

THEME

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Welcome to LBI Presents—a new podcast from the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. I'm the director of Open Learning at American Jewish University, and I've spent my career writing about Jewish history. On this series, we dive into LBI's archive, with key experts as our guides, to learn about the lives of German Jews throughout history. Beyond the stories you already know. Today, LBI presents...ghosts of your family past.

THEME OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): A lot of the guests I talk to on this show are professional academics or historians. But all kinds of people use LBI's archive. Like people who just want to learn about their own family. And family research can take some surprising turns, landing LBI at the center of real historical drama.

THEME

DANNY SHOT: And it dawned on me like, hey, this is the same person who's my mother's cousin! And then I just felt like almost crying. But I don't even know if it's like crying from joy or relief or some flood of emotion came down.

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: It was just so amazing. Like a light bulb. When you see the letters and you just understand from the letters, all of a sudden, what the story is.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): For many different reasons, gaps in our family histories are quite common. But sometimes, miraculously, and often serendipitously, they get filled in. On this episode, we bring you two stories of people who unexpectedly unearthed their personal histories with the help of LBI and its archive. Later on, you'll hear from Elliot Aronstam, who found clues to his story hiding in a box full of letters. But first, I talk to Danny Shot, who stumbled upon his relative's daring history at an LBI exhibition.

THEME OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Hi, Danny.

DANNY SHOT: Hello, Mark.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Danny, I hear that you were visiting an LBI exhibition and that you accidentally found out about a relative of yours while you were there. Can you tell us about that day?

DANNY SHOT: Certainly. It was a day in the summer, I believe it was late July. And I went to...*[fades out]*

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Danny Shot, a long time New Jersey resident, was born in the Bronx to German Jewish refugees. And on that day in July 2023, Danny had some time to kill. So he made his way to Manhattan—to the Centre for Jewish History, where he went to see an exhibition about a medieval Jewish scholar.

SFX: FOOTSTEPS IN A LARGE ROOM

DANNY SHOT: And I wandered around. You know, I looked at the manuscripts and the pictures and all that stuff, and after about 45 minutes I was like, okay. What else does this building have?

MUSIC

SFX: ELEVATOR

DANNY SHOT: And I wandered upstairs to the second floor and there was an exhibit called “Exile”...*[fades out]*

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): To give you some context to Danny’s story, last year, LBI New York curated the exhibition *Unpacking Exile*, about Jewish lives under the shadow of fascism. The exhibition included pictures, letters, reports, personal diaries—artifacts from LBI’s archive used to help make the *Exile* podcast. As Danny looked around, he stopped in front of a large black and white photograph of a smiling woman named Florence Mendheim.

DANNY SHOT: And I looked and I was like, oh, how interesting. This woman has the same name as my mother's maiden name. Mendheim. So I read a little bit about it. Florence Mendheim was a librarian in New York. And I was like, oh, what a coincidence! My mother's cousin, Florie, was also a librarian in New York. Imagine that. So I kept reading about it, and then it was, she was a spy. She spied on Nazi activity in New York City...*[fades out]*

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): In case you haven't heard that episode of Exile, it's a pretty remarkable story. Like Danny said, Florence Mendheim was a New York librarian. She had family in Germany and was hearing firsthand about the rise of fascism. She also saw how Nazism was growing in her own city. So she decided to do something about it. She passed herself off as a Nazi sympathizer. She attended meetings and volunteered at their headquarters—all while collecting information on them for the American Jewish Congress.

DANNY SHOT: And it dawned on me like, hey, this is the same person who's my mother's cousin! So I was like, wow, imagine that. So I went down to the front desk and I told the people, you know, I said, I think a person who's on exhibit is my cousin. And they were like, oh, interesting. So I wasn't totally satisfied with that. I was like, oh. So I went upstairs and two people were talking, a man and a woman. And I just stood by them awkwardly. And then finally the man, who I later found out is Michael Simonson, said, "Can I help you?"

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Archivist Michael Simonson has handled LBI's archive for over 2 decades.

MUSIC

DANNY SHOT: And I told him, I think that woman is my cousin, my mother's cousin, Florie. And he said, "We've been looking for living descendants of her for years, for years!" And I was like, here I am!

MUSIC OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So, Danny, to be clear, this was your mother's first cousin.

DANNY SHOT: Correct. So, do you want to know the relationship? It's...

MARK OPPENHEIMER: It's first cousin once removed. Her child would be your second cousin, but she's your first cousin once removed. My mother drilled this stuff into me. I know this stuff really well.

