

The Home Run: Stanley Kunitz (1905-2006)



This self-guided tour (20 minutes driving or 40 minutes walking) leads you southeast from the Canal District in Worcester, Massachusetts and up Vernon Hill to several sites related to Stanley Kunitz (Fig. 1)—a United States Poet Laureate, founder of Poets House in New York City and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and the recipient of many honors, including the Pulitzer Prize for his *Selected Poems* and the National Book Award for *Passing Through*. The tour, one of two devoted to Stanley Kunitz, traces his family's relocations during his childhood as well as his daily walk home from school, described in "The Testing-Tree." It begins at **Polar Park** and ends at the **Stanley Kunitz Boyhood Home** at 4 Woodford Street.

Fig 1. Pen-and-ink portrait of Kunitz by Emma Kuper

1. Later in life, as he returned to Worcester for honorary degrees, readings, and an 80th birthday celebration, Kunitz began writing additional poems about his childhood there, which had been scarred by the suicide of his father, Solomon Kunitz, eight weeks before Stanley's birth. One of these poems, "Halley's Comet"—which appears in a mural at Polar Park, home of the Worcester Sox (Fig. 2)—opens our tour on **Summit Street**. The poem's speaker learns in first grade that the approaching comet might collide with Earth, and so that night, when everyone is asleep, he climbs up the ladder to the roof. Thinking that the end of the world is approaching, he tells his dead father how to find him:

*Look for me, Father, on the roof
of the red brick building
at the foot of Green Street—
that's where we live, you know,
on the top floor.*

➔ To get there, take the Madison Street exit from the Kelley Square roundabout. Turn right onto Washington Street before the Polar Park entrance, take your first right on Ash, and turn left on Summit. After you park, consider walking down to Bedlam Books at 138 Green Street and buying a volume of Kunitz to read along.



Fig. 2. Kunitz and the second half of "Halley's Comet," from a mural outside Polar Park by Ryan Gardell of Artifakt Studios. Photograph by Judith Ferrara.

2. Perhaps specifying the location seemed necessary because Kunitz’s family lived at four addresses during his childhood in a Jewish enclave on Worcester’s East Side. His parents were recent immigrants—his father, Solomon, from Russia and his mother, Yetta Jasspon, from Lithuania. Stanley first lived at **133 Green Street** with his widowed mother and two older sisters, Sophia and Sarah. Yetta ran a dry goods store at **123 Green Street** to support her children and pay the debts their father left. She worked full-time—rare for a woman then—while nursemaids cared for Stanley at “the tenement on Green Street,” as he described it in “Passing Through.” In 1910 Yetta married Mark Dine, and two years later the family moved to **79 Green Street** (Fig. 3).



Fig. 31. 79 Green Street. Photograph by Katie Knippler

➔ Proceed for one block on Summit Street; at the bottom of the hill, with the Worcester heart clock on your right, turn right onto Plymouth. Take your next right onto Green; 79 Green Street is on that corner. You will immediately pass by Gold and Ash Streets on the right; 123 and 133 Green would have been between them. Keep heading south on Green Street to return to Kelley Square.



Fig. 4. The Vernon Theatre at 1 Kelley Square, which operated from 1916 to 1920, is the only cinema from Kunitz’s childhood on the East Side of Worcester that is still standing, even though it had been the first to close.
www.cinematreasures.com

3. “The Magic Curtain,” a poem that evokes the early days of cinema, recounts how one nursemaid let Stanley skip school so they could go to the movies. Kunitz’s vibrant working-class neighborhood boasted several theatres (Fig. 4). The “Bijou”—at **24 Millbury Street**, not downtown on Front Street, as the poem implies—was operated by Italian immigrants Fred and Joe Fedeli. It flourished from the silent film era to the advent of the “talkies” Fred disliked yet still screened for his patrons. The Fedeli brothers also ran the Rialto Theatre at 37 Millbury Street.

➔ Enter the Kelley Square roundabout and take your third right onto Millbury; the Bijou would have been on your right at the end of the first block.

4. With her second husband, Yetta founded the Dine Dress Manufacturing Company—which relied on her tailoring skills to produce children’s dresses—at **65 Water Street** (Fig. 5). In “The Magic Curtain,” Kunitz’s speaker remembers that

*At breakfast mother sipped her buttermilk,
her mind already on her shop,
unrolling gingham by the yard,
stitching her dresses for the Boston trade.*

After Mark Dine died suddenly in 1920, Yetta tried to keep the business going on her own but without success. Today, however, Water Street and the Kelley Square area are filled with tempting shops and restaurants that you can visit during your tour.

