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David Mayer and Pamela Poulin-Mayer

SUMMARY

David and Pamela Meyer discuss their family's history, including their grandmother Jeanette's escape from Nazi Germany and their ancestral connection to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. They reflect on their personal and cultural identities, sharing stories of their involvement in music, theater, and Jewish traditions like hosting a Seder. This interview highlights the family's resilience through migration and their efforts to maintain their heritage and values.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Can I ask you both to state your names, please?

David Mayer: I'm David Meyer.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: I'm Pamela Meyer.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Thanks. And can I have your consent to record this interview?

David Mayer: Yes.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: Yes.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Okay. We said we would start with family history a little bit. Would you guys talk about what you know about your ancestors?

David Mayer: Sure, I'm the great-great-great-grandson of Samson Raphael Hirsch, a rather famous rabbi from the Frankfurt Synagogue for 40 years, I think. Um, and he's known for helping to modernize the Jewish orthodoxy to some degree, sort of-he didn't reform Judaism, but he made it, I think, he brought it into the 19th century to some, some degree, to make it more, for a larger audience to still be an Orthodox Jew or a Conservative Jew and fit more lifestyles. And I think, um, and, uh, so he was quite beloved and his line passed down through, uh, the Levi's, my Omah's line to my father and then to me.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: What do you remember being told about Rabbi Hirsch as a kid? Or how do you remember learning about that, that ancestry?

David Mayer: Yeah, I didn't know much until I started preparing for my bar mitzvah, a couple of years beforehand. And, so I was 11 or 12 when I, I when I learned a little bit about him. I remember mostly sticking my head that we went to the gentleman who was going to help me prepare my Haftarah portion, and he got very wide - eyed when he heard, to whom I was related. And I was like, "Oh, I guess this guy's a big deal."

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: Let's say his name. He's somewhat known as the Rabbi of Hillel at Cornell.

David Mayer: That's not who I'm talking about, though. It was the younger gentleman who was helping me prep. I can't remember what his name was.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: Oh, okay.

David Mayer: But Rabbi Goldfarb.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: Yeah. You see him in journals and magazines.

David Mayer: Yeah. Um, and in fact, several years ago, I took a brief trip to Germany and, uh, got to stay a night in Frankfurt on my way to Berlin and went and found the gravesite of Samson and his wife. And in fact, I had been searching around the Jewish part of the cemetery for quite some time, unable to locate them. Eventually, just before I gave up, I went back to the map and noticed that there, in fact, was a big red arrow leading to their spot that I had missed entirely. And so I went and checked that out and got to see there was actually a little, little place for prayers and coins to be left or to light a votive. Um, so that was very nice.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yeah. Were you told any stories about him as a person beyond, you know, what most people know about his accomplishments?

David Mayer: Well, I eventually read some on him. Um, I do know that he was somewhat of a Renaissance man and very inquisitive. And he wrote a lot of treatises on Judaism. Um, and beyond that, I don't recall.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: Mhm. Okay. Even today on Amazon, you will see tons and tons of his commentaries. How much is on the Holy Scriptures. So he's still in translation even. Yeah. I could give you a little bit about how we just descended from him. So there's Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, and then he had many children. And David descends from Julius Hirsch. And he was a businessman, and many of his children were also involved in writing books and became rabbis and things like that. But as you probably know. And then, one of his daughters was Jeanette, David's Great-Grandmother, and her children, Martha was David's Omah, and all five of the children played a musical instrument, so I don't know, Hirsch that, there's probably always music. But going back to Hirsch he wanted people to be in the world, but not of the world. He wanted Jews to get an education and things, and not just rely on Jewish education. So it was a little change. Sometimes people will say he's reformed, but he had nothing to do with the Reform Movement as such. And so, your Great-Omah, Jeanette, then had a daughter, Martha, and she played the cello and she didn't want to play the cello. Being a willful person in general. So she broke the bow of the cello, and she didn't have to play anymore. And so then David's dad, my husband, learned the violin and he studied. Of course, you can tell him about where he studied music and everything.

David Mayer: Yeah. He studied, from childhood, as I ended up doing later. Um, and he ended up at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Um, and then at Illinois Champaign-Urbana, where he studied under-was it Paul Roland, was his name?

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: Yeah. Very famous immigrant from Hungary. Yeah. Violin teacher. The best violin teacher in the United States. So he went there for that and he was a major in violin, but he also studied composition while he was there. So you have to be pretty good to be a major in violin at Illinois.

