

# “No” Is Not An Answer



by  
**Marilyn Berman Pollans**  
and  
Peter Weisz

Bal Harbour, Florida  
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# WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT “NO IS NOT AN ANSWER.”

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Marilyn Berman Pollans...is a remarkable woman who has crafted an insightful and inspiring book about her life.

It is a classic American story, a woman rising from simple Jewish roots who, against steep odds, earned a doctorate and became an Associate Dean of the Engineering School at the University of Maryland.

More than that, it is a story of how the Jewish values, with which she had been imbued as a youngster, guided her to become a leader—advancing the status of women and minorities in a field where previously there had been little opportunity.

It is truly an inspirational tale.

Abraham H. Foxman  
National Director Emeritus  
Anti-Defamation League



This truly fascinating personal story provides an emotional, spiritual, and tangible roadmap for women working their way through the stages of our lives and the unique challenges of work, family,

children, illness, loss and renewal. Dr. Berman shows us how to overcome doubt and move through these stages with courage. She models an intrepid life for both men and women.

— Nancy J.  
Scheinman, Ph.D.  
Clinical Psychologist



A fascinating and unlikely story of one woman's determination to bring opportunity for all to higher education.

Dr. Pollans created a model for attracting women and minorities to Engineering education that has been replicated nationally.

At a moment in our nation's history where we are recognizing the importance of STEM fields to compete globally, Dr. Pollans stands apart as a pioneer in opening the world of Engineering to those who had long been in the dark. Her upbringing and personal challenges make her story all the more inspirational.

— George Irish  
Eastern Head of the  
Hearst Foundation

I must tell you that I read this book in almost a single sitting as it is a true page turner. Together with Dr. Pollans' deep understanding of human nature and especially in her self-analysis, she brings a sense of levity and joyfulness throughout her personal story.

It is not merely the story of a single Jewish woman, but a microcosmic reflection of the story of the Jewish people, always moving forward and upward, never giving up, with "no" never being an option. As Golda Meir wisely stated, we have no other choice but to overcome and to succeed. "Our option," she quipped, "is that there is no other option."

I highly recommend this book to people of all ages as one can learn lessons from it in so many ways. The total honesty and forthrightness sets it in a special category, from her analysis of the mindset of the early immigrants on the Lower East Side to her exploration of "Magical Thinking" as it resonates with me and with so many others.

With Torah greetings and Blessing, honor and great esteem.

— Rabbi Sholom D. Lipskar  
The Shul, Chabad-Lubavitch  
Bal Harbour, Florida

# DEDICATION

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*For my grandchildren*



# A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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*I would like to express my appreciation to the following individuals without whose assistance this literary journey would not have been possible.*

To Al Pollans, my husband, who has demonstrated superhuman patience and unwavering support for this project.

To Marcia Berman, my daughter-in-law, who suggested and encouraged me to write this book.

To Geraldine Pilzer, my dear friend who helped greatly in the editing of this book.

To William English “Brit” Kirwan, Chancellor of the University System of Maryland (ret.) for authoring the Introduction.

To Peter Weisz, my literary collaborator.



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# I N T R O D U C T I O N

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This book tells a remarkable story. At one level, it is the narrative of a strong-willed woman who overcame substantial social and familial barriers to pursue a professional career that, in turn, opened opportunities for other women and minorities.

At another level, it is a story that captures a seminal period in American history—a period when women sought and exerted their right to fully participate in the economic life of our country. Many of the challenges and stresses women faced in this important period of social transition are captured in these pages. In this sense, this story is much larger than the life of a single individual.

Marilyn Miller was born on New York's Lower East Side, the daughter of Jewish immigrants. Her strong-willed father, grounded in Jewish traditions, led the close-knit family. In this era and culture, women had very well-defined roles; they were the homemakers and were expected to devote all of their time, talents, and energy to nurturing the family. The

idea that a daughter would aspire to a professional career was unthinkable—but that is exactly what Marilyn did.

An early indication of Marilyn’s iconoclastic nature was her insistence that she be allowed to go to college. Refusing to accept any other possibility, she finally gained her father’s blessing and enrolled in Brooklyn College. At the end of her junior year, she did two remarkable things: she walked away from a planned marriage, which would have ended her college degree aspirations, and chose instead to travel by herself to Europe. While such a trip would not seem all that unusual today, in the 1950s, and in her family’s traditions, it was a remarkable example of Marilyn’s independence of thought and character. One is left to wonder how her father came to terms with his “rebellious” daughter. But, as recounted in the following pages, this trip had a profound and lasting impact on Marilyn.

Returning from Europe at the end of the summer, she completed her degree and married her first true love, Stanford Berman. Stan was an aspiring young lawyer and a native of Washington, D.C., where the young couple set up their home.

Stan’s views on the role of women were not all that different from those of Marilyn’s father. He had strong expectations that Marilyn would be a stay-at-home mom, but that was not to be. As she did with her father, Marilyn persuaded Stan that she was destined for other things and enrolled at the University of Maryland. Thus began a relationship with the university that continues to this day and that has had a profound impact on both Marilyn and the university.

Marilyn enrolled in a graduate program in counseling and personal services, ultimately receiving her Ph.D. in 1979. What must Papa Ralph have thought?

