

Jeff Gottesfeld 0:00

[COLD OPEN] I think listeners ought to think carefully about Beate's identity, because it's complicated. Here's a young woman, Ukrainian father, Austrian mother, Jewish, spends her formative years in Japan. She's Japanese. That's her background. Who's an #ownvoices story to tell this story? Who would it be? Who would it be?

Heidi Rabinowitz 0:28

[MUSIC, INTRO:] This is The Book of Life, a show about Jewish kidlit, mostly. I'm Heidi Rabinowitz. No Steps Behind is a picture book biography about Beate Sirota Gordon, a Jewish European woman who helped enshrine women's rights in the Constitution of Japan. Author Jeff Gottesfeld joined me to share this surprising story with us.

Jeff Gottesfeld, welcome to The Book of Life.

Jeff Gottesfeld 1:07

I'm happy to be here. Thanks for having me.

Heidi Rabinowitz 1:10

So before we talk about your book, let's get to know you a little bit. I took a look at your website and in your "about me" section, you posed and answered this intriguing question. You asked, "how long would it take to pack all my belongings and move to a new residence?" And your answer was "four hours, no lie, I have a very light footprint on the world." So talk more about that. Why did that question even occur to you and why do you have such a light footprint?

Jeff Gottesfeld 1:38

I love that question. No one has ever asked me it before. So now I'm gonna have to think about it. There have been times in my life when I've had a lot of stuff. And there have been times in my life when I've had little stuff. And this is one of those times where I have little stuff and it is actually freeing. I get to think, not about my stuff, but about what I'm working on, or about things I think are more important. I'm not tied down by stuff and -- all right, I'll admit I feel a little virtuous having less stuff, because more stuff is really not great for the planet.

Heidi Rabinowitz 2:20

Oh, okay, good. So, tell us about No Steps Behind. First of all, what does the title mean?

Jeff Gottesfeld 2:27

The title comes from a Japanese proverb, which was prevalent in Japan for centuries prior to World War II, which was "women walk three steps behind." Beate Sirota Gordon was born in Austria in 1923. Her father was a fantastic famous concert pianist, Ukrainian, who had come to Austria after the pogroms in 1905, married an Austrian woman. Beate was born. Leo Sirota in 1929 had an opportunity to go to Japan to teach and play music at a conservatory there. He moved his entire family there, including Beate, who was five years old. And going to Tokyo from Vienna, Austria, 1929, it wasn't get on a plane. It was Trans Siberian railroad. It took five weeks for them to get there. Beate spoke German and Russian. She was great at languages and she learned absolutely impeccable Japanese. I've had Japanese speakers listen to her Japanese on YouTube. It's perfect. Absolutely idiomatic, and pronunciation is perfect. She started at the German school in Tokyo. With the rise of Hitler and the Nazis, she and her family had their citizenship stripped, and she shifted over to the American School toward the end of her high school education. She and her family were stateless once their citizenship was stripped. Whatever objection she had to the misogyny of Japan, she'd object and her parents are like, we're guests here, you can't talk about it. 1939 comes. Beate has graduated from her high school. She's 15 and a half, and she has a difficult problem. She can't go back to Europe to attend college because she'll be

arrested. She can't really go to school in Japan because Japanese universities were taking very, very few women. So her parents sent her to the place where they believe she would be safest: Mills College in Oakland, California, closest place to Japan where she would be safe and go to school. It's an all women's college. She goes to Mills. She's 15 and a half, younger than most other students up at Mills; it was a pretty progressive pro-female place. She did well at Mills. Everything was terrific. Her parents were supporting her. She woke up on December 7, 1941 and Pearl Harbor had happened. She's 17. She's completely cut off from her parents at that point. Telephone lines are severed to Japan. There's no mail, there's no communication. She has no idea what's going on with her folks, and she has to support herself. As a Japanese speaker, she had a terrific skill that the United States government could use. The War Department hired her to go across the bay to San Francisco while she was still a student at Mills and translate Japanese radio broadcasts, because the United States, in its infinite wisdom, had put all its Japanese speakers in internment camps, that there were literally less than 100 non-Japanese, Japanese Speakers in a country at that time,

Heidi Rabinowitz 6:02

Meaning people who could speak Japanese but who themselves were not of Japanese descent.

