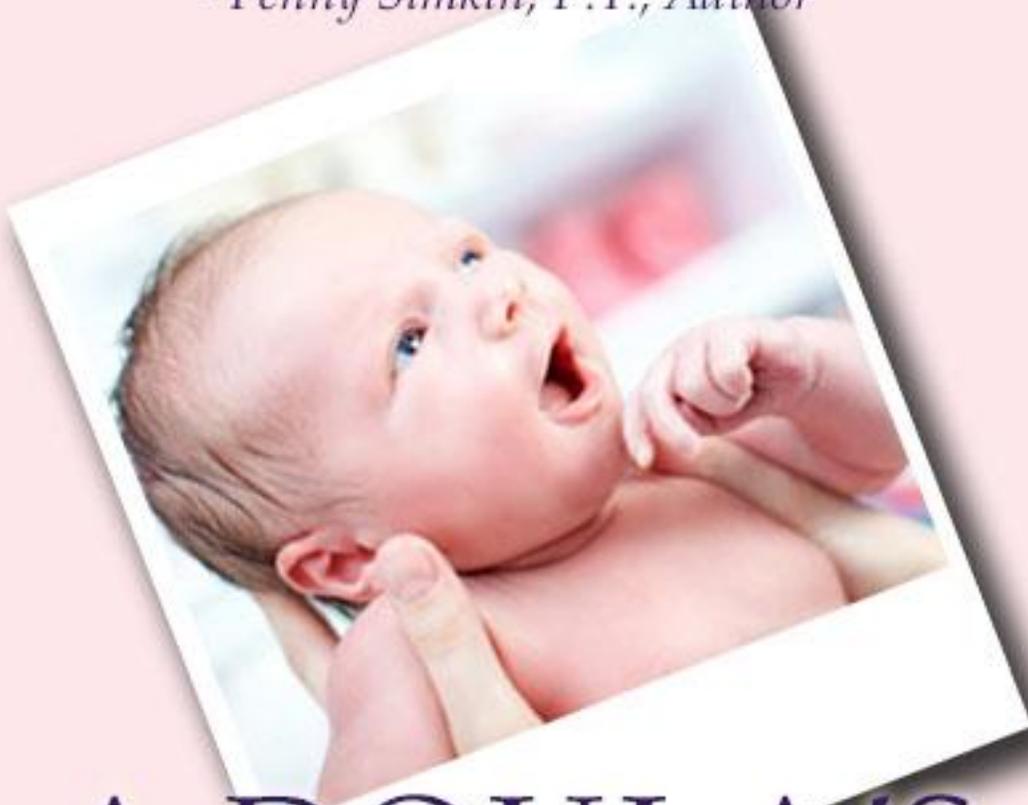


"An Inspiring & Gripping Story"
- Penny Simkin, P.T., Author



A DOULA'S JOURNEY:

Into the world of birth
SARAH GOLDSTEIN

Chapter 1: A Passion and a Profession

DRAGGING MYSELF UP the last of the four flights of dimly-lit stairs in an old, stone building, I reach a familiar door. A beautiful olive wood nameplate greets me when I finally reach my client's home: Cohen.

Though Simon Cohen's phone call awakened me from a much-needed sleep, the combination of adrenalin coursing through my body and the climb, have revived me. I am ready for action!

Knocking lightly on the door, Gail's six-foot tall husband cracks open the door and peers out at me with bloodshot, weary eyes. He looks weak and exhausted from another sleepless night.

"Thank you so much for coming," he whispers and welcomes me in.

"Where's Gail?" I quietly inquire.

"She's waiting for you," he answers, and points in the direction of the bedroom.

I know the layout of their small apartment. We have previously met for several pre-natal visits. An essential aspect of my job is to get to know the couple *before* the actual birth, so I can already be a familiar, comforting, informative and reassuring presence in their lives.

"How is she managing?" I continue, while we walk down the hallway together.

"We are getting tired," he says through a yawn. "Her contractions come and go and neither of us can sleep. Hope you had a nap after leaving us this afternoon. One of us needs to be rested."

When we reached the bedroom, I blanched at the stale air. I could barely breathe. "Hi Gail. I'm here. How are you feeling?"

She nods.

I ask her, "Can I please open a window?" She nods again.

A fresh, revitalizing breeze rushes in. I inhale deeply and feel ready for the task ahead.

I turn my attention to the woman before me. Her eyes are closed, and she doesn't answer me as she stands and sways dramatically in a hoola-hoop motion. Rays of moonlight beam through the open window, silhouetting her full round belly as she dances rhythmically through the intensity of the contraction. She doesn't seem to fully acknowledge that I've entered her inner sanctuary. I wait patiently for the contraction to end.

"I need a drink," she finally responds, opening her eyes and lumbering to the side of her bed, where she attempts to ease herself comfortably onto a mountain of colorful pillows.

The water that I pour into the glass is the only sound in the still night, reminding me that during our last prenatal intake session, Gail had specifically asked me to bring a waterfall relaxation tape.

"Simon, can you get the CD player for me?"

Before he can answer, another contraction begins and Gail immediately lifts her heavy body back up and begins her rhythmic swaying motion again.

"Sarah... my back... the pain is so strong down towards the middle....,"

"Do you think you can try getting onto your hands and knees so I can massage where it hurts?" I offer. Gail gratefully complies with my suggestion and clambers onto the bed.

Kicking off my shoes, I get onto the bed behind Gail so I can get better leverage. I begin to press on different points of her back, asking where and how much pressure feels good to her. "How is this? Is this the right spot?"

