Merav:
Welcome to the All-of-a-Kind Family Podcast. I'm Merav Hoffman.

Batya:
I'm Batya Wittenberg.

Merav:
We loved these books when we were kids and we love them now, and we hope you do too.

Batya:
Today's chapter is the very first one, the one where Sarah loses her library book.

Merav:
I'm so excited to talk about this one. It's one of my favorites. I think I'm going to say that every week.

Batya:
Probably, yes, me too.

Merav:
(laughter) We're going to talk through what happens in the chapter very briefly so that you remember which one it is. If you're reading along with us, this is the very first chapter of the very first book, The All-of-a-Kind Family Book by Sydney Taylor. And this is, as Batya said, the one where Sarah loses her library book. At the beginning of the chapter, we're introduced to the scenario, which is that Sarah's library book is missing, and a hypothesis gets raised that she loaned it to her friend Tillie, and that that's why it's missing. But they still search the whole house, and they still all panic. And we get introduced to the whole family. We get introduced to their home, which is very orderly. And we also get introduced to the library.

Batya:
Um, we get introduced to Mama. The girls are first introduced as “Mama's girls.” We don't get

a family name yet. Actually, I don't think we ever get a family name.

Merav:
We never get a family name, and that's really interesting because as we know, the author Sydney Taylor starts out life as Sarah Brenner, but we never actually see the name Brenner in the books.

Batya:
And I did not know growing up that Sydney Taylor was middle daughter Sarah.

Merav:
Neither did I.

Batya:
I found that out much later, possibly from you in fact.

Merav:

It seems really likely because one of the things that happened when I immigrated from Canada was that I immediately encountered somebody who went to Camp Cejwin and actually knew all of Mama's girls as their counselors and administrators at the camp.

Batya:
Yes, we're definitely going to talk about Camp Cejwin later.

Merav:
Absolutely. But let's get back to Sarah losing her library book. So the library book is missing. It's not in the shelf where it's usually kept and everybody speculates, but the library book is gone.

Batya:
And Sarah's in tears, and everybody else is deeply concerned too, because a library book missing means they're going to have to pay for

it and it says right away, we don't have money for that. So we get right away, money is a concern for this family.

Merav:
It's a big unexpected expense and Sarah feels extremely responsible and guilty. And so now they're going to have to go to the library because they're running out of time. The time deadline is not specified, but it is very much an impending – you must be home for supper. It's made clear that it's a Friday, but we don't get into why yet. We're going to get into that later. And so they rush to the library. Sarah is in tears. They detail the walk like, Hey, this is happening. Sarah is not okay.

Batya:
And we have all the other sisters reacting in ways that give us such a great little encapsulation of what they're like. Uh, Henny – well, Ella, the oldest, is worried but trying to be,

you know, responsible and reassuring. Henny is, is all bravado, “No library could make me pay for any old book.” And just very defensive on Sarah's behalf.

Merav:
I don't feel like we get a great picture of Charlotte here. I think Charlotte is just kind of like, you know, let's get this over with.

Batya:
She and Gertie, the youngest, are – the two younger, Charlotte and Gertie, are both trying to comfort Sarah but they don't really have any way to do that, except I think Gertie goes and holds her hand? It's very sweet.

Merav:
It's interesting, it's actually explicitly called out that Charlotte is left alone so that Sarah can be comforted. Like Gertie like, voom, away from the side of Charlotte, who's usually her idol, and

goes right to Sarah's side and goes and comforts Sarah. So that's really an interesting aspect of this, is the ways the girls are sort of broken into divisions and, you know, by age frequently. So we get to the library. They're very nervous.

Batya:
Sarah is catastrophizing the whole way. They're gonna take away my card. I'll never be able to take out another library book again.

Merav:
This is the worst thing that could possibly happen to Sarah because Sarah, as we will later learn, like we don't really have this on the page at the moment –

Batya:
Not yet.

Merav:

She’s the studious one, right? She's the one who loves reading, she's the one who loves learning. Losing her library card is the end of the world for her. So this is, this is a crisis of the soul.

Batya:
She doesn't actually think “I'm going to be sent to prison,” but it almost feels like that. She feels like she is the next best thing to a thief. It doesn't say that in so many words, but that's the vibe I get. That, that … “They will take away my card and banish me from the library for the rest of my life, and I will deserve it.”

Merav:
The world of the library, and we're about to enter the world of the library, is a sanctuary for the girls, right? Like, this is a home away from home. It's a safe place. It's like school. In fact, there's a whole debate about whether the library lady is a teacher.

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:
And I think that that's – it's very typical of the era because they see her as an authority. They see her like she's a woman, in authority, so she must be a teacher. And I think that that's a really interesting thing, which we'll get into later.

Batya:
She's a woman, in authority, in a place of books, and she's not a parent. That's a teacher, obviously.

Merav:
Right, obviously, but there's a whole debate between the girls, like is she a teacher? No, she's the library lady. So now we have this position in our society of library lady, right, which is being introduced. And then we actually,

interestingly, and this is what's really cool about how Sarah Brenner, AKA Sydney Taylor, wrote these books, is we have this sort of omniscient, what is the library lady thinking, right? She sees the girls and she describes them for us because we can't see them, we've been with them the whole time, but we haven't seen them. Now the library lady sees them and describes them for us.

Batya:
And we get to see through her eyes what this little family looks like. And they're frankly adorable. They're five girls of precisely stepped ages, identically dressed. Identically and very, very … formally, would you say?

Merav:
I would definitely say formally. I feel like the way that Mama is representing her family to the world is through formality. And that gets into sort of the idea of where Mama comes from,

which we'll get into later. But the reality of the girls is that they are wearing multiple petticoats, they're wearing starched dresses, they're very neat and tidy, they're wearing these hand-knit woolen stockings that itch, which if you've ever worn wool, you know, next to your skin –

Batya:
(Overlapping) I can't wear wool.

Merav:
(Overlapping) No, neither can I.

Batya:
(Overlapping) I literally cannot have wool next to my skin or my scalp. It's the worst.

Merav:
Now imagine wearing that on your legs every day for –

Batya:

(Overlapping) I – no. (laughter)

Merav:
Right, exactly, these girls are doing this every day without a thought, it's just, you know, up comes the toe to scratch the knee because it's itchy because the stockings are itchy all the time.

Batya:
And it says straight up the girls hate the stockings, they itch, they never wear out because Mama fixes them if they get holes in them.

Merav:
Right, and I mean, that's also a thriftiness that we see in this family, is that they have to darn and mend and fix and starch to make everything look neat because they want to consistently present that formal, beautiful look of looking like a steps-and-stairs family, which is

one of the things that happens is when they approach the library lady, it was just like, kind of like, look at these adorable girls, and they're all in tears. And so now we have this big dramatic encounter where Miss Allen, whose name we finally learn, is observing the girls and the girls are observing Miss Allen who is glamorous, right?

