

1968

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Melvin Wilk

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### Recommended Citation

Wilk, Melvin. "Origins and Ancestral Curses." *New Mexico Quarterly* 38, 4 (1968). <http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol38/iss4/34>

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## ORIGINS—AND ANCESTRAL CURSES

*Melvin Wilk*

I was born in Brooklyn, in Brownsville—one of those New York neighborhoods that is always poor. Today it's a slum, an undeclared disaster area along with East New York and Bedford Stuyvesant and Williamsburg. The streets are thick with Negroes and Puerto Ricans and a few Jews up to their souls in debris, submerged in a circle unchartered by Dante, swelling out of their boundaries, searching for the connection that leads to Queens and trees and the better life of the grasslands.

When my grandfather brought his family to Brownsville in the early twenties, the place was moneyless; but it wasn't a slum. Rather than being a hole, it was a haven. Isaac and Sara huddled there with the other immigrants as if the world beyond Saratoga Avenue were being battered by a pogrom. They were thankful for being where they were. Safe. But it wasn't that way for their children, particularly Ada, my father's sister, the older one who seemed to think from the moment she got here that the pursuit of happiness phrase in the Declaration of Independence was written especially for her.

Twenty-some-odd years ago, when I was a boy, Aunt Ada dressed with a tawdry splendor that won her immediate and hostile recognition wherever she went in Brownsville. She paraded her fat-buried beauty through the cheap streets, enjoying the stares as if she were a Hollywood queen of glamor. Her wide, furiously feathered, furiously colored picture hats; her purple glass earrings, necklaces and bracelets; her keen needs announced by her heavy toilet waters enhanced her neighborhood notoriety.

If you did not see Ada, you were likely to hear her. The curses she screamed at my grandparents gave everyone who passed their street something to gossip about. How could a loudmouth such as Ada come from such a kosher home, the home of pious Jewish parents? No one could answer.

Ada's screaming tantrums—she squawked like an infuriated infant—scratched her beautiful singing voice until it was torn irreparably. When

I was very young there was still much loveliness left in it, and a few old-timers expressed sympathy for her because these aged ones remembered how lyrical her voice had been when she was a schoolgirl just come from the other side. But her lost voice was only part of the story.

The general agreement was that Ada had ruined her life and the lives of Isaac and Sara Woolf by marrying a William Pavlovovich or Pavlenkovich—what difference?—he was a goy, a Polack. From one end of Hopkinson Avenue to the other, they talked about my aunt as if she were a slut. Aunt Ada said that whoever did not like what she said or did could kiss her ass in Macy's window.

Ada had dreamed of becoming a singer, a dream which her public school teachers encouraged; but her mother frowned on such wishes. Musical talent had always been in the Woolf family—didn't Isaac, the nut, still sing in the *shul*?—and it amounted to as much as a fart in a blizzard. A few teachers tried to convince Sara that Ada's ability was rare, but she didn't trust them, as she didn't trust all who weren't Jewish. Sara clutched at her daughter's spirit remorselessly, as if by blocking Ada's freedom she was saving the world from harm.

Ada cried that she would work to pay for lessons, but Sara insisted that work brought only worn hands, a weak heart, and an early old age: it did not bring success. Besides, too much ambition tempted the evil eye.

Sara had a different idea of what sort of life was best for her daughter. "Find a husband," she told Ada, "and I guarantee you'll never be happier than if you have children and raise a family in an apartment not too far away from home."

To Ada, a husband meant a prince who would suddenly appear and make her blossom overnight, transplanting her, transforming her.

One day towards evening, while supper was cooking on the stove, Ada drifted into her favorite subject, in Yiddish, watching her mother expectantly.

"Mamma, I want to be happy," she said reproachfully, staring at the big supper pot as if her mother were refusing to feed her.

"So? Who's stopping you?"

"Who's letting me?" Ada announced sadly to the world.

Her mother said that where they came from no one ever mentioned happiness. "I saw your father just once before they married us." She laughed devilishly. "I wish now that the first time had been the last."

