Annie's Ghosts: A Journey into a Family Secret
Steve Luxenberg
WHAT IS THE GREAT MICHIGAN READ?

This reading initiative aims to connect us as Michiganders by exploring our history, our present, and our future as discussed in a single literary title. The program is intended for young adults to senior citizens with broad goals of making literature more accessible and appealing while also encouraging residents to learn more about our state and individual identities.

WHAT IS THE GREAT MICHIGAN READ?

The Michigan Humanities Council’s Great Michigan Read is a book club for the entire state. With a statewide focus on a single book – Annie’s Ghosts: A Journey into a Family Secret by Steve Luxenberg – it aims to connect us as Michiganders by deepening our understanding of our state, our society, and our history.

WHY ANNIE’S GHOSTS?

Annie’s Ghosts is part memoir, part detective story, and part history. Employing his skills as a journalist while struggling to maintain his empathy as a son, author Steve Luxenberg pieces together the story of his mother’s motivations, his aunt’s unknown life, and the times in which they lived. His search takes him to imperial Russia and Depression-era Detroit, through the Holocaust in Ukraine and the Philippine war zone, and back to the hospitals where Annie and many others languished in anonymity.

Annie’s Ghosts is a story about family secrets, personal journeys, genealogy, mental disability and illness, poverty, and immigration. It is a story of reframing one’s self-understanding once a family secret is revealed, providing insight into how our identities are shaped by learning something shockingly new about our family history.

HOW CAN I PARTICIPATE?

Pick up a copy of Annie’s Ghosts and supporting materials at Meijer, your local library, or your favorite bookseller – or download the e-book. Read the book, share and discuss it with your friends, and participate in Great Michigan Read activities in your community and online.

Register your library, school, company, or book club and receive copies of reader’s guides, teacher’s guides, bookmarks, and other informational materials at no cost. Nonprofit organizations – including schools and libraries – may apply for discussion kits, which include free copies of Annie’s Ghosts.

For more details, including a calendar of events, additional resources, and to register your organization, visit www.michiganhumanities.org.

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Cover: Beth Cohen, Spring 1945; Courtesy Luxenberg Family
**Q&A WITH STEVE LUXENBERG**

**How did you approach writing Annie’s Ghosts?**

I saw Annie’s Ghosts as a story about a search, about putting myself in someone else’s place, about whether the truth can be found, and how to navigate the distortions that memory imposes on the truth. It seemed natural to write the story in the first person, as part memoir and part history, while separating my memories from those of the people I found and interviewed.

**As you got deeper in your research, what was the biggest surprise you encountered?**

I never thought I’d find so many secrets, with so many levels and implications—and not just in my own family. In retrospect, I’m not sure why I wasn’t prepared for that. I suppose it seems obvious that one secret begets other secrets.

**What is the story’s most compelling lesson for today?**

The power of secrecy cannot be underestimated. For many families, secrets can be a destructive force. They can affect generations long after the secret is created. I don’t want anyone to believe that we need to live our lives like open books, but if a secret is harming the secret keeper, if carrying that secret is causing the secret keeper pain, then my rule of thumb is to release the secret. My mother would have been a much happier person if she had released her secret.

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**ANNIE’S GHOSTS**

Two sisters, born two years apart to immigrant parents, grow up in Depression-era Detroit. One—Beth, my mother—escapes eight years of low-paying jobs and her family’s walk-up apartment by marrying and moving away from the neighborhood that she equates with broken promises and broken lives.

The other sister? She was my mother’s secret. Annie’s Ghosts is their story, as best as I could unearth it.

-Steve Luxenberg

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

www.steveluxenberg.com
Family secrets take many forms and are discovered in various ways – through a slip in conversation, by a family member doing genealogical research, through a treasure trove of old letters, or even through social media.

“Shame is often the reason why many people create and keep a secret. Shame is a terribly destructive emotion. If we could avoid shame, we would all be better off.”