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:
They are struck with her beauty. This is a woman in authority, she's beautiful, she's clearly smart, and they're about to learn that she's compassionate, and I think at this point the girls fall in love with the library lady.

Batya:

Yes. Sarah's first thought about her is – first how pretty she is, and then “I think she has a kind face.”

Merav:
Yes.

Batya:
She has dimples! Surely a lady with dimples couldn't be mean!

Merav:
Right, exactly. And so she's reading empathy, she's reading kindness in this face …

Batya:
And it proves to be true, that Miss Allen is kind, is sympathetic. It's not in any way a misleading impression.

Merav:

She is having a moment of empathy with this library lady. And as a result, the two of them are connecting. And so now she's made the connection for her whole family, but no one has spoken. So Henny pipes up and is like doing the introductory spiel, like, this is who we are, you know, and she introduces herself first, and then she goes steps-and-stairs, right? She goes right to Ella –

Batya:
Mm-hmm.

Merav:
– jumps to Sarah, to Charlotte, to Gertie. And that's kind of where we get, even though we've been getting these impressions of the girls. That's where we get the hierarchy of the ages.

Batya:
Mm-hmm. And the library lady says, oh, a steps-and-stairs family.

Merav:
Right. You know, some call us an all-of-a-kind family.

Batya:
Title drop! (laughter)

Merav:
Yes, title drop. (laughter) In the book about Sydney Taylor's life, we actually get the source of all-of-a-kind family, which was a visiting Chinese dignitary at their school –

Batya:
Oh!

Merav:
– saw them and said oh, hey, it's an all-of-a-kind family, right? Like they all look the same, because you know from the perspective

of this visitor, like, those ones are all clearly a set, right, they go together.

Batya:
(Overlapping slightly) That's – that’s so great! Why didn't she put that in the books? That's marvelous! (laughter)

Merav:
I think a lot of the things that really happened, and we'll get into this later, is a lot of those things were either edited out for clarity or it just wasn't something that she was able to put in or fit in, but it existed in the consciousness of the family. So it kind of became the family lore, but it didn't make it onto the page. So now we have the reconciliation of the chapter where Sarah admits the problem. I've lost my library book. I can't remember if she says she's loaned it to Tillie or not.

Batya:

She says that she lost it and Henny jumps in, “oh, she didn't lose it, it was Tillie!”

Merav:
Right, and the library lady is trying to clear up this confusion, but the upshot is, is the book is expensive to replace. At the level of poverty that these girls are living at, even though they're neatly starched, even though they have a clean home, money is very tight. They're a single-income family. And so when the verdict comes down that they have to pay, what is it, like 34 cents?

Batya:
I just found it. I have the book open next to me because I'm gonna forget stuff otherwise. The librarian has to look up how much it costs to replace and she asks, “well it's not so bad, Sarah, what do you have in the way of spending money?” Sarah says she's got a penny a day, she's got 17 cents saved up, and

the librarian thinks, how can I tell her it costs a dollar.

Merav:
A dollar, right. Yes.

Batya:
And when are we? Let's clarify for the audience who doesn't necessarily know, about what year is it, such that – what kind of money is a dollar?

Merav:
A dollar is a lot of money, because as we see in the subsequent chapter, you can buy, I think it's four kinds of candy for a penny?

Batya:
We do also get, actually I think in the next chapter, specifically what year it is. It's 1912.

Merav:

1912, yeah, I was gonna say 1910, but 1912 is right on the money. As it were.

Batya:
As it were. (laughter)

Merav:
And, uh (laughter) and here we are with this dollar hanging over Sarah. And Sarah has to pay back from her, you know, her 17 cents as down payment. She has to pay back this money. Now they're getting a penny a day, which is pretty good allowance, considering that they've got practically no money. That's a very harsh sentence. She's probably doing math in her brain, thinking, you know, what am I going to have to do without in order to pay back this library book?

Batya:

And Miss Allen says, she suggests: I'm going to make a special arrangement where you can pay this back one penny a week.

Merav:
Right, gradual payment.

Batya:
For however long it takes.

Merav:
And that's the real mercy of this chapter is Miss Allen understands the level of poverty that these girls are struggling with. She understands the situation that Sarah is in. And then all of a sudden the sisters all say, well, if Sarah has to pay a penny a week, then we'll all also pay a penny a week.

Batya:

We'll all pay a penny a week and it'll get paid back that much faster because we'll be paying five cents rather than one cent a week.

Merav:
And Sarah is probably at this point also doing math in her brain like, oh my gosh, you know, this is going to speed it up exponentially. But at the same time, like this is the first real act of sisterhood that we see in the book. I mean, we see the other children comforting her. We see Sarah and her desolation being, you know, surrounded by her sisters. This is the solidarity that the books give us. Like this is a tightly knit, loyal family where everybody cares about everybody else.

Batya:
Yes. And they're not just going to – I mean, it's important. It really is important and it is clearly helping Sarah that they are giving her emotional support, that she's relying on that, but also they

are going to give up their own pennies for her as well. Nobody is saying, why should I have to give up my penny, this is your fault, you shouldn't have loaned your library book to your friend, you brought this on yourself. No, they're saying – Henny has already spent her penny for today and she says, but I'll bring mine next week.

Merav:
And she's described as shamefaced, which I just love.

Batya:
(Overlapping) Yes. (laughter)

Merav:
Henny's like, I should have anticipated that my sister might need my penny, right? Like, that's –

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:
That is sort of the essence of that interaction. Henny's like, I know I'm a terrible spendthrift for spending my penny today. I feel like that's our piece of action, the intended, you know, confrontation, which is resolved with mercy, and all of a sudden they're telling Sarah that she can actually take out a book this week.

Batya:
Yes, she doesn't have to wait until she has paid back the whole fine before she can use the library.

Merav:
And this is paradise restored, right? Suddenly the entire library is available again.

Batya:
There is forgiveness, there is compassion, there is … we know that you didn't do the wrong

thing on purpose, we are not going to punish you more than – just, you gotta make it right.

Merav:
So there's sort of the legalistic, you know, you have to pay the fine, but there's also the providential, but you still have the entire section of books, you can still take books out. So that's a really great outcome. And now we turn back to the personal. The girls profusely thank Miss Allen, and they have to rush to get back home and get their books at the library and make sure that, you know, Gertie gets a chance to go and look at the picture magazines because she's not taking books out yet because Gertie can't read. Because she's, what, like four at this point?

Batya:
She's four, yeah, she's the – tiny little thing, walking to the library with her older sisters. The oldest one in the family is twelve.

Merav:
Right.

Batya:
And there's no … worry about letting these kids walk out on their own. Very different, I feel, from today. There's probably small towns where that's still a standard, but in New York City. I don't think people would be letting their four-year-old go out – well their four-, six-, eight-, ten-, and twelve-year-old go out in a little pack with no adult supervision.

Merav:
Yeah, absolutely. And stuff can go wrong. But in this chapter, it doesn't. They get their library books in a very business-like way, and then they just go home because, you know, a wonderful thing has happened and they can't wait to tell their parents.