As remarkable as Marilyn’s life journey had been to this point, the most significant and in many ways most incredible part was about to begin: her career in the College of Engineering, now called the A. James Clark School of Engineering at the University of Maryland.

To fully appreciate what she accomplished, one must understand how jealously engineering faculty members guard their profession. Back then (even today), it was highly unusual for a non-engineer, most especially a woman, to rise to a senior-level position in a college of engineering. But that’s precisely what Marilyn did.

Starting with a junior-level advisor's position in the college while working on her Ph.D., Marilyn rose—quite remarkably—to become the associate dean and earned the total trust and confidence of the college's senior administration, faculty, staff, and students. Her responsibilities grew over the years to encompass essentially all activities of the college. To the best of my knowledge, this is a career journey without precedence at a major college of engineering. I must add that the journey could not have happened without the nurture, guidance, and support of a remarkable dean, George E. Dieter.

I first came to know Marilyn when I assumed the position of vice chancellor of academic affairs at the university in 1981. By that time, it was already clear that Marilyn was having a profound impact on the college. Undoubtedly influenced by her personal struggles to reach that point in her life, she was driven to make the college a more welcoming place for women and students of color.

This book captures well her struggles to effect change in the racial and gender demographics of the college. As an observer and supporter of her efforts, I can say that her work and results were transformative.

Once she began working at the college, Marilyn quickly became aware that less than 2 percent of the students were women and that there was only one woman on the faculty. Marilyn had an inspired idea: start a summer bridge program for women who might consider majoring in engineering. The success of this program was dramatic. Eighty percent of the students in the program went on to major in engineering. From that modest start, the enrollment of women in the college grew rapidly, to exceed the national average by a considerable margin. Her program became a universal model for engineering schools around the country.

Building on her successful efforts to increase gender diversity in the college, and at the university's request, Marilyn played a central role in creating and leading the Center for Minorities in Science and Engineering. Thus, her portfolio expanded to include the recruitment and success of students of color, not just in the college but the science departments as well. Today, the university is cited as one of the most diverse among all the major research universities in America. Marilyn played a central and critical role in this notable achievement.

Among many other awards, Marilyn was selected for the university's esteemed Outstand-

ing Woman of the Year Award in 1991, and she twice won the university's similarly prestigious Outstanding Advisor Award.

Sadly, Marilyn's husband Stan passed away in 2000. Over the years, he had come to appreciate, support, and take pride in her amazing career and professional accomplishments. Fortunately for Marilyn, she met and married the second love of her life, Al Pollans. Now retired, Marilyn, with Al's full engagement, continues to be involved in the life of the university, providing her counsel and generous financial support to programs ranging from the A. James Clark School of Engineering to the College of Arts and Humanities and the School of Music.

Perhaps no words could capture Marilyn's contribution to the Clark School of Engineering better than something Professor Deborah Goodings, professor of civil engineering at College Park, wrote about her. Professor Goodings said, "Dr. Marilyn Berman has brought to her job energy, enthusiasm, commitment, dignity, style, and mastery. She gives value to the role of administrators by approaching the university as an institution that must and can work for its constituents. This has made her an outstanding mentor in both a personal and institutional capacity. The A. James Clark School of Engineer-

ing has been enormously enriched by her career here, and the improvements she has brought about will outlast her career because she has changed the culture.”

Changed the culture! That defines Marilyn’s life journey. What are the odds that a woman born to a Jewish immigrant family, steeped in traditions, could become an agent of change for a more inclusive university and America? It is a remarkable story and journey indeed.

—William English “Brit” Kirwan, Chancellor (ret.)  
University System of Maryland





# P R E F A C E

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“Life does not tell stories. People do. Life provides no more than raw materials. Raw enough for us to look back and connect at least two versions of our own biography: one a prison, the other a palace.

This is the greatest kindness the Master of Life has given us: He has placed His pen in our hands, so that we may enjoy the dignity of a palace constructed by our own design.”

— from “The Wisdom of the Lubavitcher Rabbi”  
Condensation by Rabbi Tzvi Freeman  
*The Shul Weekly Magazine*, Bal Harbour, Florida  
June 8, 2013

The purpose of this book is to tell some stories from my life so that I may leave a written record of these memorable moments for the benefit of my husband, my children, grandchildren, their children, as well as friends and colleagues. I have shared stories as completely and honestly as I could about how my life became a “palace” and not a “prison.” I have included stories of events and individuals, as well as the societal forces and cultural changes that have had an impact upon my life. Thank you for having a look.

— Marilyn Berman Pollans, March 2016



# CHAPTER 1

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## LIVING ON THE LOWER CRUST SIDE

All I need is one quick whiff. The smell of pickle brine. The aroma of warm *farfel*. The unmistakable scent of pickles and freshly rendered *schmaltz*. Just one sniff and I am transported—via a sort of nasal nostalgia—to a cherished and deeply rooted realm. As floodgates of memory are unfettered, my other senses fall into lockstep, and I am again able to envision and trace the textures of that lost world of my childhood.

But of all the evocative fragrance triggers that I encounter these days, there is only one that carries the key to not only my senses, but also

to my heart: fresh rye bread. Let me tell you why.

