

YIDDISH BOOK CENTER
2019 Great Jewish Books Book Club Video Conference
Burning Lights by Bella Chagall
with Bella Meyer
April 10, 2019
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Transcript edited by Jessica Parker.

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JESSICA PARKER: Okay, so it's 8:00. I'm going to get going. Hopefully I muted everyone, but myself. Nope. Haven't done that successfully yet. One moment, please.

Okay. So, hi, everyone, and welcome to our first video conference of the 2019 Book Club. I'm glad you're all joining us this evening. I'm Jessica Parker, the coordinator for the Great Jewish Books Book Club. In just a moment, I'm going to introduce our featured guest, Bella Meyer. But first, I want to tell you about the structure for this evening.

All participants will be muted to prevent excessive background noise. Bella will start with about a 15-minute introduction, and then we'll open it up to questions for about 45 minutes. You can ask her questions by typing in the chat box. To access it, hover over the bottom of your Zoom window. You should see a speech bubble with "Chat" written underneath it. Click on that speech bubble to open the chat window. You'll be able to send messages privately to individuals, or to everyone. Please address your questions to *everyone*, not just to Bella as it's helpful for me, and the rest of the group, to be able to see them.

Bella will be repeating the questions for our members who will be watching the video recording after the fact and won't have access to the chat box. I will be posting the video recording to Vimeo and sharing the link with you all as soon as possible. Rest assured that no one's video, other than mine and the speaker's, will be part of the recording. So, feel free to have your webcam on if you so choose.

In addition, we have live captioning for this video conference. If you would like to see the closed captions, hover over the bottom of your Zoom window. You should see an icon that says "CC," as in closed caption. To turn them on, click on that "CC" icon. To turn them off, click on the "CC" icon again. There is a 4-5 second lag time for the captions as a result of the software integration and the fact that it's being live captioned. So, thank you to our captioner, Heidi, who has been with us for the last few webinars.

And, if you're having a technical difficulty or issue this evening, please send a private chat message. My name is Jessica Parker within the list of folks on this call. You can email me at bookclub@yiddishbookcenter.org or call me at 413-256-4900 ext. 131. I'll be muting myself once I'm done my quick introduction, so you won't be interrupting the video conference if you call me.

So, without further ado, I would like to introduce Bella Meyer.

Bella Meyer was born in Paris and raised in Switzerland and was born immersed in the world of art. She always painted while studying art history and obtaining her Ph.D. in medieval art history from the Sorbonne. Bella taught art history, wrote numerous academic papers, and delivered informative, firsthand experiences in lecture form of her grandfather Marc Chagall's work. Invited to take on responsibilities for the Visual Arts at the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, Bella settled in New York, where she held this position for a number of years. Adding to her expanding list of accomplishments, she has had her hand in costume design and mask-making for a number of theatre performances, and also created many puppets for her own puppet show productions. Bella's passion for beauty and aesthetics led her to become a floral designer. In a recent publication, Bella describes her love for flowers: "To discover its essence—opening, life, death—is to experience an unimaginable mystery." Bella founded FleursBELLA, a floral design and décor company, in 2005, focusing her talents on creating floral arrangements much in the way an artist paints.

So, without further ado, I would like to turn it over to Bella, who I am just looking for in the list to unmute.

BELLA MEYER: Can you hear me?

JESSICA PARKER: Yes.

BELLA MEYER: Hello, everybody. Thank you, Jessica, and thank you, everybody, to give me this great pleasure and honor to talk to you a little bit about my grandmother, the author of the book *Brenendike Likht, Burning Lights*, which you read, and which I hope you enjoyed very much.

I never knew my grandmother. She died 11 years before I was born. And she died here in America very unexpectedly. Most of you might know about it, and she sort of continued hovering over our family, and continues to hover over me, for sure, like an ideal, in a way.

And I always heard about Bella, about this extraordinary woman whom I carry her name, and it was at some point when I understood how formidable a person she was, it became even more difficult to carry the name, because how could I possibly take -- how could I possibly be as good as having her name?

