

MY FULL LIFE

MICHAEL NEVINS

Dedicated to my children and grandchildren:

**Andrea, Alan, Danny, Lynn, Ted, Sharon, Rachel, David, Talya,
Leora, Sam, Julia, Ava.....and those to follow.**

INTRODUCTION

Having passed eighty years and, I flatter myself, still being of sound mind, I thought it would be fun to gather some favorite memories in one place while I still can. I read somewhere that repeating stories is “an old man’s penchant” - probably true - and although these days I sometime forget recent events, it’s remarkable how I’m able to recall past trivia. Much that’s contained here will be familiar to family and friends who’ve often, or too often, heard my stories. I confess that occasionally I’ve been guilty of embellishing facts for effect and grandchildren sometimes roll their eyes as if to say, “You’ve told us that before” - but, at least so far, they haven’t complained “You told it wrong.” That being the case, perhaps my target audience should be future generations who might be curious about their ancestor’s adventures and misadventures.

This will not be a conventional autobiography. No particular message or senior wisdom will be offered nor will this be a comprehensive review of everything that transpired during my life or descriptions of everyone I knew along the way. Rather, it’s merely a loose collection of anecdotes and vignettes, presented in roughly chronological order, that I hope may be of interest to some readers - perhaps even amusing.

CONTENTS

1. THE ESCAPE OF BELLA COHEN
2. BRONX BOY
3. CUTTING THE CORD
4. EUROPE ON \$5 A DAY
5. LET THEM EAT EGGS – SOFT BOILED
6. GOING TO THE DOGS
7. CAPTAIN NEVINS MD
8. HAIR SPRAY
9. SERENDIPITY
10. BERGEN PINES
11. WRITING HISTORY JUST FOR FUN
12. ROOTS
13. WANDERING JEW
14. HOPE DIES LAST
15. THE AMOROUS ADVENTURES OF “MIKE BIALYSTOCK”
16. RIVER VIEW
17. FOUR WOMEN
18. FAMILY
19. IF NOT NOW WHEN?

1. THE ESCAPE OF BELLA COHEN

My mother Belle Nevins (née Bella Cohen) was born in Newark, NJ in 1907. She was the last of four children, twelve years younger than sister Augusta and eight years after Rose; brother Dave was rarely mentioned because he committed the cardinal sin of marrying a *shiksa* and moved away. The Cohen clan (originally Chuvin or Chuwin) originated in Tarnopol Province in Galicia (Ukraine today) and shortly after arriving in New York in 1894, mom's father Abram married Mara Klein who was from the same region. Grandpa eked out a living as a grocer but couldn't afford to educate his older children beyond elementary school. He didn't consider it important to educate women but Belle was a gifted piano player and during summer vacations earned the \$100 annual tuition needed to pay for college by accompanying dance troupes in public playgrounds.

Chafing at her culturally stifling life in Newark, Belle yearned for adventure in the glamorous Big City that beckoned from across the Hudson. Sam Nevins, whom she met on a blind date, was a dental student from New York who must have seemed like an ambassador from a foreign world. When they married on her 23rd birthday, no doubt, Belle figured this would be her ticket out of confinement in Newark. But not right away, escape was delayed by the Great Depression. So for the first two years of their married life my parents remained in Newark and while Pop commuted to work in Manhattan, Mom got a job teaching in a local elementary school.

One morning each week students in a home economics class served whatever they cooked that morning to the teachers who had their own lunchroom and on one fateful day, the students made PORK CHOPS! Like many of Newark's Jewish households, the Cohen family was minimally observant but did adhere to dietary laws – more or less. Certainly no ham

or pork had ever passed my mother's lips so now she was faced with a moral dilemma. Because she was shy and didn't want to call attention to herself, she guiltily choked down some of the forbidden chop. A few hours later, Belle began having stomach cramps and, naturally, she knew the cause – it was Divine retribution! She'd sinned and would have to suffer the consequences, but when the pain worsened she went to see the family doctor. He heard her confession, silently examined her belly and then came his diagnosis: "Lady. It's not the pork chop. "YOU'RE PREGNANT!"

Several months after the pork chop Incident, my brother David was born and not long after that Mom finally got her cherished wish when my parents moved to the sophisticated Big City – actually, to the Bronx. Now fast forwarding four years to 1936, Mom was pregnant again and approaching term. The natural place for her to deliver the next pork chop was Beth Israel Hospital – known to the locals as "The Beth." So, as they say in Newark, I was "born at the Beth" and as soon as Mom was discharged, my parents hurried back to the Bronx, where I grew up.

There's a postscript to this part of the story. In 1997, when sister Augusta's 100th birthday was celebrated in California, nearing age 90 and nearly blind from macular degeneration, Mom made the trip along with several family members. Augusta always had a sharp tongue and, pointing at Belle, complained to my sister-in-law that she had to care for my infant brother (the first pork chop) for several months after his birth because the college girl wasn't up to the task of mothering. In fairness, Belle was teaching at the time and I always thought that Augusta resented her younger sister's relatively privileged life. For many years my mother sent financial guilt offerings to her less well-off sisters who were left to care for their aging

parents, but some 60 years later, this wasn't enough to absolve her from deserting the Newark family.

My mother was an avid reader and her favorite author was Philip Roth – with good reason because they were related. As best I can interpret our complex family tree, her father's sister-in-law was a great aunt of the famous writer, which somehow makes Roth and me distant relatives – anyway, both of us were born at the Beth, he in 1933, me in 1936. Whenever Mom read Philip Roth's semi-autobiographical novels, she would search for references to our family's dirty linen that she suspected he sometimes disclosed (especially in his novel *The Ghost Writer*.) Several years ago, I wrote an essay about Roth's novel *Nemesis* which described a polio epidemic in Newark in 1944. The book's protagonist seemed like a dead ringer for my Uncle Lou (Rose's husband) so I sent a copy to Philip Roth thinking that he might be amused. I wasn't surprised that the famously reticent novelist didn't bother to reply.

In 2015 when Philip Roth was given an honorary degree at the Jewish Theological Seminary's commencement exercises in New York, he was hailed as "a giant of modern literature." Since my son Danny was Dean of the rabbinical school when handshakes and congratulations were being exchanged after the ceremony, he had the chance to tell the honoree that he believed that they were distantly related. Roth appeared surprised, but seemed pleased and replied, "I didn't know that I had a rabbi in the family." I like to imagine that this might have stimulated some literary stirring in his mind, but Roth has officially retired from creative writing, so I guess we need not worry that our tenuous connection might become grist for some future work. However, if it ever did and if she were still around, Mom surely would have spotted it and said, "He's done it again."

Life in the Bronx couldn't have been as exciting as, say, Greenwich Village, but free at last from family shackles Mom thrived there. She was active in B'nai Brith and my parents played lots of golf on public courses - in later years when she could hardly see, Pop would tee up her ball and follow its path, usually about 75 yards straight down the middle. Eventually Mom got over her New Jersey phobia, although In 1961 when I first introduced my future wife to my parents, Phyllis had all the right credentials except for one: she was born in Teaneck, NJ. To her credit, Mom quickly forgave Phyllis that flaw. Ironically, in their later years my parents re-crossed the Hudson when they moved to Fort Lee, and after Pop died, my mother wound up in senior housing in Teaneck; although nearly blind from macular degeneration she was still accompanying singers on the piano until she passed away at age 96 – all marbles still intact. Belle/Bella Cohen/Chuvin had returned to the land of her roots, even as I did when I began medical practice in Bergen County in 1968, thirty-two years after being born at the Beth.

Several years after Mom died, I attended a medical conference at Douglas College in New Brunswick and afterward at dinner found myself sitting with strangers. In order to make polite conversation, I asked whether Douglas used to be named New Jersey College for Women because that's where my mother had gone to college and a woman sitting opposite me said that yes it was the same place and asked my mother's name? I was surprised by the question but shocked when she said, "Oh yes, I know about Belle Cohen." She explained that she worked in the alumni office and that in 2003 when planning the graduation ceremony she contacted members of the 75th year class and invited them to attend. By then my 96 year old mother was in her last year of life and to frail travel but the alumni office sent someone with a tape recorder to interview her. I knew nothing about

this and this woman was offered to send me a transcript and when it came, I learned something new about Belle Cohen. Although her father couldn't afford the tuition, he was able to pay for a monthly train pass for her daily trip back and forth from Newark to New Brunswick. Apparently there were only 20 tickets to each pass book so at the end of the month she often was a few rides short. Not a problem for my intrepid mother because after the conductor punched the ticket and moved on, she would retrieve the "chad" from the floor and paste it back. Education was of paramount importance for her - and later to provide for her children.

Our family narrative was typical of the Jewish condition in 20th century America and, as such, could have served as the basis of a Philip Roth novel. Surely there were parallels between my mother's and her cousin's desires to escape banality – as Nathan Zuckerman (the author's fictional alter ego) says in *The Ghost Writer*, he needs "to leave little New Jersey and all the shallow provincials therein for the deep emancipating world of Art...those moneyless immigrant shopkeepers ...who'd carried on a *shtetl* life ten minutes walk from the pillared banks and gargoyles insurance cathedrals of downtown Newark."

Growing up I'd never cared much for my parent's taste in furniture which I considered rather dowdy. By the time that late in life Mom moved to senior housing, most of her furnishings had been discarded but she still retained a few favorites. One day when Phyllis visited my mother, she casually remarked that a certain mahogany end table was elegant looking. Mom perked up and said she'd bought it for \$100 in 1929 at Bambergers in Newark for their first apartment. Just a few days later, Phyllis spied a photograph in the *New York Times* of what looked like the very same table. The accompanying article was about the annual Armory Show in New York

which featured American furniture and this table was billed as the star of the show. It was a Queen Anne style tea table made by Rhode Island furniture maker John Goddard in 1760 – and the asking price was \$4 million! Phyllis was so excited that she made a special trip to the city and after close inspection confirmed that Mom's table was identical – except, admittedly, the mahogany of the original was more beautiful. When this was reported back, Mom didn't seem particularly impressed by the price tag but her reply to me was classic Jewish Mother. She said, "You never appreciated it, but I always had a sense of style."

Still, my mother's copy had to be worth something -- right? After she died I asked an appraiser to pay special attention to this table. He examined it carefully and then offered \$100. In 2005 the original sold at Sothebys for over \$8.4 million! Yes, Bella Cohen had style and knew a good thing when she saw it.

2. BRONX BOY

Although I was born in Newark (May 2, 1936) as soon as my mother left the hospital my parents took me home to 1535 Undercliff Avenue in the West Bronx where I grew up. Our sixth floor apartment looked out on the Harlem River and although there was only one tiny bathroom the four of us never felt cramped. Mom may have had “style” but she wasn’t a very imaginative cook and dinners usually featured red meat – meatballs, meatloaf, pot roast and the dreaded calves liver – held in my cheek and spit out the window as soon as Mom turned her back. On Sundays my parents liked to drive to the “country” (Westchester) for a fancy restaurant meal but, in truth, my favorite gourmet destination was the humble Automat on 161st Street with its tempting displays of food behind glass windows. If you put a few nickels into a slot, a little door would pop open and you could extract a delicacy – chicken pot pie, Harvard beets, creamed spinach, Parker House rolls, glazed cakes. Sometimes Mom would bring Automat food home for dinner – after all, their slogan was “Less Work for Mother.” Not to be forgotten among my gastric memories are infinite sweets: Mallomars, Oreos, Fig Newtons, Milky Ways, Oh Henry’s, Mounds and Hershey Bars, Fudgsicles, Popsicles, Creamsicles, Mellow-Roll ice cream cones, Juicy Fruit and Dentyne chewing gum, cream cheese and jelly sandwiches, bananas and sour cream, jello with canned fruit, chocolate pudding. No wonder my clothing size was “Husky.”

Pop was the breadwinner, but Mom was in charge of everything else. She never was overly demonstrative and although neither my brother or me ever had birthday parties, we didn’t feel deprived of love – it just wasn’t expressed. Those who knew him would scarcely believe that our genial father was a disciplinarian, but when my brother or I were at our worst,

Mom would threaten, “Just wait till your father comes home.” And yes, there were extremely rare times when he laid his “strap” (belt) on our bottoms, probably much more painful for him than for us but Mom wasn’t to be denied. She sometimes took us to museums and Broadway shows and part of the grand cultural design for her sons were piano lessons. I don’t recall them with any pleasure and I certainly had no skill, but happy times were when David and I shared the piano bench with Mom while she accompanied us as we belted out our favorite show tunes and Gilbert & Sullivan songs. Although Pop couldn’t carry a tune he was an opera buff and when long playing records came along, he collected albums of his favorite Verdi and Puccini operas. We nearly wore out *Oklahoma*, *South Pacific*, *Brigadoon*, *The King and I* and *Finian’s Rainbow*.

When I attended P.S.104, kindergarten through 6th grade, everyone was intimidated by the stern Principal Miss Mahon and her assistant “One Gun” Horgan - another terror with the same surname was nicknamed “Two Gun” Horgan. On report cards I usually received A’s in conduct, but only B+ in performance - with written comments “Could do better.” On Assembly days the boys all wore white shirts and blue ties, squeaky brown corduroy knickers and itchy high socks and sometimes we had to memorize themes from classical music – example: we would chant in unison themes like, “Barcarolle from Tales of Hoffman b-y-y-y Offenbach.” I was addicted to ten cent comic books but, alas, as soon as I left for college Mom threw out my treasured collection. My favorites were Superman and Batman but I also read dozens of Classics Comics so that many years later while an English major in college, I knew the plots of all the great books which helped me get good grades.

Long hours were spent with “our gang” bicycling on the sidewalks, making model airplanes, flipping cards, shooting marbles and an endless variety of street games with pink rubber “Spaldeens” – punchball, boxball, stickball, stoop ball. If we were lucky, sometimes our building’s friendly doormen would permit us to work the elevator and every evening starting at 5:00 PM, I was glued to the kitchen radio listening to fifteen minute long adventure programs - my favorite The Lone Ranger lasted thirty minutes. Our tiny dinette was both the family workplace and playroom. In the evenings we might play casino or gin rummy, later even some Bridge, and after homework was done, my brother and I would pull out the side-leaves of the dining table and play miniature ping pong.

