Contents

Features

42

Goodnight, Sweet Print
A Farewell to the Forward's Print Editions
Introduction by Adam Langer

46  A CHANCE TO REBUILD JEWISH LIFE By Seth Lipsky
48  FORWARD TO A HIGHER PURPOSE By Jonathan Rosen
50  THE WAY WE WERE: A TYPESETTER'S TALE By Elias Frank
52  A KEY TO MY LIFE By Alana Newhouse
53  WHEN THEY COME, WE'LL BE GONE By Gal Beckerman
54  WHERE I FELL IN LOVE By Ben Smith
55  THE JEW OF NEW YORK By Ben Katchor
56  NO ONE PREDICTED THE FALLOUT By J.J. Goldberg
58  READING THE FORVERTS By Eddy Portnoy
59  A RETURN TO THE 'BINTEL BRIEF' By Liana Finck
60  ON ENTERING A NEW UNIVERSE By Nathaniel Popper
61  'NOBODY GOT HURT' By Wayne Hoffman
62  HOW WE GOT THAT OBAMA INTERVIEW By Jane Eisner
63  HOW I LOST By Jay Michaelson
64  THE STORY OF A HURRICANE By Dan Friedman
66  NO TIME FOR ELEPHANTS By Kurt Hoffman
68  THIS IS YOUR PAPER SPEAKING By Chana Pollack
As we face the digital future, we look back at the English Forward’s inky years as a print publication.
READ ALL ABOUT IT: A vendor sells the Forward on the street, ca. 1930.
WE CAN'T GO ON, WE'LL GO ON

If you grew up long past the era of shtetls, Ellis Island and tenements, it might not have been a word you knew well. There was a resonance to it, but also a distance, something someone might have said in an English conversation smattered with Yiddish — "Your uncle Norman, when he was in high school, he wrote an essay for the Forverts"; "My father, he voted for Roosevelt — he called it 'The Backwards.'" You'd see a copy of it in a museum exhibit about the early days of American journalism, glimpse someone reading it in the background of a black-and-white film, espy a copy in a perfectly preserved textile worker's apartment in the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

Only later did you come to understand the history of the place, the role it played in advocating for workers and immigrants, in helping Jews learn what it meant to be American. And only then did you come to realize that it was still here — in Yiddish and in English, on newsstands and in newspaper boxes, in public libraries and in the hands of commuters riding the subways. And only then did you realize there was still a place for it, transformed yet still vital like the community it served.

Walking into the offices, you expected the conversations to be suffused with the past. But, though the passions and anxieties remained, the topics had changed. There was little time to dwell too much over history; the present took precedence. And besides, there were deadlines to meet, headlines to change, final edits to make, a paper then a magazine that had to be at the printer by 5 p.m.

While that was all happening, in all the triumphs and the squabbles, in the frustrations and the victories, sometimes it was hard to see that you were part of history too.

Since 1897, the Forward has published the news of the Jewish community — its heroes and its villains, its politics and its culture — and how it has intersected with the American story. We are ending our English-language print edition with this issue, and we have invited some of our notable writers, artists and visionaries to contribute their memories of the time they spent working here, what the Forward meant and what it still means.

And, as we go fully digital, we will continue with two directions in mind — always looking back but always moving Forward.

Adam Langer
MAGAZINE EDITOR
Seth Lipsky
President and Editor 1990–2000

Another Chance To Rebuild Jewish Life

Of all the wonderful encounters during my 10 years at the Forward, the one I savor the most was the visit from a fellow named Harry Lopatin. It offered a glimpse of how fierce the political debate within the paper always was. And a reminder that even in the debate’s bitterest feuds, Ab Cahan held out the hope of synthesis.

Lopatin’s visit was precipitated by a review I’d penned of a new biography of the Revisionist Zionist prophet Vladimir Jabotinsky. Any piece on Jabotinsky, of course, was bound to be controversial. Jabotinsky had been the leading right-winger of his day, and Cahan was his leading journalistic opponent.

So before writing the review, I sent for a translation of the Forward’s editorial on Jabotinsky’s death, in 1940. I was expecting a condescending screed. That’s certainly what Cahan had written when, in the spring of 1940, Jabotinsky delivered at the Manhattan Opera House his last — and a prophetic — major speech.

That was when Jabotinsky called for the evacuation to Palestine of all 6 million Jews in Europe. Cahan had responded with a full-page denunciation of Jabotinsky. Six million people, he’d harrumphed, wouldn’t make much of a state. It was, with the advantage of hindsight, a shocking thing for Cahan to have done.

Particularly because Cahan himself had swung behind the idea of a Jewish state in Eretz Israel as far back as the mid-1920s. He’d been floored on his first visit to Palestine to see what socialist Jews were achieving there. In 1929 he’d praised the religious Jews who fought their Arab attackers during the Hebron massacre.

In any event, when Jabotinsky died in August 1940, the editorial that Cahan issued turned out to be an ardent, glowing paean. It lauded Jabotinsky as a writer, person and orator. When he spoke, the Forward said, “even the deaf could hear.” In the “true sense of the word,” it said, Jabotinsky’s death was a “national catastrophe.”

The sentence that struck me most was the one predicting that Jabotinsky would be missed “not only now, in the middle of the storm, but also later, when the storm is over and the time comes to heal the wounds and rebuild Jewish life on new foundations in a new time.” It seems, my review suggested, that Cahan, too, could be prophetic.

A letter from Lopatin arrived promptly. He said that he’d been a young reporter for the Forward when Jabotinsky died, and that Cahan had tried to get his editors to cover Jabotinsky’s funeral. They had, though, balked over Jabotinsky’s politics. “Send the youngster,” Cahan had finally commanded. So Lopatin had drawn the assignment.

We printed Lopatin’s letter, of course. I was so tickled by it that I invited him in for lunch with my colleagues. Shortly before that lunch, I stopped by the office of the Forward’s founding cultural editor, Jonathan Rosen. I was shocked to discover on his desk a review copy of a new book by the astronaut Carl Sagan.

“He’s a communist!” I exclaimed. He isn’t a communist, Rosen replied. Well, I growled, he might as well be a communist the way he’s opposing [Ronald] Reagan’s Star Wars program, just as we’re facing down the Soviets. I stalked off. An hour or so later, we all gathered for lunch with Lopatin, who regaled us with stories about Cahan.

At one point, Lopatin was asked whether he had liked Abraham Cahan. “Hell, no,” he said. “I hated him.” I perked up. “Cahan was a right-wing bastard,” Lopatin continued. “We all hated him.” Lopatin was dilating on this point when someone asked him what he remembered most about Cahan as an editor.

Lopatin thought for a moment. What he remembered most, he finally said, was that Cahan would sit in his office with the door open, and when he heard the name of someone he disliked, he would come barreling out, shaking his fist in the air and bellowing: “He’s a communist! He’s a communist!”

As Lopatin related this story, which I later related in Commentary, I felt a kind of calm come over me. Not that I fancied myself Abraham Cahan’s clone. By the time of the Lopatin lunch, though, the Soviet Union had been upended, in solidarity, by part of the very anti-communist labor movement that had been nursed for so long by the Forward.

So a new generation has the chance to rebuild Jewish life on new foundations in a new time. What a story. To my way of thinking, it doesn’t matter whether it’s pursued in print, on social media, or online only. What matters is that one finds a way to stay with the story in each new generation with the same tenacity that Cahan did in his.