The only way I really understood more about her is that -- or that I got this image from her, was through my mother, Ida. My mother, who adored her mother, who adored her father, and actually, after her mother's death, after Bella's death, became the most important person for my grandfather in the sense of becoming his -- not only his PR, but his everyday manager in a way.

My childhood memories are having her, having my mother, talk to my grandfather every day on the phone. They talked Russian together. But then she would talk about her mother. I realized she missed her terribly and deeply because they were very, very strong allies.

I also heard about her through my grandfather. He would talk to us grandchildren all the time about her. He would talk to her -- he would talk to us about her as if she was really the one person who truly understood him, and found ideal and knew what had to be, you know, had to be for him. She's the one who would guide him, and you could see that in his paintings. She was his support. She is always, when you look at his paintings, you see that she is the one with the open eyes. He can rest on her. He can rest on her shoulders. He can rest on her -- in her arms, because she carries him. That's what they were really about.

So, for me, it was like what really always hearing about this most idyllic person, seeing her portraits in the paintings, in the paintings around the house where I grew up all the time. I always wondered: Well, who is she? And who is she?

So, we definitely know from the book we read that she was, ever since she was very little, very smart, and sensitive. And also, quite emancipated, because she questions everything, and she actually -- she continued to question everything, and even though she respected her parents deeply, and their tradition, and she was very close to her brothers, and she was, as we read, quite annoyed that they were allowed to do everything, and she wasn't allowed to do anything. But still, she had the courage to break out of it, in a very respectful way.

So, we know that she grew up in a very well-to-do, or maybe not very well, but probably in that times and for the Jewish community, well-to-do and definitely educated, more liberal, family. Allowing her to go to high school, to a Russian high school, which was for a girl, completely unheard of, and for a Jewish child, actually at that time not allowed, except if you would pay the principals off.

And then she continued to university. She was allowed to go to Moscow, leave Vitebsk, and Moscow is quite far away, and study philosophy and theater and literature. She was clearly a very intelligent person, and she had traveled quite a bit thanks to her parents, who always took her to foreign countries. She learned other languages, and she was very -- she was very educated and curious. Quite unbeknown to her parents, when she was in Moscow, she actually participated in a number of theater productions, under a different name, and I was trying to remember it and unfortunately, I can't. But it was a completely fictitious name, a name which she -- whom she also wrote to her boyfriend, Marc Chagall, too. That was in very early on.

Also, she, in fact, when my grandfather came back from Paris as a young artist, where he spent four years with a grant from a Russian philanthropist from Saint Petersburg, when he came back, and they eventually married, they married against her parents' will. It was not at all what they wanted for her, and it was a very quick, small ceremony, and off he had to go, back to his parents' home. It wasn't even -- they really didn't like it.

At that time, when she decided or accepted to marry him, because she loved him, she wrote him innumerable letters to Paris, where he was, and missed him, and told him every single thing she did. She -- and she could have a career as an actress. She decided to, no, actually what she really wanted was to be with this little crazy young artist, painter, from the very poor family, and spend -- build a life together.

They had very similar ways of expressing themselves, and what amazes me in her writing, her writings are so similar to the way he paints. They had an understanding, a very deep understanding, of where they both came from, what made them such an extraordinary couple. They shared poetry, and literature -- whole literature together. They shared the Russian Revolution together. They shared their very strong, fervent belief in art together. They both turned away from their religious rituals, family rituals, which they both grew up in, and to immerse themselves completely in art.

They had a child, my mother, called Ida, and as this very close-knit threesome, as they were, they eventually left Russia for good, Russia which they loved, and they loved until the day each of them died. Went through Berlin to Paris, and there were completely imbued by French culture and society. They talked Russian together, and it's only after they were invited to go to Vilna in 1935 that they started picking Yiddish up again, and my mother says that sometimes they would speak Yiddish together, especially when they didn't want her to understand what they were talking about. But, in fact, my mother understood -- learned to understand Yiddish. She could never read it, but she could understand it.

