



UGC Approved Journals

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



Editor-in-Chief

Volume V, Issue V May 2017

www.ijellh.com

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ISSN :2455-0108

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(INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL ONLINE OF SCIENCE)

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ISRAEL

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF UNCLE SIDNEY, OR "VERE VAS YOU VEN DEH ROBBES CAME?"

I suppose there is nothing unusual about imagining the power of a stern, almost mythological uncle when one is just a child. Still, even as an adult I can't help but feel that there was something special about my Uncle

Sidney, even though I was eventually to learn about the limits of his authority. Growing up rather close to our extended Bronx family, I often found myself on weekends having to engage the peculiarities of my most outspoken uncle. Of course, other relatives had made their mark as well, especially my other uncles. They weren't as bright as my aunts or grandmother, but they tended to take center stage whenever possible. After all, didn't Uncle Sam during a Passover Seder at my grandmother's house put out the fire in my sister's hair by rapidly clapping his bare hands? Apparently, she got too close to the festive candles. Or how about Uncle Phil, who lived to celebrate his

101st birthday, claiming to have reluctantly turned down a life of crime in the Jewish mafia of New York? True, I do remember Uncle Phil on one occasion – when he was only in his eighties – calling on Uncle Sam to step outside, and settle their differences like men. But Bugsy Seigel he wasn't. As a young boy, I also recall him propelling his car down a country road with my father and myself as passengers, proudly showing me how he could easily get his new mid-1950s car to go faster than 100 miles an hour. How's that for peculiar behavior? These episodes made quite an impression on me, but nothing those uncles could do could ever approach the power of Sidney's exploits. No one could replace him as avuncular archetype.

Imagine, if you will, the following scenario: we are all driving to some long forgotten destination. The passengers include my parents, myself, my sister and my infamous uncle. How exactly did that constellation come about? We were probably on our way to what was known generically if not mythically as "the country." This is an easy guess for me since, aside from the one trip my parents made to Niagara Falls (which I had declined to attend in the hope of enjoying some much-needed teenage privacy), every journey we had ever made out of the city

had been to that place known as "the country." No, we didn't go abroad to visit faraway lands; we simply went upstate to a bungalow colony, to escape the summer heat of New York City. No Long Island Gatsby domicile for us: "the country" was the Jewish middle class version of the American Dream of summer leisure.

But I digress. The point I was going to make about the originality of Sidney, at least in a child's eye, was his unpredictable yet authoritarian behavior. In that infamous car ride where I found myself trapped with my uncle, I made the mistake of making too much noise while enjoying myself in the back of the car. Uncle Sidney was not happy and had no reservations about expressing his dissatisfaction. My parents, visibly shaken by the old man's proclamation concerning unruly children, hastily warned me to pipe down and shut up. Sidney was a bachelor, childless, and wasn't quite familiar with the Dr. Spock method of child rearing.

I made the not uncommon childlike mistake – I was only about 7 years old – of believing that my backseat position could protect me from the authority of the adults, even from that of Uncle Sidney, who sat regally upfront and provided my Dad with unneeded directions. I assumed I was too far away to pay the price for disobedience, so I chose to ignore my parents' warning and continue my obnoxious behavior. This turned out to be poor decision making, since without further warning, Sidney whirled around and slapped me across the face even as I was about to release a whoop of glee, enhanced by my false sense of empowerment. There was a certain benefit to having my mouth open; it made it easier to scream in reaction to his mighty blow. It's not that the slap hurt me, though it most certainly did. It was more about the insult of being manhandled in such a nonchalant manner, right in front of my parents. Perhaps the worst thing was the post-slap reaction of all those in the car: aside from my wailing, there was absolute silence. No one was about to question what the patriarch had done to me; my parents weren't going to protest his behavior, as if he were perfectly within his rights to discipline their child. It's not that they approved; later I found out that my mother was upset with Sidney and with my father, for not standing up to him. But no one ever did challenge him about anything, and a mere slap wasn't going to change that reality.

As I was to realize later, despite my ambivalence towards my uncle, I owe him a great debt. My own disdain for authority had its genetic precursor in Sidney. He did what he wanted when he wanted to. If you weren't supposed to smoke in a certain place, you could be sure that he would light up. He didn't feel rules applied to him yet he certainly had no patience for anyone who disobeyed his rules, as I had learned in our car ride.