David Mayer: Yeah. Um, so music engulfed his life from a pretty early age. And he would go on to play in professional orchestras in Fort Worth Symphony. Uh, he taught at Texas Wesleyan, and he ended up in Central New York as a music professor, composer, conductor, and violin teacher and performer. And, he helped to get the local repertory theatre going. He often wrote when he was composing, he wrote for musicals, as well as classical, or more strictly classical pieces of anything from symphonic to choral. So he kind of did a little of everything. Um, and that repertory theater that he helped get off the ground in 1972, he actually performed as the Fiddler in Fiddler on the Roof, which was also the year I was born. Um, and maybe a portent of things to come, as just a few years later, I started picking up violin. When dad asked me at the age of my age of four, he said, "Do you want to learn violin?" "Sure. Yeah, great. Sounds great."

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: But a little while later you said...

David Mayer: "I didn't know what I was getting into." So I, and I studied violin for about 14 years through high school, essentially, played in orchestras. I got to play in the orchestra with Dad and Pam. Um, he was still conducting the college community orchestra there at SUNY Cortland where he was a professor for decades. And, his last semester there, I got to, perform in the orchestra with them.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: He was the youngest ever to play in the orchestra.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yeah. What age would he have been?

David Mayer: I think I was 12 or 13. Yeah, I think 12, I think so.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: We didn't have to get a babysitter anymore. [Handy.] You saved us a lot of money. [Laughs]

David Mayer: Yeah.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Were you also playing?

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: Yeah, I was Principal Clarinet. Uh, the faculty all played principal chairs, and Lutz used to be the Concertmaster, but then he decided when there was a need that he would be the Orchestral Conductor, and they were happy to have him.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: And this was SUNY Cortland?

David Mayer: Cortland, Central New York.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Okay. And that's where you grew up?

David Mayer: Yep.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um, okay. So from four years old, you're playing violin under his instruction?

David Mayer: Not under his instruction.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Okay.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: No, they wanted to "remain friends," as Lutz would put it. And also, it was really three and a half.

David Mayer: Okay. Um, yeah, I think probably wisely so. He chose to have me instructed by others. I learned the Suzuki Method, a very famous method often used to teach children because it teaches it as another language, essentially. Um, he was very supportive, but on the side. [Laughs]

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: We went, we went to every lesson. So it was two lessons a week. And one of us would sit in on the lesson and take notes. We were supposed to take notes. And then on Saturdays, you had group lessons, and then they'd reinforce things. The same teacher and like, you know, you'd learn preparation.

David Mayer: Yep.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: [Laughs] Okay.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Three lessons a week?

David Mayer: No, it was one solo lesson, one private lesson, and then one group lesson.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: And you wanted to hear about Fiddler. Um Unlike in Broadway, they usually use an actor to mime playing the violin on the very top of the stage roof. What you saw actually didn't have quite a roof, right? Was not the full house.

David Mayer: Right.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: So, what's his friend, the director who created Cortland Repertory Theatre? And they did everything in repertoire. So each night was a different play or musical. So the whole summer, you know, you could go anytime you wanted to, but that was very hard on the actors, too, you know, have to know a lot and everything. So he talked him into going up with his violin, going up the stairs, and sitting way on the roof, and he had a little bit of acrophobia, so he wasn't really crazy about it, but he did it several times.

Pamela: I love that story. Do you want to share any other memories of Lutz? Like who, who was he as a person? As a musician?

David Mayer: Yeah, he was a sweet man who lived music in every fashion. He was also very politically aware, and he read a lot of history and biographies. Um, we had some of our best conversations in the car because he might have had the radio on. And if it was NPR, then maybe listening to the news or commentary. And I just asked questions, and he'd answer them. Never really forced anything down my throat, which was nice. Um, and then musically we would play Name That Tune, or Name That Composer. He wasn't that hard on me. [Laughs] Um, but he helped me learn a lot of the famous composer styles by listening and being able to, over time, gauge the difference between a Mozart and a Beethoven, and then eventually, maybe even the difference between a

Mozart and a Haydn, which closely, much more closely, uh, sound related, I guess. Um, and so we would play a game. Of course, 99.9% of the time he knew the piece and the composer, three notes into the song, or a piece. And so he'd help me work it out. And, "Oh, so what time period do you think this is? Okay. What? What area or country? Maybe you think, maybe this is?" And then sort of shrink it down. And one time I beat him. There was one time we were listening to an Italian piece, and I only knew a handful of Italian names, and that worked in my favor in this case, that I get. I think I might have guessed Verdi or something. And he was like, "Oh, I think maybe Bellini," or something like that. He was going on to one of the more esoteric names. And, um, it turned out it was just Verdi. So that's my one claim to fame.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: On longer trips, we'd teach him music theory. So I remember one time we were teaching you intervals, going up the scale and stuff, and then later at Chapel Hill, he took music theory and a lot of other music courses.

