

Living Legacies Productions

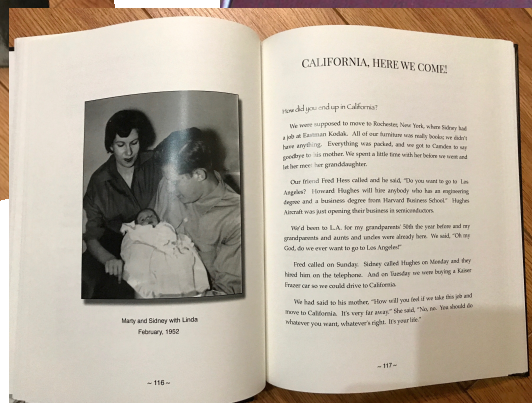
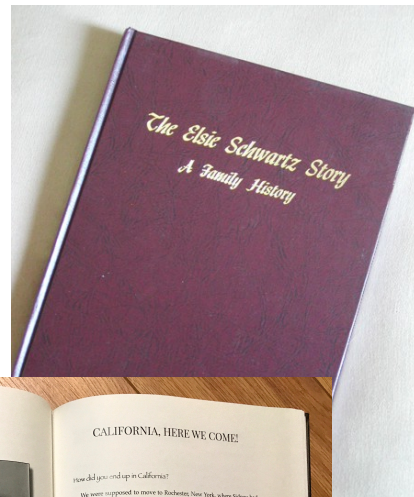
Excerpts from Our Written Oral History Projects



For the past 35 years, Ellie Kahn has been interviewing older family members in order to save their precious stories and memories.

These interviews are usually edited into a written or video project which becomes a family treasure to be passed down from generation to generation.

Everyone has a story, and each person's life story is unique. Whatever the details, these saved memories are a priceless legacy.



The following are excerpts from some of our clients' written oral histories.

SAMPLE 1: “Francine”

Let’s talk about how you met Marshal.

It was a cold, snowy New Year's Eve, about to be 1951. I was on a date with a distant cousin (with whom I didn't want to be, but my parents insisted I go out with him). We had a huge family in Chicago and he was like a third cousin removed.

We went to the ballet and then I told him that I wanted him to take me right home. And he said, “No, we're not going to do that. We're going to a party that we’ve been invited to.”

I went to the party reluctantly. I was looking for a place where I could hide so I wouldn't have to kiss him when New Year's arrived. I didn't know anybody. He was greeting his friends, and I was happy that he left me alone.

In walks Harold. (This tall Adonis, gorgeous hunk of a man, looking like a movie star.)

I kept looking at him. Many girls were around him, and he said, “Why don't you line up, and I'll find out your names.”

I thought, “What an arrogant thing to say.”

I was debating it, but I quickly got in line. I was the last one.

I was wearing my Sweet Sixteen taffeta dress with a hat that looked like a little beaded yarmulke. It had a velvet ribbon, tied under my chin. My grandmother had crocheted the hat for me.



Marshall greeted each girl very nicely, and then it was my turn. It happened that his cousin on the south side of Chicago was a very good friend of mine. We were in high school together at Hyde Park High, so that gave us something to talk about.

Right away, I began telling Marshall my problems. "I'm here with a young man I don't like. I don't know what to do, because I don't want to kiss him."

He felt so sorry for me and said, "I'm on a blind date, and I don't like her either."

Marshall took out his black book (Yes, he had one!) and he said he'd like my phone number, and I gave it quickly, with no hesitation at all.

He lived all the way on the west side of Chicago. I lived on the South side. Marshall said to me, "I'll get in touch with you."

And I felt quite happy!

That's how we met.

We were married for 65 wonderful years.

Vera, what do you know about your mother’s family background?

My mother’s parents, Golde and Avraham, were both born in Russia.

They had 12 children. My mother was Luba. She was born in 1903, somewhere in the middle of these 12 children.

The Revolution was in 1917, and there was a terrible famine, as well as on-going anti-Semitism and pogroms.

The whole family was hungry, so they traveled to different places—wherever they could make a living.

Tragically, two of the sons died of starvation. This destroyed my grandfather and he became very ill, both physically and psychologically. He became a broken man and he died when my mother was just 10.

So, Golde was left with 10 children to raise by herself. I don't know how they survived. She sold things in the market, for peanuts, I’m sure.

