

This memoir/autobiography starts to chronicle 90-year-old Ethel J. David's life and the history she experienced first-hand since 1916, but evolves to show one humorous and quirky woman's panache as she faces old age and death as an extraordinary, ordinary woman.

My Lover the Rabbi, My Husband the Doctor: What more could a Jewish girl want?

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My Lover the Rabbi, My Husband the Doctor
What more could a Jewish girl want?

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Introduction

Why would I want to write a book? I jumped at the chance to write the story of my life with Cheryl Grady Mercier. Three reasons come to mind.

First, I've been able to look back at my personal history, to see the patterns of my life, to relive it, and to examine it. It's been therapeutic and has brought up some questions that I've pondered. Some I've discussed in this book; others I'm still thinking about. I've enjoyed this experience so no matter what becomes of the book from here, it's a success for me.

Second, this work is a legacy for my children and grandchildren. I want to leave something special behind for them when I die. I want them to know about my experiences, my thoughts and my feelings. I want to bridge the generation gap and speak to my family in a special way, to let them know things about me and their family that would never be discussed in the normal course of events. Some are good and some are surprising, but I ask them to read all this with an open and forgiving mind. I hope they will understand me better after reading it.

Third, I want to see if my story is publishable, something that others might enjoy reading. At my age, I've seen a lot of history—I've always felt like a witness to history; I just always had that awareness. Anyone who knows me also knows that I enjoy having a pulpit to expound my beliefs and thoughts, and I've never been shy.

I started with the title and the thought that this could be fun. Cheryl and I have become friends as well as collaborators and this book has evolved

beyond a straightforward autobiography to an oral history/memoir—at least that’s what Cheryl says.

The chapters about my life relate my experiences as I remember them and as I told them to Cheryl. They contain my views and memories of events in and during my life. I am and have always been a storyteller. As my granddaughter says, “Maga, you never let anything get in the way of a good story.” I don’t lie; I really don’t lie, but I have been known to embellish the story a bit, to make it even more exciting. The characters in this book are real people—but the real people as I remember and see them.

Those actual people (some given other names here) may have different memories of the same incidents and their memories are just as true as mine. There’s an old movie, *Rashomon*, which tells the same story from three different points of view. Look on this as simply one point of view of many. All of these stories and memories *are* true—true to *my* point of view and my memories.

I want my children, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, their children and my friends and acquaintances to know that I present you as I know or knew you during a particular incident or incidents that are in the book. Whatever is in the following chapters does not reflect all of the depth and tenderness of my love and affection for you, only my views or thoughts at one moment in time. I know my sons think I brag about them and make their accomplishments more impressive than they might really be. However, isn’t that common to women who imbue their children’s accomplishments with a mother’s pride and love?

I hope you enjoy my life as much as I have—and still do.

Ethel J. David

Becoming Ethel's Boswell

With skepticism and trepidation, I attended my first Weight Watchers At Work™ program one bright Philadelphia spring day in 1999. Sisyphian efforts at weight loss had left me with biases against overly perky, this-is-going-to-be-easy-and-fun weight-loss cheerleaders and programs. That old rock had rolled back over me and to the bottom of the hill too often for me to accept miracle diets or the I-know-you're-cheating or you-just-have-to-exercise facile approaches. I was prepared for, and prejudiced against, gushy, preachy, overly enthusiastic, and unrealistic weight-loss mavens. We assembled in the cafeteria's back section, often used for casual meetings at SmithKline Beecham, soon-to-become GlaxoSmithKline, where I managed oncology marketing promotion. Sun streamed into 17th floor windows as 25 of us sat down to hear the lecture. I crossed my arms across my chest.

Contrary to my fears, the leader was no overbearing, gushy Barbie; she was an older woman, very business-like and down-to-earth realistic. As the ten weeks of the session passed, I was gratified that both the leader/lecturer and the weigh-in receptionist continued to be supportive and laid back. I did notice a certain tension between the two that interested and amused me. I lost a few pounds—about four—but from the beginning, I had known that no quick diet would help. My weight change, though ever so slow, was in the right direction and encouraged me to continue Weight Watchers®. Bottom line, though, the leader kept me coming back session after session.

Ethel J. David stands about 5 foot 4 inches. She's not fat, but she's not skeletal either. Her round, smooth face has a softness at the dewlaps and a little, very little, wrinkling around the sharp light from her hazel eyes. Most lines are smile lines. Her hair is always "done," an ashy-grey blonde, the indeterminate color of a wren. Her style is smart, neat, striking but not showy, and her outfits, not necessarily new, are neat, well-cared-for and definitely accessorized. Her smooth hand extended, she shakes with the grip of a stevedore. She has a nice motherly figure and she runs a nice motherly—in only the good senses—*Weight Watchers* lecture series. Ethel J. David whips the pages of her hand-written flip-chart over with vigor as she gives her class the *Weight Watchers* gospel—but according to Ethel. She has a refreshing non-corporate style and embellishes carefully-scripted corporate lectures with

her experiences, her collections of umbrellas, scarves and glasses, or tales of travel, friends and family. She explained to the class that she was “training” to take a trip to Thailand, Cambodia and the Far East in autumn 1999. She mentioned teaching other *Weight Watchers* classes—eight of them—in four or five centers in New Jersey and Philadelphia, and driving her little Honda to all of them. Trips, meetings, and evenings out were casually included as examples of making weight loss a part of one’s life rather than a diet.

One day she asked us, “Well, just how old do you all think I am?” I supposed her age was about 70 and everyone in the class guessed between 60 and 70. Ethel hooted, “Why, I’m 84!” She chuckled about that for the rest of the class. She told us that she “revives” herself by staying in touch with the world. “I drive, I see, I hear. My physical health is fine.” Her lectures were rife with timely happenings culled from the papers, the movies, and the news.

A month or two later she was explaining the futility of resisting a true craving. “If you really want something, you’ll eat a bunch of less fattening things to avoid eating that one you crave. In the end you’ll eat that too, and probably be upset and eat a lot of the craved food. For example, the other day I was really craving an apple pie and my friend was coming over for dinner.” She stopped for a minute.

“Now a lot of people would say a woman my age doesn’t have boyfriends. Well, I have three....because no one of them can service me in all ways.”