"That's great—don't stop!"

I continue pressing through two more contractions, six minutes apart.

"I brought some aromatherapy samples with me," I mention for a change of pace. "The

fragrances often facilitate a deeper relaxed state,” I continue. “Here, try this.” I sprinkle a few drops of sweet organic orange scent from a small blue bottle onto the back of my hand.

“Wow. That’s *gorgeous*,” Gail smiles.

I mix several drops into the almond oil, and continue massaging her back.

My arm muscles always get a strenuous workout during long births. I’m making up for not having played tennis or lifting weights. Despite the winter weather outside, the apartment is warm and I need to peel off layers of clothing; first my cardigan, and then my vest. A cool, cotton blouse is enough. The beads of sweat are pouring down Gail’s face.

“I am not sure I won’t want the drugs.”

“We said we will leave all options open. Right now you are doing amazing!”

I admire her for choosing this hard but rewarding approach. Witnessing the beauty of a woman whose body is surging with powerful hormonal energy gives me the momentum to continue. Each birth renews my respect, over and over, for the power of the birthing mother. It is sacred.

After three hours of position-changing, showering, applying back pressure and using relaxation imagery exercises between the now three-minute apart contractions, Gail wonders if they should go to the hospital. Though she preferred to have a midwife attend her at home, she is very conscious of the fact that Simon and her parents want her to give birth in the hospital. We had talked about this a lot during the two prenatal consultations. And now that we are in the actual moment itself, I see her wavering about what to do.

“My family is afraid of homebirth,” she reminds me. “Anyway, I never even met a midwife. Simon agreed that they can leave to the hospital “towards the end.” “Is that now?” They ask me.

“Do you feel fetal movements?”

“Yes.”

“Your water seems to still be intact.”

“Honey, we really should go,” pleads Simon, whose anxiety wears away any semblance of the calm demeanor he had maintained for so long.

“No, please, Simon, I need more time here,” Gail insists.

“Let’s go well before the rush hour traffic begins, so we don’t get stuck on our way there,” Simon continues.

By then, her contractions were two to three minutes apart and one minute long.

I decide to interject, “Gail, once we get there, we don’t have to go in immediately if you don’t want to. We can walk around outside, but at least we will be on the premises.”

Gail agrees to this idea and we prepare to go.

The taxi ride takes twenty minutes. Rocking back and forth in the back seat, Gail moans her way through the bumpy journey, riding the waves of the contractions which are coming strong and frequently.

When we arrive at the parking lot in front of the building, Simon jumps out and starts unloading the suitcase.

Entering the building, Simon exclaims, “We had better go right upstairs!”

“No, not yet,” Gail insists. “I need to find a bathroom first.”

Knowing the hospital like my own home, I escort Gail quickly to the nearest bathroom just in time for her to vomit.

“This is normal. You could be in transition,” I reassure her. “Do you want to stay here or go to the delivery room?” I ask.

“Soon, soon....Give me a couple of minutes. I don’t want to hear that I am not so dilated,”

Gail explains.

When we emerge from the bathroom, Simon pleads again that they check in. Pressured by his nervousness, Gail agrees.

As we enter the reception room, Gail is relieved to be welcomed by a smiling midwife. She is someone that I know!

Before she can lie down to be monitored, another contraction comes and Gail gyrates around the room.

“Please can you lie down now, so I can check you and the baby?” says the midwife.

“I can’t lie down, no way.”

Turning to the midwife, I ask, “Is there a possibility you can monitor her while she is standing?”

“Yes, that’s fine, but I can’t check her like that.”

I try to be a peace-maker/go-between for both — the staff and the birthing mom.

“Great heart tones,” announces the midwife, reassuring Simon. The fetal monitor is removed, and Gail returns to her rhythmic movements that have helped her cope so well—squatting and hoola-hooping round and round.

Suddenly, Gail releases an intense scream.

The midwife checks her, announcing, “Wow! Wonderful! You’re almost nine centimeters!”

“Just get the baby out!” she shouts.

We transfer into a private delivery room down the hall, Gail’s fingers bearing tightly into my arm as she grasps me for support throughout the next surges.

I sense she needs me to direct her through transition. “Get in the shower! The hot water will feel great!” I tell her, while turning on the shower spray.

Twenty minutes later the midwife enters the room and insists that Gail come out and get monitored again.

“You need an IV, too!” she says, complying with normal protocol.

“Why do I need an IV? I don’t want an IV. Am I dehydrated or something?”

“Okay, okay,” answers the midwife, trying to be accommodating. “I do need to take a blood sample, and we can put in what’s called a heparin lock— to keep the vein open.”

“Pressure! I am really feeling pressure!” Gail shouts. She hasn’t even gotten into a hospital gown yet.

Quickly drawing blood to send to the lab, the midwife then does an internal exam announcing, “You can push! I can see the head!”

Forty minutes of pushing and Gail delivers her 7 ½- pound, healthy, baby girl. We only arrived ninety minutes ago. With tears streaming down, Gail exclaims, “I’m a mom! I can’t believe it! I’m a mom!”

After an hour of helping Gail to nurse her baby, giving her a hot drink and taking pictures of the new family, I make my way home just before dawn.

