



## FAMILY ARTICLE

### TEACHER GUIDE

# THE EPSTEINS

### WHO THEY ARE

Kalman and Rivka Epstein were Holocaust survivors who immigrated to the United States in 1947 as refugees. They were unable to return home, but had difficulty coming to the United States because of restrictive immigration laws. They got help from Kalman's aunt and uncle who sponsored and supported their journey to New York City. The Lower East Side had a strong Jewish community that also helped to welcome the Epsteins. There were Jewish schools that their daughters Bella and Blima could attend, Yiddish theatres, and synagogues for every Jewish community. The children also explored the diversity of their community by making friends in their building and in the park.

### PRIMARY SOURCES

#### 1 Video: *Bella Returning to 97 Orchard Street*



Bella talks about the mezuzah that is placed on the front doorpost of the apartment, a traditional object used in many Jewish families. This object was both a protective amulet for the home, and also a symbol and portrayal of faith. Bella reflects on the fact that it was a brave statement to put a mezuzah on the front door, considering her parents and family had been persecuted during the Holocaust in Europe.

#### Questions for Student Exploration

- *How do you think Bella feels returning to her childhood home after more than 50 years?*
- *Why does Bella say it was brave for her parents to put up a Mezuzah?*
- *Do you have anything in your home that expresses your culture and identity?*



## PRIMARY SOURCES

### 2 Oral History: *Bella Discusses Paul Anka*

#### TRANSCRIPT

Bella speaks about the music that permeated the walls of her 103 Orchard Street apartment. Her father listened to traditional, Yiddish music, while she listened to the latest pop music of the 1950s. By listening to the same songs as other young kids around the neighborhood and the country, Bella was able to feel part of a larger group – like an American.

#### Questions for Student Exploration

- *What's the difference between what Bella liked to listen to and what her dad liked to listen to?*
- *Why do you think Bella says this song made her feel like an American?*
- *Are there songs, TV shows, or movies today that make us feel American?*

## READING ACTIVITIES

#### Comprehension Questions

- How old was Rivka when World War II started?
- Why wasn't Europe safe for Jewish people during World War II?
- Why couldn't Rivka go back home after the war? Where did she go instead?
- What did the law, The National Origins Act, say about immigrants moving to the United States?
- What year did Rivka and Kalman immigrate to the United States?
- What jobs did Jacob help Kalman and Rivka get?
- Which groups were moving to the Lower East Side starting in the 1940s?
- How many children did Rivka and Kalman have? What were their names?
- How did Bella tell her best friend, Rosetta, that she wanted to play?
- Why did Bella's mom paint the walls of her room pink?
- What did Bella think about Halo Shampoo? Why?



## READING ACTIVITIES

### *Your Turn / Thinking Questions*

#### ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE

- Why was it difficult for Rivka and Kalman to immigrate the United States?
- How did Jacob and Golda help Kalman and Rivka get settled in the Lower East Side?
- Why does Bella say it was brave for her parents to put up a Mezuzah?
- What's the difference between what Bella liked to listen to and what her dad liked to listen to?
- Why do you think Bella says this song made her feel like an American?

#### ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE

- If you were alive in 1945, how would you feel about the people who had lost their homes in Europe? What do you think you could do to help?
- Do you have anything in your home that expresses your culture and identity?
- Are there songs, tv shows, or movies today that make us feel American?

## WRITING ACTIVITIES

- 1** Pretend you are Bella, but you all are all grown up. A museum wants to re-create your childhood bedroom! You have to describe to the museum what your room looked like and how you decorated it. Draw a picture to go with your description. You can use your imagination, but make sure to include information from the story, photographs and primary sources. Include the following information in your description.
  - *What is the title of your article?*
  - *What pieces of furniture were in the room?  
What did you use them for?*
  - *What colors were in the room? How did those colors make you feel?*
  - *What did you put up on the walls to decorate your room? Why?*
  - *What did you hear when you were in your room?*
  - *What did you smell when you were in your room?*
  - *Who visited your room? What did you do together there?*
- 2** How does the Jewish community in the Lower East side work together to help Rivka and Kalman start their new lives? In your answer, choose two different examples and use evidence from the text and primary sources.