Growing up, our Jewish immigrant family was certainly not part of the “upper crust,” as we used to say. I understand that way back when, after English bakers prepared a loaf of bread, they were obliged to cut off the dark bottom layer before delivering only the “upper crust” to the lord of the manor. That was us. No, we were not the lords. We were the crust—the tough, hard-to-swallow underside of New York City urban life. We were the lower crust living on the Lower East Side.

Prepositions were important in that world. We did not live *in* the Lower East Side. We lived *on* the Lower East Side—as in, we lived on top of the world. And we believed that we did. To a cheery and precocious seven-year-old girl, what could be better than living only a block and a half from P.S. No. 7? Absolutely nothing.

My earliest childhood memory takes me back to the time, at age four, that I was to have my picture taken by a professional photographer (*see photo on page 87*). My grandmother took over the job of getting me ready for the photo shoot. My dress was washed and starched, my hair was curled, and my white shoes were polished. To this day, I can still smell the wet polish on those white leather shoes.

What I remember most about that day is how special I felt. Everyone was making a fuss over me and I simply loved it.

By the time I was seven, I had become the permanent babysitter for my three-year-old sister, Sandy. I took her everywhere, including the bakery, the vegetable stand, and the Saturday matinee movies with their cartoon cavalcades.

I was even required to take Sandy to get a haircut, but that turned into a real disaster. The barber, not a beautician, asked me how my mother wanted Sandy's hair to be cut. I said, "A little trim." He then proceeded to chop most of her hair off so that she looked just like a little boy. When I brought Sandy home from the barbershop, my mother hit the roof. "Marilyn!" she shouted. "How could you do this?"—as if I had had a choice in the matter.

My mother immediately went into high gear, something I rarely saw her do. She made an appointment at Best & Company, a specialty department store for children on Fifth Avenue, where youngsters could have their hair styled and permanently waved. They did an outstanding job of correcting Sandy's bad hair day disaster. It was rather expensive, but my mother justified the expense to my father by claiming she simply couldn't wait for Sandy's hair to grow back, and so this swell salon treatment

was the only possible choice, “unless you want everyone to think we have a little boy.”

One entered our third-floor walk-up on East 7th Street, between Avenues C and D, by walking down. After negotiating both the outer and inner doors, it was up three flights to our apartment. As she grew older, Sandy would always rush up those stairs two steps at a time. But that was Sandy. She took life two steps at a time as well, and sometimes all that dynamic energy would carry over into her sleeping hours. You see, Sandy was a somnambulist. She often got up during the night and went on leisurely strolls to such places as Rose’s Candy Store down the block. Of course, Rose’s Candy Store was locked up tight at 4 am, so dear Sandy—still sleeping soundly—would amble back home. Eventually it became my grandmother Ethel’s task to run interference and intercept Sandy during her midnight creeps. Grandma Ethel didn’t mind since she was up most every night walking the floor to overcome a bad case of leg cramps.

So the smell of rye bread carries me from visions of Sandy’s somnambulism to the inside of Rose’s Candy Store, and I am again seated at the counter trying to decide between an egg cream—a fizzy concoction made with chocolate syrup and soda water—or a few sheets of candy buttons. I usually opted for the buttons

since they had an added benefit. After consuming all the colored candy dots, I could use the sticky paper to make swell spitballs and shoot them at Sandy. If I received permission, I would always select Rose’s famous charlotte russe: sweet whipped cream over heavenly sponge cake. You could just die! To my seven-year-old mind, Rose’s Candy Store was about as close to heaven as I could let myself imagine. The bonus was that I never had to pay for anything. I simply said the magic words, “Charge it,” and that was that. I presumed that my father would stop by once a month and settle my sweet-tooth tab, but we never really discussed such things.

The rye bread aroma takes my memory out to the street, where my childhood buddies now appear clearly in the frame of my memory one by one.

“Ready for potsie?” I hear them call.

Our most popular pastime was called potsie. A purloined piece of school chalk and a discarded tin can lid were all we needed in the way of equipment. The lid would first be folded and stomped upon until it was forged into a tiny triangle. This became the potsie. You stood in a home base chalk line square and pitched the potsie into another chalk box on the sidewalk. In order to win, you needed to hop on one foot to the potsie, pick it up, and hop back home

without losing your balance or, God forbid, stepping on a chalk line.

The boys preferred stoop ball, and we girls enjoyed the game, too. Stoops, as buildings' outdoor stair steps were known, served as a nearly totemic gathering spot for young people to schmooze and often break into song. Many an acappella singing group got its start harmonizing on the stoops and steps of the Lower East Side. Stoop ball was simplicity in motion. You threw a rubber ball toward the steps and had to catch it on the first bounce. You kept doing that until you missed and then passed the ball to the next player. Stickball was more complex, but much more fun. It was essentially our version of Little League without the expensive equipment and the neurotic parents in the bleachers. A headless broomstick was our bat, and the fire hydrant served as first base as we channeled the Yankees every summer afternoon in the middle of East Seventh Street.

Fire hydrants? I never actually saw one used by firemen putting out a fire. We did put them to good use, however, in beating the sweltering summer heat in an era with no air conditioning and zero access to swimming pools. As my friends and I would convene in front of the hydrant in our bathing suits, one of the braver big kids would apply a monkey wrench to the hydrant, causing it to transform into a fountain of

cool refreshing water, through whose spray we could run and splash until someone shouted: “Cheese it! It’s the cops!” While such activity is condoned and sometimes even conducted by the police these days, back then we were regarded as a gang of bold scofflaws—living on the edge of civilized society as summertime outlaws.

