



The College Commons Podcast

Howard Langer: A Lost World in a New World

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Introduction: Welcome to the College Commons podcast and our acclaimed author series, a partnership between HUC Connect, the online learning platform of the Hebrew Union College, and the Jewish Book Council, featuring conversations with authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards. My name is Joshua Holum, your host.

Joshua Holo: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast and our interview with Howard Langer. Howard Langer is a lawyer whose practice specializes in the protection of vulnerable people, such as elderly victims of fraud, and his pro bono work has been recognized by the Philadelphia Bar Association. He teaches at the University of Pennsylvania Law School and has authored a legal treatise now in its fourth edition. Among his teachers, he counts Israeli luminaries, Yehuda Amichai and Aharon Appelfeld, and he recently received his own recognition, a National Jewish Book Award for his novel, *The Last Decrepitzer*. Howard Langer, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Howard Langer: Nice to meet you.

Joshua Holo: To kick us off, give us, if you would, a brief thumbnail of *The Last Decrepid*, sir.

Howard Langer: The book begins with the reader encountering a man playing violin in a subway station in New York City in nineteen sixty five. We discover that this man is the decrepit Sorebi, the sole survivor of his sect. And the book describes how he got to the subway station in New York and began busking there. It's a kind of episodic book, and goes to many places, and, many events along the way.

Joshua Holo: It's a beautiful book, beautifully written, and pulls on many really compelling emotional and historical themes. I'd like to ask a question about one such theme, which is the soul of the Hasid as it were. Our protagonist, his name is Shmuel Mayer, spends much of

his life in translation as Sam Light Up with his Hasidic identity, perhaps ironically given his name, in the shadows. It brought to mind *My Name is Asher Lev* by Chaim Potok, where his protagonist, Asher Lev, returns briefly to his native Hasidic community where he has become largely a stranger. Nevertheless, Asher, in one scene, joins prayer services with his former Hasidic community, and a Hasidic man remarks, surprised, that Asher prays like a Hasid. In that scene, as I read it, Asher Lev basically offers a variation on the old saw. You can take the man out of Hasidism, but you can't take Hasidism out of the man. Does your hero, Shmuel Mayer or Sam Lightup, illustrate this dictum or defy it?

Howard Langer: That's a very good question. The fact is that Shmuel Mayer is a rebbe, and he can't escape the fact that he is a rebbe. He meets certain key characters in the course of the book, whether it's the interlocutor he meets in the initial scene in the subway station who says, You're the decrepit sur rebbe. Or when he meets the Bavavir rebbe who says to him, You're the rebbe. Or his own son later in the book says, You're the rebbe. That is a state of being that he cannot escape. And he must conduct himself that way. And it's his destiny. But everything else about him, he's a rebbe without any Hasidim. All of his community has been destroyed. And his relationship to God, where normally the Rebbe would be something of an interlocutor between his community and God, that role is no longer there for him. And he basically confronts God throughout the book because he believes that the covenant with the Jewish people was broken, and everything that he'd learned was no longer true. But he has no doubt that there's God. And in fact, at the center of the book, he actually has a divine revelation, which makes it clear objectively to him that there is God.

Joshua Holo: There is one aspect of the story that relates to the decrepeter Hasidic dynasty that you leave relatively far in the background in its sort of origin myth. According to the story, the decrepeters define themselves by their musicality, which you have referred to and we'll talk about soon. But the decrepeter dynasty did not come into existence because of or even for the sake of music. Rather, they splintered off from another Hasidic dynasty because of linguistic politics. Tell us about the Yiddish Hebrew divide and why you care about it.

Howard Langer: That's very interesting. I never thought about that myself when I was writing the book. I just needed a vehicle to create a separate Hasidic sect. And I tried other things, but it seemed to me that that was the, most interesting one because there's so much that's been written about language after the Holocaust. And I thought a sub theme of the book would be about language, but it did not get developed that way. Music became much more the theme, almost replacing language. But initially, the decrepeters weave a bigger Hasidic sect because their founder insisted that the Hasidim speak Hebrew rather than

Yiddish in the hopes that by speaking God's language, and hopefully returning the world to its status before the Tower of Babel, they would bring the messianic age. But I have to say, it's a novel. It's not a treatise on language. And I really did not give a huge amount of thought to that. There are earlier drafts of the book, actually, which are available online because they were published in different periodicals, once in tablet and another in publication called the Fig Tree Newsletter, in which the initial chapters developed that theme much more. But in later drafts, it was omitted and made very, very much secondary.

