What’s My Secret?

One Hundred Years of Memories and Reflections

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Dedication and Thanks

I dedicate this book to my son Barry who inspired me to write it. Since he urged me to move to Ukiah, I have discussed with him my joys as well as my sorrows and fears.

In moments of despair while writing, he reminded me that “this too shall pass,” thereby assisting a quick return to my usual equanimity and vivacity. So thank you again, my dear son.

Mary Gustafson was more than a secretary. For over three years we worked together on this book with considerable gratification to me.

Mary Hooper, my former housemate, relieved me of so many household demands, smoothing the fabric of my life.

Dan Hibshman provided many suggestions to make this book a better read.

Joan Levin, Sarah Michaels, Hannah Bird, my son Norm, and Henry Dakin—who designed the book and prepared the manuscript for printing—all helped to make this book a reality.

My many friends in Ukiah provided endless support and encouragement.

Photographers whose work appeared in this book include Evan Johnson (cover and photographs 28 and 29), Barry Vogel (page 2 and photographs 18, 30, 31, and 32), and Adya Bryant (photograph 16).

And finally, thanks to my elderly cat Rosie for keeping on task by warming our laps as we assiduously worked on these pages.
Acceptance of Aging

I know I need to honor
A newer version of me.
I won’t lament
I can’t lament
For what I used to be.

Now I know it’s resting more
Wherever it is I go.
It’s also to resist the wish
To keep learning more and more.
No—this I cannot do
Not now or evermore.

And I must block out if only for now
The horrors of hatred and war.
And believe that humankind
Wants happiness more and more.

So within my realm of time
I hope to use it well.
Our world is so full
Of such wondrous things—
My wishes of what to pursue,
With people I love,
Related and friends,
To do, to be, to do.

I know I need to honor
A newer version of me.
I can’t lament
I won’t lament
Of what has gone before.

— Lillian Vogel
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* See references to photographs and letters numbered 1 to 33, in the text pages.
Introduction

“What’s your secret?” Since I moved to this rural community in Northern California in 1996, this question has been thrown at me innumerable times by people of all ages. I was eighty-six when I came to Ukiah and now I am ninety-nine. This question has pursued me even more in recent years. And the persistence of the question led me to asking—do I have a secret? Or rather, do I have an explanation for my long life of general good health, with the ability to live alone, carry on my life’s activities, pursue my interests of many years and establish new ones? What has occurred in my life previously and during this past decade that may have contributed to my longevity?

Am I qualified to write about this subject? I know that in the past decade there’s been a steady stream of books coming out on aging, written by “experts” who have not yet experienced a successful longevity. But I have! I am writing with first-hand experience of living to almost 100. Therefore, if for no other reason, I think I have some degree of authority on the subject. In this book I am exploring my life and will share what may be my “hands on” secrets of success.

I am aware that a large number of the people asking me what’s my secret are middle-aged Baby Boomers. A tremendous number are now coming into their retirement age. Many are concerned with how to live a long, gratifying life. Is it gratifying regardless of the quality of their physical or mental health? Not always. It is obvious that they are pondering how they can live a life of relatively good health, filled with a variety of rewards and gratifications, a life of physical and emotional well-being, with enough accumulated money to perpetuate life’s comforts.
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into old age. My impression is that their concerns range from physical appearance, to intellectual accomplishment, to emotional well-being, to the accumulation of enough money to live comfortably, to the service of mankind, and more.

It’s not just Baby Boomers but lots of older people who ask me that question, too. Their request seems to be: “Pour into me your wisdom!” Many septuagenarians and octogenarians—seventy- and eighty-year-olds—appear fascinated by a person who, throughout her nineties, is still alert and aware of the world’s situation as well as living a vibrant, happy, and balanced life.

As I looked around I realized that, of course, I was not the only nonagenarian living in this area in Northern California. I know there are many who are participating in the community in various ways, who take care of their own physical needs, who may live alone, doing their housekeeping and shopping, taking part in family functions and doing some traveling.

