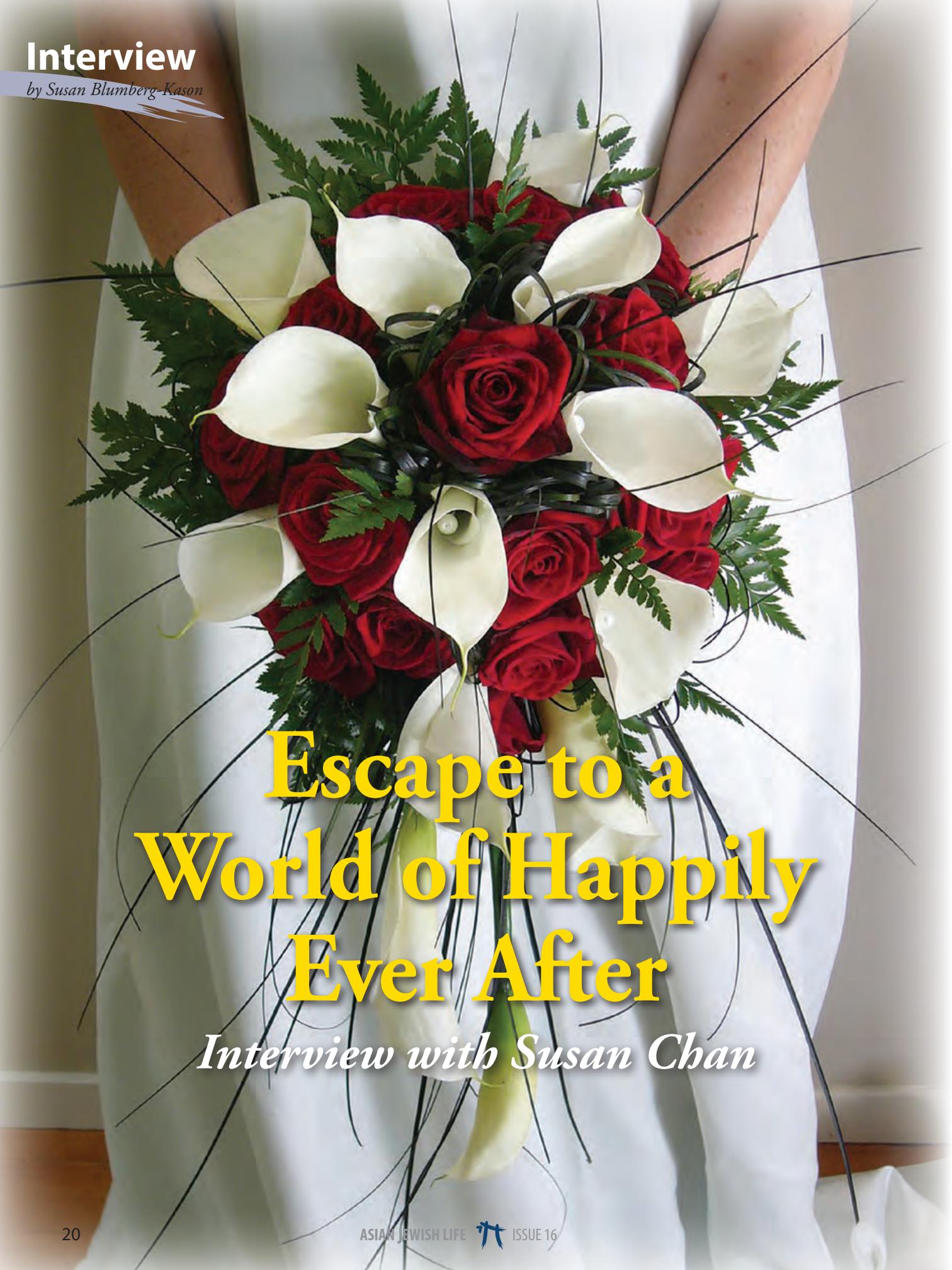


Interview

by Susan Blumberg-Kason

A close-up photograph of a bride's hands holding a large, lush wedding bouquet. The bouquet is composed of numerous vibrant red roses and elegant white calla lilies, interspersed with green ferns and delicate black ribbons. The bride is wearing a white wedding dress, and the background is softly blurred, focusing attention on the flowers.

Escape to a World of Happily Ever After

Interview with Susan Chan

Author Susan Chan lives in San Diego, California, and recently published her first romance novel, *The Reluctant Brides of Lily Court Lane*. Susan is Jewish and married a Chinese man since the early 1970s. Asian Jewish Life recently sat down with her to discuss writing, the joys and struggles of starting a Chinese-Jewish cross-cultural family, and diversity in literature.

Asian Jewish Life: Your romance novel, *The Reluctant Brides of Lily Court Lane* (2014), includes a wide mix of characters, including Jewish and Chinese ones. When you set out to write this book, did you make a point of including a couple that is like you and your husband, a Chinese man from Hong Kong?

Susan Chan: That's an interesting question. I never thought about it. All the characters are based on people I've known and their experiences, so perhaps my subconscious mind was fulfilling a wish. Jay's mother died when he was a youngster so I never had a mother-in-law like Dorothy. As a matter of fact, we had a rough first three years of marriage as both his father, and then my mother, died. They were both immigrants whose lives were tragically cut short by cancer.