Joshua Holo: Well, I wanna offer to our listeners as a teaser that it may be the case that for you, it was just a literary device to articulate the origin of the decrepiter dynasty. But when it comes to language, much of the virtuosity of the book is the way in which you adopt the various dialects of the various characters. It just affords a great deal of soul to the book, so it's really quite moving. But what I wanna focus on for the sake of the next question is actually even more virtuosic to my mind, which is your capacity to transpose music to the written word. What do the blues, which is the adopted genre of Shmuel Mayer's music, and Hasidic melodies called nigunim, which are the native genre of Shmuel Mayer's music, What do these two genres share in their musical hearts? And, alternatively, what irretrievably separates them?

Howard Langer: Well, when I wrote the book, I never knew what was going to occur in the next chapter. It wasn't that I had a conception of what the book would be and then sat down and wrote it. As I wrote it, different things occurred to me. And at a certain point in time, I said to myself, wouldn't it be interesting to see an encounter between this rebbe for whom ngunim are his essential means of communicating with God, with someone like the Reverend Gary Davis, who was a blues musician, who supposedly for twenty five years sang nothing but religious music on the streets of New York. And I said, what would happen if the two of them met and encountered each other? And it was an experiment. And you can see that they're both, what I'll say, very devout in their music, but they're devout in different ways. The Rebbe plays his music simply because he is at a loss for any words to express his feelings towards God. The Reverend Gary Davis sings on the streets of New York to bring people closer to God, which is a very different purpose. And the two of them discuss this. And ultimately, the Baba Varebi gets involved. And the Baba Varebi are famous for their music as well in a real life way. I said to myself, what would happen if the Reverend Gary Davis were in the back seat of a car with a bhav of a rebbe? And to me, that's actually the best scene in the book, is the encounter between the two of them and discussing their respective music. At one point, the Bhavava says to the Reverend Davis, If we had your music, we'd bring heaven down to earth. And Reverend Davis says, No, no, That is not the purpose here. We can't do that. We're just mortals. The best we could do is bring people to God.

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Joshua Holo: You have chosen to imbue *The Last Decrepid Surge*, which has more than mere echoes of the holocaust in it with American racial politics in the twentieth century. Did that feel like a risk?

Howard Langer: Well, the truth of the matter is no one would publish the book. It was self published by me because the black content in the book was considered cultural appropriation, I was told by more than one possible agent. So I did not think of it as a risk, but it sure proved to be a risk. But I have to say also that I recognized early on that I wasn't capable of properly writing the black English, which is the language the rebbe speaks when he speaks English. And I did get a consultant who wrote the black English. He translated my own writing into the black English because I wanted to be very, very sensitive on that issue.

Joshua Holo: You named your protagonist after your maternal grandfather. I wonder what's the story there?

Howard Langer: Well, my maternal grandfather is my idol in life, and he appears in the book. He is doctor Greenberg, the dentist, who, plays a rather important role in the middle of the book. And I wanted to honor him that way. And this is, you know, was the first novel I've ever written. And I found that it mattered as to the names that I gave different characters. I found that by giving characters names of people either I liked or I loathed helped me to simply write their roles. So throughout, I was able to keep my grandfather in mind. And it's interesting because it goes back to your first question to me. My grandfather came to America in nineteen oh five, and he corresponded with his grandfather back in the Ukraine in very elegant Hebrew and with his grandmother in Yiddish. And his letters are often half in Yiddish and half in Hebrew. So it never occurred to me till now, but you kind of bridged that divide that you raised in the beginning of this discussion. You should also notice that the founder of the Hasidic sect, the decrepiter, is named Yerushal Moshe. And he's named after my, paternal grandfather, who was a very big misnaghet, a very big opposer of Hasidim. So I thought this is something of a joke to make him the founder of a Hasidic say.