While reflecting on my own experience I became curious as to how it compared with the experiences of these others who have made it into their tenth decade. Perhaps talking with them would reveal a common thread as to why some people live long and vibrant, happy lives while so many others fail to experience this.

My earliest thoughts were of conducting a scientific study, hopefully to reach one of the scientific journals. I developed a questionnaire and interviewed 22 local women who were all in their nineties and still living vibrant, happy, healthy lives. I thought I might find that there is a commonality amongst us that would provide some answers to this “secret.”

But I became increasingly aware that these studies more often than not reach only those with scientific knowledge and backgrounds. Casting aside my initial ideas, I shifted my focus from statistical to anecdotal, leaving the larger-number findings to those researchers connected with incoming grants and other funds. So this will be a more personal document. However, in the addendum, I am including some discussion of the results of the study that I conducted.

In searching for the “secret” of my longevity I’ve had to ponder many different aspects of my life. I wouldn’t be who I am today had I not had the many and varied experiences that form my life story. Therefore, I have devoted the major part of this book to detailing my life history and to the surprising insights I derived from this process, insights I never would have gained without delving into my history.

I’ve begun to think of my life as a ribbon made up of various threads. As the events and years rolled on, the threads began to intertwine, powerful threads woven from childhood into old age.

Was it primarily genetics? Do I have a gene for longevity? Actually, my mother died in her seventies and my father in his mid-fifties. Certainly there are genetic aspects; however, I believe that an essential key to my longevity is what I have done with what I’ve been dealt.

What are the threads of this ribbon? My threads of ambition to be a good wife and mother and to be somebody on my own, these were strong threads. But where did they come from? My strong maternal grandmother? My paternal Aunt Lifsha, who was strong and long-lived? My father? My older brother or my mother? In addition, my strong body was fed with years of good nourishment. I was always concerned with diet and exercise, probably part of a struggle to be as pretty and attractive as my mother had reputedly been.

But I also know there were some ragged threads in the ribbon—mother’s judgment of and anger toward me, my
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adolescent derogation of her, her sadness and bitterness, father's vision of great success, but then his several failures and eventual success, my dreams of what my life would become. More raggedness was caused by some disappointments in my marriage and my later awareness that my husband may have at times felt emotionally neglected by me. But I'm getting ahead of myself. The question “What's your secret?” is open for exploration. Let's begin a long time ago.

My Life History—the Early Years

I was a vigorous, healthy baby, even though my mother became pregnant with me when my older brother, Bib—as he was called as an adult—was only six months old. He was a very fussy eater and would mess around with his bowl of cereal. However, I would gobble up mine very quickly and then reach over and grab the bowl that he'd barely touched. Did this indicate something? That I was going to get what was my share—or even more than my share? I've always had a tremendous amount of drive in my life. Is this my secret?

Let me go back even further, to before I was born.

My maternal grandparents, Saul and Sophie, lived in a shtetl (a small Jewish community) in Ukraine, which was then part of Russia. Grandma was a strong woman, the bulwark of the family. In addition to taking care of her home and her family, she ran a small grocery store in Cheme Ostrov, where they lived.

Grandpa was a student, presumably destined to be a rabbi. But very early on he became a socialist, more interested in the ideas of Karl Marx than in the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament). The story was told to me that once, when Grandpa was supposed to be studying the Torah, his rabbi looked closer and observed that the Torah was upside down. His student was in fact reading a copy of Marx.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, pogroms were intensifying. These were attacks on Jewish settlements by native Russians who were attempting to drive Jews out in order to steal their land. Many Jews became interested in leaving their little shtetls and coming to the United States (as presented
dramatically in the play *Fiddler on the Roof*). Those who had relatives in the United States received fantastic reports that the streets there were “paved with gold” and that opportunities for a better life were endless.

Grandpa and Grandma had five children. Grandpa came to the United States with his eldest daughter, Dora, in about 1903. For two years he worked in a chair factory in Philadelphia and accumulated enough money to send for his wife and three younger children: Clara (my mother, age 17, shown at 21 in photograph 1, page 84), Etta (age 13) and John (age 6). In 1907, another daughter, Helen, was born in the United States.