Jeff Gottesfeld 6:06

Exactly. And Beate was one of them. So she's not an American citizen. But she has this skill, and she translated Japanese radio broadcasts through the American attacks on Tokyo. She had no idea whether her parents were alive or dead. The war ends. Japan is still a closed military zone. Beate goes to Washington DC, talks her way into a job with the occupation as an economic specialist and translator. She gets sent to Tokyo on Christmas Day 1945. First order of business: find her parents. She found them. Actually her father had heard that she had arrived, he found her. The father and mother had been interned six hours outside of Tokyo before the firebombing of Tokyo, so the internment actually saved their life. But they were starving. They needed medical treatment. Beate got them to Tokyo. She's just 22 at this point. Okay, time for Beate to go to work. MacArthur's team hears about her linguistic and cultural competency. The United States was about to draft a post war constitution for Japan. And MacArthur's team puts her on the committee drafting this post war constitution. She was the only woman on the team and she was half the age of everybody else. She asked herself "What do I know of constitutions?" She realizes "not much," commandeers a Jeep, they drive all over postwar leveled Tokyo, looking for libraries that might hold copies of any constitution in any language, because she can mostly read them all. She brings them in. She remembers her experience growing up in misogynistic Japan. There'd certainly been a fledgling feminist movement in Japan in the early part of the century. And she's like, okay, here's my opportunity. There's no Japanese women in the room. The Americans didn't really care that much about it. MacArthur wanted women to vote, that's as far as he was thinking in that direction. And she drafts a long list of pro-female and pro-family clauses that she wants in the new constitution. Takes them into her commanding officer, Colonel Kades. He's like "Miss Sirota, we can't do this. You are giving women more rights than they have under the American Constitution." Beate says, "Colonel Kades, that's not very hard to do, because women are not in the American Constitution." She battled and managed to get two of her clauses approved: article 14 and article 24. It's not the end, because there's a negotiation with the Japanese about the constitution that the Americans would like. The Americans wanted the Japanese to think that the constitution was coming out of the Japanese. And the Japanese wanted that same thing.

Heidi Rabinowitz 9:06

So you're saying that the Americans were helping to craft a new constitution for the country of Japan. But both they and the Japanese government wanted the Japanese people not to realize that it was coming from the Americans?

Jeff Gottesfeld 9:21

Yes, I mean you know, it was a... it was a fraught political situation. V ery, very fraught. But there was a negotiation between pretty high ranking Japanese officials, including their home minister, and the American military team. Beate is at that negotiation, but she's not there as a negotiator, she's there as an interpreter. And they get to her clauses, and the Japanese are deeply unhappy with this: "doesn't fit our way of life, doesn't fit our culture, can't do it." The argument went back and forth until after midnight and Beate is translating all this. They have no idea she had anything to do with it. And they are big fans of her interpretations and translations, because they are culturally knowledgeable. So here she is, Russian, Austrian, Jewish, American, and had spent the bulk of her life in Japan to that time. Finally, at about two o'clock in the morning, Colonel Kades says to the Japanese, "You know, Miss Sirota here, the interpreter, she wrote these clauses, she has her heart set on them. Why don't we just pass them?" And miraculously the Japanese said, "Okay." And they did. Now you would think this would be a gigantic story. But it was a closed military secret. Beate came back to New York. The Constitution went into play. It was wildly popular and remains wildly popular in Japan. Women for the first time had equal rights to men. It was enshrined in the Japanese constitution in a way it's not enshrined in the American one. Beate got married, had a family, became a programmer with the Japan Society and then the Asia Society, was instrumental in fostering Japanese-American friendship in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. And the story remained a state secret. It finally broke, I think it was the late 1980s. Beate went back to Japan after the story leaked, was not really sure how should be received: she was a heroine. When she got off the plane, she's mobbed, there were concerts in her honor, a play written about her. She got an award from the Emperor, gave speeches everywhere, and went back to Japan often in the last years of her life. She died in 2012, December 30th. And I'd never heard of her. I read her obituary in the New York Times on January 2nd, 2013, that's how I heard about this incredible woman. By the time I got to the end of the obituary, I knew I wanted to write about it.