One of my earliest memories, from when I was about five and a half, was a radio broadcast of a Giants football game that was interrupted to announce the attack on Pearl Harbor. During the war years all boys memorized the silhouettes of enemy warplanes so that we could identify them if we were attacked. I was proud that Pop, overage for the draft, was an air raid warden and wore a white helmet during blackouts. In grade school we wore plastic name tags around our necks – just in case -- and there were periodic air raid drills when we’d crouch beneath our desks; sometimes we’d evacuate the school building and, if really lucky, were sent home early. To aid the war effort, we collected tinfoil from cigarette packs, diligently cleaned our plates and patriotically planted “victory gardens.” I remember hearing news of the Normandy invasion on the radio and reading in the newspaper that the Atomic Bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. Everyone grieved when FDR died of a stroke and we all rejoiced when VE Day arrived; our street was closed to traffic and there was a memorable block party. In 1947 we were among the first in our building to own a television set (7” screen) and I recall neighbors coming in

to watch Joe Louis fight for the heavyweight championship. We loved watching the Milton Berle, Ed Sullivan and Sid Caesar shows and I was an avid Howdy Doody fan *before* he had his face surgically changed! (Who remembers that?)

Our West Bronx neighborhood was predominantly Jewish and I hardly knew any Christians other than teachers or building workers. Judaism was a mystery that most young people accepted without question and the adults made no effort to explain its ways; indeed, probably few of them knew much about theology themselves or seemed to care. Nevertheless, in my home we never mixed milk and meat and whenever we visited my grandparents, the cuisine was classic Ashkenazic: chopped liver, challah, gefilte fish, matzah ball soup, borscht, boiled chicken, *tzimmas*, stewed prunes, sponge or honey cake.

At Passover seders, Grandpa would sit off to the side and mumble in Hebrew without engaging with the children – except for the traditional Four Questions. On Yom Kippur we would walk several miles to his *shul* near the Grand Concourse and waited outside until Grandpa took off a few minutes to come out and greet us. A very fat lady, Miss Porter, came to our house once a week to teach David and me just enough to get us through our Bar Mitzvahs and all I remember of my big day was that after the ceremony, my usually sober father had too much to drink and later at the party at our apartment, to my great embarrassment, he was “feeling no pain.” Nevertheless, the experience must have made some positive impression for I never considered the possibility of marrying a gentile. I was an obedient Jewish boy, always anxious to please my parents.

As children David and I spent most summers at sleep-away camps in order to escape the heat and the threat of polio and almost every December we drove to Miami for a week in the sun - those were times before turnpikes and roadside motels. For several years during the war, we were without a car because of gas rationing and one summer we travelled by "hack" (a group taxi) to the Catskills where we rented a bungalow near Mom's parents. I recall picking blueberries and the smell of a newly tarred road when we walked to the nearest country store - and the ice man who came to chisel a chunk to fit into our "ice box." Pop's first car after the war was a flashy maroon Pontiac with the latest styling called a "torpedo body." On Sundays he liked to Simonize (wax) behind our house down on Sedgwick Avenue (where the Major Deegan now runs.) Sometimes we rode bicycles or rented rowboats at Van Cortland Park and on sweltering hot days we'd drive to Jones Beach (no air conditioning yet.)

In 1949 we spent a month driving around the United States to visit national parks and other tourist attractions. I kept a log and still can remember almost every detail. My mother fantasized that someday I'd be an artist and, not yet in my teens in those much safer times, every week I'd carry my paint box and travel alone by trolley car (5 cents) to 167th Street. From there I took the IRT subway (10 cents) and as the elevated train passed Yankee Stadium, for an exciting second or two you could glimpse the green outfield grass before the train plunged into the dark tunnel. Once arrived at 86th Street I'd walk to the 92nd Street YMHA for my lesson and afterward walked to Pop's dental office to ride home with him. The office was on the second floor of a building at Third Avenue and 85th Street and because the elevated train passed just a few feet from his large plate glass window, passengers could look directly into my open mouth as Pop drilled my teeth. In those days, dental drills were slow and noisy and he didn't

believe in babying his squirming sons with Novocain. At least he allowed us to amuse ourselves by squishing dollops of mercury in our palms - no worries back then about toxicity. Nor were there concerns about radiation when at the shoe store we'd stand on an X-ray box to view our foot bones to check whether the new shoes fit properly.

My brother and I were fanatical sports fans and still are. We knew all the players and their stats and would buy cheap student tickets to Yankee Stadium (60 cents for a bleacher seat) or the Polo Grounds. Our heroes were Joe DiMaggio and Willie Mays and college basketball stars on the great LIU, NYU and CCNY teams. We attended track meets at the old Madison Square Garden and every September we took the long subway ride to Forest Hills for the grass court tennis championships. After school we sometimes walked several miles to play tennis on clay courts near Fordham Road and it seemed to us that every time we went there, the same four men were playing doubles. We wondered whether they ever worked and asked the pro who they were? He replied, "Oh they're doctors." That planted a seed in both of our brains – why not us too?

Long after David and I became doctors, I came to realize that while we were growing up the only doctor whom we ever knew was our GP (general practitioner) Jack Berkman who happened to be our next door neighbor. Our parents were good friends and when we had sore throats, sometimes very late at night the doctor would come over in his bathrobe, look down our throats and then reassure my parents. Both of his sons also went on to become doctors and so did a half dozen others in our circle of friends on Undercliff Avenue, and except for this same Dr. Berkman probably none of them had known any doctor either. Years later I thought about what a positive role model this man must have been for all of us when I read Dr.

Sherwin Nuland's acclaimed book *How We Die* (1995.) He was only a few years older than I and had grown up not far from my neighborhood. Here's how Nuland described his boyhood doctor:

That man – the man who stepped across the threshold with a smile and an air of competence, who called each of us by name, who understood that beyond anything else we need reassurance, and whose very entrance into our home conveyed it – that was the man I wanted to be.

I wrote to Sherwin Nuland to ask whether his inspirational but unnamed general practitioner and mine might have been the same person? They weren't, but their offices may have been in the same professional building on the Grand Concourse. Nevertheless, both Dr. Nuland's GP and mine were typical of the genre – competent, caring and personally engaged. That's what most doctors were like in those days, not glamorous television heroes, and it's what many young men like Nuland and I aspired to be.

It should be evident that I recall my innocent Bronx boyhood with nostalgia. It felt like a secure time when we young people were far removed from the cataclysm that was happening far beyond our shores. Perhaps there's truth to the old expression, "You can take the boy out of the Bronx, but you can't take the Bronx out of the boy." Many years later I came to appreciate that my parents had been each other's best friends and that my brother and I benefited from growing up in a stable home environment. And when they reached advanced ages, my good-natured father, called Papa Sam by his adoring grandchildren, was their ever willing playmate and teller of tall tales. Although Mom was more restrained, everyone enjoyed singing to her piano accompaniment - so did residents in her senior living facility when in her nineties and nearly blind, she played for them too.

3. CUTTING THE CORD

It took about a dozen years for me to fully cut the parental cord. It began to stretch when I entered 7th grade at the Fieldston School in Riverdale and the final separation came when Phyllis and I got married after my third year of medical school. To their credit, Mom and Dad valued education above all else and were willing to pay for it, starting with private school that would facilitate acceptance into a “good” college” which, in turn, Dartmouth provided a stepping stone to a professional career. As survivors of the Great Depression, they believed that being a doctor, dentist or lawyer would enable financial security in an unpredictable economy and a society where anti-Semitism still limited opportunity in many occupations. They were twice blessed with every Jewish parent’s wish for a doctor son.

Fieldston was a first step out of my Bronx comfort zone. I could have attended Horace Mann, but rejected it because they required wearing jacket and tie and calling teachers “Sir.” How could a boy resist a school where there was no dress code and teachers could be addressed by their first names? Fieldston was a splendid choice; my classmates were brilliant, the teachers supportive and it was there that I was introduced to a new word “ethics.” Once a week everyone had to attend an ethics class which none of us took very seriously although, ironically, many years later bioethics would become an important component of my medical career.

The Fieldston School was founded by the Ethical Culture movement, a secular offshoot of Reform Judaism, and their philosophy appealed to my liberal instincts. Looking back now high school seems like a blur - I recall playing lots of ping pong, jogging in a remedial “run group” and singing in the school chorus. I still can remember every word from oratorios we

performed, e.g. *Elijah*, *The Creation* and Faure's *Requiem*. During high school I began playing folk guitar and became addicted to the music of Pete Seeger, Harry Belafonte, et al. This would become a life-long hobby -- now more than sixty years later, still strumming and singing "Irene Goodnight" and "This Land Is Your Land."

Fieldston's stellar reputation enabled me to get admitted to my first choice, Dartmouth College, which was a very different environment, located on a beautiful but isolated country campus in a one-street town. Something funny happened my first weekend at school. My parents drove up to check on their *boychick* - after all, except for having preordered a mattress and a beer mug, I was on my own - how would I survive in New Hampshire's wilds? That September Saturday coincided with the season's first football game which didn't start auspiciously; Holy Cross led 28-0 at halftime so it wasn't hard to resist my bored parent's request to leave early. As it happened, after we left Dartmouth roared back and won the game on the very last play but Mom had food on her mind. For her son's last decent meal, she wanted to take me to the very best restaurant in town so she'd asked a recent alumnus, the son of one of her friends, where to go? He recommended a place called Gulfside and since this supposedly was the best place in Hanover, Mom insisted that we dress up to fit the occasion. However, when we arrived at the place, we found a tiny run-down building behind a gas station at the edge of town, and inside there were only a few tables and booths. Surely this couldn't have been the best place! Mom thought that probably our friend had played a practical joke on us, but she wasn't amused and stomped out. Instead, we went to the Hanover Inn, the town's fanciest hotel which in those days had a terrible restaurant, but at least we were properly dressed for the stuffy place. Later, I learned that

Golfside, a mom and pop establishment, really *did* have the best food in town although I don't think my parents ever believed that.

Dartmouth wasn't coed yet and there was little to do on weekends except attend sports events. My first venture out of Hanover was to Cambridge for the annual Harvard football game and it was traumatic. A high school classmate had invited me to stay in his dorm room and introduced me to some of his friends. Dartmouth students usually were disdained in Cambridge as crude "Men from the North" so when I enthusiastically bubbled over about the impending gridiron clash and asked, "Are you going to the game?" I was rudely put in my place: "Game? What game?" Thoroughly deflated, from that time on I never fully got over having a Harvard complex - at least until Danny graduated from there.

Dartmouth was famed as a party school and pledging fraternities was a ritual at the beginning of sophomore year. Although I felt no compunctions about "rushing" one of the gentile fraternities, I agreed to accompany a friend who wanted to check out one of the two predominantly Jewish fraternities. To my surprise, practically all of the "Brothers" whom I met there were premeds like me and many were from the New York area and also rooted for the Yankees and Giants. I felt comfortable with these guys who the rest of the campus considered to be nerds more intent on education than partying. Majoring in premed seemed to be the path of least resistance since I was following my brother's example, but I departed from the usual premed track by majoring in English rather than science - no doubt, that choice influenced my later propensity for writing. More about that later.

4. EUROPE ON \$5 A DAY

After college graduation, with two months off during the summer of 1958 before starting Tufts Medical School, I planned to travel through Europe with a fraternity brother. However, at nearly the last moment he had to pull out so with some trepidation I decided to go it alone. My first stop was Brussels, Belgium which that year was hosting the World's Fair.

Anticipating that it would be difficult to find a decent place to stay, my father had arranged with a former patient of his who lived there to put me up. When I arrived at the brand new airport, still lacking any direction signs in English, I was intimidated by having to rely on my limited French that I'd barely scraped through in high school and college. I nervously found my way to a taxi stand and handed the driver a paper with the man's address and although the man barely spoke English, he nodded and off we went.

We drove for a long way out of the city and finally came to a village which looked as if no American had been seen since the end of the *first* World War. I signaled the driver to wait as I went up to the front door. No one was home and I noticed a few unfriendly looking locals staring at this alien creature. The taxi felt like my lifeline to civilization so I scurried back to the car and tried to make the driver understand my dilemma. Not a problem. He indicated that he'd take care of me so we drove back to Brussels where the driver deposited me in a dilapidated hotel just a few blocks from the fair grounds. The price was right – one dollar a night – and it had air conditioning, meaning that when I dragged myself up three flights of stairs to a closet-sized room there was no glass in the window! Thoroughly demoralized, I dropped my valise and headed for the World's Fair and the resplendent American Pavilion where the restaurant concession was run by New York's Brasserie Lipp restaurant chain. Feeling very sorry for myself, I

gorged on American soul food – a cheeseburger, fries and a chocolate milk shake and then, physically and spiritually revitalized, timidly ventured forth from home base to take in the sights, which that year featured Russia's new Sputnik satellite.

For six weeks I travelled widely (not wildly) through Europe and gradually gained more confidence in my French, but that didn't help in Spanish and Austrian restaurants where I had a number of misadventures. At a restaurant in Innsbruck, the menu was completely unintelligible with long German words that couldn't even be guessed at. Not being particularly hungry I wanted to eat light but the waiter spoke no English. So after studying the menu, I pointed to two items which seemed to me like a soufflé and a salad. He gave a funny look but, trying to show that I was a man who knew what he wanted, I persisted. He soon returned with two enormous ice cream creations -- several scoops on each, heaped with various fruits and sweets and *shlog*. People at the next table seemed curious about this crazy American so I bravely downed both concoctions and staggered off.

The next stop was Munich which was on the itinerary because my friend's father was stationed at a U.S. Army base near there. It was only about a dozen years after the end of World War II and, since I had no family members directly effected, I had no qualms about visiting. However, as soon as I arrived in Munich I felt an acute sense of foreboding. To my feverish imagination, it seemed as if I was in a Hollywood war movie, the locals seemed loud and aggressive and I felt compelled to escape. I went directly to the railroad station, bought a ticket to Copenhagen and never again travelled to Germany - or bought a German built car.

That summer of 1958 I carried a new travel guide called *Europe on \$5 a Day*. The title sounded overly optimistic but wasn't too far from reality – at least in order to meet the needs of a 22 year old student alone on the Continent. When I arrived in Paris, very late at night, I went directly to the street on the Left Bank where the book said budget hotels could be found. I tried a few but there were no vacancies until, finally, I found an available five flight walk-up which I took sight unseen. The tiny room was nearly as depressing as the one in Brussels had been, but this time there was no American Pavilion to provide gastric solace. So the next morning I crossed over to the Right Bank, checked in to a more expensive establishment and ate breakfast in bed. Later in life, on several trips to Paris, I paid much more than \$5 a day and loved every moment whatever the price.

Vive la France!

5. LET THEM EAT EGGS – SOFT BOILED

Although I studied hard at Tufts Medical School there was ample time for such simple pleasures as touch football games and sampling local eateries in downtown Boston. As with medical students from time immemorial, there were hijinks at the anatomy dissection table, but we all were eager to get beyond class rooms and labs to sample clinical medicine like real doctors. We got a taste of that in our second year when each student was assigned a section of the city where we would make house calls and then report our findings back to a preceptor at home base. Proudly carrying our shiny black bags, we tried to appear professional, but probably fooled no one. Happily, I was assigned the North End where the friendly Italian mothers were eager to fill me with freshly made pasta and displayed their daughters.