Seth Lipsky is the author of ‘The Rise of Abraham Cahan.’
Jonathan Rosen
Forward Culture Editor, 1990–2000

Seth Lipsky hired me in 1990 to edit the culture section of the English language Forward before there was a culture section, or an English language Forward, and since I’d never had a job before it seemed like a good fit. For a brief while I was an editor without a newspaper, and though the trend in journalism is increasingly the reverse, it was an exciting time. It was also stressful since eventually pages would have to be filled and questions answered about what Jewish culture might be. Or so I thought; actually the questions receded with the doing, which is its own answer. That was part of the pleasure of journalism.

Of course we weren’t only a new newspaper. The great Yiddish paper was our inspiration and guide even though none of us read Yiddish; tradition is mysterious that way. We were careful to say that we were not replacing or displacing the Yiddish Forverts but we weren’t translating it either. We were grafting ourselves onto it and calling it Papa, the child it hadn’t known it wanted. At times I suspect it felt more like an older sibling and wanted its birthright back. That too is part of tradition.

Seth put 1897 on the front page. That was the date of the Yiddish Forverts’ founding; it was also the year the Jewish Socialist Bund started, as well as the meeting of the first Zionist Congress that Bundists would have boycotted because the future of the Jews was going to be secured by European workers joining hands in solidarity across the outworn borders of religion, language and national identity.

Seth liked to quip that Theodor Herzl had himself tried to start a Jewish newspaper but found it too difficult so he founded a Jewish State instead. That Herzl was a journalist, however, was not a joke, and the sense that
newspapers carried an echo of modern prophecy vital for Jewish survival gave a smudgy and imperfect business a feeling of higher purpose.

Meanwhile there were more pressing matters, like how much to pay contributors and what kind of font to use. Lipsky chose the beautiful Stempel Garamond typeface, words that

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**The typesetters were far less sentimental. They had lived through the extermination of European Jewry.**

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became archaically familiar, like pica poles, which we used to measure the font size on articles that were tiled together to make a dummy of the front page that really could be ripped up in those tactile days. You could say “Don’t start a fight with someone who buys ink by the barrel” and (some) people would know what you were talking about. There was money to be made in the tiny classified ads nobody noticed until the Internet nobody thought about stole them. Big newspapers still bought forests like aristocrats in Russian literature, and like aristocrats tried to ignore the sound of the axe in the distance.

Nobody called the lede story (yes it’s spelled lede) on the front page “the wood,” the way tabloids did, but down in the basement where the Yiddish typesetters worked at huge Linotype machines there were trays of type that included sixty-point Hebrew letters made of wood. Our first year in English was the last year of those machines, which actually melted down lead ingots — hot type! — and pressed them into words. Lipsky had encouraged me to write a column, in keeping with his policy of pretending you could do something until you could, and one of my first was about the last days of the machines.

The Yiddish typesetters, who had a good union, as one would expect of the Forverts, would keep their jobs. They moved upstairs and sat behind computers that transformed an ancient craft that Gutenberg and Benjamin Franklin would have recognized into numbing hours blinking before a giant screen. But the typesetters were far less sentimental than I was, having seen much greater changes than the merely mechanical. They had lived through the extermination of European Jewry, the murder of the majority of the world’s Yiddish speakers, and the grotesque resolution of fights between Bundists and Zionists referred in the end by Hitler and Stalin.

The typesetters were drawn from many of the folded Yiddish newspapers that once upon a time had thrived and hated each others’ guts, often for good political reasons. It was easy to think that the men with their caps and picturesque trays of type represented one big homogenized Yiddish-speaking world, rather than a faithful remnant that had learned to share a life raft.

In those days after the Berlin Wall had come down, and the World Trade Center was still standing, it was possible to see the old arguments as part of a world as archaic as Linotype machines. Once upon a time people had defended the Soviet Union even as it was murdering millions; they worried about anti-Semitism in the United States after the Second World War had made its American strain not merely unfashionable but un-American; some even argued against the right of Jews to national self-determination after the Jewish State had been established and survived more than one war of genocidal intent.

No doubt we would think of something to put in our pages, now that those distractions had been laid to rest. Meanwhile I wrote a column about the typesetters and got one of them to print out, in metal, the Hebrew name of the woman I was soon to marry. As the Linotypes were being scrapped I salvaged a few of the smaller letters and a giant aleph made of wood. I still have them on my desk.

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**TOWARD NOSTALGIA NOW: The culture section in the English language Forward’s first issue.**

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**EVERYTHING’S COMING UP ROSEN:** Jontahan Rosen in 1997.

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Jonathan Rosen, the author of several novels and works of non-fiction, edited the culture section of The Forward for ten years.

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FORWARD ARCHIVE
Elias Frank
Forward Typesetter

The Way We Were

This article originally appeared in the Forward in April 25, 1937. Translation by Chana Pollack

No historical hindsight nor research paper could relay what we — the Forverts printing press workers, the typesetters — endured those first couple of years at the Forverts.

Those were the days of kerosene lamps. When you wanted a drink of water, you had to use the pump in the yard. We used to have to crawl out there from the 15th and 26th floors. I was a greenhorn youth, unemployed with not much chance of getting work. Our union, the Yiddish Typesetters Union, was then made up of about 50 members. Nearly half of that, about 22 of us, were unemployed.

In the Yiddish print shops then located on Manhattan’s East Side, it was rare for a pressman or typesetter to be employed; the owners themselves would set the type and print their materials. If an owner was busy and employed a typesetter, that typesetter seldom got paid more than $3 or $4 a week. The work hours were as long as the boss decided.

There were three Yiddish daily newspapers back then: Dos Tageblatt, Der Yidisher Herold and the Ovend-Blatt. A few weekly newspapers were created by day and would disappear overnight. We, the 22 unemployed typesetters, used to show up twice a day to answer job listings and to see if an owner needed a typesetter for a day’s work.

If you were first in line to get a job but didn’t show up on time, you lost your place in line and went back to the end. There were more Yiddish typesetters than jobs, and those waiting on line were naturally a pretty hopeless, desperate bunch.

After long weeks and months of unemployment and despair, a happy surprise occurred: A committee of Socialists came to our union’s meeting. They had split off from the Socialist Labor Party and from the Ovend-Blatt and announced that they were getting together to publish a daily newspaper. They invited the union to choose 12 typesetters for their newspaper.

It’s impossible to describe the joy. I started having palpitations. I began doing the math: I was first in line; the newspaper would likely have its first issue published in about 10 days, and at the union meeting it was decided that the first 12 in line would be chosen for that paper.

The 12 happy ones then chose from among us three typesetters to work with management and purchase several sets of type. We prepared it all so that the first issue of the Forverts would come out on the seventh day of Passover — Thursday, April 22, 1897.

The first issue of the Forverts was published at 14 Duane Street, near Chambers Street. The composing room at the editorial office was on the second floor, over a saloon.

At the time, newspapers paid their workers for piecework. The scale was one cent per line, $1 per 100 lines of regular newspaper type, and one cent and one quarter for smaller type.

We all lived on the East Side. It often took three-quarters of an hour to get to work. There were no subways yet, and it cost two carfares to come in from Brooklyn — a luxury that none of us could afford. Our earnings were about $6 to $7 a week.