→ Turn right on Lamartine Street, then right onto Harding, the first cross street, to return to Kelley Square. Enter the roundabout, shift to the left lane, and take the second exit onto Water Street (or Route 122). 65 Water Street will be on your right.



Fig. 5. 65 Water Street. Photograph by Katie Knippler

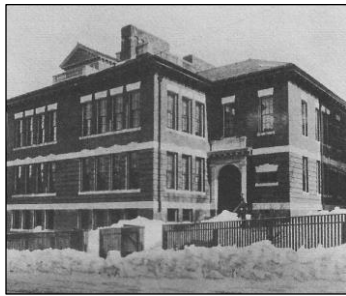


Fig. 6. Providence Street School, 1898. Courtesy, Worcester Historical Museum.

5. The next stop on our tour is Providence Street, home to many Jewish families in early 20th-century Worcester. Evidence suggests that Stanley attended **Providence Street School** (Fig. 6), at the foot of Providence Hill, for the first four grades and then nearby **Ledge Street School** through eighth grade. On a Social Security form, Kunitz speculated that one of the two schools had gone up in flames along with his academic records. Actually, both were destroyed in 1959 to make room for Interstate 290. He alludes to his early schooldays in “Halley’s Comet,” “The Magic Curtain,” and “The Testing-Tree.”

The Sons of Israel Synagogue, set almost between those two schools at **24 Providence Street**, shared their fate (Fig. 7). Although Kunitz’s family was not especially devout, worship played a central role in the Jewish community. Worcester’s East Side was eventually home to eight synagogues: riding or traveling on the Sabbath was forbidden, and so any services had to be held within walking distance. Providence Street had two synagogues—the Sons of Israel, a small wooden building called the “shul,” and Shaarai Torah, a much grander brick edifice at **32 Providence Street**—and social relationships were shaped by which one a family attended. Yetta Kunitz bought a \$5 share to help support the new Shaarai Torah building in 1906, and yet Solomon Kunitz and Mark Dine were both buried in the section of Hope Cemetery owned by the Sons of Israel, and Stanley’s bar mitzvah was held at that synagogue.

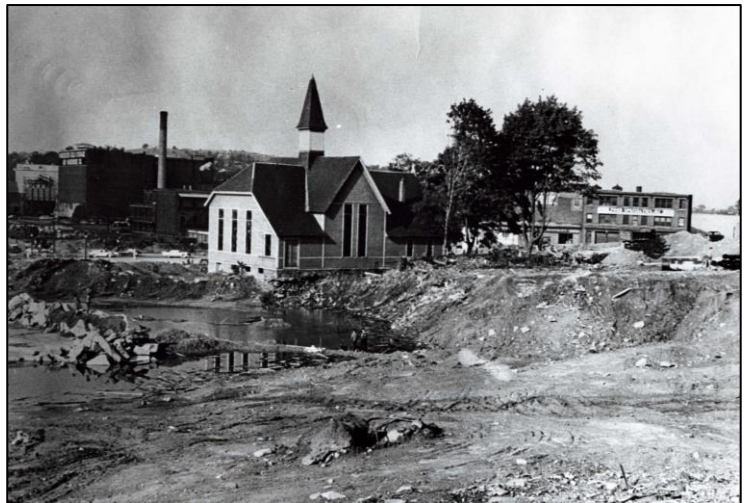


Fig. 7. The Sons of Israel Synagogue in 1958, shortly before it was razed to make room for Interstate 290. Detail of photograph. Courtesy, Worcester Historical Museum.



Fig. 8. Google Street View.

As a result of the Dine Dress Manufacturing Company's success, in 1914 Kunitz's family moved to one of Worcester's triple-deckers at **46½ Providence Street**, a few blocks up from the schools and synagogues. Like other immigrants before them, they ascended Vernon Hill as their financial situation improved. On a

trip to Worcester later in life—after many years spent elsewhere, from Harvard to rural Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Manhattan, and Provincetown—Kunitz searched for the triple-decker with a reporter from the Worcester *Telegram* but found only the “empty, rubble-strewn lot” that remains there today. He later recalled that a willow's branches would rub against his bedroom window, making him imagine faces peering in, as in his description of “childhood country” in “The Abduction.”