"But Mamma, this isn't the old country, this is America."

"My American," Sara said in broken English.

Sara raised her eyes until they reached her eighteen-year-old daughter's breasts, larger than her own had ever been. Her eyes lingered on them admiringly, as if they were well-risen loaves of bread.

"You always act as if I'm doing something wrong," Ada said.

"Your big mouth is my calamity."

"That you never did anything to train my voice, that's the calamity."

"Stop it with your voice."

Ada retaliated with full force: she told her mother of her date with a goy.

"You'll go out with him over my dead body," Sara said calmly.

America was a free country, Ada protested.

Sara stared at distorted images on the chrome handle of the ice box without answering.

"What's so terrible?" Ada prodded.

"When you live in my house, you'll do what I say or move out. And if your father ever finds out, God help you. Crazy as he is, this he wouldn't stand for." Sara laughed, as if the matter were too ridiculous to get upset over.

Ada moved closer to her mother, behind her chair, and stroked her hair, but Sara brushed her hand away. Ada gave her mother's head another affectionate stroke while she appreciatively sniffed the mists bubbling out of the supper pot, and this time her mother didn't brush away her hand. Ada's chest dropped with relief, her shoulders slumped forward like an old fat peddler's after a crafty sale.

"I'm old enough to go out with whoever I want, right, Mamma?"

Sara placed a hand on her heart and said, "Shut your mouth before I vomit."

Ada began to weep with hiccupping sounds, but her tears did not soften Sara's feelings. Suddenly her mother lifted her eyes to the cracked ceiling and wailed:

"As God is my witness, I shouldn't live to wake up if she goes with a goy." Sara begged God to take her life, not her daughter's, her own. "I shouldn't live to open my eyes if this girl lives in my house and does such a thing to me."

Her mother could be defied, but God was something else again. To quickly avert His wrath, Ada blurted out, "What? Where? Who? Me go out with a goy?"

"If you wanted your father to kill you that's all you'd have to do."

"Pappa's a nut, Mamma, and you know it."

"Nut or not, he's your father, have respect. I can say what I like."

Ada quacked like a duck, imitating one of Isaac's mannerisms. Sara laughed and a gold tooth gleamed. Still laughing at Ada's skillful mockery, she said, "And if he doesn't kill you, I will."

"Mamma darling," Ada crooned, "What's wrong with you? May I drop dead on the spot if I would do such a thing to you," she swore in a rush of lies. Spontaneously grabbing her mother's arms in her feverish hands, standing behind Sara's chair at the kitchen table, Ada began to sing:

"I chanced upon a big brown bear," she sang, *con dolore*.

"Leave me alone! Leave me alone! What do you want from me?" Sara shouted, struggling to get Ada off her, but Ada squeezed harder and sang on, and Sara listened to the story of the big brown bear and mourned. The dusty daylight in the alley beyond the kitchen window lost all its energy, the grim lines about Sara's mouth softened, and Ada's singing drifted up past the windows in the alley like sacrificial smoke.

Ada's passion for William made her forget the mournful dreams that the songs of her childhood brought back to her. She rushed towards him as if he were all the warmth there was in America. Here was boyishness and cleanliness and strength. His almost blond hair was crisply cut and straight; his nose straight and so were his teeth, all of which Ada interpreted as signs of an upright moral nature. The regularity of his features conveyed something blank, an eyeless statue; but not to Ada. She filled in the details and the effect overpowered her. In comparison with the boys she knew, William qualified as a Hollywood star. She had never seen a Jew who looked like him. He made her want to grovel before him—the feeling was irresistible. When she was away from him, she thought about him often, but thoughts of him brought her unpleasant memories. In particular, he aroused one memory which disturbed her more than any other.