I quietly unlock our front door and slip into bed to get some essential sleep. The slits that are supposed to be my eyes are barely open. Much too soon, the sunlight streams through the slats in the wooden shutters letting me know a new day is dawning. It’s 7:30 am. My children need to get on the school bus, something Moshe, my husband, normally takes care of on mornings like this. My arms, normally strong from kneading bread every week, are beyond sore. My leg muscles, still throbbing from squatting and supporting my client, slide off the bed, dragging all 5’2”, 140 pounds of me to go to the bathroom. It has been another very long night. There is only one way to return me to a semi-functioning human being. An arnica bath followed by a deep muscle

massage, were my only hopes for healing. Four more hours of sleep would be nice also. When will I quit this? Why do I go on?

I have returned from sweating through a marathon birth with a woman having her first baby. I was there for her, stroking her emotionally and physically for the endless hours of our time together. I am a *doula*. Some people are familiar with this term. Many have used our services. But there are still people who ask, “A doula? What’s that?”

It is a calling, much more than a profession. It is a passion that we embrace: to go beyond our own physical and emotional limits to help a woman’s transition into motherhood, encouraging her to access an inner strength that she does not even know she has. A doula is there to inspire. We cheer her on; “Just get through one more,” or “You can do it.”

I made a decision to help give women back the rite of passage. Now is the time to support women in making true choices based on knowledge from evidence-based medicine. Now is the time for me to help women have a positive, safe and rewarding birth experience.

Located in many countries around the world, this burgeoning profession was born from the birthing women’s demand to have support during the birth process and the willingness of concerned women to be that special support person. Today’s doula can be a woman with or without higher education. She can be of any age and background. She may have not even given birth herself. The main attributes she needs are a caring heart, a listening ear, strong hands, and a quick-thinking mind. She is a woman who has learned timeless comfort measures and techniques that have historically always benefited women.

The Bible describes the work of two Jewish midwives, Yoheved and Miriam, the mother and sister of Moses. They defied the ancient Pharaoh’s cruel decree to murder the Hebrew slaves’ baby boys. Courageously, they went about their individual tasks, Yoheved focusing on the actual delivery and Miriam comforting and cooing. Because of their pivotal roles, the Torah even assigns them second names: Shifra and Puah, emphasizing the importance of the work they were doing. Historically, birth was a woman-centered event, attended by capable, skilled, wise women. (The Talmudic word for midwife is *Hachama*-- *Wise Woman*). No woman was ever expected to birth alone, but rather with the supportive community of women to help her.

Throughout the ages, a woman gave birth in the comfort of her home, surrounded with familiar people. The midwife was a person the family knew well, her prenatal care provided in the privacy of the home. The other children participated in the welcoming of the new baby within their loving, secure environment, with no change after the happy event except for the inclusion of their new sibling. Relatives came to visit the family unit, helping with cooking, cleaning and sibling care. During their formative years, teenage girls bore witness to the miracle of birth; they knew it was a natural part of the rhythm and cycle of life. Mothers were not whisked away to a hospital for as long as fourteen days.

Siblings also understood without question that the normal, healthy way for a baby to receive nourishment was by breastfeeding.

Birth only entered the hospital setting in the early 1900’s as doctors took over the role of primary caregivers. Doctors were the ones trained in medical interventions and knowledge of use of the “tools” needed to help women birth. A massive campaign evolved of the false “dangers of home birth”, which helped convince women that hospitals were the ideal place to birth their babies.

Thus began the era when mothers were separated from their families, and mystery, secrecy and fearful trepidation of the unknown started to seep into the consciousness of young women. Now there was uncertainty in the picture: Where was mom? When will she return? If she is

going to the hospital, does that mean she is ill?

A woman became vulnerable to the unknown variables of the hospital setting. She would no longer be in control of her birth, but rather she would be told how to move, when to use the bathroom, not to eat, and when and in what position to lie. Even today, a century later, (especially in America), there is little certainty that a woman will get her doctor of choice. Most practices embody a group of doctors, who assign the on-call doctor to the laboring woman.

A bit of history: In 1944, Dr. Grantly Dick-Read wrote *Childbirth without Fear*, based on his observations of European birthing women. He noted that fear contributed to pain in childbirth, and the goal was to educate women as much as possible so that they would not have fear of birth as a cause of unnecessary pain. Nine years later, Dr. Fernand Lamaze contributed his theory of how to facilitate painless birth, followed soon by Dr. Robert Bradley, who wrote *Husband Coached Childbirth* about the importance of the father's presence and support during the birthing process.

In 1956, the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) was established in England and in the 1960's in America, childbirth preparation classes came into vogue, thus giving a couple more knowledge of their birth options. The hospital staff, however, was still in control; insurance companies needed validation of practice in case of lawsuits; and the woman was as vulnerable to being subjected to unnecessary, and even harmful, interventions as she had been. (For example, "Twilight Sleep," the drug scopolamin-morphin was brought from Europe when American feminists chanted, "If European women have a drug to ease birth pains, then we deserve it too!" It was popular for over forty years. It seemingly removed pain but actually brought an amnesic condition in the woman removing all memory of pain and the birth itself. It was later discovered to cause respiratory depression and affected the infant's central nervous system. This resulted in a drowsy newborn with poor breathing capacity. Women were unable to push so episiotomy and forceps extractions were needed.)

Needing support, reassurance and advocacy, women longed for a non-medical assistant, someone who was there solely for the birthing couple, guiding them through the process.

"My husband is my left hand, my doula is my right." — A woman quoted in *Doulas Making a Difference*, a film by Penny Simkin.

"My doula was my anchor in a tumultuous sea of sensations. She was to me what a lighthouse is to a ship; a gentle guide steering me past hazards and leading me to my destination." — *Special Women*, a film by Polly Perez.