So, they started -- they started both sort of picking up their home language of Yiddish again because of the deep, deep fears and emotions which were awakened when they were in Vilna, in Poland, and when they saw the very bad situation the Jewish communities were in, and she really, really started fearing the -- what would happen to Jewish culture. She felt that something terrible would happen.

And so that's when she started writing. She started writing very much by herself. It wasn't anything they had planned together. She started writing, and she continued writing alone at night. She also would read a lot. She read incessantly. But she wrote, and she wrote by herself. And apparently became more and more withdrawn, going into these moments of writing and going back into her childhood, into her adolescence. They fled to America where they were very much in touch with many Russians and Jews, mostly writers and thinkers.

And there again, she continued -- she continued writing, and she needed absolutely to write all what she had, because the fear of -- the real fear of the annihilation of the Jewish culture grew

extremely strong in her. So, she continued writing. So, actually, with that, I would like to read the, how is it, the letter which my grandfather wrote in 1947 when he published, together with my mother, Ida, the second volume of her memoirs.

The first book which you read, the *Burning Lights*, were put together where -- so assembled already by her, because she had already proposed them to the Yiddish Book League, or the Book League of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, which was a Communist publishing house. And she had already talked to them about it and wanted them to publish her writings in two volumes. But then this never happened before she died unexpectedly in 1944. So, my grandfather, then, with the help of these publishers, was able to very quickly publish the first volume in 1945, and then the second one, which is called the *First Encounter*, in 1947.

So, let me read, if I may. Do we have time, Jessica?

JESSICA PARKER: Yes. Sure, go ahead.

BELLA MEYER: "Afterword," this thing is called. So, he writes --

Bella wanted to work in the theater and did work in the theater successfully. Then I came back from Paris and married her. We left for France, and that was the end of her dreams of the stage. For years, her love influenced my painting, yet I felt there was something within her, held back, unexpressed, that she had treasures buried away in her heart, like her string of pearls misted over with love.

Her lips had the scent of the first kiss, a kiss like a thirst for justice. Why was she so reserved with friends, with me? Why that need to stay in the background?

Then came the day when she relieved -- when she relived the exile of recent years. The time when the Jewish soul echoed in her once more and her tongue became the tongue of her parents again.

Her style in *Burning Lights* and *First Encounter* was the style of a Jewish bride in Jewish literature. She wrote as she lived, as she loved, as she greeted her friends. Her words and phrases were a wash of color over a canvas.

To whom compare her? She was like no other. She was the Bashinke, Belushka, of Vitebsk on the hill, mirrored in the [unclear] with its clouds and trees and houses. Things, people, landscapes, Jewish holidays, flowers, that was her world. They were her subject.

Her sentences long or short, written out or sketched, were now developed fully, now left indistinct like marks or lines in a drawing which must be divined rather than seen.

Toward the end, I would often find her sitting up in bed late into the night, reading books in Yiddish by the light of a little lamp. "So late, you should be asleep." I can see her now, a

few weeks before her eternal sleep, fresh and beautiful as always, in our bedroom in the country. She was arranging her manuscripts, finished works, drafts, copies. I tried to hide my fear. Why this sudden tidiness? She answered with a vain smile: "So you'll know where everything is."

Oh, calm and deep presentiment, I can see her again from my hotel window sitting by the lake before going into the water, waiting for me, her whole being was waiting, listening to something, just as she had listened to the forests when she was a little girl. I can still see her back and her delicate profile. She does not move. She waits and thinks and perhaps already sees other worlds.

Will the busy men and women of today be able to enter into her work and her world? Perhaps, later on others will come who can scent the perfume of her flowers and of her art. Her last words were: "My notebooks."

The thunder rolled, the clouds opened at 6:00 on the evening of September 2nd, 1944, when Bella left this world. Everything went dark.

So, my grandmother, Bella, continues to be a formidable force, and an inspiration to me, the one who truly understood the essence of my grandfather's painting and world. That's what I have to say and share.

JESSICA PARKER: Thank you, Bella. Shall we open it up to questions? Do folks have questions?

BELLA MEYER: Uh-oh. No questions?