Everyone ate dinner in the shop to avoid spending money at restaurants. When it was time for lunch, we’d tie a long stick to the gas fixtures. Each stick had a lunch bucket of food hanging from it so that the gas lamps could warm it up. When the lunch pots started sizzling, various Lithuanian, Galician and Romanian food aromas wafted through the place.

We used to have lots of trouble with the final nun letters. Nun was the thinnest letter in the alphabet, and the lead ones used to break in half frequently, especially when placed at the end of an entire row. The composing room was always in need of that final nun. One of the fastest typesetters used to have lots, so we’d keep an eye on him and then grab them out of his hands. From then on, the typesetters, prior to going to lunch, used to remove their final nun’s from their boxes of type, wrap them in pieces of paper and hold on to them in their waist coat pockets until they were back at work.

As in every trade, we had faster and slower typesetters. Naturally, the faster ones earned more. This caused a lot of quarreling. If they had been permitted, the speedier typesetters would have put out the whole paper themselves, leaving no work for the slower ones. With the publication of the Forverts, the union developed a system so that
weaker workers wouldn’t be harmed and everyone earned more or less the same.

The slower-paced typesetters were the majority, we decided; so that when we received copy to typeset, there would be a line waiting for the work. Whoever was next in line received the copy. The writers would arrive at work before the typesetters, and the typesetters would grab their handwritten copy. Two to three typesetters waited on each page of copy. Every once in a while, you could hear yelling all over the shop.

Frequently the fastest typesetter would be a Romanian young man, and the slowest a Galician. When these two typesetters would come and wait together for their next turn, there would be trouble. The Romanian was tall; the Galician short. The Romanian used to overshadow the Galician, and fights would break out between them.

Until the Forverts built its 10-floor building, we would move practically every Monday and Thursday. In those days it was easy for us to move, because we didn’t have much. We would rent a horse and wagon, load up a couple of cases of type, a few stands and layout tables, the proof press—and off we went, hippity hey, to a new shop.

For some time, the “composing room” was located at 183 Division Street. That was our worst location. We were in a damp cellar where the walls leaked. Aside from that, it was dark and we had to keep lighting the gas lamps all the time. The writers, on the floor above us, in the editorial offices, also had no great thrills. It was constantly cold there. The writers simply couldn’t bear it. Our “streamer,” Sam Kulchinsky, used to run around looking for coal or wood in order to warm up the editorial offices, and then he would make tea for the writers.

The business office wasn’t far from Grand Street. It was a tiny little storefront, and we used to go there weekly to collect our wages. There was room there for only a few people, so we used to wait outside until the bookkeeper called us in one by one. Frequently we waited a lot. When the bookkeeper had no money for us, we wouldn’t leave—we’d wait as if for a miracle and for someone to bring money.

I’ll never forget that historic meeting in a hall on Grand Street when friends of the Forverts were called together to help save the newspaper from going under.

At that time, typesetters were owed between six- and eight-weeks’ wages. Most couldn’t wait anymore, and left to seek their luck elsewhere.

Comrade Winchevsky, who chaired the meeting, made a doubtful appeal to us, saying: “Boys, it’s up to you. If you want to work without wages, it’s all right. If not, we’re going to have to close the newspaper.”

We then answered that we were still with the Forverts, and that the company had us write IOU notes for the wages still owed to us. Years later, when the financial situation of the Forverts improved, we were paid 100% on the dollar. Even the typesetters who left us received their owed wages in full.

At one time, the composing room was located at 36 Chrystie Street. In that building there used to be a synagogue with windows on all sides and a skylight overhead. We thought it was heaven. A few days later we learned why the congregation had moved—the place was infested with mice. Every morning, when our darling Kulchinsky would come to light the big oven, he’d need to take a broom and go to war with the mice.

When the Forverts got its first two linotype machines, everything improved. The Forverts looked better because the newspaper type was fresh daily. Still, we were not without problems. There used to be trouble constantly with the gas engine that powered the linotype machine. In order for the engine to run, you had to turn a huge key like the one used to crank a Ford car.

I was present at the birth of the Forverts and have been with it from its infancy, been present at all its struggles for existence and survived those to see it become influential and huge.

My heart gets a reverent flutter when I think about those bygone years.

Elias Frank was the first typesetter of the Forverts.
The Forward holds the keys to my life. This isn’t only a metaphor. On the chain of openers that unlock the doors to the places that make up my world — my house, my office, the apartment where my elderly parents live — there is one that belongs to a door that no longer exists, in a building that was disappeared from the earth, another Manhattan concrete kidnapping.

This room was in the basement at 45 East 33rd, a street still named Sholem Aleichem Boulevard though it absolutely should not be. It was there that the brilliant, hilarious, generous Forward archivist Chana Pollack introduced me to the treasure trove that was the archive of the Forward — a 65,000-piece collection, spanning more than a century, that she and I would, over two years during 2005-2007, plumb to create a book called “A Living Lens: Photographs of Jewish Life from the Pages of the Forward.” And in many ways it was in that room that I found myself — as an American, as a Jew, and as an editor. Every day, when I open the door to my own home, I am reminded that I once had another.

That the owners and managers of the place could be less hospitable than I’d hoped will come as no surprise to anyone who’s had a landlord. But if you ever lived somewhere that felt glorious and ridiculous and inspiring and maddening and filled with ghosts in the worst and best ways, you will understand how it felt to be us. Despite everything that was bad — and there was a lot — I loved it. And I would have lived there forever.

Alana Newhouse is the editor of Tablet.
Gal Beckerman
Opinion Editor, 2011–2015

When They Come For Us, We’ll Be Gone

I've always thought of my time at the Forward as familial. I realize it’s a strange word to apply to the life of a newspaper, which can also attract the hard-edged and single-minded (and we had plenty of those). But I’m thinking of Wednesday nights, when the paper closed and we all had to stay late to put it to bed. At some point in the early evening, we’d order food and sit around a communal table to eat dinner together. We’d discuss frustrations from the day, who wasn’t returning our calls or filing a piece on time, whatever was in the news, plans for the weekend. I seem to have taken this for granted then, but it was part of the joy of having a print issue to put out every week. It regulated time and brought us all together, even if just for Chinese takeout.

The Forward served as this kind of familial focal point in so many ways. When I was editor of the opinion section, it felt like trying to organize a Seder every week, with crazy uncles and authoritative mothers and cousins who didn’t speak to one another. I remember often feeling overwhelmed by the sort of passions that can only exist in fights among family members, where no one can really walk away and everyone feels entitled to brutal honesty. It was tiring at times. Especially when it came to Israel. I remember one of my earliest assignments, interviewing Richard Goldstone, the South African judge who’d earned himself the title of self-hating Jew for his controversial United Nations report about Israel’s 2009 incursion into Gaza. When I sat with him, he was all anguish and regret, about the truths he felt he needed to tell, about the ways they may have been misconstrued and how he he had felt ostracized from the Jewish community. In smaller ways, being opinion editor was like that every week.

The opinion pages were this ongoing, close talking, back and forth, moving from one topic to the next, or yelling about many topics all at once. If we couldn’t argue together here, then where? And about this I feel elegiac as well.

