

Barbara Zilberberg

I was born in 1943 in Nairobi, Kenya. My parents were in East Africa living in a DP Camp, a displaced persons camp. They were living as refugees from World War II. When I was very little I had a ruptured appendix. I recovered only because of a drug that was just invented, penicillin.

While we were living in Africa during my early childhood, my parents were trying to communicate with family in the United States. My father was eventually able to locate his uncle, Jacob Wexler. Thanks to Jacob Wexler, and his son, Dr. David Wexler, who sponsored my family and vouched for them, we were able to come to the United States. There was a Jewish quota then, limiting the number of Jews that could immigrate into the country.

In 1950, I came to America with my parents. I was seven years old. My parents were overjoyed. At that time I spoke with a British accent, and had attended English schools back in Africa. I was placed a year ahead in school, into 3rd grade.

It was sometimes difficult for me as a child to fit in to a new country and community. I went to Public School #53, then Public School #121 in Richmond Hill, Queens, where I lived. I went to Hebrew School for four years. It was an Orthodox synagogue. I really liked it there. There was only one Hebrew School teacher who taught all four of the grades. In those days, and at that synagogue, girls did not have a bat mitzvah.

There were a few Jewish families where I lived in Richmond Hill. Some relatives lived nearby. I called them "aunts" and "uncles" although they were actually more distant relatives, maybe third or fourth cousins. My family raised me Jewish. My mother kept a kosher home. As a youngster growing up, I did not feel strange being Jewish. My mother discouraged me from having friends who were not Jewish, both boys and girls. After high school, I went to Brooklyn College. Then I went to the New School for my Master's. I married, gave birth to a child, and then moved to New Jersey straight out of the hospital after giving birth.