The Chinese and Russians began to build the Trans-Siberian Railroad from Russia to China to Manchuria. My mother’s oldest sister married a Jewish man who worked on the Trans-Siberian. They were transferred to Harbin, in Manchuria, which is where all of the Russians working on the railway were stationed.



There were Jewish workers among them and more Jews trickled in, legally or illegally, to escape the pogroms and famine. Most of them were poor and they



came with nothing more than their families and their skills. The city flourished, with schools, a synagogue, shops, hotels, businesses, a cemetery and a trade school. The Jews had a self-contained community but worked closely with the Russians. The main language and culture were Russian.

When my mother was 14 years old, during summer vacation, she went to Harbin to help her sister take care of her two little girls. I don't know that my mother had an education after that.

When my mother was about 18, her sister's husband finished his job and the family returned to Russia. But my mother stayed in China. She didn't want to go back to Russia, and she had a job, selling in a clothing store in Harbin.

That's where she met my father, and that's where I was born.

Let's talk about your early years.

I grew up in, Sicily. We were about 13 miles outside of Messina, in a little town called Santo Stefano. I was born 1899 at the end of the year on December 13. So my age is the same as the year-- It's 1989 and I'm 89.

What do you know about your grandparents?

My grandfather was a very tall man, about six feet tall. He died when he was 93 years old. He was a pretty old man, and pretty strong. He was never sick, either.

What kind of work did he do?

When he was young, he made charcoal. He cut big trees with a machine, then he'd cover the wood with the dirt. Then, as it burned inside, he would smoke it out and the wood turned black. They were making wood charcoal. The wood charcoal would make a nice fire, with no smoke. It was good for cooking. People would buy it for about ten cents a pound.

My grandma and grandpa started making bread for the town, and then when they died, my mother and my father took over.

Tell me about your father.

My father was not very big—just my height, or maybe a few inches taller. I'm five feet five; he was about five feet eight. Also, he only had one eye. When he was young, they would get water from the mountains. They made a tunnel with an iron pipe, and the water would go through the mountain into the city of Messina. My father was with some young kids one day and one of the kids took his hat and then threw cement at my father and it went into his eye. And that's how he lost it. That's when he was young, about 18 years old. My father died when I was 13 years old.

In 1908, there was a big earthquake and the city of Messina was destroyed completely. It was near the ocean, and the water came into the city. Most of the people died. I was 9 years old. I was sleeping with my grandpa. I remember asking him why the building's shaking. We were living on the second floor, and he said, "We're going down now any second," because a lot of houses were crumbling. But in our town, only two people died. The city of Messina was completely destroyed; all the big buildings that were five or six floors just collapsed.

My house cracked from one end to the other end, in a big line. But it didn't go down—a few more seconds and it would have. My grandfather held me, and he said, "Don't be afraid," until the shaking subsided--after about ten seconds, I think.

Let's talk about your parents' work.

My father and mother made bread for the whole town. We had a big oven—you could put about 100 loaves of bread in that oven. We all helped. When I was 9 years old and my sister was 12, we'd get up at four o'clock in the morning. It was still dark out, so we'd take a little lantern and go to people's homes and we'd lead them back to our house to make their bread in our ovens. They would bring five pounds of flour or two pounds of flour. We had a tub, and that's where they would knead the dough with their hands. Then they would make a design or initial in the dough with a knife or maybe with a thimble, so they'd know whose bread it was.

Some of the people in the town who were rich would have the bread brought to their house, but most of the people would watch the bread cook and then take the bread home themselves after my parents baked it

I remember I would carry a big bundle of wood on my back for the oven. That's how we'd get the oven hot. At the end of the oven, there was a big brick, and when the brick turned white, then it was already hot enough to cook the bread in the oven. It would cook for a half an hour in the oven. Then you'd check the color and when it was brown all over, it was done. That was my family's business. That's what my parents did for all their life.

What are your memories of the beginning of the war?

I was 17 when the war broke out. We heard a lot of rumors since 1933, so we knew what to expect, but when the Russians came in, we thought they were going to stay for good in that part of Poland.

My father was planning for the children, and he decided that we should prepare ourselves to work under the Russians. He knew for the Russian people, a good possibility for employment is agriculture. So he registered me in an agricultural college near the woods and the place was called *Slobudka Naciona*. *Naciona* means fathers. I lived there for almost two years. It was very hard physical work. The studying I did very well. I was supposed to be an agricultural engineer but I didn't finish in the two years.