JESSICA PARKER: Maybe people are thinking, or you answered all of them.

BELLA MEYER: I wanted to say that, so she's buried in -- she's buried in -- she died in the Adirondacks. And -- oh, can you hear me? Can you hear me?

JESSICA PARKER: Yes, we can hear you.

BELLA MEYER: Can you hear me?

JESSICA PARKER: Yes.

BELLA MEYER: Oopsy. Oh.

JESSICA PARKER: Yes, we can hear you.

BELLA MEYER: Oh, I just got the answer, but I just wanted to say she was -- she died in the Adirondacks, and -- but then the funeral was in New York, and she's actually buried in Westchester, not in New Jersey, which is -- which for me is important because like that, I can go

see her often. But I'm going to read you the first question.

Question: "Did your grandfather share stories of his youth and were they similar to Bella's?"

Yes, he did share lots of stories with us, but he also shared them a lot in his autobiography called *My Life*, which he actually wrote very early on. And he was thirty years old when he wrote *My Life*, and -- but he did talk to us about it, more of how he became a painter, and how he really wanted to be a painter.

His upbringing was similar to the way that he came from a very religious family, but he came from a very poor religious family, and with his father working very much, so much that he always came home very tired. He was a herring monger. He worked for a herring monger, but then went to temple, to shul, every evening. That's the only time when he started to feel better, and his mother was a very enterprising person, was illiterate, but very enterprising, and somehow understood her oldest son completely and supported him and convinced her husband who was deeply religious to let him go, to let him be a painter, to do this. His father never really accepted it, but -- because it went against all religious laws, and she sort of fought for her oldest son. So, he talked to us about it, but not really in details.

Oh, this was like -- written more -- how do I go back? There are many things here.

JESSICA PARKER: You can scroll up.

BELLA MEYER: I hope I answer your questions.

The next question: "Do you think Bella would have written more books if she had lived?"

I don't think so. She really wanted to write this to preserve the very warm rituals she remembered from her home. She wanted to write them down. She wanted them to survive in her words because of the future generations, but actually mostly for their daughter, Ida, for my mother, because since they sort of turned away from all of the rituals, Ida never grew up knowing about any of the holidays, except if they went to some family and when they celebrated Pesach or Purim or whenever, wherever they were, but she realized that she hadn't given her this great gift and she wanted to give her this gift, and she was really truly afraid that they would -- that all Jewry would be killed.

She died just a few days after France was liberated, and was so happy, and knew that they could go back to France. Unfortunately, she couldn't, so she knew that there were some Jews which were -- or she would have learned that some Jews survived the Holocaust, as terrible as it was.

So, I really don't think she would have written more. But who knows? I don't know. Thank you for this question. I've never asked myself.

Question: "How old was Bella when she died? What did she die of?"

It is written that she was actually -- that she was born in 1895. That's what's written also on her grave. But sort of archives -- we think that she was probably -- that she was actually born earlier, that she was a bit old already, but if she had -- if she was indeed born in '95 and died in '44, so she would have been 49 -- 49, I think, yes, 49, when she died. Probably she was a few years older and she died from -- she was apparently very frail, a frail person anyway, but she died of a strep throat infection, and she died because there was no penicillin available for civilians at that time.

And they were up in the Adirondacks, and went to a hospital, and then to another. We don't really know -- my grandfather at some point turned the story into saying that it was because of antisemitism that they didn't want to treat her, but we don't really know. There were the hospitals which were available then up there, upstate, were all run by nuns, so it's hard to know. But anyway, penicillin wasn't available, and they wouldn't give it to her. Friends afterwards said, well, they could have made an exception, or something. Anyway, she died very fast, two days later she was dead.

Another question is: "Can you expound on the relationship between Bella's writing and Marc Chagall's art? You said the both were interconnected."

Yes, I feel very much that her writing is -- she sees -- she sees little things. She feels the light, or the -- or she notices the, like, the fluttering of leaves, and you can see the same in -- you can see the same in his paintings. There are always little details somewhere, showing the beauty of the world, of nature, of a person, of life.

