



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“Family Values”
by Anshel Schaffer-Cohen
June 3, 2006

Interviews. When you do a lot of them it gets to be a routine, something you do without thinking. I must have interviewed at least seven or eight people, and by the end of that time, I was barely thinking about the microphone or the tape recorder. I was listening to stories. Exciting ones, scary ones, and sad ones. Stories about the old country, about immigration, and about life in the New World. All of these stories had one thing in common: their values.

My first, and one of my most important family values is Jewish Heritage, or in Yiddish, *yidische yerushe*. To me, this is about knowing who I am and who I am descended from. Both of my mother’s grandfathers were named Anshel, but her mother’s father changed his name to Arthur, while her father’s father kept the name Anshel. Arthur’s family lived in Storozynetz, a city in the province of Bukowina, which was in Austria-Hungary, conquered by Roumania during WWI, and is now in the Ukraine. During the Austrian sovereignty, both Storozynetz and Bukowina in general were mainly run by the Jews, which was very unusual. It may be the fact that he came from a place where the Jews were independent that caused Arthur to be so ambitious later in life in his furrier business. Even during Roumanian rule, the Jews were powerful and noticeable. They ran schools where Christian children learnt along with Jewish ones, and all the teachers were Jewish.

In the last 100 years, my family has been searching for freedom, in Yiddish *frayhayt*, and acceptance, *onnemen*. And to reach freedom, some of them risked everything. Freedom is freedom to be yourself, freedom to worship your own gods, freedom not to. To me this is extremely important. It was so hard for Anshel, trying to leave Poland, to immigrate to the United States, that he decided instead to go through Canada illegally. He paid, in my grandparents’ words, “some guy who charged a lot of money” to drive him across the border, and when they passed Immigration, they looked into the car, but not under the blanket where he was hiding, and he got in safely. He must have been terrified, but he went ahead anyway, risking his safety for that of his family to come.

Before Israeli independence in 1948, only 90 Jews were allowed to enter Palestine each month. The Haganah, an Israeli independence organization, was attempting to get them in illegally. Part of my family wasn’t able to leave Storozynetz before the war, and went to a death camp, from which three were among the few survivors. After the war, they decided to go on a Haganah ship, the Geula, which was trying to break the British blockade of Palestine. The ship was captured, and they spent two years in a prison camp on Cyprus. But they kept hope, and after Israel became independent they were able to go there in the end. I will be visiting them there in a few weeks.

And what were those hopeful Zionists and immigrants searching for? Justice, *yoysher*. They believed that the system would be fair to them. Justice is also about doing the right thing and standing up for other people’s rights. My father’s brother Dylan is an appellate lawyer working to defend the rights of those on Death Row. He believes that the death penalty is unfair because he thinks it’s morally wrong for the state to kill people, that the death penalty is racially biased, and that if some one is executed it is too late to free the innocent. He also believes that people have a constitutional right to defend

themselves in court, even if they can't afford an expensive lawyer. So he does public defense cases because he thinks it's right.

A major factor that helps a system of justice is education, *khinekh*. If people want to know what is wrong and how they can fix it, they need education. I think education is important because people have to know things in order to make good decisions. When I was two years old, my parents, along with six to eight neighbors, worked for six months to create the Garden Preschool Cooperative, a non-profit preschool where I went for two years and that is still in existence today. When my paternal grandmother Carol went to medical school at the University of Virginia in 1957, the school had only just started accepting women, and there were a lot of barriers that had to fall, like teachers treating her differently and expecting her not to be as smart. Even so, she was in the first graduating class that had women.

Doing something like that takes individuality, *individuelkayt*. Individuality means doing your own thing and not staying the same way just because that's the way you have always been, and it takes courage and perseverance. I think this is definitely one of my values. My father is constantly changing professions. He has been everything from a newspaper reporter to an economic consultant to a professor of computer science to a landlord. And that's just an overview. Six years after my mom graduated from high school, she ran into the mother of one of her former classmates, and when my mom said that she was in school the woman asked, "Medical school or law school?" Actually, she was in art school, and when my mom said neither, the woman replied "Sorry. MBA?" It never occurred to her that anyone in that society would take a job that wasn't expressly designed to earn money, but mom had done it anyway.