Grandma set up and ran a supper house near Fairmont Park in Philadelphia while Grandpa continued to work in the chair factory during the day. In the evenings he would come home exhausted after a ten-hour day of hard work, but then he was revitalized by talking with the young Jewish immigrant men who came to enjoy his wife’s hot suppers. They discussed the need for change and for further equality of all people, including the Jews. He had high hopes for the future of his people in America.

My father, Benjamin Liphshitz (photo 2), was one of the young men who came for dinner each evening. At the time Benjamin was living with his sister, Lifsha, in Philadelphia. Benjamin was born in a small town in Ukraine in 1885. His mother died giving birth to him; afterward, Lifsha, who was twelve or thirteen years old when he was born, raised him in his early childhood. Some years later Lifsha moved to America and married a widower with four children, subsequently giving birth to four children of her own. When Benjamin was about 15 years old he left Ukraine and came to Philadelphia to join his sister’s household. With her large family it was very crowded and he had to sleep on the floor.

Benjamin would have had much to discuss with my Grandpa Saul. Benjamin’s hopes were to help transform the Jewish masses who came mainly from Eastern Europe to the United States. His goal was to redirect these young adults away from settling into the squalor and poverty of the large cities along the Atlantic Coast, and to persuade them to go west, back to the land. Here they would find a better life; this would be their salvation. My grandfather was aware that he himself would probably never be able to carry out any of these ideas. However, he could encourage Benjamin to do so and hopefully realize some of his own dreams through this idealistic young man.

During this time period, my father was working for a farmer by the name of Brown, who lived outside of Philadelphia. Because Benjamin was always talking about his employer and mentor, people started referring to Benjamin as “Little Brown.” He learned extensively about farming, both with hands-on work and through the agricultural classes he attended regularly. Subsequently, because he so admired his employer, he took “Brown” for his legal last name.

Along with others who believed as he did, he became committed to starting an agricultural colony for Jewish immigrants. He contacted the Jewish Agricultural Society in New York for funding for a colony. He also had discussions with members in the Baron de Hirsch Fund, which was supported by wealthy, high-society Jews in the eastern United States. This group was eager to send the poor immigrant Jews into western farming states, partly for humanitarian reasons but also, I surmise, to get them out of the way. Thus began months of discussion and search for those who might wish to be part of an agricultural colony.
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Many states were interested in having such a colony, which might thereby increase their population. However, offers from the state of Utah seemed most promising. After months of discussion, Benjamin, along with some professional advisors, decided to locate the colony on a designated area of land in Sanpete County in central Utah, near the town of Gunnison.

When Benjamin was enjoying those evening suppers at Grandmother Sophie’s table, he became aware of the two older daughters living in the home. Dora, who had come to the United States earlier with her father, was then 21 years old. She was rather unattractive and visibly nervous, always twisting a part of her hair. On the other hand, she was very bright and intellectual; she was attending school to become a nurse and later worked for many years as a children’s nurse for the City of New York. This was somewhat unusual for an immigrant girl to achieve. Along with grandfather, Dora enjoyed listening to Benjamin and was very intrigued by his ideals and developing plans.

Clara, my mother (photo 1), was two years younger than Dora. She was taller, very pretty, and had a beautiful singing voice. She was interested in flowers and whatever beauty she could create in the dismal area where they lived. She also loved to laugh. Many years later Fanny, a friend of my mother’s, would tell me stories of their youth. She related how their friends always insisted Clara come along with them to dances for the immigrants, because she invariably attracted a group of young men around her.

Ultimately and unfortunately, both daughters fell in love with Benjamin (photo 4)—and he chose Clara. This resulted in a severe and life-long enmity between my mother and my aunt. Each became increasingly jealous of the other. Dora never married, but had a successful career, a modern apartment, and the freedom to travel; Clara had a husband, children, and considerable emotional turmoil in her life.

Although Clara fell in love with Benjamin, she did not have the dreams or ambitions for the masses that he did. She followed him simply out of love. She was meant to be a lady, to have an easy life, to sing and to nourish her beauty. Early in their marriage she gave birth to two children: Israel, “Bib” my older brother, who was born in Detroit on June 6, 1908, and me, born in Philadelphia in September 11, 1909 (photos 3 and 6).

