

Chapter 10. My Mother the Immigrant

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Gifts from my Alien Grandmothers

Adriana Díaz

At the age of fifty-four I won a statewide Argentine Tango Contest and claimed the prize of a round trip to Buenos Aires. It wasn't the greatest accomplishment of my adult life, but probably the most surprising. It might be easy to take my independent life for granted if I hadn't had two brave grandmothers whose chutzpah in early life far exceeded mine. At age sixty I'm more independent than they were, but their lives have always epitomized real courage.

As very young women Paula and Josefa left their home in Spain to work in a distant, unpronounceable country. Josefa carried her first child, my dad. Paula had two-year old, Joaquina. Each had a husband. Paula traveled with a family tribe.

They got on an ocean liner, not in a stateroom, as I might enjoy; they were a cargo of workers who'd contracted themselves into a servitude called "bondage." Josefa, being from the mountains, had no idea that she would be seasick (in addition to morning sickness), and Paula had no idea that she'd bury Joaquina at sea. They crossed the Atlantic to Brazil. At that first stop some family members refused to go further and remained in Brazil, never to be seen again. Others stayed in Argentina. My grandparents held fast to their contracts and sailed through the Straits of Magellan, then crossed the Pacific to Hawaii.

In Hawaii, the men and women were separated, stripped of their clothing, and showered en masse in separate areas. It was 1913. The humiliation must have been more painful than the ocean crossing.

Workers lived in plantation huts and worked the sugar cane fields for the duration of years in their contracts. My mother was born on the plantation, my father in a Honolulu hospital My grandfather had worked off his contract and was working in a hotel.

I wonder if I could have taken on such a challenge. My grandmothers performed all the traditional demands of their womanhood along with working in the fields. Eventually, they

crossed the Pacific to California, a land that at least marked streets and cities with names they could pronounce. San Jose! San Francisco! San Leandro! Los Angeles!

Even in California they didn't live luxurious lives. Paula bore nine more children. One died very young, and another contracted Infantile Paralysis, needing constant care the rest of her life. Yet *Abuelita* (grandmother) maintained the household and worked a little farm while my grandfather worked as a nurseryman. She raised and butchered chickens and rabbits, made cheese from the goat's milk, planted and harvested fruits and vegetables. She did the laundry, and cooked the meals. Of course, the kids helped, but if I think of doing one-third of her work, I have to sit down from fatigue. She never had fun. She didn't go shopping or out to lunch. By sixty-four, agricultural pesticides had caused liver cirrhosis, and she died, worried about who would care for her youngest daughter.

My paternal grandmother, Josefa, had only four children. Gratefully all lived into adulthood. She worked in their little grocery and butcher market until she mysteriously went deaf in midlife. Mama (as we lovingly called her) was our queen matriarch. She lived to ninety-eight, cared for by her children and cooked up a storm for as long as she could.

You see, my grandmothers set the bar pretty high in terms of courage, energy, and commitment. My mother lived the "normal" prescribed life of an American housewife, and while it seemed boring, in many ways her domestic identity served to identify us as Americans. We've always been proud of our Spanish heritage, but we had to fit in as Americans. Names, for example, had to be changed: Antonia became Antenette. Josefina became Josie. Jerónimo became Harold, etcetera (I reclaimed mine at 23). We spoke English in our house, ate Campbell's soup, and meat loaf. My *abuelas* only spoke Spanish. Ever.

Now over sixty, I'm a multi-lingual college graduate, exhibiting painter, teacher, life coach, and published author. I've returned numerous times to Spain and Argentina to reconnect with our points of origin. My accomplishments are beyond what was available to my family's social class in my grandmothers' days. I was able to divorce a man (okay, two men), to enjoy an active, independent life. I live alone, away from family. I've charted different seas than my grandmothers, but I can't take all the credit for where I am; I think my grandmothers did all the hard work.

A Bay Area native, Adriana Díaz, MA, CPC is a Certified Life Coach, the author of Freeing the Creative Spirit, and an as yet unpublished novel, Persephone's Tango. She is an exhibiting painter, and freelance creativity and writing teacher. Aside from the joy of her work, she is a movie buff and loves many forms of dance. See her websites: www.yourcreativelifecoach.com and www.adrianadiaz.com.



Josefa (1981)



Paula and Adriana (1953)



Adriana (2013)

[Photos by permission]

A Life My Mother Couldn't Have

Susi Manners

I am in my mid-fifties, the best stage of my life, thanks to my mother who passed away in 2010.

My mother was separated from her family during World War II and hidden from the Nazis in a convent where her name was changed. She never had a normal home life or education; she could never envision a future for herself nor understand her own power but she helped me find mine.

