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Something Permanent to Hold On To

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Oral history: In the era of e-mail and fax, a lot of family stories are being lost. Businesspeople like Ellie Kahn are capturing the tales on video and paper as lasting reminders.



It's not yet noon on a Sunday morning, and Marcia Berman has already recounted 100 years of history. As the video rolls, Berman, a children's songwriter, tells the saga of her family, from her Polish-born grandparents' arranged marriage to her parents' courtship at a Boyle Heights soda fountain to her own adolescent experiences in a socialist-Zionist youth group.

Prompting the narrative is Ellie Kahn, founder of the oral history venture Living Legacies Productions. Sitting a few feet away in Berman's living room, she patiently draws out the multi-generational account, occasionally offering words of encouragement during a sometimes emotional session.

Kahn entered the field in 1988 and has since become one of the Southland's more prolific private oral historians, compiling nearly 100 histories either in book, video or audio format. The book versions, which include family photos and documents, are printed on archival paper and bound in hardcover leather. The videos often incorporate interviews with friends and family, along with footage from gatherings; they're edited either by Kahn or a professional editor. She also produces institutional histories for temples, social clubs, companies, bar associations and other groups.

Some of the stories are extraordinary, like that of Golde and Abraham Maymudes, who met in the woods in pre-revolutionary Russia while plotting against the czar and went on to become union organizers in this country. Some of Kahn's subjects are Holocaust survivors with grim tales of Nazi persecution, such as Helen Moss, who spent a year and a half in Auschwitz before escaping from the infamous Death

March. Other stories are less dramatic but no less compelling, offering vivid insights into the nuances of people's lives.

Most of Kahn's subjects are elderly people whose children are interested in documenting their family's heritage.

"My father had told me stories through the years of his family, and I wanted to have it recorded so that his grandchildren and great-grandchildren would have it," says Sondra Smalley, who hired Kahn to interview her father, Isadore Familian, for his 80th birthday. "I felt it was very important to get that down."

Kahn's work has led her into the fields of documentary filmmaking and education. In 1993, she produced "Meet Me at Brooklyn and Soto," the well received account of Boyle Heights, and last year she established a nonprofit foundation through which she has instructed children how to interview their grandparents.

"It's important for people to know about their roots," Kahn says. "Too many people tell me, 'We waited too long to interview Grandma. She's gone now, and there's no one who can tell my kids about their heritage.' "

Kahn's subjects attest to the value of documenting their life experiences. "I believe that families can learn a lot from these tapes," says Familian, who grew up in Boyle Heights and went on to become a leading businessman and philanthropist. "When a young person has some hardships, a parent can play the tape and say, 'Your grandfather had some hardships. Look what happened to him.' I think it can be inspirational and educational."

The story of Helen and Julius Moss, recorded by Kahn in a leather-bound manuscript, is nothing if not inspirational. Each was married to a different spouse when the Hungarians came into what was then Czechoslovakia and sent most of the Jews, including Helen, to concentration camps. While she survived repeated encounters with Dr. Joseph Mengele at Auschwitz, Julius endured the rigors of a Hungarian labor camp.

Their spouses were not as fortunate, however, and when the two met in their hometown after the war, they married and eventually immigrated to the U.S. The couple settled in Los Angeles, where Julius became a baker at Gotham of Hollywood and Helen worked in real estate.

Though they had always found it painful talking about the past, the Mosses agree to record an oral history as a birthday gift for their son. "I was thinking about the family," Helen says. "It was really for

the future." Their son told Kahn that he sat up all night reading the completed book of his parents' stories, and crying; there was so much he didn't know about their experiences.

While many people record oral histories with their children and grandchildren in mind, Kahn recognizes that her subjects also benefit from talking about their lives.

"I know I'm not doing therapy, but the experience is therapeutic," she says. "It's a healing process when someone has a chance to reminisce about their entire life--to be acknowledged for what they've lived, to express the sorrows and the joys of their life—which might give them a sense of completion in the last years of life."

Kahn continues to broaden the scope of her work. She recently completed a course at Palms Middle School, teaching kids how to interview their grandparents, and this fall she will be instructing students at Malibu and Millikan high schools on interviewing residents at nursing homes. It all ties into Kahn's larger mission of preserving history, honoring elders and bridging the gap between generations.

"In ancient days, the tribal elders would tell the stories of the tribe," she says. "I think that it created cohesiveness for the family and the community to have this thread that went back in time, and to have this old person respected and admired as someone who the young people could go to. Elderly people were seen very differently--they were the keepers of the family stories--and I think that would be a really beneficial thing to have again in our culture."

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Ellie Kahn, left, chats with Edith Meyer during a recording session. Meyer fled Nazi Germany in 1938; her son Ron Meyer, president of Universal Pictures, hired Kahn to document the family's history.