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:
Right? Like, cause there's been all this panic. And I think the last thing they want is to be worrying their mother. Their father doesn't even know yet. Their father's at the shop. And we'll get into that later. Right? Their father is off doing what he does to make the money and they have to run home. because it's going to be time for dinner. And that's all we get in this chapter as far as context for why they have to be home immediately for dinner. And I think it's an interesting introduction of the themes. And I think this is a good jumping off point for us to jump into our feature, What's On the Page?

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:

We're going to do this as a segment every week: what do we see when we read the chapter, and then we're going to talk about what isn't on the page. Who do we meet in the chapter? Right, this is an easy one.

Batya:
Yes, we meet Mama. We meet all five of the girls. We meet Miss Allen. I don't think there's any – we hear about Sarah's friend Tillie, who I don't think becomes a character later. She's just, she's there, but it's not, oh, Sarah's friend Tillie is going to be a recurring figure. There isn't even really a talk about, should we ask Tillie or require Tillie or talk to her parents about her helping to pay the cost of the book? Mama says to Sarah, you're responsible. You shouldn't have loaned it to her. You have to pay for it. Tillie is a plot device for this chapter, not a character.

Merav:

I think it's interesting though that Tillie does not have her own library card. And I think that that's actually pretty significant because Mama is very interested in the kids having culture and education. And it's very possible that Tillie's parents are not or that they don't have access to a library for some reason. Tillie is a have-not. The girls, despite their poverty, have the library. And so for whatever reason, maybe it's just that Tillie does have her own library card and doesn't take stuff out. But for whatever reason, she's borrowing this book.

And we actually have the name of the book, which I think is really interesting that this gets included, which makes me suspect that this is a real life incident. The book is called *Peter and Polly in Winter*. And I discovered when we were doing research for the show, that it's actually available on Gutenberg. So I'm gonna put that in our show notes. So if you wanna check out

Peter and Polly in Winter, that is available as a free download.

Batya:
I definitely want to.

Merav:
If you see it and you know that it's there, there's Judaism on the page, but it's not explicit. Like if I was a kid growing up in the Midwest and I didn't have a Jewish background, I would not necessarily from this first chapter pick up that this was a Jewish family.

Batya:
I would give a lot to be able to remember my thoughts when I first read this book, because I cannot recall first grasping that this is a Jewish family. And I don't know if I would have gotten it just from the chapter, but like reading it as an adult, oh, we have to be home for supper

because it's Friday. That says to me, because it's Shabbos.

Merav:
Right.

Batya:
I don't know if that said that to me as a kid.

Merav:
I was definitely spoilered for this.

Batya:
Ah. I might have been also, come to think. I don't remember.

Merav:
(Overlapping) I was spoiled for this by my mother. I think it's possible, I don't remember exactly. My mother either acquired these books for us, like at the Negev Jewish Bookstore in Toronto, or we possibly bought them, we had a

yearly Jewish book fair. I was contextually aware before beginning the books that these were about Jewish children. That was sort of the hook that was used for reading them. I can't remember if we read these out loud or if I just read them personally. I definitely read them personally thereafter, but I think we might've done a read-aloud the first time. So I feel like that ability to see the Judaism is very opaque.

Batya:
Definitely in this first chapter. There's a clue, it's not a certain – it's not an “if you know for sure you know” – it's if you know you could guess.

Merav:
There could have been some big clunky clue that they didn't put in. You know, “we looked in the Passover cabinet,” like it's just not there. And I think this is sort of the, you know, the easing in that the editor did to say, hey, I want you to get to know these girls as girls, right?

Get to know this family as a family before we introduce the fact that they're religious.

Batya:
I think this would have been before the term “relatable” was common parlance. But definitely the idea, we want this to be relatable to any little children or at least any little girls. This is a thing that, so there's nothing in here that would make any American reader go, wait, what's that? What is this? These girls are not like me. Except of course, now, what there is that would make a reader go, wait, what? is there are time-related differences. There are a lot of slightly jarring things if you're a modern reader, I think. But the first kids reading this book, when it was published, it was not... When was this published?

Merav:
It was published in the 50s.

Batya:
In the 50s. It would still have been a while ago, but … it would not be more than a hundred years ago, which, let's just take a moment to have our heads explode, this is now more than a hundred years ago.

Merav:
I feel like the interior lives of these girls are very modern, they're very fresh. And because it was being written in the 50s, that's not more than 100 years ago, when Sydney Taylor was recreating her childhood adventures, and these were written for her daughter, Jo, because she took Jo to the place where she had grown up and the building was gone, and she was trying to take her around the neighborhood, and she was realizing that like that whole life had vanished.

And at this point, Sydney, who had been Sarah, is living a more secular life. It feels like a

different world to her to have lived this Jewish life with this very sort of strict set of rules, this paradigm of this apartment in a tenement. And that world is gone, right? She can't literally show it to her daughter. So she shows it to her daughter through prose.

Batya:
Yeah. So that's significant, I think, that at the same time, this is a, capturing a world that isn't there anymore, a world that's gone, and making it relatable to any reader of the time it's written in, and ideally of any time. I have no idea how much, if at all, Sydney Taylor was thinking of future generations reading this, but –

Merav:
Well, interestingly, she didn't intend to publish this. The lore goes, and I don't know if this is true, but this is the official story, is that she had this in a drawer and her husband decided that there was a book prize and he was gonna by

God send in his wife's book, and that book, in fact, did win the prize and it got published. So that's how we got All-of-a-Kind Family; is Sydney really wrote these for Jo, and then her husband, whose name I'm blanking on at the moment, decided that this was – Mr. Taylor, Ralph, I think Ralph Taylor, which I think he changed it from Schneider, which is sort of interesting, like that Americanization. And that book becomes a classic American book, which brings us back to what's on the page.

Batya:
I'm just going to briefly point out, for those of you not in the know, Schneider literally translates to Taylor.

Merav:
Exactly. Yes, Taylor and Schneider are the same word, different languages. Schneider is Yiddish –

Batya:
And I think also, is it the same word in German?

Merav:
We'll have to put that in the show notes. American culture. I feel like this is … honestly like having grown up in Canada, I didn't feel like this was a very American chapter. They're just kids going to the library. There's not any patriotism. There's not any specific call-outs to like, this is America. But it is clear they live in New York City, right? This is –

Batya:
Mm-hmm.

Merav:
– a different culture from the culture I grew up with. But they were doing something very familiar, which is they were going to the library, which is something that we did on a basically weekly basis as well. There's that call out of

like, this is something that belongs in North American cultural life, right? This is something that kids do in North America. And I don't know what it would have been like reading this book somewhere where a library was an uncommon thing, right? Where either there wasn't a library or the library was just for adults. This is clearly a kid focused library. And so that might actually be kind of a quiet American culture thing,

Batya:
Yeah.

