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A Generation of Strivers Sits for Its Portrait

More than 40 years after their first days in Kew Gardens, Queens, the children from Public School 99 came together again last week — older, grayer, more distinguished, maybe a little shorter. They had met up in the past, of course, sharing rugelach on a walk through the neighborhood or chatting across the world on the phone, but Monday night was different. This time, they would be on film.

"I was told that the people from Kew Gardens know what the word 'decorum' means, and I can see it now," said Bruce Slovin, chairman of the Center for Jewish History in Chelsea, speaking to a rapt and silver-haired audience that had settled into the center's wood-paneled auditorium Monday night for a special screening.

The film they would see, "Last Stop Kew Gardens," was indeed about Jewish history. The hourlong movie traced the history of a group of families who fled from Hitler in the 1930s and '40s and landed in this

suburban enclave in Queens. German was spoken on the streets, and Tudor-style buildings housed bakeries and butchers similar to those back in Vienna.

"It's where our values were instilled," said Jerry Springer, the talk-show host and a onetime Kew Gardens youngster, who spoke on a taped introduction for the film.

"Last Stop Kew Gardens" is the brainchild of Robert Lieberman, a wiry, energetic 66-year-old who teaches physics at Cornell.

Mr. Lieberman, who grew up on Metropolitan Avenue, one of the neighborhood's main drags, left Kew Gardens after graduating from high school in 1958 and did not return until 2005, when an article he wrote about his early memories sparked e-mail messages from former neighbors and classmates around the world.

He started to film his quest to find others who had grown up in Kew Gardens, many of whom had become prominent in their fields.

"Part of the drive of children of survivors is the drive to overachieve," said Georgette Bennett, president and founder of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding in Manhattan, who immigrated from Budapest to Queens as a child and is featured in the film at a gala with Bill Clinton.

Mr. Lieberman's movie also includes interviews with other Kew Gardens overachievers, among them a symphony conductor, a comedian, an author and a historian.

At a reception for the screening, reunions of other sorts were taking place.

"Did you ever take out my sister?" asked a smiling Fred Kurz, his white-gray hair slicked back, as he spied Michael Nussbaum, a Washington lawyer, near the cheese buffet.

"Yes, I did," replied Mr. Nussbaum, 72. "I think my mother wanted me to marry her."

Alas, their love developed too early. "I was 9 years old or something," Mr. Nussbaum said.

JEFF VANDAM



Ithaca Filmworks

Robert Lieberman, right, with his brother, George, and Mildred Berry, students at P.S. 99 back in the day.