

Excerpt 1, continued

And on a Friday evening in mid-August, Pop and Grandma celebrated my birth with a pizza at John's, which is still doing business in the Village. A delivery room nurse at New York's Lutheran Hospital dreamed that she saw me singing on stage at the Metropolitan Opera. The next day she told Grandma that I would be a great singer, a great star, and that I would perform at the Met. Grandma crowed about that prediction for a long time, never imagining that in twenty-five years, rather than appearing at the Met, I'd appear at Carnegie Hall in a program with Chuck Berry and the legendary guitarist and singer, Dave Van Ronk, at the peak of the folk boom.

Had Uncle Cecil glanced down from heaven, he might have nodded approval at his tiny namesake being wheeled to the Waterfront in a baby carriage crammed with NMU leaflets. Mom and Pop distributed them while carrying me in their arms so that the longshoremen wouldn't beat them up. "Those hard-boiled guys were sentimental about children and families," explained Pop.

From WPA to WPB

My first memory is of dust motes sparkling and dancing in the wedge of sunlight from the window above my mother's left shoulder. She was holding a mattress upright to disinfect it because bedbugs had invaded our apartment through the walls we shared with our unfriendly neighbors. Mom said they were anti-Semites, which, she explained, meant they didn't like Jews. Jewish meant that my family was different which meant that for some reason, certain people we didn't know didn't like us. That was pretty much all I knew or thought about what being Jewish meant since we never attended synagogue or observed religious holidays.

Pop could imitate that neighbor leaning out her back doorway singing, "Jaaahhh-nee . . . Jaaahhh-nee, come on home or I'll SWITCH ya," like she was calling hogs. Some afternoons, her daughter would come to our kitchen and we'd play with our dolls on the linoleum floor. She said I wasn't allowed inside her apartment and I wondered if it looked like ours, but had no desire to enter a place of nasty bugs and anti-Semites, as they are forever linked in my mind.

On the landing we shared at the top of the back steps I'd wait for this girl, staring at the patch of screen in their door behind which shadowy figures moved about in their kitchen. "You wait there," spoken through the screen, were the only words her mother said to me. This troubled and confused me, but I enjoyed playing with the five-year-old

who favored me with her company if no one else was available. She was my only friend in Takoma Park.

One afternoon I was playing in the field behind our apartment when a bunch of kids came over, knocked me to the ground, and jumped on my back. I didn't know what to think except that fighting seemed pointless against so many, so I resigned myself and lay there quietly to think it over. I shifted my head to watch the orderly line of children calmly awaiting their turn as in a game. They didn't seem to want to hurt me, plus the woolen coat I wore for late autumn protected me from the force of the children's weight, which wasn't much to begin with. In fact, I felt quite comfortable under the gentle pounding of small feet. Relaxing, I gave myself up to wondering why they had ganged up on me and if it was because of being Jewish and if so, how they knew. They ran off with one of my new sandals and later Mom and I retraced my steps, searching everywhere because we couldn't afford to lose a new shoe, but we did anyway, and never found it.

Washington wasn't a very friendly place for us and by late 1943 I was ready to head out, and some mornings Mom or Pop would find my crib empty with me sleeping on my tricycle, arms folded beneath my head on the handlebars. So when the WPA transferred Pop back to New York it was none too soon for me. Or for Mom. We'd both had our fill of Washington. Besides that, we'd be taking the train! The night before we left I dreamt I handed two crude, clay suitcases up from the platform through the window of the train to Mom.

Awakening in the still-dark morning, I beheld a shiny white overnight case on the floor by my bed. My heart stopped and I caught my breath. I got up and circled it, hardly believing it was for real. Round like a hatbox, it had a strap-handle and a tiny mirror glued inside the top. I gazed into the glass and a brown-eyed girl with curly hair stared back at me. I was for real too.

Standing in the middle of my room for the last time, ready to travel in my bonnet and dark blue, brass-buttoned woolen jacket, I felt adult and proud. I'd selected my most grown-up books and other toys and packed them carefully. It felt just wonderful to be three and moving back to the city my parents adored. Goodbye and good riddance to Washington, where kids jumped on you and wouldn't let you in their house because you were Jewish.

By the time we settled into our apartment on West Eighty-third Street I was aware of injustice and on the lookout for it. My first Manhattan memory has me sitting beside another little girl on a step of the brownstone next to our building. Newly arrived to the neighborhood, I thought she might be my friend. We were engaged in pleasant conversation when "dirty Jew" caught my ear. She couldn't have known what she was

saying, but I did, and if reason and vocabulary were not yet available to me, teeth were. First in my memory is a close-up of her hand, then a blank moment, and then the girl's back as she ran shrieking up the street. A rush of pride straightened my own back for taking a stand against bigotry.