Whatever she writes, there's lots of hope in it. There's lots of kindness in it, even if she explains to us how annoyed she was at one of her brothers or not. But there's always kindness. I don't know if I explained it well enough.

Oh, maybe one thing, also: Her writing is very colorful, and she brings in colors. She describes colors. They are as important to her, it seems, than they are to him.

Another question: "Do you know if any inaccuracies in the book or does everything in it align with family stories?"

Yes, they do all align with family stories, but actually, from her -- these are the only signs we have which remain from her childhood. No one else has told us about it. The part of her families of, you know, her brothers' children and grandchildren who survived, and they obviously did not know her when she was a child, so we have to think that they're all accurate, or they definitely are accurate in what she remembers. That's her truth.

But also, many of -- many of the stories or imageries she's sharing with us are imagined. Like the last chapter in the book, which is completely imagined. This wedding, which she does witness from afar. She doesn't not know them, but in the meantime, she's thinking about all

these other possibilities of the wedding, and that's how she describes the whole -- that's what the whole -- each stories go to, so it is her own truth.

Question: "What happened to Bella's parents?"

They died pretty soon after they -- I mean, "pretty soon after." That doesn't mean anything. I'm sorry. They were alive when the Russian Revolution broke out. They were -- both my grandfather and my grandmother were very much partisans of the Revolution, because for -- it meant freedom to Jews. It meant freedom of expression. It meant freedom of expression in all art forms.

So that's why they were both so much part of it, and especially him. He was -- he then became a big part in the art community, becoming the Art Commissioner for the whole Vitebsk region, and created a school, which he called the Free Academy, but also a museum, and because in the very early times of the Revolution, of the October Revolution, art and all creativity was most important to the politicians. They thought, and they believed, that it was only through art that people could understand the new ideas of equality and freedom. As we all know, this changed pretty fast.

Now, one thing which happened, and which both my grandfather and my grandmother were devastated about, is they couldn't protect her parents from being looted completely. Their whole silversmith and sort of treasure box of their store was completely looted, and they were pushed out. I actually don't remember what happened then, but they died -- they stayed in Vitebsk, and they -- with small means, and -- but they died when both my grandparents and my mother were in Paris.

Another question: "I felt like when reading the book, it was like a written-out version of a Chagall painting. You think this is an apt description, or perhaps an unfair one?"

Well, I'm very happy that you say, that you mentioned that, because, yes, that's very much how I feel, and that's why I think they were so much in sync together, because they spoke the same language, whether with a pen or with a brush. They understood each other completely.

Question: "Explain/describe your grandmother and grandfather's return to speaking Yiddish. How much was it related to their yearning for the roots, and how much part of the resurgence of Yiddish as a literary voice?"

That's interesting. It definitely had a lot to do with their yearning for their roots, awakened when they went to Vilna, to the tenth anniversary of YIVO. Actually, Chagall went there also because he very much hoped that they would create a museum of Jewish art, and -- but it was created, and it existed for two years but then dismantled very quickly. So that was when they started more speaking Yiddish. In there, in Vilna, it was the -- I was going to say the Mecca of Yiddish culture, the Jerusalem of Yiddish culture, and maybe it gave them also a freedom to go back to their roots. But you're right, it was also part of this possibility of celebrating Yiddish as a

literary voice, what YIVO really stood for, and not only stood for, for it to be reborn, but also to collect all the great Yiddish writings which have had existed.

And he, from there, and then back, also, wherever, in Paris or Jerusalem, or America, became very involved with many Yiddish writers. So it all definitely coincided, and -- but also, I should say before the revolution, I mean, very early on in the early 20th century, when Chagall was in Saint Petersburg, as a young student, artist, he met with all the other young artists and intellectuals and writers, and there was a new -- there was a resurgence of Jewish culture, of Yiddish culture. It became very strong to take it on as a culture, as a treasure, really, of culture, and to push it away from any religion.

Where is the next -- oh.

[Question:] "Can you tell us what led Bella and Marc to become less religious? Was this a painful issue for them?"