As for real outlaws and real crime, there simply wasn’t any. It’s hard to believe today, but my mother began sending me to the store to do the shopping when I was only five years old. The streets were safe and filled with the people we knew and spoke with every day.

“Go to the pushcart and get a bunch of nice California carrots,” she would instruct, handing me a few coins from her worn leather purse, “and then stop at the bakery and bring home a fresh rye bread.” This last instruction would always bring a smile to my lips.

“Would you like for me to slice the rye bread for your mother, dahling?” asked the slightly *zaftig* (*chubby*) bakery lady. I nodded yes. I wanted the bread sliced since I had plans for it during my walk back home. As I passed the unattended baby carriages lining the sidewalk, pass the fishmonger’s tanks and the kosher butcher shop with its dripping hunks of veal on display in the window, I would invariably reach into my bag and pull some warm crust away

from a few of the rye bread slices and pop them into my eager mouth: heaven.

Looking down on my seven-year-old self from my precarious perch built upon my life's experiences, I cannot overlook the metaphor. Our way of life, however sweet and nourishing it seems through the prism of memory, was ultimately vulnerable to the powerful forces surrounding us—forces such as anti-Semitism or, even worse, cultural assimilation. We were, by necessity forced to erect a protective barrier around ourselves, not to isolate but rather to insulate us from a world only too eager to devour us. You might call it a tough outer crust. And it is that crust—that tough chewy exterior—that has guarded my path and my heart ever since I was a seven-year-old girl, weaving through the aromatic streets of the Lower East Side, nibbling on a warm slice of crusty New York rye bread.

## CHAPTER 2

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### RALPH AND SYLVIA

“Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them.”

— *Oscar Wilde*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Both of my parents had decidedly “goyishe” names: Ralph Miller and Sylvia Smith. They could have been sitcom characters. Actually, my dad’s name was changed to Miller (as in Glenn) from Mailer (as in Norman) somewhere between Ellis Island and *The Naked and the Dead*.

Ralph arrived at these shores as part of the massive wave of Eastern European Jewish immigration that preceded the Great War. The location of his family’s exact hometown, somewhere in the Pale of Settlement, has been lost to the ages, but I do know that he came to New York harbor, at age eight and a half, along with

his parents, Gussie and Joseph Mailer, and one younger sister, Harriet. Once transplanted on American soil, the family grew, providing my father with three American-born siblings: Ruthie, Sylvia, and Arnie (sadly, Arnie died in his midforties from lymphatic cancer). I recall that my aunt Ruthie suffered from developmental problems, but this was not discussed openly at our house.

Like many Jewish immigrant families, Gussie and Joe, along with their kids, settled on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, renting a third-floor walk-up on Columbia Street. The structure was bulldozed in the late forties to make way for low-income housing projects. Gussie was a powerful woman who taught herself English by reading the newspaper and listening to the radio. Given that her husband, my paternal grandfather Joe, was something of a lush, it was left to Gussie to provide the wherewithal to keep their family stitched together. She was a fireplug of a woman. I can still picture her, clad in a leather work apron, pockets stuffed with diamond-tipped glass cutters, pliers, hammers, and nails of all sizes. Gussie the Glazier was well known in the old neighborhood and would be summoned any time an errant baseball shattered a tenement window or a shopkeeper's glass door.

Aside from her diminutive stature, Grandma Gussie’s most pronounced physical features were her pendulous breasts, which were affixed, unsupported, to her chest like two equal halves of a massive mushy watermelon. Since she was only four foot ten, her bosom would seem to enter a room before she did. In fact, walking down the sidewalk with Grandma Gussie, I often counted the number of men’s heads that would turn to catch another glimpse and then walk away marveling at her massive mammaries. These were not nurturing breasts, to be sure. They had never dispensed the milk of human kindness. No, hers was the bosom of a pugnacious battle-hardened dynamo—the breasts of a woman who was every bit as hard as the nails in her apron pockets.

In stark contrast to my vivid memories of Grandma Gussie, if I try to remember her husband, Grandpa Joe, I draw a complete blank. I don’t think he ever spoke more than two words to me—and those two words were usually slurred. There’s no nice way to put this: he was a drunk—a shikker. A dipsomaniac. He fulfilled a drunkard’s destiny by dying at an early age from cirrhosis of the liver. I don’t know for sure, but I suspect that living with a dynamo like Gussie, coupled with the indignities of the immigrant experience, was all simply too much

for Grandpa Joe's gentle soul, forcing him to seek refuge in the bottle.

Or perhaps it was the perpetual squalor in which they lived. The fact is that Gussie was much too busy earning a living and providing for their family to be much of a housekeeper. I don't recall ever having a meal in their dank and dreary apartment, with its permanent stench of cat droppings and worse.

Despite this less than glowing and decidedly deviant domestic situation, my father, Ralph, followed the religious path of a yeshiva student through his teenage years. Although he was considered to be a serious Jew and a spiritual individual in later life, he did not remain strictly observant. After he had completed Jewish elementary school, his mother, Gussie, explained to Ralph that the family did not have the money to send him to a yeshiva high school. He could either go to public school or join her and learn the glazier's trade. His decision was clear as glass. He opted for the latter.