I never had any illusions that we represented anything as coherent as a single community. This was not the Yiddish paper of the 1970s and 80s when the readership all lived within a few block radius and shared a basic history and life experience. My inbox on any given day was a testimony to just how diverse in viewpoint and anger level we all are. But there was something reassuring about the existence of that inbox as a last place, a last table, where those exchanges could take place.

When I decided to leave the job of opinion editor after a number of years, it was so much like leaving family that my last act was to write a personal essay in order to explain to myself and to readers what I’d gotten out of the experience. It’s the closest I’ve come to really trying to understand my own Jewish identity. I felt like I needed to be completely honest, to make my own offering to the conversation before I left the building, even if my conclusions were despairing. I remember seeing that piece in proofs before it went to press on another Wednesday, after another meal together. And then I made an emotional exit — I even hugged the statue of Abraham Cahan. Because we didn’t just put out a product, mere “content” (that awful, cold word), but offered up weekly a way to connect with a family that might not be around forever.

Gal Beckerman is an editor with the New York Times Book Review.
Ben Smith
Summer Intern, 1998

The Place I Fell in Love (With Reporting)

The Forward was where I decided to be a reporter — a “newspaperman,” Seth Lipsky would have insisted, and certainly not a “journalist,” which he defined as “an out-of-work newspaperman.”

Though his English-language Forward had been around for only eight years when I arrived, Seth carried the confidence of a great editor aware that he stood in a great tradition. I’m a thoroughly secularized half-Jew and knew almost nothing of the tradition of Yiddish political journalism, so I raced to learn: I enrolled in a weekly Yiddish class downstairs at the Workman’s Circle/Arbiter Ring building, and I devoured the Penguin Classic translation of “The Rise of David Levinsky.”

And, mostly, I learned: from the managing editor, Ira Stoll, who taught me what’s still the only real way I know how to edit a story, by brutally rewriting it, and from, in particular, an ambitious young reporter named Elissa Gootman, who would go on to work for The New York Times and whose beat was Jewish organizations. It was a sleepy world of people who weren’t used to being challenged, and you could just feel how irritated the officers of these organizations were to have a ponytailed intern coming by for their 990s. It was my first, small, palpable sense of the unstoppable, asymmetric place of journalism in challenging power.

I also fell in love with political reporting at the Forward: I covered the campaign of an ambitious young lawyer, Eric Schneiderman, for the state Senate. My big scoop — and, I should admit, my first receipt of opposition research — was that Schneiderman had received an illegal donation, through a company, from a Saudi prince, though in those pre-internet days I was never quite able to figure out the prince’s place in the royal family.

And I made the sort of mistake you make only once, and probably have to make once: I sloppily got the surname of the subject of a glowing profile totally wrong. He was appalled; I still cringe when I recall it.

Seth was the looming eminence of the place back then, and I realize that I can’t really remember what I learned from him as a reporter; I do recall that he tried, to my mother’s horror, to make me forgo my senior year at Yale and remain at the Forward.

But when I got this job at BuzzFeed, Seth was among my first calls. I realized in retrospect — I’d worked for him at the New York Sun after my Forward internship — that I’d learned from him most of what I needed to know about editing; about how much good reporting hits the political conversation, and should; about the importance of a clear headline and lede, and most of all — really above anything else — about the importance of standing by your reporters when they get into the inevitable scrapes, even when it’s just the intern getting yelled at for having been a little aggressive in requesting a foundation’s 990s.

For a time, by coincidence, BuzzFeed sublet an apartment on the 10th floor of a converted building near Seward Park. We used the space as our test kitchen, but it had once been — Seth alleged — the composing room of the Forward. The presses had been in the basement. The view north is still obstructed, and you can clearly feel how the institution towered over its quarter of the city in its time. It was the great media startup of its day, something with an urgency, a range and a connection to its audience to which those of us in the business now can aspire.

Ben Smith is the editor in chief of BuzzFeed.
A lost episode of "The Jew of New York" in which Enoch Letushim, a Palestinian messenger, watches Seth Lipsky, the editor of the English-language edition of The Forward, devour a plate of ribs in a small restaurant on East 33rd Street.

Ben Katchor has published many graphic novels, several of which first appeared in installments in The Forward. These include "The Jew of New York" and "Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer."
‘No One Predicted the Fallout.’

On Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, I was standing on a Manhattan subway platform, heading for work after voting in the New York primaries. Around 8:55 the platform started buzzing. A plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. Drunk pilot? Errant flight student? My own immediate thought was, “Oh, God, bin Laden has finally done it.”

No, I wasn’t clairvoyant. When I became the Forward’s editor a year earlier, I’d inherited a brilliant young reporter, Rachel Donadio, who’d been following bin Laden ever since he tried to blow up the subway in the 1990s. Now, as the towers were collapsing, Rachel jumped on her bicycle and headed for Ground Zero. The rest of the staff dropped everything and began looking for angles to cover.

That Tuesday, the Forward was transformed. A feisty, independent weekly with its own idiosyncratic angles on the news, it unexpectedly became an important voice on the only story that mattered. Reporters started calling us for leads. Our opinion editor, Oren Rawls, was reeling in op-ed contributions from the likes of Austria’s president, Poland’s foreign minister and a leading Saudi journalist. The New York Times started lifting our quotes and even whole story ideas, uncredited.

The plain truth was, we were making waves. Even before the 9/11 attacks, Matt Gutman had reported for us from Argentina on the secret Hezbollah training camp near the remote Brazilian border. In 2003 we sent Marc Perelman to Argentina, Paraguay and Chile to report on a second Hezbollah base in a Chilean beach resort. Marc returned to Argentina repeatedly to cover the stalled probe into the deadly 1994 Iran-Hezbollah bombing of the Jewish community’s main offices. And in 2005, Marc spent a month in Congo and Uganda, reporting on the genocidal civil wars there, largely outside the world’s notice.

Early in 2006, our Nathaniel Popper traveled to Postville, Iowa, to investigate the appalling abuse of the mostly undocumented workers at AgriProcessors, the nation’s largest kosher slaughterhouse. His report ignited nationwide protests, some against the slaughterhouse, some against us. As reactions escalated, the plant’s CEO landed in jail and the Bush administration launched a massive raid on the plant — not, alas, to protect the workers, but to deport them.

That August, our E.J. Kessler untangled the family secrets derailing the shoo-in re-election bid — indeed, the political career — of the Virginia GOP senator George Allen, the early front-
runner for the 2008 GOP presidential nod. Allen had been filmed calling an Indian-American videographer the racist-sounding “macaca.” It was speculated to be a variant of a French word for “monkey,” perhaps learned from Allen’s Tunisian-born, French-speaking mother, Henriette Allen. The senator insisted it was made-up gibberish. E.J. discovered that Henriette Allen came from a prominent Sephardic Jewish clan with roots in Inquisition-era Portugal. Allen angrily protested casting “aspersions” on his mother. Weeks later, her mother told him she was indeed Jewish. He clumsily declared pride in his newfound heritage. It didn’t save his career.

For me personally, though, the story that most strongly sums up the Forward experience is one that began quite unexpectedly, in August 2003. I was sitting in a Jerusalem cafe, sipping java and reading a jaw-dropping essay in the Friday supplement of the daily Yedioh Aharonot. It warned that Zionism was on the brink of collapse as its twin “pillars” — “a just path and an ethical leadership” — were failing. Israel now “rests on a scaffolding of corruption, and on foundations of oppression and injustice. As such, the end of the Zionist enterprise is already on our doorstep.” Israel had to decide whether to be a smaller Jewish state or a binational democracy — or to pass-

He’d mind my translating his essay into English and publishing it in the Forward. He agreed.