After the war, my mother and her family left Europe for New York City. My grandmother worked as a seamstress and operated other small businesses, including a chicken farm in New Jersey, to take care of her family.

My father, also a French-speaking Jewish survivor of the war, became a commercial artist. We enjoyed a very comfortable suburban life. My mother was determined her children should have everything she missed. She pushed me to take every class and have every adventure and experience possible, but neither parent emphasized a formal education.

I never followed a real path nor had a specific goal other than having children, yet I always pushed myself and have done quite well. Like my father, I started photographing and drawing early. I attended a couple art colleges but left early, anxious to attack the "working world." I became a very young art director in New York City, hiring photographers and models and directing shoots. I transitioned into producing TV commercials. For eight enjoyable years, I ran production sets and large film crews, worked with major ad agencies putting creative concepts onto film, and met impressive creative and technical people and many celebrities.

At twenty-four I married a French man, which seemed natural since my family was French and knew his family. We had a big wedding but divorced four years later when I became frustrated that my new husband was nowhere near as ambitious as I. He was happy with a small life; I was not. I met a very charismatic man on the set of a commercial, got pregnant a short time later, and, for twelve years, stayed home and raised my two children. We moved to Malibu, CA where family life began to unravel.

Our marriage ended abruptly and I went back to work, getting progressively better jobs and earning more money, not easy in Malibu, a small town. I focused on raising my children, whose father had absented himself. We found a very strong network of friends, solid ties I will keep for life. We began to have a rich life, with very little money.

By age fifty I was able to focus more on photography and bought a better camera. My photos brought some acclaim; many have appeared in local publications.

Currently, I am executive director for the local chapter of a large professional association, supporting the board of directors, assisting our membership, managing events, traveling around the country and working on legislative issues. My job offers many opportunities for growth and allows me to live, work, and contribute to my community. I volunteer for local non-profits doing artwork, taking photos, or writing press releases and have introduced one of my passions, chalk art, to the Malibu Arts Festival.

Seeking a new adventure, I started to "SUP" (stand up paddle board) at age fifty-three, and it quickly became a passion. I became much more athletic and adventurous. I bought two boards and introduce friends to this wonderful sport. Since I still identify as a New Yorker, I am often amazed to find myself on the water in places like Newport Beach or Santa Barbara.

My children are now adults and successful in their own right. I'm proud they have a strong, smart, talented and resourceful mother, but the credit goes to my mother who pushed me to be who she could not be. My parents were the rock that allowed me to experiment and be bold, take on new challenges, and thrive.

In memory of my mother Esther.

Susi Manners was raised on Long Island. Currently, besides SUPING, she practices yoga, hikes, and power walks. She also joined a gym for aerobics despite her occasional tendency to have two left feet. In 2014, Susi had a photographic breakthrough when she held her first photo exhibit and sale at the Malibu Chamber of Commerce. Her grandmother recorded her story as a Holocaust survivor for Steven Spielberg's Shoah Project; the tapes are in the archives.



Susi, her mother Esther and
Susi's older sister, 1960



Susi Manners, 2015 [Photos by
permission]

Dear Mom: I Finally Got It!

Barbara F. Artson, Ph.D.

At the age of forty-five, I received my doctorate. At sixty-five, I bought a pair of tap shoes and started to dance. At seventy-three, I began my first and only novel. At seventy-five, I started to study piano. At seventy-eight, I traveled to China to teach and interview Chinese students interested in practicing psychoanalysis. A year later, at seventy-nine, I embarked on a vigorous voyage to the Galapagos, hiking poles in tow. And, if all goes well, sometime next year, if my knee holds out, I will be riding in an open safari jeep on the African savannah, binoculars in hand, communing with lions and rhinos and crocs and gazelles in Botswana or Tanzania, or perhaps Kenya. All this as the child of an immigrant mother who arrived at Ellis Island via Odessa at ten, perhaps eleven, and never progressed beyond the sixth grade, and an American-born truck-driving father without a high school diploma.

“How did I get here?” I’ve asked myself innumerable times. As a mediocre high school student, I began my undergraduate education at thirty-three, the mother of two young children, soon-to-be divorced, and lacking confidence in my academic ability. I moved from majoring in psychology – hated the study of rats in a maze – to a love affair with English Literature and was well on my way to a doctorate when my marriage collapsed. The shortage of teaching posts in English departments influenced my transfer back to the study of clinical psychology, and then to further training in psychoanalysis.

