

Dov Friedmann

Jacob's Cane Reveals The Past

Elisa New, Harvard English professor and wife of former Obama economic adviser Lawrence Summers, shares a personal historical detective story at the Berman Center for the Performing Arts.

Jonathan Kirsch
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On the wall of my home office is an authentic family relic — a tallis bag that was carried from Byelorussia to Ellis Island by my wife's grandfather, Ben Zion Benjamin. The embroidery, elaborate and colorful, features a date: 1895. Today, the tallis bag is framed under glass, but the secret of its provenance and the significance of the date are lost to us.

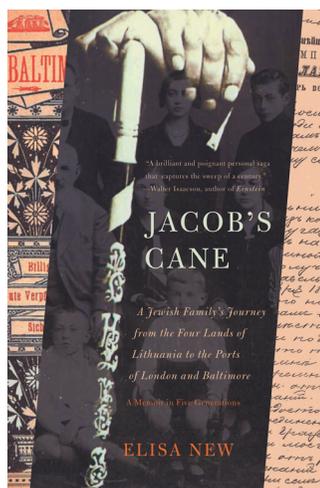
The same dilemma confronts many Jewish families in the Goldenhah Medinah, as the promised land of America was referred to by members of the immigrant generation attempting to distance themselves from

their origins as they struggled to reinvent themselves. But Elisa New has succeeded in filling in the blanks of her own family history, and the tale she tells in *Jacob's Cane: A Jewish Family's Journey From the Four Lands of Lithuania to the Ports of London and Baltimore* (Basic Books; paperback, \$16.99) is a masterpiece of history and memory.

The Jewish Community Center's Henry & Delia Meyers Library and Media Center hosts a talk by New on Sunday, April 10, at Berman Center for the Performing Arts in West Bloomfield.

A cherished family heirloom — an elegant walking stick that belonged

to New's great-grandfather, Jacob Levy — served as the starting point of her journey of self-discovery. The cane itself — "its



"Nothing I'd ever read revealed to me my Jewish civilization as my great-grandfather Jacob Levy's cane did."

— Elisa New

foreign appearance, its careful design, its Germanness" — was the first clue that the experiences of her forebears were very different from the ones that have been immortalized in a pop-culture artifact like *Fiddler on the Roof*.

"We imagine every immigrant a transplant from the rutted shtetl," writes New. "But with our gaze on the impecunious greenhorn, with our eyes straining after the rural milkman turned cloak maker, we may miss Tevye's more cosmopolitan cousin."

What New managed to find — and what she presents to us in *Jacob's Cane* — is a fascinating and illuminating variant on the Jewish immigrant saga. At first, the initials and place names inscribed on her great-grandfather's cane provoked more questions than answers. Her three great-aunts supplied more tantalizing clues, and New herself spent 10 years in teasing out fact from fancy. Eventually, as New tells us, the cane became a symbol of "veracity's triumph over family legend."

Accompanied by her young daughter, Yael, New embarked on an odyssey that took them all over the world, including the town of Shavli in Lithuania where Jacob Levy was born. Along the way, we see how Jacob Levy escaped the horrors that were to befall other family members during the Holocaust and how he turned himself and his sons into entrepreneurs blessed with social and financial success in England and America. *Jacob's Cane* is, at once, a travelogue, a family chronicle and a work of social history.

It's fitting that New — a literature professor at Harvard who is married to the economist and former Obama administration economic adviser Lawrence Summers — finds poetry in the mundane details of business. She points out, for example, that Lithuania may have figured importantly in the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment that flowered during the late 18th century, but it was also a place where Jews enriched the life of the community through their daily business endeavors.

"Fur, boar's bristles and goose feathers, gloves of ox hide and pigskin and kidskin, lambs' wool and lanolin — Jews were proficient at all the trades that took products sticky with mud or hair and blood and readied them to appear in drawing rooms," she rhapsodizes. "Jews built workshops to turn wood pulp to paper, linen to lace, beeswax to candles, cocoa to bonbons, and tobacco to cigars."

Jacob Levy made his way to Baltimore in 1884, where he founded a successful clothing enterprise of his own, but his heart was broken when his sons were lured away to England to join a family friend named Bernhard Baron in the tobacco industry. "Jacob," explains New, "regarded his sons' name change from Levy to Baron, their employment change from cloth shrinking to tobacco, and their departure from the country of their birth, America, as a betrayal." Eventually, he pronounced a curse on his own children: "May you never have sons!"

The story of social aspiration and family estrangement that New tells in *Jacob's Cane* is worthy of a Victorian novel. Jacob disinherited his unfaithful sons by leaving two of them a nominal bequest of \$100 and his eldest son "the sum of \$10 and my Moroccan Bound Bible." Down through the generations, as New shows us, the wealth of the family was never enough to prevent moments of pain and regret, dysfunction and disappointment.

Above all, *Jacob's Cane* is the work of a writer with a love of language. The author, for example, clearly takes pleasure in pausing to describe the rich objects of the cane maker's art, the ways that the workings of a Singer sewing machine transform both fabric and recollection, and the act of sorcery by which an archival document is retrieved, translated and thus made to reveal its secrets. At these moments, New is a kind of alchemist who is capable of turning the raw materials of the historian — "wanderings, guesses, luck and old glue," as she puts it — into the poet's gold. □

Elisa New speaks 7 p.m. Sunday, April 10, at the Berman Center for the Performing Arts at the Jewish Community Center in West Bloomfield. The JCC's Henry & Delia Meyers Library and Media Center is sponsoring the event through the Delia Jampel and John Frank Special Speakers Fund. The event is free and open to the public. Tickets are not required, but reservations are requested to Francine Menken at (248) 432-5546 or fmenken@jccdet.org. There will be a book signing and refreshments after New's talk.