

The Book Peddler/Deborah Lee Rose/

Raisins and Roses

While riding a carousel near our home in California, my eight-year-old daughter recognized a Yiddish song coming from the band organ.

"Mommy," she said excitedly, from the horse next to mine, "they're playing '*Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*'!"

That my daughter would know Abraham Goldfaden's classic lullaby, and that we would hear it on a carousel, were much more than coincidence. The song, "Raisins and Almonds," had reintroduced our family to Yiddish music and language, and helped inspire me to write a children's book about a family of Jewish carousel carvers.

My daughter and I first heard "*Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*" while watching a Yiddish song video, titled "Lomir Ale Zingen." On the screen, a young mother dreamily rocked an imaginary baby to Goldfaden's gentle lyrics:

"Unter Yidele's vigele
Shteit a klor vais tzigele.
Dos tzigele is geforn handlen.
Dos vet zain dain beruf.
Rozhinkes mit mandlen
Shlof zhe, yidele, shlof."

"That song reminds me of when you were a baby, and I sang to you and rocked you to sleep," I told her nostalgically.

"You should put that in your book," she advised me, in that way eight-year-olds have of hitting the nail straight on the head. I had two children's books published, and friends were urging me to write one with a Jewish theme. Yet, I had barely thought about Yiddish in thirty-five years, since my early days at the Workmen's Circle School in Philadelphia. I knew little about "*Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*," so I called Workmen's Circle Headquarters in New York for more background.

"Try the National Yiddish Book Center," came the answer when I said I was looking for Yiddish sheet music. One call later, I learned from Book Center staff about the Mel and Shifra Gold Yiddish music project--the Center's collection of 85,000 original folios of Yiddish sheet music. In three days, I held the music to "*Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*" in my hands. Seeing the lyrics in Yiddish type was a shock. As I slowly sounded out the words, I was filled with memories of reading and singing in Yiddish as a young child. I decided, right then, to write a book including not only a Yiddish song, but Yiddish phrases and other details to give children a taste of Yiddish in American life.

Based on historical research, I set the story in turn-of-the-century Coney Island. At that time, Coney Island was a capital of American carousel carving, and the master carvers numbered several Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Visitors flocked to ride the carousels of Marcus Illions, Solomon Stein, and Harry Goldstein, famous for their rose-bedecked horses.

As I delved into early Brooklyn lore, I discovered a *New York Times* article recounting how Jewish “premies” in Coney’s incubator-clinic sideshows often arrived wearing a “*nehore bendl*” (actually a “*k’nehore bendl*”) a red ribbon to ward off the “Evil Eye.” Jewish babies meant Jewish mothers, some who came with their premature infants and worked at the clinics as wetnurses. I found myself picturing a young mother, singing a Yiddish lullaby as she rocked her tiny infant to sleep. Of course, I mentally snapped my fingers. That lullaby could well have been “*Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*,” which Goldfaden had written before 1900.

From that realization, my story evolved quickly to tell of a family of Jewish carvers, drawn to Coney Island when their second child is born prematurely. All the while, I hunted through Yiddish glossaries, Jewish histories and family memories for expressions to make the story ring true. Some phrases were familiar, like “*di Goldene Medine*” (the Golden Land); others, like “*neshomele*” (little soul), were new to me. The most perplexing task was how to transliterate the Yiddish word for “Mommy.” Should I spell it according to modern convention--*Mame* without a final “h”--and have general readers pronounce it like Auntie Mame? Or should I add a final *h*, and be forced to add a final *h* to every other like-sounding word in the book? I called the Yiddish Book Center again, and Neil Zagorin promptly referred me to Dr. Mordkhe Schaechter at the League for Yiddish.

Dr. Schaechter listened patiently to my dilemma, then asked me what exact geographical area my characters “came from.” Kishinev, I told him, surprised by the question. I had chosen that fictional background because the infamous Kishinev program of 1903 was falsely blamed on a Jewish carousel owner. Dr. Schaechter soon explained that the Yiddish in Kishinev was pronounced differently than the Yiddish I had heard growing up. In the regional dialect spoken in Kishinev, the Yiddish word for mother was not pronounced “*Mame*” but “*Momme*.” In fact, he went on, the dialect spoken in that part of Eastern Europe was known as “*totte-momme loshn*.” Quickly, I began asking him how other words, including my characters’ names, would be pronounced in *totte-momme loshn*. Now, Yehudah was transformed to *Yide*, Israel to *Srul*, Miriam to *Mirel*, and Samuel to *Shmil*. When our conversation ended, I returned to the computer to correct every word Dr. Schaechter had identified. I hit the save button and all at once, characters seemed to spring from the pages to introduce themselves to me.

Soon afterwards, I submitted the manuscript complete with Yiddish lyrics to “*Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*,” an excerpt from the *Forverts* of 1909, and a glossary of Yiddish terms. In fall 1995, Harcourt Brace published the book, titled *The Rose Horse*. I waited nervously for reviews, most of all from a friend’s 80-year-old mother who had first-hand memories of growing up in Coney Island. As I showed her the book, I explained how the story had come to be. A smile of recognition spread slowly over her face, and she began to hum Abraham Goldfaden’s haunting melody.

“Mom,” said my friend, in amazement, “that’s ‘*Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*’. You know that song?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” replied his mother, shrugging one shoulder. “That’s the song I sang to you when you were a baby, and I rocked you to sleep in my arms.”

(Note: Figures crafted by Coney Island’s great Jewish carvers are still ridden on carousels today, at sites like New York’s Central Park, Hartford’s Bushnell Park, and Agawam’s Riverside Park, not far from the National Yiddish Book Center. Recently, the U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative set of four stamps featuring historic carousel horses. The stamp in the upper left corner of the foursome is Stein and Goldstein’s “King (Rose) Horse.”)

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