How were the Russians behaving towards your family?

The Russians didn't like the rich people. My father was a rich man. It wasn't too long that they started to take valuable things from us. They didn't care whether we were Jewish or not—just rich. They were very friendly with my father at first, and my stepmother prepared a beautiful dinner for the Russian big shots.

Unfortunately, she served with expensive dishes and expensive silver. The same night they had dinner, the Russians wrote out a paper that on such and such a day, they would take all of us to Siberia.

My father was a fighter and he thought he would show people. They would take him to Siberia, they would give him a job and he would be very qualified, because he was qualified in everything. He wasn't worrying too much. He said it was probably going to be for a short time and we'd go back home.

What happened next?

The day before we were to leave, the Nazis came in and the Russians moved back. Then our lives were destroyed.

One day, some people in our streets had to go to the registration. If not, they were going to pick them up and kill them. My father figured maybe he'd have a chance so he went to the registration. They pointed to the right or left. My father went to the side that it turned out was for killing. They took him away, I didn't know where to. Later, I found out it was Belzec death camp.

Every day, there were more and more transports to the east. They started grabbing anyone they could find. They were hungry for Jewish blood. They were making the ghetto "*Judenrein*" —free of Jews.

I took my shawl and I wrapped myself around and I jumped over the fence to get away. The shawl got caught on barbed wire and I was hanging. I couldn't get free, so I unwrapped it and I left the shawl there.

I was hiding in the woods. In the morning the people used to come to cut the trees, and I was not safe, so I went to my town and I went to the priest. He was good friends with my father. It was late at night when I got to his house. He opened the door and looked at me. "My god in heaven, how did you make it until now? I heard that all of you got killed. You can stay with us, but not in the house. I'll put you in the barn."

He brought me in a bucket some good food every day for a week. I used to cover myself with hay, and one day I heard somebody with a pitchfork, taking hay for the horses. He felt me, so he put down the fork and found me. He recognized me right away. He was the mailman and he used to be so happy to bring us mail because it was always from America.

He said to me, 'You can stay here as long as you want, I wouldn't tell nobody you're here.' But I didn't trust him; I didn't trust anybody.

Soon he went away and I figured that he probably went straight to the Gestapo and they would come to pick me up, so I ran from there that night.

What do you know about your grandparents' lives?

My maternal grandparents, Lieba (Berkowitz) and David Klein, landed in America in the 1880s and came to Cleveland, Ohio.



Their children were Isidor, Lena, Helen and Fanny. My mother, Lena, was born in Cleveland in 1883. The Kleins lived on 12th Street between Saint Clair and Superior, not too far from where my father lived, in what is now downtown Cleveland.

The Kleins were always quite poor. The only job I ever remember hearing that my grandfather Klein had was as a cigar maker, which meant that he rolled tobacco leaves into cigars in a cigar factory.

But actually, he never worked much. I recall that when I was in my teens and getting interested in family background, I asked my mother what Grandpa Klein did. She laughed. And the way she laughed, I got the impression she wasn't very sold on him as a working person.

Anyway, that was one of the reasons why, when Mom was about 14 or 15 and had just finished the eighth grade, she left school to work in a laundry. Then she worked in a knitting mill and became a supervisor there.

Shortly before she and Dad were married, the people at the mill wanted her to become a saleswoman and take their knitwear on the road, selling it. She never did, though, because it was unheard of for a woman in those days to do anything like that. Besides, I guess she was being courted by Dad. Unlike Mom, he was able to finish high school.



What do you recall about Lieba and David?

They lived with us as I was growing up. My grandfather never said a word. If he needed something or wanted something from the world, he was able to ask for it, but most of his wants were anticipated by Grandma, so he was very much a silent

individual. He was a presence. It was simply accepted that there was no communication with him. If he didn't like something, he told Grandma about it and it was usually settled pretty quickly.



Grandpa taught himself to read. He spent a lot of time reading and was very interested in the daily papers. Other than that, he would sit on the porch in warm

weather, or he would take a leisurely stroll around the block. He was like some kind of a special boarder in our house. In his dresser drawer were a fair number of silk shirts and humidors for his cigars, and pipe tobaccos--he always smoked a pipe.