Heidi Rabinowitz 12:09

So you mentioned in the back matter, that a lot of the information about Beate is available in Japanese, and that there's much more research or history recorded about her in Japanese than there is in English. Do you speak Japanese?

Jeff Gottesfeld 12:25

I don't. I can handle French. I can handle Spanish. My Hebrew is from hunger, but it's not non existent. But I don't speak Japanese. So here I am. It's 2013. And I'm about to wade into the story: I did it very slowly and very carefully. I knew what I didn't know. I was helped in a number of ways. Beate had recorded a number of oral histories. There's a really good one through Columbia University, so I used that. I read her memoir and practically memorized it. I befriended her daughter, Nicole, who's my age; she gave me a lot of good information. There's a fair amount of writing about the American occupation. I think it's Richard Frank's book *Downfall* about the last six months or so of the war was really helpful to put a lot of this into context. Plus, I talked to a number of experts about the situation for women in Japan. And still, I moved very slowly. I mean, it was a slow, painstaking double checking, fact checking re-fact-checking process.

Heidi Rabinowitz 13:39

Give us some context for the situation of women in Japan before World War II. You say in the book that fathers could sell their daughters like fish in the market. Explain why a father would even do such a thing.

Jeff Gottesfeld 13:52

I'm not a Japanese speaker, and I haven't lived there. So to get into the head of another person at that time, it's a stretch for me. I'm just speculating here. I will say that everybody is influenced by cultural norms. I'm influenced by them, you're influenced by them, everyone around us. There weren't social science statistics at the time, so I have no idea how common a practice that was. What I do know is, it was legal. And it happened. What would cause that? Economic privation? To an extent it's misogyny. They weren't selling their sons. Sons

had rights, sons could choose who they were going to marry, sons could inherit. If it were both sons and daughters who were being sold, okay, maybe poverty. So poverty, sure, but it was girls.

Heidi Rabinowitz 14:56

So you talked a little bit about the Japanese proverbs about women. Can you elaborate on the meaning of the ones that you did include?

Jeff Gottesfeld 15:05

I will translate simply to English, although in the book, the proverbs are there in kanji and they are also transliterated. Proverb number one: the wisdom of women is at the end of the nose. Not in the brain, not in the heart, pushed by instinct, or able to be deflected one way or another. Bottom line, not much wisdom. Second proverb: in women's hearts dwell serpents.

Heidi Rabinowitz 15:36

Whoa.

Jeff Gottesfeld 15:36

Self explanatory. Another proverb: women are devilish. There's at least one book that amasses Japanese proverbs; there are pages of negative proverbs about women.

Heidi Rabinowitz 15:49

It's inspiring that Beate was able to secure these gains in women's rights. But it's also kind of disturbing the Japanese women weren't able to represent themselves in this fight. So I'm glad that in the back matter, you did give credit to Japanese feminists to make it kind of less of a white savior story. Can you tell us a little bit more about the history of Japanese feminism.

Jeff Gottesfeld 16:12

It's not an area where I am at all expert. What I do know is that through the late 19th century, and into the 20th, there was a fledgling feminist movement. Japanese women were able to gain access to university in limited numbers. And there were certainly families who were raising their children with quite an enlightened point of view. I mean, Beate's best friend was Akara Umehara, who was the daughter of a pretty famous painter. He had spent time in Europe and was really quite far ahead of even most Americans at that time when it came to equal rights.