I often smugly contrasted my accomplishments to that of my mother's and easily came out the winner. She was a homemaker who claimed, "The best years of my life was when my children were little." I am a psychoanalyst still enthusiastically involved in my professional life and looking to a future filled with friends, physical challenges and intellectual quest. She was a woman whose illegible handwriting brought shame to my very young eyes. I have a graduate degree in both English Literature and Psychology. She didn't know the difference between north, south, east, or west or between a painting and a photograph. I am a lover of travel and of exposing myself to new adventures. She refused to get on a plane and was fearful of any novel experience.

It took the researching and writing (still) of a three generational novel (as yet, unpublished) that opens with my maternal grandmother and follows the family's journey from Odessa to New York and then to California – not my five-year training-analysis – to open my eyes to the hardship and ultimate triumph of my mother's life and achievement.

She arrived at Ellis Island when she was ten or eleven, moved into a tenement three-room apartment in Coney Island with her parents and three of her siblings, and entered the first grade knowing only Yiddish - and perhaps a smidgeon of Russian since Jews were not allowed to speak Russian in the Old Country. She learned English as she was hastily skipped to second, third and eventually the sixth grade. And that ended her academic career. At fifteen or sixteen she began working in a factory sewing elastic to bloomer waistbands until, at twenty-four, she met and married my father. She was then moved, kicking and screaming, by her new husband, to an unfriendly, anti-Semitic working-class suburb in New Jersey and was obliged, once more, to learn an alien culture's way of life. She, the only Jew, took on their way of dress, of cooking, of speaking (without an accent), and although insecure in many facets of her life, she stubbornly held onto the observance of Jewish ritual and religion in spite of not-so-subtle pressure to relinquish it.

It took reaching this stage of my life – a woman of eighty – to appreciate the enormity of her achievements and to finally answer the question of how I got here: by standing on her courageous and sturdy shoulders. I finally got it.

In my mind's eye, I see her sitting alone in her apartment in her later years, semi-blind, reading large print books, watching television, grocery shopping on her own – a shopping cart for support – waiting for the phone to ring, waiting to be invited to dinner by either my sister or myself, or her grandchildren, without complaint; waiting to die, and my heart breaks.

Prior to becoming a psychoanalyst, Barbara Artson taught Shakespeare at San Francisco State University and completed the unfinished Dickens' novel The Mystery of Edwin Drood, years prior to its production on Broadway. She was an avid runner, played B-club tennis, and in her youth, won the United States dance championship in figure skating. Currently, she publishes film

reviews in fort da, a psychoanalytic journal of the Northern California Society for Psychoanalytic Psychology. She is a mother of two, and grandmother of two sets of twins.



Barbara, her mother Dorothy Berlin Friedman and her older sister Harriet.
[Photo by permission]



Barbara Artson, 2014. [Photo credit: Nancy Rubin]

My Strong Greek Roots

Irene Sardanis

My mother was an immigrant from an island in Greece called Mytilene. She was the eldest of eight and had to care for her siblings while her parents went out into the olive groves to sell their crop in the farmers markets.

I was born in New York, the youngest of two sisters and a brother.

My mother never learned to read or write. She was illiterate and could not write her name. I got a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology.

My whole purpose in life was to be different from my mother – to leave her and get as far away as possible as I could get from New York.

My mother's friends were all Greek. Mine are from every ethnic culture.

She was very religious with few other interests. I visit different churches and have hobbies in art, writing and theater.

My mother had a miserable marriage with my father. I was determined to have a happy one. It took a while, but finally I did get it right.

My mother never worked. She had no marketable skills. At age sixteen, I had my first job at the local library. At times I had two jobs to support myself.

My mother never traveled except by train to visit relatives. She has never been on a plane. In contrast, I have traveled the world.

My mother lived in poverty most of her life. After my father left us without any financial support, we were forced to go on welfare. I vowed never to be poor like her. Even though I have no financial debt, there is an ever-present fear that something might happen at any moment to take my economic security away.

We lived in the slums of New York. There were no trees on our street. Now I live in a castle, a home where I can see a tree or blossoming bush from every window.

My mother was a peasant woman. She taught me to look in the fridge and pantry with anything there and make a feast. In that way she has passed on her culinary wisdom to me.

When I went to her village – and I've been there many times – I see my roots, my strong Greek roots.

Those roots are called *survival*.

Irene Sardanis is a retired psychologist. She was born in New York City. She writes personal essays, and has been published in the Sun Magazine, and Voices of Hellenism Literary Journal. She is currently working on a children's Christmas story. She has been married for twenty-five years and lives in Oakland, California.



Irene and her mother, Maria Almer, late 1970s. [Photo by permission]



Irene Sardanis in 2014. [Photo by permission]