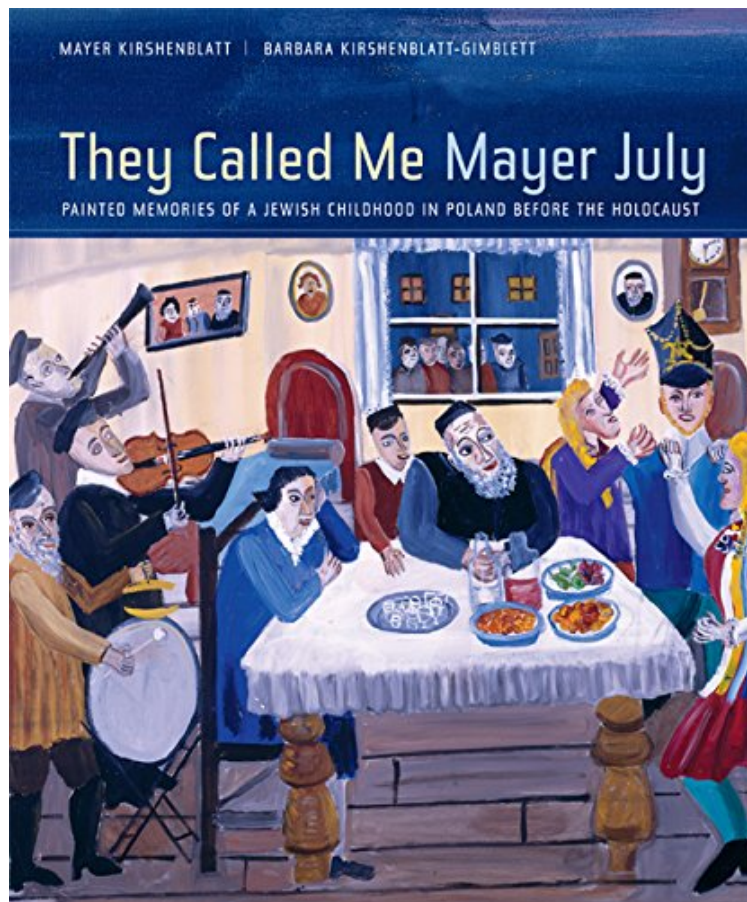


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## They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust

*Mayer Kirshenblatt, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett*  
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**Mayer Kirshenblatt, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett : They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust*:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Kirshenblatt recreates a shtetl in full color By B. V. Fetterman Having recently returned from a trip to the Polish town of my mother's childhood, I was eager to see Mayer Kirshenblatt's paintings of Jewish life in prewar Poland on exhibit at the Jewish Museum in New York. I immediately recognized buildings and landscapes I had seen on the trip--the small, square houses surrounding the town square, ruins of once impressive, multi-tiered synagogues--but the exhibition instantly filled me with joy because Mayer Kirshenblatt's paintings put the people back in a panoramic view of life before the Holocaust. At once naive and sophisticated,