I called our publisher, Sam Norich, to get a clear go-ahead, knowing that the publication could cost us subscribers. Sam said to go ahead, that this is why we’re in business. The translation ran in the Forward the following Friday, August 29.

No one could have predicted the fallout. Within weeks the essay was reprinted around the globe, in the Guardian in London, Le Monde in Paris, in India, in Kenya, in dozens of smaller papers, magazines and newsletters. Denunciations poured in from the right and center, damming both Burg and the Forward. Words like Burg’s had become commonplace in Israel, in Hebrew. To the outside world, such thoughts — from a senior Israeli politician — were unheard-of.

Most unexpected was the plan announced December 13 by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to do just what Burg predicted he wouldn’t: withdraw all troops and settlers from Gaza and a corner of the West Bank, either to end pressure for comprehensive withdrawal or, aides said privately, as a first step toward full withdrawal. Several factors were said to have driven Sharon to reverse his lifelong opposition to withdrawal. One, some said, was the shocking worldwide response to Burg’s essay in the Forward.

My own life-changing moment had come earlier, on Yom Kippur, October 6. My synagogue was an all-volunteer community with no paid rabbi or staff. Prayers and sermons were rotated among members. The sermon that Yom Kippur for the late-morning Musaf service, a climactic moment on the holiest day, was devoted to the shame brought on us a day earlier, when the Syrian ambassador appeared on CNN, quoting from an infamous essay by a renegade ex-Knesset speaker, translated and published by a member of our own minyan.

A few friends and family walked out in the middle. I sat and listened, more bemused than distressed, feeling like either an outcast, an enemy of the people, or a lone-wolf Humphrey Bogart-type character, thinking: So, this is what it’s like to be a journalist.

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I felt like an outcast, an enemy of the people, or a lone wolf.

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Lacking justice cannot survive.”

Most astonishing was the name of the author: Avraham Burg, ex-speaker of the Knesset and enfant terrible of the Labor Party.

Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Burg wrote, had bred a callous, deadly indifference. “Israel, having ceased to care about the children of the Palestinians, should not be surprised when they come washed in hatred and blow themselves up in the centers of Israeli escapism.”

As I was reading, Burg strolled into the cafe. We bro-hugged and I asked if J.J. Goldberg is editor at large for the Forward.
Eddy Portnoy
Forward Columnist 2000–2016

READING THE FORVERTS
— or —

How to Beat the Crap Out of Someone in Yiddish

Eighteen-year-old Esther Goldberg,
a pretty girl who lives at 20 Pitt Street on Manhattan’s Lower East Side,
went out early in the morning to the grocery store to get some rolls for
breakfast. Suddenly, she saw her neighbor, a young tailor by the name
of Harris Bloom. Coming home late from a dance Bloom got attacked
by a thief who popped him on the head so hard that he couldn’t see
straight. The thief grabbed Bloom’s money and took off running.
Goldberg, a Cossack of a girl, gave chase. She caught up with the
thief on Grand Street and punched him so hard that he went tumbling
down. With that, she jumped on top of him and pounded him with her
fists until he saw stars. The robber was saved only because the police
showed up and took him to jail.

Forverts, page 1, March 15, 1913

This little slice of Lower East Side
Jewish life has so much to love: a
young sweatshop tailor coming home
in the wee hours of the morning after a
night out in a dance hall, and an aptly
dnamed heroine who not only saves him
from getting robbed but also chases
down the thief and enacts a brutal
retribution. Although the Forverts is
better known for socialist politics and
quality literature, nearly every issue up
until the 1940s was full of incredibly
rich stories of Jewish daily life, stories
that — as the Jews climbed America’s
social and economic ladders — never
appeared anywhere else. Both thrill-
ing and banal, they reveal the seamy
underbelly of Jewish life in the years
before the Jews became middle class
and boring.
The thousands of stories like that of
Esther Goldberg told the tales of Jew-
ish immigrants and their offspring who
did everything from turn tricks to pull
grant vignettes, Yiddish newspapers,
especially the Forverts, were loaded
with them.

When I was hired in 2002 to write
the Forward Looking Back column,
which presented English synopses of
articles from the Yiddish paper from
100, 75 and 50 years previous, I ini-
tially thought, “Sure, the column will
be Herzl this, and Brandeis that.” I
figured I would stick to the big names
and the big stories of Jewish history as
reported in the paper, rehearsing news
that readers of the English Forward
were familiar with. But when I began
looking at the microfilms, I saw some-
thing different. I discovered a Jewish
community that didn’t exist in history
books, one that had all kinds of peo-
ple, from the lowest depths of criminal
stupidity to the highest peaks of intel-
lectual achievement. And scattered in
between those two poles were Jews of
all kinds, purveyors of good, bad and
mediocre.

As a result, Forward Looking Back
changed direction and came to include
the Forverts’s reports of the Jewish
two-bit nobodies who lived lives of
often furiously noisy desperation but
then were never heard from again. I’m
thankful to the Yiddish journalists who
had the foresight to record what they
saw on the dirty Jewish streets of the
Lower East Side. In doing so, they cre-
ated a unique chronicle of Jewish life,
one in which Jews got to tell stories
about themselves, warts and all. A Yidd-
dish universe unlike any other, the For-
verts provided its readers with the raw
reality of Jewish immigrant life — and
for only a penny. Such a bargain.

Eddy Portnoy is the academic advisor
and exhibitions curator for YIVO.
DEAR EDITOR,

I was born in Russia and was twelve years old when I came to America with my dear mother. My sister, who was in the country before us, brought us over. My sister supported us; she didn't allow me to go to work, but sent me to school. I went to school for two years and didn't miss a day. But then came the terrible fire at the Triangle Shop, where she worked, and I lost my dear sister. My mother and I suffer terribly from the misfortune. I had to help my mother and after school hours I go out and sell newspapers.

I have to go to school three more years, and after that I want to go to college. But my mother doesn't want me to go to school because she thinks I should go to work. She feels I am too old to learn. I tell her I will work days and study at night but she won't hear of it.

Since I read The Forward to my mother every night, including your answers in the "Bintel Brief," I beg you to answer me and say a few words to her.

— YOUR READER, THE NEWSBOY

The answer to this letter is directed to the boy's mother, whose daughter was one of the shop-workers who perished in the Triangle Fire. The unfortunate woman is comforted in the answer, and she is told that she must not hinder her son's nighttime studies, but must help him reach his goal. An appeal is made to good people to help the boy with his education.
Nathaniel Popper
Reporter, 2003–2010

On Entering a New Universe

I hadn’t managed to get my hands on a physical copy of the Forward before I showed up for my job interview at the paper back in 2003. I’d spent the previous year living in Berlin, where copies of Jewish newspapers were few and far between. That was after a childhood in which I had never spent any significant time at Jewish institutions, other than teen night at my Jewish community center.

When I got to New York for my interview, I had combed the subway newsstands, futilely hoping to find a print copy of the paper so that I would have a better sense of what it was all about, beyond the few stories that were posted online.