DANNY SHOT: Okay. Thank you! I'm always confused by this stuff.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: You're welcome! So you're at the LBI Exile exhibit. You see this picture and you realize this is your relative. This is your mom's cousin. What was that like for you? What was going through your mind then?

DANNY SHOT: It was like, just, oh my God. I don't even know that there's a word for the emotion that I felt. And so that's why I ran downstairs to tell someone at the front desk. And that's why I hovered over the two people who were upstairs. And then when Michael said they had been looking for a living relative, I just felt like almost crying. But I don't even know if it's like crying from joy or relief or some flood of emotion came down.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: It turns out that Florie, Florence, had this amazing past. I take it you knew nothing about that?

DANNY SHOT: Absolutely not.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Do you think your mother knew any of that?

DANNY SHOT: I don't think so.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So you had heard a lot about her when you were growing up, a little about her? I mean, you knew that your mother had a first cousin who was a librarian. But how much did you know about this woman?

DANNY SHOT: Well, I know Florie, Florence, lived with her two brothers, Arthur and Jessie. And my mom sort of took a dim view of the three of them for various reasons. My mom just thought Florie was extremely eccentric.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Meaning what? As far as you could tell.

DANNY SHOT: Well, Florie and Arthur and Jessie were very religious. They kept kosher and everything, and I think my mother had a family history with them that was not pleasant at all.

MUSIC

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Danny recalls one of the stories that his mom, Doris Mendheim, shared about Florence. It was after Doris emigrated to the U.S. from Nazi Germany with her brother in 1939. Doris was 19 and her brother was 15. After some time in Chicago, Doris' brother enlisted in the army while Doris made her way to New York.

DANNY SHOT: Her first place in New York was staying with Florence, Arthur, and Jessie. And the way my mom tells it is after a day, she brought home, like, a turkey and cheese or a roast beef and cheese sandwich, which of course was unkosher. And they just had a fit and they threw her out and she was left looking for housing, a place to live in New York after one day of staying with them. So you see my mom's ambivalence towards... Ambivalence is a nice word. Towards that part of the family.

MUSIC OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Back at LBI, at the Exile exhibition, Danny starts to learn more about that part of the family, about his first cousin once removed. And, even more surprising, about other members of his family too.

DANNY SHOT: It was interesting, bizarre, uncanny, and fascinating for a number of reasons. First of all, Michael Simonson opened up the archive to me. And so I got to see letters that my mother wrote to Florence and that my grandmother had written to Florence, which was fascinating to me because my grandparents were always an abstraction. Like I understood, that they were people. I've seen pictures of them. My mother talked about them, you know, all the time. But actually seeing a document written by my grandmother, in English, no less, really gave me a concrete sense like, oh, yeah, they're real. They're really real. The other thing is, I see the letter from my grandmother begging them for an

affidavit, you know. Of course, what I see in the archives is only one way. I can't see the letter that Florence wrote back or anything.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: And what year was that?

DANNY SHOT: I believe it was either 1938 or 39. See, they never made it to the United States, obviously.

MUSIC

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Danny also says that learning more about his past, about Florence's covert adventures, changed how he saw his family.

DANNY SHOT: It also was fascinating because of family dynamics. My sister Carol married a man, Leo. And his side of the family were Eastern European Jews, and their side of the family was filled with stories. How so-and-so was in the partisans and fought against the Nazis, you know, and rescued his wife on her way being deported. All these stories of heroism. And my side of the family, my mother's side, didn't have these stories. So seeing someone heroic in my family just changed the way I view the family history. And it just gave me a new way of seeing the family, not as victims per se, but actually actively doing something to combat Nazism.

MUSIC OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): There's a lovely poetry to the end of this story. A reunion of sorts. In 1996, Danny's mom died. He kept some of her things in a box in his basement, not knowing what to do with them but not able to part with them. Until now.

DANNY SHOT: One thing that came from this is I donated my mother's papers and photos and her like identity card, all that stuff, to Leo Baeck Institute. And then again I felt the same emotion because finding a home for like my mother's legacy. They will be archived and future generations, I mean, if there's any interest, can see my mother's life there alongside Florence Mendheim's and other people's. And it's just a sense of accomplishment, I think, when I donated my mother's papers.

THEME

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: My name is Elliott Aronstam. I live in New York City. I am retired. And I don't know, what else would you like to know about me?

MARK OPPENHEIMER: What are you retired from?

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: I was an accountant for Broadway shows.

MUSIC

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Like Danny, Elliott Aronstam also has a story about how an encounter with LBI New York helped him excavate his family's past. Elliott's story starts about 10 years ago, when his dad was moving into an independent living home after Elliott's mom died that same year. She was an exile from Nazi Germany who came to the US in 1938. So Elliott finds himself in that dreadful position that many children of elderly parents eventually face: cleaning out their parents' house.

