

# SHADOWS OF THE PAST



Local puppeteer strings together a family tale

**PAST MEETS THE PUPPET:** Although Lisa Sturz never met her grandfather Cantor Izso Glickstein, she's bringing his story to the stage. Photo by Emily Bader

Ten years ago, Asheville puppeteer **Lisa Sturz**, founder of Red Herring Puppets, received a package in the mail: Her uncle had digitized old recordings of Sturz's grandfather Cantor **Izso Glickstein**. In the Jewish faith, cantors lead fellow worshippers in the singing of liturgical music. Before these discs, Sturz had never heard her grandfather's voice. "I was stunned by how good he was," she says.

The recordings inspired Sturz to research Glickstein's story. Her discoveries have resulted in the theatrical production *My Grandfather's Prayers*. The hourlong show, directed by **Rebecca Williams**, stars Sturz and fellow puppeteer **Emily Bader**. The production — featuring a combination of shadow puppetry, marionettes, scrolling backdrops, animation, poetry and the music of Glickstein — will debut on Sunday, June 18, at the Asheville Jewish Community Center auditorium.

Sturz considers the work "one of the hardest things I've done." Part of the feat involved the research itself. Her grandfather, a fourth-generation cantor, was born in Kishinev, Ukraine (now part of Moldova), in 1889. Six years later, a Russian pogrom (a violent attack on Jews) ravaged the village. The Glickstein family fled to Rakoscsaba, just outside Budapest, Hungary. From that point on, Glickstein would be on the move constantly because of school, musical performances and a brief kidnapping

carried out by a competing synagogue who wanted the young Izso to sing for its house of worship. By 1923, he emigrated to Boston, where he would hold the position of chief cantor at the Mishkin Tefilah for 24 years.

As part of her research, Sturz traveled the world, retracing her grandfather's footsteps. Even as she gathered additional stories and uncovered details about his trials and tribulations, doubt still lingered concerning the possible production: Would anyone actually be interested in Glickstein's tale?

Over the last two years, Sturz has written and performed abridged versions of the show in Boston, as well as at the Asheville JCC. During these trial runs, her early concerns were quickly assuaged. Glickstein's immigration offered a unique but familiar tale to many in the audience. "I remember one man from Armenia who said to me, 'Your story is my story,'" she says.

The local audience also helped push Sturz toward a larger issue that has since been incorporated into the show: her own struggles with religion. "Throughout my entire adult life, I have not been a practicing Jew," she says. "I would say I've almost been a little bit embarrassed to be Jewish."

Part of her shame, explains Sturz, was childish in nature. Growing up in Bayonne, N.J., she resented not getting presents from Santa Claus like the rest of her friends. Another component of

her early humiliation and resistance stemmed from a misunderstanding. In Hebrew school, Sturz learned about how the Jews were the chosen people. "I remember ... really rejecting that idea. And feeling uncomfortable. Why do you think you're better than anyone else?"

The biggest issue, however, was fear. Every year, around Passover, Sturz's parents played documentaries about the Holocaust. The idea was well-intended — they did not want the tragedy and its impact to be forgotten. But as a child, Sturz says, she didn't understand. "I was afraid [Nazis] were going to kill me," she says. "As I've been working on this [production], I realized that was there."

All of these components are present in *My Grandfather's Prayers*. Some of the issues in the production are matters that the country and world are still grappling with today, such as immigration and anti-Semitism. Yet Sturz sees the production as an uplifting tale that emphasizes the role of music and its ability to serve as a guide through difficult times. "I want people to walk away with the power of art," she says. "I feel like that's what my grandfather tapped into — that transcendent power of music to really touch ... and soothe ... and comfort people." X

by Thomas Calder MOUNTAINX.COM