

Lucia Ruedenberg living on the Community Farm

Hannah Davis, special to the WJN

Our call was charmingly punctuated with a cuckoo-clock alarm, the chirps and squawks of pet birds, and periodic interruptions from kids in the house, as I sat down to talk to community member Lucia Ruedenberg about her life in Ann Arbor, her involvement with one of the oldest CSAs in the country (that also has deep connections to the Jewish community in the area), and the ways her Judaism informs and ties into her life philosophy.

Lucia moved to the Ann Arbor area in 2018 from Pittsburgh, having prior to that been a New York City resident for 30 years. She grew up in Ames, Iowa. Her Pittsburgh Jewish community, Dor Hadash, was one



of the congregations hit in Squirrel Hill in the Tree of Life shooting. When she and her family came to Ann Arbor, they looked up Reconstructionist congregations in the area and attended infrequently. Lucia decided to officially join the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation (AARC) this past year.

During their move, Lucia and her husband reached out through a connection via the contra dance community, which they were active in back in Pittsburgh and wanted to be involved in here too. They connected with Nancy and Drake Meadow, who are also AARC members. They saw the listing for a house on a farm in the area, which turned out to be the teaching farm for the Rudolf Steiner school in Ann Arbor. Lucia said she and her husband had “had a homestead in a previous life and wanted to be back in connection with some kind of farming.” The farm in question, Community Farm of Ann Arbor, is one of the first CSAs in the country and the first in Michigan, founded in 1988 with biodynamic principles (biodynamics is the philosophy that helped spawn the modern organic movement). Lucia and her family live on the property in the house, and the farmer lives nearby.

Community Farm has a strong focus on the “community” aspect: if you want, you can pay your dues and pick up your vegetables and leave, but many members go further. There are “weed and sing” events as well as opportunities for families to bring children who can explore the farm, play, and learn where their food comes from. Members are encouraged to bring their own skills: one member with expertise in solar energy has



converted many of the farm’s buildings and one of the tractors to run on solar, and another member runs the beehives. Last year the farm put on a fundraiser event to raise money for new roofs for the barns, with live music, contra dancing, and outdoor lectures on the history of barns, sustainable farming, and ecology.

Helping run one of the longest-running CSAs in the country isn’t easy, Lucia says: “The economics of sustainable farming are very hard ... it requires a group effort.” Most small farms stay afloat because they are a multi-generational undertaking, the land is inherited, and often one or more household members work outside the farm. Community Farm is exploring ways to sustain their model long term. Their farmer, Dan Gannon, is focusing on methods of restorative agriculture and no-till principles to increase the nutrient density of the soil. A variety of animals are helping to fertilize the fields and clear out the brush, following a few lean years of harvests. They have also introduced a stewardship cost to the CSA membership, as a way for some members to contribute extra toward the ongoing cost of stewarding

the land and the infrastructure, beyond just the cost of growing vegetables.

Community Farm has some surprisingly deep ties to the Jewish community in the area, with many active Jewish members, including Rebecca Kanner, who has been president of the farm board for many years, and Marcy Epstein, who has provided Lucia with support and community during the pandemic. Lucia says, “They’ve found it a place to bring their Jewish values of what it means to be connected to the land and to embody their spirituality. The farm has always welcomed people to do things like that, from all different parts of the community. That’s part of its purpose.” They have all found participation on the farm to be a form of tikkun olam for them. Lucia herself connects her Jewish values to her work on the farm, saying “We seek to be good custodians of the land as we grow CSA shares. We experience the natural world as an expression of God, as God’s gift to us, and it is our responsibility to value it. At the Community Farm, we value the sacredness of ordinary, daily life, with its tasks and responsibilities, especially in how they impact food and community.”

It’s hard, when you’re young, to imagine looking at the arc of your life and constructing a coherent narrative from it, pulling meaningful trends. Talking to Lucia shows that is a possibility, though. Some persistent themes were repeated no matter what part of her life we talked about. She discussed her mixed heritage influences growing up with her German Jewish scientist father and her Swiss Protestant puppeteer mother, straddling the worlds of Christianity and Judaism, academia and art, and learning to combine the two in her career, where she has been a writer and an academic, and now makes natural, Waldorf-inspired toys for Palumba, a local business owned by a long-term Community Farm member. “I sit at the crossroads of different cultures ... I think that at their core art and science come from the same source, are different expressions of the same energy, just a different way of looking at and expressing and understanding the world.”

Living on the Community Farm, too, allows her to bring together different parts of herself: working with her hands, committing to biodynamic principles, being in touch with the sources of one’s food, connecting to Jews in community, and raising a new generation with deep ties to the land.

She says she’s been able to look back on her life and see the different stages she went through across the decades: “The 20s were an incredible time of experimenting and trying new things, the 30s were real hard work years ... and by the time you hit 40 you can say, ‘I think I know what I want’ ... you don’t have to try everything anymore. By the time you hit 50, you really get a lot of clarity. It kind of all starts at 50.” She compares her journey through life to that of Rebecca Solnit, whose book, *Recollections of My Nonexistence*, she’s been reading. Solnit “always seemed to know she wanted to be a writer, but it took her forever to become one. She took a lot of winding paths.”

Lucia looks forward to deepening her involvement with AARC in the new year, perhaps by hosting congregation events on the farm: putting up a sukkah, hosting Shabbat, or other celebrations. The pandemic, and the death of her husband in mid-2020, forced her and her two teenage daughters to reconfigure many elements of their life, and her “relationship to everything has changed profoundly in many ways.” But, as with all of us, she’s looking forward to things getting better. She talked about her time working on a kibbutz in Israel in her 30s, talking to survivors from WWII there: “They said the reason Jews have survived this long was because they were motivated, they were so committed and motivated to survive. That’s what I feel, that kind of tenacity and motivation to survive, but also to thrive and to do good.”

Learn more about the Community Farm at <http://communityfarmofaa.org/>, or at <https://www.facebook.com/community-farmofannarbor>. ■