These statements transform my profession into a passion. It is worth being on call 24/7, when one is enraptured by the mystery, as well as the desire to serve.

I partially credit my own mother for my desire to save and protect the vulnerable of society, in this case the birthing woman,

Chapter 2: Mom and Dad

MY MOTHER WAS a short, thick-waisted woman, born in the Bronx, New York in 1927. The daughter of immigrants from Poland, she was born eight years after the last of three girls, and suffered during the poverty-stricken era of the Depression years. She wore large glasses that hid the kindness in her brown eyes. She was very self-conscious of the wide gap between her two front teeth, though my sisters and I assured her that she looked wonderful the way she was. She was our mom!

She used to tell us, often, in a sad kind of way, that her parents had three girls all close

together in age, and then a long break of eight years before they discovered to their surprise that they were expecting a fourth child. They were very disappointed when she wasn't a boy. She seemed to have internalized their disappointment, which strongly undermined her sense of self-esteem. In an era when boys were considered the family bread winners of the future and girls superfluous, my mom grew up feeling like the fifth wheel.

Though her eldest sister went to art school, and her next two sisters attended college, my mom graduated high school at fifteen years old, finding a dead-end secretarial job. There was no potential for advancements or a lucrative career. She worked at this job for over seven years, before she met my father, a short, stocky man with a thick head of black hair, the son of Russian immigrants.

My father's own father had died when he was only eight years-old. His eighteen year-old brother, Sam, abandoned his widowed mother and little brother in hopes of finding fame and fortune playing the piano in any city but Brooklyn. His mother attempted to eke out a living, singing in local Brooklyn dinner clubs, while my father was left alone, wandering the streets, and often going to sleep in their empty, deserted apartment.

At the age of seventeen, he seized the opportunity to become an army "lifer", enlisting for a twenty-year service. This not only gave him the freedom of expense-paid travel and excitement, and an out from the poverty he grew up with, but a secure feeling of belonging, importance and self-worth. When we were children, he proudly showed us the photographs of his battalion that he kept in fancy leather albums.

When he was not abroad, but off-duty stationed at home, he enjoyed the USO (United Service Organization) social dances that were sponsored for soldiers. That's where he met my mom. He was a handsome, twenty-three year old young man in uniform, asking my mother, who was nearly twenty-five, for a date. After only three dates, he asked my mom to marry him.

Like most American families during the fifties, Dad was the traditional family bread winner, working as a soldier who rode on tanks, helicopters and had a variety of other duties which I was never clear about. Mom was the homemaker, working part-time in the morning, always there to greet us when we came home from school. When she did return to more full-time work, doing freelance market research jobs, it was after my younger sister Paula began elementary school.

Dad was an amazing story teller—creating a story around any character or object we randomly thought of. He asked us to mention a person or object and would weave a tale around them. "A lollipop" my younger sister said. "A dog!" said my older sister. "A little girl" I chimed up and voila- a story! When he wasn't home to entertain us at bedtime, Mom would sing us popular songs by Doris Day and Barbra Streisand.

The army stationed my dad in different cities around the country and around the world. My older sister, Alice, was born in 1953 in an army base hospital in Fort Benning, Georgia. My mom doesn't remember a lot about the birth, only that it was a forceps delivery.

I was born eighteen months later, when they were stationed in Wilmington, North Carolina. One year later, my youngest sister, Paula, was born before our family relocated to California for a six-months stay. We were all bottle fed. Milk was dried up. Doctor knew best.

After California, Dad was stationed back and forth between Germany and Philadelphia for the next nine years. When we finally returned to Philly, I was twelve years-old and anxious to settle in to a "permanent" home and make long-term friendships.

When we were teenagers, my mother encouraged us to get involved in social causes. She emphasized that we were to help change things for the better. On Earth Day, April 22, I can still vividly remember how she rallied us to do our civic duty at the Fairmount Park in downtown

Philly. She succeeded in communicating to us what a privilege it was to help out, improving the quality of life by picking up litter for six hours straight! So there I was with a smile on my face doing my good deed for the day!

During my high-school years, when children went to neighborhood schools, my high school decided to bus in Blacks from other neighborhoods, succumbing to the pressure to integrate. My parents believed that the unofficial segregation was unjust and fully supported school integration. "Everyone should be given the chance at quality education and quality medical care," they repeated over and over. As first-generation offspring of immigrant parents, they could easily identify with the struggling underdog of society. Without even realizing it, they had inherited the values and wisdom of the generations before, that pervading sense of justice passed down through the generations.

When I was in eleventh grade, my high school, Northeast High, adopted a "sister class" in a West Philadelphia high school whose students were Black and mostly poor. Once a week, we had a class exchange program and an end-of-the-year, three-day retreat. An excellent facilitator encouraged us to share our thoughts, feelings and information about our lives, in the hopes that better tolerance and understanding would be created which would promote interracial harmony, and ultimately, world peace.

My mother was a staunch supporter of these programs, fully optimistic that social justice would prevail. My mom, bless her, was the ultimate hero standing up for justice. When we were old enough, we gave blood to the Red Cross where my mom volunteered giving out orange juice and cookies.

During my last year in high school, I knew exactly which field I wanted to work in: social work. I wanted to help people through struggles. I wanted to be a female version of Martin Luther King. Whether it was wayward teens, abused children, or the poor of the city, I would be there.

