

On the Anniversary of the Freeland League and League for Yiddish

July 5th, 2011

Esther Siegel, granddaughter to Itskhok Nachman Steinberg

I am honored to be in the presence of the preservers of the Yiddish language and humbled to represent the Steinberg family. My cousin, Didi Charney, and her husband Jack, are here as well as my nephew Elisha Siegel and my sister in law, Sara Jane Sachs.

Our *zeyde*, I.N. Steinberg, treasured the Yiddish language. He wrote of his son in law's first Yiddish letter to him in April, 1941, "I see the sincere endeavor to become, as soon as possible, a member of that great family to which we all so tenaciously adhere."

It was 10 years ago that a chain of events and connections led me to discover family letters, photographs and documents carefully catalogued and lovingly preserved in this building at YIVO. Where other families had a family business, I.N. called his endeavor, "our family capital". His son, Leo Steinberg, who passed away this March at 90, wrote, "My father's life was lived largely in public."

My brother Reb Daniel Siegel wrote, "There are moments in history where great events must transcend family." I.N.'s foresight into the future desperation of a people and his unselfish determination often meant leaving his family to fend for themselves for months and years during a time of scarcity and war. His life was lived as a "perpetual example to others."

As the newly appointed General Secretary of the Freeland League, I.N. discovered that the customary donation, even from well off members typically did not exceed \$5. At his first banquet in 1938, he shocked those present, who were well aware of his meager income, by announcing a personal donation equivalent to a month's income. This was not a one time act either. His wife, our *Bubba* Nechama knew all too well how great was this sacrifice as she tried to keep their household going on so little. His selfless act raised the standard of giving to a new height.

Also in 1938, as the Yiddish PEN Club delegate to the International PEN Club Congress, he attempted to persuade the Congress chair to use the international platform to protest against the "ghetto benches" for Jews introduced in Polish universities. Chairman Jules Romain, while sympathetic, did not see its connection

to literature. I.N. quickly adapted his prepared speech to protest the apathy of Poland's literary intelligentsia to the policy. It turned out to be the highlight of the congress as the Polish delegation stormed out of the meeting, thus drawing attention to the egregious policy.

Make no mistake, he could not have been who he was and accomplished what he did without his devoted, loving and inspiring wife Nechama and her sister, Esther. Both were intelligent and accomplished women, Nechama, a biologist and Esther, a respected teacher. When I.N. and Nechama's children came along, as natural as breathing, they became absorbed into the cause.

In 1933 I.N. began publishing *Dos Freie Vort* in London. According to Leo, "Aunt Esther read proofs, my sister Ada learned to type Yiddish, my younger sister Mita and I licked the stamps, and each week we choked 4,000 mailboxes within a mile radius."

Every family meal included a story or some newspaper clipping to read and discuss. "Food without Torah was merest gluttony," he would say. After giving a Freeland League speech in April, 1941, my mother Ada wrote her father, "They were amazed at my knowledge of all questions concerned. If only they knew how easy such knowledge comes to one when one grows up in the right surroundings."

Curiously, I.N.'s religious observance was an "impenetrably private aspect of his life." Leo recalls *Shabbat* afternoon walks in which his father would suddenly stop, lean on a tree, cover his head, move his lips quietly and then resume their walk.

Ada, my mother and the oldest, grew into the role of I.N.'s right hand and a political analyst. Leo developed first as a journalist and artist and then acclaimed as a world renowned art historian. I.N. congratulated Leo's first published article in 1940, to which Leo responded with how difficult it was for him to write even one satisfactory paragraph. I.N. replied, "All the better, for I hate easy writing as I hate easy living."

And he adored Mita, his youngest. He responded to her youthful letters on her level and sent her pictures of animals from Australia. Mita kept up her Yiddish, became a musician, and had a beautiful voice.

Leo said that his father's attitude toward music and art was of a "thoroughgoing moralist" which caused tension with his artistic children. I.N. once suggested that Spinoza's *Ethics* was more beautiful than music!

His letters were filled with advice for his children. To my mother, “not every gathering should be political, invite them to you from time to time, even without holding a meeting! There is nothing in life so important as human warmth.”

And to help my parents during their search to find meaningful work and balance their new life together, he offered, “Don’t worry about future work and service to the people, that will come in time. Go patiently through life’s stages and do even the insignificant work with the greatest devotion. There is no little or great service.”

Many of his letters painfully express the conflict and torment the separations caused him. In an August 1942 letter, he observed the family’s closeness while he was set apart concentrating on the big events of history. “Now the world trembles and while I am involved in so many communal activities, I am not satisfied.” He yearned for the “intimate beauty of domestic life.”

He continued, “I will never again commit the mistake of separating out both worlds in the dynamic of our family.” But then, their long letters inevitably turn to the excruciating details of their mutual struggle.

He wrote, “We should not lose our permanent courage and faith. This is our family capital and the only changes we are allowed to make are to increase and enlarge this precious capital. We must become strong as to move mountains.”

And what of our family after our grandfather? The 4 grandchildren in our own ways and now our children, pay tribute to our zeyde by believing that we cannot be observers of life. Our *zeyde* trusted that somehow the rent would be paid, but we each have a responsibility to *tikkun olam*, to repair the world.

At his daughter Mita’s wedding, I.N. took up a collection for surviving Jewish writers in Europe. Perhaps this was in poor taste, but as Leo said, “This would not have concerned my father, he only knew that “no personal joy in the family must remain purely personal.”

(I confess my husband has done similar things! And he would probably digress at this point to urge all of you to generously support the efforts to preserve the Steinberg archives. And he would have taken out his checkbook on the spot!)

A few months after I.N.'s death, Leo wrote, "my sister Mita and I came upon hundreds of receipts from various charities among his papers. He was found to own a few hundred dollars but neither investments nor savings. I shall not know another man who had so little material wealth and yet so refused to feel poor."

That was our Zeyde.