Merav:
Not necessarily on the page, but available to you, here's a resource that you're expecting to have because America.

Batya:
It's not America yelling about being American as some aspects of American culture are, but it is distinctly American. There's the public library.

There's also, although it's not talked about directly, public school.

Merav:
Mm-hm. The public school and the public library system are not that old at this point. And we can put in the show notes, kind of a history of the library system and the school system and how they came about in New York City. These are institutions that the family and the narrative takes for granted, but they aren't established that long at this point. And that's actually pretty significant. I will also say that like, we're not getting a necessarily immigrant focused story here because the kids are not immigrants. but their parents are. So –

Batya:
Their parents are, but there isn't yet, and I think there isn't a lot ever, but there isn't any at all yet of their parents talking about the difference between here and the old country, either good

or bad. There's not a lot of talk about, we came from somewhere else where it was different.

Merav:
Right, and I feel like we don't really get that on the page –

Batya:
Not much.

Merav:
– until far later when we get the extended family. Right? We do eventually get other characters.

Batya:
We get some from the extended family. I know there's a bit, I don't remember which book it's in, but I'm fairly sure there's a bit where Papa talks about a particular thing they're doing, I mean, a Jewish thing they're doing and how they would have done it differently in the old

country. I do not recall Mama ever talking about where she came from before she was here. We will get to that later.

Merav:
So, the home versus the big world: the kids leave the house in the first book. And this is interesting because like a lot of this story, a lot of this novel is interior. Like we get a lot of sequences where they're literally just in the bedroom or in the parlor. They're not leaving the house. I think that this chapter is here to remind us that these kids exist in a larger culture, right? There's a library, there's a street, there's a whole world out there that isn't in the house. And the house looms large, right, in the imagination when you read the book. But I think this chapter is here to remind you that the home is this little speck compared to all of New York City.

Batya:

Now when they're looking for the book, as you said before, when they're looking for the book all over the house, the fact that like, it doesn't say the house is perfectly tidy. But there is no mention of having to look through clutter. There's no oh, there's this big pile of stuff, how could we possibly find anything? If the book was there, they'd see it. There's a specific place the books are kept. Every corner of the two bedrooms, they poke under beds and dressers. No one believed it was in the front room, but still they searched diligently. We get a little map of the house there –

Merav:
Yup. And how small it is.

Batya
And how small it is. Two bedrooms –

Merav:
Two bedrooms.

Batya:
– in a house with five children and two parents.

Merav:
Right.

Batya:
Two bedrooms, one front room and the kitchen. Which is, I think is where Mama is when they tell her –

Merav:
Which is another tell that Shabbat is coming, because their mother is cooking in the kitchen, but also because dinner is being made. So if you don't know, of course Mama is in the kitchen making dinner. But it's interesting because what we've just described is a tidy home and this comes into sort of the cultural divides that we see in this chapter, which are kind of invisible. And I think that this is really

more of what isn't on the page, but I'm gonna bring it up because it's a Jewish family and people think of that as being kind of a monolith. But in reality, and this is something that you were bringing up a minute ago about Papa saying in the old country, we did it this way. In the real Brenner family, the father was a Polish Jew. I think it was Polish. He might have been Russian. And he is descended of a rabbinical family with potentially the pressure to become a rabbi himself. And he comes to America and becomes a peddler, which we don't get introduced to at all even as a concept in this chapter, Mama comes from a German Jewish family and that is explicitly different.

Batya:
And if I recall correctly, an urban German Jewish family.

Merav:

And that's a really strong cultural divide, which is effectively invisible on the page right now, but is going to play in heavily into the way that the house is depicted, into the way that the marriage is depicted, into the way that the family is seen. Mama is the dominant force in the marriage, creating the image of the children. And she's creating them in the mold of German Jewish children. It's an upper-class presentation, despite the fact that she's kind of married, what they would call marrying down, right? Where she is married into a family that is not German-Jewish. And so she is choosing for love to be in this situation, which is actually quite difficult for her. And that doesn't show up a lot on the page, but when you read the biography of Sydney Taylor, you'll get the impression, as I did, that her mother's life was a lot less easy and gentle than it seems on this page.

Batya:

I am actually reminded in a weird way, and probably this is going to come back more than once in this podcast, unless you'd rather I didn't, in which case I won't. But I read these books in parallel with the Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder growing up. And I am reminded tremendously of how Ma Ingalls, Caroline Ingalls is kind of the arbiter of her girls being raised civilized. She doesn't actually use that word that much, or at all, maybe? –

Merav:
(Overlapping) But it's implied pretty heavily.

Batya:
– but it's very implied she wants her girls to know how to dress well and have fine manners, and she wants them to get an education. And it's in a radically different context and the places they're coming from are very different, but it is still very much the mother is the one who wants her girls to be ladies. And both in the sense of

how they behave and in the sense of what aspects of civilization that they need to have access to. They need to read. They need to have access to as much education as possible. And that's like explicitly on the page, different book, that's a promise that Ma and Pa Ingalls have had between them since before any of their daughters were born. I feel like despite their probably significant differences, Ma Ingalls and Mama Brenner would have had what to talk about.

Merav:
One of the nice things about All-of-a-Kind Family is that unlike the Little House books, it holds up, right? There's not that feeling of a great divide between us and the characters for time. Although I think maybe for a modern reader there would be. But there is a less problematic nature to these books, possibly because they were edited so heavily. And we kind of get that impression about how Taylor

and her editor kind of went back and forth on certain aspects of their lives. And I think that they made good decisions as far as what would be relatable. And I think it also relatively sensitively treats the Jewish/Gentile divide. Right. So this is something that is brought up very frequently in the books. I'm actually sort of surprised that we don't get it in the first chapter.

Batya:
I was thinking of it before, that there is nothing about “the library lady’s a gentile.”

Merav:
It does show up on the page a lot later, right, where we get into, you know, who is a Jew and who is a Gentile becomes a very, like, prevalent thing anytime we leave the home.

Batya:
Even when it's important later, there is not … there's no assumption of hostility, there's no

discussion of the possibility of hostility, you know it has to have been there.

Merav:
That does maybe covertly get raised in some of the sequences where Papa is talking, but it's just there.

Batya:
It's barely –

Merav:
It's similar to seeing the Judaism, seeing the antisemitism is very much a reading between the lines. But I think one of the reasons that Mama makes her girls look so perfect, to the point where they're praised –

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:

– is because she wants them to be above reproach. My girls are going to be perfect examples of young woman. And no one will say, oh, she's no good because she's Jewish.

Batya:
We don't get at any point Mama saying to her daughters, you have to behave well because if you behave badly, it will reflect poorly on us as Jews.

Merav:
It’s never said on the page and I don't know …

Batya:
I wonder to what degree it was said in real life, if at all, or if it was only ever just implied, or not even that.