Amazement and consternation crossed our faces, followed by smiles and chuckles. We almost missed her explanation: she’d eaten a small piece of pie, satisfied her craving, and sent the rest of the pie home with the swain. I’m sure I wasn’t the only one thinking, “When I’m 84, I want to *be* this woman.”

In the next year and a half, I lost a few more pounds—fewer than I’d like, for sure—but at least I didn’t gain any. Ethel talked, encouraged, cajoled, persuaded. She casually incorporated more of her experiences and life. Her supply of stories seemed inexhaustible and life kept providing her with more material. We knew of her adventures on the trip to Thailand. She didn’t hide her concern as her sister-in-law’s health failed and she died. And she shared her angst and sorrow as she discovered that her main squeeze, Bernie, was suffering from early Alzheimer’s disease.

I retired from GlaxoSmithKline in August of 2001, and I approached the company liaison and Ethel to talk about joining one of Ethel’s regular classes.

Joyce, the liaison, said that if coming in to the office wasn't a problem, they'd like me to keep attending this class.

After retiring from GSK, I started taking writing classes at Rowan University. In the fall 2001, I was writing a long essay entitled "A Happy Death" that required interviewing several people about the deaths of friends or relatives. Recruiting people willing to discuss the topic was challenging. It seemed that I had too many from the same or similar religions. From two years of attending Ethel's lectures, I knew one of her sons, her husband, and several other friends and relatives had died; she was Jewish; she was always up for a challenge. I asked her for an interview.

Ethel and I met in Ponzio's in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. We drank coffee as we talked. Well, she talked. I took notes. She took the conversational ball from my handoff and did a broken-field run that didn't always reach the question's goal line, but made points all the same. Ethel touched on all the deaths she'd experienced, jumping from one to the other to the other and back again. Two questions produced two and a half hours of interview and a full notebook.

Ethel couldn't completely relate to this happy-death topic, but that didn't leave her tongue-tied. "I always said I want to die between clean sheets. I've heard of death being peaceful, being quiet. But I've never associated happiness with death.

"Death is inevitable. I want it to be painless. I want to live as long as I can possibly live productively. I can't be afraid of death because I don't consider myself a coward. Let my demise be a celebration of my life. I don't find it negative or distasteful. I'll die as I was born—I had no choice about that either. But I'd try experimental drugs or treatment—if I could help others that way, I'd want to.

"I don't want to wait for death. I want to wear out. I have a desire to know everything. Here's my advice: Be resourceful. Don't carry a grudge. Don't let anger turn inward. Become more honest with yourself and the people around you. Love the truth—it serves me well. Travel.

"I'm a totally, totally satisfied and contented person. I've seen the four things I wished to see—the Taj Mahal, the Great Wall of China, the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, and the pyramids in Egypt. I've lived a full life. I'll be sorry that I can't see my granddaughter's children if she ever has them, and I'd love to know what the world will be like in 100 more years."

Ethel considers herself spiritual without being ritual. She's not sure if there's an afterlife. "Faith can be a shedding of our responsibilities—I don't have to worry or do my part; God decides. I think people can handle death and dying better than they can handle joy."

At that table, bits and pieces of Ethel's life and thoughts tumbled out. Though I had known from classes that she was open and willing to talk about feelings and life, she made herself almost transparent. She was intriguing and I think she surprised herself. As we stood in the line to pay our check she said, "I think I've told you more about death and how I feel about it and what I want than I've ever told anybody."

A few weeks later I delivered the essay as well as the typed-up interview. She showed it to friends and family and seemed quite happy with it.

Michael Vitez of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote a feature on her as a *Weight Watchers* lecturer and it appeared, with two photos, in January 2002. Ethel shared her delight and clips with her classes.

Over the next few months at meetings, she asked if I was still writing. Yes, some fiction. She asked to read it. Then, chatting in the late spring, "I've been thinking. All this has made me interested in writing a book about my life. I've even got a title."

I took the bait and asked what it was. *My Lover the Rabbi, My Husband the Doctor: What more could a Jewish girl want?* If she can pay that off, we'd have a book.

"I'd like to write this but I can't write. I can talk, and I like the way you write, Cheryl. Would you be interested in writing it with me?" I was writing fiction right then and thought of *Memoir of a Geisha*, a fiction work that grew out of the author's interviews with a former geisha. Did Ethel envision fiction or non-fiction? At first she gave a mischievous grin.

"Fiction. I'd like to make it even better than it was."

I laughed, but we agreed to set our first official interview for September 17, 2002, the day after Yom Kippur and a year after the September 11 terrorist attack. We agreed to do this fifty-fifty—as far as final authorship credit and the incidental costs, and that we'd see where the interviews took us. We'd decide whether the book would be fiction or non-fiction later, and she deferred that choice to me. Non-fiction it had to be. I told her we'd have enough trouble getting people to believe the truth.

Our voices alternate in the following chapters: her history and my observations during the interview and writing process.

Chapter 1: Kentucky Indulged, Spoiled & Willful—1916 to 1926

My mother, Jennie Brown—Americanized from Braun, was born in 1890 in Russia and came to the United States when she was 13. She was the youngest child of a widow and widower who each had four children from previous marriages. Then, they had ten children together—18 in all. My mother was the last after my Uncle Bill; she was a fluke, born when my Bubbe Sprinya (Yiddish for Grandmother Spring) was fifty-two. Only the ten shared kids immigrated to America. The older eight stayed in Russia.

When I was grown and had kids of my own, I took Mother and my kids to see *Fiddler on the Roof*. She said, “How can these Americans know what I went through?” Mother was a victim of pogroms. Her father was a furrier in Russia. Mother remembered that the head man of the town or village would somehow find out when these things were going to happen. He would tell all the Jewish villagers: throw the furniture around, and break some dishes on the floor, then get out, and go to the synagogue. They would. Raiders would see the mess and think the residents had already been dragged out. My mother lived all that.

She talked about how awful her mother felt about leaving her older children when they left Russia. Emigrating to America was necessary to take care of her younger kids; my grandmother knew she was saying good-bye forever to the children who stayed in Russia. My grandmother kissed them from the top of their heads down to their toes.

My father’s family, the Dunksys, came to America at about the same time. Both families left Russia at the time of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904. Russia was conscripting many Jewish boys, cannon fodder.

Schooling was prohibited to Jews in Russia, so many chose manual labor. All the learning the Jews had was in their religion, in the Hebrew/Yiddish Bible. Jews became craftsmen, working with their hands. My parents’ families were poor. Both settled in Kentucky, across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. Many immigrant Jews did. Over the river was Cincinnati’s “other side of the tracks.”

As the youngest, Mother took care of her mother after my grandfather died shortly after immigrating. Mother had only a second-grade education, but

she read a great deal and educated herself. She was considered an *altamoid*, or old maid, at twenty-four. But much to everyone's surprise, Isadore Dunskey asked her to marry him. She didn't want to, but her family thought this was her last chance; she gave in and married my father.

Mother proved to be a challenge. My father, Izzy, could not control her; she didn't behave in the fashion expected of a wife. She was not a submissive individual. She argued with him over her independent ideas, over her duty to him, over where they'd live, and over the number of children they'd have. She went out to work, unheard of for a married woman. Doing that said that her husband couldn't support her and was considered shameful. My father punished her by withholding money.

Once, many years later when I was grown and married myself, I asked her why I was the only child. "I only wanted one child," she answered. "Yes, but how did you know how to have only one?" Birth control wasn't common knowledge then. In 1914, Margaret Sanger first coined the term "birth control" and opened her clinic in New York in 1916, the year I was born.

"Well, I found a prostitute and asked her how she kept from getting pregnant." I was so stunned by the idea that I never did find out what kind of birth control she used. I don't know if she used a special douche or a diaphragm. For sure my father didn't use a condom.

Pressured by her husband, her mother and her family, Mother did have me, though. Until my birth, she tried to be a compliant daughter and wife. I guess she figured that she'd gone along with them so far and would go no further.

My story starts here: "On May 23, 1916, at 7:23 a.m. in a bedroom at 623 York Street in Newport, Kentucky, there was a scream, a yell, a grunt. 'Bear, bear, bear.' And there it was: a blob of humanity." My mother repeated this description so often that it seems like I remember it.

An old sepia photograph hand-dated "May 25" shows the doctor in a suit with a bow tie, standing in the corner of the room at the head of the bed. He's facing the camera. Light streams in from a window at the head of the bed and from another window behind Aunt Rose, who's in a nurse's cap and sitting next to the bed. Flowered curtains hang at the windows and the walls are papered with a small even pattern. Her right elbow resting on the pillow above her head, a handsome dark-haired woman smiles at the newborn next to her. Shadowed in the foreground, an old woman (Bubbe Sprinya) with a

loosely knotted scarf, a *fachala*, covering her head leans forward, extends her arm, touching the small scowling bundle.

They named me Étela, Yiddish for Ethel, for my father's grandmother who died before I was born. Jews often name children after relatives, but only after that relative or friend has died. Often Jews used biblical names like Esther, Ruth, or Sarah. German, Jewish, and Russian names in Yiddish, and even in English, were later modernized. Sound and spelling were simplified; Sarah became Sondra, Sally, Sheryl or Sandy; Itzak or Yitzhak became Isaac, Isidore, Isaiah; Moishe became Moses or Morris. Now there's a return to biblical names like Jacob and Zachary.

I never had a birth certificate. Neither did my husband or his siblings. Both of us were born at home, and no birth certificates were ever issued.

I was willful from the start. Though I really don't remember this, Mother always told this story: When I was a baby the popular wisdom among the Jewish people in our community was that a woman should nurse a baby through their second summer. Well, in my second summer, I was past one year old, walking, and talking—yet Mother was still nursing me. It was too hard to hold me and, as she told it, she was standing in the kitchen and I was standing on a chair while she tried to nurse me. I spoke only Yiddish then—I didn't start speaking English until my first year of school—and I said to her, “*Feh! Kaka zitsi! Vaff aveck! [Expletive! Excrement breasts! Throw away!]*” Well that was the end of nursing.

My own earliest memory is during World War I; I was about two years old—the war started in 1918. I was wearing Uncle Bill's Navy hat and waving an American flag. Uncle Bill—I also called him Uncle B.B.—was my favorite person. My mother's mother, Bubbe Sprinya, lived with us in Newport, Kentucky, and Uncle Bill, my mother's brother—just a little older than she was—lived with us until he enlisted. He had come home on leave from Bowling Green, Kentucky. I can remember saying that day: “Uncle B.B., don't go to the Navy; it's reigning (raining).” I spoke Yiddish, of course. Not long after, Uncle Bill brought home the woman who was to be Aunt Kate; I felt the first pangs of jealousy.

I was a very possessive child: my *bubbe* was my *bubbe* and I drove my cousin Freida wild, telling her “She's my *bubbe*. She's not your *bubbe*.” I thought Uncle Bill would be there for me always; that the world's only purpose was to make me happy.

Another family story that was told for years: One evening, Uncle Bill and I were walking in Florence, Kentucky, under a huge full moon. Holding Uncle Bill's hand, I asked, "Uncle B.B., do you love me?"

"Of course."

"Uncle B.B., do you really love me?"

"Of course, darling."

"Uncle B.B., can you get me the moon?"

"But honey, it's too far away. I can't get the moon."

"Not even if you put all the chairs and tables in Florence, Kentucky, together, you still couldn't reach it?"

Laughing, he picked me up and gave me a big hug.

Uncle Bill's hobby was photography. That's why I have so many pictures of my childhood and youth. Few people have many photographs from 1916 through the 1920s, but Uncle Bill took lots of family pictures. In the Navy during World War I, he made it his business to take pictures of admirals and other brass that came to the Navy base in Bowling Green, Kentucky in 1918. I always thought it was ironic to have a Navy base in Kentucky; later I heard the Navy has a think-tank in a California desert.

Anyway, photos became Bill's job. After the service, he went into construction, building houses called Brownie Bungalows. Well, the Depression killed that. He went to New York where he started taking his camera to dog shows and became a successful dog photographer. During the Depression, Uncle Bill was ashamed to tell people what he was doing; it seemed bizarre to be taking dog photos while people were starving, he said.

When Uncle Bill brought Kate to our house the first time—I had to be three or four—this Kate thing was devastating. He was going to marry her! I loved Uncle Bill; I thought he was going to be mine forever. He tried to get us together, and took us both to the circus.

