

## A YIDDISH GUIDE TO NORA EPHRON (1941-2012)

by  
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“Gezunthayt iz beser vi krankhayt.”  
(Health is better than illness.)

Nora Ephron passed away in 2012 at the young age of 71. She lost her battle with Leukemia. She never went public with the diagnosis. Perhaps she agreed with this Yiddish proverb: “Ven men lakht ze’en ale; ven men veynt zet keyner nit.” (Laugh and everyone sees; cry and you cry alone.)

The Jewish Daily Forward ran this headline:

WARM AND ‘UTTERLY JEWISH,’ NORA EPHRON LEFT US WAY TOO SOON.

Nora planned the memorial service herself. It was an invitation-only crowd. There were 11 speakers, among them Tom Hanks, Rosie O’Donnell, her sister, Delia, Martin Short, and others. Nora was always full of surprises. She and Nick were married before a judge in her apartment on March 28, 1987. They surprised about forty dinner guests who didn’t know they would witness Nora and Nick’s wedding.

In her final book, “I Remember Nothing - And Other Reflections,” the message was clear. She was thinking of death. In the book she wrote two columns: “What I Won’t Miss,” and “What I Will Miss.” Here’s her list--with some Yiddish to accompany it.

### WHAT I WON’T MISS

Dry skin (“hoyt”)

Ephron writes about “Pathetic Attempts to turn Back the Clock. Into this category fall such things as face lifts, liposuction, Botox, major dental work, and removal of unsightly things--of varicose veins, for instance, and skin tags...”

Bad dinners like the one we went to last night

E-mail (“blitspost” or “elektronish post”)

Technology in general

Ephron writes, “Technology is a bitch. I can no longer even figure out how to get the buttons on the car radio to play my favorite stations...And thank God no one has given me a digital wristwatch.”

My closet (“shafe”)

Ephron writes, “Perhaps [President Kennedy] never made a pass at her because of her wardrobe.” It consisted of multicolored Dynel dresses that looked like distilled

Velveeta cheese. Perhaps it's because I'm Jewish." Later in life, Nora's trademark favorite color was black ("shvarts"). She says "You can't own too many black turtleneck sweaters." Note: The Yiddish word for sweater is "sveter."

Washing my hair ("hor")

Ephron says she was categorized by her colorist as a "single-process customer." And she says that "those highlights were a little like that first sip of brandy Alexander that Lee Remick drank in Days of Wine and Roses."

Ephron states some statistics: "In the 1950s only 7% of American women dyed their hair; today there are parts of Manhattan and Los Angeles where there are no gray-haired women at all." Note: The Yiddish word for gray is "groy."

Bras ("stanik" = brassiere)

Funeral ("levaye" = funeral)

Illness everywhere ("krankayt umetum")

Polls that show that 32 percent of the American people believe in creationism

Polls

Fox

The collapse of the dollar ("dolar")

Joe Lieberman

Clarence Thomas

Bar mitzvahs

Nora was relieved that her boys didn't request ("bakoshe") Bar Mitzvahs. "First of all, because of my feelings about religion, and second of all, because they're so expensive ("tayer"), and third of all, because nothing is more awful ("shreklekh") than a divorced bar mitzvah." (She was divorced from their father, Carl Bernstein.)

Marjorie Wolfe comments: Overheard by Sylvia Weisman of Jericho, N. Y. in the boys' clothing department of Barneys New York, a young fellow to his parents: "Will we be having a VIETNAMESE table at my bar mitzvah?"

Mammograms

Dead flowers ("blum" = flower)

This letter was written by Jacqueline Haberfield:

Dear Diary,

Cousin David (28, single, dentist) phoned the florist to send flowers to a friend in South Carolina. The florist asked for his name.

"David Weinstein," my cousin answered.

"And the person to whom the flowers are going?"

"Kate Anderson."

Then came the operator's reproving response: "She doesn't sound Jewish."

The sound of the vacuum cleaner ("shtoybzoyger")

## Bills

When Roxanne Coady told Ephron her films have grossed more than \$1 billion, Ephron replied, "Where is it?" And Ephron's mother told her, "A successful parent is one whose child grows up and is able to afford her own psychoanalysis."

Emails, I know I already said it, but I want to emphasize it.

Ephron says, "Block everyone on your instant mail."

Marjorie Wolfe's comment: Email, shmemail! Luck and happiness will or will not come to you regardless if you send it to another 8 people.

Small print ("kleyn" = small; "drukn" = to print)

Ephron wrote, "I used to write in twelve-point type, now I am up to sixteen or even twenty...In fact, the print on the pill bottle is so small I doubt if anyone can read it." (Source: "I Feel Bad About My Neck And Other Thoughts On Being A Woman")

## Panels on Women in Film

Taking off makeup every night ("nakht")

Marjorie Wolfe's comment: "Kheyn shtaygt iber sheyn. (Grace outshines looks. Charm rises above beauty.)

## WHAT I WILL MISS

### My kids

Nora had two sons--Jacob and Max. When Ephron and Pileggi started dating he "instantly caught pinkeye" from her children, who were three and four at the time. When the kids leave home, Nora says, "Do not under any circumstances leave your child's room as is. Your child's room is not a shrine. It's not going to the Smithsonian... Leaving your child's room as is may encourage your child to return. You do not want this."