My father was diagnosed with colon cancer during my first year of college, with his untimely death nine months later. Attending a community college for a second year, I applied and was accepted to the Bachelor's degree program of social work at Temple University in Philadelphia. The university was not too far from home - my mom still needed me around- but far enough for me to feel independent. I had left home for a short period of time after my dad died to escape from the house. I had been thrown into the intensity of a mother-daughter conflict after my dad's drawn-out, painful death had taken its toll. I wanted out. Staying with waitresses with whom I worked at a restaurant, I would talk to my mom infrequently. I didn't know then but I would hold this guilt with me my whole life.

The practicum in the social-work field made my studies more interesting; visiting families in need, apprenticing with a counselor as interactive groups tried to solve problematic situations, was immensely emotionally fulfilling. I was thrown into the intensity of teenage issues of conflicts with parents and parents in turmoil about how to handle the rebellious youth. This was the heart and soul of what social work was all about. These were core, real, raw human emotions. It was problem-solving. It was helping people to help themselves. Book knowledge was important but working with people was my thing. I loved it all.

When I graduated college in 1976, I found a job working for the Philadelphia Department of Social Services, an agency that helped families function in a normal framework. We were to assist them in organizing their home and getting their kids off to school happily in the morning; to prepare healthy, nutritious food; provide clean clothing and show them how to balance their budget to cover their needs. These were poverty-stricken families. The task was challenging.

The first family the agency assigned me was the Rodens. I arrived and knocked on the broken door of an inner-city housing project, naively bright-eyed and optimistic.

“Come on in,” said John. His black-toothed grin and his gravelly voice unnerved me, and yet I took my slow and tentative steps in.

I was immediately overwhelmed by the putrid stench that emanated from the living room. Despite the broken window which ostensibly gave 24-hour “ventilation”, the odor was still wretched.

“Um... where is your wife Nancy?” I heard myself asking.

“Oh... she’s at a neighbor. She’ll be back soon,” he said. “Why don’t you have a seat sweetie?” I looked at the food-stained, wooden chairs wondering which was worse, to insult him by not sitting down or to wipe the chair before sitting. Taking out a tissue to give a quick wipe, I sat down, thinking, *at least this skirt is machine washable.*

Two minutes later, Nancy walked through the squeaking kitchen door. At 4’10” and 160 pounds, Nancy’s weight was hanging in a large, bloated, sagging stomach. Trying not to stare, I wondered if she had a serious medical problem.

“Hi there! You must be that lady from the agency,” she greeted me in a friendly drawl.

“Yes, I’m Sarah. Maybe we can sit down for a while now and try to figure out where you would like to begin.”

John pulled out from his back pants pocket a non-filtered cigarette and lit it. As soon as it was done, he pulled out another one. I coughed a few times, trying to breathe.

Pulling out my paperwork, I decided the first thing I should do before discussing a plan of action, was to ask for a tour of their home. They both readily agreed.

“Well, here’s the living room. It’s done seen better days,” Nancy said with a sweeping gesture towards the torn couch, the fabric unraveled and the rusted, broken springs exposed.

“This is what happens when you got two bouncy boys!” Nancy grinned in the direction of her two sons, a three- and a four year-old who were playing outside in the barren yard.

I heard the muffled, menacing growl of a canine barking, and asked, “Is there a dog around here?”

“Yes, sure is,” John answered first. “We lock him up in the closet so he will get real mad. Then, if we go out or somethin’, we let him loose in the house so he will bark and run around. Then no one will come in to steal anything.”

I looked around the shambles of their home, honestly wondering what they had worth stealing, but I was trying to remain calm and non-judgmental. Inside, though, I was feeling anxious about being confronted by a wild, angry dog.

Then Nancy decided to take me upstairs. She showed me their sparse bedroom.

The old wooden beds were covered with torn, dark stained sheets. Again, I was hardly able to breathe; the sewage smell that permeated the air was horrendous. She preferred not to show me the locked boys’ bedroom. I agreed to forgo the experience, wary of what would be there. When we made it downstairs, the toilet-smelling house seemed more tolerable. I could begin breathing normally again.

The cries of a small baby became apparent to me as we entered the living room again. In the corner was a small once-white wicker crib. As I came closer, I saw the face of an eight-month old baby with the body of a three-month old. She was lying in a drenched diaper with flies whizzing around her.

“How old is she?” I asked. “Nine months old this week,” answered Nancy.

“Is she okay?”

“Yes. She’s a tiny one.” Then while her husband walked to the next room, she whispered, “He sells food stamps for cigarettes. There’s nothing I can do.”

Three children’s lives were at stake. I was determined to help.

Returning weekly, with gloves to help while we cleaned and cooked, Nancy and I began to bond. It was an impossible struggle to help them balance a below-minimal budget. Their situation broke my heart.

The boys’ bedroom had been a mystery for weeks and I was getting nervous and obsessed with the desire to go in. I wanted to attain the Roden’s confidence and trust before requesting the key.

Nancy finally handed me the key saying “Go ahead to the bedroom.”

Walking in, my body froze as I slowly backed away. The bare beds and wood floors had defecation and the stench to match.

Clothes were probably in the small closet, which I was too fearful to open. Locking the door within seconds, I managed to make my way downstairs.

“Why does the boys’ bedroom look like that?” I asked.

“Oh, well, we don’t want them to disturb us in the mornings, so we keep their door locked until we are ready to get up.”

I swallowed hard. With my eyes beginning to tear, I said I was leaving. I was tired and going home.