In Russia, on Easter Eve, He rose from the dead. The Christian children bearing torches of brightly burning wood chased Ada into the woods while they searched the night for the risen Christ. She was alone in the hut with her baby brother, Lou; Sara was gone grieving with a widow, and their father, Isaac, was lost in America. It wasn't the cries but the flames that terrified her. She darted barefoot into the darkness for her mother's help. The children encircled her and accused her in Russian of hiding the Lord in her house. Although she trembled and was wetting her pants, Ada denied their accusation. Whereupon one boy, the tallest, the strongest, their leader, whose handsome face Ada

never forgot, brandished his flaming wood and led the others towards the hut. The gang shouted and screamed and followed him for their Lord.

Ada darted away from the puddle underneath her as fast as her naked feet could fly. But she was not left alone, for she had crucified their Lord. When they caught her, they encircled her and the mixture of fear and beauty in her face attracted them and made them angry. They tore her dress and singed her hair. In sharp howls she cursed them in her own language and so ferocious was she that the searchers after Christ were astonished and left her as if she were mad. Alone, Ada slumped to the hard earth thinking of the handsome lad's face guiltily, as if it had been she who had done the wrong.

Ada told her story to William, who had never had a Jewish girlfriend before and the force with which she told it bewildered him. In her way of talking, as in everything else she did, William felt a lack of self-control which made sleeping with her seem a certainty. He was twenty years old and eager to get rid of his virginity, as if it were a disease.

Ada quoted passages to him out of the Song of Songs and he would have believed they were her own erotic utterances if she hadn't corrected that impression. She was a gypsy, a pagan. William wasn't passionate and he wasn't unusual, but he was in a hurry, which made it easy for him to tell Ada that he loved her in order to get it.

One lovely, long summer night in the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, Ada felt for the first time what it was like to have William inside her. Every emptiness within her was filled. And William kept uttering I love you, like a medicine man. When it was over he did not say I love you, ever, but Ada slept with him regularly after that anyway, until she became pregnant.

Ada pleaded with him to marry her, and when he hesitated, she threatened to kill herself, she threatened to kill him, and after looking at him like a possessed witch—her eyes wide, her mouth slightly open, and her hair pulled apart by her own hysterical hands—she stooped and kissed his fingertips. Her face near his fly made his penis throb excitedly. Such mastery was more than he could resist. She pressed her face between his legs, trying to make him realize that he wasn't making a mistake.

He married her late one afternoon in a judge's chambers in Manhattan in September 1931.

When the news was out, Isaac said that after all a Christian for a

son-in-law was better than a bastard for a grandchild, but Sara said that if she could have stoned Ada, she would have. Sara spat at Ada's explanations and called her a whore. Each time his wife cursed his daughter, Isaac mumbled and quacked like a duck. In her fury, Sara invaded Ada's room and tossed whatever she grabbed onto the kitchen floor. Her foot caught in the hem of a skirt, and she kicked at it, too madened to be restrained.

"Why didn't you tell me, you old devil!" Isaac said, his lower jaw protruding angrily.

"Because I knew you'd be as much use to me as you are now," Sara muttered, freeing her foot with an impatient jerk. At the sound of her dress tearing, Ada screamed. Isaac stepped back, and looking at them said, "My first born," in disgust and sorrow. Tears fell from his eyes onto his mustache.

At the sight of his tears, Ada looked at her father with such hatred that Isaac said to her, "Your face should only freeze that way." But Ada didn't answer him, she turned instead on Sara.

"You old bitch! It's my dress. You old bitch, you."

"Get out of my sight, disgusting animal. You should never have been born. Die, you whore, die and let me live in peace!" Then Sara turned on Isaac venomously. "You stand there and let her get away with it. The both of you don't deserve to live. Out! Get out!"

Isaac turned and with his hands flapping behind him, he edged away quacking like a heartbroken duck. Sara threw Ada's clothes after him, across the kitchen floor.

At this, Ada swept up her mother in an embrace, beating her resistance down, swearing that no matter how long she lived and whom she married, she would never love anyone more than she loved her darling maminka. Sara held Ada in her arms and said quietly that she knew. She knew. Their quarrel abruptly over, they stooped together and gathered the scattered clothes. Ada and Sara crawled over the linoleum, weeping. But they didn't weep all the time: between their sobs they cursed and shouted at Isaac to keep out of their way.