SFX: MOVING BOXES

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: And if you can picture an old closet, like in your bedroom, and then on top of the shelf were boxes. And the last box in the far back of the closet that I pushed forward was a cardboard box, a box that you would buy in Staples. A big, you know, tan cardboard box. And the box just disintegrated in my hands. And what fell out of the box and onto the floor were about, I don't know, I would say maybe 500 letters?

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So you're standing there, a flood of letters at your feet. What did these letters look like?

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: If you can think of the Declaration of Independence, that is what the letters look like. If you touch them, they disintegrate in your hands. And of course, they're all written in German. The only thing that I could read on the letters is on the very top of each letter is just the year. And underneath them is the month in German, which I could not even read that, but I can read 1938 or '39. The letters span between July of '38 and December of 1941.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Elliott is intrigued, and so he brings these letters home. And he and his wife, Karen, painstakingly put each and every one into plastic sleeves to preserve them.

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: Putting two and two together, I realized they were letters that came from my mom's parents. But that's all I knew. And I thought of how I can try and get some of these letters translated so I can read what my grandparents were writing to my mom.

MUSIC

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Elliott goes to different Synagogues. He goes to the language departments of various colleges. But, no luck.

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: Nobody could translate them. All I kept hearing was, they were a type of German script called Sütterlin. S-U-T-T-E-R-L-I-N.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Sütterlin is a type of script that was taught in German schools in the early 20th century. But in 1941, Hitler started discouraging the use of Sütterlin and other old scripts, probably because they made communication with all of his new territories difficult. And today, these types of scripts are rarely used, and almost nobody can read them. Despite these complications, the letters stay at the back of Elliott's mind. One day, he's walking around Manhattan and stumbles upon LBI, just a few blocks from his home. He gathers that LBI is dedicated to the preservation of German Jewish history. Hmm, he thinks, maybe they can help? So Elliott walks in. And he explains his situation. LBI tells him to drop off a few of the letters. They might have someone who can translate them. And so Elliott does. Hoping he can finally unlock his mom's past. His past. One of the few things he knows about his mom's story is that she came to the U.S. when she was 12 years old. Alone.

MUSIC OUT

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: What happened was, there was a couple in Fort Worth, Texas, that were in synagogue, and the rabbi asked if there was anybody who would like to sponsor Jewish children in Germany. And this couple stood up and said, we would like to sponsor a

child. And that child turned out to be my mom. And in June of 1938, my mom came to New York through Ellis Island, taking a train through St. Louis to Fort Worth, Texas, where she really only knew one sentence. Her sentence was, "How do you do? My name is Erika." That's the only words that she knew in English.

MUSIC

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Elliott says that his mom, Erika, was lucky. She said her new Texas family welcomed her into their home. But what she didn't talk a lot about was her family back in Germany. Even though, well into the 1950s, she held out hope that they were still alive. And maybe even that they had somehow made their way to New York.

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: Some of my earliest stories that I remember is my father, and I am maybe six or seven years old. I remember my father going downstairs from our apartment house and just walking around the area, the two block area, when I was seven or eight years old, so we're talking about '57 or '58. In Brooklyn. And why is because my mother is saying to my father, I know that they're here. I know that they're out there. We have to go find them.

MUSIC

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): A few weeks after Elliott drops off some of the letters at LBI, he gets a call from Michael Simonson, the archivist. And Michael tells him, bingo! They do know someone who can translate the letters. And based on what they've translated so far, the letters are indeed from Elliott's grandparents to his mother. Elliott was thrilled. He poured through the translated letters, eager to learn whatever he could.

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: Well, here, I'll pick up. This is just like a translation, you know, of a letter. And it's dated November 27th, 1938. "My dear Erika, Sincere thanks, my dear child, for your dear letter today with four especially sweet little photos. Such pictures give us happy hours and the mornings are always the same. Dear God, let us do what we think is correct. You, dear child, that are, thank God, in such good custody..."

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Elliott says the letters confirmed the impression he had had since childhood about his mother's German family. That his mother was loved.