Kate had gotten a bit ahead of us, and I remember Uncle Bill hurrying after her, saying, "Honey, Honey! Wait for me." Uncle Bill called Kate "Honey," the same as he called me! I remember watching and hating her.

After the circus, I was still sulking. I was so furious that I purposely put my hand through the glass in our door. While I was doing it I had no idea of what it would really cause. I wanted a commotion, and I just had this idea that punching my hand through glass would get it. They took me to the doctor for stitches and I screamed so loud.

It wasn't as bad as I was letting on, but I wanted Uncle Bill and Kate to know they were causing me great agony. Though Kate later became a dear aunt, it took a long time for me to accept her. I still see her in a brown dress at her engagement party. I really loved that woman even though she was a snob.

When I was four, the Ku Klux Klan came to Florence, Kentucky, where my father owned a general store. We lived above it, and while my mother worked with my father in the store, I played and took my naps in the back room. I slept with a cover over my head, because I was afraid the cockroaches crawling on the rafters would fall on me. Any place that sold food had them—these were maybe an inch long. There were no exterminators then.

The KKK was planning some kind of fair or big event; they were definitely coming to town. I remember Mr. Erlanger, the sheriff, carrying a shotgun and coming to see my father. It wasn't uncommon then to walk around with guns. He said, "I can't protect you, Izzy. Close up and go away."

Father said, "I can't close up. They'll need supplies, and this is the only place to find them." Maybe he was implying that the KKK would help themselves if he weren't there to sell the supplies.

In the '20s, the KKK was a powerful political movement. They openly wore their white robes and pointed hats. Years later, on vacation in Spain, I thought about those outfits when I saw the brightly colored costumes and huge pointed hats with slitted eye-holes that the Spanish wore in religious processions. Those KKK uniforms, and maybe others like Russian soldiers' uniforms, probably influenced my mother; she hated uniforms. She wouldn't even let me become a girl scout, because I'd have to wear a uniform.

Anyway, the KKK came to town, and they bought things from my father even though he was Jewish. But early that evening, I think, I was looking out the window in the second-floor bedroom above the store. Mother stood close behind me as we watched what was happening across the street in the clearing in front of the Catholic church. My mother clutched my hand as though I were going to fall out, even though I was standing on the same floor as she was, and the window wasn't low. I could see a crowd and fire and I could hear yelling. I knew what fire meant and I knew a cross had something to do with Jesus. I knew his name, but I didn't know much about Jesus beyond that. I also knew there were derogatory words about Jews, Catholics, and blacks.

I could see a cross on fire over there; but I didn't know that the cross was wood. My mother was breathing deeply, almost sobbing in disbelief, horror,

and fright. I couldn't see anyone being tarred, but I know from later family discussions that a young Catholic couple was tarred and feathered. As we stood there, Mother gasped, then ran down the stairs and told my father in the store, "We're leaving." Father probably held this against Mother—her place was to stay with him at the store, but she was determined. He stayed at the store, but she packed me up.

We had a telephone with multiple rings, and an operator who would say things like, "it's busy but they're not saying much." I can't believe that today I'm walking around with a cell phone with 20 numbers programmed in it. Anyway, I think Mother used that old telephone to call my aunt in Newport.

There were few cars and no buses where we lived in Kentucky, but I know we were leaving to get away from the Ku Klux Klan. Was it day or night? I can't remember, but I was tired and Mother couldn't carry me plus the suitcase she was lugging. I remember a car coming along and somehow we got to Newport to stay with my aunt and uncle until the KKK left.

My father trained as a tailor in Russia and came here as a boy. I imagine when he met my mother he was tailoring, but I don't know where. When I was small, he had the store in Florence. Shortly after the KKK incident, he sold the store, and went to work for Levine Brothers, a men's garment factory in Newport. Father was a pocket-maker; he had to have his own tools, including his own scissors and sewing machine. He became a labor union organizer, associated with the International Garment Workers of America. That was risky. In fact, a while later David Dubinsky, the labor leader brought my family to New York City. I think it was a temporary measure to keep my father from falling into the hands of hired goons. I remember my mother and grandmother arguing. My grandmother wanted Mother to leave me with her, but Mother insisted on taking me to New York. We came back fairly soon, though.

About that time...we were living at 237 Northern Avenue in Cincinnati with my grandmother and Uncle Bill. They had an arbor with grapes. Everyone grew things to eat in their gardens: tomatoes, apples, grapes... A little boy about my age or maybe a little older, Marvin Newman, lived next door. I remember climbing up on the arbor. I had a little scissors or knife in one hand and a tiny bucket in the other—that hand also held on to a branch or the arbor. Well, Marvin started pulling at my leg—either trying to pull me down, or to pull himself up. I remember hitting Marvin with my free hand. I was afraid he'd make me fall. I didn't want to hurt him, but I didn't want to be

pulled off. I was no more than four years old and very athletic. I climbed everything. But after I hit him Marvin was screaming and bleeding. I'd hit him with the scissors or knife. He ran into his house and the doctor had to come and give him stitches.

The thing I remember most about that was that Mother didn't punish me. There was a lot of talk, but she said that I hadn't meant to hurt him. She didn't punish me. I remember that very well.

When we returned to Kentucky, my father bought a farm—it was unusual for a Jew to be able to buy land—147 acres of prime bluegrass in Limaburg, Kentucky, and we lived there. Father didn't work on the farm, but it was very important to him that he owned land. Jews owning land had been forbidden in Russia. Father returned to tailoring for the Levine Brothers and remained deeply involved with the union. My parents were activists in many ways.

Being an only child had good points. I received love, attention, devotion—the giving-back part came later. I was always empathetic though. I remember when I was four or so, my cousin, Mildred, cried. Then I began to cry. “Why are you crying?” my mother asked. “Because my company is crying.”

As an only child, I had to rely on myself for entertainment, to use my imagination. My toys were alive, and they talked to me. I pretended to be famous people, dressing up in Mother's dresses and caps. Mother had a feather boa that I would toss over my shoulder. She loved big hats so I did too. Imitating pictures I had seen of ballet dancers standing in front of mirrors, I would put on my finery and perform in front of a mirror for my best audience.

I didn't mind being an only child because I had so many cousins to play with—not just blood cousins. We were part of a family enclave, a *mishpocheh*, which means family or people from the same town or territory in Russia—clansmen of a different sort from the KKK. They all helped one another.

