



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 16 | Issue 3

Article 20

Jul-2015

My Mother, the Doctor - A Memoir

Mimi S. Daitz

Recommended Citation

Daitz, Mimi S. (2015). My Mother, the Doctor - A Memoir. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16(3), 319-323.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol16/iss3/20>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

My Mother, the Doctor—A Memoir

By Mimi S. Daitz¹

My mother, Cheri Appel, M.D. (as she proudly signed her name), was born on September 15, 1901. When she was thirty-eight she gave birth to me, three years after having had her first child, my brother. That event occurred thirteen years after she “married” my father. They remained together for fifty years.

Like many bright Jewish girls of her time, my mother attended the only public institution of higher learning in New York City for young women, Hunter College, which was then tuition free. But Hunter still required the family to provide food, lodging, clothing, books, and transportation for its studious daughter. Unlike my father, who had attended the equivalent institution for boys, CCNY (City College of New York), while working Saturdays as a shoe salesman, my mother never mentioned having to work while attending Morris High School, in the Bronx, or Hunter College, although she was the eldest of five children.

My maternal grandmother, who was my surrogate mother for much of my childhood, had come to the United States alone, at the age of sixteen, from Yekaterinoslav, in the Ukraine. She had taught herself to read and write Russian, Yiddish, and some Ukrainian—because schooling was for her four brothers, not for girls. When I was a teenager she'd ask me to correct her occasional letters in English, the fourth language she had picked up—this one pronounced with a heavy Russian-Jewish accent. She'd married her 3rd cousin, Joe Appel, kept a kosher home for as long as her mother-in-law was alive, then ate ham and bacon with pleasure—except on Yom Kippur. She was a strong woman with a sense of humor—both of which characteristics she passed on to my mother. But my grandmother had had TB, a broken back, who knows how many abortions, and, finally, long standing heart disease. So it fell to my mother, originally named Sarah, then Sari, and eventually, for most of her life, Cheri, to mother her younger two brothers and two sisters.

Cheri must have been around eleven or twelve, living in Brooklyn, when one day she went roller skating with her youngest sibling, my aunt Mickey, on her shoulders. My mother fell and broke her front tooth, which went through her lip. She was taken to the neighborhood doctor, who stitched up the wound. The doctor was a woman, and that experience, according to my mother, was what set her on her way to becoming a doctor.

Medical school at NYU was a trial by fire for the five women, studying alongside one hundred men, at the time my mother was enrolled there. The Class of 1927 of Bellevue Medical School was taught by professors who thought they were wasting their time teaching young women who would never practice and were taking places that might have been held by men. As it turned

¹ Professor Daitz, now retired from the Music Dept. of The City College/City University of New York after teaching there for many years, is still active as a musicologist and choral conductor/singer. Her publications have been in two areas of music history: French song of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and 20th-century Estonian choral music. She is currently working on a study of the National Committee for Refugee Musicians, which was active from 1938 to 1942, assisting a large number of musicians, mainly from Austria and Germany, to emigrate to the USA and then to find work as musicians.

out, all five of the women graduated from medical school, married, had children, and practiced medicine. Not true of all of their male classmates.

The “superiority” of the men, proclaimed by their professors, was enacted in multiple ways by these classmates. The first time a group of students, including my mother, witnessed surgery, the tallest man among them suddenly fainted away as the first incision was made. And once, in anatomy lab, when my mother began to remove the bandages covering the cranium of the cadaver she shared with another female student, she heard whispering from some men standing near them. Out of the skull hopped several white mice, placed in there by the men, in the expectation of seeing screaming women jump up on lab chairs. No such pandemonium occurred. My mother was unconcerned about the mice. Her lab partner had spent the previous summer working with laboratory mice at the hospital. Another male supremacist myth exploded.

Whether it was the influence of my father, Dr. Benjamin Segal, already heading towards a pioneering career in ob-gyn, or my mother’s own feminist proclivities that determined her professional direction, I do not know. I did repeatedly hear the story about the director of the ob-gyn service of Morrisania Hospital, in the Bronx, where my mother was doing her residency in gynecology. (My mother also had training at Harlem Hospital. Did this incident occur there?) According to my mother, the chief found her to be a very attractive blond, and when she refused to return his amorous attentions (she was already living with my father) he would not allow her to do gyn surgery. So for more than ten years my mother was limited to office gynecology—not without interest, since she worked with the radical Margaret Sanger in some of the early birth control clinics.

One of these clinics, in Portchester, New York, near the Connecticut state line, was directed by my mother when it opened in 1932. According to her, it was funded by Nancy Carnegie Rockefeller. Mrs. Rockefeller and her wealthy friends lived in Connecticut, where it was illegal to provide birth control materials and education until the Supreme Court decision of 1965 changed that law. The proximity to the Portchester birth control clinic made it possible for these women to avail themselves of its services. A local Catholic newspaper described its director as a “gorgeous, blond, Russian type, wearing gold loop earrings...who was making prostitutes out of our young women.”