STEVE LUXENBERG

Secrets and their discovery can powerfully shape our identities. Steve Luxenberg states, “Identity along with secrecy is one of the overarching themes of the book. My mom took on a new identity, reinvented herself as the girl who grew up as an only child after her sister Annie went into the institution. Annie lost her identity when she went to Eloise, essentially becoming anonymous. In trying to reconstruct their stories, and the times in which they lived, I had to reinterpret my own identity – and confront how my mom’s secret-keeping defined me and my understanding of my family.”

LETTER TO STEVE’S MOM

“Darling precious angel,

I’m ashamed to say this darling. I’m not making a very good soldier. It’s getting me down dear and I’m going to pieces. I just can’t take it...it’s impossible to take all that’s dished out. They just don’t seem to have any heart. I’m being worked 18-20 hours a day, and every nite lying in bed I shed a tear. I just can’t help it. Perhaps I’m not a man–at least in the army way... I doubt whether I’ll ever be the same where and if I return to you.”

“Precious, if it’s all at possible in any way regardless of price–get me out of this–if I stay much longer I’ll be in the insane asylums. I know I shouldn’t be saying this –I can’t help it. I know once and for all I won’t be able to take 17 weeks of this hell. Please, darling, do whatever you can–I really don’t know what you’ll be able to do–do something–please–please. Don’t get upset as I know you probably will be–control yourself as much as you can and try and see if there is anyway for me to get out of this mess. Even if you have to write the president–I mean it...”

February 2, 1944, Steve’s Dad at Camp Wolters, writing to Steve’s Mom in Detroit

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:


Once we find out about a lost family member, we often feel compelled to find them or find out about them. *Annie’s Ghosts* recounts Steve Luxenberg’s journey to learn about his Aunt Annie.

**LOST FAMILY MEMBERS**

After her parents died, Annie Cohen was left alone in Eloise Hospital. She was essentially lost to future generations of her family.

Her nephew, author Steve Luxenberg, learns that this is not uncommon. A state employee speculated that there were thousands of people who were institutionalized and forgotten.

There are many ways in which family members were lost in the past: in psychiatric institutions; in Indian boarding schools; via immigration to another country.

There are many ways in which family members are lost today: to the streets; to prisons; to addiction; to societal and family shunning.

Once we find out about a lost family member, we often feel compelled to find them or find out about them. *Annie’s Ghosts* recounts Steve Luxenberg’s journey to learn about his Aunt Annie.

**ADMISSION RECORD**

Annie Cohen, an alleged insane person 5/8/40

**DISCUSSION POINTS**

**DO? HOW? IF?**

Do you have family members that were lost but are now found?
How did you find out about them?
If they are still living, have you been able to connect with them?
If they are deceased, what do you wish you could ask them?

“As I try to understand my mom’s reasons for hiding her sister’s existence, readers have a front-row seat to the reality of growing up poor in America during the 1920s and 1930s, at a time when the nation’s asylums had a population of 400,000 and growing.”

-Steve Luxenberg

**PIECES FROM THE PAST**

“To understand my mother’s reasons for hiding her sister’s existence, to learn as much as I could about my secret aunt, I was trying to reconstruct the world as Mom and Annie knew it in 1940, the year of Annie’s institutionalization for mental illness at Eloise Hospital outside Detroit. To see what Mom saw, I had to find the people who lived in her apartment building, or went to her school, or listened to her account of what had happened.”

-Steve Luxenberg

**Only two of the 7,441 graves at Eloise have markers with names on them. The rest only have numbers.**
Portraits of Honor cherishes and honors each and every Michigan survivor. For so long, Holocaust survivors have not been appreciated for what they endured and for what they have gone on to accomplish in their lives after the war.

**OUR MICHIGAN HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS**

New research is teaching us more about the scope of the Holocaust. On March 1, 2013, The New York Times reported that researchers at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., have now cataloged 42,500 Nazi ghettos and camps that existed throughout Europe from 1933 to 1945. An estimated 15-20 million people died or were imprisoned in the documented sites.

