

Merav Hoffman:

Welcome to the All-of-a-Kind podcast. I'm Merav Hoffman.

Batya Wittenberg:

I'm Batya Wittenberg.

Merav:

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

Batya:

Today's chapter is the one where Mama takes the girls to Coney Island.

Merav:

I love this chapter so much.

Batya:

I love – this is such a big chapter. There's so much going on.

Merav:

I'm going to do the summary. When summer heat is relentless, Mama promises the girls a visit to the beach. The girls help Mama prepare, packing lunches and carrying bundles on the overcrowded streetcar, arriving early enough to swim in the ocean before eating lunch. They play in the sand and beg to be allowed to visit the Midway. Mama relents, but then disaster strikes when Henny gets lost. Mama and Ella fruitlessly search the crowd until the carnival workers suggest that they try the police station. Henny turns up safe and sound, and the family comes back to meet Papa in the sweltering city, almost too tired to tell him of their adventures.

Batya:

Oof. So summer in New York. I'm going to take a tiny personal moment here and talk about when my family first moved to New York, when I

was fifteen. And before that we'd lived in Jerusalem for two years, and before that pretty much all my conscious life we'd have been in Seattle, which is mild. And in Jerusalem we had to deal with heat, and in New York I was introduced to heat plus humidity. Oh. My lord.
(laughter)

Merav:

It's not the heat, it's the humidity.

Batya:

There's a reason for that saying, it genuinely is. And the first week and a half that we were in New York, this would have been in the summer of '90, we were staying in a relative's apartment which had fans but no air conditioning.
(whispering) It was bad.

Merav:

Yeah.

Batya:

And I do not know how people managed – well, this is how people managed before there was reliable air conditioning is – they suffered. They suffered a lot.

Merav:

That's the truth. So let's go in for what's on the page –

Batya:

– and what's not on the page.

Merav:

All right, so I don't think we have any new permanent characters this chapter. We certainly meet a lot of people.

Batya:

We meet a lot of people that we have not

encountered before, and I don't think we ever see any of them again. This is a chapter full of strangers.

Merav:

Mm-hm. But mostly benevolent strangers, which is pretty nice.

Batya:

Yeah, which is real nice. Yeah, a trip like this, you could meet unpleasant people, and if in real life they did, they didn't make it onto the page. Which I think, probably a good call. This is a really – despite the fact that there is genuine deep terror near the end of it, this is mostly a really upbeat, happy, “good things are happening” chapter.

Merav:

Yes. And I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that we're getting away from the grind, and

especially the heat, but also just the workaday life. And we're going to the beach.

Batya:

Yes.

Merav:

And the beach comes with ... Coney Island, for those of you that don't know, is an actual barrier island. It has beaches. And those beaches are some of the most desirable beaches on the New York ... what do you call it?

Batya:

Coastline?

Merav:

Coastline. Thank you. Good. (laughter) It's a very desirable place to go. It's been inhabited for a long time. The derivation of the name Coney Island, do you know this one?

Batya:

I'd always sort of vaguely thought that, I mean, I know that coney is a word for rabbits.

Merav:

Yes.

Batya:

For wild rabbits, and I assume that there were rabbits there at some point.

Merav:

That's what I understand. So this was originally kind of a rabbit preserve, kind of naturally, and now there are people there. And there is a long history of Coney Island, which we're gonna get into later.

Batya:

For those of you who have already guessed,

yes, you are right. The reason I know that coneys means rabbits is Lord of the Rings.
Thank you.

Merav:

Shocked, shocked to discover that you read
The Lord of the Rings.

Batya:

(laughter)

So is there Judaism in this chapter? Not so
much. There's a little.

Merav:

Tiny amount.

Batya:

There is a reference, when they see the
bearded lady, that one of the girls says her
beard is “even longer than Uncle Schloimon's.”

Merav:

Yes, which is the sole explicitly Jewish thing that happens in this chapter, but as we're going to get into when we do our deep dive, I'm going to talk about the Jewish history of sideshows.

Batya :

Ooh yes, that's gonna be fun.

Merav:

So there is definitely Judaism, but not necessarily where we can see it.

Batya:

Yes. American culture. I would say, yeah, that the tradition of going to the beach and making a day of it is not specifically American, I don't think.

Merav:

No.

Batya:

I'm sure that everyone who has ever lived on a coastline has done this. But there is something about the way this particularly is done. It's not just American, but very specifically early 20th century New York.

Merav:

I would say that there's definitely antecedents for this in British and other European practice, definitely like cities like Brighton, places where there was a waterfront and they've had pavilions and gambling establishments and that kind of thing. But definitely this combination of beach and amusement park does feel very American. And you know, the idea of "it's cooler by the water" absolutely is a common, you know, human thing, like, let's go over there where it's not sweltering. So this is really a treat for the girls because they've been sleeping on

the floor of the front room. And even that isn't a treat because it's so, so hot in the city.

Batya:

Yeah. It's an interesting contrast when we had, earlier in the book we had: it's so cold.

Merav:

Yeah.

Batya:

It's so cold and there's nothing to heat the house with except the stove.

Merav:

Right, and they're putting the irons in the beds.

Batya:

And now it's so hot that the enclosed bedroom is unbearable. And the one room that's got a window in it isn't a lot better.

Merav:

Yeah, it goes back to that whole structure of tenements idea where the front room has those two little parallel windows and that's pretty much the only place that air is coming in. So sleeping in the front room, I mean, many of the people in New York City at this time were sleeping on the roofs of the buildings.

Batya:

Yeah, there's mention of that, on the roofs and fire escapes. And it's interesting to me that that does not seem to be considered as an option for Mama's girls.

Merav:

I would say it's probably a dignity thing.

Batya:

It may be a dignity thing, it may be a safety

thing, there may just not be room on the rooftops and fire escapes.

Merav:

That's possible. (laughter)

Batya:

Any number of things. But dignity is the first thing that comes to mind for you, and I think that's probably, if not the whole of it, that's probably a big part of it, that it wouldn't feel, ah ... civilized, to sleep on the roof.

Merav:

There's probably also a modesty component, I would assume.

Batya:

Oh yes, that's related.

Merav:

Because they're in their night clothes, and anyone who has to strip down further, that can't be done in public, right? If Gertie wiggles out of her nightshirt in the middle of the night, that's insufficiently dignified.

Batya:

Huh. I've actually just realized that the book does not mention whether or not they slept without clothes or with fewer bedclothes on than usual, not bedclothes because bedclothes means sheets and blankets, but nightclothes. Whatever it is they wore to bed there's no mention of, did they go with less of it or without it entirely.

Merav:

Right, it's just not mentioned.

Batya:

That I suspect is a dignity and modesty thing.

Merav:

I have always sort of assumed nightgowns, simply because the old world sensibility that Mama has, this is sort of before pajamas become a thing for girls. So I would assume that they're wearing some kind of like a flowing shift, but who knows? We just don't have a particular picture of that.

Batya:

Yeah. Yeah, I have the vague notion that flannel nightgowns are mentioned in the winter parts of the book. I don't know if they had lighter summer nightgowns, and if in this case they didn't use them, we do not hear of it.

Merav:

Right.

Batya:

And that doesn't seem likely to me, honestly.
That just, if everybody's sleeping on mattresses
in the floor of the front room, I – it doesn't feel
like something Mama would approve –

Merav:
No.

Batya:
– for them to be sleeping naked or only in
underpants on the floor in the front room.

Merav:
And I mean, we don't even necessarily have a
great picture of what they're wearing. We know
that they wear bloomers.

Batya:
Yeah.

Merav:

You know, we would know that they wear tights. We don't necessarily have a picture at this time of what they're wearing to sleep in. So it's just kind of a, okay, well, hopefully it was comfortable, but no one knows.

Batya:

I mean, yeah, hopefully they were able to do what little they could to make things more comfortable, but it's clear nothing they can do is gonna beat the heat.

Merav:

Right.

Batya:

Can't be done. It's just too, it's just too damn hot.

Merav:

And it's interesting to me that we get this initial

interior space, right? I mean, we have this initial sequence where they're in the house, it's too hot. And then we have the getting-ready sequence, right? Mama is like, if it's hot another day longer, I'm taking you guys to the beach. That's it. You know, we're getting out of the city. And it's funny that like, Mama's idea of "out of the city" is Coney Island. So that's ... you know how in "The Night Before Christmas," the poem, it's written at the country estate of Chelsea which is quite literally Chelsea, midtown Manhattan.

Batya:

Huh.

Merav:

But at that point, when everyone was living way down at the tip of Manhattan, that was considered kind of an upstate location. So in this case Coney Island is, you know, outside the

city. Whereas in modern convention we think of it as being inside the city.

Batya:

It's very much in the interior of the city. But yeah, this is, this is the classic "I remember when this part of the city was all farmland, far as the eye could see."

Merav:

(overlapping) Yeah, exactly.

Batya:

It's not farmland exactly, but it is, uh ... suburban? Is that even the word? Not really.

Merav:

I wouldn't say it's suburban at this point, because it's been developed a lot. This is not the first time there's been an amusement park on this land. We'll talk about that in a bit. But

the beach is still kind of this, you know, it's a beach, right? It's not a managed beach. It's not a beach you have to pay to get onto. It's literally just a public beach. Right? They're able to go for free. They just have to pay for the trolley. So it's definitely, and this is one of the things that comes up later in the chapter, is the fact that they can do this for free is what makes it possible.

Batya:

Yes.

Merav:

Right? Because Mama doesn't have money to have them go to the amusement park and do things. They can go to the amusement park and they can look. So the beach sequence is sort-of the – okay, this is our free vacation. We bring our lunches. We bring our clothes. We probably are paying a little bit of money to use the

bathhouse to get a key, because we have that bit where they go and lock all their clothes in the bathhouse.

Batya:

There is a mention of that, yeah.

Merav:

And then that's the, you know, the sunk cost of doing this is being able to buy a bathhouse key.

Batya:

That and the streetcar.

Merav:

And then taking the streetcar both ways for six people. So that's probably, you know, all of the expenses. Plus, Mama does splurge and she buys them cupcakes.

Batya:

Yes, oh gosh. Frosted cakes, this is such an extravagance.

Merav:

Right, and there are two flavors.

Batya:

Chocolate and vanilla frosting, yes.

Merav:

And so that's a huge treat for the girls. And I mean, everything else is very home cooked. We get the loving description of the meal, and then we get the surprise of the cupcakes. And that's sort of supposed to be the treat. So I feel like there's a little inveigling going on here. We're like, oh, we had this wonderful beach excursion. We're playing in the water, and we're eating lunch, and now we're going to go home! ... No.

Batya:

(laughter)

Merav:

At that point, the girls are like, hey, so there's this amusement park –

Batya:

(pleading tone) Are we going to the midway?

Merav:

Right. And they don't even say midway. In fact, Henny, I think, I would have to look. I think she says Playland.

Batya:

I think you're right. Yes.

Merav:

And we're going to get into that a little bit later, and sort-of talk about what does that mean and kind of, what was there at the time. So we have

these small beseeching children, you know, they've dried off, they've eaten, and now they've been playing in the sand. And I love the description of them playing in the sand.

Batya:

Yes, oh, so much.

Merav:

Like they're burying each other in the sand up to their necks and like the whole sort-of period fads for sand castles, kind of the, you know, that's what you do with sand. Like they don't have fancy buckets and shovels, they're playing with seashells and they're making whatever they can with their hands.

Batya:

And they're building tunnels, which is always one of my favorite things to do.

Merav:

That's one of my favorites, especially if you can flood them.

Batya:

You can flood them, but also like, I'm gonna dig a hole here, you dig a hole there, we're gonna try to burrow through the tight-packed sand –

Merav:

Tunnel between them to get to each other.

Batya:

– and see if the roof of it stays up.

Merav:

Yeah, exactly. I used to like to build little sand labyrinths.

Batya:

Oh yes, oh yes, we did roads and we did, uh –

one of the things that always fascinated me from the point I realized you could do it is using the edge of a sand shovel or some, anything else with a hard straight edge, to make dozens of tiny, tiny little steps.

Merav:

Yes, that's kind of great.

Batya:

All over the sandcastle.

Merav:

That's very medieval.

Batya:

Favorite thing to do.

Merav:

That sounds like fun. And yeah, we get to see them just kind of being kids and playing. In fact,

they have games that they play. Mama brings a ball. They're playing in the water. And they're actually playing games that we know. Like they're playing, um ... Ring Around the Rosie. So Ring Around the Rosie is something that we're all pretty familiar with, including the whole falling down into the water, because it's nice and safe to fall down into water.

Batya:

Yes. I don't think it ever occurred to me, despite having read this as a kid, that you could play that in the water, but sure, that's great fun. When you "all fall down," you get a ducking.

Merav:

Right, exactly. So, and I don't know, I mean, I'm picturing Henny pulling everyone down at the end, but like maybe it's all of them. Maybe they're all kind-of into that. I mean, bathing in water that's deep enough to swim in is pretty

unusual in their lives. It's not like these kids have a pool or anything else that's near them that they can kind-of immerse in.

Batya:

Right. And there is no mention of a thing that I know did happen occasionally, because I have come upon it in other works written about this same time and place, is the impromptu fire hydrant water park.

Merav:

Not positive we have fire hydrants yet. We must, because there's a fire department. But I don't think it gets mentioned on the page.

Batya:

The thing I am thinking about, which is, I forget whether I have mentioned it before, Sam Levinson, Jewish comedian writing about his upbringing in just about this same time and

place, writes at one point about, on some day where it is too hot to move, the city opening up a fire hydrant, putting an empty bucket over the nozzle of it, and sending a geyser six floors up —

Merav:

They still do it.

Batya:

— and all the kids in the neighborhood charging into the street to get wet all over and dance around in the spray. And just, I cannot call to mind the phrasing, but it's just this immensely evocative passage. And so yeah, I don't know if Mama's girls would be allowed to do that.

Merav:

Hard to say, but my feeling is probably not, unless of course it was an event like this where it was just so hot. It might've happened, we

don't know. It's not on the page.

Batya:

It might have. But going to the beach is a much more dignified way to get completely wet all over at once.

Merav:

And we have another sort of Mama's wisdom here, where she brings them sweaters.

Batya:

Yes.

Merav:

Right?

Batya:

“It's so hot, why are we packing sweaters?”

“You'll thank me later.”

Merav:

Right, exactly. Like we're definitely sort of setting it up –

Batya:

That's not even actually in the book, I don't think –

Merav:

(overlapping) No, you're just making that up.
(laughter) But that is kind of the –

Batya:

(overlapping) But that's just very clearly – like, that is the kind of dialogue you can imagine happening.

Merav:

Absolutely. And because this is such an ensemble chapter, we kind of get all of the different girls' voices –

Batya:

Oh yeah.

Merav:

– you know, as they're packing up and getting ready, Charlotte daydreaming and Henny clowning around and everybody just kind of waiting – they're wearing high button shoes.

Batya:

Yep.

Merav:

In this heat.

Batya:

In this heat.

Merav:

So God knows what the rest of it is. Like what

else are they wearing? We don't really know. We just get clothes and shoes, but like ... what's interesting to me is that they're packing their lunches in shoeboxes. I thought that was an interesting detail.

Batya:
What a brilliant idea.

Merav:
It's a great idea, because it's not going to get – I mean, if it gets damaged, it gets damaged. Nobody cares. If it gets lost, oh well, we lost this shoebox. But they're not putting, like, expensive objects into these boxes. They're fairly disposable. But we do see them bring them back. So clearly, there's some utility in keeping these.

Batya:
Sure, I mean, of course you want to save them,

but like, I don't think, I don't know if you could get, uh, like, brown paper bag lunchbags kind of stuff, but even if you could, this is more economical, they're easily reusable –

Merav:

Exactly.

Batya:

– and, uh, they're less likely to get crushed and crush whatever is inside. They're sturdier.

Merav:

Right, because this is very much the era well before Tupperware, right? Like what would you take to the beach?

Batya:

I'm thinking, yeah, that like this is before also brightly colored plastic lunch boxes.

Merav:

Right, I mean, I think the classic thing would be a picnic basket. But this is sort of more practical because they're going to be going on the streetcar.

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Merav:

And they also have to pack, you know, enough food for six people.

Batya:

Enough food, a ball to play with, sweaters, you can imagine Mama making the list.

Merav:

Yeah, absolutely. So this is really well thought out so that they have everything that they need when they go. I think the depiction of them on

the streetcar is very interesting too, kind of the reality of kind-of being crowded into this streetcar and having all of this, you know, excitement going on around them and just kind of trying to get there and not fall out of their seats. And then we have this wonderful sequence with Ella kind of daydreaming about Charlie.

Batya:

Oh yes, this tiny little interlude.

Merav:

And she's just kind-of like in her reverie.

Batya:

And it starts with her, in a very adult sort of way, asking Mama, what do we hear from Charlie? What's happening with him?

Merav:

Right, like let's be confidants now, now that we both know this secret. Let's talk about what's happening. Mama's just like, oh, it's not good. Right? Charlie is very distressed. It's still not going anywhere, right? Like, I think Mama certainly thinks this is a lost cause.

Batya:

She uses the word “hopeless.” Not about the situation, but about how Charlie is feeling.

Merav:

Exactly.

Batya:

And that's such an awful word. I mean it is a perfect word for an awful feeling.

Merav:

In *From Sarah to Sydney*, we learned that Mama herself was a depressive. So it's very

likely that she was recognizing that in Charlie. Not that I think Charlie is actually a real person, but that in this, in this scenario, in this reality that we have in the book, Mama's empathy for Charlie is maybe born a little bit of her own inner anxieties and fears.

Batya:

Very well could be.

Merav:

Right, what would I do, you know, in his situation? And then we have this lovely sequence of Ella like dreaming up a happy ending for Charlie.

Batya:

Yeah. Yeah, she's writing a little bit of Real Person Fanfic for Charlie in her head.

Merav:

Yes. He's gonna find the perfect, you know, the girl, she's gonna reappear, they're gonna meet – and she comes up with, and I kind of wonder if this was because of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, or probably just because they're on a streetcar, but the idea of like, meeting the girl on a trolley.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

And he sees her once, he takes her into his arms and it's very romantic, like –

Batya:

You can hear the music swelling in the background!

Merav:

(overlapping) Exactly.

Batya:

Except not really, because Ella would not have the movie-watcher's background that lets you hear the music swelling behind this scene.

Merav:

No, probably not.

Batya:

But we the readers do.

Merav:

Absolutely.

Batya:

And actually, very likely Sydney Taylor when she wrote this did.

Merav:

Yeah, almost certainly. And I definitely think that there's a cinematic quality to Ella's daydream

where she's absolutely kind of picturing the girl, picturing Charlie, and like she's now eclipsed herself from this dream.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

Right? She's taken herself out of the picture because she knows that it's not even hers to dream about.

Batya:

Yeah, which is like, I remember talking about this before, when this first came up, that Ella has given up completely the idea that she could be the one to make Charlie happy, that he might give up on this girl he's chasing and notice that there's another perfectly good girl right here, there's no part of that. There's no daydream where Charlie, depressed and despondent,

gives up on finding that girl and turns to Ella who's right there wanting to make him feel better. None of that.

Merav:

I mean, practically speaking, Ella is twelve. So that would probably not work out—

Batya:

Exactly, but any number of twelve-year-old girls would be daydreaming about putting themselves into it —

Merav:

(overlapping)

— but like ultimately yes, would absolutely daydream that.

Batya:

— whether actually wanting it to happen, or just spending time thinking about wouldn't it be nice,

it's not a realistic daydream but I'm going to fantasize about it anyway.

Merav:

Right. And if Ella does, it is elided.

Batya:

Ella, and again, here we mean Ella on the page. We have no knowing of what real Ella actually dreamed of or didn't, but Ella on the page is just dreaming about Charlie finding his long lost love and being happy with her.

Merav:

Yeah, exactly. And Ella is being unselfish in her daydream. She wants Charlie to find happiness.

Batya:

And she wants the girl to be the best possible sort of person.

Merav:

Yes.

Batya:

She wants her to be beautiful, kind, gentle, proud, high-spirited, everything that – she's idealizing this girl probably more than Charlie is.

Merav:

Oh, probably. Well, because Charlie knows her.

Batya:

Charlie knows her. To Ella, she's just – a character in a story. But only the best girl will do for her Charlie.

Merav:

Yes, exactly.

Batya:

Who is not her Charlie, we're very clear about

that. (laughter)

Merav:

(laughter)

Right, exactly.

Batya:

For their Charlie, for the family's Charlie.

Merav:

Yes, the collective Charlie. So I think a lot of the little interactions that we get kind of as we're getting prepared to go to the beach are really fun. On the streetcar we get Charlotte saying, Coney Is-land and Henny correcting her kind of with a superior air, like "you clearly have reader's disease here". For those that don't know, reader's disease is where you pronounce what you read as it reads and not as it's said. And then you say that aloud and people just look at you funny, like, what did you just say?

Charlotte is absolutely experiencing that here.
And we do see that Charlotte is kind of in a
daydreamy state today. Like she's just definitely
kind of in that, like she actually gets asked, you
know, do you want to be left behind?

Batya:

Yep.

Merav:

Which is kind of an interesting foreshadowing
for later when Henny gets left behind.

Batya:

Yep!

Merav:

Mama is just constantly counting the children.

Batya:

Oh gosh, yes.

Merav:

Right, like throughout the day she's like, she literally puts the older girls kind of in a line together, like they're fine, they're accounted for, they're in front of me. And I have each of the smaller children by the hand, they're not gonna get lost. And then, however we planned, you know, she's got sort of these two groups of three, right, Ella and Henny and Sarah. And then because the others might need assistance, like when they go to the bath house or when they're on the streetcar, she's sticking to them.

Batya:

Charlotte and Gertie and Mama, yes.

Merav:

The older girls are kind of going themselves, keeping in mind that like the older girls here are twelve, ten, and eight.

Batya:

(overlapping) Right! Yes, like *the* oldest girl who was being given a great deal of responsibility is twelve.

Merav:

Right, exactly.

Batya:

And the ten-year-old and the eight-year-old are considered able to look after themselves so long as their older sister is there in case of trouble.

Merav:

Yeah, absolutely. But Mama is watching them. I thought it was a very New York City touch that they talk about counting the beach in blocks.

Batya:

Yes, beach blocks, that's a mention of that.

Merav:

Yeah, which is, it's so New York City. And later on, this beach will have a boardwalk, but there isn't one yet. And we're gonna get back to that a little bit later.

Batya:

We're not there yet.

Merav:

No, we're not there yet, but I think it's really interesting because they're probably walking along on sidewalks or possibly even just on the sand, but they're still thinking in the city mentality of block by block. Because if you go to Coney Island, it really is kind of a, you know, city grid. And then all of a sudden there's just waterfront expanse. So it's definitely a valid way of looking at that. And we're getting a lot of like

the girls' personalities on the beach, you know, Henny being the one who's like, yes, let's jump in the water.

Batya:

Get wet all over right away! (laughter) And Sarah going ahhhhhhh...?

Merav:

(overlapping) And Sarah's like kind-of sticking her toe in, like "I don't want to do it", right? And Ella is like, "all right, let's just, we're gonna go together, I'm gonna count us in". And they kind of like, Ella is sort of directing, like we're gonna one, two, three, into the water and there they go. And then they're just like in another world, right? Like they're like, "I can't believe it was so hot in the city". Like "it's so great here".

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

Like, “hooray,” you know, “we have reached Nirvana and we no longer remember the old life”.

Batya:

(laughter)

Merav:

With the full recollection that they're gonna have to go back at the end of the day. (laughter)

Batya:

Of course, of course, but they're – like, [I'm] reading this and thinking it's been such a long time since I've been to the beach and gotten to swim. I miss it. But, but there really is a sort of, like you say, you are in another world, you are outside of the regular world. Even knowing full well what you still have to do with the rest of the

day. It's a ... what's the word I'm looking for?
Not liminal. Um ... nope, it's gone. But there's a
word for that, for –

Merav:

You mean like, like a remove. Yeah.

Batya:

Yeah, there's a word for, we are entering a
different place and thereby a fundamentally
different state of being.

Merav:

Yeah, exactly.

Batya:

And we will return to the old state of being, but
for now we are just, nothing outside it matters
for a little bit.

Merav:

Exactly. But eventually it gets cold and they have to come out.

Batya:

They get cold, they get hungry.

Merav:

And yes, Mama has really prepared well. She's got the sweaters. She's got, I love the description of the sandwiches, bread and butter sandwiches with sour rye and pumpernickel, one on each side. I used to make these because they were delicious. I love swirl rye where it's partly rye bread and it's partly pumpernickel swirled together. It's more popular here in New York. It's delicious if you like that certain set of flavors and the sourness in bread.

Batya:

(overlapping) If you like the- yeah.

Merav:

The hard boiled eggs. And this really felt like a Batya thing, whole tomatoes with salt.

Batya:

Whole tomatoes with salt, yes!

Merav:

I literally watched you do that this week.

Batya:

Yep!

Merav:

(laughter) So I definitely feel like All-of-a-Kind Family influenced our eating.

Batya:

Oh, probably. I never really cared for rye bread that much, and pumpernickel I like but not so much as to seek it out. But it's only occurred to

me now that this way of eating bread, eating sandwiches with rye and pumpernickel together, I wonder if that's not why swirl rye bread became a thing. Because so many people liked the experience of those two breads together.

Merav:

I wouldn't be at all surprised.

Batya:

The Limburger sandwiches!

Merav:

The Limburger sandwiches, I didn't know what Limburger was when I was a kid, I thought it was a sausage. It's cheese. It's just smelly cheese.

Batya:

I think I knew Limburger was cheese, and it's

like, it is proverbially stinky. It is like the stinky cheese of stinky cheeses. I don't think I have ever either smelled or tasted Limburger cheese.

Merav:

I think I've smelled it. I certainly haven't put it in my mouth. But I think this is really kind of Mama's European heritage showing.

Batya:

(overlapping) Very possibly.

Merav:

Like this is an acquired taste, right? Mama definitely loves this. She's clearly not eating it in the house very often. Like this is Mama's like go-to, like I'm going, I'm going on a mini vacation with my girls. What do I wanna be eating? I'm gonna eat Limburger. And that's what she does.

Batya:

That's such a lovely thought. I really like the idea that this is Mama treating herself.

Merav:

I'd like to think that.

Batya:

Because Mama deserves a treat.

Merav:

Yes. And I mean, like clearly she could also partake of all of the fare that she's put out for the girls, but like she's choosing a Limburger sandwich and I'm guessing maybe Papa doesn't like the smell.

Batya:

Very likely.

Merav:

But it could also just be, you know, I can't imagine taking that in a shoe box and enjoying it even more for eating it, you know, beachside. I feel like today we'd put that in with like an ice pack so it wouldn't weep too much. But you know, maybe that's how she likes it.

Batya:

(overlapping) Probably, yeah. Like, I don't know if Limburger is a hard or squishy or spreadable cheese or what.

Merav:

Squishy. It's kind of rindy squishy.

Batya:

What they call a runny cheese?

Merav:

Yeah runny, exactly. So that's definitely weeping into the bread and it's probably delicious to

Mama. I think I know why I thought it was a sausage. I think I had it crossed in my brain with liverwurst.

Batya:

Oh, you know what, probably. And also, “burger” suggests to the American ear something made out of meat.

Merav:

Exactly. And the rest of the meal is dairy, so I guess my brain was like, but that doesn't make any sense. So, because there is that bread and butter to the sandwich, so.

Batya:

There's the bread and butter. Yeah, there's, there's... I'm once again remembering Sam Levinson describing what his family ate on the beach. He said, to this day, sanded pickle is... like, he says it's a defining treat of his

childhood, next only to
cream-cheese-and-sand-wich. (laughter)

Merav:

I can taste that in my brain and I'm so sad about
it.

Batya:

(overlapping) Yep, yep, yep. There is no
mention here of sand getting into the food, but
let's be real, it is extraordinarily difficult to keep
sand from getting into the food when you are
eating on the beach.

Merav:

And I'm pretty sure they're not on a blanket. I
don't think I see the word blanket anywhere.

Batya:

There is no mention of a blanket, I don't think.

Merav:

Right, they're just on the sand.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

So I don't see anything keeping the sand out of the food. But they are being kept safe in the boxes, so hopefully they're not eating too much sand. Sanded pickle, that's amazing. (laughter)
So Mama has this thing where she's like, you have to stay out of the water for an hour after you eat. Which I mean, even into my own childhood was the standard wisdom. It turns out that that's not a thing anymore.

Batya:

They're saying now that there's no, there's no evidence that it is in any way more dangerous to swim immediately after eating, but that was

the conventional wisdom for close on a century,
I think.

Merav:

Yeah, absolutely.

Batya:

If not longer.

Merav:

If not longer.

Batya:

I don't know how far back it goes.

Merav:

I'm curious where that originated, and that's something to maybe look up after the episode. So this is really interesting to me: Henny asks, can we go to Playland? And we're going to get into this pretty deep in our Deep Dive later.

There is no Playland ever at Coney Island.
There is a Dreamland, and Dreamland actually
burns down right before they're there.

Batya:
Like in 1911?

Merav:
Like 1911, like early 1912. I think it's 1911. It
literally burns, and they open a sideshow. So it's
very likely that they are actually, like, historically
right there right after the Dreamland fire. But it's
interesting that she says Playland. There was a
Playland.

Batya:
Where was that?

Merav:
Playland was in Rye, New York.

Batya:

Ah.

Merav:

Rye, New York is significantly farther from where they are. For those of you that don't know New York geography, Rye is fairly far up, even past the Bronx and like into the beginning of what we would think of as upstate New York. Although many, many people will write in angrily and say that that's not upstate New York, it's not upstate New York until you get to Albany, at least, right? But despite that –

Batya:

(overlapping, laughter) No, but it's like close to an hour by train, I think.

Merav:

(overlapping) Modern train.

Batya:

From the middle of New York City. Modern train, yeah. Rye is. So that's not where we are.

Merav:

No, and Rye Playland isn't built until 1928. So it's possible that Sydney Taylor in writing this got a little bit confused about the names, or it's possible that Henny just got confused about the names, or it's possible that somebody was operating something that they think of as Playland, but it was really called Dreamland. And so the Dreamland fire happens right around this time. And there are definitely attractions still, the whole thing doesn't burn down, but a lot of it does. So the sideshow that they see later in the chapter gets, you know, created at this point. And we'll talk about that when we do our Deep Dive.

Batya:

So this is, sorry, this sequence is impossible is what you're saying, that there is an amusement park?

Merav:

We're going to get into that.

Batya:

We'll get into that later then. About confusing the names though, I definitely recall a point in my childhood where any amusement park was referred to as Disneyland.

Merav:

Ooh, interesting, sort of the generic like band-aid for any bandage.

Batya:

Or maybe it wasn't Disneyland, maybe it was some other – was called by the name of, I mean, we went to Disneyland exactly once

when I was a kid.

Merav:

Yeah.

Batya:

So I don't think it was necessarily, I don't think it was us who called any amusement park Disneyland, but I seem to recall coming upon the idea that someone using either Disneyland or the name of some other amusement park as a generic term for amusement park.

Merav:

And certainly Playland would fit that.

Batya:

It would.

Merav:

I mean, Playland literally just implies a place

you go to play. So because there is an actual Playland in the New York area, which I would kind of guess maybe Sydney Taylor took her daughter Jo to see it. We don't know. That that is in her brain when she's writing this, and maybe she just didn't do a fact check. Who knows?

Batya:

Fact checking was a lot harder before Wikipedia, it's true.

Merav:

There is a slight impossibility here, but we'll get to that when we get to the Deep Dive. So Mama is tired, right? She's like, I've been schlepping my girls to the beach. I'm tired. Do I really want to do this thing where we like go into a crowd and there's a possibility of like getting lost or losing our stuff? You know, is this a good idea? And she weighs it and she's like, my girls get so

few treats. I really want to take them to do this, even if it's going to cost me personally.

Batya:

And what it's going to cost her is time and effort. Like she's clear, we don't have money to spend on anything there. And so much of the park, like any amusement park, is designed to separate the visiting people from as much of their money as possible.

Merav:

Absolutely.

Batya:

There's all sorts of things to spend money on there, and they are not going to be able to spend money on anything.

Merav:

No money at all.

Batya:

That is, like, in itself a whole other difficulty. But it's going to be fun just to see it.

Merav:

It's so outside their experience, right? Like in this period in Coney Island, we have all kinds of really like eye-grabbing things. There is a side friction roller coaster called the Scenic Railway, which allows you to go kind of up and down a bunch of hills. It's not yet kind of a loop de loop, you're not going upside down, but you are going up and down little hills. It's not quite what we're thinking of today as a roller coaster, but it is a thrill ride such as they had them in this period and this is really the genesis of the thrill ride style of ride at this time. Henny a hundred percent wants to get up on that roller coaster and Mama is like nope. Nope.

Batya:

(laughter) (overlapping) Yes. The other kids are going, oh, you'd never get me on one of those, would you? No, I wouldn't. Henny's like, oh yeah, I would right now.

Merav:

Yeah, exactly.

Batya:

Henny is a thrill seeker. Henny is adventurous.

Merav:

Yes.

Batya:

Mama says, you might as well stop thinking about it, you're – She doesn't say you're not going because it's expensive and we're not spending any money. She says, you're not going because it's too dangerous.

Merav:

Right, I mean, this is the same argument that they have in the Fourth of July episode about going to see the bonfires. Mama says no.

Batya:

That's true. Yeah.

Merav:

Right? Like, you are not going to thrill-seeking on my time.

Batya:

(laughter)

Merav:

However, they're at a carnival. I thought it was really interesting, actually. They're passing by all of these concession booths, where there's a whole bunch of stuff that they could potentially

eat, right? Like things like popcorn or saltwater taffy, all of those kinds of things, not explicitly kosher maybe, but probably as kosher as shopping in the market, right? So it's possible that they could, they've just had lunch, they've just had a treat, so nobody says oh I want, you know, this, I want that, right? They just kind of walk right past all of this temptation.

Batya:

Ice cream! How often in their lives are they going to see ice cream? Not often enough!

Merav:

(overlapping) (laughter) Not very often, not very often. There are shooting games, there are like games of chance, there's a fortune teller.

Unfortunately, she does use the ethnic slur for the fortune teller, which we're not gonna repeat on the show, but it's possible that they were ethnically Romani. We don't know. There's a

long history of Romani people working in carnivals.

Batya:

And there is also a long history of people dressing up and cosplaying Romani people as fortune tellers. So it could very easily be either.

Merav:

(overlapping) Yes, absolutely.

It could be either, it could be a mix, we don't know. They get to the carousel and they just stop. And they watch.

Batya:

Oh, this bit is so sad.

Merav:

I know, it's so – 'cause like all these other little kids are getting on the carousel and they're just like looking at the carousel like with lust in their

hearts. They're like, I want that. But I mean, I think they also are kind of weighing the fact that like a carousel ride is fleeting, right?

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

Like these girls know the value of money. And if it's my penny versus a carousel ride versus my penny versus, like, having candy for the rest of tomorrow, I'll have the candy, right?

Batya:

Yeah, yeah. And there is no negotiation like, "Mama, can I ride the carousel and I'll pay my pennies for the next week and a half for it."

Merav:

No, the girls know better.

Batya:

No negotiation. They just know perfectly well, this is too much of a luxury.

Merav:

Yeah, we're going to look at it and we're going to love it from afar.

Batya:

And honestly, looking at a really nicely appointed carousel is great.

Merav:

It is. It's a visual spectacle. You get to see all of those beautiful painted, in this case, they would have been wooden horses.

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Merav:

And there might have been a chariot. Certainly carousels from this period had fairly elaborate carving, and all of the horses were usually unique. So you could sort-of go and pick your favorite horse.

Batya:

Mm hmm. I remember reading somewhere else that it is traditional for all carousel horses to have names.

Merav:

Yes.

Batya:

Because they are unique. But they get to hear the music for nothing. They get to enjoy the spectacle for nothing.

Merav:

Yes.

Batya:

And they're just going to spend as much time as they can enjoying those things before they will agree to be moved along.

Merav:

And speaking of spectacle, they have now come on a thing that at the time was called a ten-in-one sideshow. It's still called that today. And literally that just means that there are ten attractions. You get to see a few of them for free. They're bringing people out of the tent. I'm just gonna talk for a minute about the language we're gonna use here.

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Merav:

I'm gonna call these carnival performers. There

are other words that people have used in the past. One of those words is freaks. There was a famous movie called *Freaks*. And there is a long standing use of that word and it's been reclaimed. As someone who isn't a carnival sideshow performer, I'm not gonna use that word for myself or about these people, but this is the attraction of coming to see people who are not like you.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

And this is very much a thing that went on in this period, it still goes on today, but there is definitely more of a dignity to it now. In this era, people were literally kind-of sold into the sideshow. But many of these people are there deliberately of their own accord because they know that they can make money because they

are not conventional.

Batya:

Yes, just to be looked at and ogled for your physical or presentational weirdness.

Merav:

Exactly.

Batya:

And I'm going to do another side jump into another set, actually, of Jewish children's books. Did you read the K'tonton books when you were little?

Merav:

Oh yes, I love the K'tonton books.

Batya:

(overlapping) Of course. K'tonton, for those of you with the audience who haven't heard of

them, was described at one point as the Jewish Tom Thumb. Here is this little boy born to a Jewish family. I think born, I don't think there's any, like, unusual magic about how he came to be. I think he was just –

Merav:

There is magic.

Batya:

Was there?

Merav:

(overlapping) There's something about ...

Batya:

(overlapping) Was he – he wasn't found in a peach pit. That's a different person.

Merav:

(overlapping) No, I think that is, there's

something, they wish for him.

Batya:

I know they wish for him.

Merav:

It's a whole, there's a whole conception story, but they do eventually get him in a, I think, non-magical way.

Batya:

Yeah. So he's a little Jewish boy who was about the size of a finger. And there is, one of the, in one of the books, he winds up in a circus sideshow with all of the other strange looking circus performers in their own various ways. And they say, well, you're one of us, obviously.

Merav:

Right.

Batya:

And they take him in and they're kind to him and they – the thing that he has that sets him apart from all of them, of course, is he's Jewish.

Merav:

And he has a family.

Batya:

He has a family but he doesn't talk about it much. But he does insist, like, I can't eat food that's not kosher, what are we going to do? And they go to great lengths to help him with that. Delightful... I don't know how I would feel about this story if I read it now. I remember really enjoying it as a small Batya ...

Merav:

Yeah.

Batya:

But I think that may have been my first exposure to a story told from the point of view of circus performers, sideshow performers, did we say?

Merav:

Hm? Yeah.

Batya:

Yeah. And how they feel about that being the way they make their living. I don't know how, I don't know whether it was based on real people's experiences or if it was just the author imagining what it must be like. But it's the first thing I ever encountered that thought about, what is it like for them? That made *me* think about, what is it like for them?

Merav:

Right, absolutely.

Batya:

This does not so much. This is much more the way that popular culture in general viewed sideshow performers as just, wow, they're fascinating. They're so weird to look at. Come look at them and pay us money for it.

Merav:

Right, exactly. And our ten-in-one consists of entirely physicalities, right? We have a tallest man, we have a shortest woman, we have a tattooed lady, we have a wild man from Borneo, which is a costume piece, which we'll talk about later, we have a bearded lady, right? Those are the ones that we know about.

Batya:

Yes. And I would point out that tattooed lady is of a different category.

Merav:

Yes, because it's deliberate and intentional changing of one's appearance. Although one can tattoo for a variety of reasons. And one of the main reasons people tattoo, other than look at me, I'm beautiful, is to cover scars.

Batya:

There is that.

Merav:

So it is possible that there is a history of that tucked into this narrative.

Batya:

Oh, there very well may be, yeah, that somebody who could not get paid to be looked at as the Scarred Person could get paid to be looked at as the Tattooed Person.

Merav:

Absolutely.

Batya:

But so yeah, this is a mix of people putting on a strange appearance and people born with a strange appearance.

Merav:

Yes, and we'll talk about the wild men from Borneo a little bit later in the deep dive, but that was actually a thing that was imitated very heavily. It's almost certain that this is not an original wild man from Borneo. Those were actually a pair of brothers, and we'll get into that in a little bit. So the girls are taking in the spectacle, right? There's a sideshow barker who's kind of telling them, what's to come, like, "hey, come into the tent, you'll see even more." Obviously they can't. So they're just kind of standing there absorbing all of this with their eyes. And of course, Sarah lights on the bearded lady. And her entire context for people

with beards is her uncle, right?

Batya:

Her religious uncle, her uncle with a Yiddish name.

Merav:

(overlapping) Exactly. Yes, exactly. So for her, this is, oh, hey, it's a comparison between two things that are like each other, kind of. She doesn't have the thought of, like, why does a woman have a beard? She's just like, oh, wow, how cool.

Merav:

It's really interesting. A lot of women who were bearded ladies are actually Jewish.

Batya:

Yes.

Merav:

There is a hirsutism gene that comes along with some things like PCOS, which is a disorder that a lot of us have. It runs in my family too. And it creates a condition which creates mustaches and beards on women.

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Merav:

And there's actually quite a few really cool books about this. And there was a really good issue of Lilith magazine about fifteen years ago about Jewish hair, which I think may be digitized online at this point. And one of them is an account from a woman who grew a beard and just kind of her experience of like living with a beard as a woman.

Batya:

So yeah, I grow hair on my face, and early in the lockdown period of the pandemic, I thought, well, hey, what if I just didn't do anything about it for a little while? I'm not going out of the house. Why not? Sort of experimenting to see if I could be a bearded lady if I decided I wanted to. I wound up deciding fairly quickly that I didn't want to, but mostly because I just really didn't like how it felt. But I don't know, had I been living in a time where you could make a living being a bearded lady, maybe I could have, maybe I would have, might have been worth it.

Merav:

Yeah, I mean, most bearded ladies had very luxuriant large beards. It is hard to grow something like that.

Batya:

Mm-hmm, which takes a while to grow.

Merav:

It takes quite a while to grow. And that is a feat in and of itself. It's like growing your hair very long and, you know, maintenance is also really important.

Batya:

(overlapping) Mm-hmm. Oh yes.

Merav:

And making sure it looks nice. And a lot of the historical photos we have of bearded ladies are very elegant. And they emphasize the femininity of the woman because that's where the contrast lies. And so I think that it's very interesting how they were styled and how that sort of created the image of the bearded lady.

Batya:

Did they do things like curling and braiding?

Merav:

Yes, actually there are some where you see them with bows, and curled and braided. And also because they also had luxuriant hair on their heads, frequently it's kind of of a piece. And I can't remember the name of it, but I feel like there was either a book or an article about a family that was a Jewish family that worked in circuses, and the women worked as bearded ladies, and the men frequently worked as what they used to call dog-faced boys, which were people who had hair sort of from the crown of the forehead down the cheeks and onto the chin, covered entirely in hair.

Batya:

Mmm.

Merav:

And you have this sort of fur look, and there's actually a film called *Fur*, which was a ... it was

sort of a fairy tale about Diane Arbus, the photographer who actually took many pictures of sideshow performers in real life, and sort of the imagined scenario of her living in an apartment, kind of living a normal life and being transformed by meeting someone who had that condition. So it's very much a fable, it didn't happen to her, but she did take some of the photos that are featured in the film. She was very involved with the underground life of New York, and there's some really good biographies of her out there, which I'll put in the show notes. This chapter absolutely kicked off my love of circuses and sideshows. This has been a lifelong fascination. And it's definitely something that I'm still into. You know, nearly fifty years later, it's definitely an ongoing fascination for me.

Batya:

Oh yes.

Merav:

So the girls do move on with Mama. And they see the Ferris wheel. And I actually sort of dug into this because I was like, oh, a Ferris wheel, wait a minute. There was no Ferris wheel in New York. The Ferris wheel was in Chicago. How can this be? So to talk about this, we have to sort of dive into, what is a Ferris wheel?

Batya:

What is a Ferris wheel?