➔ To get to Providence Street from 65 Water Street, turn sharply right at the traffic light onto Grafton Street, following signs to “Grafton Hill.” Stay in the right lane. Go straight through another light and take your first right on Waverly (unmarked), then right on Coral Street, which veers left, becomes Union Place, veers left again, and transforms into Providence Street in front of Shaarai Torah, on the right at Number 32 (Fig. 8). Behind you, Route 290 has swallowed up where Ledge Street School, Sons of Israel, and Providence Street School once were. One block ahead, on your right, is a lot where the triple-decker at 46½ Providence Street was.

6. When Stanley was fourteen, the family moved again, far above Green Street and Providence Street, to the edge of the city, “beyond the last trolley stop.” The rest of our tour follows him on his walk home from school—as described in “The Testing-Tree”—up the long slope of “tribal Providence Hill” to his new home at 4 Woodford Street. Trudging up the hill, Stanley would come to the majestic entrance of the Worcester Academy at **81 Providence Street**—a private boys' school with a very different student body than either of the public schools he attended—and then to

*the Academy ballpark
where [he] could never hope to play*

because he was the child of poor Jewish immigrants, as he suggests in “The Testing-Tree.” Stanley shone at tennis and baseball, and the poem's speaker, gathering stones into his “pitcher's hand” and sprinting “lickety-split,” tells himself no one can deny that on his own street, at this moment, he is faster than anybody. As Kunitz grew older, he did achieve the creative, adventurous, fulfilling life that in the poem he remembers wishing for as a lonely child. At age 74, three years after it was published, he posed at the gate to **Gaskill Field** (Fig. 9), the ballpark where he could not play.

➔ Keep going up Providence Street. Worcester Academy will appear on your left and then, half a mile later, Gaskill Field on your right, immediately after the Worcester Senior Center.

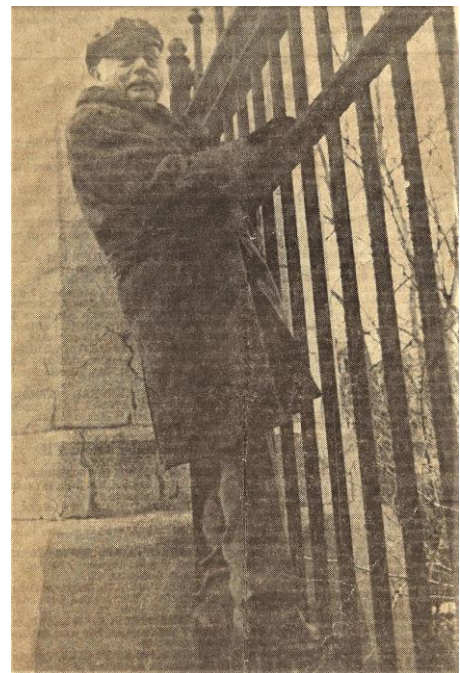


Fig. 9. Detail of photograph by Amy Zuckerman from the Worcester *Telegram*, May 25, 1980.



Fig. 10. Detail of a photograph by Cheryl Richards of Kunitz being greeted by the Stockmals' cat on the porch at 4 Woodford Street.

Returning years later, he found that the wild landscape was gone, but the house—a mix of Spanish Mission, Craftsman, and Bungalow styles—remained and was being lovingly restored by owners Greg and Carol Stockmal. During his 80th birthday celebration, Kunitz met them and saw it for the first time in 60 years (Fig. 10), including a pear tree he and his mother had planted. A friendship blossomed with the Stockmals, who sent him pears from the tree each year—inspiring the poem “My Mother’s Pears,” which he dedicated to them. The Stanley Kunitz Boyhood Home is now a Literary Landmark (Fig. 11). The house, renovated and furnished with Kunitz memorabilia, is open for tours by appointment; visit www.kunitzhome.org for information.

➔ From Gaskill Field on Providence Street, take your first left onto Holcomb Street and then right onto Woodford. The house is on your left.

7. Our tour ends at **4 Woodford Street**, the three-story, two-family home that Yetta and Mark Dine built in 1919. Yetta owned it with another couple, but when Mark died soon after they moved in, she struggled financially and in 1925 had to sign over her half of the property. Kunitz later said that of all the places where he lived in Worcester, this house was the one he dreamed about. He set several poems here, including “Three Floors” and “The Portrait,” which both use the house’s architecture—floors, stairs, windows, and doors—to convey the hidden trauma of his father’s suicide. “The Testing-Tree” tells how, after coming home from school each day, Kunitz escaped to the woods and abandoned quarry beyond it.



Fig. 11. Photograph of 4 Woodford Street by AJ Leto

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Fig. 12. Pears ripening on the tree that Kunitz planted with his mother at 4 Woodford Street in 1919. Detail of photograph by John Gaumond.



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