Where you have individuality you often find humor, maybe because humor is personal and individual. Humor, *humor*, is more than just being funny. It means laughing and having a good time while you are telling a joke. I love a good joke, and humor is one of my values. Humor has always been important for both sides of the family, but particularly my dad's side, which practically lives off humor. When my father and my uncle Dylan were both living with my grandpa, they used to have contests to see who could make him laugh so hard that his coffee came out of his nose. At the end of the year, the score was about three to two, my father can't remember in whose favor.

For a system of justice to work, people have to be honest, *enlekh*, with each other. Honesty is also about being honest with yourself as well as with others. When my maternal grandfather Gerald had a growth in his chest, before the doctors sent back the test results, people were saying that if it was cancerous, they shouldn't tell him. But his wife, my grandmother Rita, decided that she had to tell him, even if it was cancerous. Personally, I think she made the right decision, because if it was cancerous it would be more important for him to know. Luckily, it wasn't. When my great-grandfather Arthur's business went down, he took out a lot of loans and tried to put the business back together. He failed, but rather than declare bankruptcy, he personally paid back every debt from his own wallet. He died without any money to spare.

And with whom are we more honest than with our friends. Friendship, *frayndshaft*, is about being with friends and helping them through hard times. I care a lot about friendship. Years ago, two of my mom's good friends were Glenn Lieberman and Dale Emmart. At a party, she introduced them, and they eventually got married. Our two families became very close, and when their children, their daughter Ana and I, were born, we became good friends ourselves. That is the magic of a strong friendship. It's almost like having another family.

If a friend came across bad times, most people would help them. Helping others, best rendered in Yiddish as *breythartsikayt*, or big-heartedness, is helping anybody who needs help, friend or not. It means helping a specific person in a one-on-one situation. One time someone asked my grandfather Gerald for money because he didn't have enough for the subway ride home. Instead, my grandfather *drove* him home, completely out of the way.

And where do we learn these values? We learn them as a child, from our families, *undzere mishpokhes*. As a value, family is about helping and caring for and about your family, no matter what. It is one of my most important values. When Louis Cohen, my Great-grandfather Anshel Cohen's oldest brother, came to this country from Poland, he founded a business. He was in the *schmatte*, or garment, business, (what else?) and he worked very hard to bring the rest of his immediate family to America. When they came, their jobs in his factory depended on their ages. The next oldest was the foreman, then came the cutters, and, finally, the youngest became sewers. His nephew, my maternal Grandfather Gerald, barely saw his father because he was working in the factory, so he decided that when he got married he would work hard, but still spend as much time as possible with his family. He came to all of my mom's special occasions, like her graduation and her birthday parties. When my paternal grandfather Alan had only a few months to live, my uncle Dylan went from San Francisco to South Carolina to be with him and care for him right through to the end.

And now you see the daunting task ahead of me. Find some coherent meaning, philosophy in all of this. And I definitely don't want to use anything that isn't original. As my father's father's brother Frank put it "I don't want to sound like a phonograph record." So what can I say? I do sense a sort of family philosophy, but it's hard to put into words. Nevertheless, I'll try. Here goes:

Life is tough. Get used to it. But don't get so used to it that you just sit there and mope and don't do anything about it. If you haven't got anything to do with all your possessions, give them to someone who needs them. Remember: if life is tough on you, it's probably tougher on someone else. Don't complain. Remember what our ancestors had to survive: Nazis, Cossacks, Czars. This makes you feel very lucky. Still there are others today who suffer the same kinds of problems for the same kinds of reasons, and it is our responsibility to help them.

At the same time, have fun! We surround ourselves with family and friends so that we can hang out and talk, play, joke. We have our individuality so that we can do this without boring others or becoming bored ourselves. And last, but definitely not least, we have humor. Humor helps us weather the bad times and enjoy the good. All of these values are important, but humor holds it all together and lets us survive and enjoy life.