Maurice Sendak's Yiddish Heart

by Richard Michelson for Hunger Mountain on May 15, 2012

In 2002, when my children's book Too Young for Yiddish was accepted for publication by Charlesbridge Publishers, my editor asked if there was anyone in particular that I would like to "blurb" the book. With no lack of chutzpah I suggested Maurice Sendak. Why not start at the top. And it was common knowledge that Sendak's Wild Things were based on his Yiddish speaking, Holocaust surviving Aunts and Uncles, who "terrorized" the young Maurice with their constant attention. Yet, the adult Maurice had tamed these creatures, become their King, and developed a love of Yiddish culture.

"Sendak doesn't do blurbs," I was told. I decided to mail him my manuscript anyway. Perhaps the great author/artist would write back to decline, and I would be the proud owner of a signed letter of refusal. "Vat vas to lose," as my Bubbe might say. If you don't ask, then the answer is already "no."

It was weeks later. I was sitting in my office at R. Michelson Galleries when the phone rang. The caller ID said: M. Sendak. I let it ring, and ring again, while I caught my breath. Had smart phones been as ubiquitous then, as now, I'd have surely snapped a picture: M. Sendak.

Richard Michelson at Maurice Sendak's home."I don't do blurbs," were the first four words that greeted me. No hello. No is Mr. Michelson there? "But your story touched my Yiddish heart," he continued, (Silence on my end. Breath holding). "so I'll write something this once."

We chatted. Yes, chatted. Me and Sendak. About his health ("I am an old man, I am dying. What's to say?"), his current project, Brundibar ("It is not going well. What's to say?"). Before hanging up, in the way of unthinking politeness, Mr. Sendak said, "so come visit someday."

How many times in a lifetime does your caller ID say M. Sendak? "How about tomorrow," I asked. "I can drive down to Connecticut. I'd love to see your Brunibar sketches." (I'd love to see your sketches. Even I flinched at the triteness as I said/heard it). And that is how I came to visit Maurice Sendak and our acquaintance began.

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When my daughter was eleven, in 1994, she performed in a traveling production of the opera Brundibar. This "entertainment" was originally put on by inmates in Terezin, the Nazi concentration camp, in order to fool the Red Cross into believing that "prisoners" were being

treated humanely, and that the arts were flourishing in the camps. We now know that cast members — mostly children — were transported to Auschwitz and gassed after their performance.

At a concert in Lincoln Center of my daughter's recreation of the role, the woman who played the Cat in the final performance prior to liberation, Ela Weissberger, attended. I had been preoccupied with worry for my daughter—how did she look on stage, would she hit all the right notes, and which "theater industry big shots" were in the audience. When I met Ela, all those petty concerns instantly vanished, and I realized the difference between acting for your art, and acting for your life. Since I often write about social justice issues, I try to remind myself of this lesson when I get too bogged down fretting about my book's reception and whether I will win any "stars" from the reviewers. I try to keep in mind the real difficulties that many of the people I write about have encountered. That is what Maurice Sendak and I were speaking about when I first visited his home in Connecticut. By happenstance, he was working on his picture book version (libretto adaption by Tony Kushner) of Brunidbar. This is the story Maurice told me: "When Ela heard I was doing a picture book about Brundibar, she wrote and asked if I would like to meet with her. Soon after, I got a call from another woman who had also sung in the final performance. She too proposed that we meet. I mentioned that I'd previously heard from Ela, after which the woman indignantly stated: 'Well then you probably won't want to talk to me. I was just in chorus. I was a nobody. She was the big fancy-schmancy star.'" It was at that point, Maurice told me, that he realized his trouble with Brunibar was that he was approaching it as too sacred a project. He was letting the enormity of the subject invade his consciousness, blocking his creativity. But after the call, he again understood that regardless of circumstance, people are people, with all their grudges and insecurities and pettiness, and that is what makes us wonderfully human.

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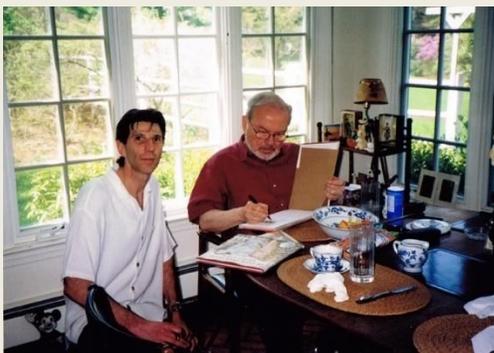
One day a client of R. Michelson Galleries brought in the original Brundibar stage setting design for framing. His grandmother had been interred in the camp, and had smuggled it out upon liberation. Serendipity? I called Maurice immediately. He was, he said, still having a hard time finding the right tone for the book, and he asked if he could "borrow" the drawing so he could hang it over his desk for inspiration. "I will see what I can do," I replied. "And I'll see what I can do about finding some drawings for you to sell," Maurice added. I had, of course, over the length of our relationship asked numerous times about curating a Sendak exhibition at my gallery. Maurice had little to no interest. Most of his major works were already pledged to the Rosenbach Museum and Library. But Maurice wanted that set design and he was sweetening the pot.

My client happily agreed to the arrangement, and Mr. Sendak, true to his word, was the featured artist at our 13th annual R. Michelson Galleries Illustration exhibition. He visited Amherst-Northampton for 3 days of celebration (and an accompanying collaborative exhibit at the Eric Carle Museum). He was, true to his reputation, curmudgeonly from beginning to end. That was his public persona, and not entirely manufactured. But privately, visiting with him at his home, he was also a wonderful, witty, welcoming host. I treasure our conversations about literature and art. And whenever I see a copy of Brundibar, I feel pleased to have done my very small part to usher that incredible book into life.