

Jewish Geography

In late 1996, I planned a two-week vacation in New Mexico for the following May with Carmen, my late ex-husband's first wife. (I was his second wife.) Carmen, who is not Jewish, lives in Las Cruces – the City of the Crosses. We decided to spend our first week at an Elderhostel in Santa Fe and our second week in Las Cruces.

When Carmen and I arrived in Las Cruces, I called Nancy Peters Hastings, who lived there; she was the guest editor of *Café Solo*, one of the journals that had published an excerpt from my memoirs. She suggested we meet her that afternoon at Nabe's Coffee Bar & Newsstand.

Nancy had no sooner come over to our table and introduced herself when she turned her head as she spied a man leaving the restaurant. "Oh," she said, waving him over, "there's a man I'd like to introduce to you. He's a writer, too, and also an editor."

When Nancy introduced the man as Ben Nussbaum*, I wondered how someone named Nussbaum had gotten *farblonjet* in the City of the Crosses.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Monticello," he said.

Could he have come from Monticello, the town in the Catskill Mountains where I grew up? But there are many Monticellos in this country. "In what state?" I persisted.

"New York," he said.

"Sit down," I said. I told him I had graduated from high school there in 1946 but didn't know anyone named Nussbaum. "But in Woodridge," I continued, "where I lived from 1936 to 1941, *there* I knew someone named Nussbaum. He was a plasterer and a friend of my parents."

"That was my grandfather," said Ben.

Then I realized that I could share with Ben a story that I'd been carrying around with me for almost sixty years. "Would you like to hear a scandal about your Aunt Sherrill*?" I said. He would.

I told him that when I was about ten and attending elementary school in Woodridge, I was aware of a beautiful young woman of about eighteen – Nussbaum, the plasterer's daughter, Sherrill. She had a certain look of innocence about her.

That summer, a man named Jack Kornblatt*, one of the New Yorkers who frequented Woodridge during the season, met Sherrill, fell in love with her, and asked her to marry him. They married that very summer and shortly thereafter left for Manhattan.

"She always was impulsive," interjected Ben.

Several years later, while Sherrill was in their New York apartment one Saturday afternoon, the phone rang and the caller asked for Jack. "He's not here right now," she said. "But I'll be happy to tell him you called when he gets home."

"Who is this?" asked the caller.

"It's his wife," said Sherrill.

"That's funny. You don't sound like Betsy*," said the caller. "But have Jack call me anyway when he gets home."

"You don't sound like Betsy?" Who was Betsy? When Jack came home, it didn't take Sherrill long to find out who Betsy was. Betsy was Jack's wife, the mother of his 3 children, the woman he had already been married to when he proposed to and later married Sherrill. And the woman he was still married to, and had in fact been with, along with his children, that very Saturday afternoon.

After all the tears and remonstrances, Sherrill left New York and returned to Woodridge, somewhat in disgrace. Shortly thereafter, however, she married one of the village's most eligible bachelors, and, I presumed, lived happily ever after with him in Woodridge.

"Not exactly," said Ben. "She's now on her 4th – uh, I guess now he's her 5th – actually, I guess he's still her 4th – husband, and last I heard she was in California with him." Apparently, Sherrill had shed her innocence.

Then Ben got up to leave – he was running home to call his father – to find out why he'd never before been told about his Aunt Sherrill's first marriage.

*The asterisked names are fictitious.

"Jewish Geography" is an excerpt from Ms. Fuentes' memoirs, *Eat First – You Don't Know What They'll Give You*.

