

Whomever Saves a Single Life, Saves a World Entire¹

It was April 1938. Having just passed through “Anschlussed” Austria in a sealed railway car, my mother, Sally, was returning from a visit to her aged mother in Rumania. Seated at the kosher table aboard the French liner *Ile de France*, she was joined for dinner by one Martin Lichtenstein of Breslau, Germany. As the great ship crossed the Atlantic, the conversation that unfolded the next few days revealed that Mr. Lichtenstein had, after much effort and interminable waiting, obtained from the United States Consulate in Berlin an immigration number for his family. The number would enable them to enter the United States and so escape the storm gathering over Germany’s Jews. Immigration numbers alone were not enough. They were less than useless if the lucky possessor did not have certain affidavits from bonafide American relatives. The affidavits signed by these American citizens affirmed that there not only was a family relationship, but that these relatives had the means and agreed to support the new immigrants for up to five years. This was to insure that the new refugees would not become a public charge, and a drain on the United States of America. Martin had an aunt in Detroit and was headed west after docking to ask her if she would sign for him and his family. At some point in their shipboard conversations, my mother gave Martin. Lichtenstein the business card of

Bloom’s Bargain Floor Covering
Go where the thrifty go to save
684 Bergenline Avenue
West New York, New Jersey

A month or so later, Mr. Lichtenstein showed up at the store. He was distraught and depressed. The aunt in Detroit was unable or unwilling to sign the affidavits. It was, after all, depression time. And besides, no one in their right mind had the temerity to predict what was about to happen in the land of Bach, Goethe and Schilling. Then began a redemptive moment. My parents, Sam and Sally, told Martin Lichtenstein that they would be his family’s sponsors. They would say that they were his cousins. They would open their books and their Internal Revenue Service records to the Immigration authorities to demonstrate that not only were they related, but they had the wherewithal to sponsor this escaping family. They agreed to support the Lichtensteins for as long as was needed.

¹ Avot DeRabbi Natan ;31:2

The Lichtensteins excerpted from The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar

They would sign any and all of the crucial affidavits. According to the Lichtenstein's son Kurt, "They signed whatever was put in front of them."

On Friday, March 3 1939, the ship's manifest of the *SS Manhattan*, passing the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor listed four Lichtensteins. It was some eleven months after Sally had inadvertently met Martin Lichtenstein and barely six months before the German invasion of Poland. Sam Bloom got in his truck, with the *Go Where the Thrifty Go to Save* logo emblazoned on its side, crossed the Hudson and went to the pier at 18th Street to pick up the immigrant family he had sponsored and was now responsible for. Martin and Katie and their two children, Irma and Kurt, and their belongings awaited their American benefactor eagerly and with some trepidation arriving in this strange new land. It was a winter Friday and the ship arrived at 9:30 P.M. The Sabbath² had in its inexorable way begun 18 minutes before sunset. The Lichtensteins were new refugees. They were also observant Jews. Despite Sam's pleas, despite the fact that this was their first day in the United States, and their patron had come to fetch them, and everyone would have understood anyway, they politely, but steadfastly, refused to ride in the truck on the Sabbath. What to do? Sam Bloom, resourcefully escorted them to the nearest hotel. There they refused to even sign the hotel register. That experience marked a turning point for Sam. He gradually, over the next years, returned to the traditions of his ancestors and became more and more personally observant. Sam signed the register for them, returned home and came back with the truck Saturday night after the Sabbath was safely over. He took them to the new family home in Palisade. After a Sunday's R&R, he spent the next week finding and renting an apartment for them on 58th Street in West New York, New Jersey. Then he went on to obtain, using any contact he knew and with his own persistent style and after much effort, an Edgewater, New Jersey peddler's license for Mr. Lichtenstein, so that he might begin earning a living. The days were the days of the great depression and a peddler's license was no small thing.

I was a little boy back then. From my child's perspective, the Lichtensteins were the source of great bounty. They gave me a mechanical toy car they had brought with them from Germany. The car had a long wire attached to a small module that I could hold in my hand. The module had a steering wheel on it and a miniature gear that could propel this wondrous toy forward or backward and in any direction I wished to steer it. A marvel of German technology! The

² Orthodox Jews do not ride on the Sabbath, which lasts from before sunset Friday to the appearance of three stars Saturday evening.