Ephron says, "When your children are teenagers, it's important to have a dog so that someone in the house is happy to see you."

("I Feel Bad About My Neck And Other Thoughts On Being a Woman")

"Nakhes fun kinder iz tayere fun gelt."

(Joy from children is more precious than money.)

### Nick

Refers to Nick Pileggi, her third husband. Ephron once shared what she believed was the simple secret of happy endings in life: "Marry an Italian." Pileggi is not going to disagree. (They were married from 1987 to 2012.)

Spring ("friling")

Fall (autumn = "harbst")

Waffles

“Es tsegeyt in aleh glider.” (It melts in all parts of the body; delicious, heavenly food.)

The concept of waffle

Bacon (“beykon”)

The price of bacon and other pork products is on the rise. Sliced bacon cost an average of \$5.55 per pound. Rules of Bacon #11 says: “Thou shalt always consume bacon on the Sabbath. An the Mondath. And the Tuesdath, and the ....” And, of course, there’s always “Facon”--fake bacon. Anyone for a F.L.T.?

A walk in the park

The idea of a walk in the park. “Geyn” means “to walk.” “Shpatsirn” also means to walk or stroll aimlessly.

Shakespeare in the Park

The bed (“bet”)

Reading in bed (“leyenen” mean “to read”)

Nora did most of her reading as a child (“kind”) on her bed or on a rattan sofa.

Fireworks

Laughs (“gelekhter” means “laughter”)

The view out of the window (“fentester”). “oysblik” means “view or sight.”

Twinkle lights

Butter (“puter”)

Dinner at home just the two of us

Dinner with friends (“khaverim”)

Ephron said, “You can’t be friends with people who call you after 11 p.m.”

FYI: In 1903, the Jewish Daily Forward, which always closely scrutinized these trends, reported that a new word had entered the Yiddish language: oysesn, or “eating out.” To dine out--not at a friend’s or relative’s house, but at an actual restaurant--had been unheard-of in the old country (and up until that point, even in the new), but the Forward note that this stylish habit was “spreading every day, especially in New York.”

Dinner with friends in cities where none of us lives

Marjorie Wolfe comments: I thought Nora Ephron’s favorite “d” word was “divorce.”

In her book titled, “I Remember Nothing: And Other Reflections,” she wrote, “One good thing I’d like to say about divorce is that it sometimes makes it possible for you to be a much better wife to your next husband because you have a place for your anger; it’s not directed at the person you’re currently with...The best divorce is the kind where there are no children.”

Paris

Ephron found herself in Paris and learned about a “Kelly bag”--A Kelly bag is an Hermes bag first made in the 1950s that Grace Kelly had made famous. Her friend paid \$2,600

for one. Ephron purchased a much less expensive MetroCard bag at the Transit Museum in Grand Central Station, and people ask, “Where did you get that bag?”

Next year in Istanbul

Marjorie Wolfe comments: What? I thought it was “Next year in Jerusalem”? Here’s something Aron Moss always wanted to know. What if you’re living in Jerusalem. Do you say the prayer/wish, “Next year in Jerusalem” or just leave the line out?

Pride & Prejudice (“Shtolts un forurtl”)

The Christmas tree

“Nora grew up in Beverly Hills with colorful parents (“tate”/“mame”) and a Christmas tree,” said Abigail Pogrebin.

Marjorie Wolfe comments: And all those iconic Christmas songs which were written by Irving Berlin, who was Jewish. Those other Yiddish words for Christmas: “goyimnakht” (gentiles’ night), “tolenakht and yoyzls nakht” (both meaning, colloquially, Jesus’ night). “Nitl” is the polite Yiddish word for Christmas.

For many of us this is the time of year to watch other people schlep huge pine-trees across town or listen as they kvetch about last-minute shopping runs and other mishegos. (Jonathan Anker)

Thanksgiving dinner

Consider the poor turkey. First somebody gives him such a hit in the neck, his head flies off the handle. Then they tear off the wings, break his legs, knock the stuffing out of him, cut him to pieces and, as if all that wasn’t enough, they pick on him for weeks after.

Marjorie Wolfe remembers what Erma Bombeck said...”Thanksgiving dinners take eighteen hours to prepare. They are consumed in twelve minutes. Half-times take twelve minutes. This is not a coincidence.”

With Nora’s cooking skills, she could certainly prepare a Thanksgiving meal “from zup to nislekh” - from soup to nuts.

One for the table

The dogwood

Taking a bath

Nora likes to take baths “because you can’t do anything in a bathtub but think.” She uses Dr. Hauschka’s lemon bath which costs about \$20 a bottle.

Coming over the bridge (“brik”) to Manhattan

Ephron writes, “I live in New York City. I could never live anywhere else.”

Pie (“pay”)

Ephron says, “You can order more than one dessert.” A “shtik”--a bit of pie?

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Nora Ephron wrote on dying: “Everybody dies. There’s nothing you can do about it. Whether you eat 6 almonds a day. Whether or not you believe in God.”  
(from “I Remember Nothing: And Other Reflections.”)