Another time when I was very young, Mother had left me with Bubbe and Aunt Rose. I was sleeping and I had a bad dream. I don't remember the dream, but I woke up hysterical, sobbing. They tried to console me, but I cried with all I had. Uncle Bill and Uncle Sam came in, and they tried to talk to me. Remember this was all in Yiddish. Anyway, I was so inconsolable that they had to call Mother back from wherever she was. When she arrived, I was still

crying hysterically. I remember a thought going through my mind, “Look at all the people around me. I’m not hurting. I’m just crying.” By then I’d forgotten why I was crying, but I just kept on. I liked the feeling of everyone around me. I didn’t want to stop crying.

The Limaburg farm had a tenant farmer and his family living there. The Glass family—Phil and Katie, son Joe who could fix anything, and daughter Rosetta—farmed the land. We lived near the Glasses from the time I was six until I was ten. Before we moved to Limaburg, I had started school in Newport with my cousin, Frieda, who was 10 months younger than I. Though at school less than half the year, Freida and I learned English. When we started, both of us spoke only Yiddish, but we were Americanized quickly.

On the farm, Rosetta Glass was my friend and co-conspirator. Rosetta hated the black bloomers she had to wear to school. I helped her change out of them each morning on the way to school, and back into them on the way home. We went to the stereotypical little red schoolhouse: one room heated by one stove and with one teacher, Miss Virginia, who kept the library in the back of her car. The boys brought sticks in the morning to scare away any rodents or snakes that had come into the schoolhouse to keep warm during the night. I got a great education—both at that one-room school and on the farm.

I loved to perform in front of Rosetta’s mother, Katie Glass. She was a laughing lady, but toothless. I also learned what kids learn on a farm—I was often the lantern-holder at animal births. Watching it, I would get sick—the smells, the grunts and noises the cows and animals made. But I made good use of the knowledge later.

Are you born with observational skills or not? As a little girl, I always noticed things and they had meaning to me or I put meaning to them. I always had a sense that I was witnessing history.

Opening the Door **—September 17, 2002**

On this sunny September day, the day after Yom Kippur, I park at the Towers at Windsor. I'm ready for our first official interview. Ethel lives in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, a Philadelphia suburb of 70,000 people. The Towers—two of them—were built in the 1960s, and are about 12 stories high with balconies offset for privacy, and panels—teal on Ethel's building—on the front of each balcony. I'm very aware of this being just a few days after the anniversary of 9/11, and of what happened to those Towers. Not that I am afraid, but that kind of thought comes to many of us. Like the day that J.F.K. was assassinated, it's an event one never forgets and one that many relate other events to. For my parents it was Pearl Harbor and World War II; for their parents and Ethel, World War I and the Depression were those formative shared memories.

The security guard calls Ethel. Her cheery answer on the speaker phone: "Send her up."

On the eighth floor, she's propped her apartment door open, singing "Come in," at my knock. The apartment is spacious—from the foyer I see straight ahead into a large living room with a wall of windows. In the left corner just inside the door, a large container overflows with umbrellas and walking sticks. The open door to a modest kitchen is to the right; next to it, a hall hung with art leads back to bedrooms and baths. To my right a large two-door closet is next to the door I entered. A small two-drawer table, holding a samovar, a vase, and other knick-knacks, faces me; a painting and two large sconces hang above the samovar. Art is everywhere—to my left, a bright flowery print next to a single door to another closet, more paintings and prints adorn the living room walls, and sculptures rest on tables throughout.

I feel comfortable in this space filled with art and the mementos of a lifetime of living and travel. If the apartment had been modern or decorator chic, I wouldn't have felt at home, but I could feel Ethel and her personality in these things. Over time, I would learn the stories about all this and about other mementoes yet to be unearthed from closets.

Ethel meets me laughing, immediately launching into a cheerful monologue about the art that “comes from 20 years of working with the art shows for the National Council of Jewish Women.”

She leads me to the dining room where one end of the table is set for two. The coffee cup and plate on my side of the table allow space for my notebook. A plate of dried fruit and a few meringue cookies rest between the place settings. The dining room adjoins the living room along the window wall and a door leads out to a balcony. The dining room isn't visible from the foyer, but is open and makes the foot of an “L” with the living room. Two antiqued corner cabinets filled with dishes and glasses are parentheses around a painting of hollyhocks that hangs behind Ethel's chair. As we sit down, I can see through both door and pass-through to the small bright yellow kitchen, the beige-and-white checked linoleum, and the white 1970s cabinets.

As I take out my pen, Ethel says, “I have so much to tell you. Everything is starting all over again. I just learned that my oldest son, Harris, has been diagnosed with multiple myeloma. He was feeling bad and went in for a checkup, and they found this. It's quite advanced, this cancer. I can't believe it. I learned about Harris on almost the same date that Chucky died in 1952, 50 years ago. Chucky was only eight when he was diagnosed with leukemia and died 13 days later on Yom Kippur. Now I'm beside myself with worry about Harris.

“Yesterday at the synagogue, I walked up to the *Bimah*, the platform where the Ark that holds the sacred Torahs rests. The Torahs are the five books of Moses. The sign of wealth of any synagogue is not in the building or the wealth of the community; it's the number of Torahs. We visited a synagogue in Israel that had 28 Torahs; it's the wealthiest one in the world. Women were not allowed near the ark in any synagogue until the 1980s. Orthodox synagogues still don't allow women on the *Bimah*.

“On Yom Kippur, the Ark doors are open, and all can see the Torahs. I walked up to it, and I had so much on my mind. The rabbi had to call my name to break my concentration and remind me to move on. I was just in a trance. I could not stop thinking about Harris and Chucky and...”

She drops that line of thought, and launches into her birth and life as a young child. Ethel had made coffee, and as she talks, she intersperses the *Weight Watchers* point count of the snacks on the serving plate between us. For four dried apricots and four meringues, only three points total.

In the midst of youth-in-Kentucky recollections, she stops, stares out the window and smiles, “Life is a process of getting up every day and not knowing what is in store.” I can tell she’s come to talk in sound bites, often distilling thoughts into pithy sayings like that. It comes from years as a storyteller, organization leader, fundraiser, book reviewer, and volunteer docent at the University of Pennsylvania. But these sound bites will make it harder to tease out details and feelings associated with various life events. This thing may be harder to write than I thought.