Ada carried her belongings out of the house in a yellowish pillow case and she brought the stuffed bundle down into the hot subway and rode to Manhattan. While on her way to him—away from home but not yet with her new husband—she impulsively thought of deserting him. And then. She wanted no husband and no home. But her will was weaker than her imagination and she wept, feeling powerless to

make any decision. She dragged herself and her clothes behind her up to William's place, her only thought and fear, once there, that he wouldn't take her in.

In the Chelsea section of Manhattan where William lived, all that Ada had loved through habit was gone, and she was lonely and bored. She stopped eating meat because there were no convenient kosher butcher shops. She perspired over his suppers, but if it was pork, she did not eat. The smell of chops broiling made her want to vomit.

Ada had had no idea that she would react so strongly. But there were many trifles and she responded as violently to all of them. There was beer. Beer in the ice box, beer at the supper table, beer in the bedroom. It was worse, however, when instead of beer William drank milk when meat was served—even if the meat were pork. It was clear to her that William was ignorant and she referred to him as The Brute. It was beginning to be as her mother had said it would be. Mealtimes were a pagan spectacle which she was forced to serve as punishment. Her happiness was more costly than it was worth.

Ada longed for Brownsville. But she couldn't give up William quickly, because whether they were Russian or American, Ada thought that the princes of the world were blond and gentile. Whatever contempt for him she expressed, no matter how uncivilized she claimed he was, she still suspected that *fundamentally* William was superior to any Jewish man she had ever in her life seen. It took Ada some time before she admitted that William did not belong to that superior race she dreamed of. For the rest—her anger, her contempt, her separation from her mother and father and brother—she brooded over these in the kitchen. While in their bed, she apologized and worshipped.

Her belly swelled and her breasts filled; but her face was thin and pale. She felt no joy, and depression buried her blood. It grew dark and cold in their forlorn apartment as the seasons changed, and Ada sat bundled in a black sweater on the tepid radiator, burning the gas in the oven for warmth. She was sitting on the kitchen radiator facing the open door when her pains began. The deep twists were part of the punishment she felt she deserved. Crying, she asked a neighbor to call a doctor for her from the telephone in the candy store five flights below. Then she lay herself down in the tiny bedroom waiting, the sweat dripping between her breasts, her forearms stuck to the sheet of the bed. She screamed and moaned alternately, begging God to forgive her, promising to do whatever He wanted her to do if He saved her and the

baby. She was exposed among strangers but she no longer cared, and her screams deepened into grunts that sounded pleasurable. She gave birth to a five-pound boy before William returned from work; the bed she lay on wasn't even paid for, but Ada felt happy and she was glad.

Her baby son had to have a *briss* but William refused to have his boy circumcised. Ada, however, had made her promise to God and she intended to keep it lest the evil eye claim her baby. As each day passed, her fear of the evil eye increased and she secretly began preparing herself for her escape. She decided to go home to her mother and father and bring her baby with her.

Although she had eaten little, Ada gained weight during the pregnancy which she did not lose afterwards. William complained that she still looked pregnant. He told her that she was as fat as a mountain. To this Ada made no response. Her teeth had started to rot, her body looked wide and fat, and all of this she blamed on William for having made her pregnant. But she did not argue with him because she felt that it wouldn't be long before she had the courage to go.

Their last night together William came home smelling of liquor, something he never had done before. He stood near her side of the bed and called her a fat, disgusting pig.

Ada asked him to go away because he stank.

"You are nothing but a fat, disgusting pig," he repeated with a drunken effort at articulateness. He opened the zipper of his pants. "That's all you want, isn't it?"

"Go away," she said. "You're drunk and you'll wake the baby up." He looked so ridiculous she wanted to laugh at him, but she was afraid.

"Take it, it's yours," he slobbered, fumbling with himself.

"You're the *disgusting pig*, not me."

"You don't have to pretend with me."

Ada cursed him in Yiddish.

