



From the Point of View of...

Lisa Lipkin

In the articles entitled “From the point of view of...”, we tell the story of an expatriate who is living in the Netherlands. In each edition, we interview an expatriate, each time from a different country and each time in a different position (the person who was placed here by the employer, came here on his or her own initiative, the partner, the family members, etc.) For this issue of The XPat Journal we interviewed Lisa Lipkin, a professional storyteller from the US.

When Lisa Lipkin opens the front door to welcome you into her home, you know for sure that you are entering a magical world. There is something about the light that comes in through the window; no matter how grey the day is, it manages to infuse her apartment with a friendly golden hue, with just the right brilliance to enhance the veritable art gallery on her walls.

“Most of this art is not mine,” Lisa explains, indicating her walls with a sweeping motion. “A friend of mine has an art gallery, and needed storage space, so I said to him ‘I have the perfect solution!’ And he agreed.” She grins, “Aren’t I fortunate? I know it’s a bit of a mish-mash of styles, but some of the paintings are just absolutely beautiful! And I try to find the right spot for each one of them.”

Lisa grew up in New Jersey, the daughter of a second-generation American father, who grew up “joyously in the freedom and safety in New York”, and a Hungarian mother, who is a Holocaust survivor. “My father believes all people are innocent, until proven guilty. My mother believes all people are evil until proven innocent. I grew up in a house full of dark secrets, where the pain was never discussed. Many of the surviving members of my mother’s family married other survivors - and came to the US too, settling close to each other and close to us, creating a little pocket of Old Europe right in the middle of New Jersey. That was the world I grew up in. The only type of Jews I knew, other than my family, were the Fran-the-Nanny type - you know, from TV. They couldn’t have been further removed from my world.” Which is hard to believe as you sit across from someone who could easily have passed for Bette Midler’s twin sister. You’d think Fran the Nanny was the PG-rated version of the rock ‘n’ roll life that Lisa led growing up in New Jersey.

In order to cope with the invisible world of ever-present grief, Lisa took refuge in humor; “Like so many children of parents with a painful past,” she explains. Hard work and being in the right place at the right time, has allowed her to make a living

being exactly what she was born to be: a professional storyteller. “I was working at the Museum of History of New York, as a storyteller, when they decided to do an exhibition on the Holocaust. They asked me if I would be willing to write and tell a story to go with this exhibition. And I did. I told about growing up among children to whom ‘camp’ meant ‘summer camp’...” she pauses a moment to allow the realization of what type of camp she grew up hearing about sink in. “I told about how my friends used to fantasize about princes climbing in through the window to sweep them away and how about my fantasies involved *outwitting* those who made their way into my home to take us away... I filled it with humor and poignancy, but it was never my aim to be funny. That that was the outcome made it all the more powerful - but I do not believe in setting out to *create* comedy.” She continues: “That was when I realized the power of personal stories. How they affect the audience, and how telling them can transform you.”

The show was such a success, that Lisa ended up traveling across the US with it, and finally ended up in London. “There I was spotted by a couple of people from Holland who told Xaviera Hollander about me.” She laughs, “Most people know her as the Happy Hooker, but she has since become the Happy Booker, very successful at producing shows - and she is half-Jewish, which also very few people know.” Xaviera invited Lisa to come to Holland and perform at her in-house theater. “It was quite an experience!” Lisa grins, “For two weeks I would do my show at her all-night salon, followed by dinner served by her gorgeous slaves, after which would come a follow-up act.”

“I don’t think I have to explain,” Lisa tells, “that that was quite a wonderful introduction to Holland. But what really drew me to the country was the fact that the sadness of the Second World War was still here. It felt more complete, somehow, more sincere. I love the boundless enthusiasm and positivism of the US - but it is an optimism that comes with a certain level of comfort and naiveté. It assumes that evil is something that

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you can defeat instead of something you have to learn to live with. Being here, in a country that is populated by war survivors and their children, made me feel like I had come home.”