Merav:
I think it was a by example thing. Certainly I think that was felt in the way that the girls

represent the family. I think that they were conscious of being sort of the ambassadors for the family in the world. And I think that plays heavily into what we see in later chapters in terms of scholastic achievement. I'm gonna go to one of my parallels, which is Ballet Shoes by Noel Streatfield, where the girls are orphans and they're brought in by this eccentric old man and they live together as sisters. They don't really have a father figure. They have multiple parental figures, most of whom are women and most of whom are learned women and are teachers. And the three girls make a vow that they will become famous and get their names in the history books. And I feel like there's a really strong parallel between that explicit, hey, we're going to do something with our lives, and the somewhat implicit world of All-of-a-Kind Family where the girls are just going out there and being impressive because that's what they've been taught to do. And I do think it's interesting that there isn't an implication of pressure here.

Not, oh, I hate being an All-of-a-Kind Family girl. I hate wearing these tights. It's, I'm doing this because it's what I do.

Batya:
Like we do get occasionally in some of the later books: boy, it would be great to be a boy, they don't have to whatever-whatever, or they're allowed to whatever-whatever. I don't recall ever showing up: boy, it would be great to be a gentile, except in the – well, it's Christmas and they're getting presents.

Merav:
I don't remember that.

Batya:
That's in one chapter in one of the later books. We'll get to that when we get to that. And for the most part, there isn't, if I weren't part of a Jewish family, I wouldn't have this obligation to – keep kosher or keep Sabbath, but like I

wouldn't have to be perfect all the time. I don't recall that ever showing up. I don't recall any of the girls at any point expressing, I wish I didn't have to always be so perfect.

Merav:
And that actually gets into one of the next things that's on our, what's on the page, which is kids being kids, right?

Batya:
Kids being kids.

Merav:
Playing versus acting out versus their responsibilities, right? I think you're right. There's no point at which the girls question their role in the world. They never say, oh, if I wasn't part of the All-of-a-Kind Family, if I wasn't a Brenner girl, who would I be? Right? I mean, Henny sort of goes into that fantasy of being a

boy later in the books, but that's really about acting out.

Batya:
Yeah. And it's also, it's also when Henny goes out about that, it reads to me a little bit more like she's – not “I want to be a boy,” but “it's not fair that I as a girl can't do the same things the boys do.”

Merav:
Exactly. Henny is not acting on a trans impulse. She's acting on an impulse that says, hey, I want to go and play kickball. I want to go and climb the fence. How come I can't do that? And then she just proceeds to do it anyway.

Batya:
Yes! She does it anyway.

Merav:
The feminist impulse is strong in the family.

Batya:
Oh, yes. It gets more explicit later. Right now, they're all still kids and they don't have the vocabulary to talk about that, but we get there eventually. Henny is the impulsive one and Henny is the least likely to care about what other people think of her.

Merav:
Exactly. Henny is outspoken, she's brash. She is the leader. But it's interesting that when Henny jumps in and gives the, “hey, this is who we are”, it's Ella who actually kind of says, “okay, but let me give some context here.”

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:
Let's get to the realities of the situation.

Batya:
After Henny has broken the ice, Ella takes over, because she's the oldest and she feels that responsibility.

Merav:
Not only the responsibility, but you know, Henny does the introduction, but Ella does the emotional heavy lifting. She's doing the emotional labor for the family. She is supporting Sarah so that Sarah doesn't have to do all of the, “oh no, I've lost my library book. I feel so responsible, I feel guilty.” Ella is taking on part of the burden as the eldest sister.

Batya:
Yeah.

Merav:
And that's something we see throughout the books. I think when we get to *Ella of All-of-a-Kind Family*, if we get there (laughter),

we will talk about Ella's ability to put down the older sister role and step away and have her own life. You know, what happens when the family unit does eventually spread out. I'm not going to say break up because they don't really break up. In fact, these women continue to be involved with each other their entire lives in a very close-knit way, and their children wind up in that same sort of situation. Obviously, we're not going to get too deep into the real families because the descendants of the Brenner family are out there and we don't want to impinge on their privacy.

Batya:
Right.

Merav:
So let's talk about what's not on the page.

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:
What's the historical context? We have this family living in what is almost certainly a tenement apartment. And they are, to whatever degree, thriving. Right? They are able to give their children pocket money. Papa is clearly making enough money. And we don't even have Papa's profession yet. We don't even have Papa.

Batya:
Yes, I think Papa is maybe mentioned once in this chapter, if that.

Merav:
And I think that's really, right, exactly. I think it's really just there to give us the context that there is a father.

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:
Right, that Mama is not raising these girls alone. Because that would be scandalous in historical context unless Mama was a widow. And therefore we explicitly mention that there is a dad. This is where we sort of talk about like tenement culture.

Batya:
1910s, Lower East Side, Manhattan is hard times. Wealthy people don't live here.

Merav:
I mean, if you have a choice, you move out. And in fact, that's exactly what the family does later, spoiler (laughter), *All-of-a-Kind Family Uptown*. But that's, that was a migration path that a lot of people took was that they would land on the Lower East Side and they would live in a tenement apartment and they would make money. And then eventually they would

save up and they would buy an apartment somewhere else. Because tenement apartments were almost always rentals. And even if you were eventually gonna rent somewhere else, this was an ability to save money towards that future and get somewhere nicer, where there were gonna be better schools and better education …

Batya:
There doesn't seem to be a consciousness on the family's part that this is not a good place to live?

Merav:
I think that that's down to Mama. Mama has made it a good place to live. And also, this goes into child psychology, but the idea that when we're kids, we don't know any different?

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:
The reality that we're presented with is the reality that we live. So yes, of course we're five in one bedroom. That's completely normal,

Batya:
We're five in one bedroom, our streets don't have trees. That's brought up later at some point, because this was before they started making sure that pretty much every street in the city had at least a median strip of grass and some trees here and there. That just wasn't there.

Merav:
Right, and I mean, people were cheek by jowl in every other apartment, so I think that the girls probably figured that this was just normal.

Batya:

And for that neighborhood at that time, it is, it's normal. Everything is very crowded, there's not a lot of space – What they think of as luxury is stuff we would consider basic.

Merav:
I mean they have clean clothes – we don't even know how they're washing their clothes. I assume that they're washing them in the kitchen sink and then starching and ironing and whatever else and drying them on a line.

Batya:
I feel like we get later a laundry day, but that's not yet.

Merav:
Right, and like bathing, and all of the facilities that we take for granted. I mean, in a tenement apartment, usually there was *a* bathroom down the hall. Or if you go earlier, there's an outhouse. And moreover, a lot of people living

in tenements were actually operating a business out of the front room. This family is sending their kids to school instead of putting them to work as lace makers. This was certainly an era where you could have been – at that age, you could have been in a mill.

Batya:
Uh-huh. We later meet someone, I think not until a later book, meet someone whose mother takes in sewing. People bring sewing that has to be done to her house, she does the sewing in her front room, they send the things back. Remote working! (laughter) Of a very early kind.