Family legend has it that Ralph met and fell in love with my mother, Sylvia, but instead of proposing marriage to her, he informed her that he had syphilis! It sounds strange today, but at that time, it was less embarrassing to have a venereal disease than to admit the truth...which was that he could not afford to get married. Finally, by the time Ralph reached

age twenty, he had found the fortitude and financial stability to propose. He married Sylvia, age eighteen, soon thereafter in the late 1920s...just in time for the Great Depression.

Life was a struggle for the newlyweds. Money was as scarce as hens' teeth and compassion even scarcer. Swallowing his pride, my father appealed to his mother for financial assistance to tide him over till he could find a steady job. She refused. "You've made your bed, now lie in it!" was her cold, hard-hearted reply.

To add to their woes, my mother gave birth to their first child, Helen, who was born with a cleft palate. Tragically, the baby died while undergoing surgery to correct the condition.

My father was reduced to earning money by shoveling snow for the City of New York. As a result, he contracted rheumatic fever, a strep infection easily treatable today with antibiotics. But back then, in 1942, such drugs were still in the testing stages.

Ralph was admitted to Bellevue Hospital in critical condition. Bellevue is the nation's oldest public charitable hospital and a rather foreboding place. While there, my father met an earnest young staff physician, Dr. Kienholz, who also served on the staff of Sing Sing State Penitentiary. Dr. Kienholz and Ralph's relation-

ship grew into something more than a “patient-doctor” one. The two became close friends. One day, the doctor approached my father—who continued to languish in Bellevue showing little improvement—with a radical proposal.

“You know, Ralph, I work with prisoners over at Sing Sing,” he explained. “Sometimes they use those guys as guinea pigs for new medications.” Ralph nodded his understanding.

“Well,” Dr. Kienholz went on, “they’ve been testing a new miracle drug over there called penicillin. It’s fantastic at knocking out the type of infection you’ve got. I’ve seen the results. It works, and it seems to be totally safe. I want you to try it.” With some apprehension, my father agreed. Penicillin had not yet been approved by the government, so Dr. Kienholz smuggled a vial out of Sing Sing and administered it to my father. It worked immediately. Dr. Kienholz had succeeded in saving my father’s life.

The friendship continued after my father recovered, and it endured for the rest of their lives. In fact, I recall that one of my three sisters was born in Dr. Kienholz’s home in Ossining, New York.

Despite the hardships he was forced to undergo, my father was blessed with both good looks and a gregarious and engaging personali-

ty. From his Clark Gable mustache to his readily outstretched hand, Ralph had a gift for charming people and, as a result, collected a wide circle of friends. He was generous to a fault with what little money he had, as well as with his time and ready assistance whenever a friend or family member asked for his help. I liked to think of him as *bon vivant*, although he hardly had the bankroll for such a title.

While a joyful, popular, and likable figure among his many friends, Ralph at home was another story. One glaring look from my father's penetrating eyes would send me reeling. Whatever admiration I held for my father was gathered from afar. He was seldom home, either working long hours or carousing with his buddies. As a result, I was not particularly close to my father. We did not enjoy the type of father-daughter relationship I witnessed in other families. We did not, for example, have a fixed family dinner hour. In fact, the only time our family sat down together for dinner was during the Passover Seder and other holiday meals.

My father had a fetish for the latest gadgets, and his passion for technology placed him somewhat ahead of his time. For example, we were one of the first families on our block to own an actual TV set. It was a Philco, with a tiny flickering black and white screen housed in a mahogany radio cabinet. I was mesmerized

by the new addition to our living room and recall sitting and staring at the test pattern for hours on end.

Another high-tech (for its day) purchase was an electric washing machine. I remember it had a pair of hand-crank-driven rollers on the top to wring out the wet clothing. This machine was a godsend. I can remember the drudgery of washing everything—including bed sheets—by hand. Looking back, I feel it's a good thing my buxom Grandma Gussie did not have one of these washing machines or else she might have wound up as the inspiration for that expression about getting a part of the female anatomy caught in a wringer.

My father also appreciated the classics. Perhaps this was why we owned the only robin's egg blue Ford Model T roadster in New York City. We drew lots of stares during our regular summertime drives to Coney Island. One time, I recall, we got a flat tire as we were heading home. Not having the money for a spare tire, my dad drove us all the way home on the wheel rim. I shrank with embarrassment in the back seat all the way home.

In addition to Coney Island, summertime would find us vacationing in the Rockaways and in a small village called Hawthorne, located in Westchester County, New York. Even though money was very tight, our family could

still manage to rent a small bungalow for the summer. I was free to ride my bike everywhere and then go swimming in the Atlantic every single day. While some New York dads would only come stay with their families on weekends, Ralph drove into Manhattan every weekday morning to tend to his glass business.

Summer days were a magnificent and magical time for me, and while most of my memories are idyllic, there remains one negative one that overshadows the rest: polio. Polio outbreaks were a serious concern in those days before the Salk vaccine. It's hard to believe today how much the fear of contracting polio terrified and haunted us as children. It wasn't until the development of the polio vaccine in 1956 that we could really experience a more worry-free summer. Without fail, as soon as the warm summer months arrived, we heard reports of polio outbreaks from around the country and saw pictures of poor children in iron lungs, crutches, and leg braces.

