



Living Root

Michael Heller

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Bialystok, Brooklyn, and Miami Beach—these are the cities brought to life in *Living Root*. Bialystok was the Russian-Polish city from which Heller's grandfather, a rabbi and teacher, fled in 1911, leaving behind the pogroms and poverty of Central Europe. An old brownstone in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn was Heller's family residence until they moved to Miami Beach in 1943 after the author's mother became ill. His mother's atheistic leanings "forever sheared me off from belief," he writes, although he fondly recalls the Jewish High Holidays and the Passover suppers of his youth.

His father's few temper tantrums, while memorable, "mostly betrayed the frustration and desperation he'd bottled up over my mother's bad heart and his own downsliding fortunes," Heller writes. As a young man his father was a cook's mate on a ship and a reporter on *The Brooklyn Eagle*. He was a Republican in a Brooklyn Democratic ward and proudly displayed photographs of himself and Republican Gov. Thomas E. Dewey.

Heller recalls his childhood in the apartment houses of Miami Beach where the neighbors spoke an assortment of Yiddish, Russian, German, and an English so inflected by accents that "it sounded like a crowd of people spitting" and how they all spoke at the top of their voices, whispering only when it was necessary to insult someone nearby. It was in Miami Beach that he first heard the word "kike" and even at the young age of eleven he understood its implication.

The author, a poet and essayist, writes that he "blundered into poetry" in his late twenties, previously not aware of its transformative power. George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, and Louis Zukofsky are the poets who first motivated his interest in poetry. A few of Heller's poems are included in the book. One is a homage to the writer Walter Benjamin after his suicide in 1940 as he sought to escape the Nazis. Another pays tribute to the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai and a third is a eulogy to his grandfather. *Living Root*, the latest volume in SUNY's Modern Jewish Literature and Culture series, is a gracious and moving memoir.

GEORGE COHEN (July / August 2000)

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