



# An Education for Esther

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[Home](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

In the late winter of 1918, the Lower East Side welcomed everybody. People swarmed, streamed, pushed, and quarreled. Streets overflowed with pushcarts, hawkers and peddlers. Little children delivered bundles of laundered clothes and shoeshine boys with blackened hands called to passersby “Hey, ya shoes need a shine.” Newsboys screamed the latest war headlines. Hustlers hung out on street corners: “Lady, gimme a nickel for a pickle?” Clotheslines looped across narrow alleys, from one tenement apartment to another, dripping with newly washed sheets already darkening from the thick soot in the air. Lillian Wald’s nurses from the Henry Street Settlement House crossed tenement roofs to reach their patients.

On the streets, withered horses pulled splintered wagons. Old people sitting on benches argued about whether the price of bread would drop now that war was almost over “Over There.” Women disputed the quality of fruit in the pushcarts, in Yiddish, Italian, Polish and Russian:

“You call that a banana? I’ve seen better bananas in the garbage!!”

“Good, lady, go dig in the garbage and stop bothering me!”

“So, you still want five cents a pound for those rotten bananas? How about four cents?”

Store windows were loaded with ties, silk top hats, fur hats, boaters, women’s wigs, shirts, collars, collar stays, shoes and socks, suits, coats, *mezuzahs*, Hebrew books, *Shabbas* candles, gold crosses, Palmolive soap, laxatives, Vaseline petroleum jelly, jelly beans, Jordan almonds, yellow lead pencils, white chalk, buttons and ribbons of all colors and sizes, Irish lace, thick Havana cigars and umbrellas. Such abundance.

Esther Datlovitsky was five. Her ten-year-old brother Julius whistled to school each morning. Her baby sister Ethel sat in a playpen in her parent’s laundry store on East 13<sup>th</sup> street, while her mother ran the machines and her father delivered clean bundles back to customers. Esther was on her own.

One morning, Esther secretly followed Julius to school and stood beneath the first-floor window of the school’s kindergarten class, listening to the goings-on inside. She could barely hear the teacher instructing the students in the correct way to print letters and numbers. But she could hear the children declaiming loudly at the beginning of the day—“I pledge legions to the flag . . .” She didn’t know what legions were, but they must have been very important and the children must have had a lot of them because they pledged them to the flag every morning without fail.

Several days after Esther took up residence under the kindergarten window, it suddenly whooshed open and out popped the head of the kindergarten teacher. A prim-looking compact woman, with crinkly brown eyes and hair to match, she looked down at Esther:

“Would you like to come in?” Esther nodded “yes” and that was that.

From the moment she walked in the door, Esther loved kindergarten. Picture books in a little library along one side of the classroom, her own kindergarten-sized straight-back chair, a blackboard that ran the length of the room, chalk and erasers on the blackboard lip, crayons for drawing and paper on which she could print her name, snack in little paper cups every afternoon—apples and cheese, peanut butter and crackers and—her favorite—raisins!

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Mrs. Moriarity ran a proper kindergarten. Girls on one side of the class, boys on the other, sitting alphabetically, hands and faces subject to Moriarity's cleanliness inspection, mud-free shoes, soles positioned flat on the floor, no shouting out, no hand-waving, no wriggling, permission to use the lavatory—one student at a time. "We are here to learn—English, reading, addition, story-telling, imagining, painting, singing, and even dancing from time to time." She picked up a big chunk of white chalk, placed it along one side of the blackboard and walked across the front of the room, drawing a long line on the board as she moved: "And time marches on, children. We have none of it to waste."

Before Esther left for the day, Mrs. Moriarity told her to have her mother come to school the next morning to fill out an application, and then Esther could come to school every day.

As she walked the two blocks home from school, Esther could see her mama Sarah in front of the laundry store, talking in an agitated fashion to people on the street. Sarah spotted Esther half a block away, shrieked "Oy!" and ran to her, yelling as she ran:

"Esther, where have you been? Where have you been? You cannot just disappear like that without telling me where you are going. I could not find you! You had me going crazy with worry for you." She grabbed Esther by the back of her collar and shook her. She was furious. She had been frantically looking for Esther on the street for over an hour!