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Ikh hob gemakht a plan far a vakatsiye in Nyu Meksike, mit Karmen, di ershte vayb fun mayn geshtorbenem man. Karmen iz a goye, un voynt in Las Krusis. Mir hobn bashlosn tsu farbrengen di ershte vokh in an Eltere lernung salye (Elderhostel) in Santa Fey, un af der tsveyter vokh in Las Krusis. Ven mir zaynen arayngefurn in Las Krusis, hob ikh opgerufn Nansi Peters Heystings:. Zi iz geven di gast redaktorike fun eyne fun Kafe' Solo, eyne fun di zhurnaln velkhe hobn publikirt an oystsug fun mayne zikhroynes. Zi hot mir nerayet az mir zoln zikh tsuzamenkumen bay Nabe's Kafe Bar. Ven Nansi iz tsugekumen tsum tish, un zikh gemakht bakant, hot zi derzen vi a man geyt aroys fun restoran. "Aw" hot zi gezogt, un im tsugebrakht, mit a shokldike hant. "Ot iz a man velkher ikh vil ir zolt im bakant makhn, Er iz oykhet a shrayber, un a redakter." Ven Nansi hot dem man undz bakant gemakht, (zayn nomen) Ben Nusbaum*. Vi azoy hot a man mitn nomen Nusbaum farblondzhet in Las Krusis? "Fun vanen kumt ir?" hob ikh gefregt. "Montiselo, nyu york" makht er. Nu, ken dos zayn az er iz gekumen fun Montiselo, di shtot in de Ketskil Berg, dafke dortn vi ikh bin geboyrn gevorn? Ikh hob im dertseylt az ikh hob graduirt fun der hoykh shule in nayntsn zeks un fertsig, ober ikh hob keynem nisht gekent mitn numen Nusbaum. "Ober in Vudridzh (Woodridge), dortn vi ikh hob gevoynt fun 1936 biz 1941, dortn hob ikh gekent eymitsn mitn numen Nusbaum. Er iz geven a gibs arbeter, un iz geven a fraynd mayne eltem. "Dos iz geven mayn zeyde," zogt Ben. "Hob ikh demolts farshtanen az ikh meyg take dertseyln Ben a mayse; aza mayse vos ikh hob mit zikh arumgetrogen far kmat zekhtsig yor. "Efsher vet gefeln a skandal vegn ayer Mime Sheril*?" hob ikh gefregt. Yo, er vet dus take gevolt. Hob ikh im dertselt aza mayse: ven ikh bin gegangen in dem elementere shule in Vudridzh, hob ikh zikh bamerkt az dortn iz a zeyer sheyne yunge moyd geven, m'stame akhtsn yur alt dem gibs arbeters a tokhter, Sheril. Zi hot gehat epes an umshuldikn kuk. Dem zumer, a man mitn nomen Dzhek

Komblat*, eyner fun di Nyu Yorkern, di vos hobn farbrakht in Vudridzh demolts, iz bakant gevorn mit ir, un hot zikh farlibt in ir, un hot ir gefregt tsu zi vil mit im hayretn. Zey zaynen farhayret gevorn dem zelbn zumer un nokh dem geforn kayn Manhetn. "Zi iz shtendig geven a shpringerin." Mit Etlekhe yurn shpeter, dervayle, ven Sheril iz geven in zeyer Nyu Yorker dire, hot ir telefon geklungen, un der vos hot gerufn hot nokhgefregt nokh Dzhek. "Er is nisht du yetst," hot zi gezugt. "Ober, mit tsufridnhayt, vel ikh im zugn, ven er kumt aheym, az ir hot im ongeklungen." "Ver iz dos?" hot der telefonirer gevolt visn. "Ikh bin zayn vayb," makht Sheril. "Dos iz take modne. Es klingt nisht vi Betsi's* shtime." hot der man gezogt. "Ober loz visn Dzhek az er zol mikh oprifn ven er kumt aheym." "Es klingt nisht vi Betsi's shtime"? Ver iz Betsi? Ven Dzhek iz aheymgekumen, hot es nisht lang gedoyert biz Sheril hot oysgefunden ver Betsi iz geven. Betsi iz shoyngelangen Dzheks vayb, a froy mit dray fun zayne kinder, un zi iz shoyngelangen zayn vayb, eyder er hot forgeleygt khasene tsu hobn, un shpeyter khasene gehat mit Sheni. Un er iz geven dortn mit der dozike froy, mit vemen er iz nokh geven farhayret, mit di kinder. Sheril, nokh di trern un nokh di remonstratsyes, iz avek fun Nyu York un tsurikgeforn kayn Vudridzh, epes a shande. Kmat nokhdem, hot zi khasene gehat mitn voylbarstn bokher fun shtetl, un es hot zikh mir gedakht az zi hot mit im gelebt mit tsufndenhayt oyf eybig in Vudridzh. "Yetst hot zi shoyngelangen un efsher, er iz der finfter – ober eygentlekh, treft zikh az er nokh yetst ir ferter man, un itst voynt zi mit im in Kalifornye." Ben hot geklingt zayn tateⁿ oystsugefinen varum men hot im keynmol nisht dertseylt vegn zayn Mime Sheril un ir ershte khasene.

The asterisked names are fictitious.

This an excerpt from Ms. Sonia Pressman Fuentes' memoirs, "Eat First--You Don't Know What They'll Give You, The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter."