Celia and Zachary Freedman, Esther's distinguished maternal grandparents, who probably fled Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution.

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THE FREEDMANS IN THE BRONX

Esther's maternal grandparents, Zachary and Celia Freedman, etched out lives in the new country that were golden threads in the tapestry of all immigrant Jewry in New York.

Arriving in New York in 1902 as a nineteen-year-old, Zachary Leo Freedman found a city of nearly four thousand Jewish associations and societies, most of them immigrant-founded. Zachary (whose Hebrew name was Zaccharia) found a city where Jews enjoyed spectacular entrepreneurial success across the city. Even before World War I, East European Jews were buying real estate, erecting apartments in New York, and renting them to early Jewish immigrants, who preferred renting to owning. It was a way of recreating the shtetls of Europe, where Jews lived together in community.

The importance of Passover was explained in an April 8, 1876, *New York Times* article, which imparts a glimpse of the importance of Judaism and Jewish culture to *Times* editors and readers. The point of the Jewish feast of unleavened bread, it noted, was "to commemorate the divine deliverance of the children of Israel from the cruel and tyrannical rule of Pharaoh." The lengthy article concluded, "All the Jewish temples and synagogues will be open for divine service this evening and tomorrow, and in the principal places of worship sermons will be delivered on Sunday by eminent Jewish ministers."

Jewish influence was beginning to dominate certain industries in the United States, including whiskey (Seagram's), stage and cinema (Hammerstein, Ziegfeld, Samuel Goldwyn, Louis B. Mayer, George Gershwin), clothing (Levi Strauss), and cosmetics (Helena Rubinstein). White-collar professions were also becoming Jewish-dominated, and Jews in New York in 1930 represented a quarter of the population. Sixty-five percent of the lawyers and dentists and 55 percent of the physicians in New York City were Jewish. The "thought experiments" of physicist Albert Einstein were turning the scientific community on its ear as he argued that molecules and atoms existed and calculated their size. Einstein would soon become an outspoken supporter of Zionism. Tongue-in-cheek, the great contemplative once said: "It was a Jewish weakness to always and eagerly try to keep the Gentiles in a good humor."

They lived in an apartment at 661 East 158th Street in the Bronx, a mile east of the Harlem River, in a perfectly safe and respectable Jewish neighborhood.

Celia and Zachary married in 1910 when she was nineteen and he was twenty-seven. They lived in an apartment at 661 East 158th Street in the Bronx, a mile east of the Harlem River, in a perfectly safe and respectable Jewish neighborhood. During the early 1900s, the Bronx attracted Jewish immigrants with such magnetism that by 1929 Jews in the Bronx numbered some six hundred thousand. The Bronx at the time was a thriving enclave of middle-class life, with tree-lined streets, cozy parks, and safe neighborhoods.

Their first child, Miriam, was born in 1911, exactly nine months after they married, upsetting the respectful Celia. She would have preferred a somewhat longer marriage before the first baby came along, to quell any doubts about her chasteness.

At one point, Zachary worked for S. Klein, a popular department store with locations at 68 Clinton Street and on Union Square. Klein's was immortalized in the musical *Guys and Dolls* when Miss Adelaide sang, "At Wanamaker's and Saks and Klein's, a lesson I've been taught, you can't get alterations on a dress you haven't bought."

The 1918 Jewish Register of New York said that the city was the largest Jewish center in history, with 1.5 million Jews—more than half of all Jews in the country. There were more than 3,600 Jewish organizations, whose expenditures the year before totaled $17.6 million. Many Jewish organizations were both cultural and political and did not shy away from the needs brought about by World War I. The American Jewish Congress proposed to send a delegation to the Versailles Peace Negotiations in 1918. The Jewish Congress also proposed that it become a nationally accepted body, acting alongside the US Congress.

Esther says that Zachary's ancestors had lived in shtetls, but Celia's line was less religious, so the couple lived as traditional but unreligious Jews. While they did not attend synagogue, they celebrated Passover with a traditional meal. The day before the meal, Celia would make gefilte (pronounced ge-FIL-te) fish. It was a laborious process that began by going to a nearby fishmonger's and picking out whitefish and pike (Celia considered carp a poor-man's choice). The fish store filleted the fish and wrapped the bones separately from the meat, which they ground and packaged. Then a delivery boy delivered both to the Freedman's apartment.

Celia would mix the fish with salt, pepper, and matzo meal, and hand shape the fish into balls. The bones would be put into a massive steel pot with chopped onions and carrots, the fish balls placed on top of the vegetables, to which was added enough water to barely cover the balls. This layered mixture simmered for several hours, then refrigerated until the meal. The stock would turn gelatinous when chilled, which would then be spooned over the fish balls when served.

Many tales surround the origins of gefilte fish at Passover. One explanation is that, traditionally, the ground fish was stuffed back into the skin of the whole fish, calling to mind *gefüllt*, the German word for "stuffed."

Accompanying the fish was maror, a horseradish condiment: bitter herbs to call forth the bitterness of slavery. In addition to remembering the enslavement of Jews in Egypt, Jewish people are also called to look at their own bitter enslavements, including bad habits and addictions. According to custom, if the maror brought tears to the eyes, all the better to more fully remember the pain of the past before celebrating the freedoms of today.

One of Zachary's jobs was to slice horseradish paper thin, which would be eaten with the gefilte fish. He also made a mustard concoction that was eaten with beef tongue or brisket. Everyone agreed that Zachary's spicy condiments would completely clear out the sinuses.

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Esther's mother, Charlotte, was born December 6, 1917, into a home that was decidedly Jewish and apparently pro-union. Both of her parents were Russian born, and many of Charlotte's ancestors were affected by the Bolshevik revolution, which brought floods of Jewish immigrants into the United States. Charlotte's infancy intersected World War I, when their new country and their old country declared war on each other, killing each other's citizens and destroying—or plotting to destroy—each other's cities.

The first armistice was declared by Bulgaria before Charlotte reached her first birthday in September 1918. When the Treaty of Versailles was signed on June 28, 1919, four empires had disappeared: German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian. Charlotte was two years old. It was a time when many nations were torn apart from World War I and their people scattered to the winds. But wherever the wind found them, many held on to the cultural milieu of Eastern Europe: joining unions to support industrial workers, speaking Yiddish at home if not on the street, and maintaining a more-or-less Jewish household.

Esther's winsome mother, Charlotte, possibly on graduating from seventh grade.

"A union is an institution of flesh and blood, built out of the aspirations and hopes of the workers." So wrote the editors of Local 66 in one of its newsletters.

It began in the 1800s, with the flood of East European immigrants who were veterans of the Bolshevik Revolution and Russian civil wars. Garment making quickly became a Jewish-dominated and unionized industry in New York—the first and the principal target for the early Jewish Socialist movement. Jewish Socialist unions such as the United Hebrew Trades (*Fareynigte Yidishe Geverkshaftn* in Yiddish) arose in the mid-1800s. It was here that Esther's grandfather Zachary gained a foothold in America.

Zachary would spend many years not only as a union member but a leader who was associated for decades with the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Founded in New York City on June 3, 1900, the ILGWU was within nine years able to organize more than 22,000 garment makers, many of them young women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two, who went on strike to "fight their sweatshop bosses." The ILGWU would grow to nearly a half million workers in subsequent decades.

Jewish laborers in America never forgot their brethren they had left behind. In 1922 the ILGWU pledged $200,000 toward a million-dollar fund to buy industrial and agricultural tools and machinery for Jewish artisans and farmers in Russia and Ukraine. Announcing the gift, ILGWU committee member Alexander Kahn said the tools "were not to save them from a day's hunger, but to put them in a position where they would need no further gifts."

Local 66, otherwise known as Bonnaz and Hand Embroiderers, Truckers and Pleaters Union, was in its infancy when young Zachary joined in 1916 as a Bonnaz operator. It was highly specialized work, creating embroidery with a specialized sewing machine considered state of the art at the time. The intricate work is performed either freehand or by following a perforated design. This skill was passed from father to son, a tradition of Old-World craftsmanship. Designs that came out of the Bonnaz machine were softer to the touch than machine embroidery. The sophisticated designs were often used for borders and monograms as well as intricate raised designs on vests, bodices, and wall hangings. The walls of Esther's home are graced with several exquisite pieces, including a Bonnaz shawl that her grandfather made for his wife.

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Zachary quickly became known as an accomplished embroiderer who was well-spoken and dignified, and he rose in the ranks of leadership, just as he had done in England. A year after he joined Local 66 (then called the Bonnaz, Singer, and Hand Embroiderers Union), its members elected Zachary president.

For the greater part of his forty years as president of Local 66, Zachary Freedman continued to work as a Bonnaz operator. Under his leadership, the union grew from a small guild of Bonnaz embroiderers to an organization ten thousand strong, embracing every craft in the embroidery industry, enveloping tucking, pleating, and the Allied Crafts Union.

Zachary is described in the Local 66 newsletter as quiet, unpretentious, possessing great willpower, levelheadedness, and warmth of heart. He is eulogized as a man who continually fought for better working and living conditions for the workers in his industry.

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Local 66 accepted into its ranks the Allied Crafts Union as well as Local 41, which represented pleaters, tuckers, and stitchers. Local unions were generally part of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, which had been founded by mostly Socialist immigrants. Its slogan was, "One battle is won, but the fight's just begun." In 1919 the ILGWU became the first American union to negotiate an unemployment compensation fund that was contributed to by its employers. The ILGWU pioneered regional union health centers, a resort for union workers, and training in traditional union techniques as well as citizenship and the English language.

Zachary presided over Local 66 throughout the Great Depression. In 1930 New York's Bank of the United States had 400,000 account holders, virtually all Jews. When the Great Depression triggered a run on the bank, most of its depositors lost their life savings. It was a time of intense stress for Local 66, and Zachary Freedman led union members through the storm.

A spread of photos possibly taken at the union house in the Catskill Mountains in the 1920s.

Clockwise from top left: Zachary with Miriam and Charlotte (Esther's mother); Miriam standing behind Charlotte; Zachary, Celia, Miriam, and Charlotte posing on the ground together; the family posing with Celia standing; the two girls, with Charlotte's impressive hair let loose.

Zachary, Celia, Miriam, and Charlotte in the 1920s relaxing on the grounds of the union house in the Catskill Mountains.

Leading the union meant using wisdom and patience as members debated the risks and rewards of staging a strike, holding steady when a strike was called, sitting on a negotiating committee hammering out details of a contract, and wrangling over terms with the employers' associations.

The ILGWU had adopted what was called the protocol of peace: a system of industrial relations that attempted to ensure stability and limit strikes and production disruption by providing for an arbitration system to resolve disputes. Arbitration would eventually be the apparent cause of Zachary's death.

In 1939 "a chaotic situation" developed within the ILGWU that made the then-president David Dubinsky beg Zachary to quit work in the Bonnaz shop and take over management of the union as a full-time paid official. We don't know what the clash was over. Possibly it was related to the attempts of organized crime to infiltrate and take over unions. Or it may have been rooted in the anti-Communist upswing in the country at the time. Many members of Local 66 had recently emigrated from Communist countries. The disturbance may have been influenced by the expulsion that year of Jews from Germany (Poland refused to admit them), the marking of their passports with a large letter J, the forced yellow armbands, Kristallnacht, the slaughter of innocent Jewish families, the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany . . . and that was just the beginning.

...Zachary stepped up to the plate, brought peace within the ranks of Local 66, and served for the rest of his life—a mere sixteen more years—as the full-time union manager.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr. addresses the union as Zachary Freedman stands close.

A packed union listens intently to a speaker as Zachary Freedman studies their reactions.

Right: Zachary and Celia Freedman, 1948.

Below: Zachary Freedman behind the podium at a meeting of Local 66.

Whatever the cause of the disturbance, Zachary stepped up to the plate, brought peace within the ranks of Local 66, and served for the rest of his life—a mere sixteen more years—as the full-time union manager.

When Esther and her parents visited, they stayed with the Freedmans. A driver took Zachary to the union, and when Esther was in town, she rode along in the big car. At the union offices her aunt was the bookkeeper; the switchboard operators let Esther be their apprentice and helper, and other union members also fell over themselves, making sure their leader's precious granddaughter was attended to. When it was lunchtime, Zachary took her out, sometimes to the nearby Russian tea room. He always offered

to buy her a present along the way, perhaps at Macy's or Wannamaker's, and Esther loved dolls. But her mother's reaction to what she considered expensive gifts made the little girl a good shopper. If she saw something she wanted, she'd first turn it over to investigate the price and would be sure to suggest the least-costly item.

She accompanied her grandfather to the tobacconist, where the smell enchanted her as he bought cigarette tobacco and rolling papers. He rolled his own cigarettes, which he kept in a slim, monogrammed silver case and, in his elegant manner, smoked in a cigarette holder.

One day five-year-old Esther piped up and said, "Grandpa, I'd like a puff."

Esther's mother happened to be standing nearby and began to object, but Zachary simply said, "Sure," and put the cigarette holder to his granddaughter's lips. The poor child, whose pulmonary system was already prone to bronchitis, sucked in the smoke, drew it into her lungs, gasped, then gagged, then finally vomited. Zachary looked at his daughter as if to say, "See? Now this child will never be a smoker." And he was right.

When Esther spent the night with her grandparents, she ran to her grandfather first thing in the morning and watched the end of his morning routine: smiling at her through teeth yellowed from tobacco, his buffed fingernails moving to fasten his socks to garters, and dispensing the morning injections that kept his diabetes at bay. She'd sit on his bed while he made a new search for a place to stick the needle and administer the insulin. Esther's grandmother called her husband Z and was a constant emissary of his health, ensuring that he took vitamins and ate balanced meals.

It was said of Zachary that his great dignity and self-respect were "qualities that he imparted to everyone with whom he came in contact, whether a man on the street or a powerful official. He never looked down on anyone but always accorded the next fellow the same measure of respect as he expected, and got, for himself."

The man was well loved and deeply respected. Esther owns a photograph of several hundred well-dressed people enjoying a formal dinner (the men's suits and the ladies' dresses are stunning), with herself the only toddler in attendance. The bottom of the photograph reads: "Birthday dinner tendered to Zachary L. Freedman, President, Local 66, ILGWU, by friends and active members of the union, Hotel McAlpin, New York City, December 5, 1946."

The Local 66 newsletter reported that Zachary, "courageous as a lion," was stricken in the afternoon of Monday, August 8, 1955, in the middle of a conference with employers as they hammered out the terms of a new agreement for the union. His heart had slowed to a dangerously low rhythm. As Esther's father sadly noted, "One day, there will be a fix for this." Had pacemakers been invented at that time, he would have lived.

As the union newsletter sympathetically reported, "His warm heart gave out." In fact, Zachary's death that day had been foreshadowed. As a boy in Kamenetz, he had contracted such a severe case of rheumatic fever that the family presumed him dead. His illness, in the late 1880s, came near the end of a worldwide pandemic of scarlet fever, strep throat, and rheumatic fever. Europe and North America were especially affected. Following the widespread use of penicillin, rheumatic fever was widely curtailed, but when Zachary was infected, little could be done to save the life of the patient.

Now comes what is known in the family as "the feather story." The rabbi was called to provide spiritual support and advise the family in preparing for shiva, but he thought he noticed weak breath sounds coming from young Zachary. Producing a feather, the rabbi held it under the nose of his bedridden "dead" patient: lo and behold, the feather quivered with Zachary's faint breath. Although he lived, his heart would be forever weakened, presumably from scar tissue buildup from the infection in the heart.

At Zachary's funeral, Roosevelt Auditorium was filled to capacity, with mourners filling the balcony and spilling out onto the street. Photographs taken at the time show Celia, Miriam, Charlotte, Abraham, and Esther in their seats among the thousands.