A weekly highlight were Grand Rounds which were held at the teaching hospital across from school. All the senior professors attended and reviewed challenging cases. We neophytes understood little of the discussions, but enjoyed the pure theater of our mentors – some of them world famous alpha males with inflated egos – competing to show who was smartest. I remember very little of what was taught in class but one lesson from our freshman year stands out more than a half century later. I can't vouch for all the details, but what follows here is how my fading memory recalls the event.

We were addressed by Dr. Samuel Proger, the chief of medicine at Tufts, who had a caveat for us fledglings which came in the form of an anecdote that his Harvard colleague Paul Dudley White had recently encountered. During the 1950s Dr. White probably was the most famous cardiologist in

the world. He'd recently consulted on President Eisenhower's heart attack and treated many celebrity patients. Paul Dudley White was an early proponent of preventive cardiology – especially the virtues of exercise and a healthy diet. By the time that I was a medical student, eggs – especially if, God forbid, accompanied by bacon, ham or cheese – were strictly forbidden for anyone with even a whiff of heart disease.

As Dr. Proger explained to us, in June 1957 the eminent 80 year old cellist Pablo Casals was recovering from a heart attack that he'd suffered in Puerto Rico while rehearsing for the first concert of what would become an annual Casals Festival. He was being nursed at home by his 20 year old cello protégé, Marta Martinez, but although he was recuperating well enough, the maestro was extremely depressed. At the insistence of the Governor of Puerto Rico, the famous Paul Dudley White was summoned from Boston and, as Dr. Proger warned us, when you're called to consult out of town, you should never make the local docs look bad – after all, they might not invite you back.

Dr. White took an extensive history and probed to learn why the cellist was so sad. Perhaps Dr. Proger colored some of the details but he explained to us that Pablo Casals was a man who was obsessed with routine, none more important than how he began each day. His morning ritual was three-fold: first he would “service” his bed-partner, next he would arise and play a Bach suite on his cello and only then would he proceed to breakfast -- which always was two soft-boiled eggs. Any deviance from this sequence was upsetting and the rather fussy Casals was known to be prone to fits of depression. But now his Puerto Rican doctors had disrupted the routine – “NO MORE EGGS!”

The old man was inconsolable and probably this effected his playing – on the cello, of course, and here I'm only guessing also on his beautiful student Marta, soon to be his young wife. Maybe, it's just my salacious mind, but our professor's point was that it was then that Paul Dudley White demonstrated why he was a sought after consultant. He paused for a few moments and then offered consolation to Casals: "It will be permissible for you to have soft-boiled eggs *but only twice a week!*" The art of compromise was the lesson Dr. Proger wanted to teach us medical novices – to never say never.

What follows is entirely my own invention, but I can imagine the eighty-year old cellist jumping up and kissing Dr. White (himself 71 years old) – and perhaps then kissing Marta Martinez. Soon *all* of his various early morning "exercises" also improved. What is known for sure is that several months later, despite their sixty year age differential, "Pau" and Marta eloped (because her parents disapproved) and married. They lived happily together for some sixteen years until Casals died in 1973 at age 97.. Certainly the soft boiled eggs hadn't hurt.

Pablo Casals had been a child prodigy; at age 23 he had played for Queen Victoria and at age 85 for President Kennedy. In one interview he explained, "I am a simple man, I don't like complications. I like what is natural – both in music and life." When asked why he practiced the same Bach cello suites every morning, even into his nineties, the maestro would say, "I think I'm making progress. I see some improvement." That kind of determination and optimism probably had more to do with his longevity than soft-boiled eggs, but you never know.

Although Paul Dudley White was famous for promoting a physically active life style, he was less enthused about the emerging theory about reducing dietary fats. As a biographer recalled, the cardiologist took considerable liberties with his own diet favoring milkshakes for lunch and lots of ice cream. He lived to age 87, not quite as long as Casals, but in his role as a consultant he certainly hadn't made "the locals" in Puerto Rico look bad when he offered a compromise to the aging but still virile cellist.

6. GOING TO THE DOGS

Toward the end of my second year in medical school, a fraternity brother offered to “fix me up” with a blind date. After graduating from Dartmouth, my friend had landed a job as public relations director at Wheaton, a woman’s college in Taunton, Massachusetts that was fairly close to Boston. He explained that there was a pretty Jewish student from New Jersey working part time in his office, the details were worked out and one spring evening in 1960 I drove to Wheaton for a date with Phyllis Brower. The challenge was what to do and where to go? There were no movie theaters or clubs in Taunton and the only local attraction was a dog track. So, lacking any other options, I decided that we would go to the dogs.

When I picked Phyllis up at her dorm she was wearing a dress which I thought was a bit too fancy for our night at the track. I suggested that she change to something simpler, she did and away we went. I wasn’t a seasoned gambler. In fact, a typical bet for me was “Two dollars to show” – the minimum for no worse than a third place finish. Either it was in the stars or just dumb luck but going into the evening’s last race I was \$20 ahead. Giddy with success, I decided to go for broke and bet \$5 to win! Would you believe that an entry in that last race was a dog by the name of “NEVINS”? What kind of a name is that for a greyhound? He was going off at odds of 15 to 1 so placing a bet on him was irresistible. Unlike horse racing, greyhounds circle the track twice and as the field passed by us the first time around, Nevins was in front and I already was calculating my potential winnings. Then, calamity! Just after he flashed before us, Nevins fell flat on his face and eventually limped in last. There went my \$5 but there still was \$15 left from earlier races, so this big sport invited his date to come to Boston the next night to enjoy the remaining winnings.

We were engaged several months later and after Phyllis graduated from Wheaton we got married in Teaneck on June 25, 1991. When we honeymooned in the Caribbean, the first of three destinations was the elegant Caneel Bay resort on St. John in the Virgin Islands. It was so idyllic that we decided to stay an extra night but that required notifying our next hotel of our change of plans so I asked the hotel clerk how I could telephone ahead? He replied that the only public telephone on the island was in town which was about ten miles away. We hired a jeep taxi to take us and when we arrived in the town center, the driver pointed to a small wood box attached to a telephone pole which contained an ordinary home telephone. When I picked up the receiver an operator asked whom I wished to call? I gave the number and asked how do I pay? The operator replied, "No charge. Just don't speak too long." Things have changed considerably since then.

After a marvelous honeymoon, we rented an apartment in a two family house in Malden, Mass. and Phyllis' first attempt at domesticity was memorable. For our first home meal she selected Boeuf Bourguignon from Julia Child's iconic book *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. For flavoring the recipe called for bacon, but neither of us had much experience with that forbidden food, and instead of calling for a slice or two Julia insisted on a "chunk." Following instructions Phyllis bought the bacon but the chunk turned out to be ten times saltier than what she expected and the result was tears and feelings of inadequacy. Phyllis consulted our Italian landlady who lived downstairs and understood about such things. She was sympathetic and treated us to a marvelous dish of home made lasagna. So that's how I went to the dogs and won much more than a \$5 bet. Eventually Phyllis became a wonderful cook but she was always wary of bacon. Of course, that was long before our Kosher conversion.

Nearly a half century after the boeuf bourguignon debacle, in 2009 a movie called *Julie and Julia* starring Meryl Streep as Julia Child was a box office hit. In the film a young woman (Julie) writes a daily blog in which she describes cooking every recipe in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* - one every day. Not only does she ruin the boeuf bourguignon but when sampling the tasteless dish, her husband *adds* table salt for flavoring. I'm sure that she must have omitted the chunk of bacon!

7. CAPTAIN NEVINS MD

Midway through my second year of internal medicine residency training at Brooklyn Jewish Hospital a choice had to be made. Things were starting to heat up in Vietnam and young doctors like me were eligible to be drafted. Although only a few actually would be called up, if so it would mean two years away from family and serving as a general medical officer. That wasn't appealing, especially since I'd already begun my internal medicine residency program and we had a newborn baby.

But there was an option – the so-called Berry Plan. If a doctor volunteered for two years service, you could work as a specialist and there was a good chance that you could select the base where you'd be stationed. I was told that if I went to Washington DC and personally expressed enthusiasm for the program, although there was no guarantee of getting my first choice of assignment, almost surely I'd get one of my top selections. I did a quick study of Air Force bases, made my selections, travelled to Washington and then waited.

Several months later the official letter arrived and announced that I was assigned to Walker AFB in Roswell, New Mexico. Needless to say, it wasn't on my top ten list; in fact, I'd never heard either of the base or the place. In shock, I showed the letter to one of my fellow residents who told me that just the previous night he'd seen a movie which he thought was made at this very same base. I hurried home, told Phyllis the news, we got a baby sitter and rushed off to catch the movie which was *Captain Newman, MD*, starring Gregory Peck as an Air Force psychiatrist. We were mortified because the film was shot on a bleak Air Force base located in the Southwest. Could this desolate spot be where we were going to spend the next two years?

To our great relief, when the movie ended and the credits rolled, they thanked Fort Huachuca in Arizona – *not* Walker AFB in Roswell, New Mexico. But it turned out that Roswell wasn't exactly paradise either. As we drove across country with baby Andrea caged in a crib in the backseat, all went well until the last 200 miles, a straight stretch of highway across a flat desert landscape – virtually a moonscape -- nary a tree, house or any evidence of human habitation. Roswell was 200 miles in all directions from anything resembling another city, but once we got over the shock, we came to love the big sky and open vistas. Indeed, the base was like an oasis and we were assigned our own house where, for the first time, we owned such suburban staples as a lawnmower, a barbecue grill and a blender to make banana daiquiris.

Walker AFB had a small hospital with about a dozen doctors, most of them like me serving for just two years. We formed a close knit group and with our wives enjoyed the privileges of the Officers Club but none of us knew much about military life and were considered as anomalies, designated as Captains but without having actually earned that rank. Because the hospital had only one other internist, I was assigned to report directly without having gone through the usual introduction of basic training.

On my first work day I was issued two sets of uniforms: one consisted of light weight khakis, appropriate for the hot desert climate, and the other a heavier blue winter outfit. Before doing anything else, I was told to report to the Base Photographer for my formal Air Force picture which required the winter uniform. I carried it as it was issued on a hanger under plastic and the photographer politely asked me to change into this outfit. However, not having gone through Basic Training, I didn't know where to attach my captain bars and other insignias, so I asked the airman for help. He looked

shocked. What was the Air Force coming to when a Captain didn't know how to get dressed? For the next two years I saluted whomever passed and except for that initial embarrassment, I don't recall ever wearing my Air Force Blue outfit again.

Our two years in the Southwest turned out to be a wonderful experience in several respects: best of all a son was born to us. Phyllis had a circle of friends and for me it was a very useful medical experience. For much of the time I was the only internist on the base which served some 15,000 people and, although I was only half-baked, I knew more general medicine than the other doctors so everyone deferred to me as an expert. In fact, I often encountered challenging cases and gradually gained clinical confidence which served me well in later years.

Danny was born in Roswell in 1966 and for his tenth birthday wanted to see where he'd come from. I arranged a week long trip which began with a visit to the air base and wound up in Santa Fe for its famous annual Fiesta. Held every autumn since 1712, it combines native American, Mexican and Spanish cultures and people come from great distances to celebrate. With some two hundred thousand others we attended the kick-off event that is called "The Burning of Zozobra." It's held in a dusty field on the edge of town where a giant wooden framework is erected in the shape of a human figure. Zozobra signifies "Old Man Gloom" who must be destroyed in order to permit happiness and when it got dark, brush placed around the base was lit, Zozobra ignited and flames soared into the night sky. Then his wooden arms started to move and as from within the pyre came loud groans, 200,000 voices cried out "Burn, Burn, Burn." The kids were terrified, even Phyllis and I were shaken - it reminded us of some pagan ritual burning Christians or Jews.

As the flames shot upward, the crowd surged toward town for a mass debauch - there would be no gloom that night. We noticed that many of the mob wore black leather motorcycle jackets; Santa Fe's sober elements, knowing what was to come, had arranged to be elsewhere. Our hotel was located in the town's central plaza and that evening we cowered behind our locked door as shots and cries sounded outside. The American West can be a scary place. Better known than the annual burning of Zozobra was something else that supposedly happened in the sky above Roswell some two decades earlier - or did it? In later years when people learned that we'd once lived in Roswell, they'd often smirk and ask whether we'd seen any aliens there? That's because a television program in 1995 popularized what became known as "The Roswell Incident." It described how way back in 1947, an unidentified flying object (UFO) had landed in the desert not far from town. Some conspiracy theorists suspected a government cover-up of what they believed were landings by extraterrestrial aliens (ETs.) They scoffed at the official explanation that an off-course aerial balloon had fallen to earth.

Our sojourn in Roswell in 1964-1966 was midway between the alleged "incident" and its TV revelation some three decades later, and I wondered why I'd never heard anything about aliens when we had lived there? But on reflection and based on my own experience, I wasn't surprised that some locals saw UFOs in the New Mexico sky. After all, many of those who regularly came to my clinic were veterans who lived sufficiently close to the base to buy grub and cheap liquor at the commissary. I recalled that one day I'd read in the Roswell newspaper that retired Colonel Bolton had seen an unidentified object flying over town. This Colonel happened to be one of my regulars - a chronic alcoholic -- and I understood from the newspaper account that he'd be visiting me within a day or so in DTs! ETs? Not likely.

8. HAIR SPRAY.

During the very first week of my internship at Brooklyn Jewish Hospital (June 1962), I found myself on the next to the bottom rung of the hospital hierarchy – the bottom rung was reserved for ignorant medical students who now were my responsibility to teach. On morning rounds one day a rather cocky student presented a new admission - a black women hairdresser who was short of breath and coughing. Her chest X-ray showed typical abnormalities of a condition called sarcoidosis but the student confidently diagnosed her as having a “classic” case of *Thesaurosis*! Ashamed to admit that I’d never heard of that, I mumbled something, changed the subject, and as soon as possible rushed off to the hospital library to look up *Thesaurosis*.

Sure enough, in that week’s issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine* was an article that described twelve cases of a sarcoid-like condition that occurred in hairdressers. The authors suggested that it was a new occupational disease which they named *Thesaurosis* to indicate that it was a storage disease due to inhalation of a plastic (PVP) present in hair sprays that they claimed showed up in lung biopsies.

Our patient’s work-up included a lung biopsy and I recall eagerly looking over the pathologist’s shoulder as he peered through his microscope. He was a world famous specialist so whatever he said would have great credence – and, yes, he confirmed that there were abnormalities (non-caseating granulomas) suggestive of sarcoidosis. However, they looked funny – as he described, they looked “dishevelled.” I knew a lot of big words but had never heard the adjective dishevelled (disordered) used in a medical context -- it sounded catchy and I liked it. Then the pathologist added that he’d seen this appearance only once before in a man who had

a compulsive habit of using spray deodorants. Spray deodorants-hair sprays-dishevelled granulomas. I couldn't resist jumping to conclusions and - without drawing out the story any further -- let me tell you that I wrote up these two cases and the next year the article was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. In my own eyes, I was famous – after all, how many interns are lead authors in a major journal?

Now fast forward about five years. By the summer of 1966 I'd completed my Air Force stint and was back in New York where I resumed my residency training at Mount Sinai Hospital. My first rotation was on pulmonary medicine and, once again, I found myself looking over the shoulder of a famous doctor as he peered through his microscope. This time it was the chief of pulmonary disease, Dr. Louis Siltzbach whose name was synonymous with Sarcoidosis – in fact he was the acknowledged world authority.

Sarcoidosis was first described in the late 19th century and in 1941, a Norwegian dermatologist Morten Kveim had developed a skin test in which sarcoid tissue was injected under the skin, four weeks the site was biopsied and if granulomas were present that was considered to be diagnostic. (Dr. Siltzbach reported that, in his hands, the test was 98% specific.) The test became known as the Siltzbach-Kveim test and by the 1960s any doctor in the world who wanted to use the gold standard test had to send their patient to Mount Sinai where Dr. Siltzbach would inject the material and a month later personally read the biopsy. Louis Siltzbach may have been a living icon, but he wasn't a very pleasant man – and certainly not gracious to a lowly resident like me.

Although by then I was on the third rung up the hospital staff ladder, my main responsibility that month was merely to pour tea for the great man.

He rarely spoke to me except occasionally to grunt, “More tea.” That was the extent of our interaction, until one day he looked up and must have spotted the name tag on my white coat. He seemed puzzled and then he said – “Nevins? Not THAT Nevins! Very damaging. Very damaging!” I felt flattered that he’d finally noticed me but why? And he didn’t sound happy. Then he pointed for me to pour more tea and that was the end of it.

In truth, I knew perfectly well what bothered him. Louis Siltzbach read everything written about *his* disease and my paper, which had appeared in *JAMA* only about a year earlier, suggested that sarcoid might be caused by inhaling hair or cosmetic aerosols. That would have contradicted his theory that granulomas of sarcoidosis were caused by a single as yet unknown antigen. He insisted on what he called a “unitarian” cause of the disease as opposed to a so-called “diathesis” in which many things could provoke the same reaction. To Siltzbach’s mind, sarcoidosis could not have been caused by hair sprays or spray deodorants and he was unimpressed by what he considered to be an ignorant description of “dishevelled” granulomas – the fantasy of some ignorant pathologist who couldn’t recognize an artifact when he saw one.

In 1973, seven years after his description of Thesaurosis appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the lead author acknowledged that although others had failed to confirm their findings, there’d been a few anecdotal reports similar to what they’d encountered. The jury was still out and he made the familiar disclaimer that more work needed to be done, as he put it, to distinguish between illness and illusion. After Dr. Siltzbach died in 1980, the Kveim test became an outdated relic – even Mount Sinai’s famous Sarcoid Clinic stopped performing them as newer blood tests

came into use for diagnosing the condition. But that wasn't the end of my story.

In 2001, the issue of causation arose again in a most unlikely and tragic way – the World Trade Center disaster. In months and years afterward, first responders exposed to dust from the fallen towers began developing a higher than expected incidence of lung symptoms. Mount Sinai's registry of about 20,000 first responders reported a four-fold increase in "sarcoid-like" granulomas which peaked about two years after the event and then tapered off. A later review article concluded, "Sarcoid is a systemic disorder that is triggered by as yet unidentified *antigens* in genetically susceptible hosts which lead to a cellular immune response and granulomas. They also noted that the Siltzbach-Kveim test was no longer being used. Some four decades after my unhappy experience with the grouchy Dr. Siltzbach this was partial vindication. However, I suspect that were he alive today, all that Louis Siltzbach would have to say to me would be "Pour more tea."

9. SERENDIPITY

When my partner Leonard Lyon and I began our medical practice in 1968, in order to supplement our paltry income my partner and we worked part-time in a drug research clinic at the Bronx VA hospital. Pharmaceutical companies were eager to test their new products on live patients and there were plenty of vets willing to volunteer as guinea pigs – why I never understood. Many of the drugs we studied were anti-hypertensives and whenever a new experimental protocol began, we'd prescribe that drug to our stable of vets and follow-up for several months. Some of these old-timers had been coming to the clinic for years and knew the drill – some responded to the new drugs, others didn't, but whenever we finished a study and were between protocols, my partner and I were free to prescribe whatever we wished until the next new drug came along.

So it was that during one such hiatus I had to decide what standard blood pressure drug to prescribe for a grizzled veteran whose blood pressures had been refractory to whatever drug we gave him – whether experimental or conventional. He consistently ran about 240/140 (!) and it didn't seem to phase him – no stroke, no heart attack. This man was rather surly and rarely spoke, but he showed up every week and dutifully took whatever we gave him. In those days the strongest prescription drug for hypertension was guanethidine (Ismelin) but even that didn't always work. However, one day I read in a cardiology journal that its efficacy could be enhanced if it was given along with a small dose of dibenzylamine (an alpha-adrenergic blocker.) With nothing to lose, I added a single pill to this man's daily regimen and eagerly awaited his next visit.

Sure enough, the vet arrived on schedule the next week and right away I noticed that something was different. He seemed unusually animated, even smiled, and then he said, "Give me some more of those new pills Doc." I presumed that they must have worked – his blood pressure must have come down - so I excitedly pumped up the cuff and what was his BP? 240/140. Disappointed and confused, I asked "Why do you like this new pill so much?" Nearly a half century later, I still can hear his reply: "It gave me back my nature."

I'd forgotten that the major side effect of guanethidine was impotence and that he'd been receiving a maximum dose. Although adding dibenzylamine hadn't altered his blood pressure - nothing ever did - obviously it eliminated his erectile dysfunction. Realizing the potential implications, I prescribed dibenzylamine for another man who also was receiving guanethidine, but when he returned the next week there were no smiles and, alas, no return of "nature." Having no talent for clinical investigation and faced with a single failure, I promptly forgot the incident.

Some thirty years after my serendipitous observation, Pfizer researchers who were studying a vasodilator as a possible treatment for heart disease found that although it was ineffective for that purpose, there was an unexpected side effect – it *caused* erections! They pursued this finding and in 1998 Viagra was approved by the FDA as the first drug for treating erectile dysfunction. That's how my Nobel Prize was lost - along with the royalties. Fame and fortune as the discover of Viagra never materialized, but perhaps I should take consolation in knowing that it took Paul Ehrlich 606 failed attempts before he discovered the presumed cure for syphilis and won the Nobel Prize in 1908. I suppose that I shouldn't have given up with a record of just one win and one loss.

10. BERGEN PINES

During the summer of 1916 a terrible epidemic of polio gripped the East Coast and Bergen County desperately needed an isolation hospital. The closest one in Paterson was filled to capacity and although the need had been recognized for many years, every potential location said “not in my back yard.” A temporary 30 bed structure was rushed to completion and in the next decade five permanent buildings were constructed. In 1924 the complex was officially named “Bergen Pines” for the trees planted “to add to the health of the guests and to enhance the beauty of the place.”

Through the next quarter century the institution grew and served mainly as a sanatorium for tubercular patients, but with the advent of antibiotics at the end of World War II, contagious disease facilities were no longer needed and, like with many similar public hospitals, Bergen Pines was considered for a different role. A psychiatry division and acute medical-surgical units opened, residency training programs began and there were grandiose plans for conversion to a major teaching hospital. However, post-war availability of Federal funds favored expansion of community hospitals and then with the advent of Medicare and Medicaid, “The Pines” was perceived by most county citizens as a medical poor house for alcoholics, drug addicts and the insane.

Such was the case in 1970 when my partner and I accepted the offer of the medical director Dr. Stewart Alexander (see next chapter) to assist him as co-directors of medical education. One of us would tend to our growing practice while the other supervised the medical resident training program and every two days we reversed roles. This arrangement worked well for about a dozen years and, in addition to teaching, our responsibilities

included leading weekly medical conferences and editing a monthly journal. Without dwelling on the details, there were two important offshoots from those early years at Bergen Pines which influenced my later career.

Visibility afforded by directing the hospital's popular weekly conferences helped get me elected Governor of the New Jersey Chapter of the American College of Physicians which, in turn, introduced me to the latest developments in internal medicine. When I was appointed chairman of the ACP's geriatrics committee, I became aware of opportunities to improve care for the rapidly aging population and envisioned starting an innovative geriatric center in Bergen County. Plans advanced to the point that I decided to make this a full-time commitment and after twenty years in a two man partnership, I decided to leave private practice. However, funding didn't work out and I had to abandon the idea before it materialized and resumed private practice on a limited scale and solo.

One day - I think it was in 1984 - I read in a New Jersey newspaper about a certain Dr. Greco, the medical director of a large nursing home who was being investigated for misconduct by the Board of Medical Examiners. His sin was that on several occasions Greco decided not to hospitalize patients with pneumonia, instead choosing to treat them with antibiotics in the nursing home. A few of these patients died and a pulmonary consultant said this was intolerable because in his opinion you couldn't successfully treat pneumonia without a sputum culture which back then could only be done in a hospital. Today that sounds ridiculous but it convinced the Board of Medical Examiners and poor Dr. Greco lost his license to practice. When I read that I couldn't believe it because I'd often done the very same thing. In fact, I thought that when I made similar decisions, treating the whole

patient not just the disease, those were my finest times as a doctor. Dr. Greco's fate easily could have been mine. How could this be?

At about this same time, New Jersey was establishing a Bioethics Commission whose mission was to advise the legislature about potential new directions to pursue. As the leader of the internal medicine specialty society, I was appointed as one of three doctors on the commission and for the next few years we discussed so-called "end of life" dilemmas, e.g. how and by whom life or death decisions get made, the emerging concept of "whole brain death" and the use of advance directives ("living wills.") During later years I sometimes lectured and wrote on related subjects, served on institutional ethics committees, and these experiences helped broaden my perspective beyond my own personal experiences. After a hiatus of a dozen years I returned to Bergen Pines as Vice President of Medical Affairs and Director of Geriatrics but my progressive ideas were out of synch with the for-profit agenda of the businessmen now running the county hospital. They finally tired of paying me a good salary for criticizing everything that they were doing; we parted ways and I never looked back.

In retrospect, I recall my long medical career with great satisfaction. To be sure, I received abundant recognition and awards, including the ACP's National Governor of the Year and the New Jersey Chapter's Laureate Award for contributions in medical education, bioethics and

geriatrics. But what was most gratifying was the privilege of caring for and about individual patients; the experience of treating people more than merely their diseases. Some old-timers refer nostalgically to the time of my professional career as “the Golden Age” - a time when practicing physicians were fairly autonomous and felt free to follow their own judgement. The dynamics of private practice permitted long relationships with patients which frequently established a bond of mutual trust. I fear that much of that has been lost as medicine has become depersonalized and bureaucratized. The era of the solo practitioner has passed and now most doctors are employees. No doubt there are positive aspects to this transformation but it’s time for a new generation to carry the ball forward.

11. WRITING HISTORY JUST FOR FUN

Mea Culpa! As a student I never enjoyed studying history. It seemed remote to my world and, as taught back then, mainly consisted of memorizing names and dates. During my early career I sometimes published articles in medical journals about interesting cases I'd encountered and I always seemed to have some writing project to engage me. My greatest pleasure in these literary ventures was doing the background research, organizing the material and describing it in a lucid style. Although composing the first draft was tedious, I enjoyed polishing the manuscript until it read just right – a process that Philip Roth once described as “turning sentences around.” I wasn't interested in marketing for, as the cliché goes, it was the journey that mattered more than the goal. The creative effort was all consuming until the project was completed when, as if intellectually purged, I could turn my attention to something else.

What changed my mind about studying and then writing about history occurred shortly after I entered medical practice in 1968. One of the first local physicians to welcome me was Stewart Alexander, a well-respected senior internist who, later, I came to think of as my mentor. When he returned home after World War II, Stewart succeeded his father in medical practice; in 1910 his father had taken over for the area's first physician Henry Neer who began in 1865, so that by the time my friend retired in 1982, that three generation practice had lasted 117 years.

Stewart Alexander was an engaging story teller and I enjoyed hearing not only his own war stories but also descriptions of his predecessor's medical careers. I visited his home office several times and together we would

examine old office records, photos and medical equipment - it seemed to me that they never threw anything out. I once asked Stewart why he didn't write a book about all this? He replied that he was too busy – that I should do it! That sounded unimaginable because, back then, very few people wrote books and certainly not novices like me.

Curiously enough, several years later that's exactly what happened. At the time of the American Bicentennial there was great enthusiasm for local history and I decided to learn as much as I could about our area's pioneer doctors. As a result of that research, and the encouragement of a friend Alvin Schultzberg who was in the publishing business, my literary first-born appeared in 1979. I named it *Early Physicians of Northeastern Bergen County* and, naturally, with a cumbersome title like that it drew no attention beyond Northeastern Bergen County – and precious little there either.

But that first publishing experience taught me a useful lesson. At about the same time, Dr. William Ober, a pathologist at nearby Hackensack Hospital, also published a book which, unlike mine, drew attention and critical praise. The reason was only too evident – its title was *Boswell's Clap*. (For the younger generation, "clap" was vernacular for gonorrhoea.) Ober's book was full of stories about the venereal histories of various Victorian literary figures – William Boswell had proudly reported seventeen episodes of clap in his diary. Other than for the title, I found Ober's writing to be rather dry but titles count and the sexier the better. (When I last checked Amazon's best seller list, my book languished at more than # 7,400,000 in sales while Dr. Ober's book at about # 3,500,000 was far ahead. However, I could take comfort that a used copy of mine could be purchased on-line for \$35 while you could buy *Boswell's Clap* for just one penny.)

Over the next four decades I self-published a dozen books most of which were collections of unrelated essays (more than one hundred in all) about subjects that engaged my interest. Inspiration sometimes came from such unexpected experiences as a painting on a museum wall, a roadside historical marker or a diary entry by an obscure farmer which led me to discover a long forgotten cholera epidemic in my home town nearly a century ago. And learning from my initial experience, I made a conscious effort to concoct provocative chapter titles, e.g. *Zombie Medicine*, *The Perils of Pus* or *When Freud Visited New York City - and Wet his Pants*.

Here's an example of the kind of narrative that I loved. In 2002 I curated a medical history exhibition at The Hermitage in HoHoKus and when speaking on opening night I described some of my favorite pioneer docs from Bergen County. One of them was Dr. William Vroom who began practicing in Ridgewood in 1888 and continued for 76 years! He saw patients until he was in his mid-90s when he was hailed as the nation's oldest active physician. In the audience when I spoke was a journalist who in reporting the event for her newspaper featured the part about the local hero. A few days later I received a phone call in my office from a woman, whom I'll call Mary, who'd read the newspaper story and identified herself to me as Dr. Vroom's last patient - some 35 years ago. Mary explained that when she was a teenager she'd suffered from severe anxiety - what today we'd call a "panic disorder." It was so disabling that she rarely ventured out of her home, so bad that several times she was admitted to mental hospitals but without benefit. Her desperate mother heard about this old doctor who still was seeing patients and felt that there was nothing to lose by consulting him, so she phoned and the doctor said to come right over. When Mary and her mother arrived at Dr. Vroom's home office they found him to be up a tree - literally! He was perched on a ladder pruning a

fruit tree in his garden. The old man climbed down and without saying a word to the mother asked Mary to lend him a hand as he finished up. How could she say no? She meekly agreed and after a few minutes he thanked Mary and asked whether she could come again next week to help again. She did and soon this became a regular routine; in effect, they reversed roles so that she would be helping him. From their weekly work in the garden, Mary gradually gained self-confidence and in later years became a poised health professional who counseled others who were afflicted with anxiety disorders. The young woman and the old doctor had become friends and when Vroom attended Mary's wedding, he said, "I'm not going to leave until I get a snoot full." And when she brought her baby to his 100th birthday party he pointed to them and said, "That's the best thing I ever did" and the appreciation was reciprocal. That's an example of what used to be called "the art of medicine."

I had no illusions that stories like that, what I eventually came to describe as my "meanderings" in medical history, were profound or worthy of a scholarly thesis. Whether or not many people read them was of little concern because my motive for writing was merely for my own edification. Nevertheless, after serving a term as president of the Medical History Society of New Jersey, writing a dozen books and lecturing to various groups, I came to feel comfortable describing myself as a "historian" - even if not a real professor - best of all, it was great fun.

My books about Medical History:

Early Physicians of Northeastern Bergen County

Bergen Pines. A Remembrance of Things Past

The Jewish Doctor

Jewish Medical Roots

Case Reports. Short Stories About Jewish Doctors

Jewish Medicine. What It Is and Why It Matters

A Tale of Two Villages: Vineland and Skillman, NJ

Abraham Flexner. A Flawed American Icon

Meanderings in New Jersey's Medical History

More Meanderings in Medical History

Still More Meanderings in Medical History

Meanderings in Medical History. Book Four

12. ROOTS

Inspired by *Roots*, a popular television program in 1997 about black history, many people began to explore their genealogies. My own quest began by constructing a family tree but the branches contained few leaves for the first generation of immigrants to this country or their predecessors. I'm not sure why but as information accumulated my attention focused on my paternal grandparents and the Russian *shtetl* Dubrowa from where they had emigrated during the 1890s (now located in northeastern Poland, it's officially called Dabrowa Bialostocka and pronounced Dombrava.) Grandpa Hyman Nevins (originally Haskel Neviadomsky) was the son of a peddler and when his father died in 1890 the twelve year old went to *shul* to say *kaddish* where he met Celia Zaban, three months younger, who was mourning her mother. She came from a line of tailors and soon Hyman was apprenticed to her father Moishe Aaron (after whom I'm named.)

My grandparents died during the 1960s which was about a dozen years before I became interested in genealogy. I was surprised at how little my father knew about his parents' early lives but a cousin of grandpa, Phillip Sidransky, was happy to serve as a primary source of information, not only about our family's roots but also about the Jewish history of Dabrowa. He had a scholarly and retentive mind and as a young man had been a school teacher there until he fled to America when Poland was reconstituted after World War I. Once established in New York he became an officer in the town's *landmanshaft* (benevolent and burial society) so he knew the stories of many other emigres including where they were buried. When I recorded our interview I asked Philip why he'd never written a book about the town's history? He replied that he was too old, that I should do it. (Just like Dr. Alexander's words to me described in the previous chapter)

That seemed foolish since I was several generations removed from the *shtetl*, but before long I accepted the challenge and widened my scope to include not only the narrative of our family but the town's history as well.

After World War II hundreds of *landsmanshaftn* published *yizkor* (memorial) books about life back in the old country but not Dabrowa so that became my self-appointed task. The *Chevra Bnei Rabbi Menachem Mendel Anshei Dubrowa* which formed in New York City in 1892 flourished for decades until as its members aged and drifted away the organization lost its vitality. By the time I became interested only a few survivors or their children met sporadically to administer the society's burial plots in two cemeteries. I gradually felt an increasing sense of obligation realizing that if I didn't complete the task, perhaps no one else would. So with names and addresses supplied by cousin Phillip, I contacted several *landsmen* and visited a few who were living in Brooklyn and Tel Aviv.

Just a few days after *Dubrowa. Memorial to a Shtetl* was published in the spring of 1982, Phyllis and I were invited to a seder at the home of my friend and publisher Alvin Schultzberg. Another guest that night was shocked to notice a copy sitting on a table - virtually hot off the press. For years she'd been searching unsuccessfully for details about Dabrowa where her husband's grandfather had lived and right here was what she'd been seeking - a book that contained a list of the town's Holocaust martyrs. Phyllis and I had translated the list from Yiddish on a visit to *Yad Vashem* and, sure enough, her husband's grandfather's name was included! I sent copies of my *yizkor* book to many Jewish libraries and archives and, eventually, it was posted on-line so that the story of Dabrowa's lost Jewish community would be preserved. (More about this in Chapter 17.)

In 1987 I was contacted by the Schlachter sisters of Silver Springs , Maryland. Rena Holstein and Lillian Gritz who escaped Dabrowa just before the war had recently revisited their home town and found no recognizable houses; the old Jewish cemetery was overgrown by weeds and in bad shape more from neglect than vandalism. The sisters vowed to raise money (about \$20,000) to have a protecting stone wall built around the cemetery with a locked gate and monument. They arranged for a former high school friend - a Catholic who still lived in Dabrowa - to coordinate the project and when it was completed in June 1985, Phyllis and I joined a small international group in a moving rededication ceremony. (described in a second edition of my *yizkor* book.) When it was my turn to speak, I remarked that the story of the Jews of Dabrowa was not only about death and despair but also about good times: "I think of my grandparents who as teenagers met and fell in love here more than one hundred years ago." I closed with these words:

Sometimes when I've visited our family graves in the cemetery in Queens where former Dubrowa natives are buried, my eyes have drifted upward to the descending airplanes which approach JFK airport. It happens that a main flight path runs directly over the Dubrowa society's plot. Next week when Phyllis and I return home, we will land at JFK and as we look down from the airplane window, we will be completing a symbolic linkage of these two Jewish cemeteries. I believe that my grandparents would have been pleased that we've made this connection and that somewhere they will be smiling.

I began this chapter by describing how my paternal grandfather fled Dabrowa in order to escape conscription into the Imperial Russian Army.

According to family legend - probably apocryphal and admittedly promulgated by me - when Grandpa saw a sign in Brooklyn for Nevins Street, he shed his clumsy Russian surname Neviadomsky for a Yankee moniker - but how Haskel became Hyman remains a mystery. Grandpa made enough money tailoring to send for his girlfriend and when Celia's ship arrived in New York Harbor in 1899, it corresponded with a huge celebration for the return of Admiral George Dewey, hero of war in the Philippines. Perhaps she thought that all the fireworks and sirens were meant for her - another dubious family legend. They married and had four children, in order Irving, Nat, Sam (my father) and Mary who, in turn, produced my cousins Debbie, Raphael, Larry, Susan and Dorothy.

In those days, there was very little interaction between the generations and I can't recall any meaningful conversations with my grandparents on either side although by the time they died I already was in college. Grandma Nevins was a tiny woman and a skilled if unimaginative cook of traditional Jewish dishes - boiled chicken, matzo ball soup, stewed prunes and the like - and I remember being impressed with Hyman's skill at peeling an apple in one piece. Little else.

In addition to digging up my family's roots, I became involved in studying Phyllis' genealogy. Her maternal grandparents (Sam and Sara Mazer) still were living and could provide some answers, but her father Irving Brower, who grew up in a small town in Ukraine called Felshtin, was less forthcoming. As a teenager in 1919 during the Russian Civil War, he witnessed a pogrom in Felshtin in which nearly 500 Jews were slaughtered by local peasants and elements of the White army. His mother and two sisters had escaped the day before the pogrom and eventually made it safely to Palestine (see chapter 13.) Irving fled to America where he

married Rose Mazer of Teaneck and they had two children Phyllis and Michael. In Israel there was a large contingent of relatives and we were especially connected with Phyllis' cousin Rina Chaki and her husband Elie and their children Eyal, Avital and Eran with many visits back and forth.

It was understandable that Irving Brower never wanted to describe the horrors that he'd witnessed, but one day when Phyllis visited the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst she found a thick *yizkor* book that chronicled Felshtin's Jewish history. Because it was written in Yiddish, we were frustrated that we couldn't read any of it, but along with several other descendants of that *shtetl* we collaborated to raise money for an English translation and sponsored a symposium about Felshtin. That experience taught me a great deal about European Jewish history which, combined with my interest in medical history, contributed to my eventually writing four books concerning various aspects of Jewish medical history from ancient times to the Holocaust.

Long after I thought that I'd discovered all the major branches on our family tree, there was something totally unexpected. In Chapter One I mentioned that my mother had an older brother David who was never talked about because he'd moved away and married a Catholic woman. About three years ago I was contacted by a man from Indiana by the name of John Koven who had been zealously studying his family's genealogy. He was surprised to discover that his late paternal grandfather, who seems to have been rather non-communicative about his past, was buried in a Jewish cemetery in New Jersey. Yes, he was my mother's long forgotten brother. Although my grandparent's anglicized family surname was Cohen, in the old country it was Chuwen, which was transposed by my mysterious Uncle Dave to Koven. When digging Roots sometimes there are surprises.

13. WANDERING JEW

In addition to many visits to Phyllis' *mishpucha* living in Israel, I led three group trips to interesting medical history sites there, so I stopped counting visits to Israel after two dozen. Probably our most memorable family gathering was for Danny's Bar Mitzvah which was supposed to be held in Jerusalem at the *kotel* ("The Wall.") The night before the big event a relative who had police contacts urged us not to go there because it was to be the day of the peace signing with Egypt and there might be violence. Although Danny was disappointed, he understood that the "old people" (relatives over age 50?) might not be able to run for safety so it was agreed to change the venue to the large national synagogue *Hechal Shlomo*. In fact, there was violence the next day but the natural kind - a powerful rain and wind storm. We would have been washed away at the wall but, instead, were dry inside.

Another fond memory was of a family wedding that we attended in Israel where among the guests were three cousins each with variations of the name Moses: Phyllis' brother Michael, Israeli cousin Mossik and a newly arrived emigre from Russia Misha. The three had never met together before - nor since - and it seemed to me that this juncture symbolized the existential condition of modern Jewry - together in Israel but not religiously observant. Phyllis and I grew up in assimilated families and during the early years of our marriage paid little attention to religious strictures. But with the responsibility of parenthood we began to think differently and, along with several synagogue friends, we began to study Jewish history and became more active in community affairs. Phyllis was far more observant than I and we soon began keeping Kosher, adhered to Shabbat rules and the boys attended Jewish summer camps and a modern orthodox high school.

When we became aware of the fate of Russian "Refuseniks" and travel restrictions loosened, in 1986 the five of us travelled alone to Leningrad and Moscow to meet Jewish families in their homes and even smuggled some

contraband to them. In retrospect it seems crazy and, truth be told, it was a bit scary. We imagined that we were being followed and perhaps we were. After a week, with great relief we boarded a Swiss Air plane in order to decompress at a kosher hotel in the Alps before returning home. After grim and scary Russia, being in Switzerland was like suddenly going from a black and white movie to technicolor and on the last day, as the five of us marched down from snow-covered peaks through green meadows, we held hands and sang. It felt like a scene from *Sound of Music* and I recall saying, "It's all downhill from here." Metaphorically that is.

Teddy spent his first post-college year as a volunteer in India working for the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee with the tiny community of indigenous Jews. It was a marvelous experience for him and although he kept us informed of his activities using the new communication technology of faxing, Phyllis and I wanted to check things out first hand and joined a group tour led by Rabbi Marvin Tokayer called "India Through Jewish Eyes." Tokayer had once served for eight years as the rabbi for Japan's small Jewish community and knew a great deal about Jewish history in the Far East. Teddy joined us for part of the trip and one stop was the Paradesi synagogue in Cochin which was founded in 1567 and is located on Jew Street. Our group of thirty American tourists far outnumbered the Indian remnant but after Shabbat morning service, the tiny congregation treated us to lunch which featured a single *kasher* chicken for the multitude. Our host told me that he'd been present in 1967 when Indira Ghandi, the prime minister of India, attended the synagogue's 400th anniversary and began her greeting by saying "Shalom." Later he asked, "Madame Prime Minister. Where did you learn that word?" She replied, "*Fiddler on the Roof* of course."

We took two other group trips with Rabbi Tokayer, once to China and the next year to Japan. In Kyoto we visited a large church called *Beit Shalom* (House of Peace.) We learned that it was the mother church of a sect called Christian Friends of Israel which had about 10,000 members who strongly supported the

government of Israel and believe that fostering good relations between Christians and Jews will hasten the return of the Messiah. As we exited the bus we saw a statue of Ann Frank outside the entrance while inside there were flags of Israel and Japan. The large auditorium was filled with hundreds of people who as we entered stood and greeted us by singing *Shalom Alechem* - many of them had tears in their eyes and so did we. A choir gave a splendid concert of Israeli and Hebrew music - all sung by heart and with heart - followed by messages of greeting by church elders. (Later we learned that there's another pro-Israel Christian group in Japan called Makuya which has some 60,000 members.)

Marvin Tokayer was a marvelous raconteur and my favorite of his many stories dated back to the time when he was based in Tokyo and each month would take a train to Kobe to meet with a small enclave of Jewish businessman who had married Japanese women. The group would lunch at a local restaurant that also was frequented by Kobe's municipal and business leaders. Among the locals whom Tokayer came to know was the chief of police who one day approached him and said, "Rabbi, I need your help. We have one of your people and don't know what to do with him." Rabbi Tokayer drove with the police chief to the local jail where he found sitting on a stool in a cell a forlorn looking young man in full *hasidic* regalia!

The young man could only speak Yiddish but Tokayer was able to piece together his story. It seems that his family was in the jewelry business in New York City and he had been sent to Japan to buy pearls. He brought with him two suitcases - one with his clothing and the other with cans of kosher food to eat. But what to eat them *on*? He bought some dishes but, according to Jewish custom, first they had to be purified in running water. Not only is Kobe a coastal city, it also was a navy base and when the intrepid (and oblivious) *hasid*, marched down to the water's edge, opened his suitcase, bent over and began doing something suspicious looking, the Navy guards observing this bizarre scene must have been amazed.

Who was this alien creature and what was he doing? Of course, the *hasid* couldn't have understood the many signs that said "Keep Out" nor could the guards understand his strange language, so they arrested him. Although Rabbi Tokayer understood the scenario, he wondered how to explain it to the police chief. He took out his English-Japanese dictionary and looked up a single word, RITUAL - and when he pronounced that to the chief, the prisoner was immediately released. The Japanese appreciate ritual.

The next year we took Rabbi Tokayer's trip "China Through Jewish Eyes" which featured a three day cruise down the Yangtze River to view the soon to be completed Three Gorges Dam. Kosher style travel can be daunting but this boat trip was catered by a synagogue in Hong Kong, so as we cruised down the river we feasted on chopped liver, pot roast and various kosher delicacies. One day we were served turtle soup which had suspicious looking things floating in the tureen - thankfully, these "mock turtles" were giant mushrooms.

Once when Phyllis and I attended a medical meeting in Atlanta, on Friday evening she wanted to attend synagogue so we consulted a phone book (remember them) and found a modern orthodox one close to our hotel. As we settled in to enjoy the service, the rabbi suddenly announced, "Now Dr. Nevins will give a *Dvar Torah*" (a talk on a religious theme.) I panicked and for a moment wondered what I should talk about. To my great relief, a man sitting a few rows in front of us stood up, walked forward and delivered a passionate talk. Afterward, I sought him out and introduced myself: "Dr. Nevins, I too am Dr. Nevins." Then we played "Jewish geography" and I learned that he also was from the Bronx - in fact, only one block away from my home; literally a "stone's throw away" since his "gang" up on Popham Avenue sometimes threw rocks down at us on Undercliff Avenue. It turned out that the other Dr. Nevins wasn't an MD but a PhD professor on the faculty of Emory University and we weren't related at all - except by neighborhood.

14. HOPE DIES LAST

In 2005 I led a small group on a medical history study trip to Israel and one of our first stops was the Ghetto Fighters Museum in Nahariya. I'd arranged for us to be met by a local Israeli doctor with whom we would discuss Jewish medical ethics. Tomi Spenser was born in Prague and at age eleven, along with 7,000 other Jewish children, escaped to England on a *kindertransport*. He grew up there, became a doctor, married and then moved his family to Israel where he became a general practitioner on Kibbutz Sasa in the north. Dr. Spenser also taught on the faculty of the Technion's medical school in Haifa where he developed a curriculum for medical students that discussed certain moral dilemmas encountered by prisoner doctors in concentration camps - such things as euthanizing dying patients or killing crying babies who might reveal the presence of hiding Jews.

Dr. Spenser mentioned that in 2000 he had curated an exhibition at the school consisting of digitized reproductions of some three dozen paintings with medical themes, all made by prisoners in the Terezin concentration camp near Prague; many of them captive physicians. I asked Dr. Spenser whether I could borrow them to exhibit in the United States and he agreed, but when I returned home Phyllis was entering a terminal phase of lymphoma and it was more than a year before I got through her loss and recalled my conversation with Tomi Spenser. However, then I couldn't reconnect with him until after many months I learned that in the interim he had died shortly after Phyllis did and of the same disease (non-Hodgkins lymphoma.) I was able to locate one of Tomi's sons who found the collection stored in a carton in his kibbutz garage. He shipped them to me and I exhibited the art at several venues in New York.

Terezin (the Germans called it Theresienstadt) wasn't a death camp; it was euphemistically described by the Nazis as a "city of refuge." Actually it was a walled ghetto where Jews were concentrated for varying periods before being deported to "the East" for the final solution. At any time there were more than 50,000 people enclosed in a space built to accommodate about 5,000. Some were wealthy or prominent people who came voluntarily, lured by promises of privileged treatment but they were deceived. Between 1941 and 1945 of nearly 160,000 people sent to Terezin, some 36,000 died of old age, illness or starvation and the rest were deported to work camps or killing camps. Only a few thousand lived to tell the tale - of more than 12,000 children only 325 survived.

In effect, Terezin was a Potemkin's Village, used as a demonstration project for visiting Red Cross inspectors to show how well the Jews were being treated. Cultural activities were permitted for the purpose of propaganda – a cabaret, a jazz band, soccer games, a chorus, lectures by famous scholars - all of them prisoners, soon most all would die. Visual art, both permitted and subterfuge, was produced and many paintings survived; some done by children, others by professional artists and then there were the medical pictures that were collected by Dr. Spencer.

I'll describe just one of those painters, Karel Fleischmann a Czech dermatologist who also was a gifted artist and writer thousands of whose hidden works survived the war. His description of what it felt like in 1942 while he was waiting deportation to Terezin reads like something written by an earlier Prague Jew, Franz Kafka:

All of us felt a sense of sliding helplessness, again and again, day after day, night after night, you descended toward the abyss whose bottom was unfathomable...you felt only the downward movement, the fear, what next?

The morning of our deportation was pitilessly cold. The clouds as black as ink, the rising sun blood red in the background...darkness on earth, darkness in our souls...a nightmare. We arrived in Terezin in the evening. Really you did not arrive, you were consigned. Someone managed for us for we no longer were we – we had become an object, a number, a ground substance, a kneaded mix of humans...

Tired to the bones, sick, longing for quiet and sleep, we came into the cellars and dark holes of the barrack...still the mass was mixed, kicked and reduced to nothing, dirtied, put on the floor, kneaded and rolled till we became a formless porridge, a heap of rubbish...poisoned with the taste of the stable...Your helplessness became more and more pronounced as you lay denuded among the hundreds of strangers on the concrete floors or on bunks in the huge barracks...We live like rats in a cellar and become shy of the light and shy of people.

You wouldn't expect such eloquence from a mere physician but Karel Fleischmann was no ordinary man. At Terezin he headed the geriatric ward and worked closely with the medical director of the ghetto Erich Munk. I've written elsewhere about their close working and personal relationship (*Two Doctors of Terezin*) and in October 1944, both doctors were among the last group shipped to Auschwitz where they were gassed upon arrival. In one of Karel Fleischmann's poems he wrote, "Nobody will hear my song. The world of my time ends behind these walls." Another time he predicted, "One of us will teach the children how to sing again, to write on paper with a pencil, to do sums and multiply; one of us will get there." As I will explain, he was only partially correct.

Before I felt competent to lecture in the United States about the medical art collected by Tomi Spenser, I felt obliged to see the place for myself so in 2007 I made a brief visit to Prague to look around. The same optimistic spirit expressed by Dr. Fleischmann - the idea that “one of us will get there” - was evident when on my last day I interviewed an eighty-two year old woman who was working as a docent at the Jewish museum. Anna Hyndrakova had been one of the few children who survived Terezin and told me that in 1942 when she was fourteen, her family was sent there and remained for nearly two years. Anna was sick much of the time with dysentery, hepatitis, mumps, scarlet fever – all diseases that were prevalent there. She worked for awhile as a dental assistant, using her foot to pump the hand drill that the dentist used and in her spare time, she painted what she saw around her; after the war one of her works was displayed with other children’s art in a synagogue in Prague.

When the Nazis wanted to “thin out” the densely crowded camp before a Red Cross visit in 1944, Anna was deported to Auschwitz where Dr. Mengele selected her to work and not to die. During the next year she escaped twice, once from a death march, and just two days before the war’s end she made it all the way back to Prague. She lived for two years in a Jewish orphanage there and eventually was able to make a real life for herself. She earned a doctorate in social science, married and had two children and later three grandchildren. Anna told me that she never wanted to leave her home city and, in order to keep the story alive for others, and even into her eighties she worked in a Holocaust archive at the Jewish museum in Prague. She admitted that although it’s depressing to constantly relive the past, she feels obliged to talk about it. When I asked how she’d kept up her spirit through those dark days, she replied: “Hope dies last.”

Later I remembered that phrase when I read about another survivor of Terezin who also attributed his good fortune to hope. Victor Frankl was a former Viennese psychiatrist who worked for two years under Karel Fleischmann in Terezin's geriatric ward, counseling depressed, sometimes suicidal patients by engaging their minds in constructive ways. Dr. Frankl survived three camps after Terezin, all the time jotting down ideas on pieces of stolen paper which he hid in the lining of his clothes. After the war ended he published *Man's Search For Meaning* which sold over nine million copies in nineteen languages. The core of Viktor Frankl's philosophy was that there must be a purpose to suffering and dying. He wrote that everyone can rise above their fate but must discover the meaning in life for themselves, either by creating a work or doing a deed – by experiencing something or encountering someone. In his book Dr. Frankl observed that in the camps those without hope were the ones who died the quickest; conversely, those who held on to a vision of the future were more likely to survive.

In the concentration camp, we witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions, not on conditions. Our generation is realistic because we have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers and he is also that being who entered the gas chambers upright with the Lord's Prayer or the S'hma Israel on his lips.

Viktor Frankl wrote that “the salvation of man is through love and in love” and the way that he hung on was to constantly think about his wife. But when he returned to Vienna after the war, he learned that she and his

entire family had been killed. Broken and alone, he accepted a teaching position at the medical school, remarried and went on to become a world famous psychotherapist. Dr. Frankel held five professorships in American universities, received 29 honorary degrees, was a Nobel Peace Prize nominee and died in London in 1997 at age 92.

One of the places where I exhibited Tomi Spencer's collection of Terezin art was the Holocaust Study Center in Spring Valley, NY. After I spoke at the opening event an elderly woman by the name of Ela Weissberger introduced herself and explained that as a child she had spent nearly three years at Terezin and that she owned a painting done by the same Dr. Karel Fleischmann about whom I'd just spoken. Would I like to see it? And how! When I visited Ela's home in Tappan, the small painting was unimpressive but how she got it was another matter. Her mother worked in the Nazi's vegetable garden where prisoners weren't allowed to take anything for themselves. However as Ela proudly told me, "My mother was the best thief in Terezin." She once hid fifty tomatoes under her clothes without squashing them, the theft undetected because she was so thin. Her mother lived in the same barracks as Dr. Fleischmann and had bartered her precious tomatoes for this simple painting.

When Ela was about eleven years old she played a leading role as the cat in the children's opera *Brundibar* which was staged for the amusement of the Nazis. In fact, it contained subtle mocking of the captors which they didn't understand and it was performed 55 times, though rarely by the same cast because so many children were taken away and killed. After the war *Brundibar* was performed throughout the world and sometimes Ela Weissberger would travel long distances to attend and tell her story - the title of her published memoir is *The Cat With the Yellow Star*.

At the end of the children's opera, sometimes this very old "cat" came up on stage to join the chorus as they all sang the opera's final victory song.

Ela Weissberger frequently was asked why she continued to travel so far in order to tell her story and she'd answer, "I want to speak for the children who died. I ask people to remember my friends. By doing this, they stay alive in our hearts and minds. I'm the bridge between today's children and generations to come. And if we, as survivors, keep talking, we'll be heard. We can't keep silent - it's a part of our bodies." Ela told me that young people had an unofficial anthem that they used to sing in the ghetto's cabaret that was called *The Terezin March* and many years later when survivors held reunions at a kibbutz in Israel, they would join hands and sing this refrain:

Anything can be done, no matter how bitter the time.

Hand in hand we look to the future with a light heart.

Tomorrow our lives begin again.

We'll laugh as we stand on the ruins of the ghetto –

Because together anything can be done.

Hey! Tomorrow life starts over, And with it the time is approaching

When we'll fold our knapsacks

And return home again.

Where there is a will, there is a way,

Let us join hands

And one day on the ruins of the ghetto

We shall laugh.

The title of Israel's national anthem *Hatikvah* means "The Hope" and it seems to me that contained in these two anthems of hope is an inspirational message for us all to be optimistic and never give up one's ideals. Ela Weissberger and Anna Hyndrakova were living testimony of that commitment. As for the others, all that remains are their pictures and written words as a legacy of their indomitable spirit.

15. THE AMOROUS ADVENTURES OF “MIKE BIALYSTOCK”

In Mel Brooks' classic play/movie *The Producers*, Zero Mostel played a lecherous stalker of wealthy widows by the name of Max Bialystock. I'd always identified with his surname because my paternal grandparents came from the Bialystock region of then Russia, however, early in 2007 I began to think that perhaps Max and Mike had more in common than that. It was about a year and a half after Phyllis' death that, in a lonely moment, I logged on to *JDate*, a Jewish computer dating service, to see what this modern equivalent of the traditional matchmaker was all about. Signing on was easy: just answer a few basic questions, send a photo and \$30 and then sit back. Wow! It was like opening Pandora's Box. I hadn't considered that the legendary appeal of a Jewish doctor still applied even for those of advanced vintage.

Almost immediately I began receiving e-messages from dozens of flirtatious women, most from within a 40 mile radius but some from as far away as Kansas City and Tel Aviv. Apparently an eligible doctor was like catnip for ladies using code names such as NevRbettR, PetiteSweetie, bwaybaby, designing woman and smallnsweet. They all seemed eager to tell me that I was cute or that my bland bio was “intriguing.” That's heady stuff for I'm as susceptible to a little flattery as any guy – especially a codger who hadn't had a date in more than a half century!

The photo of one determined woman who wouldn't take “No” for an answer reminded me of my Aunt Augusta in her later years – she lived to 103. Others appeared attractive but I'd been warned that it's standard practice for JDaters to submit much younger photos. At first it was exciting to scan each day's new crop, but after a week or two the process began to feel like

virtual stalking. To be sure, it was consensual, but, unlike Max Bialystock, I soon began to feel more like the hunted than the hunter.

