



**Claire Zuckerman**

I grew up basically in Greenwich Village during the 30's, which was a much more sophisticated community, much more open and free -- artists lived there. My mother had wanted to be an artist. She left my father in 1933, and we moved to Greenwich Village. I was eight and my sister five. She was a single parent and worked as a cracker-jack secretary to support us. At night she studied at the Art Students League. Families didn't separate that easily then, particularly if a woman decided to be independent. My father didn't take it very well.

My mother became a mural artist on the WPA Art Project. She was a buxom, little, friendly lady with a flowered hat. There is a circus mural she painted in the Children's Hospital that is very charming.



We were living in Greenwich Village and discovered that there was a settlement house -- Greenwich House, it's still in existence. Teaching in schools was another way that starving artists were being supported by the WPA -- they were given money, just enough money to keep them from starving to death.

Our art teacher was one of the abstract expressionists, Ben-Zion. He was a delightful man who treated us like fellow artists. We had dance class with a 6-foot tall Danish woman. I believe she studied with Isadora Duncan because of the style of dance that we did, the floaty things that we wore and the sandals on our feet. And there were plays, always, there were plays! The arts and the library...these were my haven, my lifelines.



Our father took us out every Sunday. I was the go-between for my warring parents. When I was older, after my father had died and during my senior year at Michigan, I was working and paying my own way, my mother took off for Mexico on a "visit" that lasted for many months, leaving my sister, only 15 at the time, with the parents of a school friend. My mother never assumed responsibility for my sister after her return from Mexico. She became a traveling artist, living in different parts of the country, for the rest of her life. I became both mother and father to Fran. I wrote a book called *Sunday Hostages*, a novel based rather loosely on the things that happened to us growing up.



One of my first jobs out of college was with a Chicago catalog house, Butler Brothers. I was writing great copy, for all those little pictures, you know, "genuine plastic handbag!" I realized that if they had known I was Jewish, I wouldn't have gotten the job, and I needed the job.

Our company worked closely with the garment district since many of the items that were sold in our catalogue were made there. I had just visited one of these garment companies with this guy Larry, who was a big handsome guy that all the girls in the office liked. This was just after World War II had ended and I was riding in the elevator with Larry and there were these two Jewish men talking with their hands, you know, as they do, and Larry said, resolutely, "Hitler should have finished the job."

I said to myself, I can't let this go by, even if it costs me my job. I said, "You know you are talking about me." He was embarrassed and angry I think ...you know, how did she get in here... and he stuttered, "Well, of course I didn't mean *you*..."

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At Abraham Lincoln High School in Brighton Beach, I met my husband Irv in a school play. We both loved acting and became friends.

On the day of Pearl Harbor, I had come back to the high school to watch the dress rehearsal of the play that Irv was performing and suddenly someone came running in and said, "The Japanese just bombed Pearl Harbor!" The kids were jumping up and down and not showing how frightened they were. And...I think of some of those kids....who.... were gone at the end of that war.

The next morning I was at Brooklyn College...gathered in the open area between the two main buildings...listening to Roosevelt's speech announcing that we were at war with Japan. It was a very solemn experience. My father suffered a massive stroke that week of Pearl Harbor...he died a year and a half later.



I graduated high school at age 16. I had received a full scholarship to Cornell but had to turn it down because freshmen were not allowed to work, and I couldn't get up the small amount of money that I needed to be independent. So I stayed local and went to Brooklyn College instead.

I was at Brooklyn College, and I decided that I really wanted to go out of town to school. We were in the Village at the time---there was a war plant that was making gyroscopes, and I became a payroll clerk there. I earned enough money to pay my tuition at the University of Michigan -- get this, \$100 a semester!

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I realized that the most important thing that Jeffrey Sirkman ever said to me came when I had spoken to him about the difficult relationship that I had had with my father. Jeffrey said to me, "You may not be able to change the injustices of the world, but you can't let them change you."

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**Claire Zuckerman** says that Larchmont Temple is not just her religious community; it is her support network and her extended family.