

**SYDNEY TAYLOR AWARD FOR YOUNGER READERS:  
ILLUSTRATOR ACCEPTANCE SPEECH**

*Maryann Kovalski*

It was early evening in Toronto in late October. One of those magical fall nights that might open a Spielberg movie. I'd walked home from the studio and got a kick out of all the skeletons and other ghoulish things that were set up on the neighbors' lawns for Halloween. Funny how those things are festive even in the aftermath of a parent's death.

My husband was stirring the boiling pasta, the kids were in the family room, watching TV and I was sitting on the counter sipping a glass of wine and telling him about my recent trip back home to New York. Though I lived in Toronto, I often went back to New York. But this trip was different and had more meaning than most of them.

My father had died the year before. I don't know if he was stoical or just blessed with a lack of pain, but he didn't seem to be suffering. Still, the time passed slowly sitting by his side, what to say to distract or amuse him. I don't know why, but I asked where he lived exactly when he was growing up. In the typical way the human brain works, this man who couldn't remember exactly where he lived now, could reel off every address he and his immigrant family of eleven lived in on the Lower East Side. I grabbed a sheet of paper and wrote: 25 Henry Street, 58 Henry Street, 33 Market Street, 64 Pike Street, 358 East Eighth Henry Street. Up to the Bronx now, rumor was there were rooms to be found on Franklyn Avenue, St. Paul's Place, Vyse Avenue. Then he went to High School. A constant migration for a better life. Not an unusual story. There are millions like it. It's the American story. I was telling my husband about the addresses my brother and I found and the ones we didn't when the doorbell rang.

The UPS man handed me an envelope from Simon & Schuster with the manuscript for RIVKA'S FIRST THANKSGIVING. At the first read through I knew I wasn't finished with the Lower East Side

In the trips that followed to study more closely the details of the buildings and get the feel of tenement life, I felt an extraordinary closeness with my past and indeed with America, land of my birth.

Cheek by jowl, hoards of disparate people lived together in some of the most awful circumstance. There has never been greater human density, greater even than Calcutta. I wondered how many illiterate geniuses lived in those airless apartments. Most of them would die in obscurity, lucky if they managed to move up to the Bronx or maybe to Brooklyn before they died. But the wheels of their hope would turn in their children and grandchildren who would move out and up and go far beyond even New York. They would spread their extraordinary energy all across America.

I wondered at the bits of architectural stonework and frivolity that surrounded many of the windows. These buildings were made for the poorest, and yet someone seemed to have the idea that even the poorest should be able to look at architectural ornamentation and beauty.

As I drew those pictures, I could hear my father's voice and remembered his stories of how it was when he grew up there. All the shouting—a veritable Babel of tongues from every part of the globe.

I'd love hearing about how he'd spend his days wandering in the streets, dodging disapproving adults, who had no compunction about castigating any child.... Children grew up quickly on the Lower East Side. Elsa may have invented brave Rivka ..., but the Lower East Side would have produced such a child.

It was a pulsating nucleus of humanity with one thing in common—hope. It was, I think, perhaps a selfish hope; they simply wanted not to be so poor. They longed not to be oppressed. They had no idea they were going to be one of the primary sources of America's strength.

I can't help but wonder how many of us are obscurely related if only because our grandparents or great-grandparents might have rubbed elbows in that place. I feel so blessed to have come from it.

I want to thank Elsa for writing "Rivka" and Karen at McElderry for giving me such a wonderful creative experience and of course the awards committee for putting the icing on the cake.