Lisa remains a professional storyteller, but has since given it a different twist; she founded Story Strategies in 2008 (storystrategies.net), a consultancy that uses her skills and knowledge of storytelling to help organizations identify their core stories and communicate them more effectively. “The economy has taken its toll and companies need to find a new way to distinguish themselves from their competitors. Businesses generally don’t even know what their story is. And slogans can be googled nowadays, and found to be completely untrue. The goal is not to help a business find the facts - what is factually accurate - but to find the truth; what is emotionally true. A lot of businesses don’t know the difference. To illustrate this, I sometimes tell the story of the Korean War-hero. This man had jumped out of a helicopter, and was known throughout the state for his heroics. This had generated so much pride in his family, that many of his children and grandchildren had joined the military. It had become their legacy. Well, a few decades later, a writer, who wanted to write about the family, did a little research on this man and found out that the story was completely untrue - in fact, he had dodged the draft altogether. And there was the dilemma; should he reveal this fact or not? He decided not to, because this story had become the family truth. It motivated the members of the family, and gave them a sense of identity and direction.” Lisa places a finger on the table to emphasize her point; “Now, I am not suggesting that people or businesses lie. I am just saying that, if you understand the emotional truth, you have a better chance at selling what is factually accurate. And that is what makes it such a powerful tool in business.” Her clients in the Netherlands include Aegon, the Tax Authorities, and Amsterdam Molecular Therapeutics, among others. She is also the storytelling advisor at Cliffmedia.com, a Dutch multi-media company, and her publications include articles in the *New York Times Magazine* and the *New Yorker* and a book, *Bringing the Story Home*.

Before starting her business, in the ‘80s, Lisa took her storytelling to homeless shelters, refugee homes, welfare hotels, and homes for battered women, to help these people find and tell their story. “My first job was in a home for pregnant, sexually-abused teenagers. Extracting their stories was a way to help them unburden themselves through a process that wasn’t threatening. The idea was to help them figure out who they were - the person they had lost along the way - and what they wanted to do with their lives.” She wraps her hands around her cup of tea as she says: “Stories are the best

weapon in our armament. They are so universal; everyone can relate to the core emotions - they cut through all cultural differences. Which is why storytelling is such a powerful form of communication.”

Lisa sees the US as the country “of reinvention. I love that about it and I see it as the US’s greatest gift to the rest of the world; the power of reinvention. It is a potent tool and many people go to the US to give it a try. But it also has a hard side,” she warns, “because it is a system that inherently produces either winners or losers. Either you succeed at this *and become part of the system* - or you don’t, and fall outside it. The absence of universal health care causes a tremendous amount of stress in the daily lives of Americans - how many people are faced with the choice; either my mortgage or my health insurance? You feel very defeated when you have to sell your car in order to get the medical care you need. And you definitely do not feel like you are part of - or protected by - the system. I have heard the Dutch comment many times on how hard the Americans work and how stressed they seem to be about it. But if only they could experience what it is to know, every day, that you are but one pay check removed from living in a box on the street, without any health care... How very different and relaxed the average American would be if they could afford health insurance and if they knew that, if they lost their job, the government would help them pay for it! So, even though the American mentality is a very positive and encouraging one, underneath it lays a great amount of insecurity and anxiety.” People without health care insurance are even more vulnerable due to the steep prices of medical care: “I remember how, when I had just arrived in the Netherlands, I needed a number of blood tests - but I had not yet been able to arrange insurance. I had no choice, however, so I went to the hospital and when the time came to pay, I got out my credit card and asked for the bill, mentally preparing for what I knew from experience in the US was going to amount approximately 1,200 Euros. ‘There you go, ma’am,’ the lady behind the counter said, ‘that’ll be 50 Euros.’” Lisa pauses again, and sighs. “I cried.”

Lisa pauses to make one more point: “I have been talking about *storytelling* all along. But there is one more thing I would like to emphasize, and that is that communication is a two-way process; on the one side is the teller, on the other, the listener. Learning to take the time, to pay attention, to see and hear the other, to say with sincerity ‘really, how fascinating!’ is at least as important. For ourselves as well as for the ones telling their story.”