An age-related problem I encountered was that with failing short-term memory I could deal with only one or two women at a time. Soon I couldn't remember which one had described her body habitus as "proportional" or who it was who confessed, "I'm a real lady, but I also enjoy a dirty joke." I concluded that I could never be a Mormon because I'd flunk polygamy – I'd need a scorecard - so after the first week I began compiling a spreadsheet. However, after scanning the first 150 or so candidates, their faces began to blur and the bios all began to sound alike. Some who claimed to be "passionate" just appeared to be hyperactive and I was terrified to note that almost all seemed to work out and lift weights suggesting a robust new breed of Jewish Amazons. I envisioned a battalion of jogging, dancing, skating, beach walking, iron-pumping superwomen – nary a pot roaster in sight and the thought of keeping up with these Olympians was daunting.

Virtual dating soon became addictive and, even after the initial flurry, every day brought still more "Flirt" messages. I'd finish reading one e-mail and another would be waiting so I decided that it was time to get "real." I began making preference lists and ranking the top ten. I even phoned a few of the more promising candidates and chatted, but was dismayed at how fickle I was – like the lyric in the old Broadway musical song, "When I'm Not Near The Girl I Love, I Love the Girl I'm Near."

After a week or two my scientific nature kicked in and I decided to keep track of everything in a journal and then it dawned on me that I could use my funny experiences as a litmus test – if I e-mailed the journal to some women who claimed to have a good sense of humor, some might be

amused while others wouldn't. I began receiving replies from veterans of internet dating who were willing to describe their own experiences – many of them embarrassing or worse. One suggested possible titles for my journal such as “Looking for Love in Cyberspace” or “Close Encounters of No Real Kind.” Another woman confided that although she'd had a number of good experiences, she'd also encountered several weirdos. She noted that many men seemed to be in denial about the passage of time and appearance and some wannabe Don Juans were forthright about their intentions - as one fellow wrote, “If you don't have a mustache, you can have me.” This woman thanked me for sharing my insights about computer dating because they “helped me to feel better about this whole ridiculous process.”

Before long I was prepared to move on to more conventional socializing. I'd become emotionally exhausted, was sleeping poorly and felt the need to get beyond casual browsing and arrange for an actual meeting. I began to doubt myself and worried what would happen if my chosen one didn't choose me? After all, I was in my seventies and well-worn -- damaged goods? My new strategy was to select a few of the most promising potential partners and arrange to meet them in real time. This was easier than I'd expected because most of the women had some “disqualifying” characteristic; in fact, I was surprised to find how similar my favorites were during this preliminary stage. In retrospect, this shouldn't have been a surprise because so far they all were disembodied extensions of my own imagination.

These wry observations may seem cynical but they reflect the fact that in some respects cyberdating invites spoofing. In truth, all those who enter are aware of the limitations and, after all, it does offer new opportunities for

social interaction. I have no doubt that from the distaff perspective there's plenty to mock about aging males but it's all part of the human comedy and if we lose our capacity to laugh at ourselves, what's left but to cry? Life and people can be absurd at any age and I suppose that for seniors, the familiar maxim still applies: "There's no fool like an old fool."

I winnowed the list down to three finalists and began making phone calls. The first was to a woman named Golda who was from Brooklyn. I'm ashamed to admit that I didn't fancy the idea of introducing "Golda from Brooklyn" to friends or family because it conjured up images of Golda Meir or Tevya's wife in *Fiddler On The Roof*. I chastised myself for being so shallow – after all, she seemed pretty and witty - so I phoned her, but Golda's thick Brooklyn accent confirmed my worst stereotypes and she struck out.

That left two candidates for the great privilege of meeting me: Carol and Linda. Both passed telephone muster so I arranged to meet each of them three days apart in Manhattan and what happened next confirmed my ineptitude as a cyberstud. Carol was first. We met on a beautiful summer day, she was attractive and clever and we walked and talked for several hours in Central Park. It went so well that after returning home, aglow from my first date in a half century, I felt compelled to send an e-mail to Carol telling how much I'd enjoyed meeting her. I carefully composed it and then pressed SEND. But right after the message whizzed off, I reread what I'd written and noted with horror that I'd begun "DEAR LINDA..." Oy!!!! That was the name of the NEXT scheduled date. Mortified, I shot off an apology: "So sorry. I'm terribly embarrassed... I don't even know a Linda {yet}." Carol must have understood the perils of computer dating the presenile. Taking my gaff with good humor, she replied "DEAR IRVING."

Good for her. But three days later I met the REAL Linda -- and now, more than a decade has passed and we're still together. Mike Bialystock is long retired and definitely is offline.

16. RIVER VIEW

Although I was an English major in college, I never developed an appreciation for poetry so when an opportunity arose in 2016, I signed up for a poetry writing class and some immersion therapy. I can't say that I mastered the art, but the following feeble attempts described my delight in my new apartment in Piermont with its splendid view of the Hudson River. Linda thinks that my fascination with this scene represents nostalgia for my Bronx boyhood when I'd often sit for hours gazing out of my bedroom window at the Harlem River far below and day dreaming. Perhaps so.

DAWN ARRIVES WITH AN OVERTURE BY HONKING GEESE. THE SKY LIGHTENS AND DARK BLUE CLOUDS EMERGE LIKE INK BLOTS IN A GIANT RORSCHACH. OFF TO THE EAST, A SALMON SKY ADORNS THE ENTRY OF MORNING'S PREENING HERO – HIS HIGHNESS, THE SUN!

THE RIVER AWAKENS TO REVEAL TODAY'S PATTERN. ITS FACE IS EXPRESSIVE, ITS MOOD EVER CHANGING. THE COLOR VARIES DEPENDING ON TIDE AND TIME, SEASON AND WEATHER -- GRAY, GREEN, BLUE, BROWN. AND IF THERE'S A PARTICULARLY VIVID SUNRISE OR SUNSET, TINGES OF PINK OR ORANGE.

THE VIEW FROM MY BALCONY IS LIKE LIVING ON A HOUSE BOAT. THE DISTANT BRIDGE TRACES A HORIZONTAL DIVIDE – SKY ABOVE, WATER BELOW; LONG AND LOW NEAR NYACK, THEN A GRACEFUL RISE AS IT APPROACHES TARRYTOWN. SOMETIMES LATE AT NIGHT, I FOLLOW THE HEADLIGHTS OF A LONE CAR FLICKERING THROUGH THE TREES HIGH UP ON 9W – HURRYING WHO KNOWS WHERE?

WINTER ICE FLOWS ETCH JAGGED DESIGNS WHILE SPRING RAINS FORM INTRICATE PATTERNS ON THE SURFACE. BEST IS WHEN THE RIVER IS FOG

BOUND AND SILENT. IF A STORM PASSES, FIRST ROCKLAND IS OBSCURED IN DARKNESS AND THEN AS LIGHT IS RESTORED, IT'S WESTCHESTER'S TURN TO FADE FROM VIEW.

TRAFFIC ON THE WALKWAY BELOW MY BALCONY BRINGS OLD AND YOUNG, FEEBLE AND HALE, LOVERS AND LONERS, WHEELCHAIRS AND BABY CARRIAGES. RESTLESS DOGS ON LEASHES WANT TO RUN FREE. ON SOME SUMMER MORNINGS I AWAKE TO THE SHOUTS OF A CREW AT EARLY PRACTICE. LATER IN THE DAY I STRAIN TO HEAR SNATCHES OF TALK FROM THE WALKWAY. A SMALL CHILD WHINES "PICK ME UP." SOMEONE ON THEIR CELL PHONE IS LOUD AND OBLIVIOUS.

SO MANY BOATS PASS MY WINDOW – KAYAKS, SKULLS, FRISKY JETSKIS, GRACEFUL SAILBOATS. AT DUSK MOTORBOATS CUT THEIR ENGINES AND GLIDE INTO THE MARINA. A FEW REMAIN MOORED JUST BEYOND, POISED FOR THEIR NEXT OUTING. A GULL HOVERS, THEN DIVE BOMBS FOR A TASTY DINNER. ALAS, HE FLIES OFF WITH EMPTY BEAK. THERE'S A SPLASH OF A FISH BREACHING AND LATE AT NIGHT, WAY OFF IN THE DISTANCE, A TRAIN WAILS.

THERE'S A CONSTANT SOFT GROWL OF TRAFFIC ON THE BRIDGE – THE BEAST NEVER SLEEPS. A STORM ARRIVES WITH A RUMBLE OF THUNDER. THE RAIN HISSES AS IT POUNDS THE WATER AND IF THE DOOR IS LEFT OPEN A CRACK, THE WIND HOWLS.

HURRICANE SANDY WAS HIGH DRAMA: WHITE CAPS HURTTLED STRAIGHT AT ME LIKE AT THE SEASHORE; THEN THE TIDE TURNED AND RUSHED TOWARD TOWN – BOATS WASHED ASHORE, DEBRIS AND FLOODING, LIGHTS OUT.

TRAGEDY STRUCK TWICE LAST WEEK. FIRST, A WRONG-WAY COLLISION ON THE BRIDGE – SIX INJURED, ONE DEAD – NO CARS MOVED FOR SIX HOURS, FLASHING RED LIGHTS UNTIL 3:00 AM. SIX NIGHTS LATER, A MOTOR BOAT SMASHED INTO A CONSTRUCTION BARGE – FOUR INJURED, TWO DROWNED. THE NEXT MORNING HELICOPTERS, RATHER THAN SEAGULLS, CIRCLED OVERHEAD. A LONE POLICE BOAT TROLLED NEAR MY WINDOW – SEARCHING.

POINTING LIKE A FINGER INTO THE HUDSON, THE MILE LONG PIER WAS BUILT TO JOIN TRAINS FROM THE WEST TO SHIPS UP FROM THE CITY. A CENTURY LATER, HALF A MILLION TROOPS MARCHED ALONG IT, BOARDED TRANSPORTS AND SAILED TO FRANCE. THEY CALLED IT “LAST-STOP USA.” NOW IT’S A HAVEN FOR FISHERMEN, CYCLISTS, STROLLERS -- AND BIRDS.

CRANES ARE FLYING BEYOND THE OLD BRIDGE – YELLOW, RED AND WHITE, THEIR NECKS STRETCH UP. A WHOLE FLOCK OF THEM AND MORE TO COME THEY SAY. THIS MORNING, THE INSISTENT BANG OF A PILE DRIVER. SIXTY BEATS A MINUTE -- JUST LIKE MY HEART.

17. FOUR WOMEN

After our visit in 1995 to rededicate the Jewish cemetery in Dabrowa Bialostocka, for the next two decades I rarely thought again about the *shtetl* where my paternal grandparents grew up. Then in October 2015 I received an e-mail message from a high school teacher there who'd read a Polish translation of my book. Dorota Budzinska explained that she and her students were studying Dabrowa's forgotten Jewish history and had been cleaning out the overgrown cemetery. Now they were planning a symposium and she invited me to speak. Naturally, I was delighted to accept. How could I say no? So accompanied by my son Ted and grandson Sam, we returned to our family's *shtetl* for the program that was held on May 24, 2016.

The school sent a van to pick us up in Warsaw for the nearly four hour drive to Dabrowa. The formal part of the program was held in the auditorium of a modern school with flags of Poland, The United States and Israel displayed. There were lengthy greetings in Polish by various officials before it was my turn to speak. I'd been advised to avoid controversial subjects since the current political situation was sensitive and had composed about a ten minute talk, submitting the text in advance so that an excellent translator (Elzbieta Smolenska) could alternate reading paragraphs with me. Here's what I said:

When I was born 80 years ago this month, I was named after a great-grandfather (Moshe Aaron Zaban) whom I never knew because he is buried here in Dabrowa. In 1896, 120 years ago, his daughter, my grandmother Seely (Celia) Zaban, left for America to join her boyfriend Haskel Neviadomsky who left two years earlier to avoid being drafted into

the Imperial Army. When grandpa arrived in New York, he made enough money to pay for grandma's passage and when she arrived in New York City at age 18 she was uneducated and unskilled - except for being a very good cook. After they married they joined a social organization with many former Dabrowa residents who lived in New York and sometimes that group would meet to recall old times. When members of the society or their families died they were buried together, just as their ancestors had been in Dabrowa's Jewish cemetery.

History usually focuses on famous men but since this week you'll be celebrating Mothers Day, I thought it would be appropriate for me to discuss four women starting with my tiny grandmother. In truth, her life was undistinguished except for the fact that she raised four successful children which, in itself, was a praiseworthy achievement. I was one of her seven grandchildren and my generation produced more offspring so that now there are many descendants scattered throughout the world. With me today is Ted, one of my three children, and Sam, one of my seven grandchildren - respectively, we are at least four, five and six generations removed from ancestors who are buried here.

My grandparents never spoke to us about their early lives but long after they were gone, I became interested in studying our family's story. I not only wanted to learn about their experiences, but also about the place from where they came. The result was a small book that was published in 1982 called Dubrowa, Memorial to a Shtetl. In it I focused on the history of the former Jewish community and, in the course of my research, I interviewed many people who were not relatives but who had interesting stories to tell. I've mentioned my grandmother but now I'd like to describe two other special women from a later generation who also came from here.

One was Rena Schlacter (Holstein) who was 23 years old when she left Dabrowa just three days before Germany invaded Poland. Her father had been killed in a pogrom in 1916 when she wasn't yet two years old and in September 1939 her mother insisted that, for safety, she join her older sister Lillian (Gritz) in America.

When war broke out, 17 year old Sonia Grabinski (Lewkowicz) remained in Dabrowa with her parents and, as with everyone else, they lived under desperate conditions until in December 1942, along with nearly 300 remaining Jews, she was transported in a cattle car to Treblinka to be executed. But, miraculously, upon arrival Sonia was assigned to work in the camp's laundry and after about five months, in August 1943, she was one of more than 300 prisoners who revolted and escaped to the forest. Fewer than 70 of that group lived to tell the tale and they were the only survivors out of more than 800,000 people sent to Treblinka. After the war, Sonia was one of two or three Jews who returned to Dabrowa, but after several months she left for Israel where I interviewed her for my book in 1982.

In 1946, shortly after the war ended, Rena Holstein wrote a letter from America to Sonia Grabinski in Israel asking for details about what happened in their home town and I'd like to read a few lines from Sonia's reply:

"Our Dabrova [sic] the Germans burned in the year of 1941, immediately as they entered.... Your sister and [her] husband remained and lived in a mud hut... There were many such. We also lived in terrible conditions. And, yet, everybody [passed] the time with hope that maybe after the war will

end it will get better. It happened differently. People of Dabrowa were lost in terrible gas chambers in the factory of Treblinka. Nobody escaped...

It is terrible to speak and write it down. I don't want to bleed your heart and that is why I am telling you not to think about it. And if ever you remember, think that they have it good already. They suffered and now they are at peace. Maybe you think...that I am either crazy or an unfeeling, terrible person. No, my dear, you see my hands are trembling....Myself, who lived through and who lived longer than my family, survived [but] I have it much worse...I lived through [Hell] for three and one half years, it is hard to imagine it...I survived but my heart and soul are deadened. I am sorry that my letter cannot give you more pleasure. Yes, the reality is very, very sad and it makes no sense to lie." [Sonia died in Israel in 2006.]