Luckily, when I showed up for the interview, the editor at the time, J.J. Goldberg, had little interest in talking about what I thought of the latest edition. He flipped through the broad pages with a sense of discovery and opportunity that I can still feel in my fingers.

The only other newspapers that had offered me interviews were local publications that published on tissue-thin paper and covered the ephemeral goings-on of town councils and police precincts.

The paper stock the Forward used at the time was somehow much thicker, and it became connected in my head with the sense of historical and intellectual weight in the paper’s articles and features.

This was not long after Art Spiegelman had published his graphic series about the twin towers and the war in Iraq, which had been rejected at larger publications. Those comic strips came with a heft that spilled into the pages around them. It was not unlike that job interview with J.J., where we moved so quickly from the latest news to world events and history and big ideas.

When I arrived to start work, I was obsessed with the print copy. There was, of course, the ego involved with where my stories appeared. But even when I didn’t have a story, there was something satisfying and almost surprising about the moment when the first stack of papers of the newest edition arrived at the office. It served as evidence that this whole institution, which often seemed like some kind of a mystical Isaac Bashevis Singer fever dream, actually existed.

Before working at the Forward, I had not been much of a Jew to speak of. After I joined, the little universe of editors and reporters came to define my Jewish identity and made me feel connected to a history of debate and argument and difficult choices being hashed out in real time. At a time when the news industry came to seem flimsier by the week, here was a place willing to pay me and other young people to spend weeks reporting and digging deeply into questions that other people didn’t want to ask.

Over the years, the paper stock was thinned out and the website became the place for the breaking news stories that mattered. By the time I left, in 2009, the print edition didn’t even contain the latest version of my stories when it came out. But there was a degree to which the whole thing should have never existed. I still have some of those papers I took home from my job interview, tucked in a container beneath my bed, proof that it all really happened and that I was a part of it.

When the Republican Convention was preparing to gather in New York City at the end of the summer of 2004 — in the midst of two wars, plus the “war on terror” — newsrooms across town took safety precautions. The Forward's offices were then just a few blocks from Madison Square Garden, where the convention (as well as days of massive protests against it) would take place. To beef up security, we added physical barriers at the entrance: the staff also got some training about what to do in case of an attack on the city, or on our office in particular.

I had one of the few private offices in the newsroom, with a heavy door that could be closed. So, my office became the designated area where any suspicious packages should be placed — after, I hoped but was not certain, I had left the room.

A few weeks after the convention had passed without incident, with the High Holidays just behind us, the staff had gathered for our weekly group dinner in our cramped lunchroom. It was deadline night, the one night every week when everyone worked late, so we'd order in food and eat burritos or Chinese food or falafel together before returning to our desks to finish the latest issue of the print newspaper.

But while we were eating, our editor, J.J. Goldberg, came in to say that he'd noticed a mysterious package at the front desk. It was a small white box with no return address, addressed to the Forward but not to anyone specific, so it was sitting up front, unclaimed — that is, until J.J. noticed it, because it had started beeping.

I got up and tried to squeeze past the other staffers' chairs, but there was a small room with a big, hungry crowd around the table. J.J. was getting impatient.

"Wayne," he said, with urgency in his voice. "Come on."

"I'm running toward the bomb as fast as I can," I replied.

But once I saw the package and heard the beeping, I couldn't joke about it anymore. I put the box in my office, closed the door, called the fire department and evacuated the staff. There weren't many other people in the building at dinnertime, but as we waited across the street on East 33rd Street, a klezmer combo that had been rehearsing joined us on the sidewalk.

The fire department arrived and dealt with the package. After several minutes, they gave us the all clear, and we went back upstairs and returned to our desks.

What was inside that package? Not a bomb. It was an electronic countdown clock from the National Basketball Association with a printed schedule for the upcoming basketball season, which was (so I learned) just 30-some days away.

The next day, the paper came out as usual. And I spent my morning talking to the publicists for the NBA, trying to figure out what idiot had the bright idea to send out an unmarked, beeping package to a Jewish newsroom.

There's a happy ending, though. Nobody was hurt, and I got a good story out of it, And it's a story that has all the elements of a typical week working at the Forward: lots of food, long hours and a little reminder that behind every scary moment there's a funny moment — and vice versa.

Wayne Hoffman is the executive editor of Tablet, and the author of the novels "Hard," "An Older Man" and "Sweet Like Sugar" — which was inspired by his time at the Forward.
My August 2015 interview with President Obama in the Oval Office was a personal and professional milestone, a historic first for the Forward. Until the very last minute, I was afraid it wasn’t going to happen.

I first thought of interviewing the president on the train ride home from the annual White House Hanukkah party the previous December, after being struck by the sense of acceptance I felt as an American Jew in the seat (and home) of national power. The Marine Corps band had played “The Dreidel Song.” Won’t the president want to talk to the Jews?

I contacted Matt Nosanchuk, the hyper-energetic White House liaison with the Jewish community; he supported the idea immediately. Nosanchuk helped me craft a letter arguing my case, and he suggested that I wait until after the new year to send it.

Months of phone calls, strategizing and careful lobbying ensued — I could not ask a favor of anyone I might cover as a journalist. I even visited Obama’s former law partner in Chicago for his endorsement.

Suddenly, in May, a flurry of messages came, suggesting that an interview might, indeed, happen. Even a time and place were discussed. I was starting to believe that it was real.

And then, just as suddenly, came word that it was off. Maybe later, I was told.

The summer of 2015 was a momentous time for the Forward. During heated national debate over the Iran nuclear deal, my colleague Larry Cohler-Esses became the first member of the Jewish media to visit Iran since the 1979 revolution. As the editor of his stories, I recognized their unique importance and made sure the White House did, too. By mid-August I began receiving cryptic emails asking about my availability to come to Washington.

Then one Wednesday evening, I paid a call and turned off my phone, only to discover afterward a flurry of messages. “Can you be here Friday morning?”

Mindful of the prior disappointment, I waited until Thursday afternoon to book a train ticket and a hotel room near the White House.

I was told that I would have only 15 minutes, a terrifyingly short time with a man known for elongated, professorial answers. I scripted every word of my questions. I agonized over what to wear. (A suit, in the end, was perfect.) Unusually for me, I arrived early.

I’m often asked what surprised me the most about the experience, and it was this: Obama’s graciousness. He came out of the Oval Office to greet me. Offered me something to drink. Tried to put me at ease. Nodded appreciatively over the copies of Larry’s stories that I gave him. He sat not behind the Resolute desk, but in a winged chair next to mine.

My interview lasted more than 45 minutes. The White House staff could not have been more accommodating. My questions were not vetted in advance. A transcript was quickly made available, as were official photographs, and my story was published the following Monday morning.

Later on, we learned that no sitting president had ever met with a member of the Jewish media in the Oval Office. Obama didn’t do this because I nagged his office for nine months. He did it because he felt it essential to speak to American Jews through the Forward — a vivid illustration of this news organization’s authority and respect. I’d like to think Abraham Cahan would have been proud.

Jane Eisner is a writer-at-large for the Forward and the Koeppel Journalism Fellow at Wesleyan University.
Jay Michaelson
Forward Columnist 2003–2018

How I Lost

I wrote 362 articles for the Forward from 2003 to 2018, but the one that stands out is an essay from 10 years ago, titled “How I’m Losing My Love for Israel.” I think of it as a canary in the America-Israel coalmine. Before J Street, before Peter Beinart, it described, in mournful, first-person terms, the alienation between American Jews and the increasingly right-wing-dominated Israel. But it wasn’t an analytical piece; it was personal, about the loss of love, and maybe of a kind of innocence.