She touches on her many awards from organizations, and quickly moves on to another childhood story. We talk about her mother; from the stack of mail, newspapers and books on the window end of the table, she produces a 1966 letter from her mother. As I read it, she goes to get a book.

The letter, postmarked 21 Feb 1966, from Miami Beach, has a return address for Jennie Dunson at 1732 Collins Ave, The Catalina Hotel, Miami, Florida; the letter’s postage cost ten cents. It’s a chatty and loving letter from a woman who seems to have been quite sharp and very interested in what was happening in the world. She talks about raising money for the Federation, for *Histadruth*, [both refer to the Federation of Labor Unions in Israel], and for the Jewish National Fund. She chats about a “primadonna visitor,” comments on national troubles with Hanoi and China—how she’s been “glued to the TV to hear Maxwell Taylor, former ambassador to South Vietnam, General Matthew P. Ridgeway, former U.S. army chief of staff, and aid administrator David E. Bell.” She talks about watching Senate sessions on TV. “Babe, I have so much to learn... (I) sit up here and take it all in...regardless of [other] people that love to gossip about their hair doos. [sic]”

Here’s the source of some of Ethel’s spunk. Ethel herself breezes in carrying a book. “Did I tell you my mother was in a book?” It’s a compilation of two- or three-page profiles, *The Bold Survivors* by Joan Dufault. Two hours have sped by. I take my leave with book, letter, and a sheaf of notes.

Later, I read both the introduction and the profile of Jennie Dunson. Names keep changing and confusing me. Although Dunson was Ethel’s name when she married, Dunsky was the name her father had when he came to the U.S. I know many immigrants changed their names or had them changed as they entered the country, but Ethel’s extended families seemed to have a plethora of names, and spellings of the same name. As mentioned previously, her mother’s last name was Brown, Americanized from Braun. Ethel’s father had changed the family name in 1921. Later, after Ethel married Leo Lipsitz,

that whole family changed its name to David during the World War II. When I later ask Ethel why all the changes, she explains that all Jews who moved here wanted to have American names.

Ethel's father, Itzhak Dunskey, changed his name to Isadore Dunson, though not all his relatives changed their last name. Some did, but to another spelling—Dunsan. Correspondence is sometimes addressed to I. Dunsan, but most of the time it's Dunson. Thus, three brothers could have three different last names. The changing names are only one reason why I have trouble following all the relations and people Ethel mentions. Another is that everyone in the community or *mishpocheh* becomes a relative somehow. When Ethel mentions a "cousin," it may literally mean a cousin or perhaps just someone in the *mishpocheh*.

A gray-haired woman with dark eyes alert behind plastic-framed glasses smiles out of the full-page photo in *The Bold Survivors*. Jenny Dunson's photo is on page 146, and her story starts on the facing page. I imagine the eyeglass-frames are gray or pale blue mother-of-pearl, but I can't be sure from the black-and-white head shot. Jenny Dunson's face is pleasant, lined—the stereotypical pleasant grandma who kisses and pinches cheeks and always has a treat. Jenny was 85 when she died, more than a year younger than Ethel is now. You can see the resemblance, but Ethel looks more youthful even though she's 18 months older than her mother in this photo.

Dufault interviewed Jenny Dunson:

...in a bright little efficiency room in an old residential hotel located a block or two from the ocean. She had her own icebox and bathroom and a small stove. The building was entirely occupied by retired people. There was no nurse on hand, nor were there any dining facilities. There was a small elevator and a front porch filled with rocking chairs.

Several anecdotes in the book confirm Ethel's stories, but a few are much different. At another meeting, I ask for clarification.

"My mother didn't always have things straight. I know she talks about our son Bill being a professor at Brandeis in that interview. Well, Bill was a sophomore student at Brandeis then. But to her, it was all the same thing. It wasn't a lie or an overstatement. He was an educated person, like a professor. She went no further than second grade, so education was something of a

My Lover the Rabbi, My Husband the Doctor: What more could a Jewish girl want?

mystery. He was at college, so he must be a professor. That's just the way she saw it."

Dufault quotes from Helene Moglaen's introduction to *The Self Conceived*, her biography of Charlotte Bronte. The quote expresses a thought I hadn't quite formed yet: "I have pursued my own shadow through the beckoning recesses of another's mind, hoping to discover its substance at the journey's end." These interviews are deepening the friendship born at *Weight Watchers*, and I know I am pursuing more than facts and stories as I chronicle Ethel's life. But what?

I want to know how she manages to stay so active, to be interested in so much, and to keep her spirits up in the face of roadblocks, disappointments, and losses.

I can see that keeping a "professional journalistic distance" from the material will prove to be a challenge. Already, we feel like friends, but I want to report both my observations and Ethel's story as accurately as possible.

Chapter 2: Crossing the River Opens Life Up—1926 to 1931

We moved from Kentucky across the Ohio River to 3642 Alaska Avenue, when I was ten. Cincinnati was a wonderful place to grow up. Jews and Catholics ran the city, which everyone called the Little City on the Rhine, harking back to German immigration and heritage. Cincinnati had brewers with Clydesdale horses, and meatpackers. How beautiful and scenic: the Delta Queen, the Island Queen, the suspension bridge over the Ohio, and the Cincinnati skyline viewed from Kentucky, with all the gaslights. Culture was at our fingertips: the Art Museum, the Taft Museum, Times Square, Fountain Square, Hebrew Union College, Xavier, the University of Cincinnati, and the history of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Stephen Foster. The city itself was a good influence on me, a wonderful place to grow up.

Alaska Avenue was quiet, and shaded. It was in a hilly neighborhood quite near the Cincinnati Zoo, where we would go to see the animals or to picnic. When we moved, Aunt Rose and Uncle Sam moved in with us. Though they had once lived above their store in Newport, they stayed with us until after I was grown and married. That may have been another bone of contention between Mother and Father.