Heidi Rabinowitz 16:57

As you mentioned, Beate herself was Jewish. How do you think that affected her life and her outlook? And how does this story reflect her Jewish identity or reflect Jewish values?

Jeff Gottesfeld 17:10

It's a great question, because she was fiercely non-observant. However, she married a Jewish guy. He was actually another Japanese interpreter, Joseph Gordon. Beate was a person who cared tremendously about justice and about fairness. You know, she met incredible Japanese women as she was growing up, and it was troubling for her to see when a man walked into a room, for women that she knew to look at the floor. So I think it is a combination of being raised in Europe, being Jewish, and then coming to America and studying at Mills. Those things taken together influenced her tremendously.

Heidi Rabinowitz 17:56

Tell us about the illustrations and about the illustrator.

Jeff Gottesfeld 18:00

Here's something really important to know. I can't draw a loop. I have trouble making a squiggly line. And I have trouble making a straight line. That's how bad, that's how bad I am as an illustrator. So I look at illustrating, it's like a dark art to me. Every illustrator is terrific, but this one is more terrific than most terrific. So Shiella Witanto did the illustrations; they are stunning in their vibrancy and in their colors and in their accuracy. Shiella, she caught Beate... I've seen a number of photographs of Beate, she had a gaze, she could see through you. And in every one of these illustrations, Beate's gaze is captivating, it's perfect. There's not an illustration I would change. My publisher Marissa Moss, met her I think at an event in San Francisco. Shiella was then maybe a student at the Art Institute. Shiella had come to the United States to study at the Art Institute six years ago. And then she got a Green Card; had been here for five years. She went to get the Green Card renewed, and the Trump administration did not renew it. She was given two weeks to return home to Indonesia. And that's where she is right now.

Heidi Rabinowitz 19:32

Wow.

Jeff Gottesfeld 19:34

Yes, I mean, she's Indonesian, and Muslim nominally, and just so talented. I mean, this is the kind of person we need here. I spoke last May at the opening of Beate's archive at Mills College, Nicole Gordon invited me to come, and Shiella should have been there. It's criminal, that she wasn't there to speak and to enjoy this. I'm furious about it. It's just wrong. Wrong. Wrong on every front.

Heidi Rabinowitz 20:06

Yeah, there's no no reason for her not to be here. Absolutely.

It's Tikkun Olam Time. What action would you like to invite listeners to take to help heal the world?

Jeff Gottesfeld 20:18

You know, Heidi, I was thinking about this and it was actually the topic of conversation at the Shabbat dinner table on Friday night. I want to talk not so much about substance and a little more about process. It came up at Shabbat dinner, the wonderful quote from Pirkei Avot from Rabbi Tarfon of fame from the Passover Seder for sitting around discussing the Passover Seder until sunrise comes and it's time to recite the morning Shema. Rabbi Tarfon said in Pirkei Avot, I think it's chapter two, that it's not incumbent upon us to finish the task, but neither may we shirk it, and the tikkun olam piece, the message I would bring and that Beate would bring is, you know, you don't have to do all of it. But you do have to do some of it and work towards the goal. And I think for each of us, if we're going to have a top 10 list of social justice issues, or things that we wanted to change, they would not be the same. However, each of us can do something. And if enough people do enough somethings, change will happen. And Beate, you know, her life is a testament to that fact. So yeah, just don't shirk the task, whatever the task would be.

Heidi Rabinowitz 21:42

Thank you for that. Because that particular piece of the Pirkei Avot, for me, is life saving. It's when... when I'm getting depressed at the state of the world, you know that, that gives me hope. So thank you for bringing that up. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that I haven't thought to ask you?