No, I don't think it was painful for them at all. It really was because they grew up in that same -- that time when many intellectual young Jews decided or thought to abandon their parents' beliefs and way of living and wanted to break the traditions open. It was sort of like a pre-revolution. They were not interested in the very strict rules of their religions, but to break away, and to embrace, embrace art, embrace freedom, in a way, like suddenly I'm thinking like in the '60s, like where people broke -- where youth broke free, and it was all about love and the Beatles song, "It's All About Love," or something.

It's, I think very, in a way, similar. It was a huge movement in Russia, and so they were part of it, but just as immersed and involved in it, they were fighting for the freedom of artistic expression. It was most important to them. In a way, it was just like their religion.

And they never -- I have never felt my grandfather ever wanting to be -- become religious again. But he felt completely Jewish, of course, but also, I felt him to be very spiritual. And had an immense respect for, as he would say: "Oh, the God." I mean, he wouldn't say, it's like... So, he was very -- he was in awe for the higher power, and respected the rabbinate, any rabbinate, very much.

[Question:] "Did any of Bella's siblings survive the Holocaust?"

They all survived the Holocaust. They were very -- very, very lucky. Not only because they were well off, I guess because they were very lucky.

Some went to study in Switzerland early on, and they never went back to Russia. Others went to Saint Petersburg. Somehow, they all found a way. None of them were killed, murdered, during the Holocaust.

Quite extraordinary. And actually, the same with my grandfather's sisters. They all either died

of natural causes. None of them were murdered and when I think of that always, I've said they were like blessed. They were so lucky. It was extraordinary.

Question: "How do you feel about the editing, which apparently changed the order of her text?"

Well, actually, I don't really know what the order of her texts were. I was trying to compare the translations, actually, more than editing, because I really don't know how the editing was. But I trusted completely, because I know my mother and my grandfather did the editing, so they both missed her terribly. They wanted -- they knew that these texts were vital for her, so they knew they had to do the -- they had to order them.

Maybe they were already ordered in a certain way. I'm sure they were. And we still -- I'm sure we haven't done enough research in our archives, which we have in Paris. I'm sure there are going to be some exchanges we'll be able to find between the publisher and my mother or my grandfather to know what their discussions are, but I'm -- yeah, I'm -- I trust it completely.

The drawings which were added are indeed a lot done after she died, but there are some which were done before. Now, were they done *for* her book? Or, did he do them anyway and then my mother decided that that would be good for it? I don't know. I don't know.

[Question:] "Can you tell us about the painting of your grandmother looming over your grandfather and mother, tiny figures in the bottom of the painting?"

Oh, yes. You had this painting, I know, in the documents which you were -- which were shared with you. I don't know, I adore this painting. This painting is actually in -- at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. It's huge, it's very big, and yes, I think -- it shows -- it's from a time when they're very happy. It's just before the Revolution. They're mostly in the country, and they paint -- he paints. And he paints what he truly sees. He sees her being their -- maybe their power, their guide, their support.

She has an ominous presence over them. He adores her so much, he sees her like a goddess -- I'm taking your word -- looming over the forest where the little house were which they rented, and she'd take care not only of their daughter, but of him, also. So, it's a very just painting or expression of what he really felt.

There is another painting which I was actually looking for a reproduction here. I always forget where to find them, of a later painting, portrait, of my grandmother who sits there. They are in Paris at that point already, and she sits there very powerful, just her, and with a very serious, serene face, and look. I don't know if some of you know the Renaissance portraits by Titian. It's very similar to that, and she could be -- seemed quite frightful and frightening even, but she represented this power of them as a trio, as a family. She's the one who really lent him. It's only thanks to her and her strength that they were able to go on. It's only thanks to her that he could paint, and that he could forget about his doubts, because he was a very doubtful -- he

was always in doubt. He was terribly insecure about his painting, so I think her, seeing her like this goddess is very much what he felt.

[Question:] “You mentioned that your mother missed Bella so much after her death. Did your mother share any childhood memories about Bella's and Bella's characters?”