We got a dog—Shimka—a mongrel from the word “go.” Shimka means Simon in Yiddish. Owning a dog was very unusual for a little Jewish girl; Jewish people just didn’t have the money to take care of dogs. Uncle Sam loved dogs though, and he loved that Shimka. Not everyone did, at least not immediately. Once, Shimka was missing for three days and we were all frantic. He came back. On the porch steps, we found him—bruised, hurt, and whimpering. Aunt Rose, who didn’t even want the dog, scooped him up. For the first time, I heard her curse in Yiddish. She very gently gave him a bath and tended to his cuts and wounds. We took such good care of him. Everybody’s attitude about Shimka changed. Was there concern! After that, he was part of our family.

During the summer we moved, I made a neighborhood reputation as the smart kid in overalls who knew about sex. I told the other kids about the births and animal copulations that I’d seen. Lantern holding on the Limaburg farm had given me valuable experience.

In the fall, I started fifth grade at Avondale Public School, where Miss Alice Walker was our teacher. I had worn overalls or dungarees to the country school in Kentucky. Overalls, dungarees, canvas shoes—those were poor people’s clothes. To this city school, I wore leather shoes and skirts. This was painful because I thought I my legs were really ugly; I still think my legs aren’t good. One day, Miss Walker called on me. I didn’t want to come to the front of the class; I refused to, even after she sternly ordered me to the front.

“See me after class,” she snapped.

“Why wouldn’t you come to the front of the class when I called on you?”

Finally, I admitted my shame. “I have ugly legs and clunky shoes.”

She stood up. Her hair was marceled in tight waves, and she wore a fitted skirt; she walked from behind the desk. Miss Walker looked me up and down in silence, and then lifted her skirt so I could see her piano legs. Nothing was said. Sitting down behind the desk, she told me to walk, to sit. As I did, she watched in silence.

“I don’t see anything wrong with your legs. It’s what you do with them. Walk beautifully. Sit like a lady. Dance.” She paused. “Next time I call you to the front of the class, you come.”

So much dates back to that year. I seem to have come alive at age ten. My interest in travel, in history, and in others’ lives started with a book report, an assignment from Miss Walker. My much-later interest in the University of Pennsylvania Museum and in book reviews also began that year with a book report on *Digging in the Yucatan* by Ann Axtell Morris. I still remember the title and the author. That book report whetted my interest in anthropology, archeology, book reviews, and maybe even public speaking—things that have interested me all my life. At ten, I was dreaming of seeing the Taj Mahal, the Pyramids, the Great Wall of China, and the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

I attended the Bureau of Jewish Education as well as regular public school during my fifth-grade year. There, I learned Jewish culture, politics, history, and music from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. on Sunday. The Bureau of Jewish Education was right across the street from the Avondale School. This was not a religious school. It was grounded in Hebrew, not in religion—not like a parochial school, based on teaching a faith. It was secular—like going to a French or Spanish academy where students learn the language and the culture, not religion.

Many famous rabbis and scholars attended or worked at the nearby Hebrew Union College from which the Bureau drew its staff. Isaac M. Wise

started the college. Famous philosophical scholar Josh Trachtenberg; Alex Goodman, one of the famous Four Chaplains; and Joshua Loth Liebman, who wrote *Peace of Mind*, were all part of the HUC. I had such an unusual childhood. I was exposed to genius, not an experience most people have.

Though we weren't religious Jews, my family was involved with the Zionist movement. We were Labor Zionists—visible Jews. Not in our physical appearance or our name, Dunson, but Zionists in our verbal identity—vocal Jews. We helped our cause in every way we could.

Jews who were in the first immigration wave into Palestine in the '20s were Russian, and so were we. This was long before Israel was Israel; Theodore Herzl*, a young Austrian journalist who covered the Dreyfus trial, started the movement for a Jewish homeland.

When I was a child, David Gruen or Green [*subsequently changed to BenGurion**] and Golda Myerson [*later Meir**] traveled around the United States raising funds among the Labor Zionists here to support the statehood and labor movement in then-Palestine. They stayed in homes, spoke, and passed the hat to support the movement, to buy land or to plant trees in Palestine. Out of those funds, they took their fare to the next town. They didn't have money for food and lodging. Local Labor Zionists provided room and board as they traveled. My parents, Aunt Lily, and Aunt Rose were activists for Palestine; we often took these travelers in. That's why I gave up my bedroom and bed to Golda Meir or David Ben-Gurion a number of times. My mother said (about these famous houseguests), "I used to wash their socks and underwear and consider it an honor."

I remember BenGurion's wife Paula, a lovely lady. BenGurion adored her. Golda Meir came several times and my mother liked her enormously. When these guests would come, my Uncle Sam would take a door down off its hinges, and put it on two sawhorses; Aunt Rose would get bedding. I'd sleep there and BenGurion or Meir would take my bed.

Golda Myerson came from the Milwaukee area before she moved to Palestine/Israel. Her husband couldn't keep up physically or mentally with his wife's ambitions. She lived in Israel; he spent much of his time in Milwaukee, but traveled with her in this country. Golda came to Cincinnati often as part of her job with the Pioneer Women, an American group started to support the *Histadruth* movement in Palestine/Israel.

Once, Mr. Myerson, Golda's husband, was sitting in Aunt Rose's kitchen. I never did understand what he did for a living. He had thick black hair and

glasses with thick black frames; he was talking in Yiddish as I sat on his lap, but his stomach protruded so much that I had very little space to sit on his knees. Drinking tea with lemon, he voiced his complaints to Aunt Rose, “Golda is not a home person.”

He called me what many called me “*Étela mit di tzingala*,” Yiddish for “Ethel with the little tongue.” Everyone agreed with him. I never shut up. Being an only child led me to become a storyteller, sharing my life’s experiences with others.

In Cincinnati, I got another nickname that stayed with me. At age 12, I got scarlet fever—complete with a quarantine of our house. After I recovered, all my hair fell out. When I was better that spring, I started lying out in the sun in the back yard. When I took a physical for summer camp, there I stood in line; I was brown as a berry, wrapped in a white towel, with my just-growing-in dark hair sticking straight out from my head. The doctor giving the physicals said, “Well, here’s the queen of Sheba.” My classmates heard that and called me Sheba from then on. Anne Shone added to it; she called me Self-satisfied Sheba, and she still does.

Many of my neighborhood classmates went on to great things. One of the kids in my grade school was Arnold Spielberg, Steven Spielberg’s father. We all called him “Stinky” Spielberg. He was kind of a drip; no one wanted to hang around with him. “Arnold Spielberg, Radio engineer” was how he signed a book that the eighth grade wrote and published—I still have it.