MUSIC OUT

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: My grandparents must've wrote to my mom three, four times a week. I mean, we're talking about 5, 600 letters over three years. With a little scribble on the bottom from her six-year-old, my mom's sister Helga, writing, you know, kisses from your younger sister. And the letters are about just everyday life in Germany. Michael showed me marks on the letters. So we can see that they were definitely opened by the Germans before they sent them towards Fort Worth. So you really can't, in the letters, really talk too terribly about what's going on there, because I am sure they would not have gotten out of Germany to America. But from the letters, they start out mundane, like, when we come, should we bring our furniture? Or do you think we should look near at a two bedroom apartment? Or do we need a three bedroom apartment? And I'll just quickly fast forward it to 1941 where the letters definitely. You feel the different tone of, Erika, you have to get us out. And not in that way of saying it, but saying it like that. And what deeply affects me is two things. One is, there's this 12, 13-year-old girl learning English in Texas, writing back to her parents in German, to Germany. And on the other hand, my grandparents having no one else to turn to except asking their 13-year-old daughter for help.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: What did it feel like to get to read some of these translated letters?

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: If you're Jewish and you have Passover and you have Thanksgiving, so you don't have to be more than ten years old to realize that everybody, all your aunts and uncles and your cousins, they're all on my dad's side, which is great! But it doesn't take rocket science to know there is only one half of a family. There is nothing there on my mom's side. So you live with it. But it was just so amazing, like a light bulb, when you see the letters and you just understand from the letters, all of a sudden what the story is.

MUSIC

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): That story goes even further than the letters, thanks to a few calls Michael Simonson makes to some contacts he has in the town where Elliott's mom grew up: Längenfeld, Germany.

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: And I found out unbelievable stuff that I never knew anything about, about my mom's side. What happened to my grandparents and my aunt and so forth...*[fades out]*

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Elliott went from not knowing much at all about his mother's family, to getting a landslide of information about his grandmother and, get this, about his grandmother's 10 brothers and sisters.

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: I didn't even know anything. My mom really never talked about her mother's siblings, the 11 siblings, although my mom knew many of them, because in the letters that her parents are writing her, they're writing about, we have seen Aunt Bertha and Uncle Edwin or Uncle Max and I did not know who any of those people were until...*[fades out]*

MUSIC OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Elliott also found out exactly what happened to his grandparents and his aunt, Helga.

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: So on December 11th, my grandparents and the other people, Jews in Längenfeld, and my Aunt Helga, were put on a transport in December 11th of 1941 and sent to Riga. We lose contact with my grandfather Bernard that day. I have a letter that's dated December 9, '41. And so those are the things that set you back for a second and go, oh, shit. That could be the last thing that my-grandfather ever wrote.

MUSIC

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: My grandma is named Emma. And Emma and Helga make it in Riga through, ready? The second half of '41. All of '42. All of '43. 'Til August of '44. D-Day is happening in England. And the Germans know they're losing the war. And why this day is so incredible to me is because August 9th of 1944, Helga is 13. That's her birthday. And on her birthday is the day that Helga and Emma are sent from Riga to Stutthof, which is a killing camp.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): After that, the historical record loses track of Elliot's Aunt Helga. His grandmother, Emma, was killed on January 5, 1945. Less than six months later, the camp was liberated by the Soviets.

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: So I missed my grandmother and aunt by months.

MUSIC OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Elliott says that when he was growing up, not knowing much about his mom's side of the family was like hearing half of a conversation. And now he gets to hear the other half. Or at least some of it. And so do the next generations of his family. Like Danny Shot with his mother's documents, Elliott has also donated letters to LBI, where they are still being translated. It's an ongoing project. But Elliott didn't donate all of the letters.

ELLIOT ARONSTAM: I wanted to keep 40 or 50 of the letters with the translation behind them so I could give them to my daughter, Danielle has some. And my brother's two children have some. So they have the actual letter from my grandparents and the translation of it. Just so they have a feel about who their great grandmother was. And so I like that.

THEME

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): That was Elliott Aronstam and we also heard from Danny Shot. Two encounters with LBI New York, and LBI's archive, that changed how they saw their families and led to a fuller understanding of their histories. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. And this is LBI Presents. 'Til next time.

PRODUCER: For more information and to visit LBI's digitized archive, go to lbi.org.

On the next episode of LBI Presents...Eva Hesse came to America on a Kindertransport when she was just two years old. She went on to become an icon of the 1960s contemporary art scene in New York.

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: She had a very kind of utopian view of art. That somehow art could be...not a message, but an expression of your feelings at the moment.

PRODUCER: Life doesn't last, art doesn't last. Coming up on LBI Presents.

LBI Presents is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions. It's hosted by Mark Oppenheimer. Our Executive Producers are Laura Regehr, Stuart Coxe, and Bernie Blum. Our Senior Producer is Debbie Pacheco. Our Associate Producer is Emily Morantz. Our associate sound editor is Cameron McIver. Sound design and audio mix by Philip Wilson.