After the Holocaust, some survivors immigrated to the U.S.; many of those came to Michigan. The Program for Holocaust Survivors and Families, a service of Jewish Senior Life of Metropolitan Detroit, has created an interactive educational exhibit, Portraits of Honor: Our Michigan Holocaust Survivors, to document the lives of our Michigan Holocaust Survivors for education and posterity. The exhibit is housed at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills and available online at www.portraitsofhonor.org.

**ANNA OLIWEK**

One of our Michigan Survivors, Anna Oliwek, was instrumental in helping Steve Luxenberg learn more about his family history. You can learn more about Anna by reading Annie’s Ghosts and from her portrait in Portraits of Honor.

To be included in the permanent exhibit, survivors can contact Dr. Charles Silow at 248.661.2999 or at csilow@jslmi.org. Families of Michigan Survivors who have passed away are also encouraged to contact Dr. Silow to have their loved ones included in the exhibit.

**DISCUSSION POINTS**

**DO? DID? HOW?**

Do you have family members who left their home country because of persecution?
Did they find solace and protection in their adopted countries?
How can future generations keep their stories alive?

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**
www.portraitsofhonor.org
www.holocaustcenter.org

**15-20 Million**

An estimated 15-20 million people died or were imprisoned in the documented sites.

**42,500**

**NAZI CAMPS & GHETTOS**

Researchers at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., have now cataloged 42,500 Nazi ghettos and camps that existed throughout Europe from 1933 to 1945.

**SURVIVOR: ANNA OLIWEK**

NAME AT BIRTH
Chayka Shlain
PLACE AND YEAR OF BIRTH
Radziwillow, Ukraine, 1923
NAME OF GHETTO
Radziwillow
ESCAPE OR HIDING PLACE
Novomoskovsk, Russia using a false German identity
YEAR OF DEATH
2013

Anna Oliwek’s postwar identification card. Courtesy of Anna Oliwek.
Before writing Annie’s Ghosts, author Steve Luxenberg knew little about his family’s history. He calls himself a storyteller, not a genealogist, but he taught himself as much as he could about the techniques that genealogists use.

**DISCUSSION POINTS**

**HAVE? WHAT?**
Have you tried to research your family’s history?
What was the most interesting thing you learned?
What was the most difficult roadblock you encountered?

**BEGIN YOUR SEARCH**
You can begin your search for census and other records by using online databases such as familysearch.org and ancestry.com. These and other resources are available to the public at the Archives of Michigan in Lansing. Online databases are also available through many public libraries, and for a fee, you can subscribe to them yourself and have access from your home computer.

Available for free at Seeking Michigan (seekingmichigan.org), the Archives of Michigan has developed a step-by-step guide to help researchers get started. With the combination of onsite research at archives and libraries, online research at subscription databases, and the network of local genealogical societies across the state, exploring your family history has never been easier.

Archives of Michigan Senior Archivist Kris Rzepczynski says that the first step to researching family history is to ask “any and all family members key questions such as who, where, and when?” Before delving into census and other records, he says, it is very helpful to be able to narrow your research by name, location, and time period.

**WHERE TO BEGIN YOUR SEARCH**

**CYNDIS LIST**
www.cyndislist.com
An excellent starting point for online research.

**FAMILY SEARCH**
www.familysearch.org
This free website has an impressive array of records from across the world.

**SEEKING MICHIGAN**
www.seekingmichigan.org
The free, digital platform for the Archives of Michigan.

**ANCESTRY.COM**
www.ancestry.com
Access billions of genealogy records including Census, SSDI & Military records.

**GET STARTED**
Online databases are also available through many public libraries, and for a fee, you can subscribe to them yourself and have access from your home computer.

**ANNIE’S BIRTH RECORD**
Born: April 27, 1919
Died: August 7, 1972
As Michigan’s general population grew, so did its population of citizens experiencing mental illness. The state recognized its responsibility to care for those experiencing mental illness, opening the Michigan Asylum for the Insane in Kalamazoo in 1859. As the need for mental health care grew, additional facilities opened.

By the mid-1950s, more than “20,000 Michiganders with mental illness were residing in state- or county-operated psychiatric facilities.”