Jeff Gottesfeld 22:01

I think listeners ought to think carefully about Beate's identity, because it's complicated. And it's complicated for all of us. Here's a young woman, Ukrainian father, Austrian mother, Jewish, spends her formative years in Japan. She was Japanese. That's her background. So white savior story? this is a Jewish woman who if she'd

gone back to Europe, would have been killed. So her identity: really, really complicated. Who's an #OwnVoices story to tell this story? Who would it be? Who would it be? Which is why I finally said, you know what, I think I should do this. Because the story is too important not to tell. The world will be better if people know Beate's story, and if kids know Beate's story.

Heidi Rabinowitz 22:57

Do you want to talk about any forthcoming books you may have?

Jeff Gottesfeld 23:02

Coming in 2021, within, I think three months of each other: I have a book about the obliteration of identity coming, called 21 Steps. It is about the tomb guards at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. On Veterans Day 2021, November 11, it will be the 100th anniversary of the creation of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. That's an incredible story in and of itself. And the tomb guards are almost as incredible a story. There have only been 600 some odd of them since 1937. It is the hardest job to get to the army, other than being an astronaut. I've spoken with many of them. And it is a role where you obliterate your own identity in service of this national shrine. Matt Tavares is illustrating it., Candlewick is publishing it, I can't wait for it to come out. Then I have a Jewish book coming I think in October of that year. It's called The Christmas Mitzvah. Marissa Moss at Creston, the same publisher as No Steps Behind. It is inspired by the true story of one Al Rosen, who lived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the late 1960s. Al Rosen was a Jewish man who loved Christmas. Just adored it. One day, late 60s, he's driving home from work. He was a door to door salesman. Stopped to get gas, the attendant came out because they had attendants in those days, and Al looked at him and he's like, "why are you working? It's Christmas Eve, don't you want to be home with your family?" And the gas station attendant said, "you know, my boss is making me work until two in the morning." And Al Rosen was so irritated by this. He went home, he called a radio station. They put him on the air. He's like, "I'm Al Rosen. I'm Jewish. If there's any Christians tonight who have to work, I'll do your job for you for nothing." He ended up tending bar in some working class Milwaukee neighborhood; he'd never tended bar before, he didn't drink! And for the next several decades, Al Rosen did the jobs of Christians so they could be home with their families on Christmas Eve. It is the putative start to the Mitzvah Day movement in America and it became a big thing in Milwaukee. So The Christmas Mitzvah. That's the book.

Heidi Rabinowitz 25:31

Okay. And Jeff, where can listeners find you online?

Jeff Gottesfeld 25:36

Oh, I'm easy. First of all, there are not that many Jeff Gottesfelds out there. There are only two or three other people and I know them both. I had a beer with one of them. I can be found at JeffGottesfeldwriter.com. That's my website. I don't spend a lot of time on Twitter. I have an Instagram. I'm easy to find.

Heidi Rabinowitz 25:56

Jeff Gottesfeld, thank you so much for joining us.

Jeff Gottesfeld 25:58

The pleasure is mine. Thank you for having me.

Matthew Ransom 26:03

[MUSIC, DEDICATION] Hi, I'm Matthew Ransom, Heidi's husband. I'd like to dedicate the upcoming episode to those who speak up for justice. I'm currently reading the biographies of Frederick Douglass and Lenny Bruce, and autobiographies of Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, and the progressive commentary of my mother

Jerilyn Bowen. We all need to reach out, even to those we may have differences with, and advocate our common need for justice.

Heidi Rabinowitz 26:31

[MUSIC, OUTRO] Don't be a stranger. Say hi to Heidi at 561-206-2473 or BookofLifePodcast@gmail.com. Check out our Facebook page or our Facebook discussion group Jewish Kidlit Mavens. We are occasionally on Twitter too. There are lots of ways to support the show through Patreon and through donations to our home library, the Feldman Children's Library at Congregation B'nai Israel of Boca Raton, Florida. You can find links for all of that and more at BookofLifePodcast.com. Our background music is provided by the Freilachmakers Klezmer String Band. Thanks for listening and happy reading!

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