Merav:

A Ferris wheel is a very specific thing. Picture a subway car.

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Merav:

For those of you that aren't in New York City, picture just the car of a train. The cars on the original Ferris wheel were as large as train cars.

Batya:

Huh.

Merav:

Because they were intended as observation platforms. You would get into a subway-car-like object, filing in at one end. They would close up the car, and then it would rise into the air on this enormous wheel. Ferris wheels were huge because they had – I think something like sixteen or twenty of these cars on the frame. And you can just imagine how heavy that was.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

And so they don't, these do not come cheap, right? Creating this is like, it's a huge feat of engineering. What we probably have here is one of two different kinds of wheel. It might be a Somers wheel. A Somers wheel had much smaller cars. It could be a generic ferris wheel, like what we think of a ferris wheel today with the little booths.

Batya:

I was going to say, like generally what's called a Ferris wheel today does have much smaller enclosed or open cars that seat like two to four people.

Merav:

Yes.

Batya:

Not this enormous train car.

Merav:

Exactly. It's not like a gondola car. It's just like, you know. So what's interesting is when people picture Coney Island, they picture the Wonder Wheel, because it's iconic. The Wonder Wheel doesn't go up until 1920.

Batya:

Hmm.

Merav:

So we are eight years pre-Wonder Wheel. So clearly, there's some kind of wheel going on here. We don't know. I was not able to find evidence of an earlier wheel. It's very possible it exists. Maybe we can find it on a map. But what kind of wheel it is is probably lost to history. It's also possible that Taylor conflated –

Batya:

Different periods, yeah.

Merav:

The Wonder Wheel has just always been there, right? Because we're definitely seeing a little bit of just kind of pulling together different memories of coming to a Playland-style place and seeing the sights. The original Ferris wheel had a very sad ending. It was at the Chicago World's Fair. It travels to St. Louis in 1904. And then it was bought for demolition for an enormous sum of money.

Batya:

Huh.

Merav:

And it was demolished. Portions of it are still under St. Louis. They did a ground excavation using, I think they were using those machines that they use for archaeology, where you can kind of look through the ground. And they found

this enormous structure. And they're like, that has to be the Ferris wheel, the original one. So

...

Batya:

That's fascinating, why was it demolished?

Merav:

Because it was so big. It was so big and so heavy and that amount of metal was extremely profitable to buy and sell.

Batya:

Mmm.

Merav:

And you know there's this little thing called World War I.

Batya:

Yeah...

Merav:

And I suspect, I'm not positive that was why it was demolished, but that was definitely something that like...

Batya:

So just demolished so as to be able to use the parts.

Merav:

Exactly.

Batya:

That makes sense. Huh.

Merav:

So this is roughly when Henny goes missing.

Batya:

Yes.

Merav:

Or rather when they realize that Henny's gone missing, because Henny has already gone missing.

Batya:

I think it doesn't actually say this, but I have a strong feeling that the reason this is where Mama notices that Henny is missing, is she realizes Henny is not saying how much she would love to go up in the Ferris wheel.

Merav:

I think you're probably right.

Batya:

Because you know she would!

Merav:

Absolutely she would, and we've got plenty of

precedent for that.

Batya:

Like, oh God, this enormous, terrifying ride, counting down to Henny saying she wants to try it. Wait, where's Henny?

Merav:

Right, exactly. And so, Mama, we actually get an internal view of Mama having anxiety, which up until this point, the girls had scarlet fever, Mama's not exactly anxious, but she's worried. Now, Mama is actually having a panic attack. And she's just thinking to herself, okay, it could be worse, we could have still been on the beach, and this way at least I know she didn't drown.

Batya:

Yeahhh.

Merav:

Right? Like they're far enough from the water that that's not a concern. But now like every other thing that could potentially happen – which doesn't go on the page because this is a kid's book – is going through Mama's head, right? “Is my child abducted, what's happened to her? How do I take charge of this situation so the other children are not going to panic. I have to, I have to hold this together.” So Mama puts Ella in charge, right? She's like, stay right here. Don't you move.

Batya:

“You watch your sisters and don't move. I'm going to look for Henny.”

Merav:

Right, she doesn't even get them settled on a bench, like Ella chooses to do that herself. She's like, we've been standing around for a

while. We're going to move to that bench and wait for Mama there. She'll see us, it'll be fine. Ella's making command decisions at this point.

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Merav:

Because Mama has gone off to look for Henny. And where's Henny? And there's this little moment, Mama calls Henny her “wild one.”

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

And I kind of wonder if that's translated from *vilde chaya*.

Batya:

I think it has to be. I think it has to be because

that is an extremely common German Jewish thing to call. It works as something you would say as an endearment or fondly and as a thing you would say in a genuine reproof or scorn.

Merav:

Right. And for those that don't –

Batya:

Vilde chaya literally means wild animal.

Merav:

Yes. And I mean, we've seen that the children have animal nicknames. Like we've seen, you know, *Mausele* and like the, the affectionate use of that. And so here is sort of the, okay, where's my wild animal of a child gotten to, right? She's not here and she needs to be here. So Mama is, you know, inwardly in turmoil. She's soothing Gertie, right? Gertie is crying. Mama's come back. She hasn't found Henny and Ella's like, I'll

go, right? And she goes and she's wandering around, she goes back to the sideshow.

Batya:

Because she figures that would be enough of an attraction that maybe Henny stayed there.

Merav:

Ella knows Henny, right? She's known Henny the longest out of any of them, except for Mama. So she's like, what would I do if I were Henny? She doesn't actually express this, but I think that must have been her thought pattern. Like, what would Henny be attracted to? How would I have lost my sister in this crowd, and where would she be? Ella uses the mental language of “queer people” for the sideshow performers, which I thought was very interesting, because of course it's the old meaning of queer, meaning peculiar or unusual.

Batya:
Strange people.

Merav:
But it wouldn't be terribly surprising to me if there were queer people in the sideshow.

Batya:
Queer in the modern sense, that is. Sure.

Merav:
It was one of the few places in the world you could be safe, right? We could absolutely have people in the sideshow who have alternative lifestyles. Who knows, right? We're not gonna get into that on the podcast. But ultimately, they're very kind to Ella.

Batya:
Yes.

Merav:

Right? The barker's like, "Sister, what are you looking for?" And she's like, "my sister." And everybody starts laughing.

Batya:

Cause they think it's a bit!

Merav:

Right, they think it's a gag. Well, there's clearly this young woman who's a plant in the audience because she can project and she's, you know, Ella's a performer.

Batya:

You know, I hadn't thought of that, but yeah, that if Ella is answering in her loudest, clearest voice to call to somebody who's a little ways away, she does have, she is gifted with an amazing voice that's going to come up in later books.

Merav:

Yep. And then everybody tries to help, right?

You just kind of get the piling on of, like, oh, well have you tried this? Have you, what does she look like?

Batya:

What's she look like? Where did you see her?

Merav:

How can we help you?

Batya:

This is classic. Classic New York crowd.

Mera:

Yes, absolutely. People say New Yorkers are rude.

Batya:

You mind your own business, you mind your own business right up until there's a thing you could actually do.

Merav:

And then you help.

Batya:

And then you help.

Merav:

Exactly. So the barker, ultimately, is the one who directs her to the police station. I think maybe because Ella is upstaging him a little bit at this point.

Batya:

Hah!

Merav:

Right? His job is to sell tickets and get people

into the tent to see the ten-in-one. And here's this little girl. She's taken up his whole crowd. So he's like, "sister, go to the police station and get out of my crowd so I can continue doing my work." But it's done cheerfully. And so she goes and reunites with the family, right? Ella goes and gets Mama and the other sisters, and they go looking for the police station. They flag down a policeman.

Batya:

He tells them where to go.

Merav:

They get to the police station and Henny is sitting on the bench, swinging her feet, eating an enormous chocolate ice cream cone.

Batya:

(laughter)

Merav:

She's got candy. She's got a peanut bar.

Batya:

Extra candy in her lap, perfectly composed.

Merav:

Cheerful, almost nonchalant about being found. Like, “oh, there you are.” Right? Like, “guess you found me.” And like the first thing Ella says is like, “where'd you get all that candy?” Right? Like not, “how did you get lost?” Not “why did you leave us?” Like that, “that is an astonishing amount of loot. Where did you get it?”

Batya:

(laughter)

Merav:

(laughter) And so Henny gets to be the storyteller and tell the whole story of, oh, this

policeman found me. And, like, he bought me the ice cream. And then I got, no, he bought me the candy bar. And then he bought me this lollipop. And then when I got here, they wanted to buy ice creams for everybody. And I wish they had, because all the other children are crying, and I could have eaten their ice cream, which is clearly a brag. She's still eating her own ice cream. But.

Batya:

(laughter) Yeah.

Merav:

It's just like, it's so Henny. Like this is iconic.

Batya:

Either she was just so self-possessed that it didn't occur to her to be scared, or now that she's fine, she does not want to even admit to the smallest possibility that she was scared.