In 1963, the passage of the Michigan Community Mental Health Services Act (Public Act 54) empowered each of the state’s counties to establish and administer community mental health services. In 1974, the passage of the Michigan Mental Health Code (Public Act 258) established the principle of “least restrictive setting,” which solidified the trend of deinstitutionalization. As a result of deinstitutionalization, the inpatient census in public psychiatric hospitals fell to 5,000 by 1975 (Michigan Mental Health Commission Final Report, Appendix B, 13). Since 1996, person-centered planning has been required by the Michigan Mental Health Code.

Currently, the Michigan Department of Community Health maintains four state psychiatric hospitals and one state psychiatric facility for children and adolescents. In 2013, Michigan’s state psychiatric bed capacity totaled 1,017. At the same time, 46 Community Mental Health Service Programs serve all 83 counties in Michigan.
ELOISE HOSPITAL

1832-1984

The Wayne County Poor House – Eloise’s progenitor – was founded in 1832, five years before Michigan became a state. Its original property, located at Gratiot and Mt. Elliott avenues in Hamtramck Township, deteriorated quickly. In 1834, 280 acres were purchased in Nankin Township, now the City of Westland, for a new poorhouse. In 1839, 35 people were transferred to the new location.

The name Eloise is derived from the name of the post office established at the Poor House in 1894. The U.S. Postal Service required that post offices have original names—Eloise was named after the postmaster’s four-year-old daughter.

Eloise, like many of its peer institutions, developed into a “self-supporting community with its own police and fire department, railroad and trolley stations, bakery, amusement hall, laundries, and a powerhouse” (Ibbotson 7). Eloise also had its own farm, including “barns, a piggery, root cellars, a tobacco curing building, and greenhouses” (Ibbotson 7).

At its peak during the Great Depression, Eloise occupied 902 acres and housed 10,000 patients (Ibbotson 8).

Farm operations ceased in 1958. Some of the larger buildings were vacated in 1973. The general hospital closed in 1984.

Today, four buildings remain (two of which are habitable) on a small parcel of land.

902
Eloise occupied 902 acres, and also had its own farm, including “barns, a piggery, root cellars, a tobacco curing building, and greenhouses.”

10,000
At its peak during the Great Depression, Eloise housed 10,000 patients.

1984
Farm operations ceased in 1958. Some of the larger buildings were vacated in 1973. The general hospital closed in 1984.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:
www.cityofwestland.com/historicalcommission

WHAT?
What do you think it was like to live at Eloise?
What would it be like to visit Eloise?

LITTLE ELOISE
The name Eloise is derived from the name of the post office established at the Poor House in 1894. The U.S. Postal Service required that post offices have original names—Eloise was named after the postmaster’s four-year-old daughter.

DISCUSSION POINTS

From Top: Cannery Employees; Music Therapy; Sleeping Quarters at Eloise. Courtesy Westland Historical Commission. Bottom: Eloise today.
**DISCUSSION POINTS**

**HOW?**
Historically, how were Michigan’s mentally ill children served?
How are they served now?
How were and are persons with developmental disabilities served?

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**MICHIGAN PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS**

1. Eloise Hospital 1832-1984
2. Kalamazoo State Hospital 1859-
3. Pontiac State Hospital/Clinton Valley Center 1878-1997
4. Ionia State Hospital for the Criminally Insane 1885-1974
5. Traverse City State Hospital 1885-1989
6. Newberry State Hospital 1895-1992
7. Michigan State Hospital for Epileptics/Caro Regional Mental Health Center 1914-
8. Detroit Psychiatric Institute (served both adults and children) 1915-1997
13. Walter Reuther Psychiatric Hospital 1979-
14. Center for Forensic Psychiatry 1969-

Currently, 46 Community Mental Health Service Programs serve all 83 counties in Michigan.

*still open; all other publicly owned and operated psychiatric hospitals listed here have been closed

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**FACILITY OPEN & CLOSE TIMELINE**

- OPEN DATE
- CLOSE DATE
- STILL OPEN
The original settlers of Michigan were the Paleo-Indians, descendants of people who crossed the Bering Strait from Asia roughly 14,000 years ago (Glazier and Helweg 19). Between 1000 BCE and 1650 CE, the Ojibwa (Chippewa), Ottawa, and Potawatomi migrated to Michigan from the eastern seaboard, settling in the upper and lower peninsulas (Clifton, Cornell, and McClurken v).

