

BECOMING A BAT MITZVAH

A Treasury of Stories

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**With a Foreword by
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GOD BLESS AMERICA

Alexandra Nessa Berg—May 28, 2000

Alexandra Berg is a student at Central High School in Philadelphia. She excels in gymnastics and she qualified and attended national competitions at U.S.A.I.G.C. (Orlando, FL 2002). The little shul in South Philadelphia is still open.



Photo by David Ickes



Immigration into America at the turn of the last century conjures up a vision of men, women, and children lining the railings of huge steamers, muttering silent prayers of thanks as they pass the Statue of Liberty. Not all new immigrants saluted “Lady Liberty” as they entered the United States. There were several other ports of entry through which new immigrants made their way. The docks of the Delaware River at Washington Avenue in South Philadelphia were also a welcome sight for the weary passengers arriving in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Brought over by his two older brothers who were already here, Leib Kalinsky arrived in Philadelphia in 1910. Leaving behind the oppression of Czarist Eastern Europe, he bounced down the gang-



plank at the age of 15, ready to embrace America as his home. It wasn't surprising, then, that before long Leib Kalinsky became Louis Martin. Taking an Americanized name only showed his respect and love of his newly adopted country. He never forgot his roots and where he came from.

South Philadelphia is famous for its rowhouses. In these houses in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, each new group of Jewish immigrants established its own *shul*. In its heyday, over 100 *shtetle*-type *shuls* were set up in converted row houses. Louis Martin, like other Romanian "landsmen," joined Congregation Shivtei Yeshuron Ezras Israel on South 4th Street. He davened there daily until his death at 97 in 1992.

South Philadelphia at one time was a hub of activity for the Jewish community. Over 100,000 Jews made their way into America through Philadelphia and stayed right where they landed. It's all changed now. There was some upward mobility. The old generation died off and the population dwindled. Now other ethnic groups inhabit the homes that were formerly occupied by Jewish immigrants and their descendents. Out of the 100 row house *shuls*, one remains—the little *shtetle* where Louis Martin worshipped. One reason for its survival is that the job of *shamas* (caretaker)—currently, Mr. Alvin Heller—has been kept in the same family for generation after generation.

Alexandra Berg was 5 years old when her great-grandfather Louis died. What she didn't remember firsthand was gladly filled in time and time again, as stories abounded about Great-Grandpa Lou. He was easygoing and good-spirited. He had a succession of jobs, but worked as a quartermaster until his retirement in the '60s. Most of all, he loved to sing. He occasionally found work as a cantor, but his singing didn't have to happen in a formal arena. He loved this country so much that on many occasions, he would break into "God Bless America." At funerals, unveilings, and even at the end of the seder, Louis would stand up and lead the family in this patriotic song.

As Alexandra approached Bat Mitzvah age, her father, David, wanted hers to be more than a time to honor and perpetuate tradition. Because David and his brother Mel grew up in South Philadelphia, they had their Bar Mitzvahs at Grandpa's *shul* on Fourth Street. Even though David's family has since moved to the Chestnut Hill section in the Northwest, they decided that Alexandra's Bat Mitzvah would also be the perfect time to remember the legacy of Grandpa Lou and pay



respects to their South Philadelphia heritage by holding her Bat Mitzvah in the *shul* that he'd attended daily.

Because Congregation Shivtei Yeshuron Ezras Israel remains Orthodox, they set Alexandra's Bat Mitzvah on a Sunday, out of respect for the traditional worship. As it was an Orthodox *shul*, the men customarily sat downstairs, and through a large hole in the ceiling the women on the second floor could watch the service. For Alexandra's Bat Mitzvah, all of the participants, both men and women, sat downstairs, and the overflow or latecomers were relegated to the second floor.

The morning started with the showing of an award-winning documentary entitled, *Echoes of a Ghost Minyan*, by Longshore Productions. The film portrays immigration at the turn of the century and highlights all of the different rowhouse *shuls*, including the one that they were in. With the *shul's* antiquated electric system, it was no easy feat to wire the building in order to show the film, but they were successful. The Bergs chose to start the morning with this film to give those in attendance a feeling for what this place was like in years gone by—when every seat was filled and the room was alive, when the room was brightly lit and awesome, and when Lou Martin had davened there. You could almost feel his presence and the congregation experienced a sense of reverence, pride, and sadness.

The service that followed was egalitarian, eclectic, enthusiastic, and filled with high energy. There was a mix of a traditional service interspersed with Klezmer music, Joni Mitchell, and Shel Silverstein. Ben Laden, the Klezmer accordionist, wearing a sequined *kipah*, revved-up the group with the traditional *Hevenu Shalom Aleichem* and *Hava Negila*. When he unexpectedly broke out into "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers" and "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby," people started to dance in the aisles. The room was alive, and if there was ever a *Fiddler on the Roof*, they knocked him off!

In the Sephardic tradition, the *bimah* is located in the center of the room, with all seats facing in that direction. Alexandra ascended the *bimah* and read the ancient words from the Torah, while her guests followed along in equally ancient prayer books. Then she completed her Torah reading, she addressed her guests:

When my great-grandfather, Louis Martin, escaped the oppression of the Czar in Eastern Europe, he came to a new



land and eventually to this synagogue. Just as told by my Torah portion: The Jewish people, led by Moses, left Egypt and came to the desert—to a new land. They were instructed on building the *Ohel Moed*, their sacred place of worship from an ordinary tent. This very synagogue was once just a regular house, which then became the *Ohel Moed* in the new land.

Just as the Jews had hope for freedom of worship when coming to America from Eastern Europe, we *must* make sure that no one will ever be slaves or prevented from having their freedom of speech and worship. They had hopes and dreams for their children to grow safely in a free country, and *we* are the children of those dreams.

When Alex finished, her father, David Berg, a professor at Community College and no stranger to lectures, shared an in-depth history of the Jews of South Philadelphia. Edna Berg, Alexandra's mother, who let her husband take the reins while planning this innovative celebration, talked briefly about her daughter's emerging autonomy and self expression.

As a matter of practicality, since they were already in South Philadelphia and in order to continue to honor their roots, the party was held right after the service at the nearby Mummer's Museum, with buses shuttling the guests. However, while the lights still blazed and the little *shul* was so alive, Ben Laden and Alexandra asked the group to stand and they led the emotional singing of "God Bless America" in both Yiddish and English. They sang it for Grandpa Lou, for all of the Jews, for the dream.