Kirshenblatt's art captures the energy and diversity of life as it was lived in prewar Apt (Opatw in Polish), a shtetl in southern Poland. Shunning nostalgia for accuracy, the paintings are rich in ethnographic detail and show every area of activity, some with the artist as a blue-clad schoolboy looking on. The 93-year-old Toronto artist, who started painting in his seventies, is becoming internationally known; his work was recently exhibited at the Galician Jewish Museum in Krakw. The text of this book, which includes 200 full color reproductions, represents another kind of achievement. Each painting tells a story, evoking memories of people, trades, and events. Mayer Kirshenblatt collaborated with his daughter, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a scholar of Eastern European Jewish culture and folklore, on a captivating text recording his almost encyclopedic range of memories of the town up to 1934, the year he departed for Canada. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who co-authored *Image Before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland* with Lucjan Dobroszycki, a book based on the photographic collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, comments on her father's art: "Until Mayer's paintings, all my images of Jewish life in Poland were black and white because all of them were from photographs," she writes. "That world, thanks to Mayer's paintings, was now emerging in vibrant color." Kirshenblatt's extraordinary visual memory, humor, and love can revivify this world for us all.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. *Journey through a Lost World - through a Young Boy's Eyes* By Astros Fan in Exile This wonderful book matches up primitive paintings with an engaging narrative to take you through a journey to a lost world - a largely Jewish town in pre-WWII Poland. Mayer Kirshenblatt, the artist who created these paintings (starting in his 70s!), had an incredible visual memory for the world of his youth. The text, crafted by his daughter (a well-known anthropologist/folklorist), is a first-person narrative, largely told in his smart-ass adolescent voice, then coming back every now and then to his adult voice to provide updates on "where are they now?" Or --given the time and place -- how did they die at the hands of the Nazis? However, this is NOT a Holocaust book; it's a visual journal of youth in a Polish town, in a largely Jewish community. The paintings are primitives, from his youthful viewpoint - the rooms have improbably high ceilings, more a reflection of a child's shortness, always looking up at everything. The paintings provide a tableau of pre-war Jewish life, including celebration of life events, Sabbath and holidays. However, this is not an overly sentimental memoir of the Old Country. The painter wasn't always good little boy who minded his parents and teachers - he skipped school to check out all parts of his town, including many of the grimier aspects. The painter's sly graphical sense of humor is well matched by the text, where his daughter (after spending years hearing her father's stories) did a lovely job of echoing his youthful voice. There are, of course, some pretty terrible events that are depicted - some of them based on the painter's imaginings of events that happened after he left Poland as a teenager. But overall, there is more to laugh about than cry - many of the stories are very funny. I saw the exhibition of this art work at the Jewish Museum in NY. It was a wonderful show, and made me run back to read the book again. By the way, Mayer Kirshenblatt (z"l) passed away last month.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. *Amazing story and fun to read* By M. S. Fenton This book is like listening to a beloved grandfather or uncle tell about his life. Only, it is so much more interesting than my relatives and not nearly as judgmental. The illustrations are amazing, the story is really interesting to me, because I am sort of a student of shtetl life and an artist, as well. This is one of the best books I've read in years but for reasons not usually cited. I liked the man for what he said and how he said it. I formed pictures of his family, his home, his life in my head that stay with me forever. I've recommended this book to many people. I'm only sorry I missed his last exhibition in New York before he died. If you have any feeling for the subject and if you want to get in touch with your eastern european soul, this might help you get there.

Intimate, humorous, and refreshingly candid, this extraordinary work is a remarkable record in both words and images of Jewish life in a Polish town before World War II as seen through the eyes of an inquisitive boy. Mayer Kirshenblatt, who was born in 1916 and left Poland for Canada in 1934, taught himself to paint at age 73. Since then, he has made it his mission to remember the world of his childhood in living color, "lest future generations know more about how Jews died than how they lived." This volume presents his lively paintings woven together with a marvelous narrative created from interviews that took place over forty years between Mayer and his daughter, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. Together, father and daughter draw readers into a lost world where we roam the streets and courtyards of the town of Apt, witness details of daily life, and meet those who lived and worked there: the pregnant hunchback, who stood under the wedding canopy just hours before giving birth; the khayder teacher caught in bed with the drummer's wife; the cobbler's son, who was dressed in white pajamas all his life to fool the angel of death; the corpse that was shaved; and the couple who held a "black wedding" in the cemetery during a cholera epidemic. This moving collaboration is a unique blend of memoir, oral history, and artistic interpretation. It is once a labor of love, a tribute to a distinctive imagination, and a brilliant portrait of life in one Jewish home town. Copub: The Judah L. Magnes Museum

From Publishers Weekly Starred . Memoirs have become a vital genre in Holocaust studies, and while all are important, the uniqueness of some makes them especially important. Mayer Kirshenblatt (b. 1916) grew up in the small Polish town of Apt, a center of rabbinical culture, and in 1934 emigrated to Canada. When he was in his mid-70s his wife and daughter urged him to paint a visual record of the everyday life of his youth. Kirshenblatt's paintings are

amazinga cross between a childlike realism and the embroidered fantasy of memory; they convey a sense of boyhood innocence tinged with grief. The subjects range from people shopping in town stores and chopping wood to celebrations like weddings and the festival of Succoth. Kirshenblatt has an eye for quirky visual and social detail, as in his picture *The Kleptomaniac Slipping a Fish Down Her Bosom*. These exactly reproduced paintings are enhanced by Kirshenblatt's equally fresh memoirs, transmitted to his daughter, Barbara (co-editor, *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*): from jokes that emanated from the women's mikve, or ritual bath, to the mechanics of the local laundry. This collection of pre-Holocaust memories will be a lasting contribution to our understanding of Eastern European Jewish life and culture before its destruction. (Oct.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. Brimming with rich narrative detail. . . . This unique project is a blend of memoir, oral history, and visual interpretation.