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**Hudson Valley One** |

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Elegant is the word

Yiddish Corner

students fête Noami

Leaf Halpern’s 106th

birthday at Golden Hill

**by Frances Marion Platt**

**“S**he’s here!” Intermittent rain and a sustained sense of excitement both permeated the air outside the Golden Hill Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Kingston last Friday afternoon, as friends and admirers of Noami Leaf Halpern gathered to wish her a happy 106th birthday – pandemic-style, through window glass. Celebrants juggled umbrellas, hand-lettered signs, flowers, a scruffy dog and a fruit-festooned birthday cake as the centenarian made her appearance, dressed in a lilac blouse

and enthroned in a wheelchair.

“I’m asking God to make the rain stop,” announced one visitor, Shelley Wyant. “I need that blue sky!” She got part of her wish, as the drizzle abated long enough for the well-wishers to gather (at six-foot intervals) around the window, take selfies with the birthday girl and join her in a Yiddish folksong, “Schoen, Bin Ich Schoen,” assisted via Wyant’s speakerphone. Still graceful and vivacious, Halpern accompanies the singing with hand movements, “conducting,” miming hugs, blowing kisses and exaggeratedly licking her chops as the cake baked by Manana Levine was presented. Wyant, who first became acquainted with “Noamele” while teaching a course in Yiddish theater at Bard college, proclaimed Halpern “a glorious, beautiful human being.”

Born Noami Leaf Aleh to Russian Jewish expatriate artists in Jerusalem in 1914 and a Woodstocker since the 1940s, Halpern has expressed herself primarily in movement since she first took up

dance and drama as a child at Camp Kinderwelt, the Labor Zionist Yiddish summer camp in Highland Mills. Her dance career spanned some 60 years. By age 13, she was studying ballet under former Ballets Russes choreographer Mikhail Fokine. Observing folkdance troupes from many lands performing in New York City, she decided to make it her mission to perform Israeli dance styles, choreographing dances in which she portrayed biblical heroines. She took these on tour throughout Europe in the 1930s; but as conditions for Jews there worsened with the growth of Nazism,

she settled more permanently in the US.

Among the highlights of her life as a performer were a stint with the Ziegfeld Follies, in 1934, and appearances at the Museum of Modern Art and on the *Steve Allen Show* in 1960 with a troupe of

Yemeni folkdancers. Halpern organized the first modern dance troupe in Boston, the Festival Dance Company, and later worked as a dance therapist. In 1941 she married Rabbi Peretz Halpern, who presided over a congregation on Long Island before relocating to Woodstock. They bought a historic house in the Byrdcliffe neighborhood. After Peretz’s death in 1988, Noami returned to her native Israel

for a while to live on a kibbutz. Since her return to Woodstock, Halpern remained active in community

affairs, including acting and doing choreography with the Comets of Woodstock. Many of the well-wishers from her 106th birthday celebration know her from the weekly Yiddish Vinkl (Yiddish Corner)

classes that she taught for years at the Woodstock Jewish Congregation. The Jewish Federation of Ulster County honored her with its Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014, when she turned 100.

Unfortunately, WJC’s rabbi, Jonathan Kligler, who was supposed to play guitar at the open-air birthday party, was unable to attend because he was officiating on July 3 at the funeral of another local centenarian, Pauline Delson of Saugerties.

One of the celebration’s other organizers, Barbara Lubell, had planned to duet with Kligler on fiddle, but the weather proved too inhospitable to bring out humidity-sensitive wooden instruments. Lubell carried a sign instead, sporting the number 106 in large, colorful letters. “Elegant is the word for Noami,” she said. “She speaks many languages; she’s fluent in French, Russian and Hebrew.

She always embroidered and crocheted. She has an artist’s sensibility.”

In 2017, Christa Whitney recorded an interview with Noami Leaf Halpern, more than an hour long, for the Yiddish Book Center’s Wexler Oral History Project. The full version, in Yiddish, can be viewed online at *www.yiddishbookcenter. org/collections/oral-histories/interviews/woh-fi-0000902/noami-leaf-halpern-2017*. There are also links on the webpage to shorter segments, translated into English.