"Oh, Mama, I'm sorry. I was at the kindergarten with Mrs. Moriarity."

"Mrs. Who? At the kindergarten? What were you doing at the kindergarten? And does Mrs. Moriarity have five-year-old children who just go out on their own without telling her where they are going? Do her children disappear without letting her know how to find them? I bet she does not, Esther. I bet she does not!" Sarah wiped her face with a hankie she had tucked in her sleeve "Don't ever do that again, Esther," she said, speaking now in her normal, calm voice.

"Can I, Mama? Can I go to kindergarten? Please, Mama."

Sarah looked at her daughter quietly. Esther never begged, yet here she was begging for something she wanted desperately. Why should she be denied? The next morning, Sarah asked her husband Benjamin to run the machines in the laundry while she went to the school to fill out the application—and Esther started kindergarten.

Morning was spent with Mrs. Moriarity leading the class responsively. "Good morning, children." "Good morning Mrs. Moriarity," they answered. "What is the sum of three and one?" "Four, Mrs. Moriarity," they responded. She wrote a sentence on the blackboard. "Who knows how to read the sentence?" Esther raised her hand. "Datlovitsky." She stood: "The colors of the flag are red, white and blue." "Correct. Now write it again—three times." Esther picked up a chunk of chalk and copied the sentence while the rest of the class copied the sentence on their slates. When she sat down, her right hand was covered with chalk dust, a badge of honor in the classroom. None of the children ever cleaned the chalk dust off their hands.

Recess and lunch split the day in half. Mrs. Moriarity walked the children to the cafeteria, boys on the right, girls on the left, in two straight lines. No talking. They picked up small cartons of milk and straws as they entered the cafeteria and sat down at the long tables running the length of the cafeteria, boys at one table, and girls at another. Since they were lined up alphabetically, Esther sat between Maura Connolly and Cynthia Dumbrowski. Quiet conversation was permitted, as was trading lunches. Lunch lasted for 20 minutes. The children gathered up their empty milk carts, straws and wax paper wrapping and dumped them in the waiting garbage

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pails at the end of the cafeteria. Then they exited to the playground for recess.

No more lines, no more alphabet. Girls skipped rope on the concrete, played potsy and Prisoner's base, boys teamed up for kindergarten stickball, played jacks and marbles, and stoopball against the playground stairs. Boys and girls raced around the playground to release the sheer exuberance of being five.

Esther wanted the other children to like her and she thought that would be an easy task. She would be very wrong. At recess the second day, a blue-eyed, redheaded kindergarten girl named Mary O'Hara asked her what church she attended. When Esther told her she didn't go to church—she went to *shul* because she was Jewish—Mary stared at her for a long time, then reached her hand out to touch Esther's head, and, finding nothing but hair and bow, raced away to join the other children. Esther found out quickly that she was the only Jewish child in class. Esther's apartment on East 13<sup>th</sup> Street sat on the very edge of the Jewish East Side and bordered on Italian, Irish and Polish neighborhoods.

"What was she looking for on my head, Julius?" Esther asked her brother.

"Oh, forget it, squirt. They think Jews have horns."

"Horns? What kind of horns?" Esther pictured trombones and trumpets.

"Devil horns, squirt. They think Jews are devils. Don't be surprised if they ask you where your devil's tail is or strip your skirt off to look." For the next few days at school, Esther held her skirt tight against her leggings.

Esther paid harshly for being Jewish. Try as she might, the other kindergarteners would not play with her during recess and would say hateful things:

"I don't want to play with you because you're Jewish," said a blonde curly-haired girl named Emily Olmstead, when Esther asked if she wanted to play potsy. *What did being Jewish have to do with potsy?*

"The Jews killed Jesus," Kenny Valentine, a rough-looking disheveled boy shouted at Esther across the playground. When she tried to tell him she hadn't killed anyone, he stuck his tongue out at her, and then guffawed like a donkey.

*Why did I have to be born Jewish, she mourned to herself. Not one to capitulate, she spent hours thinking up ways she could become Catholic like the rest of her kindergarten class. How hard could it be to become Catholic? I would need a gold crucifix and chain to wear around my neck. I had seen them in the stores on East 13<sup>th</sup> Street, not hard to come by, but beyond my small allowance and meager savings. Martha Santoro who sits behind me in class wears a little silver medal around her neck with a picture of a lady on it. The stores had those in the window too—less expensive than the gold crosses.*

Then there was the going to Church on Sunday part.