Joshua Holo: I'd like to just focus for a moment on the title, the last decrepeter, the two words separately. The word last because Shmuelmer is the last of his dynasty, and the word decrepizer, which evokes, of course, the idea of it being decrepit, being on its way out. The title on its own, and even after you read the book, it seems to invoke a kind of fatalism, the end of an era, something irretrievably lost, perhaps, as the world and life gets into different gear for the latter half of the twentieth century and then the twenty first century in a different universe. Is fatalism a fair way to describe at least aspects of the book, or is there another emotional register that you're trying to capture?

Howard Langer: I'm not sure that I understand what fatalism means in the context, so I can say how I came to call it what I did. It evolved from a joke, although as you know, the book is not very funny at all. And it also reflected a kind of negative attitude I carried almost my whole life towards this romanticized view of the shtetl, the kind of fiddler on the roof Judaism. I always thought the shtetl was a pretty unpleasant, poor, and relatively ignorant place. And in the book, I tried to get out of it as quickly as possible. I needed to give some background. So the first twenty pages or so take place in the shtetl, but that wasn't the world that I wanted to describe. Originally, the name came because I didn't wanna romanticize it. I thought of it as a decrepit aspect of Jewish civilization, I guess. But frankly, we used to sit around the Shabbos table together, my sons and my wife and I, and would make funny names for different Hasidic sects. And I came up with the decrepeters, and I would elaborate on it. I said, The decrepeters were Hasidim who had one pious that was straight and one pious that was curly. And when I started writing the book, my wife said, no. No. You can't go that far. You can't make it such a satire. But, yes, I had a certain view, and that's why I named it what I did. But I think that the book leaves the question open as to whether he is the last decrepizo because as you get to the final chapters, his black child, you know, has voiced the view that he wants to be the rebbe and that he's next in line to be the rebbe. And, you know, his mother discusses this with the Bavavir rebbe. So I think there's a question as to who is the last decrepiter.

Joshua Holo: I agree that it leaves the question open, hence, my wondering about its fatalism, by which I mean fatalism in the kind of way of a Roman Vishniac use of the idea of a lost world, if he's simply marking the end of a world or not. And it sounds like, perhaps it's ambiguous.

Howard Langer: No. I think he's marking the end of a world. There's no question about that. But that world was ended, unfortunately, in ways that nobody imagined it would be. But the name that I give him shows the attitude that it was, shall we say, on this deep decline even before the Nazis arrived. I I just finished reading Chaim Grade's Sons and Daughters, which I actually picked up on the table at the award ceremony at the National Jewish Book

Awards. And that book describes that world between the wars just before it's all destroyed. And I would say you could call the sects that he, discusses decrepeters.

Joshua Holo: On a personal note, when writing this book, did you bump into a version or a facet of yourself that surprised you, or did the writing of the book itself elicit something that you didn't expect?

Howard Langer: Yes. And let me say this. The book came to be written as a novel because I'd written a short story that's now the prologue to the novel. And my therapist said to me, Howie, that's not a short story, that's a novel. Because she recognized in a way that I did not that all of the themes of my own life, the seeds of them were in that short story and could be developed into a novel. But what really surprised me was I started writing this book when I was seventy years old and had wanted to write a novel my whole life. And I'd sat down many times to write a novel, And the concept I had of the novel I wanted to write was a character like Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, a pure soul trying to operate in the very impure world. And I never was able to do that. And when I sat down to write this book, I had no consciousness of an effort to do that at all. As I said, the book kind of just wrote itself after I began writing. Different things came to me. I didn't have a concept. But there's a review of the book by a, Rabbi Katz on the Jewish Book Council website. And I was blown away when I read his review because towards the end of the review, he describes the pure vision of Shmuel Mayer and how the reader is almost forced to adopt that pure vision of the world. And I was blown away when I read that because here it is. I've been trying to write a novel like that my whole life. I sat down and wrote a novel and didn't even think about that, and yet ended up writing about something like that.

Joshua Holo: Well, I can only concur with my colleague, a graduate of the Ebrahim College, Rabbi Mark Katz, and congratulate you on *The Last of Krepitzer*, the National Jewish Book Award, and to thank you for taking the time to speak with me.

Howard Langer: Thank you very much.

Closing: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons podcast available wherever you listen to your podcasts. And check out HUC Connect, compelling conversations at the forefront of Jewish learning. For more information about all that HUC Connect has to offer, visit huc.edu/huc