I don't have any recollection today of ever having learned a thing about what Grandpa Klein thought about any subject.

How would you describe your grandmother?

Grandma Klein sat silently at the dinner table. She moved around as needed to help my mother prepare the food, and to put it on the table or serve it. Occasionally she stopped what she was doing--whether it was working in the kitchen or eating or whatever--to do some portion of her daily prayers. She had several old, well-thumbed prayer books. One was in Hebrew, one was in Yiddish.

It wasn't until I was in my teen years that I discovered that of these prayers, which she faithfully read and repeated over and over at many intervals during the day, she understood only what she was reading of the Yiddish. She didn't understand a word of the Hebrew prayer book, but she knew it was holy and that it was to be done.

My grandmother, along with her quiet manner, had great dignity and strength. She lived her life according to quite rigid standards and values. These included not only her strong religious faith and dedication, but also a sense of work, helping others, kindness towards others, and consideration. And she had a sense of giving that was almost limitless.



During the '30's and the Depression, there were many homeless, jobless people--particularly men who were drifting around the country. Often, when I would come home from high school in the afternoon, I'd find her alone in our kitchen with two of these people, who we referred to as "bums". They were unshaven, dirty, usually unkempt men, and sometimes one, sometimes two, would be seated at the kitchen table with my Grandma waiting on them, serving them meat, potatoes, vegetables, soup, dessert, beverage.

She did this with absolutely no fear for herself or the house. They would come to the back door and knock, and she would let them in, serve them, and they would leave. She didn't speak much English, so, apparently there was little, if any, conversation. She knew what they wanted and she gave it to them out of her sense of wanting to help people.

My mother would come home and find the men there and be very upset to have these wild looking strangers in her house when my Grandma was alone. Whatever she said to my Grandma about being careful about doing things like this, or wondering how she could let these men in the house, all my Grandma ever had to say was that the poor men were hungry. When she asked her, Grandma said, "What could I do? They are hungry." This was very much the kind of values I grew up with.

What is a childhood memory you have of your parents' relationship?



My parents had a wonderful, loving marriage. They were able to handle all kinds of obstacles and problems that came up in a very easy, natural way. My father might express some objection when they had a disagreement, but in the long run he gave in to her.

Dad was a very organized person. He was the most organized person I've ever known in my life.

I remember one particular clash between my mother's way and my father's. In autumn, she and my grandmother always put up canned fruits and vegetables for the winter. My mother would drive down to a wholesale produce company in downtown Cleveland and come back with crates of fruits and vegetables of all kinds. Then she and my grandmother would spend probably every day for a week or more canning fruits and vegetables.

There was a whole process of boiling the mason jars from last year, making sure they were perfectly clean and then getting the fruits and vegetables ready for processing. It was a lot of cooking. Then they filled the jars and sealed them up tight with the proper paraphernalia--covers and rubber seals and so forth.

Then they took the jars down to what was called a fruit cellar, which was a little locker with shelves in it, and these shelves would be loaded with the fruits and vegetables and jellies and jams and sometimes homemade wine.

When Mother said, "Harry, go down and get some raspberry jelly," I would look at the jelly section, and I'd see through the glass if it looked like the color and the

texture of raspberry, and I'd bring it up. If it wasn't the right thing, she would tell me, and I'd go back to the cellar, but usually I got it right.

Well, my father had an objection one year to this system, because he couldn't always tell what was what. So he arranged with Mom that he would type out labels and she would label the jars appropriately. So they had a whole new system.

Not only were the jellies with the jellies, but every jelly had a label on it, telling what kind of jelly it was. That was marvelous, and we went through the whole winter with that system. My dad undoubtedly was very pleased, and my mother, I'm sure, couldn't have cared less, because she had no trouble at all with the system her way.

Well, we came around to the next year, and my mother and grandmother got ready to do canning. They took all the old jars and boiled them out and filled them up. On some of them the labels stuck and on some they didn't, but it didn't matter, because neither my grandmother nor my mother gave a damn. They put whatever they wanted into whatever jar was there.

I'm sure if my father wanted to re-label the whole bunch, they would have let him, but they really weren't too concerned, and he could see that it would be a losing battle, so he gave up. So we only had labelled canned goods one year.

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