## GLOSSARY

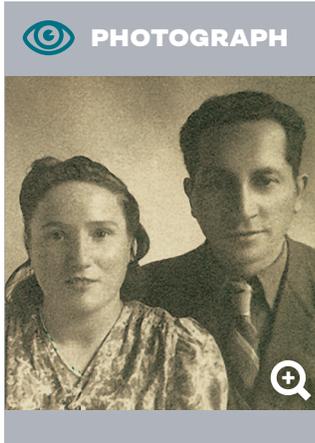
<b>JEWISH</b>	(adj.) a word that describes a person or a practice that relates to the religion of Judaism.
<b>CONCENTRATION CAMP</b>	(n.) a place where large groups of people are imprisoned and might be forced to work, with very bad or even dangerous conditions.
<b>DISPLACED PERSONS</b>	(n.) people who have lost their homes and have nowhere to return to.
<b>REFUGEE</b>	(n.) a person who is forced to leave their home country because of war, persecution, or natural disaster.
<b>NATIONAL ORIGINS ACT</b>	(n.) a law passed in 1924 that made it very difficult for people from countries in Eastern Europe (like Poland), Southern Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa to immigrate to the United States.
<b>ADAPT</b>	(v.) to take on the characteristics and practices of a new culture.
<b>CONTRIBUTE</b>	(v.) to provide resources or skills.
<b>ATTITUDE</b>	(n.) a way of feeling or thinking.
<b>SPONSORS</b>	(n.) people who provide support in the immigration process.
<b>TSHOLNT</b>	(n.) a slow-cooking stew popular in Jewish cuisine because it can be cooked following Jewish dietary restrictions and practices.
<b>SABBATH</b>	(n.) the Jewish day of rest, starting Friday night and lasting until Saturday night every week.
<b>MEZUZAH</b>	(n.) a small box that is placed on the doorposts of Jewish homes. Inside the box is a small scroll with text from the bible. It is a symbol of a person's Judaism, and serves as a protection for the home. In practice, every time a Jewish individual enters a room, they will gently touch the mezuzah as a small blessing.
<b>TRINKETS</b>	(n.) small gifts, often jewelry.



## FAMILY ARTICLE

## THE STORY

## THE EPSTEINS



## Escaping Europe

Rivka Epstein was born in a small village in Poland and was only a teenager when World War II started in 1939. It would completely change her life. Rivka and her family were **Jewish**, and Europe was not safe for Jewish people. Adolf Hitler, the leader of Germany, tried to murder every single Jewish person by sending them to **concentration camps** where they would have to work and often be killed. Rivka was sent to one of these camps, and although her family did not survive, she did. In 1945, World War II ended, the camps were closed, but Rivka could not go back home; she did not have a home to go back to. Instead she went to another camp called a **displaced persons camp** (today we might call it a **refugee camp**). At the camp, she met many other Jewish people and other people who could no longer safely live in the countries they were from. They were waiting to see if another country would let them come in and start over. One person Rivka met was a man named Kalman. Kalman had lost his wife and children in the war, and he and Rivka decided to get married and start over.

Where could Rivka and Kalman live? Most of Europe was still not safe for Jewish people. The United States would be safe, but there were laws that made it almost impossible to immigrate there. In 1924, the United States had passed the **National Origins Act**, which restricted the number of people who immigrated from Poland, as well as other Eastern European countries, Southern European countries (like Italy and Greece), Asian countries, Middle Eastern countries and African countries. This law was passed because many people living in the United States at this time didn't think people from these places could **adapt** to American culture or **contribute** to the economy.

Even though Rivka and Kalman were trying to come to the United States 20 years after the law is passed, many people still had the same **attitudes**. However, the president, Harry Truman, created an opportunity for a small number of displaced people to move to the United States. Rivka and Kalman were among the lucky 23,000 displaced people who had the opportunity to enter the United States at this time.

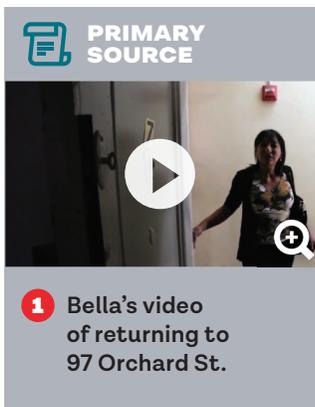
**YOUR TURN** *If you were alive in 1945, how would you feel about the people who had lost their homes in Europe? What do you think you could do to help?*



## A New Life

Kalman's Aunt Golda and Uncle Jacob were their **sponsors**. They were officially responsible for helping Rivka and Kalman get started in their new country. Golda and Jacob were immigrants too, but they arrived in 1913 and had lived in the Lower East Side of New York City for over 30 years. Jacob, who owned a clothing store in the Lower East Side, helped Rivka get a job as a sewing machine operator and Kalman a job as a presser (ironing clothing). Rivka was still young when the war started and didn't learn to cook, so Golda taught her how to cook many things, including **tsholnt**, a special Jewish stew eaten once a week for the **sabbath**. Although many Jewish people had immigrated and settled in the Lower East Side in the early 1900s, by 1940, most had moved. Many people from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and other Spanish speaking places were moving to the Lower East Side. However, Rivka and Kalman would find many speakers of their language, Yiddish, and there were still many Jewish synagogues, stores, and organizations to help Rivka and Kalman feel like they belonged. All four family members went to an organization called the Hebrew International Aid Society for assistance. They helped Rivka and Kalman complete all the paper work they needed to eventually become citizens of the United States. Kalman and Rivka also kept a box to collect their change for the Jewish National Fund, an organization that supported other Jewish people looking for a home.