Merav:
An era of piecework, right? Where people would take in laundry, they would take in sewing, they would take in mending, whatever it was so that they could make a living, especially – and this is sort of going back to, they have

Papa as a provider – women who are without husbands.

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:
frequently were the people who did that because you had to be able to pay for a living. And we certainly will not be getting into sex work on this podcast –

Batya:
No.

Merav:
– but that was also a thing that was going on in the tenements. So we basically have a world where they're very much dependent on a single earner. And the idea of bringing in extra money is not a worry that they have on the page, but

it's sort of implied by the fact that they're living in a tenement.

Batya:
That – another thing that I don't recall happening in the later books is any perception on the part of the daughters that they have a responsibility to bring money into the household.

Merav:
Which is really interesting because I think if this was a book about boys, that there would be paper routes, that there would be – working in a shop, working as a delivery boy. Any of the things that boys traditionally did to bring in money, I think those things would be on the page. Because we're dealing with a family of girls who are eventually going to become women, we really don't see, okay, Henny got, went out and got a job delivering papers.

Batya:
But as you point out, there were plenty of things that girls and women could do out of their own homes that would bring money into the house and i don't recall that ever being … um, once again I'm going to compare to the Little House books, Laura has internalized the idea, shockingly early to my mind, she's got to do something to make money for the household.

Merav:
And I think that comes down to the pioneering spirit of the Little House books.

Batya:
Very probably, yeah.

Merav:
(overlapping) Whereas these girls are also pioneers, right? The Brenner family is pioneering, in America, but it's urban America, right?

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:
Laura and her siblings are in what I'm going to call wilderness America, where they are exploring and cultivating new spaces for white people.

Batya:
Mm-hmm.

Merav:
I'm going to say for white people –

Batya:
Oh yes –

Merav:
– because it's –

Batya:
(overlapping) Yeah.

Merav:
(overlapping) – it’s very evident from the books that they're –

Batya:
(overlapping) That's explicit.

Merav:
– not taking into account the fact that people who've lived there in civilizations for, you know, hundreds of generations, but they are, you know, cutting a swath for their own world. And Laura is very aware, like when she starts to grow up and do things, she's like, well, I'm going to be... Does Laura become a teacher?

Batya:
She becomes a teacher. She doesn't want to, but being a teacher will make money to send

her older sister, Mary, to college. And that's the big thing she is earning for, so Mary can go to college.

Merav:
And that is one of the parallels between these books and Little House books is that we have that sibling solidarity, the idea that you do your best for your siblings. And I think that is in some ways more important than the context of whether it's a tenement or whether it's a settler house. You have this world where family relationships are everything.

Batya:
Yeah, it is such a strong common thread, which I think is one of the reasons that I constantly think of them in parallel.

Merav:

And I think if the shoe was on the other foot, if they were not being given money, right? If there was no money for snacks,

Batya:
Mm-hmm.

Merav:
if there was no money to spend on pretty ribbons or whatever, the girls would be more conscious of the fact that Papa is struggling. But thankfully this is a story about, predominantly about, prosperity. Papa makes his living from rags.

Batya:
This is definitely a thing I want to go into when we get to that chapter because I do not understand the economy of junk shops, but we'll get to that.

Merav:

Oh, well, I will explain it to you because I come from a junk shop family.

Batya:
Ah!

Merav:
My grandfather was a scrap dealer, so I will 100% explain the economy of that. It really comes down to Papa is making do with what other people don't want. And then in the Ingalls Wilder books, for contrast, you kind of get this, you know, well, it's all out there, let's just take it. And I think that those are very different worlds. And I think that –

Batya:
Fundamentally different, yeah.

Merav:
– you know, this sort of moves us into, as modern readers, what are we seeing in this

world, right? We have this, I think we've talked about a lot of this in our previous segments, but what are we seeing in our chapter that might look weird? You talked about the clothes, the attitude towards, kind of what is a child's role? We haven't really gotten into – what do kids do in the home? Because this is something that, you were just saying, well, they don't work, they're not –

Batya:
I'm not gonna say they don't work, it's they don't make money. Those are distinct things.

Merav:
Right, those are very different. But their mother is definitely putting them to work.

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:

Right, like they're not getting that penny a day for free. They're getting that penny a day because they are cleaning the house.

Batya:
Which is what we're gonna get to in the next chapter.

Merav:
And they are maintaining a contract with their parents, they will do profitable work in the house, in the home, keeping the home beautiful and tidy so that they can live a good life. I think that that's a key piece is they're being paid, not by an external force, but by an internal force to keep them, I won't say in line, because the girls are clearly cooperating with the scheme –

Batya:
Mm-hmm.

Merav:

But they're keeping the home in line

Batya:
(overlapping) Yes.

Merav:
with what Mama's idea of the home should be.

Batya:
Home is everybody's responsibility. And like, I don't think their penny a day allowance is directly tied to them doing the chores.

Merav:
No.

Batya:
They do the chores regardless, they get the penny regardless. But social contract is a good way of looking at that.

Merav:

Part of that social contract is being home for dinner. They know that if they don't come home for dinner on Friday, the social contract is broken. They know if they don't finish their food, like this comes up in a later chapter, they might not get their penny the next day. They might not get food the next day. Like there is a strict social contract being enforced. 90% of the time, the girls are happy to live within the social contract.

Batya:
The trouble in this chapter is not within the house. It's between the household and an exterior entity. I suppose you could say between the household and society, insofar as the library is part of their larger social contract with the city.

Merav:
That's another thing, is the idea of the Jew as American. We get a lot of American patriotism in these books, which I think is fascinating, and

was actually a really interesting influence on me as a Canadian child –

Batya:
Mmm.

Merav:
– who later moved to America, which I think we'll talk about when we get to the Fourth of July chapter.

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:
But the reality of these books is that they're very – the parents, anyway, are very aware of their engagement with the American society, aware of the religious freedom that they're given. We don't see them in a religious context yet, but we will. And the parents are aware that they're being given the chance to make it in America,

regardless of who they are. And I think that that's the American pluralism at work. And it's such an influence on Taylor's writing. It's baked into this world that they are being allowed to do whatever they want as equal citizens of America. And she's writing this after the Holocaust.

Batya:
That's another thing, is that for the characters, nothing like that has happened yet. Mama as an urban German Jew …

Merav:
She definitely has the experience of being an immigrant. And I think Papa does also. They're not … so the children are first generation American. They're being raised as Americans.

Batya:
No, but I was just thinking, early, early 20th century German Jewish experience,

anti-Semitism seemed, I mean the word anti-Semitism hadn't been coined yet. *Judenhass*, Jew-hate, seemed pretty much a thing of the superstitious past and it wasn't a thing anymore.

Merav:
In Germany.

Batya:
It was not, oh, we have to leave to escape our neighbors hating us. And by the time Sydney Taylor was writing this down that was roundly disproven. But again that doesn't really come into the books, that's our awareness of history affecting how we read it.