When I was eleven years old, my parents wanted to attend a family wedding in Washington, D.C., but they needed a babysitter. Sandy was seven, and my sister Irene was an infant (*see photo on page 88*). I was terribly excited about being chosen as the babysitter for a whole weekend. I was in charge of the household, cooking the meals, making formula for

the baby, changing her diapers, and keeping us all fed, rested, and safe. My mother, father, and grandmother were gone for three whole days, and I was just fine with that. I didn't feel neglected, abused, or in any way burdened by this serious responsibility.

I can only imagine parents leaving three young children, age eleven and under, alone for a whole weekend these days. Certainly child protective services would be alerted. I considered myself fortunate to have loving parents who trusted me. I always felt safe and secure no matter what. However, there was a downside to all that responsibility. I was on my own so much of the time that loneliness was often something I had to learn to contend with.

As I grew from childhood into adolescence, I relied on my own thinking to do what I wanted to do or whatever I thought was best for me. This was true when participating in school activities, when joining clubs and so on. I actually taught myself how to swim, how to roller skate, how to ride a bike, and how to navigate the subway. This skill gave me the freedom to travel often to Times Square to attend Broadway shows after eating lunch at the Automat. I particularly liked Horn & Hardart's mashed potatoes, fresh beets, and spaghetti—separately, not all mixed together. I didn't think too much about carbs in those days. I loved going to the

Metropolitan Museum of Art and visiting the Egyptian wing. I simply adored those mummies. This was an empowering time for me since my parents were so preoccupied with making a living or just dealing with their own issues that they had little time to direct my activities.

Growing up so quickly and with a great deal of responsibility, both for myself and for my sisters, also had an upside. It made me fiercely independent, determined, and very strong-willed. I could never understand why I had restraints placed upon me by my parents and always chafed against them whenever they were imposed. It was this streak of independence that fueled my decision to go to college—a fact that alarmed and angered my father. My independent personality also informed my later decisions, such as enrolling in graduate school and then going to work at the university—decisions that my husband, Stanford, strongly opposed.

My earliest real work experience was in my father's glass and mirror business. He was a typical small businessman, doing much of the work himself, such as installing residential windows and plate glass for storefronts as well as selling decorative wall-mounted mirrors. From the time I was about twelve years old, I worked there on Saturdays, answering the

phone, taking orders, and occasionally making a mirror sale.

When I reached high school, I was obliged to sit for the Regents exams. Passing them was a requirement in order to receive an academic high school diploma. With some trepidation, I informed my father that I could not work on the following Saturday because I would be busy studying. This did not go down well with my dad. As we locked horns over this, my mother mercifully intervened.

“I’ll cover for her,” she volunteered. I was off the hook, and evidently things worked out because my mother accompanied my dad to work every day from then on. It turned out that they loved working together, and doing so cemented not only their business partnership but also their marriage in a very positive way. Mother kept the books and handled collections. The business seemed to bloom once she became involved. The increased revenue allowed my father to purchase some property that would house his burgeoning business. It also provided my mother with the financial freedom to begin investing in the stock market—something she did with a rather high degree of success.

As his business grew, my father began to branch out. One night, he was awakened in the wee hours by a phone call from a customer who needed a plate-glass window replaced urgently.

It had been broken in the course of a burglary. My father explained that he could not replace the plate glass until the following day after he was able to order the large piece from the factory. The shop owner asked if my dad could temporarily board up the window. Although he had not done this type of work before, Dad agreed, rushing over to the burglarized shop with several sheets of plywood and his toolbox.

Dad soon realized that this type of emergency service could generate considerable income since he could charge for both the boarding up and then the glass replacement. He decided to hire a late-night crew and changed the name of his company from Tri-boro Glass to Abbott Glass in order to appear at the head of the alphabetical list of window repair services found in the Yellow Pages. This move proved successful, and he was soon dispatching repair crews all over the city at all hours of the night. Although he didn't personally do the window boarding any longer, he still served as the dispatcher. Phone calls in the middle of the night became commonplace at our house from then on. The upshot was that I became used to them, and I don't bat an eye when I receive such a call today.

As will be recounted in another chapter, my father did not agree with my decision to attend college and provided me with zero finan-

cial support. Nevertheless, I enrolled at Brooklyn College because it offered free tuition for New York residents. Later, my two younger sisters were permitted to attend any college they chose. They both opted for the school where my career path had led me: the University of Maryland.

My father's standing joke, whenever someone commented on the fact that he was the father of three daughters (actually, he had fathered four daughters counting my older sister, Helen, who died as a newborn), was, "I just don't know how to make a boy." I bristled whenever he proffered this wisecrack, since it was a joke at my expense. He was implying, "Oh, I would love to have had some sons, instead of all these girls, if only someone would show me how." It's funny, isn't it, how snide little remarks like that and the subsequent pain they inflict are what you remember most vividly about a person after they are gone.

Ralph Miller, my father, died just short of his sixty-ninth birthday. The cause listed on his death certificate was lung disease and resultant congestive heart failure, but the real reason was his profession. The glass business, which he dearly loved, was the true cause of his illness and eventual death. Years of polishing glass surfaces and inhaling the resulting minuscule

glass fibers caused irreparable damage to his lungs and heart.