David Mayer: I ended up at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as well. Not for music, but partially because I knew they had a good music program and my dad had been there, and I did take several courses there. I switched-I had always been singing in choirs also from a young age, and I kind of switched off of the orchestral stuff into various vocal performances there. So I was in the Carolina Choir, and I was in an a cappella pop group, having fun doing that. So I kept up with music in that realm and got sort of the equivalent of a Music Minor there. While I actually got my Major in Journalism. Uh, I thought maybe at the time I'd become a sports broadcaster, but I wanted a journalism degree. I thought that was a more well-rounded sounding degree, if nothing else, than a communications degree. And Chapel Hill had a wonderful, highly ranked journalism school. So I thought, "Well, that's a great combination. I've got that. Getting a well-rounded education. I've got a good music department and good sports." Um, so that was a good fit for me. Um, as it was for Dad and he never-there was another thing he never forced, you know, onto me, or anything. He mentioned it, I think, when I said, "Well, maybe I'll get into journalism." He said, "Well, you know, Carolina has a good journalism school, too." So then I did the research myself, and, yeah, it was a great experience.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um, I want to step back and ask about him and also about growing up, like what your family's relationship to Judaism was, or the Jewish community where you're living, or any particular traditions you guys. uh, did?

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: Or I'd like to add one thing. Yeah. Um, if you knew my husband, Lutz Meyer, one of the first things you would notice is his sense of humor. He had an incredible sense of humor, and he was sort of a quiet guy. And he would never tell a joke to tell a joke. If somebody said something that reminded him, and it would be the quintessential joke for the situation, then he would tell a joke. Otherwise, he'd be sitting there, and then people would be talking and everything, and then he'd say something very wry, and then people would stop, not expecting to hear from him, and then they'd laugh because he'd said something really funny.

David Mayer: He's a master of timing. I really got my interest in comedy, I think, from him. And, I've grown up to somewhat be considered a pretty funny guy amongst my friends, and I largely attribute that to the start I got with Dad. He even helped, in a way that helped me study that. I think, just in the way he would talk about Jack Benny and the Masters back then, and how they made something funny, you know? Um, so, yeah, that was definitely a big part of our relationship as well.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: I must add that most of your course credits were in music at Chapel Hill. I counted them. Maybe you don't think so, but it's true. [Okay.] And I taught there for a year as a visiting professor. Um, we were all there at different times, but Lutz and I would go to a national music conference together, and then friends he knew from that time period, and friends I knew, they would look at us and say, "Oh my God, what are you two doing together?"

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yeah. They knew you from separate...

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: Yeah, different lives.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yeah. Um, did you want to talk about your family's Jewish experience at all, or do you want to?

David Mayer: Oh, yeah, I mean, largely for me as a kid, it was around preparing for my bar mitzvah. Um, a couple of years of Sunday School and Hebrew School, and I did have my bar mitzvah at a Conservative temple. Uh, it's a small place for a nice community in Cortland. Um, with a good cantor, a guy with a lovely voice, was a friend of the family named Bruce Siegel. Um, I think it was his name. Yeah, he was a student of Dad's at one point. Right?

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: Yeah, right. He took music theory, and his wife took music theory from Lutz, and he would quote anything Lutz would say, you know, as a student and then as an adult, you're just waiting for him to say something funny.

David Mayer: Um, and then for a couple of years afterwards, still, you know, go to services. You know, Friday night usually would be the one. Um, but I think by the time you know, I'd gone to college, my observances had somewhat fallen off. I'll still

occasionally do things, largely if there's family involved. Um, I did I did decide a couple of years ago to host a Seder for local friends up on Whidbey Island, where I live with my girlfriend. Um, just to give them some flavor and remind myself that it's a lot of work to put on a Seder. [Laughs]

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: But he has Hirsch's Haggadah, too.

David Mayer: Right, yeah. Um, but it was a lovely experience. Um, do it again someday.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: I got you shortened-a real shortened version, Seder in 30 minutes. You may have seen it on Amazon, but just in case you ever. But of course, everybody, as David did, just picks out the main things. Nobody has-unless we went to Fred Blumberg's, who would go on to midnight and but nobody actually, really, do they? Everybody picks and chooses. Well, that's what I think.