At 12, I also became involved with Young Judea, a youth organization that sponsored hiking clubs, service projects, and social get-togethers. Hiking clubs arose because orthodox Jews wouldn’t ride on Saturday. Though I wasn’t orthodox, many of my friends were. For example, I went over to a friend’s on the Sabbath and was told where there was a box of pre-torn toilet tissue. I didn’t know what they were talking about at first, but orthodox Jews do not tear paper on the Sabbath—including toilet paper, so there were pre-torn pieces. Later, after Kleenex was first marketed in 1924 as a make-up remover and came into common use, it became another option.

Our parents were involved with Young Judea. We had hayrides, field trips, and raised money for the Jews in Palestine. In grade school, we had a bridge club that consisted of four girls (Selma Levinson, Bernice Rosen, Marge Poley, and me) and one mother, who tried teaching us to play despite the talking and giggling.

Young Judea was designed to keep Jewish culture and content in children's lives, and to help the Jewish people. The Jewish National Fund raised money to purchase "dunams of land"—the dunam is the Arabic equivalent of an acre of land—and trees for Palestine. I was being reared in this philosophy: Do for others and you'll improve yourself and be a happier person.

Collecting for the JNF, I went door-to-door asking for "pennies for Palestine." That's how I met Rabbi A. David Philipson, a reform rabbi in Cincinnati who did not believe in the concept of a Jewish state. He came from Germany and he believed in assimilation—Jews becoming completely part of the area where they were living. He thought that being Jews meant (Jews had) "to roam." I didn't know any of this; I just knocked on the synagogue door, collecting coins for trees and land. He invited me into his office and I climbed up on a great big brown leather sofa. As I was giving my canned speech, the rabbi said "I don't believe in Palestine." Shocked, I lambasted him with all the reasons for Jews to be in Palestine, things I'd heard my mother, father and aunt say. I went on and on. This large gray-haired man smiled at me. At the end, he pulled out a dollar—that's like pulling out fifty dollars now—and he said "I don't believe in your cause, but I admire your spirit." When I turned in the money, they asked me who had given me a whole dollar. I told them—and their reaction told me what a feat that had been: to get the famous Rabbi Philipson to give money for Palestine.

I had a talent for getting people to do things, for getting them to help. I think this was the start of the organizational work I've always done. I still know some of those Cincinnati kids: Miriam, Selma Levinson (Marcus now), Anne Shone Rogers, and Amy Lee Rosenberg.

My mother rarely spanked me, and when her friends talked about "training" their husbands or spanking their children, she bristled. Jenny's philosophy was: "You train a dog, not a man or a child. Spanking a good child or a bad child does no good. It only relieves you." Mother taught her own values: humanity and decency, and the difference between right and wrong.

My father taught values too: hard work, family responsibility, and working for the betterment of all—like his dedication to labor unions—but his philosophies had a more negative feel. One of his favorite theories was: Your brains are in your hands. He believed Jews needed skills more than education. He probably believed that because schooling was prohibited to Jews in Russia. He admired educated people, but most people thought girls didn't need to be educated.

Jews were creative through books and music: Yiddish papers, books, and theatre. Jews were not great at representational art because they believed that creating a human face through art would be violating God's prerogative. That's why their artistry was in masonry, cabinetmaking, and craftsmanship.

I had an insatiable curiosity, a desire for knowledge. How do you make that? I was interested in World Almanacs—I'd just sit down and read them. I wanted education, and I was interested in music—that came from babysitting for Rabbi James G. Heller. He was a reform rabbi at the Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati; he had married a very, very wealthy girl, a Bachman. I found out later that she had grown tired of being a rabbi's wife and went out all the time. That was why I became their regular babysitter. Heller wrote the music notes for Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra programs; I would look up facts for him after his daughters were asleep. I babysat for them quite a lot—for fifty cents a night. I'd put the three little girls to bed and knock on the door of the Heller's study.

"Do you have anything to look up?"

"Yes."

Then I'd enter the study, furnished with only a piano and a chair, the four walls lined with books and sliding stepladders like libraries used to have. He would tell me what to look up. I couldn't say a word. After I looked up the facts and wrote them down on a piece of paper, I handed them to him. Silence was not only golden, it was essential. If I had a question as to which of three or four related facts was the right one, I just put them all down. He was known as an orator with a great voice and musical, almost lyrical, language, but I never heard evidence of it in that room. I did learn a great deal about classical music.

Mother and Father battled constantly about every little thing while I was growing up. I thought that all married people did that. Father could never get Mother to understand his feelings and concerns. However, both were always living, saving, and preparing for the "slack season." I don't know that there ever was a slack season; that must have been their term for a "rainy day."

Father had a great intellect and he fought for causes. My parents were both dedicated to Zionism; they had a great sense of family—but by family, they meant their extended families and the *mishpocheh*—and they were dedicated to me. I was their family and, though they loved me, our tiny family was never peaceful and happy. They just had a severe personality clash.

Cheryl Grady Mercier & Ethel J. David

We always had someone living with us; people lived together in groups, extended families, during the Depression times. I can't remember any time during my childhood that we, just the three of us, lived alone. Bubbe Sprinya and Uncle B.B. lived with us in Kentucky; in Cincinnati, it was Aunt Rose and Uncle Sam.

But everything seemed good to me. I was loved, indulged, the pet of my parents, my grandmother, my aunt and uncles. I had lots of friends; I loved school and learning. My friends were intellectual girls. In eighth grade our teacher, Mrs. Urban, assigned the whole class to write a book. We titled it *As We Were*. I worked on it with Amy Lee Diamond and Anne Shone. I still know them. Amy has eight grandchildren now, and lives in Niagara Falls; Anne Shone Rogers lives in Florida now. I don't remember being bored. There was always something to do while I was growing up—in part because Young Judea organized activities for us. During this time, in the Young Judea organization, I met my first lover, the rabbi.

This memoir/autobiography starts to chronicle 90-year-old Ethel J. David's life and the history she experienced first-hand since 1916, but evolves to show one humorous and quirky woman's panache as she faces old age and death as an extraordinary, ordinary woman.

My Lover the Rabbi, My Husband the Doctor: What more could a Jewish girl want?

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