

A Harvard professor strikes gold in family's past

By Leah Burrows
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It all started with the cane.

It stood in the den closet of a cousin's Baltimore ranch home for years. Not lost, or forgotten, just ignored.

But then the cane fell into the hands of Elisa New and changed her life, catapulting her on a 10-year journey through Europe and Israel. Along the way, she uncovered her family's past, discovered ancestors and shattered her preconceptions about her heritage.

New recounts her odyssey in "Jacob's Cane," the first non-academic book by the 51-year-old Harvard professor of American literature and poetry. New splits her life between homes in Brookline and Washington, where she exchanges the literary world for the political one of husband Lawrence Summers, the former Harvard president and current director of the National Economic Council.

"Jacob's Cane" was originally intended to be a scholarly history of cosmopolitan Jewish life in the late 19th and 20th centuries. But the cane transformed the book into a personal saga, one spanning five generations of her family.

New had seen the cane in old family photos, but hadn't thought much about it until one afternoon 10 years ago when she was visiting relatives in Baltimore. A cousin casually mentioned he had it and asked New if she'd like to see it.

"When I first held it, I felt the plates of history shift beneath me," New said. The cane belonged to New's great grandfather Jacob Levy, who received it as a gift from his brothers when he returned to his native Lithuania in 1928. Levy had immigrated to America 40 years before, founding Levy's International Shrinking Company, a fabric treatment company in Baltimore that the family still owns and operates today. But Levy wasn't your conventional capitalist; in 1914, he unsuccessfully ran for Congress as the Socialist Party nominee.

Dark and elegant, the cane demanded attention. Spiraling up the shaft, in silver and gold italic letters, were the initials of Jacob's three brothers and the three towns where they lived in Lithuania and Latvia: Riga, Raseinai and Shavli. Close up, the elaborate designs on the cane made it look like a mezuzah. It just didn't fit in with how New had imagined her family's life in Europe. Like many American Jews, she assumed the Old Country meant something out of "Fiddler on the Roof," where the men were like Tevye, the women like Golde, and every town like Anatevka.

But New's ancestors were not milkmen or tailors; they were lawyers and businessmen. The history of cosmopolitan Jews, the book New had been planning, was right in front of her. It was her family's history.

In the spring of 1999, New and her eldest daughter, Yael



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WEB SITE: JACOBSCANE.ORG

The cane held by her great grandfather Jacob Levy (center) set Elisa New off on a 10-year investigation of her family's history. This photo was taken in 1928, when Levy visited his native Lithuania. Besides him, only one other person in the photo survived the Nazis.



The Frankel Leather Works employed many of New's ancestors in the Lithuanian town of Shavli. Right: monument outside of Shavli marking the mass grave of Jews killed in the Holocaust.



Levine, 12 at the time, made their first of three "Jewish roots" trips to the Baltic region, visiting each of the towns on the cane.

Together, they discovered the rich history of each of the towns. Shavli, for example, was once home to the Frankel Leatherworks factory, the largest factory in the Russian empire. Not far from Jacob's childhood home, the factory was the lifeblood of the new, cosmopolitan city. Like many Jews in Shavli, New's family worked in the factory as managers and expert tanners.

During World War II, the Nazis commandeered the factory. They kept on some of the Jewish workers, including a cousin of New's, because of their skills as tanners and leatherworkers.

But many other members of New's family were killed. Outside of Shavli, in a site surrounded by birch trees, New and her daughter were brought to a small stone monument marking a mass grave.

"I couldn't help but think, what kind of trip am I taking my daughter on?" New said. At the time, Yael was only a few weeks shy of her bat mitzvah. "I wanted to protect her and educate her at the same time."

Yael relished the experiences she shared with her mother. "My mom is very passionate about her work, but it was never about the research for me. For me, it was just a mother and daughter trip," Yael said.

Besides the trips with her daughter, New saw the forests in Lithuania where another cousin



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Elisa New

lived with the partisans during World War II; dug through the dusty libraries at Harvard; and scoured the databases of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

With the aid of family sources, museum workers and helpful tour guides, New wove an intricate tapestry that spans continents and centuries. Its threads include Jacob's in-law, Bernhard Baron of London, a tobacco ty-

coon who invented the cigarette rolling machine; Jacob's sons, who abandoned their father for Baron's high-class life; and his grandson who died on the battlefields of France in World War II.

A research project across continents may seem daunting but travel has always inspired Elisa New. When she was a child growing up in suburban Maryland outside DC, family drives to the Delaware shore piqued her interest in history. Young Elisa would stare out the window, watching miles and miles of old tobacco fields glide past.

"I saw these old slave lands, and I would think to myself, slaves! How could this be? But then, we would drive through Baltimore and I would see the names on these old, brick buildings and they were German Jewish names. I've always been fascinated by that regional history."

After graduating from Brandies University with a bachelor's degree in English, New received a grant to write poetry in Israel. She would take long bus rides through the country, absorbing the world around her.

When she completed her master's program in English at Columbia University, before she continued on to get her doctorate, New explored her own country by taking the train from San Francisco back east.

After hours of watching the country roll by, of connecting the American landscape with American culture, New would sneak into a compartment (she couldn't afford her own on an assis-

tant professor's salary) and write. "I love writing in transit, in airports, on trains. It turns writing into an experience rather than just work," New said.

In 1999, Harvard English professor Lawrence Buell, 70, recruited New from the University of Pennsylvania to Harvard.

"We needed someone for our American literature program," Buell said "and she had already written two important books on American poetry at a very early stage in her career."

When she came to Harvard, New never imagined that one day she would eat hummus and pastries with the king and queen of Jordan. Nor did she imagine meeting the president of the United States. But then that was before she met Larry Summers.

Both New and Summers were recently divorced when they were introduced at Harvard in 2001 just after Summers was named president. Both were single parents of three. They hit it off right away. They kept their relationship under the radar the first year, hoping to avoid campus gossip. In December 2005, they were married in the dining room of the Harvard president's house.

"When the book wasn't getting done," New said, "I was afraid that my greatest Jewish accomplishment would be marrying a Jewish president in the WASP stronghold of the Harvard presidency."

After 10 years, with the encouragement of her new husband and expanded family, the book did get done. On her last trip to Lithuania with Yael, three years ago, New had one of those rare moments when everything seemed to come together.

Yael was 20 at the time, and studying Slavic languages at Harvard. On this trip, she acted as her mother's translator.

Mother and daughter stood together on a cold, gray summer day in the ruins of the Frankel Leatherworks factory. The history of New's family and that of the Eastern European Jewry – their ascension along with their annihilation – could all be found in the crumbling brick foundations of the once imposing factory.

"It represented all the Jews had achieved before the war," New said. "It's now a ruin, an immense brick complex. It's haunting. We took a long walk behind the factory around the lake that was next to it, and I imagined my great grandfather playing there. I could really see that scene."

Elisa New appears at Harvard Hillel in Smith Hall on Monday at 7 p.m. and at Newton Free Library Dec. 14 at 7:30 p.m. For other events and more on "Jacob's Cane," visit www.jacobscane.org.



Yael Levine