Merav:
We also know that she writes these books just after the war.

Batya:

Right.

Merav:
And so that's a really interesting piece, is that she's trying to preserve this capsule of Judaism on the Lower East Side for her daughter, possibly because she's aware of how much has been lost.

Batya:
You know, that’s very possible.

Merav:
There's that entire world of religious Jewry in Poland, in Germany, effectively annihilated. She can't take Jo back to the source and say, this is where my parents came from, she has to build it whole cloth.

Batya:

Right, and in a very different way for very different reasons, the context she grew up in is also gone.

Merav:
Exactly.

Batya:
There’s layers here, there's our awareness of Sydney Taylor's awareness of the recent past and the time in which she was writing this. We're guessing, to a large part –

Merav:
Yeah.

Batya:
– how much that knowledge was affecting her. And affecting the way she presented this because she doesn't put it in directly, she doesn't write it out for us to see.

Merav:
And there's certainly no introduction that says –

Batya:
Right.

Merav:
And at the same time, it's very hard to conceive a Jewish life lived without an awareness of the Holocaust. You know, three to five years after the Holocaust, when she's writing this first novel, she's gotta be aware of the impact.

Batya:
It's unthinkable that not be in her consciousness as she was – not even necessarily foremost in her consciousness, not something that motivated her necessarily in any way, but it has to have been there.

Merav:

And I mean, living as a secular Jew, I think she has to be aware of the fact that the people that she grew up with, the people who formed her parents were the targets.

Batya:
Yeah.

Merav:
And I think that is an important, you know, keeping in mind her father is, and this is again not on the page, from a rabbinical family.

Batya:
We know, although we haven’t got to them yet in this chapter, but we are going to, in later chapters, get to a whole swath of aunts and uncles. And only a couple of those are pointed out in terms of whose sibling they are, Mama’s or Papa’s. So we're gonna play some fun guessing games when we get to the ones who

aren't named as – but clearly, both Mama and Papa have family here.

Merav:
Yes, and that's actually really important, because inside the context of the books, and I think we've talked about this a little bit, we have the house and we have the greater New York City. We also have this smaller ring of family, where they're the homes of the aunts and uncles. And while those don't play an enormous role on the page, I suspect that the girls spent a lot of time in that ring, right, spending time with those aunts and uncles and having those other parental-age figures guiding their lives. So it's not 100% clear. I definitely think that there is tension between Mama and Papa and the various family members, but I don't think that it's as explicit on the page as it might otherwise be.

Batya:

Yeah, some tensions do get spelled out on the page, and others are barely, if at all, implied.

Merav:
I think though that what we see is that this is a very, I wouldn't say that the family unit is closed off, but that it operates under its own regulations.

Batya:
Yeah, it is a nuclear family with all that implies. It's not a multi-generational or multi-parent household.

Merav:
It is a two-parent household, but it is in some ways a single-parent vision because Mama's … Mama's word is law.

Batya:
That's very true. No, but I was thinking like, it's not a household where multiple parents with

multiple sets of children are all living together as a single – there's no grandmother or other aunts or uncles helping to raise the kids. The kids are being raised by Mama and secondarily by Papa.

Merav:
I mean, I would say that in a *kol Yisrael achra'im zeh lazeh* –

Batya:
(overlapping) Oh for sure.

Merav:
– that we kind of get – and to just define that for our audience, "all of Israel is responsible each for the other" –

Batya:
Mm-hmm.

Merav:

Right? Like everybody looks out for everyone else.

Batya:
The community absolutely exists. There are ways in which they can call in help and help will come. But it is, the thing I mean is that that is help. That's not their job.

Merav:
Exactly. There's no one who lives with them and there's no one who drops in on the regular to like look in on them. It's very much Mama is running the show – and we do know from the historical context that she absolutely needed help at certain points. One of the things that's not on the page is the fact that despite the fact that the girls are steps-and-stairs, there were miscarriages, right? There were definitely, historically, quite a few of these instances where Mama was bedridden and was devastated and didn't have the energy to get up

and do. And of course, you know, one of the things we're looking at here is a lack of birth control.

Batya:
That's true.

Merav:
So the fact that we have this steps-and-stairs family is great, but we have to think about what creates that.

Batya:
Yeah, they are not consciously spacing their kids. The fact that there is a child every two years and not, e.g. every year, as there was in another book about a family that I am probably going to call in every so often, is *Cheaper by the Dozen* –

Merav:
Oh, absolutely.

Batya:
– by Frank Gilbreth Jr. and Ernestine Gilbreth, which was a family of twelve kids, the children of Frank Gilbreth, the efficiency expert, who practiced his efficiency theories on his kids, which sounds dreadful when I say it that way. It does not at all sound dreadful, the way they talk about it in the books – was probably somewhere in between.

Merav:
And his wife actually was complicit in that.

Batya:
(overlapping) Oh, for sure.

Merav:
(overlapping) I mean, not only did they agree to have 12 children, she herself was an efficiency expert and actually carries on Frank's work when he dies. So it's not just Frank imposing it

on the family. It's both parents conducting a social experiment.

Batya:
Very much so.

Merav:
And it's interesting because while the books are explicitly about the Dozen, at one point in the books, one of the children actually quietly dies. And we just don't really get the details of that. And we continue with the adventures and her name is just gone.

Batya:
And we don't hear about what that was like for the family. But the reason I bring it up is that there is a kid every year, there's no multiple births, which they say we always thought Dad must have been disappointed about that because that would have been so much more efficient, to have just six sets of twins. But it's

every year there's another child, they start talking about, we want the latest model.

But the thing is that yeah, there's not a child every year in this family and Mama is clearly very fertile. There's five kids and spoiler, there will be a sixth.

Merav:
Eventually, spoiler, there will be a seventh.

Batya:
That's true, I'd forgotten about that. That comes much later.

Merav:
Much much later, that's a very future spoiler, but ultimately yes, I mean Mama's fertility is a character in the book to some degree because it is her fertility that creates the family.

Merav:

I think it's time for our Deep Dive.

Batya:
The Deep Dive! We're going to do this occasionally or regularly, depending on how we feel about it, where we're going to just pick one little detail in the chapter, and we're going to *delve*.

Merav:
So our deep dive subject this week is paper cuffs. The library lady is described as being very neat and she is wearing a blouse with paper cuffs. And so we were both kind of interested in this, like what are paper cuffs and why? A lot of this data came from the Disposable America website. I'm gonna include a link in the show notes where they were talking about paper collars. Paper collars were also very common. They also made things like paper shirt fronts. And some of these actually survive. I will include a link in the show notes to those as

well. These were a heavily manufactured item that was extremely common in working class people who wanted to look neat and respectable, but didn't necessarily have the money to wear a different shirt every day. So we're gonna talk about the footprint of the paper cuff – Batya, I know that you were dying to talk about certain things, so –

Batya:
[laughter] I'll get to them as I get to them –

Merav:
(overlapping) [laughter] Go for it.