What was most prescient about the piece, though, was the reaction to it. From the tenor of the outrage, you’d think I’d joined Hamas and denied the Holocaust. What I thought was a nuanced, ambivalent and personal essay was interpreted as, variously, an anti-Israel polemic, a privileged squeal of cowardice and a rejection of Zionism itself.

I loved the attention, of course; the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about. But what I didn’t know at the time was that the tenor of that response would soon come to be the dominant tone of the institutional Jewish community.

A bit like the Trump phenomenon, it started out on the fringe — a few tea party nuts, another hysterical email from the Zionist Organization of America. Gradually, however, a kind of fact-free insanity moved to, and took over, the mainstream. For example, it is now publicly blacklist “disloyal” students and faculty at universities. Anti-Zionism is routinely equated with anti-Semitism. And bans on any recipient of Jewish federation money from ever featuring, including on a panel, or otherwise contacting anyone who has ever considered saying anything nice about BDS — once considered shocking transgressions of Jewish inclusion and Jewish values — are now in place across the country.

This drift has many causes and variations, but it is also inevitable. Progressive Jews spread their philanthropic giving over a wide variety of Jewish and non-Jewish causes. Those Jews who focus primarily on the Jewish community — in America and Israel — tend, almost by definition, to be more particularistic and more tribal. So while the majority of American Jews remain quite liberal, their donor-driven institutional community, political lobbies and nation-state have all drifted away from them into nationalistic territories that few progressives would ever wish to inhabit.

Progressive Jews, as I wrote a few years ago, are in our ‘Yavneh’ moment: Like the talmudic sages of two millennia ago, we are leaving the institutional community’s Jerusalem and setting up our own parallel worlds, dynamic and intersectional and spiritual and vital, everywhere. It’s actually a wonderful time to be an American Jew, as long as you don’t pay attention to the Jewish mainstream. Of course, we don’t yet know which Yavnahs will survive — but then, the overbuilt and overblown institutional Jerusalem is not sustainable, either.

I loved my time at the Forward. I am grateful to its readers, supporters and staff, many of whom are my friends. I look back fondly on my memories of it, and on the Jewish community it once epitomized.

Jay Michaelson is the author of ‘God Vs. Gay’ and ‘Evolving Dharma.’
I was onstage in Toronto, interviewing Howard Jacobson, when the airline canceled all flights to New York. By the time we left the stage, at noon, Jacobson’s wife had postponed all his Manhattan events and booked the two of them a flight back to London. It was the Sunday before Halloween 2012, and my plans to stay in Canada for 25 hours only were looking bleak.
After the dire warnings and damp of Hurricane Irene the year before, Manhattanites were about the threat of Hurricane Sandy. It might flood some New Jersey basements, we thought, but closing the airspace around the city and stopping buses and trains seemed to be overly dramatic.

It wasn’t.

Increasingly violent as it raced up the Eastern seaboard, Sandy became the largest Atlantic hurricane on record, and the second most destructive in terms of dollars. More crucially, the deaths of at least 230 people in eight countries were attributed to the storm. Fortunately, none of those people was associated with our organization. In fact, though there was damage to property, the extended Forward family suffered no personal injury.

Lower Manhattan was hit by howling winds, rising tides and a torrential downpour on the Monday night. Cars outside the Forward office were covered with water to the tips of their windshield wipers. Though the eighth floor of 125 Maiden Lane was undampened, the entire lobby was flooded, as was, more significantly, the basement. Housed under the building, the electrical systems, climate control and communications network were destroyed by Sandy.

With our building hors de combat, the staff were all working remotely. The website didn’t miss a beat, as remote servers had kicked in and staff, as well as the effective precautions by our IT consultants at MacHelp, had taken home any equipment they thought they’d need. We thought we’d be back in the office by Tuesday or Wednesday. In the end we were out of the office for over three months.

In the immediate aftermath, some of us were more remote than others. The conference organizers in Toronto kindly extended my hotel stay: It took five nights before I could get on a plane to New York. I took both personal and professional precautions: I bought underwear and travel wash from a nearby store; I borrowed a computer from my dear friend, the University of Toronto professor Walid Saleh. And, thus armed with iPad, iPhone and Walid’s second-best laptop, I set about running the website and putting out a print edition from our northern neighbor.

We knew that our dedicated print readership would forgive us a missed edition. The Daily News plant where the paper was printed was washed out, our office was washed out, the images of devastation were all across the television and internet. Josh Nathan-Kazis, Nate Lavey and other intrepid reporters ventured out to report on the damage to Jewish sites, and at Forward.com you could read about it. But, in the aftermath of Sandy, we wanted to give our print readers good news.

Our print deadline was Wednesday afternoon. Could we possibly put out this issue, or should we concentrate early on the issue we had to publish next week? Next week’s issue was the biggest of the year, containing the annual philanthropy “Giving” section as well as the Forward 50 list of American Jews who had contributed most in the past year to the American conversation.

MacHelp and Kurt Hoffman unfurled all the saved documents from the current paper in production. Kurt booted up his home office. Via text messages, emails, FaceTime and group Skype, Jane Eisner, the editor-in-chief, and I (at that time, the managing editor) conferred with the editors and the production team. One by one they replied, “Yes, we can.” Yes, we can produce a print edition, indeed yes, we must; we are obligated to tell the story of Sandy to our print readers.

And so, pushing back the deadline a couple of hours in consultation with our printers, we set to it. Me from my tiny hotel room in Canada, editors from their living rooms scattered across the boroughs of New York, writers and staff from around the tri-state area.

For 36 hours we pushed our local Wi-Fi bandwiths to the max, enlisted colleagues to help, and ignored loved ones as we filled up and enlarged our Dropbox to allow us to share all files conveniently. Gradually, page by page, the files were written, designed and checked. Finally, at a little before 9 p.m. on Wednesday — mainly through the banal virtues of hard work, constant communication and close attention to detail — we put out a paper of which we were proud.

Our publisher, Sam Norich, visited the offices at the end of the week of Sandy. He wrote a letter to our readers, explaining our situation, and posted a photograph of himself on our website holding a copy of that week’s newspaper. It was a triumph in the face of adversity and, tangentially, raised more money for the Forward than any other single article had hitherto raised.

The next week wasn’t much easier, putting out a paper twice the size from our respective home offices — as we referred to our laptops on kitchen tables. The following three months of exile, accommodating ourselves to a large single room kindly loaned to us by Bloomberg, were also an exercise in the strange expectations of management and the tricky management of expectations.

But once we’d put out that first paper, we knew that we could do it. As a team, as the Forward, we were uncowed by climate change or acts of God. The newspaper would go on.
I came aboard the Forward 22 years ago. I scarcely thought I’d last a week, let alone two decades. The 33rd Street office was yellowed and filled with archaic office equipment that had been dragged uptown from the old Forward building on the Lower East Side, where it had acquired a patina of gritty newsroominess. The computers were feeble, the network was a stack of battered floppy disks that got passed around. And the type galleys were output on a temperamental contraption that had to be fed photo chemicals from enormous bottles.