Merav:

Right. And I mean, this is probably bravado, but like it is Henny and Henny is pretty self-possessed.

Batya:

Mm-hmm. I note, by the by, that Ella was right, she did stay too long by the sideshow.

Merav:

Which is exactly what Henny relates to them, right? She stayed longer, hoping that they would bring someone else out. So she does get to see the tiniest lady. She uses the M word here, I'm not gonna use it, but she says that even Gertie is a giant compared to her, right, just like giving an idea, because Gertie's four. Right? So the fact that Gertie like towers over this woman gives you the idea that she's very small. Now, of course, Henny could be

exaggerating, but this is the impression Henny has gotten from the sideshow patter, like this is a very tiny woman. Now, she didn't see them side by side, so who knows how tall this woman is.

Batya:
Right.

Merav:
I tried to look up and see who this could have been. I didn't get a really clear picture. Coney Island history is much better after 1920. There's not a lot of clear history of who the performers would have been. I do, I'm gonna get into that a little bit in the deep dive. There's a comedic moment where Henny is imitating the policeman's accent.

Batya:
It's Irish.

Merav:

Yes, with an Irish accent, where, you know, she just is having so much fun depicting all of this. And Henny is generous. She's like, hey, you know, "eat some of my candy. I can't possibly eat all of this." And the girls are like forgetting that they were anxious, forgetting that they were worried that maybe Henny was missing or dead, right? All of a sudden they're like, oh, that sounds great. I wish I had gotten lost too.

Batya:

You had an adventure and you got ice cream and candy. This sounds great.

Merav:

Right. I mean, obviously this could have turned out a lot worse.

Batya:

Absolutely. But it's interesting to me that Henny thought of, well, policemen help lost kids, I should look for a policeman. But it doesn't seem to have occurred to Mama or to Ella, maybe we should ask the police.

Merav:

I mean, that might be simply we're not in our jurisdiction?

Batya:

Could be.

Merav:

Right, like this is not our local policeman. And it may have just been that we're in a big crowd, you know, spotting a policeman at Coney Island. It'd probably take some work. Um, but knowing where the police station is, you know, they didn't know. So they, they literally just kind of like figure it out – cause I think, you know,

when you're in a bad situation, your brain kind of gets the roaring in the back.

Batya:

Oh yeah.

Merav:

That's panic, right?

Batya:

So it could be just that Henny thinks of it and the others don't because Henny is not scared. Henny is just, well, here's a problem. But Henny is not distracted by, oh God, what could have happened? She's the one who it could have happened to and she knows she's fine.

Merav:

Exactly. So Henny is definitely kind of going through an adventure, whereas the rest of them are kind of in a horror movie of A Little Girl is

Lost.

Batya:
Yeah.

Merav:
So.

Batya:
So they get Henny out of the police station.
They go to get the streetcar home. Papa has
been waiting. There are no cell phones. No one
has had any way to notify Papa. Forget cell
phones. There aren't house phones.

Merav:
Right, exactly.

Batya:
Papa has been waiting with no possible way of
knowing why there was a delay. Or indeed if it is

a delay or something terrible happened. He's just really, really worried when they come back.

Merav:

Absolutely. And because this is an era where we just don't have the ability to keep tabs on someone, you know, this is definitely not helicopter parenting in this era, right? He's just got to wait it out.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

Right, like this is an era where people waited years to find out how people were doing, you know, across the ocean. Because if no postcards were forthcoming, you just didn't know.

Batya:

Yeah, it's true that there is a very different vibe between ... one would expect to hear a call and there isn't one, and there is no expectation of a call because there is nothing in place to make a call possible. So like not knowing what's going on is to be expected. But then by that same token, they are late and there is no possible way to know why or how much longer they will be. He's anxious. He's worried. They're so much later than they expected to be home.

Merav:

Right. And I mean, Mama probably gave him a time to expect them – probably back for dinner, I would assume, because they didn't pack a second meal. And obviously, you know, Papa's not getting dinner because this is happening. So who knows what's going to happen?

Batya:

(overlapping) Oh gosh, that's right.

Merav:

So, you know, we don't know what time it is. It could be seven o'clock. It could be nine o'clock. It could be eleven o'clock. We don't really have a description in the story to tell us kind of how long it's taking them to get back from the police station, onto the train, and then all the way back to the city. So, you know, Papa has a long time to be anxious, but moreover, you know, Mama is probably thinking, oh gosh, how am I going to handle logistics on the other end? That doesn't even get dealt with because it's just the relief of, "oh good, there you are." (laughter) Papa says very understatedly, "what a time you must have had." Right?

Batya:

(laughter) And he's carrying Gertie who is dead asleep.

Merav:

Right, right, like remember Gertie a few chapters ago and the, you know, “I don't need a baby stroller.” You know, we'll just take it with so we can put the bundles in it. And here she is, having had this long and sort-of trying day in the sun. You gotta keep in mind that they're not wearing sunscreen.

Batya:

You're right, you're right, they do not have sunscreen.

Merav:

So they could be sunburned, right? They could all have heat stroke for all we know. They're just tired and they've been in the sun all day. I don't think they even have hats. So we don't know. But, like, the illustration shows them bareheaded in the water. And I'm inclined to think that was the case. We really just didn't

have a good idea about sun damage.

Batya:
Yeah.

Merav:
And so they're probably all pretty tuckered out by the end of this day.

Batya:
(sigh) And yeah, that's the chapter.

Merav:
All right, I think it's time for, yeah, it's quite a chapter. I think it's time for our deep dive.

Batya:
Time for the deep dive! We are going to talk about –

Merav:

We're going to talk about the history of Coney Island.

Batya:

Yes!

Merav:

And I think the development of Coney Island really sort of starts in 1886. So 1886, you know, the land gets sold to a company called the Ohio Grove Corporation, which was headed up by two former steamboat captains. And they started attracting acts over the next couple of years. In 1891, we start getting things like Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, Harry Houdini appears there, Coney Island performances, 1891. 1893, there's the World Exposition in Chicago, which is the World Fair. And that's where one of the owners sees the Ferris wheel and decides they're going to build one on Coney Island. There's a guy called George

Tilley in 1894 who builds a Ferris wheel. It says a Ferris wheel. We don't know if it's literally a Ferris wheel, like we talked about, or more like a Somers wheel. Some kind of rotating contraption that takes you up in the air so that you can see far.

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Merav:

So as of 1895 we no longer have a majority ownership of all of the amusement that's going on in this period.

Batya:

Oh!

Merav:

There are multiple amusement parks going on in the same space, vying for people's attention,

because it's not like what we have today where you pay one price and you walk in and you get to go on all the rides. It's much more like the Disneyland model where you kind of pay a gate fee, but then you pay to ride each ride.

Batya:

I don't think I'd realized that they were like, different rides had different owners.

Merav:

Competing different owners. So then there are competing parks. There is a Steeplechase Park that opens in 1897. And then there are these two guys, Thompson and Dundee, who build a thing called the Trip to the Moon, which is very famous.

Batya:

What a great name.

Merav:

It's literally what you think. Like, you kind of go in and walk around in a lunar landscape. And people loved it. It was a huge hit. It shows up in 1901 and they christen the park Luna Park, because of the attraction. And so Luna Park opens up in 1903. And then in 1904, Dreamland is opened. And this is where I think our girls are in this period, is at Dreamland or at least at the wreck of Dreamland because as we're about to see, Dreamland was the big one, right? They were the grandest park. And it was built by a guy who was actually a state senator, a guy called William Reynolds. In 1906, the popularity of Coney Island is such that there are over 200,000 people sending postcards from Coney Island on a single day. So you can imagine that that's (laughter) hugely overpopulated and probably incredibly crowded.

Batya:

Had to be.

Merav:

In 1911, the fire destroys Dreamland, right?

There is a tower, like a major pillar tower in the park, it's 375 feet tall, and it burns. And you can see the fire for miles. This is depicted pretty well in, I don't know if it's this fire or a later one, but there's a really wonderful Alice Hoffman novel where this is depicted and I'm trying to remember the name of the book. I'll put it in the show notes. So there's several Coney Island fires. This was just an occupational hazard for entertainment those days. PT Barnum's museum also burns down multiple times.

Batya:

I mean, I guess that makes sense. It's just occurring to me to ask, I'm not sure why: what powered these rides?

Merav:

That's a great question.

Batya:

Was it steam, was it electricity? It wouldn't have been electricity, would it?

Merav:

Sometimes it is electricity, surprisingly, because we do get electricity fairly early, right, if you, if you watch *The Gilded Age*, you see that they do have electricity in New York fairly early on.

Batya:

(overlapping) No, that's true. Yeah.

Merav:

And electricity was one of the main things, if you want – there's a wonderful web series called *Defunctland* that really like heavily details the history of the American amusement park.

And kind of goes into all of the minutiae of this, and I really recommend it. It's quite a lot of – a lot of viewing. So definitely settle in or pick a few that you want to watch. But just really amazing stuff. And the introduction of electric light is huge because it creates this sort of fairyland effect where there are all these little twinkling lights. And we're very used to that now.