"Grandpa did not want a rabbi," Esther says. "He didn't want someone who didn't know him talking at his funeral." There was little need for strangers to speak because those who had known Zachary Freedman filled the day with their heartfelt tributes to him.

Among the many honors that survive Zachary are a scroll presented by the United Jewish Appeal of Greater New York, the establishment of a memorial fund in his name, and the naming of a sanatorium room after him at the Deborah Sanatorium for Consumptives (now the Deborah Heart and Lung Center) in Brown's Mills, New Jersey, which initially administered primarily to patients suffering from tuberculosis. Celia, Miriam, and Charlotte signed their names to a public thank-you letter, affirming that Zachary was" a guiding light . . . who gave of himself abundantly: his energy, his love, and respect to all whose lot was heavy."

Z. L. Freedman, Esther's maternal grandfather, was a giant in the Local 66 Union in New York City in the early 1900s.

Zachary Freedman Was Completely Incorruptible

There have been many occasions when, not seeing eye to eye, we have fought with him . . . but . . . we never once doubted his deep sincerity in all that he did. Here was a man with only one dream: to further the well-being of his beloved union. Here was a man completely incorruptible.

Despite his many obligations, Zachary Leo Freedman found the time and energy to take an active part in such philanthropic activities as the United Jewish appeal, the Federation of Jewish charities, etc. Mr. Freedman not only mobilized his own energies, but he managed to instill in all who worked with him the same zeal so that all the drives in which he participated were uniformly successful. He was held in such high regard by all who knew him that his participation in an affair was an almost an automatic guarantee that it would come through with a bang.

—*The Steambox*, the newsletter of the Pleaters, Stitchers, and Embroiderers Association

Zachary Leo Freedman Obituary

Obituary from Our Local 66 Newsletter, October–November 1955, Vol. XIV, No 5 (126), published by the Bonnaz, Embroideries, Tucking, Pleating, and Allied Crafts Union, Local 665, ILGWU, AFL, 225 West 39th Street, New York

With deep sorrow we record the sudden death of Zachary L. Freedman, the late President-Secretary of our Union.

Zachary L. Freedman died like a warrior, holding the fort for the Union, which he served with so much devotion for four decades. He was stricken in the afternoon of Monday, August 8, in the midst of a conference with the employers discussing terms of a new agreement for the Union. He was given immediate and continuous medical attention but failed to rally, and his warm heart gave out before midnight the same day.

The death of Zachary L. Freedman came as an awful shock to the union, to every one of its members, and to all with whom he had associated in his long career as union leader. . . . For the greater part of the forty years as President of Local 66, Freedman made his living in the shop as a Bonnaz operator. And it was only in 1939 that Zachary L. Freedman quit work in the shop and took over the management of the Union as a fulltime paid official, in response to a demand from President Dubinsky that he step in and clear up a chaotic situation that had developed in the Union.

But whether in the honorary office of President or as full time President-Manager, Zachary L. Freedman devoted all of his time, energy, knowledge, and skill to the up-building of Local 66 and the living conditions for the workers in the industry, and to advancing the economic and social welfare of all working men and women.

Zachary L. Freedman lived to see his cherished Local 66 grow from a small union of Bonnaz embroiderers to a mighty organization ten thousand strong, embracing every craft in the embroidery industry, but cruel fate did not will it that he enjoy the blessings of his fruitful efforts for very long.

As the highest executive of Local 66, Zachary L. Freedman distinguished himself for his strong willpower, levelheadedness, and warmth of heart. He was a personality possessed of a high degree of dignity and self-respect, and these qualities he imparted to everyone with whom he came in contact, whether it be a man in the street or in high station in life. He never looked down on anyone but always accorded the next fellow the same measure of respect as he expected, and got, for himself.

The death of Zachary L. Freedman is an irreparable loss to the Union. His memory will remain with us in the years to come and will serve as an inspiration to work unselfishly for the achievement of the goals to which he devoted his life.