With mixed feelings, I reported the desperate situation to my boss. There had been little change in the cleanliness in the home, other than the days when I came. The food plan was not adhered to, the children ran wildly, unkempt and dressed in dirty clothing. They still fared poorly in school. Angry for the suffering of innocent children, I was enraged about the injustice. My boss had to turn the case over to the courts. They were out of our jurisdiction, beyond our ability to help. Immediate action needed to be taken to protect their children. This wasn’t the first time there was a report on the Roden family. That’s why we had entered their lives in the first place.

Two months later, I received a letter requesting my appearance in court, to report what I had objectively witnessed, to testify on behalf of the safety of the Roden children. The three children were placed in foster care. I prayed the family would get what they needed to be healthy and to heal.

In 1979, after only two years doing social work, I decided to pursue a master’s degree. If I was going to learn for another two years, I decided it must be in a sunny, warm climate. My options appeared to be San Diego and New Mexico. San Diego appealed to me more, somehow. It was near the ocean and had one month a year of rainfall. Winter rarely hit freezing temperatures. And no snow. Snow was fun for skiing or sledding but not for shoveling the mound next to the car when I had to get to work. San Diego boasted winter temperatures of seventy-two degrees. My decision was made. Shangri La here I come!

My mom was fully in favor of her daughters earning a higher education. Though California was over 3,000 miles away, six hours by plane, visits were do-able. It seemed like such a drastic move, to continue my education so far from the East Coast. I recall one particularly sentimental night, once the decision was already made. I sat on the bed in the room that I had shared for years with my older sister. I mentally sorted through what needed to be stored and what I would pack to take with me.

Early September, in 1979, when I packed my bags, I sensed that I was on the beginning of a journey.

Greyhound had a three day, cross-country \$100 special. What a bargain! The rest of my savings I could use for food, rent and a trip back home sometime in the future.

Unable to eat breakfast, I packed some peanut butter and whole wheat sandwiches for the long trip. I brought dried fruit and nuts, a couple of bottles of water and frozen orange juice. We packed ourselves - my mom and my sister Paula (Alice was at work) into the taxi, with my two suitcases and backpack. We arrived at the Greyhound bus station fifteen minutes before departure, which minimized the long goodbyes that I hated. With trepidation and some inner guilt, I kissed my mom's cheek. "Wish me luck!" I said after hugging each of them. I boarded the bus for my seventy-two hour trip.

Could I really be leaving? I was just as stunned as they were. Wasn't I the daughter most attached to her mommy's apron strings? Wasn't I the one in the kitchen with her, helping prepare the holiday meals or looking for clothing sales, our favorite pastime? My mom's apron strings were loosening.

I looked through the bus window at my sister and mom standing on the platform. I smiled through the tears that welled up in my eyes, turning away as they began to flow. Nervous of the unknown, I focused on what I knew for sure: I had the youth hostel booked for the first week. After that, I had no clue where I would live, work, or who my new circle of friends would be.

When I reached my destination, I spent a week searching through the newspapers, looking for a place to stay. Before the first seven days of rent at the youth hostel were over, I noticed a small ad: a couple looking for a boarder for their three-bedroom, two-story home. I arrived the next day to meet my potential landlords. The home was in need of new side-boards and some internal repairs, but my room was clean with a nice multi-flowered bedspread. I was *crazy* about flowers. The salt-of-the-earth, middle aged couple seemed to be honest and hard-working. "No late night parties?" I joked after finding out about their structured days. "No, not us," they answered. It was close enough to the university, so I signed the lease, while we sipped mint tea together at the dining room table.

I soon found a market research job. It was more like soliciting, which I hated. I felt that I was bothering people trying to sell them something they probably didn't want, but it was a full-time job that paid the bills, and I needed to hang in there, until my studies began.

That spring, I took the required GRE (Graduate Record Exams) that I needed to pass in order to qualify to enter the university the upcoming fall semester. One month later, I was informed that the test results of the entire group of students were lost. As a result of this ridiculous development, there was no way we could begin the program that fall semester—we would have to wait an *entire year!!* I was engulfed with anger and disappointment. A quick appraisal of my life situation: I had no social life, a job I hated, and no money to visit my family and friends in Philadelphia.

Another full year? I couldn't. Holding the letter that bore the bad tidings, I collapsed onto my bed thinking, "*There has got to be a reason for this crazy thing to happen! And I better see it soon. What am I going to do all next year? Where will I work? I can't stay at this job!*"

Exhausted, but nevertheless trying to think of a solution to this situation, I fell into a deep sleep around 1:30 am. I didn't even call my family or friends to tell them the news that Princeton, the place where the exams were sent for grading, just added another year to my uncertain future.

When I awoke the next morning, I was able to muster up the courage to check the want ads, just to see what was there. More openings for secretaries, (not interested), more phone soliciting (please, no), and a spot at a restaurant as a waitress. That was a possibility. I didn't want a

sedentary job anyway.

Then, a couple of days later, about seven months after arriving in San Diego, I saw an ad which was exactly what I was looking for. The position was for a social worker position at a Mexican-American youth center. I would be the assistant to the director. The drop-in center, which contained a pool table, ping-pong table and a couple of soda machines provided counseling, job-search help and channeled the youth into programs designed to help them finish their high school diplomas.

I was hired two days after the interview. I relaxed on the beach before starting to work the following Monday morning.

The center was an over-sized ranch house on a hill top that attracted youth from various neighborhoods. This made for some friction. The gangs which formed among them sometimes had shouting matches. On weekends, when there was drinking, the end result was sometimes a swollen eye or puffy cheek, evident on the faces the kid's faces when they arrived Monday afternoon.