Batya:

I'm thinking of the Disneyland Electric Light Parade. That was a whole thing for that very reason.

Merav:

Exactly.

Batya:

But that was later, I think, that started later.

Merav:

Oh, quite a bit. But that starts because Disney has the opportunity to observe these very early amusement parks and see that phenomenon of the twinkling lights and the attraction of that is what drives him to build Disneyland.

Batya:

That makes sense. And man, that – the effect on humans of twinkling lights cannot be overstated.

Merav:

No, absolutely not.

Batya:

We're such suckers for twinkling lights.

Merav:

Absolutely.

Batya :

But yeah, no, I'm just thinking, you have a lot of stuff built out of wood and you've got either fire for steam power or electricity. Fire hazards are built into the very, the underpinning of the amusement park. So sadly, but stands to reason.

Merav:

Yeah, a lot of the really famous kind of iconic rides that we think of today for Coney Island are really built in the next decade after the girls' visit, right?

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Merav:

Think Wonder Wheel, the Cyclone, which is still standing today was put up in 1927. The Wonder Wheel was 1920. There was a parachute jump

in 1939. All of these things are very, like, specifically iconic to Coney Island, and they just don't exist yet.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

None of these things are there for the girls to see. But we do have the carousel, we have the Ferris wheel, and we have that amazing scenic railroad. And those are our bits and pieces of iconic Coney Island. And some of those are still viewable in photographs. And there's even some very short films of Coney Island in this period. And it's quite astonishing because obviously, like, this is more than a hundred years ago at this point. So, you know, the fact that we have really good replica photos and everything else from this period is quite astonishing. The boardwalk, right? Like when

people think of Coney Island, they think about the boardwalk. The boardwalk is built in 1924, right? It gets started in 1912 because there's just so many people milling around and they wanna have that attraction, the boardwalk. The boardwalk appears in the book. However –

Batya:

Yep, and it doesn't exist yet.

Merav:

It doesn't exist. There is no boardwalk. It's possible that there was something else. It's possible that there was some kind of pedestrian pathway that she's calling a boardwalk. But the boardwalk, as we think of it today, doesn't exist yet. It won't be built for another, you know, bunch of years. So that kind of gives us an overview of what's going on Coney Island at this period. Most of the Coney Island we think of today is sort of an amalgam of the different

pieces that people put up at various points.
What stayed up during different fires is kind of what survived.

Batya:
Yeah.

Merav:
Dreamland officially closed in 1911 which is a year before this is set. The girls might be at Steeplechase Park or at Luna Park but the likelihood is that they're actually just outside of the burnt-down Dreamland seeing the sideshow and the carousel, which were not park-affiliated.

Batya:
We were going to talk more about the sideshow.

Merav:
Yes, I was just going to get into that. So there is today a resource for the Dreamland Side Show,

and I'm going to put this into the show notes. There's actually a photograph. It doesn't have a specific year. It was taken by Edward Kelley, no, I'm sorry, Edward Kelty. And it's literally just a picture of the cast. And it just says Dreamland Side Show. I think it says 1927 on this one. And it's possible that some of these people are people that were seen by the girls, either on this visit or another visit. And it's just literally them sort of, you know, like, it looks like a class picture, right? And they're all sort of sitting out and there's a bearded lady. And it's just, it's interesting to me that there are these photographs of the people who were doing this work, right? Like this was a profession.

There's a wonderful article on the Wild Men from Borneo, which I'm going to put into the show notes. It's on Wikipedia. It just kind of goes through kind of the whole phenomenon and how it came about. There was, I believe I

remember reading that Harry Houdini wound up playing a Wild Man from Borneo. I want to say at the World's Exhibition, because it was just kind of at that point sort of a stock character that was being played by just, you know, regular people in costumes.

But there were actually two brothers who were the wild men of Borneo. So their names were Waino and Plutanor except that they were really called Hiram and Barney Davis. They were disabled. They were mentally disabled young men and they were being shown around by a sort of impresario figure.

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Merav:

And they spent their entire lives portraying these characters of wild men from Borneo.

They were not very tall. They were each 40 inches tall, and they both weighed about 45 pounds. So they never actually grew very large. They were shown to be performing huge feats of strength. So they were given this sensational backstory about being from Borneo. But, you know, hard to know kind-of what that really meant. One newspaper did do an expose on them because in 1860 census, they were living in Somerville, Massachusetts in the household of a Henry Harvey, who was a showman. So it's – there's a lot of debate about kind-of what their identities really were. And they wound up getting involved with P.T. Barnum.

Batya:

Aha.

Merav:

And they were part of his ... you know, cabinet of curiosities as it was in those days, and

ultimately, you know, spent most of their lives in show business until one of the brothers died. So a lot of these stories are actually very tragic.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

And we get a lot of these like, I mean, sort of thinking of the Hilton twins, who were conjoined. They're not mentioned here, obviously, but there are many stories like this, like Chang and Eng, who were brothers –

Batya:

Chang and Eng Bunker, yeah.

Merav:

Right, absolutely – who were, you know, just for whatever reason, a little bit outside of society. And there are some really wonderful resources

on this. And I'll try to share some of those in the show notes as well, because there really just were so many people who were sort of celebrities of the time, who have been forgotten. And I think that this really sort of dips into that world without immersing in it.

Batya:

It is really fascinating to me how sideshows had this, as you say, stock character sort of thing. That like, uh, so-and-so's show has got a bearded lady, we need to have a bearded lady. We can't find a lady with a beard. We'll either put a false beard on the lady who looks like maybe she could grow a beard, or we'll take a man with a beard and put a dress on him. Now, were some of those "bearded men wearing dresses" actually what we would understand today as trans women?

Merav:

Probably.

Batya:

Maybe, maybe not, no way to know from this end.

Merav:

I would say case to case. So I just think it's interesting that there is a huge propensity of sideshow performers who were Jewish.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

I wouldn't say disproportionately, because Jews have often been in entertainment, because it was one of the professions that was open to us in the old country.

Batya:

Yes.

Merav:

And, you know, we've come across with the tradition of that. But it is interesting that some of the things that made us visibly distinct, you know, see also the bearded lady and dog-faced boy that we talked about earlier. There's definitely a propensity in show business to have a lot of Jews. So it's very interesting that we have our religious Jews who are our characters kind-of looking across the fence at these secular Jews who, you know, they probably aren't even aware of each other's Judaism, but they see each other and maybe that's why the barker is so sympathetic to Ella.

Batya:

Yeah. Gosh, I didn't even think of that, but could be. That, you know, he's, that it's, of course there's, here's a lost, sad-looking little girl. Not

lost in the sense of lost, but you know, here's a distressed little girl. But is he also thinking, oh, she kind of reminds me of my sister. Oh, she kind of reminds me of my cousin.

Merav:

Yeah, absolutely.

Batya:

There's a look there that this is, that this is maybe in some distant way family. Who knows?

Merav:

Yeah, and I mean, side shows are absolutely based on a family structure, a lot of them, and I mean, not all, obviously, but there's definitely a feeling of family and a feeling of solidarity. And to have, you know, a little girl lost, you know, to have that idea of, you know, okay, she's out there in the world, they know what the world looks like. They know the danger she's in. They

know the specific danger of the place that they're employed.

Batya:

(overlapping) Yeah. Oh yes.

Merav:

They're probably pretty worried about this little girl. They want her to get found. So there's definitely an aspect of human kindness coming from an unexpected quarter.

Batya:

And at the same time, as you said, there's the, "you're hogging the spotlight, little girl. Get to the police station so I can take my audience back."

Merav:

Yeah. (laughter) "You've had your fifteen minutes, kid."

Batya:

And these are not contradictory! Two things can be true!

Merav:

Absolutely. And I mean, and it is a happy ending, right? Like this is not tragic. Obviously, you know, all the girls live to adulthood and everything is fine. And Henny gets an ice cream in, you know, in the bargain.

Batya:

Yeah. And Henny gets an ice cream. Yeah, there are versions of this story that are a little bit worse. There are versions of this story that are a lot worse.

Merav:

Absolutely.

Batya:

That's not the story we have here today. We have here today the story where everything actually does turn out okay.

Merav:

And I mean, that is sort of the ongoing theme of All-of-a-Kind family is that these are happy stories. There are absolutely like if you read *From Sarah to Sydney*, June Cummins really captures the fact that like not all was wine and roses in these days. Mama absolutely had depression. There were a lot of things going on in the background that don't make it onto the page. But here we have sort of an untouched day, a day untouched with sorrow, because all is well and Henny is found and they get to go home.

Batya:

Mm-hmm. Fear but not sorrow.

Merav:
Exactly.

Batya:
There's a happy ending, and I think that about wraps us up for today.

Merav:
I think it does. I'm Merav Hoffman.

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

Merav:
Tune in next time when we'll hear Sarah say,
“My goodness, the Jewish holidays certainly
come in bunches.”

Batya:

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