You mean if she -- if my mother shared some memories of my mother's childhood. I would imagine, because she wouldn't be able to share memories about her mother's childhood. I hope that that's what I see.

And, yes, my mother shared memories. Bella was always there -- okay -- was always there to protect my mother. My mother wasn't allowed to go to school, actually, because my grandfather, even -- he thought that my mother was -- oh that my mother -- wait. Okay, say it. I don't know.

Sorry, I was reading here. That -- I'm sorry, I lost track.

Oh, my grandfather didn't allow my mother to go to school, because he was afraid that she would be “spoiled,” not spoiled because he saw her as the most extraordinary, wonderful little girl who could exist, and he thought that somehow, French schools would spoil her, and take away her talents she had, or teach her things which maybe he didn't want her to learn. I don't know.

Bella, on the other hand, knew that it was most important for her daughter, Ida, to learn, so she secretly brought in private tutors, so that my mother could learn to calculate and learn about history and, obviously, read. Mother read from a very young age on, and that's essentially what she did always.

But she also decided to -- oh, she also painted all the time, and that's what she did, because the living room was the studio, and that's what happened. So, she would paint. My grandfather painted. She painted.

He would paint sometimes on the other side of her drawings when he didn't have paper, which maybe wasn't the nicest thing to do, but so that's what it was, and she had a difficult, you know, in a way, a very difficult childhood, because it was very much in that trio, and she couldn't necessarily do -- she didn't live a childhood as other people did.

She said that Bella was very wonderfully sensitive and elegant and intelligent and kind and patient. I don't know. My mother said that -- would tell this to us maybe because she lost her when she was a young adult, and really missed her, because maybe she was her closest friend actually. It's hard to know.

Thank you for the -- oh, thank you all for all your thanks and compliments. Thank you, everybody.

Then there's other questions: "You also mentioned that your grandmother became secular, and yet proud to be a Russian Jew. Did your mother or you and your sister feel you missed out on Yiddishkeit?"

Yes. So, they all, my grandmother, my grandparents all became secular, yes, right. And they were not only proud to be Jews, Russian Jews, yes, but Jews in general, but that's very much what they felt in the worst of times.

My mother probably -- I don't know if she really missed to -- missed -- being a Yiddishkeit is different than, in a way, than to be, in my opinion, to be religious, but she missed maybe not to be part of a religious community.

On the other hand, for the Yiddishkeit side, she at some point needed to retranslate her mother's books, both volumes, from Yiddish into French, because she thought that the French translation which existed -- I can't remember when it was done -- was -- didn't do justice at all to her mother's Yiddish texts and so she decided -- at that time I was a student in Paris -- to translate both volumes from scratch into French, and it was -- I had never seen my mother so happy. It was sort of a love story of love, really. It was amazing, and she did that. It was in 1973 that she did it and published it.

Since she couldn't read the Yiddish, in the Hebrew letters, she asked her cousin, whose name is Bella, and she's still alive, Bella who was -- who is a granddaughter of -- daughter of one of Bella's brothers. And so, she was the youngest. She came every day, and read the text in Yiddish, and my mother translated it, because she could understand it, which was very beautiful.

Myself, I can only talk for myself. I can't talk for my sister or for my brother. Yes, I do miss the Yiddishkeit. I do miss not having grown up with religious rituals. I miss not having grown up with the traditions of the time -- the rhythm of the year, of the rhythm of the weeks. I miss it. I had to learn it, to acquire it for myself. But it doesn't -- it didn't just come from my childhood.

Another question: "Bella seems an artist, in that she experiences the world visually. There is little reflection in the book, despite its having been written in adulthood. How much formal education did she have? Were the attitudes of her parents the common ones that girls needn't be educated formally?"

So, I mean, this sort of reflects that, yes, I think she indeed wrote and saw like an artist. That's very much like my grandfather did. But it's fine -- I think actually there is lots of reflections in her book, but the reflections are not intellectual. They are very dream-like. She reflects on everything she sees. And even if she writes it in adulthood, because she frees herself from all forms, in a way, and she follows her -- the dream-like visions she has touching on some memories, because it could be like this, if it could have been like this. In a way, very much, especially since she read lots of Yiddish literature, very much like Yiddish literature, where it is

always a continuation of a thought, and you go far away and then eventually come back to the beginning.