I wish I could have seen my mother at that time! The black and white or sepia photos of her that I have reveal a very attractive woman, her long hair pinned back at the nape of her neck. (During my childhood it was coiled on top of her head, more like a thick pancake than a crown.) The November 14, 2011 issue of *The New Yorker* contains a photo of Margaret Sanger, the quality of which reminded me of my mother, although the two women didn’t really resemble each other. The article in which the photo appears is about birth control, abortion, and the political uses of these issues in American history. This brought to mind a special connection between Sanger and Appel, which was their trip to the Soviet Union in 1934 to teach birth control methods. My mother said it had been a waste of time: they fitted the women doctors with diaphragms, but there was no way of obtaining a supply of spermicidal jelly to use with them, nor were there diaphragms for the Soviet doctors to distribute for use by patients. The lack of these supplies left the sole means of birth control—abortion—as the continuing method used for many generations of women.

My mother never spoke about a private practice in gynecology, but I remember, as a young child, going with her to the IWO (International Workers’ Order) clinic in Manhattan. In 1937 she’d become its first director. At that time—before I was born—it was the first center for women’s health, including birth control, established by a fraternal organization. Any married woman could be treated there, not just the members of the organization. (The Sanger Papers project at NYU

provided me with this information. Sorry for the intrusion of a bit of historical research into what is essentially a memoir based on family stories.)

The 1934 trip to the Soviet Union with Sanger, according to my mother, was a turning point in her political thinking. Before the trip she'd been a far left radical; after it, she continued being a socialist, but one who was critical of the Soviet Union on many accounts. However, a dedicated feminist (though she never, ever used the term about herself) she remained for the rest of her life. Why not call herself a feminist? My guess is that the term would imply that she belonged to a group with others like her. Above all, my mother prided herself on being different, independent. The only organization I know of to which she belonged—this was many years later—was the Society of Medical Psychoanalysts, a group independent of the dominant, Freudian professional society, the American Psychoanalytic Association. In her late eighties, with my father and many friends gone, she joined the Ethical Culture Society, but soon stopped attending their weekly gatherings. She liked to be with people, but she wasn't a joiner.

Very early in her career as a doctor my mother would take the El train at night to deliver a baby at home—where six or seven children waited anxiously to see their new baby brother or sister and hope that, despite the cries of pain, their mother would be all right. Such scenes confirmed for her the need for birth control and so, for a number of years, her work in gynecology seems to have satisfied her social and feminist ideals. But eventually she found that many of the gynecological problems she was treating in the office had a psychological component—so she recycled herself, took courses, did a residency, and became a psychiatrist. The training center she enrolled in at the New York Medical College, located at that time in Flower and Fifth Avenue Hospital, had an eclectic program. There were confirmed Freudians on the faculty, but break-away schools of thought were also represented. She chose as her control analyst Bernard Robbins, one of the early analytically trained American-born psychiatrists who was an outspoken feminist. For my mother, Freudian thinking with regard to women was anathema. Karen Horney, Clara Thompson, and others provided some of the basis for her own work. I was four, five, six years old when she began her training and then undertook the only residency in psychiatry in the New York area that did not require her full time presence at a hospital. She took the northbound train from New York to Valhalla early in the morning during the week, returning home each evening. One weekend a month she stayed at Grasslands Hospital. Many years later she confided to me that she would occasionally have to work with a violent, severely disturbed patient. Fortunately such work was rare.

As she established her practice, there were years when she had forty hours a week of private patients, taught integration of gynecology and psychiatry to medical students and interns, worked in the mental health clinics of Mt. Sinai (for children) and, later, at Metropolitan Hospital (for adolescents)—and ran a household. To help maintain family life in the brownstone on East 64th Street in which I grew up there was a cook and a chambermaid, as well as a handyman to stoke the coal furnace, until we finally changed to oil heat. But my mother did the food shopping and organized the domestic workers. The cooks we employed learned much of their culinary repertoire from my mother, who, already in the 1950s, could cook Chinese, French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian, Russian, and Jewish dishes. My parents had been in France in the 1930s and years later had paintings hanging in their home by their young American artist friends who were studying in the center of Western art. Though they didn't have the means to eat in the Michelin starred restaurants of Paris they absorbed the importance of eating well. And in 1949, just as soon as it was possible to travel after the Second World War, they took me and my brother to Europe.

That trip, and subsequent ones, could provide stories for another essay; the connecting link from my mother to my son, who became a chef/restaurateur, would require still another one.

The food served at my mother's dinner parties, whether sit-down for ten or buffet for thirty, was greatly appreciated by their doctor friends—all of whom were also very interested in literature, visual arts, music, and politics. Some of the women dressed well, but that was secondary to other aspects of their lives. My mother chose her clothes carefully, teaching me how to rapidly plough through the crowds in Ohrbach's and Klein's to find the really well made suits and dresses amid the piles of junk. She spent little time on her daily wardrobe and wore sensible shoes, but for professional societies' dinner dances, or theater or concerts, or dinners at friends' homes, she wore beautiful clothing, usually enriched with earrings, pins, and bracelets from her large collection of Victorian jewelry. Glittering diamonds, makeup, and dyed hair, even as the blond turned grey-white, were not part of her persona. No hiding, no hypocrisy in appearance or speech.

Her taste in décor, like that of her jewelry, was governed by her knowledge of antiques, learned, she told me, from seeing her father auction off items from a shop on the Coney Island Boardwalk or from a small gallery on Broadway. When my parents moved to the townhouse where they lived and worked for more than twenty years, the former owner, Dorothy Benjamin, widow of Enrico Caruso, wanted to sell to my mother the heavy red velvet draperies that adorned the three windows facing 64th Street. Not my mother's taste. But she didn't object to the dark stained mahogany flooring, nor the heavy, black Renaissance wooden door that closed off the second floor from the marble staircase with its brass hand rails.

That floor, I was told, had originally been one huge room with two concert grand pianos and two fireplaces. I was two years old when my parents had the room converted into our living room, a bar area forming a passageway to the dining room, and, next to it, the kitchen. Food was brought up to the fourth floor on a dumbwaiter when my brother and I were small, but I guess that once I joined my brother at Hunter College Elementary School, conveniently located a few blocks from our house, we both ate with my parents in the dining room. Our family dinners, until my brother and I went off to college, were always at 6:00 p.m. Presence at the table at that hour was mandated for all of us—unless my father was delivering a baby. Discussion was lively—mostly politics, with an occasional exchange between my parents about interesting medical experiences. Often they spoke about their European trips—the one just passed and the next one to come. When they wanted me and my brother not to understand their conversation they would speak in Yiddish. I got my grandmother (who lived with us until her death, when I was sixteen) to speak Yiddish to me so that I could understand them—and I refused to translate for my brother.

During my high school years I began to learn more about my mother's past. One day she objected to my wearing jeans to school. In the 1950s Music and Art was the only high school in New York City that allowed girls to wear jeans—because the art students spent many hours in studios. We were very proud of our exemption from a city wide rule. But my mother insisted that it wasn't the thing to do—until my father revealed that a certain medical student had been known to wear checkered stockings with her white uniform.

Another story from my mother's past was even more intriguing. When I was about eight years old I asked my mother why she wasn't wearing a wedding band. Her response: she had lost it. That was shocking! How could she have let that happen? When I was a teenager she corrected that story. She and my father had never married—on principle. No piece of paper or ceremony could be a guarantor for their relationship. I thought that was great. I wondered why she hadn't told me the truth originally. Their "marriage" of fifty years ended only with the death of my father in 1973. My mother explained to me that common-law marriage had been legal. At that time, after

having lived together for ten years, they were legally husband and wife. That also explained why my mother was Cheri Appel and my father, Ben Segal. My mother was a “Lucy Stoner” (like that 19th-century American abolitionist and suffragist who was the first to retain her own last name) and kept her maiden name after their “marriage.” I’d always thought it was because my parents were both doctors that they didn’t want to have the same last name.

My mother’s first private office as a psychiatrist was off Fifth Avenue on 60-something Street. She shared a waiting room with another physician and complained that her consulting room was impossible to use when there was a parade on Fifth Avenue. After my grandmother died, in 1955, my mother moved her office into our house, using the waiting room on the ground floor, long established for my father’s patients. What had been my grandmother’s room on the third floor became my mother’s consulting room. A buzzer system used by my father’s nurse/receptionist sent my mother’s waiting patient up the stairs to Dr. Appel’s office, occasionally crossing with one coming down. My brother and I learned to avoid the staircase during this “changing of the guard,” if at all possible.

In what turned out to be the last year of my father’s life, my parents bought a condo in Florida because his heart condition made New York winters very uncomfortable. Although my mother enjoyed the balmy air of West Palm Beach, the way of life there was not hers. Shortly after my father’s death my mother sold that apartment and resumed her private practice in New York, continuing to see patients until she was ninety-five years old and had had early stage Alzheimer’s for several years. Fortunately, it was just before the onset of that disease, when she was the sole living medical professional who had worked with Sanger, that she was interviewed for books and a film about the birth control activist.

But it was at seventy that she had been forced to retire from her clinic work at Metropolitan Hospital. This was prior to the Supreme Court’s decision that declared age-determined mandatory retirement illegal. That Dr. Appel was mentally and physically able to contribute to the care of their patients was apparent: the hospital administration requested that she continue to work at the clinic—as a volunteer, since they could no longer pay her. I’d like to have heard her retort to the administrator who offered her that position. At home she simply said, with a cutting tone of voice, here so appropriate, that if she was good enough to continue to work at the clinic in a professional capacity, then she should be paid a salary. She would volunteer her time elsewhere, where she chose to do so.

As a young adult I would sometimes hear my contemporaries—women friends or colleagues—lament the lack of female role models for them when they were growing up. I read *The Feminine Mystique* with some understanding of the message needed for many women—but thought it was not for me, since my mother was not the frustrated, stay-at-home woman pictured in that study of post-World War II, middle class, white women. My mother was a doctor.