Two years after Kalman and Rivka arrived in New York City, they started a family. Bella was born in 1947 and Blima was born in 1953. In 1956, they moved to 103 Orchard Street together. On the entrance to their new home, the Epsteins put up a mezuzah. A **mezuzah** is a section of the Jewish Holy book, The Torah, in a small case that is affixed to the side of the doorway. The mezuzah helps people remember their Jewish faith every time they leave and enter their home. How will Bella and Blima experience their faith and culture as they grow up in the Lower East Side of New York City?



**1** Bella's video of returning to 97 Orchard St.

## Bella's World

Bella had a window in her bedroom that looked out onto another part of her building. Bella's best friend, Rosetta, lived in this part of the building. By yelling out the window, "Rosetta!" Bella let her best friend know she wanted to play. Rosetta's parents were immigrants from Italy. Rosetta and Bella went to the neighborhood park together and went to each other's apartments, where Bella remembers hearing Italian spoken and smelling the red sauce Rosetta's mother cooked. Although the girls played often, their parents didn't interact much with each other. Perhaps it was because they spoke different languages, or maybe they felt more comfortable spending time with people from similar backgrounds. In the Lower East Side by the mid 1960s, you might have heard Yiddish, Italian, Spanish, and Chinese as people from many different places were making the neighborhood home.


 PRIMARY SOURCE

## TRANSCRIPT



2 Oral History about Paul Anka.

Bella's parents wanted to teach her about her history and culture and they sent her to a Jewish girl's school in the neighborhood. She attended the synagogue, celebrated Jewish holidays and remembered the smell of the tsholnt that her mother learned to cook from Golda. However, they didn't want to tell her about their experiences in the war. The walls of her room were painted bright pink, and she and Blima had bed spreads with colorful flowers because they wanted their children to have as much brightness as possible in their lives. Bella and her mother shopped in the neighborhood for inexpensive, but precious, **trinkets** to treasure together. Rivka and Kalman wanted their children to grow up free from harm and danger in the United States.

 PHOTOGRAPHS


Having parents from another country, will Bella feel like she belongs in the United States? Bella recalled how she and her mother would see women in advertisements and movie stars with shining blonde hair. Bella bought a shampoo that often had these women in ads called Halo Shampoo. Even though it was just regular shampoo, Bella thought it would change her hair from dark and curly to blond and straight. Bella was trying to look like what she thought an American looked like. Bella also remembered how listening to pop music affected her sense of belonging.

Bella and her family moved to Brooklyn in the 1960s and that's where she grew up. After living many years in Miami, Florida, she lives in Brooklyn again. She has three granddaughters who have also had the chance to visit their grandmother's childhood home and learn all about their family history. One of Bella's granddaughter's even wants to name her children Kalman and Rivka.



## VIDEO

In the video Bella talks about the mezuzah that is placed on the front door post of the apartment. The mezuzah protects the home and also shows her family's faith.

**NOTE** The link will open a new webpage in the default browser. [↗](#)



*This is my apartment. I can't believe it. This is where you looked to see if somebody, if a stranger... my parents always told me, "Always look here, never open up the door unless you're sure you know who it is." This could be the mezuzah that we had put up, because we never lived without a mezuzah to protect us. Which was brave of my parents considering that they'd always been persecuted because they were Jewish. And no matter what, I always put a mezuzah up in my house, where ever I live, in every room. Wow.*



# TRANSCRIPT

Bella speaks about the music she heard in her apartment. Her father listened to traditional, Yiddish music, while she listened to the latest pop music of the 1950s.

## Interview with Bella Epstein, 2014

[Swelling voice singing in Hebrew]

*My father bought a record player that he used to play Yossele Rosenblatt albums on. Yossele Rosenblatt was a famous cantor, and he would say “Oh, a shtime, a shtime!” That means “A voice, a voice!” and I’d say “Okay, fine.”*

*And then, when my father wasn’t using the record player, I had gotten my mother to buy me a record, and it was Paul Anka, “Oh Please Stay By Me Diana.”*

[Doo wop music and Paul Anka singing in a deep voice]

*That was the song. It was played more in my house than anywhere else in the world. That was it. That song made me an American.*



Rivke and Kalman Epstein in 1947 before their children are born.



*Bella (right) and Blima (left) Epstein outside thier apartment building in the 1950s.*



*Bella's bedroom. Bella would call out the window to her friend, Rosetta, when she wanted to play with her.*



*This is Bella's record player. Bella remembers that listening to pop music helped her feel like she belonged.*



*Bella with her husband, son, and granddaughters.*