But the people were affable and smart. The editor at the time, Seth Lipsky, was a conservative gadfly to the chagrin of those sympathetic to the Forward’s socialist roots. But the staff was all over the place politically, and somehow it worked. Lipsky ran around his newsroom as if he were a character in a ’30s movie, barking at reporters to get more scoops. He barked at me to do more drawings, and I obliged, eventually becoming a fairly competent illustrator. I was improbably — but helpfully — admitted to the Typographer’s Union. I stuck around.

Here are a couple of stories from my time at the Forward, the first one illustrated:

**ELENA**

*Awhile back,* there was a woman named Elena who worked for the Yiddish edition. You couldn’t miss her bright red lipstick and jet black curly hair that had a touch of the New Wave about it. She was often on the phone, holding forth in Yiddish and Russian with great *esprit.*

One morning, I ran into her in the lobby of the Workmen’s Circle building, where the Forward had its offices. The lobby was decorated with a bronze relief sculpture of the Warsaw ghetto, dramatic, profound and vaguely dated looking. Elena arrived behind me, stumping along on a crutch at a quick clip, her leg in a splint. I asked her what had happened.

“I broke my leg,” she explained.
I held the elevator for her and she got on.

"How did you break your leg?" I asked.

"I was dancing."

"Oh, that's terrible!" I said. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm not sorry at all," she said defiantly. "You know why? Because I was dancing. And that's the most important thing."

She smiled broadly, her mascaraed eyes twinkling, and she hopped away on her crutch.

Not long after, maybe weeks, Elena met a sudden and tragic end, run over by a bus on Queens Boulevard. It was shocking and sad.

Chana, the Forward's archivist, was charged with cleaning out Elena's desk. She found a box with all the red lipsticks.

Dance while you can.

THE CIRCUS

On September 11, 2001, I'd watched the towers fall on TV at my boyfriend's house in Long Island City. Civilization was ending, so naturally the subways weren't running. But it was the day before the Forward's deadline, so I trudged over the Queensboro Bridge amid the dazed crowds, as plumes of smoke rose in the distance from the World Trade Center site.

In the weeks to come, many times a day, the sounds of emergency vehicles would leak into the windows of the Forward office from every direction. Sometimes false alarms, bomb threats. No one knew why. But the city seemed alive with noisy secrets. There was an anthrax scare, and our office assistant opened mail wearing a surgical mask and rubber gloves.

That chaos had subsided when, late one night, I was working at the Forward's 33rd Street office and I heard not police cars, but the roar of hundreds of voices. I set out on foot to explore.

On 34th Street, crowds of people had gathered to watch the march of the elephants. They had traversed the Lincoln Tunnel by foot, and were continuing towards the circus at Madison Square Garden. There was a woman in a glittering outfit riding on an elephant, smiling.

I returned to the office and continued working. The next day was a deadline. And the next week was a deadline. My adult life at the Forward was marked by the weekly surge and frenzy of print issues going to print. I've been through at least 1,000 deadlines at the Forward, and this issue will be my last one.

No elephants this time.

Kurt Hoffman is the outgoing art director of the Forward. His website is kurthoffman.net.
Dear reader, this is your newspaper speaking. Remember me? I was born nearly 122 years ago, on Duane Street in a little loft before lofts were fun things and before there was even TriBeCa or SoHo. I was born in Vilna in Poland, in St. Petersburg on Hester Street, on Krochmalna, on Nordau and Dizingoff, and in New York City on East Broadway. And then again in Milwaukee; Newark, New Jersey; Detroit; Los Angeles; Chicago; Philadelphia, and Boston. On E. 33rd in midtown, and now even in the heart of the capitalist Financial District, on Maiden Lane. I’m a rootless cosmopolitan New Yorker.

I offered you a true version of the news, first only in Yiddish then also in English and once, for a while, even in Russian. Among others, I brought you the writing of Gorky and Sholem Asch and Kadya Molodowsky and Emma Goldman; Celia Dropkin, Victor Hugo and Trotsky; Du Maupassant and Ben-Gurion, FDR, and I.B. Singer and Chaim Weizmann and more — all in Yiddish. I was for the people, but there is always only one editor in chief, let’s be clear about that.

I once cost a penny and ran two full pages, including an editorial column and international news. There was no art at first, but there were ads, including for psychic readings and false teeth and socialist schools, and the local downtown Russian and German newspapers, and ointments and creams for hair and for faces. I gave you Yiddish classifieds so that you could buy and sell everything from chickens to cows to acreage in the Catskills, and candy stores and delicatessens in good locations so that you could make a living.

I celebrated July Fourth and Thanksgiving and Labor Day for you so that you could learn how, and I went on strike with you so that you could learn how, and I showed you what a voting booth looked like, how to mark a ballot and how to work the lever so that your vote would count.

To raise money, we sold, of course, subscriptions and Yiddish record albums, Yiddish books, silverware sets and reading lamps, and even sewing patterns for dresses.

I posted photos of your loved ones lost in pogroms and revolutions and wars, and the names of those who arrived and got detained on Ellis Island, and those who disappeared and abandoned you because it was hard or because they were having an affair or maybe had actually married several people at once. I was, as they say in American English, your home away from home.

And I kept some dark secrets, like whether a rough trade in Judaica antiques was being run out of our basement on East Broadway, how to handle the goodfellas of the newspaper distribution business, whether there are bodies actually buried in that same basement, and why the newsboys broke into our offices and smashed up things that day in 1907.

I ran headlines in red ink sometimes, like when the State of Israel was declared. I celebrated our anniversary every April and took photographs of the office staff up on the rooftop of our building on East Broadway. On our 35th anniversary the composing room staff members alone took up half the rooftop, as did the mailing staff and, of course, the writers in editorial.

There was an Ab Cahan, a Rogoff, a Fogelman, a Crystal, a Weber, a Strigler, a Sandler, a Schaechter, a Lipsky, a Goldberg and an Eisner. There was a Vladeck and a Kahn, a Held and an Ostroff, a Norich, a Swanson, a Friedman, and a Feddersen. There was Yaska Frankel, the stenographer who could read the most difficult handwriting, and proofreaders and typesetters, pressmen advertising a reference library and a mailing department, and a main editorial office administrator on the ninth floor that offered advice and compassion to the frequently visiting public and the out-of-town writers, and opened the mail and had an overseas telephone line that reached out to the world and back in again.

There were the artists: There was Zagat and Peter Neagoe and Lola and Paul Markison and Jeanne Pokorny and Kurt Hoffman and Budiyaniski, Anya Ulinich and Yehuda Blum. There was a Teri and a Fern and a Joyce.

There were gallons of ink and rolls of newsprint paper, and lines of text and column inches and headlines and bylines and scissors and knives, and glue to actually cut and paste, and the stench of kerosene in the composing room, where the typesetters’ lunchboxes hung on the coat racks, their contents still warm and smelling like home.

There was Martha, Estelle, Hymie and Fani. There was Breslow and Gutkin and Sylvia and Don and Marina. Dear writer, dear reader, dear staff, there is you. May these souls and smells and vibes be bound up in the bonds of the living.

May these memories be blessings. May the readership thrive.

Chana Pollack is the Forward’s archivist.
A surviving fragment of a portrait of Forward staffers from the early 20th century.