

When I Grow Up: The Lost Autobiographies of Six Yiddish Teenagers

Ken Krimstein

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in the Rissman Kol Ami Collection at North Suburban Synagogue Beth El

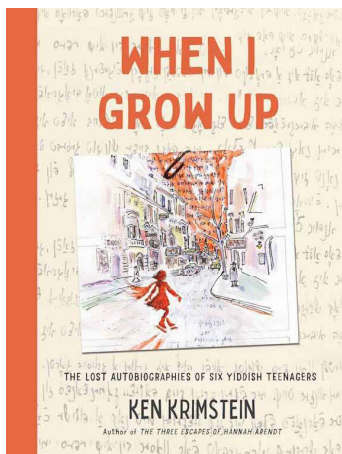
About the Artist



Ken Krimstein is a cartoonist, author, and educator whose work appears in *The New Yorker*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *The Chicago Tribune*. His 2021 book, *When I Grow Up: The Lost Autobiographies of Six Yiddish Teenagers* has been named an NPR Best Book of the Year, a *Washington Post* Best Book of the Year and Top Ten Graphic Novel of 2021, and a *Chicago Tribune* Fall “Best Read.” His 2018 book *The Three Escapes of Hannah Arendt* won the Bernard J. Brommel Award for Biography and Memoir and was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award. He teaches at DePaul University and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His collection of cartoons, *Kvetch as Kvetch Can: Jewish Cartoons*, was published in 2011. His humor writing has been in *The New York Observer*’s “New Yorker’s Diary” and humor websites, including *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*, *Yankee Pot Roast*, and *Mr. Beller’s Neighborhood*.

Krimstein lives and writes and draws in Evanston, Illinois. He is excited to return to North Suburban Synagogue Beth El for this exhibit, having attended the Pre-School as a child.

About the Project



In one of their odder and more chilling moves, the Nazis occupying Lithuania once collected Yiddish and Hebrew books and documents, hoping to create a reference collection about a people they intended to annihilate. Even stranger, they appointed Jewish intellectuals and poets to select the choicest pearls for study. These workers, assigned to sift through a major Jewish library in Vilna, Vilnius in Lithuanian, ended up hiding thousands of books and papers from the Nazis, smuggling them out under their clothing, and squirreling them away in attics and underground bunkers.

In 1991, a large part of the collection was found in the basement of a Vilnius church, and were hailed as important artifacts of Jewish history. But in 2017, curators at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in Manhattan, the successor to the Vilnius library, were told that another trove, totaling 170,000 pages, had been found, somehow overlooked in the same church basement. These documents, experts say, are even more valuable and compelling.

Among these documents were submissions to a 1930s autobiography contest created by YIVO’s Division of Youth Research in an effort to study Yiddish thirteen-to-twenty-one-year olds. These young people were encouraged to write candidly, covering topics such as family, school, political party affiliations, occupations, and events in their lives making the greatest impression. Each entry to the competition would be anonymous and a grand prize of 150 zlotys (roughly \$1,000 in 2021 money) was to be awarded. More than 700 entries were received, but the prize – scheduled to be announced on September 1, 1939 – was canceled as that was the day the Nazis invaded Poland and the Second World War commenced.

Krimstein writes, “By harnessing their words, hopes, dreams, and actions, as well as imagery from the times and places they inhabited, I’ve enlisted the form of the nonfiction graphic narrative in an attempt to allow these people without names to once again speak their words, the words of youth...”

Excerpted and adapted from “A Trove of Yiddish Artifacts Rescued from the Nazis, and Oblivion” by Joseph Berger, *The New York Times*, October 18, 2017, and the Preface of *When I Grow Up* by Ken Krimstein.