But now that I've revealed the worst about Sidney, I think it only fair to talk about his more positive characteristics. He was always glad to see us kids, and made us feel welcome whenever we visited. I should note that in yet another peculiar turn of circumstances, ever since my grandfather died, my uncle lived with my grandmother, his sister-in-law, in order to save money. It turns out he was the only one doing the saving, because he simply didn't pay my grandmother much rent. Tough as she was, she was apparently no match for Uncle Sidney. So visiting my grandmother meant visiting my uncle as well. To further intensify matters, right next door lived Uncle Phil, married to my father's sister Rae, and their daughter, my lovely older cousin Gayle. So these visits were very Sicilian in nature.

Nothing, however, could truly prepare us for an encounter with Sidney. Or to be more exact, with his greeting: the patented Uncle Sidney kiss. You might be familiar with the postmodern vacuum cleaner, the kind that sucks out great amounts of dust from seemingly perfectly clean rugs. The power generated by this appliance has nothing on Sidney. When he sucked in your cheeks with his signature kiss you were lucky not to leave your feet. I was actually worried – if not secretly pleased – that my sister might disappear entirely in the anaconda-like suction of an Uncle Sidney kiss. Needless to say, if you were lucky enough to survive one kiss there was still the other cheek to deal with. Sidney was a symmetrical kind of fellow, after all.

What a strange feeling it was to look forward to and suffer anxiety about an Uncle Sidney kiss. It was a thrill to be greeted in a way that clearly signified his joy at seeing us. Yet the question at the back of my mind, and I'm sure my sister's as well, was how are we going to survive this? How long will it take our faces to recover from the Botox-like repositioning of various facial muscles? Somehow, despite our misgivings, we always managed to come through.

On the positive side of the Sidney ledger, as I have promised to present, my uncle was a committed bachelor for all of his life. Why positive, you probably are going to ask? Well, I suspect he knew he wasn't the marrying type and would never be able to successfully share his life with a partner. To his credit, however, he didn't avoid female companionship, but actually pursued it. I couldn't help but feel terribly proud of Sidney for his having a girlfriend at the age of 77. I was even fortunate enough to catch him at my grandmother's house in date preparation mode. Now that was a thing of beauty. Sidney, pampering and preening himself like a peacock on the rampage. I was amazed that anyone could dress so carefully, check every button on a shirt, manipulate a tie and collar endlessly and, finally, comb and re-comb the same three hairs

on his head over and over again. And that was before he covered his head with a sharp Philip Marlowe-style fedora anyway.

He certainly was a sight, both before and after his ablutions and preparations. In addition, he gave off quite a smell as well. He would call me over and ask me to give a "shmeck," which in Sidney speak meant to smell his aftershave lotion. My grandmother would roll her eyes in the time honored tradition of all wise women observing and reacting to old men acting like young boys. But I was in a different boat. I didn't have the heart or courage to let Sidney know that even people around if not in Yankee Stadium, a good 12 blocks away, could probably smell his cloying aftershave as well as I could.

But how cool is that? A girlfriend at the age of 77! She was no spring chicken either, but they apparently had some good times. I mean, I can only judge by the effort he put into sprucing himself up. Of course, I had also seen him do the same to go out for a coffee or buy a copy of the *Forverts*. With Sidney, as you may have noticed, there always seems to be a downside. Yet Sidney as Valentino should not be judged. In fact, I have to say he lost his girlfriend through no fault of his own. She was killed in a car accident, an unlucky pedestrian whose eyesight wasn't all that good. As I said, she was no spring chicken.

I don't recall anything about Sidney's love life after the accident. I could ask my cousin Gayle or my aunt or even my father for more information. But I prefer to remember him as heartbroken, not someone who could pick up where he left off and immediately find another "hot chick."

One thing that certainly didn't change was Sidney's disdain for rules and his insistence on doing things his way. Even at the end of his life, when he had suffered a stroke, he found a way to communicate his long list of desires. Although he was unable to speak and unwilling to work with the speech therapist, whom he chased from his room with threatening gestures, he still found his own unique way to communicate. Sidney was able to sing, so most of what he wanted to say he would sing to his audience. It wasn't a perfect system of communication, but somehow it worked. I know he never lost his ability to direct my father's shaving stroke whenever he came to visit.

I went along one time, this time as an adult, and watched field marshal Sidney manage my father's unsatisfying efforts to give my uncle the perfect shave. Sidney was bedridden, in a home for the aged, no retirement communities back then, a victim of his own stubbornness and diabetes. Eating whatever he wanted, he had had his leg amputated as a result of his dietary neglect. It was clear there would be no more dates for Sidney, but that didn't mean he was about

to give up on the perfect shave. I understand it was more than stubbornness that guided him; it was also a matter of self-respect. Why not look your best, even if pajamas were as close as he was to come to high fashion at the end of his life? There was something uplifting about his insistence on the perfect shave, but also something depressingly Sidney-like about the way he issued his commands and demands.