The Lichtensteins excerpted from The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar

Lichtensteins gave the family a Zeiss Ikon camera, a bellows model, with an eyepiece through which by looking down, one would frame the picture. It served as the family camera for many years. There were also some little silver whiskey goblets - a few of which I still have. But the *piece de resistance* was a scooter that had a floorboard with a ratchet that was attached to the rear wheel. By shifting your weight back and forth you could make it go without *ever* putting your feet on the ground. I loved it, and was heart broken when my father inadvertently drove over it and bent the rear wheel. I have never seen anything like it in the United States.

The families became and remained good friends for a long time afterward. Indeed the Liechtensteins virtually became our “cousins”, visiting back and forth and attending each other’s “simchas”³. I remember spending a full Sabbath at their home in West New York in a very observant Sabbath atmosphere, an atmosphere almost too intense for me. I remember Irma’s marriage at the Broadway Central Hotel in New York City. And so the years passed. In October 1961 Sam Bloom died. At his funeral the rabbi of the West New York synagogue, where he regularly attended morning services, seemed to have a score to settle with the Lichtensteins. In his eulogy he mentioned that even though Sam had done this saintly act of saving this family from the holocaust, those he had saved were not even present at the funeral. It turned out that the Lichtensteins indeed were there. Nonetheless, without Sam Bloom around, and with his beloved Sally going through difficult times, and my own preoccupation with my studies, my new spouse and beginning career, the two families lost touch.

Fifteen years later, on a shopping expedition to Orchard Street on New York’s lower east side, I walked into a store called “*Charlie’s Place*”. Who should I see behind the counter, seated with a yarmulke on his head, but Kurt Lichtenstein. I recognized him immediately, walked over to him and said;

“Kurt, I’m Jack.”. There was no recognition.

“Kurt, I’m Jack Bloom” and still no recognition.

“Kurt, I’m Sam Bloom’s son’.” Kurt's eyes lit up and he blurted out, “*Jackie*”!

It was the first time we had seen each other in years. We inquired into the usual things. Are you married? How many kids? Where do you live? Before parting,

³ Joyous occasions. Originally a Hebrew word, taken over by Yiddish.

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we exchanged addresses. Having Kurt and his wife Brocha's address meant that they were on our list to receive our High Holyday cards, each of which included a family photo.

Sometime thereafter, Kurt invited us to the Bar Mitzvah⁴ of his fourth son in Monsey, New York. My wife and my daughter Rebecca went to the Bar Mitzvah, and were seated in the women's section. I was honored with an aliyah⁵ among the men. Afterwards there was a *kiddush*⁶, where we were seated at long tables, laden with potato and noodle *kugels*, nestled in the aluminum containers they had been baked in, large bottles of soda, bowls overflowing with chopped liver, pickles, cole slaw and potato salad, all the appurtenances of a lavish *kiddush*, that paid little attention to presentation, but ensured that no one would go away hungry. As fortune would have it, I was seated across from the Lichtenstein's fifth son, who was less than ten years old. He was looking around when suddenly his gaze fell upon me and his eyes went wide. He said to me,

“ ***You're the man in the picture***”.

‘ “Yes, that's right, I'm the man in the picture.”

You saved my father from Germany”.

“No, I didn't save your father from Germany. My father saved your father from Germany”.

Your father, saved my father from Germany”?

"That's right!"

He stood up, grabbed a full potato *kugel* lifted it high, and pushed it towards me.

MISTER-HAVE THE WHOLE PIE!! ”

⁴ At age 13, a young person is obligated for the fulfillment of Gods commands. The occasion is marked by being called to the reading of the Torah, and participating as an "adult" in the service.

⁵ Congregants are honored by being called to and reciting a blessings for a portion of the Torah being read at the service.

⁶ Collation following the service. Jewish life is intimately linked with food.

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I left the Bar Mitzvah with a radiant inner glow. That Sabbath day I reaped what my parents had sown with a spontaneous decision back in 1938. Long before that it was written that "whomever saves a single life saves a world entire." My parents saved a family they did not know from a destiny they could not have imagined. They gave life to Kurt and Brocha's five sons and all their descendants for generations to come, thirty-one from Kurt alone as of 1997. There was no pie big enough. Their act is an inheritance I did not earn and will always treasure.