My mother, Sylvia Smith, also emerged from an immigrant family (*see the following chapter*).

If anyone had told me that after my father died my mother’s golden years were destined to be highly productive, I would have scoffed. My early memories of my mother were of a highly dependent woman, handicapped by a chronic hearing impairment and often afflicted with poor health—whether real or imagined. To my great surprise, and very shortly after my father died, my mother settled my father’s estate, sold her home in Forest Hills, and bought a new house in Glen Cove, New York, to be near my sister, Irene, and her family. I was amazed at the way my mother began industriously building an entirely new life for herself.

My mother loved baseball and spent each season watching the Mets and her beloved Yankees. She continued to play the stock market, consulting with her broker by phone every day. Since she never learned to drive and felt she was too old to learn she took taxis to the city to go to the theater, the hairdresser, the dressmaker, and the grocery.

After my father died, and after a suitable mourning period had elapsed, I asked my

mother if she wanted to travel somewhere with me. She agreed but was reluctant to leave the country. We settled on the Nevele (NEH-valee), a lush resort in the Catskills Mountains, just outside of Ellenville, New York. The hotel was a popular spot during the glory days of the Borscht Belt and had once hosted a presidential visit by Lyndon Johnson.

It was a kosher hotel, known for its unlimited food service, large swimming pool, tennis courts, two golf courses, and a nightclub, where comedians such as Milton Berle and Jackie Mason honed their craft.

I enjoyed that trip with Sylvia tremendously until I learned from her that the warm spots in the pool were due to guests frequently relieving themselves. After all, my mother pointed out, “What do you think the chlorine is for?”

My mother retained her vibrant wit, sound intelligence, and facile resilience throughout her final years. She died in 1993 of heart disease and complications after a series of ministrokes.

## CHAPTER 3

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### MY GRANDMOTHER

“Between the Earth and the sky above, nothing can match a grandmother’s love.”

— *Anonymous*

*M*y mother, Sylvia, was the first and only “Yankee Doodle” baby to be born in the United States to my Ukrainian grandparents. Her four older sisters were all born in the old country. The family had arrived at the Port of Savannah in the early part of the twentieth century, a few years before my mother was born. When asked by the immigration officials, my grandparents gave their names as Samuel and Ethel Schmelensky. But this Ukrainian Jewish moniker was entirely too alien for the sensibilities of the southern immigration officer who greeted them upon entry. “Y’all gonna be named Smith from now on,” he pronounced as he completed their entry forms.

Like many Jewish immigrants of that era fleeing anti-Semitism, forced military conscription, and grinding poverty, my grandparents found life in America a mixed blessing. Unlike the earlier mid-nineteenth century wave of Jewish immigration that emerged from central Europe, these Eastern European immigrants did not possess the educational and skill levels of their predecessors. This was the reason they arrived at Savannah instead of New York. Members of the New York Jewish community, composed mostly of assimilated and successful Germans, were not thrilled about the massive influx of ragtag *Ostjuden* (Eastern Jews) landing on the shores of their new homeland. They successfully petitioned the US Immigration Service to deflect boatloads of these “huddled masses, yearning to breathe free” to other ports of disembarkation, such as Savannah, Galveston, and even San Francisco.

Grandma Ethel was undoubtedly my most significant influence during my early and formative years. It was apparent that I was Ethel’s favorite grandchild, and she made no excuses for it. I still hear from my cousins to this day how Ethel always favored me. My late sisters often remarked about it, too. Ethel had a total of nine grandchildren: six girls (two were my sisters, Irene and Sandra) and three boys.

Ethel was functionally illiterate and was not able to find work outside the home in Savan-

nah. She cared for the children, which, after my mother was born, meant looking after five young girls under very trying circumstances. Her husband, my grandfather Samuel, worked primarily as a house painter.

My grandmother's siblings, members of the Slan family, had previously immigrated to the United States from her hometown of Yekaterinoslav in the Ukraine. The city was renamed during the Soviet regime in honor of Ukrainian communist leader Grigori Petrovsky, and is today known as Dnipropetrovsk.

My great-uncles found financial opportunity and success in the United States. One brother, David Slan, settled in Atlanta, where he founded the well-known Butler Shoe Company. His brother, Reuben Slan, moved to Washington, D.C., and launched a successful dry-cleaning enterprise that prospered thanks to several ongoing contracts with the U.S. military. By the middle of the twentieth century, my mother's family had settled all along the eastern seaboard, from New York, where my grandparents finally put down roots, to Philadelphia and Washington, all the way to Atlanta.

My grandfather Samuel, the house painter, suffered from chronic hearing loss. Evidently this was a hereditary condition since three of his five daughters, including his youngest, my mother, Sylvia, had seriously impaired hearing.

It was discovered that the condition was due to congenital reduced bone connectivity in the middle ear.

Samuel and Ethel's five daughters, oldest to youngest, were named Zena, Rita, Edith, Sara, and Sylvia. My mother grew up enjoying a close relationship with her four sisters—a relationship that endured throughout their lives. Once the women grew up and began raising their own families, the closeness continued. I grew up with an entire gang of first cousins, and I recall that it took me several years to finally learn which cousin belonged to which aunt.