"Martha," Esther asked, "where do you go to Church on Sunday?"

"Sacred Heart," Martha said, pointing out the kindergarten window toward a high gray spire just visible above the tenement buildings.

The Church of the Sacred Heart was down the street from the laundry. On Sunday, Mama and Papa were busy doing errands. *If I disappeared for an hour, would they notice?*

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“What do you do in Church on Sunday, Martha?”

“Oh, we kneel and bless ourselves with holy water and recite prayers in Latin and the priest comes out wearing a green dress and blesses us and the priest tells us a story about going to a place called ‘purcatory’ and then my Mama and Papa and my older brothers and sisters go up to the altar and each get a cookie but I’m too young and things like that and it’s very serious and long,” she paused and took a breath, “and the altar boys—my brother Petey is an altar boy—ring the bells and sometimes they ring them at the wrong time and the priest yells at them later and there’s smoke coming from the lantern that smells nice,” another breath, “and when I get bored and fidget, Mama pinches me, and then at the end the priest tells us to be good children till next Sunday, when we do it all over again.”

*That doesn’t seem so hard, Esther thought. She could do that.*

“Martha, can I come to church with you on Sunday?” Martha hugged Esther. The next day, Martha brought Esther a silver medal:

“It’s MaryMotherofGod,” Martha explained. “You pin it on your dress She keeps you safe from the devil.”

Suddenly the week was over and it was Sunday. Esther dressed herself carefully, white leggings, black boots, white dress with the wide starched collar, white bow in her hair, just so, neither tilted to the left or right, and, of course, the MaryMotherofGod silver medal, pinned to the left side of her collar.

“I’m going to play with a girl from school, Mama. I won’t be late,” Esther yelled from the apartment door, and she headed to the church. Esther saw Martha standing on the church steps. “Just do what I do,” Martha whispered and they went in through the heavy double doors.

Esther held Martha’s hand as the two girls stopped at the back of the church. Martha placed her fingers in a fountain of water sitting near the double doors. Esther did the same. She watched as Martha dropped to one knee and touched her wet fingers to her forehead, chest and then each shoulder. Esther did the same.

As the two girls began to walk down the center aisle, Esther looked around the church. Beautiful stained glass windows lined the walls, reaching up almost to the ceiling letting in the sun in flickering prisms of light. Statues of robed men and women stood around the edges of the church, silent and unsmiling. She turned her face toward the altar, and she froze, seeing for the first time the statue of a man dressed in white, beckoning people toward him. What froze her in place was the sight of the man’s heart, outside his body, huge cherry-red and luminous, encircled in a band of silver! The sight of it terrified her. *Oh, oh, what happened to the man that his heart was outside, not inside?* Esther rushed out of the church. She would have to find another way to make the children in kindergarten like her. Dejected, she entered her apartment to find her grandfather Israel sitting at the kitchen table, reading the *Jewish Forward*. Old he was, and worldly. Able to recite long passages from Genesis and Deuteronomy from memory. An expert on so many subjects. Perhaps . . .

“Grandpa, why can’t we believe in Jesus Christ? It would make life so much easier for me in kindergarten. All the children make fun of me and they don’t want to play with me at recess because I’m Jewish.”

Israel looked at her for a long minute and then said:

“Why can’t we believe in Jesus Christ? Why can’t we believe in Jesus Christ?” Israel repeated back, astonished at her question. “What did Jesus Christ ever do for the Jews? Did Jesus Christ part the Red Sea for us so we could escape the Egyptians

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and the slavery that we were in? Did he send us manna from heaven for forty years in the desert? Did Jesus Christ give us the Ten Commandments? Did he bring us into the Holy Land promised to us by God? No. No! God gave us those things, did those things, and many, many more for us.”

“Ohhhh.”