In the 17th century, “the French were the first Europeans to come to Michigan” as explorers and traders (Glazier and Helweg 22; Dunbar and May 17).

In the 18th century, “The original settlers of Michigan were the Paleo-Indians,” descendants of people who crossed the Bering Strait from Asia roughly 14,000 years ago (Glazier and Helweg 19). Between 1000 BCE and 1650 CE, the Ojibwa (Chippewa), Ottawa, and Potawatomi migrated to Michigan from the eastern seaboard, settling in the upper and lower peninsulas (Clifton, Cornell, and McClurken v).

In the 19th century, “the French were the first Europeans to come to Michigan” as explorers and traders (Glazier and Helweg 22; Dunbar and May 17).

The growth of the auto industry in the 20th century brought a new wave of immigrants to Michigan, including Arabs, Poles, Russians, Hungarians, Romanians, and Greeks. Joining them were African Americans from the south and whites from southern Appalachia.

In 2011, 11.4 percent of Michigan’s immigrants were born in Mexico, 8 percent in India, and 6.4 percent in Canada (“Michigan Fact Sheet”).

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**
The Michigan Central Railway facilitated Jewish settlement in southern Michigan. Jews also traveled by foot, horse and wagon, river steamer, and train to the lumbering areas of mid-Michigan.

**JEWISH IMMIGRATION & MIGRATION TO MICHIGAN: 1761-1924**

The first known Jewish settler, a German-born fur trader and supplier, made his way to what is now Mackinaw City in 1761 (Cantor 3). By the 1850s, about a hundred Jewish traders and pioneers, mostly from Prussia and Bavaria, had settled in Michigan (Cantor 6-7). Jews came because of discriminatory laws in Europe, and because of the promise of religious freedom.

Similarly, in the 1880s as conditions in eastern Europe became increasingly oppressive for Polish, Russian, Czech, and Hungarian Jews, immigration to the United States and Michigan increased dramatically. Between 1880 and 1920, the Jewish population in Detroit grew from 1,000 to 35,000 (Bolkosky in Cantor 16).

The first priority for Jewish immigrants was to earn a living. According to Cantor, many Jews chose peddling – fruits, vegetables, clothing, and sundries – because sales presented an immediate opportunity (16-17).

Jewish entrepreneurs ventured far and wide in Michigan. The Michigan Central Railway facilitated Jewish settlement in Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, Adrian, Jackson, Marshall, and Kalamazoo (Graff in Cantor 23). Jews also traveled by foot, horse and wagon, river steamer, and train to the lumbering areas of Muskegon, Saginaw, Bay City, East Tawas, and Alpena as well as to the mining camps of Houghton-Hancock (Cantor 18-38).

Migration of Jews to Detroit continued in the early 20th century; Detroit’s industry was booming, and in 1914 Henry Ford’s $5/day was a significant incentive. By 1924, new restrictive laws caused Jewish immigration to Detroit to cease (Bolkosky 19).

**FRUITS OF LABOR**

Many Jewish immigrants earned a living peddling – fruits, vegetables, clothing, and sundries – because sales presented an immediate opportunity.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**


In the 1880s as conditions in eastern Europe became increasingly oppressive for Polish, Russian, Czech, and Hungarian Jews, immigration to the United States and Michigan increased dramatically. Between 1880 and 1920, the Jewish population in Detroit grew from 1,000 to 35,000.
THE GREAT MICHIGAN READ IS PRESENTED BY
THE MICHIGAN HUMANITIES COUNCIL

The Michigan Humanities Council connects people and communities by fostering and creating quality cultural programs. It is Michigan’s nonprofit affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Since 1974, the Michigan Humanities Council has supported communities through family literacy programs, special cultural and historical exhibits, book discussions, author tours, scholarly lectures and mentors, films, cultural celebrations, and school programs and performances that have reached millions of Michiganders.

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