AJL: How did you decide to write a romance novel as opposed to women's lit, or chick lit? Have you always been a big reader of romance novels?

SC: I believe human beings, whatever their differences, have one thing in common – the need for love. I want to give readers an opportunity to escape to a world filled with love and where 'happy ever after' can be happen – as can be found on Lily Court Lane. I discovered romance novels as a young mother –



Susan Chan

because of their size! I love to read and I found there was never enough time to do so. Browsing in my neighborhood bookstore, I discovered some very thin books that I could slip into a pocket book or diaper bag, so I decided to give them a try. I have always read before bedtime and I hate to put down a book in the middle of a chapter, so I guess that also explains why I like to keep my chapters short. I enjoy science-fiction (but not fantasy) and legal thrillers, but I don't feel I have enough background to write in either genre, although one day I might even consider working on an inter-species love story.

AJL: Besides the Jewish and Chinese characters, *The Reluctant Brides of Lily Court Lane* also includes a character whose family comes from Mexico. There's a big push in young adult literature to become more diverse. Do you think there is a need for the same in the romance genre?

SC: Now that you've mentioned it, my answer would definitely be yes. I

remember my first reader. Dick and Jane didn't match any children in my neighborhood, with their mother and father, dog, and a garden to play in. But that's not why I write about Dallas Cruz. I live in San Diego which is very close to the border with Mexico and we have a large Spanish speaking population. I write about what I know and the women I've met, so it seemed only natural to include Dallas.

AJL: The Ming character in your book comes from a traditional Chinese family that lives in the US. In real life, you have been married to a Chinese man for almost forty-five years. Times were so different back when you got married. What obstacles did you face when you told your families about your engagement?

SC: Looking back in time I can now smile at my mother's reaction – but not at the time. She said, "But he's not Jewish." You notice she didn't say, "But he's Chinese." My mother bore the brunt of prejudice when neighbors called her to report they had seen her daughter out with a "Chink." Not to excuse their prejudice, merely to explain it – this time period (1968-1971) was the height of the Vietnam War and the admission of Communist China to the United Nations, so there was a lot of anti-Chinese sentiment. To avoid upsetting my mother even further, we did not date in the traditional fashion but instead spoke for hours on the phone. By the time we decided to marry we had discussed and agreed on all issues that affect married life – from the number of children we wanted, to how we'd raise them, where we'd live, religious practices, and so forth.

AJL: You and your husband raised your children Jewish. Was it difficult to explain Jewish customs to your husband's

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family, and how did they take to your decision to have a Jewish household?

SC: We never discussed it with them. Jay is the youngest of seven with loads of brothers, sisters, and an extended family of aunts, uncles, great aunts, cousins, and so forth. To them my religion was just another oddity about this white girl he was bringing into their midst. I think I would have had a far more difficult time if Jay was Christian but as he'd told me when he lived in Hong Kong, he was a "rice Christian," going to church so he could be fed. His family fled from South China to Hong Kong by twos and threes; and weren't together until they came to New York City. They "accepted" his marriage as one of the perils of living in a new and strange country but never fully embraced me.

AJL: What are some of the Chinese customs that you taught your children? Was that difficult in the 1970s and 80s when people in the United States cared more about assimilation than embracing their ethnicities?

SC: I think the most important traditions are respect for elders and the importance of family. As parents, we are gratified by the love our children have for each other. We never set out to teach them to be Chinese or Jewish, they just were because we were and they could see how important it was to us. On Saturday we'd go to Chinatown for *dim sum*, and then to Chinese school. As they grew

older, we felt the school curriculum was too rigid and did not serve our purpose so we hired a lovely lady to tutor them. She took them to exhibits and museums, festivals and so on, so they would develop an appreciation for their Chinese heritage. Then on Sunday off to Hebrew school while I volunteered in the school office.

Christian. I remember one family we knew at Hebrew school solved this dilemma when the father would bring his son to Temple while his wife brought their daughter to church. I wonder how that worked out for them.

AJL: Do you have any advice for writers who are just starting out?

SC: Just go for it, write, write, write. And as is always said, write from what you know. To this I'd add that if you don't know something, do some research. Your readers trust you to be truthful so don't lie to them. I have to point out, though, that I'm just starting out myself. I'm not particularly good at multi-tasking, so it wasn't until I reached a time in my life that I could sit and write to my heart's content that I finally became an author.

AJL: What are you working on now?

SC: I've always envisioned Lily Court Lane as a series of books finding romance for each of the women friends living on the Lane. I'm working on Book 2, tentatively entitled "Lies of Omission," focusing on Cindy finding her birth family. There has been such a positive response to her romance with Ming that I'm planning to write more about his Chinese culture. There'll also be a new character, Danny, a Jew from Ireland who'll provide an interesting mystery for our readers. If all goes well, Book 3 is in the planning stage, and I also plan a prequel to answer the question of why these women moved to Lily Court Lane. ✧

AJL: Do you have any words of wisdom for couples that are raising multicultural children in a Jewish home?

SC: Develop their love for their culture and religion. They can decide when they're older if they want to follow any particular belief or practice any cultural traditions but how can they make an informed decision if they haven't been properly exposed? Don't hold one in higher esteem than another, but I must say I don't know how this can be done if one parent is Jewish and the other