And as I mentioned in a way, her parents were quite educated themselves, and felt free to give her a formal education, and so did send her to a Russian high school, and then allowed her to go to university, so she was very lucky with that, and that was very unusual for that time, not only for a girl, but for a Jewish girl.

JESSICA PARKER: Bella, we're going to need to wrap up in the next five minutes or so, if you just want to prioritize another couple of questions.

BELLA MEYER: Well, I can't prioritize. I just have to go down the list because it's too much, too much.

JESSICA PARKER: Okay, okay.

BELLA MEYER: But the next question: "I'm assuming your mother read *Burning Lights*. What did she have to say about the contents of this?"

Just what I said, she actually read, she translated it from, again, from Yiddish to French, so for her, it was clearly important.

[Question:] "Your presentation suggests a different nature to the book than I had seen clearly. This seems not so much nostalgia as a kind of weaving. Perhaps that explains some of the imperative quality of the introduction. If I'm correct, do you think the book freed her in an emotional sense from the loss of what she carried with her into adulthood?"

Yes, I think so. I think that's a very beautifully way to respond to it, and, yes, I think it is a kind of grieving. And thank you for giving this explanation. Yes, I agree.

[Question:] "It would have been interesting to know what her siblings thought about Bella's *Burning Lights*."

Indeed. I think they would maybe -- especially the parts of when she was talking about her brothers making fun of her, and maybe continuing to poke her, so...

I see someone saying, "Chagall's granddaughter," and then, "Yes, yes, yes." I don't know what this is, but, yes, I am Chagall's granddaughter, if you are talking about me. I don't know.

But another question: "Do you know if this book has ever been used in any art history classes?"

I don't know. I would not know, but I know it has been used by a wonderful woman who -- not far from Amherst, in Boston, for an organization who helps women's rights, especially Jewish women's -- women's rights, and she used this book once. That's the only -- in her classes. That's

the only time I heard about it, and I helped her with it.

And then Jessica says, “We're going over time.”

[Laughter]

JESSICA PARKER: I think that was the last question. So, thank you so much.

BELLA MEYER: Thank you, everyone. Thank you, thank you! Okay.

JESSICA PARKER: Yes, it's clear how meaningful and important this was to everyone who joined us. We had almost sixty people on the call tonight, so that was really exciting.

BELLA MEYER: Wow!

JESSICA PARKER: Yeah. So, I'm going to wrap up our video conference this evening. Thank you, Bella, for sharing your memories of your grandmother and thank you, Heidi, for your expert live captioning, and thank you to all of you for joining us.

BELLA MEYER: Enjoy reading *The First Encounter*.

JESSICA PARKER: We're selling books here, fast and furious.

BELLA MEYER: By the way, I saw that you are in Amherst. You have *The First Encounter* in Yiddish, and you can even download it as an audiobook in Yiddish.

JESSICA PARKER: Yes. We have wonderful resources to help supplement people's reading of this book.

Oh, Lily, you started screen sharing.

BELLA MEYER: She was screen sharing because she heard about the Yiddish *First Encounter*.

[Laughter]

Or something.

JESSICA PARKER: Okay, there we go. I got it back. So, the recording of this video conference, including the live captioning, will be posted online shortly and I'll send out the link as soon as it's available.

We will wrap up our reading of *Burning Lights* on Friday, April 26th.

Book #2 shipped out this past Monday, so you should all have it in hand by the end of the

month. We'll start reading this next book together on Monday, April 29th. And I know some of you have gotten it already.

Thank you again for joining us, and enjoy the rest of your evening, or day, depending on your time zone and thank you again so much, Bella.

BELLA MEYER: Thank you, Jessica, and thank you, everybody. Thank you.

JESSICA PARKER: Thank you. Goodnight, everybody.

BELLA MEYER: Bye!

[End of session]

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Transcript edited by Jessica Parker.

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