

GRIT & FORTITUDE

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A story of
resilience,

LOVE

and
sacrifice

By Nadia R. Watts



"Hello. My name is Sam." he practiced.

Except it sounded like this: "Hieeloh. My name ees Sahn."

It was the year 1906. With only a paper-thin blanket to cover him, my great-grandfather shifted on the stained, straw-filled mattress of his bunk, practicing his English to distract himself from his seasickness. The odor of 59 other insufficiently bathed souls didn't help matters, and the life jacket under his neck was no match for the pillow he had left on his childhood bed in Minsk.

A young man of only 16, my great grandfather had somehow strolled undetected aboard the ship without a ticket. Now, alone within the throngs, he daydreamed about the life he would soon lead in the United States.

Some 50 years later, he would sit his small granddaughter — my mother — on his lap. "Zayde," she asked, "why did you move from your home all the way to America?" He swept the brown bangs from her forehead and said simply: "Helaine, some things are best to be forgotten."

I am Nadia Renee Watts, the daughter of the young girl in that story. My family and I are alive today because of the courage of my great-grandparents Sam and Sarah, who immigrated to the United States to escape the fierce anti-semitism they and their family experienced throughout their lives in Eastern Europe.

The purpose of this book is to celebrate the courage, determination and strength of the three generations that came before me on my maternal side. Some of these brave people risked their lives and livelihoods to save generations of children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren that would succeed them— many of whom they would never meet.

The persecution my ancestors endured had a lasting impact on the way their descendants lived their lives; we are stronger for it. Today, we raise our own children with sensitivity, grit, and fortitude.



FAMILY TREE

My maternal family line

Helaine Bette Samuelowitz
born April 7, 1944



Abbott Jay Schulman
December 7, 1938 - November 8, 2019



Nadia Renee Schulman
born Feb. 4, 1973



Sylvia Siegel
April 27, 1912 -
December 21, 2010

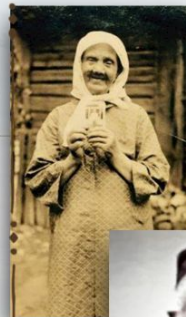


Solomon Samuelowitz
May 15, 1907 - May 26, 1972

Sarah Feinberg
Sept. 15, 1889 - July 26, 1975



Chaia Bashe Feder
1860's - 1941



Harry Feiffer
1860's - 1941



Samuel Siegel
Sept. 14, 1890 - Feb. 5, 1987

PART 1: THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

Chaia Bashe Feder & Harry Feiffer



This story begins with my second great-grandparents, who lived and raised their children in the Kletsk area of Minsk, Belarus — a part of Russia before and during World War I, and a part of Poland for a short while after the war ("Jewish Life").

Unfortunately, permanent historical records about these ancestors are scant, so I've done my best to piece together the puzzle of their lives.

That sweet face wrapped in a babushka is my great-great grandmother, Chaia Bashe Feder, and the handsome bearded fellow is her husband, Harry Feiffer. Both were likely born in the 1860s.



It is said that Chaia sheared sheep and goats, dyed and prepared the fibers and sold them to townspeople in the market (Meadows). My mother, who was named after her, is also a lover of fiber, fabric and yarn.

In celebration of that tradition, you will find photographs of a number of my mother's hand-made quilts within this book.

Together, Chaia and Harry had three children: Abraham, Joseph Meyer Yossel, and Sarah, my great-grandmother (Saved Ancestry Family Trees). The children changed their last name from Feiffer to Feinberg upon their arrival to the States.

At the time, Jews living in and around the Russian Empire struggled to survive organized mob violence called pogroms, and many people fled to begin new lives elsewhere. I can't imagine how hard it must have been for Chaia and Harry, but they bravely supported their three children, each of whom emigrated from Kletsk in the early 1900s. My great-great grandparents, however, stayed behind in their home country at one of the most dangerous times for Jews in history.

Chaia and Harry's son Abraham and his children visited them at least once in 1936; a 24-minute filmstrip of the trip is one relic that remains of that reunion. A few years afterwards, however, Chaia and Harry's letters to their family stopped abruptly, and they couldn't be reached again (Meadows). It is most likely that they were murdered in their home town by the Nazi party, who invaded Kletsk in 1941 with the goal to exterminate 75% of the population there ("Genocide Policy").

"Everybody died over there," my mom explained. "The only people who lived were the people who had immigrated" (Meadows).

Helaine Bette Samuelowitz, my mother, is Chaia Bashe's namesake. How fitting that the Hebrew word "Chayim" means "life"; my mother carries the memory of a strong, loving woman who sacrificed her own life and livelihood to save her children.



MY MOTHER, HELAINE BETTE, IS
CHAI BASHE'S NAMESAKE.
'CHAYIM' IS THE HEBREW WORD
FOR LIFE.

Sarah Feiffer and Samuel Siegel

My great-grandparents, Sarah and Sam Siegel, lived in a small home in Passaic, N.J. Chickens grazed in their back yard, and the pungent aroma of borscht or kasha varnishkes — a mixture of fat, buckwheat, elbow macaroni, and slow-cooked onions — wafted from the kitchen (Meadows).

My mother, Helaine, said she remembers the large, chipped, white porcelain table in their kitchen, as well as the powerful stench of the food. "It stunk to high heaven," she laughed. "It was awful. So, out the back door to the chicken coop, I would go" (Meadows).

Sarah and Sam represent the first generation of my ancestors to live in the United States; they left behind their own parents, extended families, and friends to seek a safe life, far from the religious persecution and violence they had suffered in Russia.



My great-grandmother was born Sarah Feiffer in the year 1890, but she changed her maiden name to Feinberg when she immigrated to the States in the early 1900s. She may have met my great-grandfather, Sam Siegel, after each crossed the ocean to New York City (Meadows).

Sarah and Sam married on July 19, 1910, when they were both in their early 20s. They made their first home in Kings County, New York, and later moved with their children to Passaic, N.J.

Like her mother before her, Sarah liked to sew and work with her hands. "I asked her to help me thread a needle when I was about five or six," Helaine told me. "She squinted her eyes and missed [the hole in the needle.] And I still remember, we laughed and laughed and laughed" (Meadows).

Sarah was also a neat freak; perhaps it was she who passed down that trait to my mother and me. "She was always picking up these tiny little pieces of lint," Helaine said. "She was picking things up off the floor all the time" (Meadows).

Sarah gave birth to eight children, but only four — Isadore, Sylvia, Eva, and Harry — survived (Meadows). She passed away on July 26, 1975, when she was 85 years old.

My great-grandfather, Samuel Siegel, was born in 1891 in Belarus; my eldest son is his namesake.

In 1906, when he was just 16 years old, Sam illegally stowed away on a ship bound for New York (Meadows). "He made his way by doing odd jobs on the ship, I suppose," Helaine said. "And when he came to Ellis Island, they let him in. They didn't send him back" (Meadows).

Helaine recounted how bright Sam was. "He spoke five languages, and in Russia, he tutored the children in the neighboring farms and villages," she said.

My mother remembers visiting her grandparents, Sarah and Sam, as a little girl living in Passaic. Down one street nearby lived her Uncle Yossel and Aunt Shimke. Interestingly, Yossel's sister was Sarah, and Shimke's brother was Sam, which made all their children double cousins.

"Down another street was a bakery, where my grandpa took me and bought me three cupcakes. I could eat one," she laughed. "We didn't normally have cake in the house, so that was a big deal."

"I was the apple of my grandfather's eye," she continued. "He always told me I was his favorite, and boy, was I ever adored by him."

My mother and her grandfather maintained their relationship until his death in 1987 at the age of 96 (Meadows).



THE DAY THIS PHOTO WAS SHOT WAS THE FIRST AND ONLY TIME I VISITED WITH GREAT-GRANDPA SAM, WHO WE ALL CALLED ZAYDE (YIDDISH FOR GRANDFATHER). I WAS FOUR YEARS OLD.



Sylvia Siegel and Solomon Samuelowitz

Sylvia Siegel met her husband, Solomon Samuelowitz, as she and her sister, Eva, strolled at the beach one day in 1933. "Back in those days, there was no internet dating," my mother told me. "The young ladies and the young men would walk on the boardwalk to see what eye candy they could pick up."

Now, Sylvia perceived that her younger sister was much prettier than she was, so when she saw two young men — Solomon and his friend Joe — walking toward them, she staked her claim. Explained Helaine, "My mother leaned over to Eva and said, 'The short, dark one is mine.'"

Both young ladies found their husbands that day: Eva married Joe in 1937, and Sylvia married Sol in 1941 (Meadows).



SOL AND SYLVIA, ALONG WITH THEIR GIRLS, HELAINE AND SARAH, AT BRADLEY BEACH IN NEW JERSEY.

The sign on the door read "Anti-Defamation League." My grandma Sylvia, then a young mother of two pre-teen girls, knocked with purpose. She and her husband, Sol, had just moved their family from their small apartment in Passaic to a lovely two-story home in the suburbs of Wyckoff, New Jersey. Nearby, a sign on the Spring Lake Country Club gate read "No Dogs or Jews allowed."

Sylvia would have none of that. "The only way we could get in was that my mother fought," Helaine said (Meadows).



SYLVIA WORKED IN WASHINGTON, D.C., AS A CLERK WHEN SHE WAS A YOUNG WOMAN.



AS SHE PROMISED TO ME WHEN I WAS VERY SMALL, GRANDMA SYLVIA DID, INDEED, DANCE AT MY WEDDING. HERE SHE IS WITH MY HUSBAND, RANDY WATTS.

Sylvia Siegel was born in Brooklyn, New York, on April 27, 1912, her parents' second-born child.

My mother told me that first and foremost, her mother stood up for what she believed. "She was a scrappy little Brooklyn kid," she said. "She was a fighter when she felt like she needed to be."

My mom credits her own mother for inspiring her to be a social worker. "In social work, we learned to advocate for our clients or our patients. And [my mother] did. She advocated for what her family needed" (Meadows).

My grandma Sylvia used to remind me of a story when I was a little girl. She said to me, "Nadia, one day I'm going to dance at your wedding." She told me I looked up at her with love in my eyes and said, "But, Grandma! You'll be dead by then!"

She was right. Grandma Sylvia showed up that day in black sequined dress and heels, at a youthful 88. She passed away on December 21, 2010, more than a decade later.

She was a fighter.

Solomon Samuelowitz, the first of his family to go to college, had a problem to solve. He had no shoes to wear to class. Determined to see his education through, he found a pair of women's shoes in a garbage pail and broke off the heels. He may have been the only man in women's footwear at the City College of New York, but he was successful.

Grandpa Sol was born on May 15, 1907, in Kings, New York. The oldest of eight children, he helped to support his family and so was unable to marry Sylvia until eight years after they had met.

As newlyweds, they lived in Washington, D.C., where he was an accountant, and Grandma Sylvia kept his books. They got by financially by taking in boarders.

After years of work, they were able to move to the Florida suburbs, where they raised their two girls — my mom, Helaine, and her younger sister, Sarah. Unlike their parents, the girls never knew hardship.

Helaine said her father was the best listener you could ever imagine. He personified his name, which means "peace" in Hebrew. "My father was just loving and warm, and he was so proud of us. He would've given us the moon if he could have" (Meadows).

Grandpa Sol passed away on May 26, 1972, when my mother was newly pregnant with me. My Hebrew name is therefore Shulammit ("peaceful"), the feminine version of the name Solomon. His funeral was standing room only.



Helaine Bette Samuelowitz

It had been a bad day for three-year-old me. I was on a walk with my babysitter, a redheaded boy named Wyman. Clutched in my hand was my favorite stuffed animal, a white, tufted bunny with soft ears and the long arms and legs of a rag doll. It would be the last walk that bunny ever took.

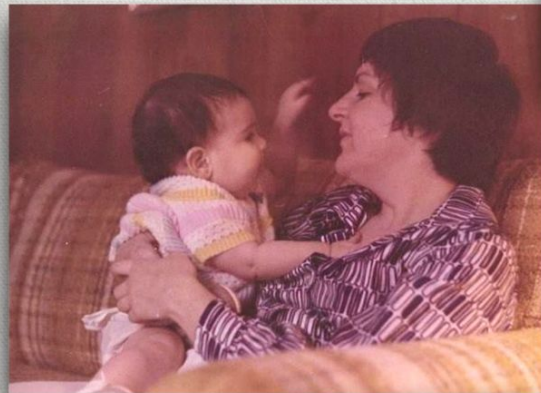
My fuzzy lovey met its doom when a neighbor's German Shepherd snatched it out of my hand and mauled it before my very eyes. I watched in shock and terror, rooted to my spot on the asphalt. When the dog finally got bored and trotted off, Wyman helped me collect all the pieces of fur and stuffing. He put the mess of parts in the hood of my winter parka and walked me, sobbing, back to my house on Apache Road. That's when my mom took over.

Her voice was a song of reassurance, the notes warm and calm. She wiped my cheeks and hugged me tight until I stopped crying. "We'll fix it, Nadia," she promised. We scooped the mangled bits of my bunny out of my parka, and she went to work on her sewing machine. Granted, the bunny never looked the same again, but in my eyes, my mom was forever a superhero.

When I think of my mother, I think of all the times she felt my forehead for a temperature and bought me Coke to bring the fever down. I think of the times when I woke up to find homemade notes made of construction paper and stickers on my bedside table — little love notes just for me. The times when she took me roller skating or hosted my birthday parties. The times when she came to my rescue when I tangled with my sister. I have long since realized that my mom taught me how to mother.



Helaine Bette Samuelowitz was born on April 7th, 1944, in Passaic, New Jersey, Sylvia and Sol's first-born child. For the first seven years of her life, she lived in a Jewish ghetto in Passaic, in an apartment building on the third floor. "All the apartments were exactly alike," she told me. "We had two bedrooms, one bathroom, and a kitchen."



Since her childhood, she has paid it forward by looking out for others. She is trained as a licensed clinical social worker and has led a long, successful career in the field.

"Your pledge is to do no harm and to help as best you can," she said.



Rigged up to the bathroom window was a clothes line that stretched all the way to the next apartment building. "It was on a pulley," she said. "And as a baby, I would look out the bathroom window, and I saw all these pretty clothing hanging out there."

The lines connecting the homes were more than metaphorical. She felt safe there. "People looked out for each other," she explained.



PART 2: OUR HISTORY

The year was 1921. Shimke looked up, listening to the gallop of the Cossacks' horse hooves above. She bounced her toddler, Harry, gently on her hip as her husband, Yossel, whispered to him in Yiddish, "Sheket, sheket, sheket" — "Quiet, quiet, quiet." From their hiding place in an underground bunker, they prayed they would soon be safely aboard a ship and on their way to the United States, where they would be free from the religious persecution that had terrorized so many of their friends and family members.

Shimke would soon reunite with her brother, Sam — my great-grandfather — and her husband Yossel's sister, Sarah — Sam's wife and my great-grandmother. Baby Harry had double cousins waiting for him in New Jersey.

When my mother, Helaine, told me this story that had been passed down to her, she emphasized the feeling of anxious suspense. "All I could remember was the tension in the story about how if this 18-month-old baby had cried, that would've given the whole group of them away," she said (Meadows).

It may sound like something out of a movie, but this was my maternal family's reality as they fled from their homes in the city of Kletsk, located in the Minsk region of Belarus.



SHIMKE AND YOSSEL FEINBERG, MY GREAT-GRAND UNCLE AND AUNT, IMMIGRATED TO THE STATES WITH THEIR YOUNG SON HARRY. THEY LATER HAD THREE MORE CHILDREN. HERE THEY ARE WITH THEIR YOUNGEST, ALICE.

Most of my ancestors escaped, but my elderly second great-grandparents stayed behind, only to be murdered by the Nazi party for their religious preferences.

Between the late 1700s and the early 1900s, eastern European Jews were only permitted to reside inside of an area called the Pale of Settlement, located in what is now modern-day Belarus, Lithuania, Moldova, much of the Ukraine and east-central Poland. Most lived in extreme poverty (Weiner). "The Pale's cities, like other cities throughout Europe, confined Jews to walled-off ghettos with gates that only opened during daylight hours. These conditions, combined with the community's isolation from medicine's significant advances of the early 1900s, resulted in high rates of disease, malnutrition, and death" (Weiner).

The Pale saw acts of anti-Semitic atrocity called the pogroms — violent mob attacks aimed directly at Jewish people — which began in Odessa, Russia, in 1821, and came in three waves over the span of a century. These acts of aggression, often backed with government and police support, were marked by damage to property, rape, and murder (Grosfeld, et al.).

Some scholars say the pogroms erupted from the combination of political turmoil and economic crisis. "Jewish middlemen were the providers of insurance to the majority during economic crises: they forgave outstanding debts and extended new credit," Grosfeld explained. However, during times of uncertainty, Jewish creditors required grain traders to repay them, so "buyers of grain turned against Jews when grain prices were high and there was no credible way to commit to payment in installments" (Grosfeld, et al.).

For those living in Belarus, the already egregious treatment of human life became mass murder in June of 1941, when Adolf Hitler ordered his soldiers to infiltrate Russia so that they could repopulate it with Germans. A representative from the Imperial War Museum in the United Kingdom wrote, "Hitler regarded the Soviet Union as his natural enemy. He aimed to destroy its armies, capture its vast economic resources and enslave its populations, providing the Lebensraum, or 'living space,' that Hitler believed Germany needed in the East" ("What Was Operation Barbarossa?").



ADOLF HITLER, THE LEADER OF NAZI GERMANY ("ADOLF HITLER")

Hitler's directive was to kill 75% of the Jewish population and to Germanize the remaining 25%. He announced to his followers, "We must exterminate [the] population. It is our mission if we want to protect Germans. I have the right to annihilate millions of people of the lowest race who reproduce like worms" ("Genocide Policy"). German soldiers were told to forget their compassion and sympathy. "Do not stop at anything, whether you see an old man or a woman, a boy or a girl in front of you. Kill. ... It will bring eternal glory to you" ("Genocide Policy").

It took only a week for the city of Kletsk to be occupied by Nazi Germany ("Kletsk"). The few Jews whose lives were spared were isolated in ghettos and used as forced labor. Nazis prevented their contact with the outside world by segregating them; depriving them of food and proper nutrition; and threatening constant danger. This "brought the Jewish population to complete spiritual and physical exhaustion" (Vinnitsa).

Finally, on October 6, 1941, the Nazis in Kletsk massacred some 4,000 local Jews. Those who remained — approximately 2,000 people — were corralled into a ghetto and eventually transported to extermination camps ("Kletsk").

My elderly great-great-grandparents, who were in their 80s at that time, would never have been allowed to live.

The last record of Chaia Bashe and Harry Feiffer was a film taken by their son Abraham's children, who visited them in Kletsk in 1936. The short silent film features clips of the family smiling into the camera, singing, and hugging (Feld and Feinberg Families). After that visit, my mother said, there was no more contact from my great-great grandparents.

The family said the letters stopped," she said. "Everybody died over there. The only people who lived were the people who had immigrated" (Meadows).



IT IS MOST LIKELY THAT HARRY FEIFFER (PICTURED ABOVE), AND HIS WIFE, CHAIA BASHE (PICTURED AT RIGHT), PERISHED IN A NAZI ATTACK ON THEIR HOMETOWN OF KLETSK IN 1941 (FELD AND FEINBERG).



"Some things are best to be forgotten"

While my great-grandfather Sam never gave my mother a straight answer as to why he emigrated from Minsk, Belarus, in 1906 (1930 United States Census for Samuel Siegel), she told me she had the sense that he fled to the States after a sister, Eva, was killed in Russia.

"Nobody wanted to talk about it. They made up the story that this Eva had eaten a green apple," she said. "But I think that there was darkness around that story; I never believed that. I think something happened [during the] pogroms, and I think she got killed in some way" (Meadows).

Since Sam stowed away on the boat that brought him to the United States, there are no ship records of his passage. Similarly, my great-grandmother Sarah's immigration to the States is undocumented, but it is said that her brother Abraham, who had come to New York City in 1903 or 1904, sent for her two years later (Meadows; 1920, 1930 United States Census for Abraham Feinberg). It is unknown how Sam and Sarah met in the States.

Exit full screen



HELAINE SAID OF HER ZAYDE SAM: "I WAS THE APPLE OF MY GRANDFATHER'S EYE. HE ALWAYS TOLD ME I WAS HIS FAVORITE. AND BOY WAS I EVER ADORED BY HIM."

My great-grandparents were among 2.5 million eastern European Jews who immigrated to the U.S. Upwards of 85% of these people entered the States through New York City, and some 75% of these settled in the Lower East Side of Manhattan (Moore).

"By 1890, the downtown neighborhood bristled with Jews," Moore said. "These Jewish immigrants ... came at a time of unprecedented immigration to the United States" (Moore). The first few decades of the twentieth century brought social isolation and economic trouble to the Jews, Weiner wrote. "Not only were they a large and expanding segment of the population, but differences in language and dress made them highly visible" (Weiner).

MAKING THEIR WAY

By 1900, over 90% of Jewish immigrants found their homes in tenements, or large apartment buildings that housed a number of other families, Moore said. "For the many immigrants who arrived as children and for those children born to immigrant parents in America, the tenement experience defined their identity more than an increasingly remote Romanian, Hungarian, Russian, or Ottoman town did" (Moore).

Most immigrants lived in tiny apartments that had no indoor plumbing. "Water needed for laundry, cleaning, and cooking had to be fetched from a faucet in the rear yard, which also housed laundry lines and privies," Moore wrote. "No refrigeration and very little storage necessitated daily shopping. Privacy didn't exist" (Moore).

In the year 1920, Sam and Sarah lived in Kings, New York, in a tenement on Sheffield Ave. Sam worked as a sewing machine operator, and Sarah, who had immigrated with only a fifth grade education, was a homemaker (1920 U.S. Federal Census for Samuel Siegel; 1940 U.S. Federal Census for Samuel Siegel).



MY GREAT-GRANDPARENTS' APARTMENT ON SHEFFIELD AVENUE IN BROOKLYN NO LONGER EXISTS, BUT THIS PHOTO IS REPRESENTATIVE OF THE IMMIGRANTS' TENEMENTS IN 1920 NEW YORK ("WASH DAY").

THE EARLY 1900s

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

For many children of immigrants living in New York City, an education was hard to come by. By the year 1914, the children of Eastern European immigrants represented 75.1% of all children in the city of New York (Weiner), which led to overcrowding in the schools. Educators attempted to solve the problem with double sessions, wherein half of the students took classes in the morning, and the other half went to school in the afternoon. This reduced children's school time to just four hours, still in tight conditions. "In each classroom, 60 to 100 students sat three to a desk, on benches, and on the floor," Weiner said.

My grandmother Sylvia and her sister, Eva, only finished up to the seventh or eighth grade. "Eva became a cosmetologist, and my mother became a clerk in Washington, D.C.," Helaine said. But their brothers, Isadore and Harry, were among the lucky ones: they were given enough resources to finish college and earn their master's degrees. "Harry became a commercial artist, and Izzy was a fine artist. He was well known among some of the famous artists in this country," she explained (Meadows).

The young women made up for their lack of education with their chutzpah, or extreme self-confidence — in the kindest sense of the word, of course. Sylvia was excellent at what she did, my mother said. "She took lessons in typing and shorthand." But she faced adversity as a young professional when she was blacklisted in the era of McCarthyism. In the 1940s and 1950s, a blacklist was a list of persons who may have been connected to the United States Communist party, thereby making it hard for them to find work or resulting in termination from employment. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) "was seeking to purge the country of any communist influences" (Burnette)."

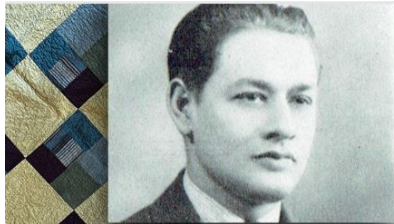
"My mother was called up by Senator McCarthy when they were blacklisting people," Helaine told me. Sylvia's father, Sam, had been a socialist in Russia and had attended a few communist-socialist meetings in the States, and so Sylvia's job was put in jeopardy. "She was just a young woman trying to make her way," my mother said.

Helaine explained that her grandmother Sarah gave birth to eight children at home, but only four had survived — Isadore, Sylvia (Helaine's mother), Eva, and Harry.

"I don't know what kind of prenatal care they had in those days," Helaine told me. "My mother tells the story that when her mother was in labor and she heard her giving birth, she didn't understand. So she screamed, 'Mama scharke! Mama scharke,' which means, 'Mama's dying!'" (Meadows).

Most eastern European immigrants spoke Yiddish, "a language that emerged in German lands and expanded throughout eastern Europe" (Moore). Alternately, Sam and Sarah spoke Russian when they didn't want their children to understand them (Meadows). My grandma Sylvia and her siblings knew Yiddish and English.

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: ISIDORE; SYLVIA; EVA AND
HER TWO BOYS, BARRY AND STUART; AND HARRY



the next generation is born

Sylvia soon gave birth to her firstborn, a boy, who died just a few days later. Hear daughters, Helaine and Sarah, were born in 1944 and 1948, respectively; the family lived in a small apartment at 361 Madison Street, Apartment 5C, in the city of Passaic (1950 United States Federal Census for Solomon Samuelowitz), a largely Jewish enclave of New Jersey.

"Most of the people who lived in our apartment building were Jewish," my mother told me. "You were safe there. People looked out for each other" (Meadows).

When my mother was around seven, however, her father landed an accounting position and moved his family from their flat in Passaic to 90 Linden St., a two-story home in the suburbs of Wyckoff, New Jersey. "There was grass and trees," Helaine remembered. "My mother planted yellow and purple flowers every year on the walk leading to the front door. She planted strawberries and chased the birds away, shrieking, 'Get outta my strawberries,'" she laughed.



THE SAMUELOWITZ FAMILY MOVED TO WYCKOFF, N.J., IN THE EARLY 1950S.

Helaine and Sarah faced a new reality living in their new suburban home: it was the first time they would meet others from differing religious backgrounds. "It was an awakening for me, because I hadn't known anybody who was not Jewish," Helaine said.

Though anti-Semitism was diminishing rapidly with the civil rights movement, it still existed, even after World War II ended.



THIS SIGN IS SIMILAR TO THE ONE POSTED AT THE SPRING LAKE COUNTRY CLUB IN WYCKOFF, N.J. MY GRANDMOTHER FOUGHT SUCCESSFULLY TO HAVE BOTH THE SIGN AND THE RESTRICTION REMOVED ('ANTISEMITISM IN AMERICAN HISTORY').

According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), an international Jewish organization specializing in civil rights law and founded in 1913, "Some exclusionary practices persisted, such as those that inhibited Jews from succeeding in certain professions or entering particular social venues" ("Anti-Semitism in American History"). Wyckoff, N.J., unfortunately, was no exception: near my family's new home, they discovered a sign on the Spring Lake Country Club gate that read "No Dogs or Jews allowed" (Meadows).

Her mother, Sylvia, would have none of that, Helaine told me. She and a number of other Jewish families marched to the office of the Anti-Defamation League and fought legally. "The only way we could get in [to the club] was that my mother fought," she said. "And I was so proud of her for doing that" (Meadows).

STRENGTH IN FAITH



Sylvia's fearlessness and grit obviously rubbed off on my mother. Soon after the Spring Lake Club incident, Helaine met an older, taller girl in her new neighborhood — a child who had never met another Jewish person, just like my mother had never met anyone other than a Jew.

The girl said to Helaine, "I know about you. You don't believe in God."

My mother replied, "Of course, I believe in God!"

The girl said, bating her, "Well, God is Jesus."

Young Helaine asked, "Who's that?"

The girl pointed her finger, saying, "See?"

What happened next goes down in history as the first and last time my mother used violence to attempt a resolution. "I slugged her," my mother admitted. "I took my fist and punched her. How dare she say I didn't believe in God! That was the worst insult she could give to me!"

The girl never bothered my mother again.

Questions and answers

Nadia: Tell me what role faith has had throughout your life.

Helaine: It's the most important part of my life. When I went to Sunday school, the first lesson that I learned was that God was everywhere and in every living thing. God loves all his children. Judaism is still the base of my faith; it was a springboard for me to learn about other faiths and what they had to offer. But I have rejected all of the sexism and hierarchy of Judaism, and I don't accept the idea that the Jews are the "chosen people" — that they are special in the eyes of God.

I became a clinical social worker and served as a therapist for people of all walks and religions and cultures. I learned that people have different versions of God. And I also noted that when people did have faith in something — whoever they called God or whatever their belief structure was — that helped them through hard times, because life does have hard times for all of us. Most people get better if they have faith. It doesn't have to be any particular faith; they just need faith to hold onto.

Nadia: How did you come to find a home within Unitarian Universalism?

Helaine: Well, my identity is still as a Jewish person within a Unitarian backdrop. I celebrate my Judaism through Unitarian Universalism. I have a real community of people who I just love and feel embraced by, and I embrace them. It's very good to have a community and to feel a sense of belonging. For the most part, people are not judgmental. They're accepting of different viewpoints and ways of looking at things. We try to help one another, and we reach out to other communities and do service work, which my life has been about.

I don't call Unitarian Universalism a religion. I call it a philosophy, which is about respect for the dignity of all living things. That we are all one family.

Nadia: What would you say is our family's contribution to the world?

Helaine: Just a few members of our family immigrated here, but the children of those families thrived and had children. And those children had children who have been integral to the American experience in terms of being physicians, lawyers, social workers — people who have been part of the life of America. Very accomplished people. Artists, journalists, teachers, architects. Lovers of food and life.

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