During these early years of their marriage, preparations for the agricultural colony in Utah were being completed. In 1911, my family moved to central Utah along with many other young Jewish families, including Benjamin’s younger half-brother, Nathan. He came with his wife and child directly from Ukraine to be a part of this group of cooperative farmers. The colony was named “Clarion,” which means “call.” Thus the name became a clear call to the participants to come “back to the land.” Their hope was that successful farm ownership would not only increase self-confidence in the young farmers but would generally promote greater acceptance of Jews, if only in central Utah as a start.

When I was about three, the colony was at its height. My father spoke some English, as did my mother, but mainly Yiddish was spoken in the colony and it was my first language. One day there was a picnic. Several children were crowded into the back of a buggy. One child moved and caused me to fall to the ground. I hurt my lip and was bleeding from my mouth. (I still have a little lump on the inside of my lip.) Of course everyone was greatly concerned that I might have been badly hurt. But it was just a split lip. For days following the accident my father lovingly kept asking me, “How is your lippilla?” My answer was always, “Ich kan nischt reden veil mine lippilla teit
mir veh.” “I can’t talk because my little lip hurts too much.” He used to tell this story, with considerable amusement, for years afterwards. This memory of my father’s adoration of me was perhaps the inception point for a life-long adoration I had for him.

At age five I was very eager to learn to read, even though I knew I couldn’t go to school until the following year. Several times Bib brought home a book from his first-grade class and would read a few pages over and over to show me how well he was doing. Meanwhile, I memorized the story from the pictures and later showed my father that I knew how to read as well as Bib. I was continually trying to emulate Bib and to be equal to him. But once when he was on the school stage in a guessing contest, I knew I could never duplicate that particular talent. One boy asked Bib what was in his pocket. After many guesses, Bib finally hit on the right answer—a hole! I couldn’t figure out how Bib was so smart.

Life was harsh, living in a little wooden cabin with no electricity, insulation, or running water. I can remember Mother bathing Bib and me in the muddy water of the ditch behind the cabin. The colony had perhaps fifty families and the land was divided into forty-acre plots that were assigned one to each family. Dirt roads between the plots were developed in a kind of grid pattern. The cabins of four farms would be built near each other at their common road intersection, thus creating a four-family “neighborhood.” One of the cabins next to ours was that of the Horowitz family. Mrs. Horowitz was actively engaged in the affairs of the colony while her husband worked on the land. Often she would leave her two boys in the care of my mother.

Every two families in these four-family “neighborhoods” shared a two-sided outhouse. I can remember many times that I would be sitting on our side of the outhouse and at the same time Johnny Horowitz, who was about two years older than I, would be sitting in his family’s side. We would have fun carrying on conversations and passing the time singing songs together. Many years later, when I was a high school senior in Los Angeles (photo 9) and he was a Harvard student, John and I had a brief crush on each other.

Because we had so few neighbors who actually lived near our cabin, and because the neighbor women often participated in the colony’s plans, Mother was very lonely. Father was off to many meetings and trips, always being greatly admired by the community. Some actually referred to him as the “Little Moses,” leading his people to a better life. Consumed with his mission, he did not often share his ideals and hopes with Mother. Most of the time when they were together Mother focused on her hardships and deprivations, her only joy being her two little children.

In the colony there were two unmarried brothers. They had an unmarried sister in New York, Annie, who had tuberculosis. The brothers induced Annie to come to the colony because at that time it was felt that the dry climate in Utah would help her tubercular condition. Annie became enamored of the colony and also of Benjamin and his ideals. As the months went on, a relationship developed between them; subsequently, she became pregnant by my father Benjamin.

My mother was thoroughly humiliated and devastated by my father’s affair with Annie. I was about five years old and unaware of this tragedy going on around me. At the same time, the colony had begun to develop some agricultural as well as many financial difficulties, and with the revelation of Father’s affair with Annie, these troubles only increased. He became, in the eyes of a large number of the members, someone who had