I am still close to my childhood cousins to this day. These include Zena's two daughters: Marian and Sheila; Sara's son, Steven; his sister, Helene, who is now out of touch with the family; and Rita's two sons, Bernard and (a different) Steven. My parents, Sylvia and Ralph, of course had four girls: Helen, who died in infancy, Sandra, and Irene—all of blessed memory—and little old me.

Hearing loss was not the only negative trait passed on by the Smith sisters to their progeny. There was also some depression and outright schizophrenia. My aunt Edith was institutionalized for paranoid schizophrenia after attempting to smother my younger sister Sandy in her crib. Other members of our family have also

been diagnosed with various mental illnesses over the years. Fortunately, most sought out and obtained effective treatment. This was also not the case with Aunt Edith, who sadly died in a mental institution.

Of all the family members mentioned, I have to admit I was closest to my grandmother, Ethel. This was partly due to the fact that she stayed with us the entire time I lived at home. She was the anchor of our family. Ethel served as our gourmet chef, family tailor and laundress, and general concierge. But for all her domestic skills, she did not know how to relate to her daughter, my mother, very well at all.

Ethel dominated every aspect of her daughter's life in ways that were highly destructive to Sylvia's self-esteem. This often led to conflict and confrontation, during which times my father would side with Ethel. Of course, my loyalties were torn at times like these. I wanted to defend my mother, for whom I felt genuine sympathy, but I also cherished my ties to my grandmother and wanted to remain in good standing with her—since, after all, I was her favorite grandchild. Those late-night family squabbles haunt me to this day.

Perhaps due to her hearing loss, or maybe due to the constant drubbing inflicted by her husband and my grandmother, my mother was socially introverted. Finally, after giving birth

to my younger sister Sandy, my mother broke down and began wearing a hearing aid. In those days, they were cumbersome devices that required my mother to wear a large battery pack attached to her leg and connected by wire to a microphone tucked into her brassiere. This change made a profound difference in her life, and I recall observing her become more socially engaged and confident from that point on. Eventually, she even found the gumption to stand up to her domineering mother.

My grandmother made a painful habit of comparing my mother's lower middle-class living conditions with that of her other relatives who had achieved such financial success in America. Ethel would make an annual 6 to 8-week pilgrimage to the affluent Washington, D.C. suburb where her oldest daughter, Zena, Zena's husband, Max, and their two daughters, Sheila and Marian, now resided.

Ethel would then move on to pay extended visits to the three highly successful Slan families. When my grandmother returned from these yearly rounds, she would regale us with stories about the magnificent lives these other family members were enjoying. They owned designer wardrobes, luxury cars, and single-family homes staffed with black domestic servants to do all the housework. I listened as each

year my grandmother would crow on and on about the great popularity and charm of my cousin Marian. It seemed that the relatives she told us about lived in some sort of magical fairyland that we could only imagine in our wildest dreams.

Ethel delighted in the “good life” she witnessed in America and, in the process, became something of a snob when it came to her own humble beginnings. For example, she refused to prepare cholent. Cholent is a bean casserole dish that is traditionally consumed by Eastern European Jews on the Sabbath, when starting a fire, even for cooking, is forbidden. In the *shtetl* (*village*), the woman of the house would prepare the dish on Friday, before the Sabbath, and store it in a sealed pot to be served, without reheating, on Saturday afternoon. “That stuff is for the poor people in Russia,” my grandmother would declare.

Ethel spoke a mixture of Yiddish and broken English and could not even write her own name. She did all the cooking, cleaning, sewing, and ironing for our family. My parents, as I explained, were more or less absent, so it was my grandmother who would get me to smile and tell me how beautiful and talented I was. It was she who polished my white shoes, who ironed my frilly dresses, who curled my

hair, who prepared my favorite foods, and who told me about a place near Washington where beautiful people lived glamorous lives that were completely removed from the life I and our little family were leading. She convinced me that I could do anything I wanted to do. And, of course, the best thing I could possibly do would be to marry a good man and then live the good life like her *other* family did in Washington, D.C.

But something happened to my grandmother after I married my good man and, in fact, did move to Washington, D.C. Ethel became a bitter woman. She treated my mother worse than ever. Ethel complained to me about how she was being mistreated at the hands of my parents. For example, they had given her a bed that had such a bad mattress that her back was constantly in severe pain. Ethel complained to my aunts that she was being abused and not being given enough to eat. Her vitriol at this point even extended to me, her favorite grandchild.

Once, during a visit with my parents, my grandmother severely belittled my early attempts at cooking and baking. She even ridiculed an apple pie I had prepared just for her. This behavior resulted in my mother informing her sisters that my grandmother was no

longer welcome in her home and that they should start taking turns caring for her.

I was living in Washington and torn between what I knew of the generosity of my parents and my devotion to my grandmother. My grandmother died alone and lonely, shuffling from daughter to daughter. She never reconciled with my parents.

As things turned out, I learned that I was as much of an anchor in my grandma’s life as she was in mine. I believe that if I had not married and moved away, my grandmother may not have suffered so in her last years of life. I loved her and she loved me, and we would have continued sharing our lives and our stories. I had always told her about my friends, my dates, and my intimate secrets, and once that connection with me was gone, she retreated into bitterness and loss.

In many ways, Ethel was my mentor. She was an independent force of nature who let no one deter or dissuade her. I learned from her example and have never permitted myself to fall under the thumb of another person—particularly those inclined to tell me “No.”