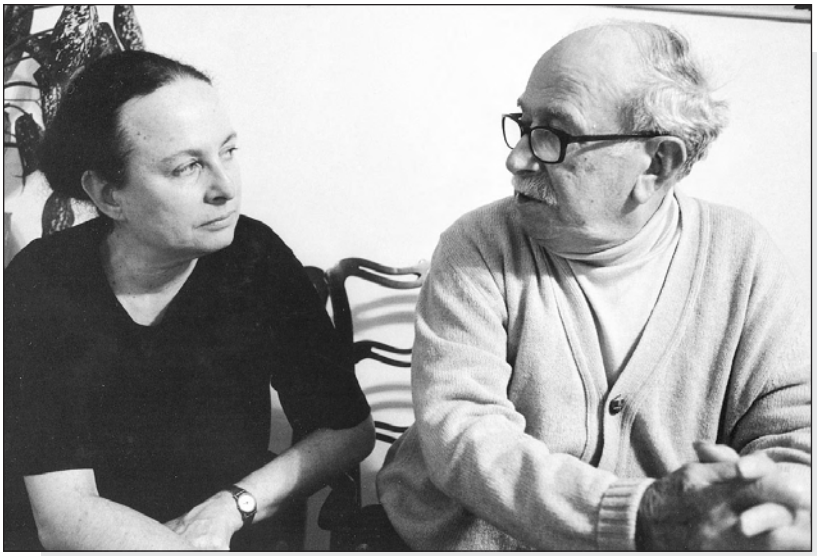
Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

The following is an excerpt adapted from "A Daughter's Afterword," in Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust *(Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming September 2007), to accompany an exhibition at the Judah L. Magnes Museum in Berkeley.*

They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust arises from a forty-year conversation between a father and a daughter. I began interviewing my father, Mayer Kirshenblatt, in 1967 with the intention of both salvaging what he could remember of his life in Poland, and documenting his immigrant experiences. He was born in Opatów (Apt) in 1916 and came to Canada in 1934. Over the years, as I continued to interview him, it occurred to me that someone whose memory was so visual should be painting what he remembered: whenever he would explain how to bridle a horse or how to make a shoe, he would make a quick sketch to show me what he meant. Finally, in 1990, after a decade of coaxing, he began to paint at the age of 73.

With the paintings in hand, the interviewing intensified and the idea for a book that would integrate images and words emerged. But what kind of book would it be? As I began to compile the manuscript from the transcribed interviews and Mayer's pithy writings, I decided that the text for *They Called Me Mayer July* would be entirely in Mayer's voice and that its structure would arise from an internal logic, yet to be discovered, in the tangled network of stories and images that he had created.

When I say that *They Called Me Mayer July* is entirely in Mayer's voice, I mean to distinguish this book from such works as Art Spiegelman's rightly celebrated *Maus*, which is structured around "the story of the story," that is, around the process of creating the work. *Maus* shows both parties to the collaboration in conversation, overtly representing their relationship and way of working together. Indeed, for Spiegelman "the story of the story" is the story. This is decidedly not the case in *They Called Me Mayer July*: here, the story is the story. Nonetheless, to say that *They Called Me Mayer July* is "entirely in Mayer's voice" is not the whole story because the text is anything but a monologue. Quite the contrary, it is profoundly dialogic, but without our forty-year conversation appearing as such in the text.



Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Mayer Kirshenblatt. Photo credit: Frédéric Brenner.

In *They Called Me Mayer July* the voice of the text is the voice of our collaboration. There were many other ways we could have composed this text. I could have told Mayer's story in the third person. I could have written in my first-person voice and quoted him. I could have preserved the form of the interview. Or, in the manner of Charlotte Salomon, we could have matched a sequence of images to a sequence of discrete texts.

We chose instead what anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff calls the "third voice," which she explains as follows: something new, a "third person," is created "when two points of view are engaged in examining one life." That voice can be heard in the text's orientation to the listener: "the authorial word enters the other's utterance from the lived subject position of the listener, that is, as if it were a gift of loving attention," as Mark Kaminsky explains in his account of Myerhoff's approach. For Myerhoff, who developed these ideas while working on *Number Our Days*, a book and film about elderly Jews living in Venice, California, listening is an ethical stance; it is essential to what she calls "growing a soul." The third voice that emerges from the listening relationship is realized textually through an approach to editing that she calls "soulwork." To be present in the text as a listener is not an act of self-

effacement, but one of intense attentiveness.