West Side Story came to life when I decided to bring the neighborhood gangs together on a project. Raising \$1,000 from the local bank, I approached the less-than-proactive Mexican director about my idea of "the mural." He, himself, had been a graduate of the center so his main focus was schmoozing with the boys to keep them off the streets. He had no educational experience, so he left much of the directing to me.

I got busy contacting local papers for publicity for the center, rounding up a group of eight budding artists from four different neighborhoods. After three months, their center boasted a multi-colored mural of teens in Mexican cultural settings. The youth were so proud of themselves and especially of the group picture in the local paper.

In 1978, "Proposition 13" had been enacted. It was an initiative that added to the California constitution limiting property tax rates. This caused a shift in support for schools from local property taxes to state general funds. Unless I resided in California for at least a year, I would have to pay high tuition fees for attending the State university which had been, until now, free for California residents.

After less than a year of working there, I had been promoted to official director. Now I had even less time for a social life. My life was the teen center. I wanted to start meeting people with whom I could develop friendships. I put my master's degree on the back burner. I had a job I was crazy about and wasn't interested in advancing my professional status.

A Mexican Jewish colleague at a liaison agency suggested I go to a local center for Jewish activities called *Chabad*. That was where he had met his fiancé. They are a world-wide group that helps Jews reconnect with their roots.

I immediately began to have a wonderful time meeting nice singles and warm families. After a few months, I decided to attend the local center's Torah (Bible) classes, and learn more about my heritage. There was hamantashen baking for Purim, those cute triangle cookies filled with jam or poppy seeds. They hosted authentic Pesach seders for people to experience, supplied with huge round, handmade matzos, the likes of which I had never seen in my life. There were weekly Sabbath celebrations with beautiful festive meals, accompanied by the traditional wine and braided challahs. Not only was I intellectually stimulated, my heart was stirred. Over the following months, I slowly decided to stop working on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, a day when observant Jews do not work. Ultimately, this meant quitting my job on the teen center's busiest day. In the meantime, I took a temporary leave of absence. While attending the local Chabad house, I had heard about Manis Friedman's Women's Study Center in Minnesota and decided to

sign up for the December session. It was a one-month intensive study program. Two months later I was airborne.

We were about thirty students, mostly college-educated women in their twenties from similar secular backgrounds. The classes covered meaningful topics, i.e., modesty in relationships, the beauty of the Sabbath, and laws between man and man. The information taught by dynamic teachers was both fascinating and inspiring. I was excited by being immersed for the first time in living a Torah lifestyle. I had been raised in a totally secular way, and now it suddenly dawned on me at age twenty-four, that I had a lot of catching up to do. Infused with a deeper appreciation of the relevance of Judaism to a modern life, I seriously considered moving to a larger, more cohesive Jewish community.

Upon returning to San Diego, I took what could be called “a leap of faith”. With jittery nerves and a few prayers, I resigned from my position, sold my car and moved to Brooklyn, New York. I had been living every East-Coaster’s dream in sunny California, with friends and family often saying, “How lucky you are!” or, “It’s so beautiful there!” I knew I needed something more. People began to make comments. “Are you sure a cult didn’t get you?”

My mother had been so proud of my decision to get my master’s, and now I had to tell her these plans were on hold. I thought she would die from embarrassment. Here I was, returning to Brooklyn—the place my parents had escaped. *Plus* – I wanted to study Torah!

Just as I suspected, Mom didn’t tell her friends for some time. She was very disappointed, yet we tried to maintain our relationship. There was an obvious strain because I had begun to keep kosher, so she couldn’t cook for me anymore, and I wouldn’t eat in just any restaurants. The Sabbath was now a holy day for me-- not a day to shop. And I was also very excited about my “new-found” religion. I wanted to talk about it a lot and I was hoping she would show some interest in the heritage that was both of ours. I wanted my family to understand me, but my enthusiasm was often expressed in the form of unintentional lectures, which turned them off. Mom couldn’t believe that I wanted to learn and do any of this, as she had abandoned the little she knew about the Jewish way of life before she married my father.

To help make my visits more comfortable, I purchased some separate pots and pans to keep in a cupboard near her stove.

The movies and theater performances we used to share were now of little interest to me as I was trying to focus on learning about my new Jewish lifestyle. I preferred to use any spare time I had to read books on Judaism. That was of utmost importance to me now that I had adopted the traditional ways of my ancestors. Keeping the Sabbath meant so much but, now when I visited my mom, I would read alone after our Friday night dinner together while she closed the door of her bedroom to watch TV.

We continued to take walks on Saturday and play Scrabble, her favorite game. I tried to do whatever I could to find some common denominator to keep our relationship positive.

“I want to watch my TV shows on Saturday not attend services,” she declared.

“But Mom, it is such a special day for family; no weekday chores, and the best meals of the week,” I pleaded.

“I know all about it. I had enough of this when I was growing up and I am not interested.”

As a result of these painful new challenges to our relationship, my visits to Philadelphia were very few. We maintained weekly phone calls, where we tried to steer clear of “sensitive” topics and stick with general subjects.

Chain Snatching in Brooklyn

Excitement, passion and a sense of justice followed me to Brooklyn. In my mid-twenties, this was just another adventure to right a wrong and to save the world.

After making a decision to find my way back to my heritage, I found myself studying Torah in Crown Heights, New York, home to the Chabad Chassidim. After a brief stay of five months—before moving to Israel—I found myself involved in two robberies.

