



Writer and producer Robert H. Lieberman has made the documentary "Last Stop Kew Gardens."

Taking a Kew from his old neighborhood

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Robert H. Lieberman's road to a movie about Kew Gardens started two years ago, when he wrote an online reminiscence about his childhood. But maybe it really started 66 years ago.

He was just 2 months old in 1941 when his parents, who had fled Vienna three years earlier, moved from the Bronx to the cozy Queens neighborhood. He attended PS 99 with many classmates like himself: children of German-Jewish and Austrian-Jewish immigrants who spoke German at home as they strove to become American on the outside.

His parents, he wrote, had "one cultural foot in Europe." He was proud to be "a genuine Yankee," though "my shadow was also in Central Europe."

The response to his article, for oldkewgardens.com, was overwhelming, he says. So when PS 99 alumni held a reunion a few months later in 2005, Lieberman — a Cornell University physics professor who is also a novelist and a film producer — decided a documentary was in order.

"I thought, what a shame not to record this," he says during a recent visit to Manhattan. He started filming at the reunion, then traveled throughout the United States and to Europe to interview former Kew Gardenites.

"Keep moving forward"

He gathered revealing statements from some surprising corners. Talk-show host Jerry Springer, who says his parents "were determined that I would become an American boy," says he wouldn't do his hard-edged TV show if they were still alive. Comedian Robert Schimmel recounts a story his father

told him about a kid in front of him on a forced concentration camp march who stopped and was shot: "If you want to make it," his dad advised, "you've got to keep moving forward."

Most participants in "Last Stop Kew Gardens," which debuts Monday in Manhattan, share a drive toward overachievement, Lieberman found.

Not everyone who grew up in the neighborhood then had the same experience. Donald Polay of Port Washington is a third- or fourth-generation Jewish American, he says, and was barely aware of his schoolmates' backgrounds: "Everyone seemed the same. This was elementary school. Kids are kids." Though he attended the reunion, he's not in the film. But his memories glow: "It was the world unspoiled... Kew Gardens stood out as something special and different."

The film depicts the community of curving streets and its own park as a village within the city.

Gabriele K. Libbey of Long Beach didn't move to Kew Gardens from Manhattan until she was 12 and, she says, regrets not growing up in that close circle, as her younger sister did. "I always felt the oddball in school," she says. Nevertheless, Libbey, who came to the United States from Berlin at age 1 in 1939, is excited about seeing Lieberman's

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movie. "I feel a connection, absolutely," she says. "There was no question we had a special drive to excel."

A surprising nostalgia

Lieberman says the film spurred him to write a new novel, "Exit Kew Gardens," about a 14-year-old boy whose father disappears in 1941. His most recently published book, "The Last Boy," centers on a 5-year-old boy who disappears from day care in 1938 in Ithaca, where Lieberman lives. His PBS documentaries have been about famine in Ethiopia and a ballet troupe. "Green Lights," his first feature, is new on DVD (ithacafilms.com).

Lieberman's nostalgia surprised him, because after high school, "I couldn't get far enough away, I think, from that environment," he says in the film. He even moved to Sweden for a while. "I became a wandering Jew."

Making the film became his homecoming, he says: "I came to peace with the past."



Lieberman with Jerry Springer, left, who is interviewed in the Kew Gardens film

WHEN&WHERE "Last Stop Kew Gardens," Monday at 6 p.m. and 9:30 p.m., both with Jerry Springer and Robert Lieberman speaking, at the Center for Jewish History, 15 W. 16th St., Manhattan. Call 917-606-8200 or visit cjh.org. Check kewgardensmovie.com for future screenings and DVD availability.