

JUDY'S JOURNAL

June 2023

Dear Reader:

This month's journal is a reprint of the paper that I delivered at the American Literature Association's 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on May 27, 2023 in Boston.

**Mother as Legend: Stanley Kunitz and Yetta Dine**



*A feast of losses: Yetta Dine and her son, the poet Stanley Kunitz.* TidePoolPress.com 2023

Poet, editor, translator, and teacher Stanley Kunitz was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1905 and died in New York City in 2006, ten weeks shy of his 101<sup>st</sup> birthday. He earned many honors, including the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, the National Book Award, and the National Medal of the Arts. In 1976, he served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, which was the precursor to Poet Laureate, a post to which he was also named in 2000. He was a founder of Poets House in New York City and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

I will begin by reading Kunitz's poem, "The Portrait."

*My mother never forgave my father  
for killing himself,  
especially at such an awkward time  
and in a public park,  
that spring  
when I was waiting to be born.  
She locked his name  
in her deepest cabinet  
and would not let him out,  
though I could hear him thumping.  
When I came down from the attic  
with the pastel portrait in my hand  
of a long-lipped stranger  
with a brave mustache  
and deep brown level eyes,  
she ripped it into shreds,  
without a single word  
and slapped me hard.  
In my sixty-fourth year  
I can feel my cheek  
still burning.*

An early draft of "The Portrait" found in the Stanley Kunitz Papers at Princeton University reads, "she ripped it into shreds/ without a single word/ and slapped me hard/inconsolably sobbing." To consider the effect of his deletion of "inconsolably sobbing" is to set us on course for today's discussion.

The purpose of this paper is to present findings based on the recovery of primary documents belonging to Yetta Kunitz Dine from the estate of her son Stanley Kunitz. These documents recast, enlarge, and enrich perceptions of his mother, who was born in Lithuania in 1866 and died in New York City in 1952. In poems and interviews, Kunitz portrayed her as an unaffectionate, unforgiving, and

distracted mother, whose “fierce love [he] never doubted.” The recent recovery of her four letters, 1945 memoir, 1951 diary and other documents present Yetta Dine in more detail than Kunitz allowed. This presentation is not aimed at obtaining a judgment of good son/bad son or good mother/bad mother; however, it will present Yetta’s transformation from the one-dimensional mother figure created by her son into a multi-dimensional person. She took up subjects in her writing, such as social relationships, philosophy, history, and organized religion. These documents revealed Yetta as a force that required a reckoning.

Three questions were central to my investigation of the life and poetry of Stanley Kunitz, which began in 2009, then shifted focus in 2016 with the recovery and transcription of his mother’s papers.

### **QUESTION 1: What biographical documentation exists to deepen our understanding of Kunitz’s mother and son portrayals?**

In 1945, Kunitz “suggested that [his mother] occupy herself with putting down on paper...the untold story of her life.” She gladly took up the task with the expectation that he would edit and publish it. Publication did come about, but not until three decades later and in highly edited excerpts which pale in comparison to her own words. Untouched since 1985, recovered and transcribed in 2016, Yetta Dine’s complete, unabridged, and minimally edited papers, supported by additional biographical documentation, add her voice and narrative to his and shape a more complete portrayal. If she were not the formidable and dramatic presence in her son’s poems and interviews, then perhaps she would be a minor figure in the drama of Kunitz’s life and poetry. Immigrant by choice, seamstress by trade, and a natural storyteller, she was no stranger to metaphor and might have argued: “To appreciate the garment, examine the fabric.”

Her memoir and letters reveal an outspoken, shrewd, opinionated, compassionate, independent, resilient, and loving individual with strong family ties, whose cinematic narratives about life in Lithuania and on New York’s Lower East Side pulse with authentic detail. To his credit, Kunitz’s assignment helped his mother to discover the special satisfaction of producing a compelling account of a life threaded with success but penetrated by profound losses. Despite her memoir’s mid-twentieth century origins, her observations about economic and religious oppression in a Lithuanian shtetl and the challenges of immigrant life in 1890s lower Manhattan reach across the decades to touch us today. In 1951, she suffered a stroke and was confined to a rest home. Broken in spirit and feeling “abandoned,” she used writing to help resurrect memories of “a few sweet drops in [her] bitter cup,” while delivering a cautionary tale about end-of-life hardships. Her spiralbound notebook functioned as a diary, although at times, it shifted into a

letter to her son, a farewell speech to family and friends, and an agonized plea to God for release from a life bereft of independence, usefulness, and connection.

## **QUESTION 2: What are key differences between Kunitz's portrayal of his mother and her self-portrait?**

As I began to transcribe and scan each page, Yetta Helen Jasspon Kunitz Dine came to life. To offer a visual reference, imagine Kunitz's portrait of his mother as a line drawing by Matisse transformed into an Annie Leibovitz photograph. I also realized that her self-revelations did not always match the mother portrayed in Kunitz's poems or reinforced in interviews or even on display in the chapter "My Mother's Story."

What was "known" about Yetta was controlled by her son, who said after her death, "She has become part of my legend." Until now, Yetta was found in his interviews and poems, as well as archival and public records. Princeton University, home to the Stanley Kunitz Papers, a 115 linear feet trove, is where I began doing research into Stanley Kunitz's early life and poetry in 2009. In 2016, my question shifted: Who was this mother figure, who did not fare well in interviews? For example, Kunitz said, "I was deprived of a father and deprived of a soft, maternal presence" and "[my mother] was not one to demonstrate affection physically—in fact, I don't recall ever being kissed by her during my childhood." Kunitz's nine-page chapter, "My Mother's Story" in *Next-to-Last Things: Poems and Essays* presented an excerpt drawn from the memoir she wrote. He explained that the memoir was written in 1951 because she was "bored with her uselessness [while] she was in a rest home recovering from a stroke."