David Mayer: Depends on how Orthodox you want to observe, I guess. But I want a little bit of ceremony. Right? I mean, that's if you're going to want to do a ceremony in Judaism, I think Passover is the time to do it. Um, so, you know, try to involve some of that.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: And Lutz was brought up Reformed in Wilmington. And for a while there, he thought of being a rabbi. And, Phillip likes that story that Opah was a cousin, a nephew of Lutz. That he "Well, what are you thinking of being, Lutz you know and everything?" But, "Well, I was thinking of being a rabbi." "Oh, no, no, no, you said music, didn't you?" [Laughs]

David Mayer: Right.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Um. These are great stories, thank you. I'm curious. You mentioned a lot of driving around. Like you listened to NPR while you were driving. You did your music theory lessons while you were driving. Was this just, like, did you road trip? Where were you going?

David Mayer: Oh, I mean, often this is just local travel.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Yeah.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: Well, it's 20 minutes into town, you know. That wasn't theory. It was like if we were going to North Carolina to see Lutz's sister, Laura, and her three boys. Or going down to Florida to see Omah and Opah. Don't you think those were the long trips?

David Mayer: Yeah, yeah. Um, yeah. We didn't talk about it all. So him getting over here. [Oh, yeah.] Um, so Hans and Martha, my Omah and Opah in Hamburg. Um, they have two children. Hannah Laura, who would become Laura over here. And Leo Lutz, who would become Lutz Leo over here, uh, because they called him Lutz all the time. And, he was born in December of '34. His sister was three and a half years older than he. And, of course, it's already Nazi Germany. Uh, everything is going downhill. Uh, my aunt, in fact, at one point translated a diary of Omah's that she had kept in the couple of years before they left. And, it's not that they spend a lot of time talking about the Nazis or the horrors that they're seeing. It's more in the background, and it occasionally pops in while she's just talking about everyday life. But you get the foreboding as time goes by, and the fact that they need to get out of there. And the story, I don't think this was in the diary. But the story is, as I recall, it was when they eventually decided they had to go, that Opah wanted to go to Paris, I believe. [Right.] And Omah said, "No, we've got relatives already over in the States. We're going there." And thank God that they went that direction. So in '37, Opah Hans came over. He had to first establish himself for a year as being able to take care of a family. So he came over first, and he start working for Allied Chemical right away, I think.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: It sounds like...

David Mayer: Yeah, I think so, [Yeah.] Um, and got a good job and tried to start assimilating, as hard as that is. And a year later, I believe June of '38, Omah Martha, Hannah Laura and Lutz came over. He was three and a half at that time. Uh, on, uh, one of the Hamburg Line, it was the Washington.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: Yeah, well, you got the manifest.

David Mayer: Yeah. Yeah. Yep. Um, and, uh, there was a story that I always get the details wrong that supposedly for a time on the actual boat they were stolen by somebody.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: They were kidnapped by a sailor on the boat and kept for several days. And of course, Martha Omah objected and went to the captain and everything. And they had him there, and they said, okay, "You have Leica camera. And, you

know, you weren't allowed to bring that with you from Germany, right? We will turn you in."I don't know how, I mean, the Americans didn't care. And, "If you say anything more." But she got the children back, and, I don't know, maybe Laura remembers it, but well, Lutz doesn't remember much about it at all. And he just remembers there were double-decker beds and going up and down this ladder. That's all he remembers. [Laughs]

David Mayer: Yeah. Um, and I think they did recall seeing the Statue of Liberty as they came through. They did not go through Ellis Island. I think Ellis Island was done by then. But, um, and then they made their way to Wilmington, Delaware, where relatives were already. And spent his young childhood there before moving down to Greensboro family, North Carolina. Um.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: He's got a job.

David Mayer: He got a job.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: He had to move.

David Mayer: Yeah. Okay. That's what it was.

Pamela Poulin-Mayer: In Germany, um, let's tell this one story, that Hans Opah was heckling the Nazis at this big speech and everything, and he was heckling them. And then he had to take off and run. And some of the youth Brownshirts ran after him. But he must have been very fit because he eluded them. And, so that-he was a wheat merchant in Germany, and Omah was a secretary in four languages. So she was very good. And, it wasn't a problem of the Germans letting them leave. It was the United States government because they would only let one person come, not the whole family. At the time, even though there were three brothers here with three families already in Wilmington, who would each of them volunteer for them, or what? I can't remember the word that you use when you... [Like, sponsor?] Sponsor them. And they actually did. They lived in homes of the other families when they first came. But, Opah was only able to get two part-time jobs, and they wanted one full-time job, the government. And so he got both employers to stand up for him in court and say it was the equivalent of one full-time job. So he just squeaked by bringing the family and these-in '37 and '38, this was not good times. So anything could have happened to that.

David Mayer: Yeah.

Ruth Kodish-Eskind: Do you want to take a little break?