Above all, he made it very clear that my father was a very poor surrogate shaver. True, Sidney's hands shook too much to get the job done himself, but that didn't mean that he had to accept the work of an incompetent. No matter how hard my father tried, he could not meet the demands of a Sidney shave.

What a mythological, complex character, indeed. Like all super heroes, his origins are nebulous. How or when he came to America is a mystery to all. He simply showed up, following his brother and sister-in-law to America, without consulting anyone. History, as you can see, is not my family's strong suit.

Once he arrived, and probably well before that, he had his opinions and wasn't open to dialogue or discussion. He lived his life as he saw fit and was too stubborn to make the compromises and adjustments so many of us willingly or unwillingly make. When my Uncle Phil got Sidney a good job as a presser in the garment district, Sidney would quit every few weeks because of some perceived slight or injustice. It would be up to Uncle Phil to convince the boss to take Sidney back and to persuade Sidney to return. When he was reading his Yiddish newspaper, the *Forverts*, he could not be disturbed: on pain of being slapped if you were a kid, or shouted at if you were a grown up. The only person he showed a modicum of respect for, albeit in his own peculiar way, was his sister-in-law, my grandmother. When she would summon up the courage to make an unusual or new dish, Sidney would issue a royal proclamation in Yiddish. "This is really very good. Don't make it again." I guess he could have had a career as a diplomat, if he had the time or inclination.

I suppose by now you have picked up on my ambivalence toward my uncle. He was a big-hearted character larger than life, but also capable of being vicious, petty, violent, and cruel. Nevertheless, the Uncle Sidney story that brings tears to my eyes, and deflates his heroic image is his infamous run-in with the law. Nothing in his tyrannical experience had prepared him to face down the authority of the traffic police.

It all started when Sidney was making his way out to Yankee Stadium to take in a day game. The Yankees were an important part of my life, but the baseball team was even more important to families like mine, immigrants living in the Bronx that looked upon baseball as a great equalizer or facilitator, something that could ease the pain of being different, foreign, and

speaking English with a strange, guttural accent. To love baseball, or the Yankees in NY, was a way to belong, to fit in, to be American. Even my grandmother, she who would rise at dawn to attend daily services at the synagogue, was a Yankees fan. A highly intelligent and unusual woman who had come to America as a young married woman in the first decade of the 20th century to scout out the "Goldene Medina" on her own, she was most proud of having read *Gone with the Wind* in English from cover to cover and having a certain familiarity with baseball and the Yankees. Of course, this was a time when ball players didn't earn much more than ordinary civilians and could still be seen around the Bronx pursuing their off-season jobs. She, and certainly

Sidney, would have no patience for the "me," current generation of athletes.

So here we have Sidney, representing the family on an important quest, off to see the Yankees and enshrine us in the immigrants' hall of fame, undertaking a holy mission, a Jewish Jihad in the Bronx, if you will, only to be thwarted by the man, the system, a representative of the law. How hard it must have been for Sidney to deal with his barely contained rage, his frustration, at being pulled over by a cop, even though Sidney was on foot at the time. As I have noted, Sidney didn't do well with any authority but his own, and even if he didn't especially fear or respect the police – he had had much to say about their incompetence after his and my grandmother's home had been broken into – he had enough good sense to know that verbally abusing a policeman wasn't a great idea, even if said officer had stopped Sidney after he had crossed the street against the red light.

Busted for jaywalking: the horror, the horror! Sidney tried to explain to the cop in question about how busy he was, how he had to hurry, on the way to the game, etc. He even pointed out, quite correctly, something about the Founding Fathers giving New Yorkers the constitutional right to jaywalk. But his efforts were to no avail. The cop, unmoved mover that he was, wouldn't give up his prey without writing up a twenty-five dollar fine.

What could Sidney do? How could he turn the tide and show this cop what's what? Finally, using the ultimate slur, grandiloquent hyperbole, something grand for a grand occasion, after crossing the Grand Concourse no less, Sidney, raw, Sidney unplugged, launches into a no-holds-barred attack on the unsuspecting officer and pounces – with a sneer, not a whimper – in

Yiddish English, or Yinglish:

" and vere vas you ven deh robbes came?"

The cop, speechless, overcome with remorse, walked off without another word. Or so I like to think.