What did Mayer remember and how? "It is perhaps in the artisan that one must seek the most admirable evidences of the sagacity, the patience, and the resources of the mind," writes Jean Le Rond d'Alembert in his "Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot." This too was Mayer's philosophy. With the town as his classroom, Mayer pursued a self-designed curriculum of gestural knowledge, embodied intelligence, and know-how connected to tools, materials, processes, and workspaces: the cooper, ropemaker, blacksmith, butcher, goldsmith, carpenter, brushmaker, tailor, and shoemaker. Delight in how things work—"the pleasure taken in observing processes"—is what Neil Harris calls the operational aesthetic.

Mayer says he has no imagination, by which he means that he is more interested in the "made" than in the "made up." Mayer's disclaimer notwithstanding, memory and imagination go together. His capacity to find the extraordinary in the ordinary is the form that his imagination takes. We might call this kind of imagination extrospective because it is more concerned with the palpable world than with interiority. In this respect, *They Called Me Mayer July* is an instance of what Paul John Eakin calls the referential aesthetic.

What makes Mayer's stories memorable is precisely that they do not force "the psychological connection of the events" on the reader (or the listener); this is a hallmark of the art of the storyteller as Walter Benjamin understands it. When Mayer says, "What I am trying to do basically is not to glorify myself, but to portray life as it was," he points to what makes *They Called Me Mayer July* an extrospective autobiography. It is a prime example of the "dependence of the self for wholeness on its surroundings," in John Dewey's words.

Mayer's account differs from the autobiographies that the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research had hoped to solicit from Jewish youth in Poland during the 1930s through a series of autobiography contests. What YIVO wanted were autobiographies that would yield insights of psychoanalytic value, the better to understand a generation that in many cases saw little hope for a future in Poland. The more introspective, the better. Mayer could easily have been a contestant; he was in Poland at the time and the right age to enter the contest. But would he have won a prize?

And, is *They Called Me Mayer July* an autobiography, strictly speaking? If, as Elizabeth Buss states, "There is no intrinsically autobiographical form," what kind of autobiography is *They Called Me Mayer July*, particularly when Mayer asserts, as he often does, that his project is about Apt, not about himself, and that all such towns were pretty much the same? This kind of autobiography, which gives precedence to the world in which Mayer lived, is what I am calling extrospective; others have called it autoethnographic, because of its strong documentary impulse and focus on daily life. Although many examples can be cited, to mention only Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Zora Neale Hurston, Jewish autobiography has been characterized not only as a late flowering within the history of autobiography more generally but also as decidedly not in the confessional mold of St. Augustine and Rousseau, whose accounts have traditionally defined the genre. It follows, some have argued, that most Jewish autobiographies are therefore not autobiographical because their focus is "not upon the self of the author but upon the community, the first-person singular of the autobiographical narrator being, in effect, a trope for the first-person plural of the collective," as Marcus Moseley discusses in his magisterial history of Jewish autobiography. Given that all autobiographies are relational and that they can take any form, *They Called Me Mayer July* may not look like Rousseau's *Confessions*, but that does not make it any less autobiographical.

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Moreover, the distinction between extrospective and introspective, while useful, quickly dissolves, for the material world as lived has a way of exceeding its concreteness: "A house that has been experienced is not an inert box," as Gaston Bachelard writes. The experienced house, however extrospectively described, has the capacity to "become the topography of our intimate being." Doorways and windows in Mayer's paintings often open to mysterious spaces, rather than to precisely defined locations in Apt, suggesting a psychic topography yet to be charted, in an affective territory that is at once oneiric and foreboding. For all its discomforts, the house in which Mayer grew up is described in fine detail: the stenciling of the walls,

construction of the oven, and repair of the ceiling. Mayer's home is a vital space intensely inhabited. In Bachelard's words, "by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms,' we learn to 'abide' within ourselves."

Mayer's way of knowing the world may account in part for his ability to remember, for there is something intrinsically mnemonic about his bodily engagement with an intelligent material universe. Its relational logic makes it memorable, whether the articulation of parts, the workings of a mechanism, the entailment of steps in a process, the arrangement of things in space, or the connection of a thing, process, or space to a vivid person. His descriptions of things, tools, and machines are narratives in their own right, and they are endowed with a poetics of their own—if we agree with Barthes, writing about the images in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, "to define Poetics as the sphere of the infinite vibrations of meaning, at the center of which is placed the literal object."

In a letter dated June 6, 1982, Mayer wrote to tell me that he had carefully packed the porcupine he made from an intact eggshell and toothpicks, and that he hoped this time it would arrive in one piece. He included a few Yiddish children's rhymes in the letter and a P.S.: "This should make your day a happy day for you." Indeed, it did. *They Called Me Mayer July* is the culmination of many such happy days.

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