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The Most Jewish Crocodile in New York

Menachem Wecker | September 18, 2015 | Image: Illustration 1987 by Bernard Waber

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On the sidewalks leading up to the National Museum of American Jewish History, located mere steps from Philadelphia’s Liberty Bell, green reptilian footprints lead the way to the exhibit “Lyle, Lyle, Crocodile and Friends: The Art of Bernard Waber.” Ilana Blumenthal, the museum’s marketing and communications manager, conceived of the footprints to promote the show, and she often sees children leaping from one four-fingered mint-green pad to the next. Sometimes she also sees adults enlarging their

strides to follow the crocodile's path, but when they realize they're being watched, they stop immediately, embarrassed.

That bridge between adult and child is a good way to think about the exhibit, whose installation at NMAJH is more playful than its previous iteration at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, in Amherst, Massachusetts. At the Philadelphia venue, the walls are painted a lighter shade of green than that of the show's namesake, and there is a room with large stuffed crocodiles and books reserved for child's play. "I think we all knew the Lyle section was going to be green. How could you not?!" said Shira Goldstein, the museum's exhibition coordinator.

"We took inspiration from the books," Josh Perelman, chief curator and director of exhibitions and collections, said of the color palette and whimsical designs. "We very much want this to feel like a family-friendly experience. Having the illustrations on the wall and having the unique coloration, the environment is quite joyful, like many of his books."

If an informal poll I took of family, friends and bewildered acquaintances is any indication, there are some groupies who grew up with and adore "The House on East 88th Street" and "Lyle, Lyle, Crocodile"; a smaller number that doesn't see what the fuss is about and many who aren't at all familiar with any of Waber's 30 children's books. Waber, who passed away at 91 in 2013, wrote and illustrated all of them. Lyle, after all, is no Curious George, even though "Lyle" was made into a TV show, and on May 14, 2014, New York City's Yorkville Community School, on East 88th Street, was named a "[literary landmark](#)" for Waber's books.

For those who don't know Lyle, here's the quick version. The crocodile, who is based on drawings of crocs that Waber created as a child at the Philadelphia Zoo, is mysteriously found bathing in a house on East 88th Street, terrifying the new owners, the Primm family. Before they can dial 911, an "oddly dressed" man arrives at the door, hands them a note and quickly departs. Stage and screen star Hector P. Valenti, Lyle's previous owner, reveals in the note that the croc is named Lyle, eats only Turkish caviar and is "the most gentle of creatures and would not do harm to a flea." He also can perform

many good tricks. And so Lyle tries to find his place on a sometimes hostile Upper East Side.

Perelman, who grew up with Lyle and with Waber's "Ira Sleeps Over," notes that having children was Waber's inspiration to write. Although familiar with the author and illustrator, Perelman wasn't aware until recently that Waber's parents were European Jewish immigrants to Philadelphia, and that Waber grew up in an observant home.

Paulis Waber, the artist's Washington, D.C.-based daughter who is a graphic artist and the illustrator of "Lyle Walks the Dogs," said: "My father had a strong sense of Jewish identification and a love of Jewish home life and culture. He was also quite interested in the lives of Jewish people in America. I think he would have been especially proud to have the exhibition at the NMAJH."

When she first saw the banner for her father's exhibit at the museum, Paulis Waber took note of a sign that advertised another exhibit; it read "Only in America" in neon. "I think that my father's story was similar to the multitude of postwar American lives," she said. "The GI Bill gave him an opportunity to obtain the education he wanted and strike out in his own direction at a time when opportunities had become especially available."

Goldstein sees Jewish values in many of Waber's stories. "Lyle as a crocodile in a world of humans is obviously an outsider. That definitely represents Waber's growing up Jewish, as a child of immigrants," she said, noting that Waber's family spoke Yiddish and one of his brothers founded Philadelphia's Germantown Jewish Centre. Paulis said her dad was fond of the Hebrew/Yiddish word *ta'am*, which he defined as something with "true taste or relish," a trait that "he greatly valued... in life and in literature. And he wanted his own work to have *ta'am* — in other words, to be enjoyable and in some way memorable.")

"They moved around a lot during his childhood. He often found friendships wherever he moved, in the library," Goldstein said. "In interviews he would say whenever they were moving, he would ask his parents, 'Are we going to be near a library?' That's what got his storytelling and imagination going."

After attending elementary and high schools in Philadelphia, Waber started taking accounting classes at night at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, but he was drafted to serve at the Panama Canal in World War II. When he returned to Philadelphia, he enrolled at what was then the Philadelphia Museum School of Art (now The University of the Arts) and earned a commercial art degree. After marrying, he moved to New York to work in magazine layout at Conde Nast and at Time Life.

Walking through the NMAJH galleries, where one can see the manuscript version of “The House on East 88th Street,” illustration boards and Waber’s drawing table, it’s clear that Lyle the Crocodile was a bridge between his creator’s time in Pennsylvania and in New York.

“In a way, Lyle, even though he’s a typical New Yorker, was born in Philadelphia,” Goldstein said.

Menachem Wecker is co-author of “Consider No Evil: Two Faith Traditions and the Problem of Academic Freedom in Religious Higher Education” (Cascade Books, 2014).