Batya:
But yeah, the paper cuff, as I understand it – and correct me if I'm wrong, because you did more of the research about this than I did – the paper cuff was disposable, you didn't clean it and reuse it, you threw it out, and that was cheaper than either having many different shirts

– and the reason the collar and cuff specifically is that that's where sweat happened, and that's where visible soiling of the shirt happened, and you either had to get the shirts laundered repeatedly, or you had to be able to just swap in clean, pristine paper collars and cuffs. It's kind of amazing to me that this hasn't lasted.

Merav:
It's interesting, the thing you were saying about disposing of paper cuffs and collars, because they were actually making them more and more durable as time went on, is they stopped being paper and they start being cellulose. And one of the things that brings down the paper collar empire is that people start seeing them as unsanitary because they're absolutely certain that people have just turned around their paper collar and are using the other side, the clean side.

Batya:

Oh … oh heavens. [laughter]

Merav:
(overlapping) And, of course, that's ridiculous because if you turn it around, what you're showing is the sweaty side. At the outset, they are absolutely a disposable product. You get them in a little flat box, and they came in a really large variety of styles. There were like eight or nine standard styles for collars. There were multiple styles for cuffs. So you could sort of pick what you wanted to look like and then just buy them in the right size for you and they were
adjustable. And they would frequently have buttons and other things on them to make them look like real cuffs and collars.

Batya:
But apparently, I mean, just to judge by this scene, you could tell just by looking –

Merav:
Yes.

Batya:
– that they were paper.

Merav:
There was a whole fad for that, actually. There was a fad for imprinting the look of linen onto the paper.

Batya:
You have that now with paper disposable napkins.

Merav:
Napkins, tablecloths …

Batya:
That it’s supposed to look and even to a degree feel like a cloth napkin. And I find some of the ones that are the fanciest looking are actually

the least useful as napkins. They don't absorb or wipe very well, but they look so pretty.

Merav:
That was the case with the celluloid collars too, is instead of being able to sweat into your collar like you would with cloth, you were basically accumulating sweat under the collar and it would run into your shirt, which would not be great. So then they started adding linings and the lining would absorb the sweat. So that was something that was going on for quite a long time before this scene occurs. And so what's really interesting to me about this sequence where they meet Miss Allen and she's wearing a paper cuff, this is out of fashion.This is indicating actually that Miss Allen is a little bit old-fashioned to wear these.

Batya:
Oh –

Merav:
She's looking neat and presentable, but she also looks a little bit old-fashioned. I don't know if this is confabulation on Sydney Taylor's part, you know, having the paper cuffs on Miss Allen or whether this was just an anachronistic thing. They were still available. People were still making them.

Batya:
They just weren’t a fad anymore.

Merav:
Because, I mean, we're really looking at sort of the Sherlock Holmes, Importance of Being Earnest. you know –

Batya:
Yes, where you have people scribbling things on their cuffs, and, you know, if you read that and you thought, what are they doing writing on their clothes, it looks very different when you're

aware that what they are scribbling on is a piece of paper that is going to be removable later.

Merav:
And this is of course, where we get the phrase “off the cuff,” because public speakers, when they wanted to make notes, would just make them on their cuff. And they would just read them off the cuff, literally off the cuff.

Batya:
I'm so delighted to know that. Like, it made my day when we found that bit. Never occurred to me to wonder why “off the cuff” was a thing.

Merav:
I had the idea that people were like putting note cards into their sleeve, but this makes a lot more sense. So we definitely see references to this in Sherlock Holmes where he's writing notes on his cuff, so it's definitely a factor in this

era. And there is both, you know, this idea of like the sensational new thing, the paper cuff that everyone is wearing, the paper collar. And then there's also this attempt to appear higher class, very much a – you know, you're clerking for somebody wealthy, you want to look nice. In this case, I think Miss Allen is really just trying to look proper.

Batya:
Yeah.

Merav:
Right? She's trying, and I mean, because she works with ink all day long, I think that that's a practical reason to wear paper cuffs. Because think about the fact that, when you stamp library books, you're stamping them off an ink pad. Modern world – I'd have to look up how old ink pads are.

Batya:

I do remember that when I was first getting books from a library as a little, little kid, they were still using the kind of stamp that you stamped on a separate ink pad and then stamped on the thing you were marking. And then somewhat later it was the stamp with its own built-in ink pad
that didn't get exposed to the air, that when you pressed down, the stamp would rotate and bring the stamping surface from pressed against the internal ink pad to pressing against the page. And of course, now –

Merav:
Right.

Batya:
– everything is digital in a library and ink is barely at all a thing.

Merav:

Right, but in Miss Allen's day, she absolutely would have been encountering ink, not only on a daily basis, but on an hourly basis.

Batya:
For sure.

Merav:
So in order to stay looking neat, you know, okay, so my cuffs are ink-stained, I'm going to throw them out, or I'm going to launder them. But either way, they're going to be, you know, disposable paper or durable cellulose.

Batya:
I'm looking right now at the initial description of the library lady who “looks fresh and clean in a crisp white shirtwaist with long sleeves ending in paper cuffs.” Sarah is wondering, watching the library lady pull cards in and out of the index file, she's wondering “how does she keep her nails so clean?” And it's very clearly important

to Miss Allen to, whether for her own purposes or because that is like library policy or both, she has got to present as neat, as tidy, as clean, as respectable. And the paper cuffs, at least in Sarah's eyes, contribute to that. Sarah is not thinking... Oh, the only note marring her perfectly put together setup is the paper cuffs. No, the paper cuffs are part of …

Merav:
… a perfectly put together woman, a woman that she – she immediately feels attraction to this woman, like this is a person I could like.

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:
And I think a lot of that is the way that Miss Allen presents. And part of that is this higher-class look, where she's basically clean and starched, and she's got proper looking

cuffs. Like, I don't think she's wearing a paper shirt front. I think she's actually wearing a proper shirt front and she – we don't get a description of what she's wearing below the waist, presumably because she's behind a desk, but one has to assume that it's a skirt.

Batya:
It's got to be, and very likely a long skirt – I don't know about floor-sweeping but –

Merav:
Yeah, absolutely below the knee. I'd have to go and look at women's fashion. My brain provides the pencil skirt, but I think it's too early. I think we're probably dealing with something with … not a bustle, but like a straight skirt, probably with some kind of petticoat.

Batya:
I'm seeing a Gibson Girl look.

Merav:
I definitely get Gibson Girl from Miss Allen.

I think that brings us to the end of our show for this week. Thank you all for listening. We're really happy to have you here with us. And if you're reading along with us, we'll be covering the second chapter in a couple of weeks, so come and join us again on All-of-a-Kind Family Podcast. I'm Merav Hoffman.

Batya:
I'm Batya Wittenberg, we're really glad you're here.

Batya:
Tune in next time, when we'll hear Mama say: "Henny, put aside your book, it's your turn to dust the front room today."