This was not true. Six years earlier, after the death of her daughter Sarah, Yetta was living with a great-niece in Tarrytown, New York; she was essentially homeless, taken in by relatives and full of anguish over three of her four grandsons on active duty in World War II. The memoir was written in 1945, not 1951, as Kunitz stated repeatedly. There certainly was another document, her 1951 diary was written in a rest home after a stroke; Yetta is depressed, lonely, and feeling "abandoned." Her worst fear had materialized: she was dependent on Kunitz and his wife, Eleanor, who were burdened with her rest home expenses. She begged for Death to take her because she had become a burden. Although Kunitz took notes on her 1951 diary, he did not publish passages from it. Thankfully he secured it, along with letters and her memoir.

Further, Yetta was not the solitary emigrant from Lithuania portrayed in "My Mother's Story." Her memoir shows her reliance on family and people from her village to set her on course in "the Golden Land" of America. Another mismatch was that she never worked in a sweatshop, although she had plenty to say about

them. Her recovered papers placed me in the position of observer trying to understand her and her circumstances and their effect on her son, while maintaining a balance between empathy and neutrality. I was soon caught up in her guileless writing style, which was akin to an expansive dramatic monologue. She described it in this way: "I'm writing the way I would be telling my experience." One story lit up the memory of another or ignited an opinion about human behavior, the exhilarating challenges of immigrant life on the Lower East Side in 1890s, the negative effects of organized religion and the need for labor unions. After applying the lightest editorial hand to her memoir, Yetta spoke for herself, and I supported gaps in her story with further research. During this process, she would contradict, correct, enhance, and unravel representations of her. Thus began the reconstruction of her hybrid memoir/biography.

Recalling these lines from "The Portrait" ---

*She locked his name  
in her deepest cabinet  
and would not let him out,  
though I could hear him thumping.*

While he openly resented his mother for withholding information about his biological father who committed suicide ten weeks before Kunitz was born, her papers revealed the complexity of a troubled mother-son relationship. Yetta could control one aspect of the suicide: she decreed silence on the subject in her home. It is likely that she believed in the superstition that talking about the suicide would endanger their three surviving children. Openness about their father's suicide would make her responsible for handing the legacy of a his "temporary insanity," as one front page newspaper story declared, to them.

A core conflict unfolded between mother and son: one of values. Kunitz wrote: "I knew that I was going to be a poet from a very early age. I can picture telling my mother. She asked me what I wanted to do with my life and I told her. I thought she would be shocked, and my mother said, 'I always felt you would do something like that.' Then she asked, 'Sonny, how are you going to earn your living?' That's a mother's natural thought. I said, 'I'll find a way.'" True to his word, Kunitz taught on his "own terms, which was never to accept tenure, always to be on an annual contract...still an outsider." He chose a life of low-paying adjunct professorships, fellowships, and editing reference books for H.W. Wilson. This was in direct opposition to his mother's definition of success for her children: homeowning, steady employment, spouses and children, all of which she had lost, resulting in her status as a permanent guest of relatives. A letter from Yetta to Kunitz's second

wife, Eleanor, showed her disapproval of their lifestyle, after the birth of their daughter: “I don’t think Gretchen will want you to be changing living quarters too often, and both Stanley and yourself will find it more difficult to move around with your darling little daughter.” The needle of her own yearnings and frustrations pierced a line straight to the heart of her relationship with her son.

**QUESTION 3: While Kunitz sensed the needs of the poem and bent biographical truth to “make art,” what is at stake, if anything, as his Mother circles back and takes a seat at the table in discussions about her character and humanity?**

Commenting on Saul Bellow’s ill treatment in his novels of people from his life, Philip Roth said, “Once you’ve been mythologized, you don’t have a chance.” Kunitz created the reductive story of his mother to fit his legend, saying, “All creative writing is fiction, a distillation and transformation of reality. That’s what makes it a work of art.” When a college student asked him what he meant in a certain poem, he responded, “Excuse me...but I didn’t come to explain the poem. I came to listen and perhaps to join in your discussion...You see, it isn’t *my* poem now. It’s published. It belongs as much to you as to me.” This stance permitted him to create powerful and evocative poetry. Kunitz was in full command of his subjects and connects us with the complexities of memory and imagination.

As a self-professed legend-builder, Kunitz was not the first person to conceal whole truths from interviewers. Consider his poem “An Old Cracked Tune,” which he said was about rescuing his father’s name. He could have added the truth, “Oh, by the way, my given name was Solomon ...” Would the integrity of the poem be diminished? I believe he thought so, and that another consequence would have readers thinking, “Well, that’s poetic license” (a.k.a. fabrication) and be distracted from the artistic truth of the poem. Kunitz’s “Mother legend” further simplified his narrative and positioned readers to empathize and sympathize with him.

Paradoxically, Kunitz deliberately organized and stored his mother’s papers, withholding them from public collections, and went on to deconstruct the richly textured, colorful, sometimes quirky-looking garment his mother left behind and reassemble pieces into a serviceable and useful frock. His daughter Dr. Gretchen Kunitz discovered the collection among shoeboxes piled high in the musty closet of her father’s study in his New York City apartment after his death in 2006. What kept him from destroying documents that might step, however lightly, on the legend he created? Love and respect for her? Guilt over not taking her in and putting her in a rest home? An acknowledgment that her unabridged memoir was worthy of eventual publication?

Finally, future investigations of Kunitz's work and biography will be enriched by the recovery of these documents. Decades after his "transformation" of her, Yetta Dine has returned, complete with an invitation for readers to be provoked by her presence.