The first one happened when I went to a gym downtown. I got a cheap deal from a friend who had to give up her gym membership. The private lockers at the gym added another cost to my tight budget. Before leaving for the subway, I took some jewelry with me, and I left some at home, in an area I knew had robberies, even in the daytime. I had been renting a basement apartment with two other girls but no one was around in the day. Two of us were studying, the third working. The landlords, who lived upstairs, were mostly out during the day.

The rings, bracelet, and Krugerrand (a gold coin people bought at the time for an investment), I scattered around in different hiding places. I kept some in my jewelry box and a couple of other pieces in different socks. Returning after gym, I walked into a mess. The apartment had been turned upside down with clothes strewn on the floor, dresser drawers left opened and my new purple Fieldcrest washcloths blocking the toilet. It was an invasive robbery by not just ordinary thieves. My stomach churned as my eyes jumped around the tornadoed apartment.

My roommates' cameras were gone as well as jewelry from all of us, although some of my hidden items were saved. We called the police who came to file the report and assess the damage. "We can't do much lady, but here is a copy of the report if you need it for insurance purposes. If we ever find the cache, you may get your stuff back." Insurance, I thought? That's a joke.

As the days passed, I was filled with rage and humiliation. There were so many robberies and so many chain snatchings and the police were powerless to stop it. It was no wonder that when my friend, Michal, who was visiting me from nursing school in Miami, was robbed, I decided to take action. Wrongs had to be righted. That was my upbringing.

On our way to a lecture on a Sunday morning in May, we were strolling down Eastern Parkway towards the community center. Chatting as we went, I suddenly heard a low, ascending scream from Michal as a guy came at her throat to snatch her gold necklace, which proudly bore her initial, "M". Taking off down Eastern Parkway, he ran towards Bedford-Stuyvesant, an area that a white girl just doesn't stroll through, even in the daytime. The relations between the Crown Heights' Jews and the Blacks in the surrounding areas had been very strained, but I wasn't exactly functioning rationally. My own personal feeling of violation was fresh in my mind. With my heart racing and adrenalin pumping, I ran after him shouting, "Call the police! I am going after him!" During the days before cell phones, my dad, may he rest in peace, always taught us to take a dime wherever we went. "You never know when you will need to make a phone call." Not having had a dime that morning, I left the apartment with a quarter.

Ducking behind cars and trees past row houses, which left me little place to run away if needed, I followed our robber until he arrived at a corner store, which boasted a sign, "We buy gold and silver." Diagonally across the street was a middle-aged Black woman talking on the only public telephone in sight. I was totally exposed in this neighbored with nowhere to hide anymore. If the robber would come out of the store, he would see me immediately as the telephone hung from a pole with no booth around it.

"Please!" I pleaded. "I must make an emergency call. I will give you a quarter if I can use this phone."

“No problem. I’ll hang up. Keep your quarter.”

“Bless you,” was all I could think to say.

911. The familiar number took five rings to answer. I was sweating from the run or the panic, they finally answered.

“I followed the chain snatcher!” (There had been a rash of these thefts for months causing girls and women to stop wearing necklaces or to walk in fear when they decided to wear a necklace for an occasion.)

“Please come. He is on this and this street corner.”

Calmly, the lady on the other line asked, “What is your name?”

“Sarah, S-A-R-A-H!” Continuing with my maiden name and answering her where the chain snatching occurred, I said emphatically, “If he comes out of the store, he will see me.”

“Hold the line,” she answered.

Hold the line? Hold the line? Is she kidding?

“Did you just call from Eastern Parkway?” she asked.

“That was my friend whose necklace he stole. Can someone come already?”

The next two minutes seemed like hours when, suddenly, racing from three directions, were three squad cars with two policemen in each. Signaling to them towards the direction of the store, they motioned to me to come with them, I assumed to identify the thief. Oi vey. Crossing the street, we entered the store as I identified the only person selling gold that morning. He was handcuffed and taken away. After I gave a second policeman my details for the upcoming court case we would have to attend, I was almost ready to leave the store. I turned to the women sitting behind the glass windows, saying “This is how you have to make a living, from other people’s stolen jewelry?” She stared at me like I was crazy.

The police drove me back to Michal who was anxiously awaiting my return.

“Are you alright? I was so worried.”

Hugging each other tightly, I said, “Thanks for calling the police. You will get your necklace back at the court case.”

Explaining to her what happened she said, “The necklace wasn’t worth your life.” Still shaking, we walked towards the community center for a day of lectures on how we could serve G-d with our days on this earth.

I wanted to study longer but not in Brooklyn. I needed a change. Two robberies in five months were enough, especially after the court case when the police told me the robberies triple in the summer.

So, in 1981, I visited my mom for another farewell. I decided I was moving to Israel. My new lifestyle was hard enough for her, but the move to Israel threw her completely. I built up the idea of studying abroad gradually, but I actually broke the news one week before I left. Saying good-bye in person was important. I needed to show her I was sad about leaving as well as nervous.

I traveled to Philadelphia before continuing to Kennedy airport.

“Mom, I found this lovely place where some women go to study.” I was too scared to tell her I was going but now was the moment of truth. “It’s in Israel.”

“What should I say?” Mom asked. The conversation, if you could call it that, was brief. That’s all I remember.

I packed more of my “history” that I had left stored in Philadelphia, and boarded a plane for Israel one week later. My gut feeling was that I was not coming back. I told my older sister, Alice, but not my mom. This was 6,000 miles, not 3,000 miles away. That would have been too

painful. Coupled with separating from family once again was the excitement of traveling to a country I had never even visited. A new chapter in my life was about to begin. I was twenty-six years old.

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