"What you call me? Huh? What?"

"Shut up and go to hell. You're waking the baby up."

William plodded haphazardly around to his side of their bed, undressed, and fell in beside her.

And when she felt him near her she wanted him and she whispered that she would do whatever he wanted her to do if he still wanted it.

William said nothing. She repeated her offer. William said that he didn't care. Then, after a moment, he reached behind her head and urged her downwards.

Ada yielded to him hungrily. But she knew that he was no prince, and that he didn't love her, and that she wouldn't be there the next night.

That morning, after William had gone, she bundled her four-week-old son in a faded blue blanket and, leaving the bed unmade, she rode the subway back to Brooklyn. Sara beamed at the sight of her, clucking and smiling, lifting the baby out of her arms and beckoning her on. To the satisfaction of all the Wolfs, Ada was home again, forever this time.

The child's health was poor. By circumcision, Ada hoped that the evil eye had been propitiated, yet all through the chill and rain of an early spring, a cold lingered. Ada carried him to the local health station, where he registered a low fever continually. Then, in late April, when the days had grown warmer and it seemed the baby was almost cured, he was stricken with croup.

Five days after the coughing began, her baby gasped to death during the early hours of the morning while Ada, exhausted, dozed in the rocker—near his crib—in which she kept her nightly vigil. She had been singing lullabies before both of them had fallen asleep. Although she awoke, she could never forgive herself that sleep.

Sara believed that all Jewish people suffered excessively always, no matter where they lived, even in America, and it was in this spirit that the family accepted the baby's death. Pleased as she was to have a toilet that flushed, she did not doubt that at any moment all her new pleasures could be taken from her because she was a Jew.

Ada wanted no part of Sara's consolation. She did nothing all day at home but grieve and eat, alone. She ate and she grieved until she weighed over one hundred seventy pounds. Sara tried to treat Ada gently, but nothing she did pleased her. When she did not like the meals Sara prepared especially for her, she burst into abusive tirades. She screamed bitterly if the borscht was hot, or if the gefilte fish wasn't ground finely enough, or if she discovered a hair in the skin of the capons her mother roasted and stuffed for her. Once she made such a tumult, because the apple cake filling was not smooth, that ugly sharp sounds broke in her throat, as if she were trying to choke up a stuck core. At last she tore most of the music out of her throat and then she ate and ate and ate.

In time Ada went to work behind the counter in a bakery store, and with some of the money she earned, she bought much bright costume jewelry and cheap toilet waters. But the greater portion of her wages

she saved. With these savings she bought a piano and had it delivered to the apartment while Sara watched the movers through narrowed eyes. "You should only have a boil for every good dollar you wasted," she said. Sara urged Ada to sell the piano from the first day of its arrival, but Ada told Sara to shut up and mind her own business. She never learned to play, and the piano remained—beneath the two oval, dark-framed portraits of family ancestors—flush against the parlor wall commemorating, as it were, Ada's wasted talent and frustrated dreams.

On Saturday Isaac and Sara left the apartment to pass the day in shul, and that was the only day of the week when Ada did not scream. Late in the afternoon, Ada, bedecked with a matching set of purple glass—earrings, necklace, and ring—and a violet feather-flower blossoming in her black hair, Ada adorned but with no place to go, sat in the empty parlor and sang the songs she had learned in public school. While she sang, she stared at the keyboard, as if she were waiting for accompaniment by some miracle.

Aunt Ada sat, her hairy legs fat and wide apart, and nodded her head at the keyboard, and the feather in her hair trembled as she sang.

I chanced upon a big brown bear  
And a mighty bear was he. . .

And if you were a kid coming home from the movies on a Saturday afternoon in the darkening light and you heard Ada singing, it made you feel all the unhappiness in the world. By the time you'd climbed the stairs, opened the apartment door and stepped into the kitchen, you were wondering how much longer it would be before your father had enough money to buy you a house of your own in some place like Queens, where life was better. Someone who'd been there said you could walk for miles and still not run out of trees. Forests everywhere. Wild animals.