Despite Sonia's advice to forget and move on, before Rena left Dabrowa she promised her brother that she wouldn't forget the children. So it was that in 1988, about 42 years after Sonia's reply to her, the two sisters, Roncha and Leychie as they were called, returned to Dabrowa and engaged their former Christian school friend Jan Jarjecki to build a secure wall with a locked gate around the Jewish cemetery. After the project was completed the sisters, my wife and I and several others participated in a dedication ceremony that was held here on June 27, 1995.

There's also a fourth woman whom I'd like to remember today although she didn't come from Dabrowa and wasn't Jewish. The names of the other three are known only to their families, but I'm sure that most of you know the story of Irena Sendler (Sendlerova.) However, I confess that until very recently I'd never heard her name - so let me explain why I mention her now.

Several months ago I received an official invitation from your mayor to participate in this program and from that I learned that its title would be Reading Ashes. I was unfamiliar with that phrase, so I “googled” it and that’s when I first heard of the poet Jerzy Ficowski who in 1979 published a book of 25 poems he’d written about the Holocaust (in English translation the title is A Reading of Ashes.) One of these poems was about the poet’s wife Bieta whom I learned was only about six months old in 1942 when she was sedated by her Jewish parents so she wouldn’t make noise and smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto in a wooden box.

Her rescuer was a young social worker Irena Sendler who arranged for the child to be raised by the same Catholic midwife who had delivered her and many other Jewish babies. It’s an inspiring story, but even more remarkable was the fact that Bieta was one of nearly 2,500 Jewish children also rescued from the Warsaw ghetto as a result of the courage of Irena Sendler. Eventually, Irena was arrested, tortured and sentenced to death, but she was rescued by Zegota (Council to Aid Jews) and lived to age 98.

Many years later, Irena Sendler was honored by Israel as a righteous person and in 2005 she was nominated for a Nobel Prize. But for decades her story was little known even here in Poland where it was suppressed by the Soviet government. I can attest that even today, except for a very few scholars, her name is virtually unknown in my country so let me explain why I presume to speak about her today to a Polish audience who probably are quite familiar with her?

One reason is because nearly twenty years ago three American high school girls who lived in a tiny town in rural Kansas (Uniontown, pop 270) - far smaller than Dabrowa - heard about Irena Sendler from an obscure

source and then did their homework. The students wrote and produced a play about Irena, entered it in a history competition and slowly spread the word about her - even to Poland where she still was hardly known. In time the girls visited Irena in Warsaw where they also met Bieta Ficovski - the baby in the box - who by then was helping to care for Irena in her last years. There's a nice symmetry to all this - American high school students teaching Poles about their own national hero whose story was little known - and today, Polish students hosting this event so that when we return to America we can use what we learn here to educate people back home.

Which brings me to a second reason for mentioning Irena Sendler today. I pride myself in knowing a lot about Jewish history and about the Holocaust - yet, until just a few months ago I knew nothing about this saintly woman, nor of the poet and his wife. My point is that, even now, there is so much that we don't know about each other. And if I knew nothing about these Polish heroes, I wonder how little you may know about things that on our side we take for granted? That's why a meeting like this is so important - for, in a small way, it helps bridge a gap not only of cold facts but of human stories. Because it seems that even in today's hyperconnected world we remain virtual strangers, it's our mutual responsibility to listen and learn from one another.

Once again we live in troubling times - certainly not as awful as during the darkest years of the 20th century - but troubling enough. And again, harsh words are being spoken by influential leaders both in your country and in mine. Now is a time for all people of good-will to be vigilant in guarding against injustice and hate - and it's in times like these, that it's necessary to hold fast to our best values - including tolerance, kindness, humility and humanity. That was a fundamental lesson in the life and poetry of Jerzy

Ficowski - a lesson that can be learned from "reading ashes" - and today it's my message to you.

Of some 14 million Jews living in the world today, the families of nearly three quarters originated in Poland. Of nearly 3.5 million Jews who lived in Poland before World War II, only about 10% survived and most of them moved away. But since the fall of the Soviet regime in 1989, there's been what some have called a "Jewish Renaissance" which culminated two years ago with the opening of the new museum in Warsaw which celebrates 1000 years of Jewish life here.

How many Jews currently live in Poland depends on who you ask and how one defines who is a Jew? Some estimates suggest that today between 5,000 and 25,000 Poles identify as being Jewish but, whatever the degree of their observance and connectedness, compared to the number of Jews who lived in Poland during the 1930s, that's less than one percent of the pre-war population.

Nazi rule in Poland caused the most terrible genocide in human history and Jewish blood and ashes permeate the soil. But today we haven't returned in order to cast blame. Rather, we come in a spirit of reconciliation - its time to learn from the past and never repeat the worst of it. So, hopefully, as a result of educational programs like this, we all can move forward together in peace. SHALOM.

Next up after my talk was Dr. Mark Podwal whom I'd invited to join us because I knew that his mother and family members had emigrated from Dabrowa in 1929. In addition to being a dermatologist in Manhattan. Mark is a world-renowned artist whose unique Jewish-themed paintings and

drawings are displayed in many major museums. He was so inspired by this his first visit to the town that when he returned home Mark painted 18 pictures that juxtaposed local Jewish and Polish history which were exhibited at sites both in the United States and Poland. Our obscure *shtetl* finally received some recognition beyond its borders.

Dr. Podwal's talk was followed by a documentary film produced for the occasion by journalist/historian Tomek Wisniewski of Bialystock. He'd spent hundreds of hours interviewing a dozen elderly people who had lived in Dabrowa before the war and remembered their former neighbors. To my mind, the film wasn't particularly edifying because it was heavily edited and most of the old-timers had selective memories. They said polite things but if you read between the lines (subtitles) certain old prejudices still seemed evident. One woman recalled that there used to be talk about Jews using Christian blood to make those tasty matzahs she'd tasted but that she had never believed it. Perhaps not but others did because, according to my own research, in the spring of 1939 - six months before the war began - there were pogroms in Dabrowa, the reason given was the age-old blood libel. Another lady said that when she was a school girl she once was made to sit in the same row as a Jewish girl: "Maybe it was because I was naughty."

After lunch there was a ceremony in the old Jewish cemetery which was in better condition than when I'd visited some twenty years earlier. The mayor and I pulled a red and white ribbon from a new plaque put up by the town council to mark this occasion. Then prayers were led respectively by a visiting rabbi, the local priest and an imam and I thanked Dorata's students for clearing the underbrush from the forest. The gravestones were well worn and I couldn't find my great-grandfather's after whom I'm named.

The program ended in the town square where many people were gathered in a festive mood. "Jewish music" was being played in an open band shell and when we arrived, they broke into "If I were a rich man" and I gave my best imitation of Tevya's belly shake. As we milled around for nearly an hour several people came up and in halting English, or just smiles, handshakes or hugs, expressed thanks for our visit. One man placed a pin on my shirt which joined the Polish and Israeli flags and another told me that it was his son who'd found my book and translated it into Polish. He was near tears when I gave him an inscribed copy. Our return to Dabrowa was a memorable experience and the best news is that long after the event, Dorata Budzinska continues to teach students about their town's Jewish history and Mark Podwal's pictures are on permanent display both in the school and the town hall.

On our last morning in Poland as Ted, Sam and I strolled through Warsaw's restored old city we watched a solemn Catholic ceremony celebrating the holiday of Corpus Christi. Thousands of the faithful marched through the quarter and their chanting was so infectious that I joined in - also humming a few Israeli songs under my breath. However, there was a disturbing sight because while browsing in souvenir shops, we saw hundreds of tiny wooden figurines for sale which are called *zydikis* - "little Jews." They come in various sizes and shapes - all of them caricatures with hooked noses and long beards - and apparently they're very popular because supposedly they bring good luck. What kind of luck? Many of the little Jews carried money bags while others held coins. Old stereotypes never die.

A few months before the event in Dabrowa, I received an official invitation from the town's mayor which indicated that the title of the program would

be *Reading Ashes*. That meant nothing to me but it sounded rather poetic, I so I “googled” those two words and learned that *Reading Ashes* referred to a collection by that name of 25 poems on Holocaust themes that were written shortly after the war’s end by Jerzy Ficowski who as a young man growing up in Warsaw during the war, was horrified by barbarism that he observed up close of Jews and gypsies. He felt powerless to do anything meaningful to help, but joined the partisan resistance movement and fought in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 (not the Ghetto uprising of 1943.) After the war Jerzy Ficowski found his poetic voice and some critics described his Holocaust poems as the most poignant ever written by a non-Jew.

One of Ficowski’s poems was about his wife “Bieta” who was eighteen years younger than him. She was born in the Warsaw ghetto in 1942 and when it was obvious that no one would survive, like many other Jewish women, her mother gave her daughter away to Irena Sendler (whom I mentioned in my Dabrowa speech *Four Women*.) The six months old baby was sedated and placed in a wooden box with air holes. An inscribed silver spoon placed inside gave the child’s name and birth date and the box was placed on a truck under a pile of bricks and driven out of the ghetto. Bieta was brought up by the same midwife who delivered her, along with many others in the ghetto. Her parents were killed and she never knew about her origin until she was 17 years old and decades later she cared for Irena Sendler who by then was in her nineties.

Bieta still was living in Warsaw and I arranged through intermediaries to meet her so that I could learn more about her husband’s poems - especially one that he’d dedicated to Marc Chagall. When we met in a cafe in Warsaw’s old Yiddish theater, her grandsons served as translators and

Bieta told me that when Jerzy Ficowski was awarded a poetry prize in 1999, he was described as having contributed his whole life and work to promoting tolerance and building bridges of closeness between people of different nationalities and religions. It's a pity that today this admirable humanitarian as well as Irena Sendler are not better known in the West, but it's gratifying that other righteous gentiles, including Dorata Budzinska of Dabrowa, are carrying on their good work.

18. FAMILY

As I explained in the Introduction, I've made a conscious effort to keep the focus of this book on me - at risk of being accused of being a narcissist - so as not to offend anyone by saying too little or too much or the wrong thing about them. Nevertheless, a little more should be added.

Phyllis was a loving partner and parent and during her last year of life demonstrated great courage. Although her life was cut short far too soon, at least she was able to speak at Rachel's Bat Mitzvah and even to cuddle baby Ava who was born just one week before the end. Illustrative of Phyllis' character was that the pleasure she derived from calligraphing more than twenty beautiful *ketubahs* (Jewish wedding contracts) was not related to their artistry as much as by engaging each young couple in the creative process she facilitated their first act of working together as a Jewish couple.

Phyllis guided our transition to a more religiously observant life style and one day a team of zealous Orthodox women arrived from Monsey armed with blow torches to *kasher* our kitchen. The house survived and soon we all came to treasure Shabbat dinners with fresh baked challah, good conversation and spirited singing. Among the best times were when each year I constructed our own cozy *succah* in the front yard and we entertained guests. The most memorable bad time was one Yom Kippur when we accidentally abandoned my nearly blind mother in the dark and rain on Temple Emanuel's mountain top as we raced off in two cars to "break fast" at Toni and Mike Brower's home. The mishap became family legend and on repetition every year afterward we would exaggerate the scene which seemed straight out of King Lear.

Of course we were enormously fortunate that our lives were free of financial stress, tragedy or extreme personal drama and as a result of this good fortune, Andrea, Danny and Teddy grew up in a stable environment. So did their spouses Alan, Lynn and Sharon who also were blessed with loving and supportive parents - respectively Phil and Doris Sherman, Bob and Marney Scheele and Abe and Roselle Morris. The eventual beneficiaries of all this were our grandchildren: Rachel and David Sherman, Talya, Leora and Sam Nevins and Julia and Ava Nevins.

Contributing to family bonding were annual winter vacations, at first on Palm Island on Florida's Gulf Coast and later at more exotic venues in the Caribbean and Arizona. A feature of these get-aways were the home movies that everyone participated in making. Although the scripts were corny and the acting terrible, we all delighted in watching them over and over.

My grandchildren used to keep count of whose photos appear most on my refrigerator door (perhaps they still do) but, I'm sure they know that I love them all equally. Admittedly, I don't always remember birthdays (that was Phyllis' job/joy) but I offer the following as proof that I have some awareness of dates:

Michael Nevins (5/2/36) m. Phyllis Brower (2/3/39 -10/19/05)
 Andrea Sherman (4/1/63) m. Alan Sherman (10/22/59)
 Rachel Sherman (12/2/92)
 David Sherman (6/21/96)
Daniel Nevins (3/16/66) m. Lynn Scheele (2/26/67)
 Talya Nevins (2/15/95)
 Leora Nevins (6/5/97)
 Sam Nevins (12/28/99)
Ted Nevins (11/24/68) m. Sharon Morris (9/15/69)
 Julia Nevins (3/16/03)
 Ava Nevins (10/10/05)

By now many beloved relatives and friends have passed away and I've lost touch with others; however, when I visit with Mike and Toni Brower, Debbie Nevins or members of the Chaki family, we take pleasure in recalling treasured memories.

If Phyllis had lived longer, she would have been proud of how Andrea, Danny and Teddy have succeeded in their professions and along with their spouses are devoted and effective parents. And she certainly would have enjoyed observing how our seven grandchildren, each in their own unique ways, are happy, healthy, talented and progressing toward being independent and responsible adults. For me, that's the great reward of reaching advanced age.

19. IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

Way back in the 1950s there was a popular television program called *Life Begins at Eighty*. Obviously that was a deliberate exaggeration, but I had no complaints about the decade leading up to 80. Perhaps 80 is the “new” 70. To be sure, after 44 wonderful years of marriage there was a painful transitional period after Phyllis died, but by the time that I entered my 70s I was blessed with good health and free of most responsibilities.

When I met “the real Linda” we settled into a mutually satisfying arrangement of independent living, maintaining separate households but talking every day, doing fun things on weekends and taking “honeymoons” about every three months - I stopped counting after the fortieth! We enjoyed going to movies and museums, spent summer weekends at music festivals and travelled extensively.

I enrolled in adult education courses, wrote and sometimes lectured about medical history, sang in a chorus and even hosted a weekly “salon” in my Piermont apartment where more than a dozen retirees would gather to discuss the current issue of *The New Yorker*. As a result of all this, I kept intellectually and socially active and added new friends to long-timers. Now the challenge is how to maintain my full life until the machine inevitably breaks down. Life may not *begin* at eighty, but so far it’s been a very good run.