

A Conversation with June Levitt Nislick, author of *Zayda Was a Cowboy*

Why did you set out to write this book?

JLN: *A few years ago I asked my grandson, Noah, if he wanted to be a cowboy when he grew up. His answer was, "There's no such thing as a Jewish cowboy!" I told him he was wrong, but he, being a little wise guy, said to me "prove it." So I looked all over for a children's book for Noah about Jewish cowboys. Although I did find quite a bit written for adults, I couldn't find anything for him. So I thought, why not write a book for Noah myself?*

You have six grandchildren, is there a message you hope they take from *Zayda Was a Cowboy*?

JLN: *Every grandparent has a story to tell. Since my grandchildren were very little, I have felt it my privilege, responsibility, and special joy to share family stories with all of them. There was the Rebbe who lost his Congregation because he spoke Hebrew (the Holy language) in his home with his wife and children. There was the dairy farmer who almost got caught, running away from the Russian army, because he forgot where he had buried his tallit and t'fillin and siddur, and couldn't leave without them. I think the spirit of these tales, from one generation to another, informed my writing ZAYDA.*

Q. Meyer becomes Mike very quickly in this book. In one scene he breaks down and eats food he knows is not kosher. Did you worry about the message Meyer's assimilation sends to children in the US today?

JLN: *No. This is not a story about one man's struggle against an alien, inhospitable world. It's a story about a young man who honors and respects his heritage, but is also curious, adventurous, and eager to become a part of his new country. Meyer leaves home because life there is intolerable. He needs to discover a new direction.*

I think the character of Meyer is honest and that many Jews in America will identify with his choices and decisions. He does not abandoned his Judaism; he accommodates to a specific time and place in a way that works for him. When we meet Zayda as an old man he is very much a practicing Jew. He wears a kippah, he davens - he has not put aside his beliefs. He is Americanized but not assimilated. Perhaps Meyer became 'Mike' too quickly, but that's just the way it was!

Who was the most fascinating figure you learned about during your research of Jews in the American Southwest?

JLN: *There were Indian fighters and slavery fighters, there were gunslingers and sheriffs – quite a few sheriffs, actually. But I would have to say Rabbi Henry Cohen of Congregation B'nai Israel of Galveston. He was a great, compassionate humanist and stories about him abound.*

Once he traveled all the way from Galveston to Washington, DC, - no easy trip in those days - to see President Teddy Roosevelt. Rabbi Cohen was pleading the case of a man who being deported back to Poland, where he faced certain death. President Roosevelt told Rabbi Cohen that he never interfered in immigration issues, but that he was impressed that the Rabbi would travel so far and with such difficulty to help a co-religionist. Rabbi Cohen replied that the Polish man was not Jewish. "Then why are you working so hard on his behalf?" asked the President. "Because he is a human being," answered the Rabbi. Roosevelt prevented the deportation. A man like Rabbi Cohen fascinates me more than even a Jewish cowboy.

To schedule an interview with June Levitt Nislick,
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