The next day when the kindergarten children started making fun of Esther at recess on the playground, she stood them down:

“Big deal. You and your Jesus Christ. Did Jesus Christ part the Red Sea for the Jews? Did Jesus Christ ever send manna from heaven for forty years to feed our people in the desert? Did Jesus Christ give us the Ten Commandments? Big deal, your Jesus Christ!”

And that satisfied her for a long time, that God, not Jesus Christ, was the important one for the Jews. But it didn’t satisfy her about all of God’s actions.

Esther’s grandfather used to tell her Bible stories. One day, he told her about two wicked ungodly cities, cities so evil that God ordered them destroyed along with all their inhabitants.

“Grandpa,” she wailed. “Everybody? Even the children? God couldn’t have meant to destroy all the children.”

“Yes, even the children.”

“But Grandpa, why did he have to kill the children? Why, Grandpa?”

“Only God knows the answer to that question, *Estheke*. We can never know why God does things.”

Esther felt anger rising inside her. *God killed the children, too? How could he do such a thing? Such an evil action to take, and against innocent children.* And that is when Esther uttered these apocalyptic words to her grandfather:

“I do not like your God who orders such terrible things!”

Israel was patient. He tried to explain the meaning behind God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah but Esther did not want to hear his explanation.

“No, no,” she interrupted him, “it’s not right what God did. God did something bad. I don’t like God anymore!”

Finally, after his attempts to explain had failed, Israel became quiet. He looked at Esther with his old, old eyes and said:

“You know, I want to tell you something, Esther. God doesn’t really care what you think of him. You think he cares about whether you like him or not? He’s not sitting up there worried about whether Esther likes him or not All he cares about is Esther should live by the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses.”

Esther stopped: *what did her grandfather just say?*

“You mean God doesn’t care if I like him?”

“No. Just be good to your neighbors and treat them right and he couldn’t care less. Esther, do you know what the Ten Commandments are and whether you live your life according to them?”

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Now, this was a challenging question for a five year old to answer, but Esther said yes she knew what the Ten Commandments were. Nevertheless, her grandfather persisted:

“Esther, while there are some commandments that you are too little to understand, there are others that you are old enough to live by: Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not lie. Thou shalt honor thy mother and father.”

“Oh, I do live by those commandments, Grandpa. I would never steal. Oh, maybe borrow and forget to return. But never steal. And I don’t lie. Sometimes I don’t tell, like when Papa asks me have I seen Julius because he wants him to come in and practice the violin and I saw Julius headed out to play street ball and I don’t answer Papa. But I don’t lie. And I do what Mama and Papa tell me to do . . . mostly Is that honoring? But Grandpa, but Grandpa . . .,” she paused, “I don’t believe in God.”

Israel looked at her silently with his crepe papery eyes for a long time, and then revealed one of his deepest secrets.

“That’s Ok. As long as you live by the Ten Commandments, God will understand. The truth is, Esther, I have tried to live my life according to the Ten Commandments, but I too have never been able to accept the existence of God. This will be our secret.” Esther nodded her head. It was a secret she would never share.

Another Jewish child came into class toward the end of March and the children’s attention shifted from Esther to him. His name was Heimie. Raggedy, unkempt, shoes tied with bits of string, nothing but a piece of bread in his lunch bag, Heimie came from a poor family, Esther thought. Mrs. Moriarity sat him in the back right corner of the classroom, next to the open window. Heimie smelled.

After a week in class, Mrs. Moriarity gave Heimie a note to take back to his mother, asking her to make sure Heimie bathed regularly. Mrs. Moriarity lived in a neighborhood where people bathed regularly, where people had bathtubs in their apartments, where hot water was provided free to residents, not paid for in a meter. Esther bathed twice a week and she came from a relatively wealthy family. Her parents owned a laundry store. Most of the children in the class didn’t have bathtubs in their tenement apartments. They shared a bath with four other families.

The next day, Heimie handed Mrs. Moriarity a note back. It read:

“Heimie ain’t no rose. Don’t smell’im. Learn’im.”

Heimie was an outcast in every way. He didn’t speak English, just Yiddish. He lived in a tragically dissolute tenement, unclean, crumbling in the back and rat-ridden throughout. The soles of his shoes were made from cardboard boxes, cut to fit the shoe and then glued on. His baby teeth were discolored and uneven. One afternoon, Heimie’s mother came to see Mrs. Moriarity. Heimie waited outside in the schoolyard. Esther waited with him.

“Your Mama came to see Mrs. Moriarity?”

“*Vus?*”

“Your Mama—*Muter*,” Esther said, pointing to the kindergarten classroom window.

“*Neyn. Nisht Muter. Shvester.*”

Esther stopped. The woman speaking to Mrs. Moriarity wasn’t his mother. She was his sister! She looked . . . old, and tired and unwell. Heimie’s sister couldn’t be that old—perhaps 25. Yet she appeared haggard, her hair already beginning to gray and thin, her face blotchy, her arms bony, sticking out of her skimpy blouse, her legs

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patchy and bruised. A seamstress, the lowest paid profession in the tenements, she led a life on the Lower East Side that ate up her youth. And, now, supporting a younger brother and God knows how many other siblings, she had nothing left. At last, she exited the school and found her brother in the schoolyard, shepherding him away without a word.

Things in school were a little better for Esther in May because the kindergarten class had someone else besides Heimie and her to pick on—a little colored boy named Rowland. He had moved into the neighborhood shortly before the end of school. He wasn't from New York. Esther could tell because Rowland talked with an accent she had never heard before that made it hard to understand him.

"Mama, where do you think that little boy Rowland is from?" Esther asked one morning before school, as she ate her bowl of Quaker Oats at the hardwood kitchen table.

"I don't know exactly, Esther. Why don't you ask him?"

"I'll do that, Mama. I'll do exactly that."

That day during recess, Esther saw Rowland sitting alone on a short, round concrete pylon at the edge of the schoolyard.

"Hi." Rowland said nothing.

"Come on, I'm not going to bite you. My name is Esther." The boy still said nothing.

"I know you can talk. I heard you in school, although I didn't understand you. Where are you from? Some foreign country?"

"Poplaville."

"Where's that?" Rowland looked at her like she was stupid.

"Mississippi."

"Like the state?" she asked.

"Like da state."

"Why did you leave Poplarville?" Rowland was quiet again.

"Okay, don't tell me. I'm just trying to be your friend." Esther started to walk away.

"Da Klan kilt ma Uncle Claude."

She stopped, and then turned back to him. "What's a clan?"

He looked at her like she was stupid again and shook his head in astonishment.

"Y'all never hearda da Klan? You lucky. Da Klan kills colored people. Da Klan scares us and burns our houses. They kilt ma dawg. Then they kilt ma Uncle Claude when he try to save ma dawg."

"Oh," Esther said, trying to understand. "You mean your Uncle knew he could get killed and went to save your dog anyway?"

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Rowland nodded.

“Even though he knew he could get killed?”

“Even doe he knew he could get kilt.”

“Boy was that stupid.”

“Yeah. Stupid. I kudda got anudder dawg. I kudn’t get anudder uncle. And once da killin’ started, we hadda leave.”

“The clan would have come and killed you too?”

“Yeah. And my momma. So we left Poplerville and came to New York where dere is no killin’ Klan.”

Esther walked home from school thinking about Rowland’s Uncle Claude. What would make a man so stupid that he would be killed to save a silly dog? Would her Papa have run into the street to keep a *dog* from being hit by a trolley? No. Never. But would her Papa have run into the street to keep her **Mama** from being hit by a trolley? Yes.

When Esther got home from school, she asked Julius if he had ever heard of the clan.

“Yeah. Where’d you hear about the Klan, squirt?”

“From Rowland, a new boy in my class. He’s from Mississippi. Rowland says the clan killed his Uncle Claude when he went to save Rowland’s dog. Isn’t that stupid?”

“Yeah—stupid. Rowland a colored boy?”

Esther nodded.

“Well, stay away from him. If you think the kids in your class are hard on you now, they will be miserable to you if you make a friend out of Rowland,” and Julius walked away.

Esther knew Julius was right. But she also knew Julius was wrong. Her grandfather said that she had to live by the Ten Commandments. She figured there was no commandment that said, “Be nice to the colored people,” but somehow she had a feeling that something like it must be buried in one of those Ten Commandments. She was five and she figured she would find the right commandment when she was older . . . when she was . . . six.