

A Lifetime of Resilience

While I don't dwell on the bygone days, looking at my life today affirms my belief that because of the good parts of our past lives, we become who we are in the process of ever evolving.



The author's family, about 1937. From left Judith (Dita), Mendi Gelber, the author (age 4), Fani Turkfeld Gelber (Courtesy Dr. Erica Miller)

By Dr. Erica Miller

I am not, by nature, someone who spends a lot of time in the past. And for good reason: When I was seven years old, my parents, sister, and I were whisked away to the Nazi camps in Mohyliv-Podilska, Ukraine, during World War II. Miraculously, we all survived. For that reason, I like to say the past is gone, but when I look back, I am reminded how strong I became because of, and perhaps

despite of it. The four years I spent in the camps made me a capable, resilient and determined child. During and after my incarceration, I willed myself to be tough for my parents and sister and discovered my yearning to be a healer and protector — all by age eleven.

Having endured the brutality and unspeakably horrifying conditions in the camps didn't stop me from being curious

and thirsty to prove my worth. But my path was not one many survivors could follow. My sister, Dita, struggled with recollections of the camp. My father had barely survived. My mother was stoic and resilient — traits I incorporated and cherish to this day. My version of resilience was not the same — I pushed the envelope and always did the unexpected.

After being liberated from the camps by the Russians in 1944, my family and I returned to Romania, where I went to school for the first time at age twelve. As a short female Jew in a Catholic school — with a thick German accent to boot—I was unique. My happiest memories are surprisingly for the times that affirmed my uniqueness and drive to achieve what others said couldn't be done. That belief system shaped my adult life.

I was good at math, and I was smart. “Does anyone in the class know about Newton’s theory of gravity?” the teacher asked one day. I raised my hand. After writing the correct formula on the blackboard, I knew right then that education was my future (and maybe the first hint of my eventual Ph.D.). Another memory from that school was going to a friend’s house, where her mother had just made some *challah*. Any whiff of freshly baked *challah* today will take me back to those happy days.

When the Romanian government gave us permission to leave the country in 1947, my older sister traveled with many other Holocaust survivors to Israel (then Palestine) on the ship “Exodus.” My parents and I followed her in 1949.

My next proud memory was enrolling in high school in Tel Aviv at age fifteen. I worked two jobs during the day (in a cardboard box assembly line and as a receptionist in a music school) to feed our family and then went to school at night. I was one of the few girls in the school because education was deemed less necessary for girls than for boys.

After earning a diploma, I was ready for the next step: military service — a mandatory requirement for boys and girls in Israel unless the

girls were married or Orthodox. I wanted to serve my country and join the military’s most prestigious and elite branch, the Israeli Air Force. My parents didn’t support this goal because they were sure I’d never find a husband if I was too smart and independent.

I don’t remember what made me think I could get into the Air Force since they were very selective, yet I was accepted. It was exhilarating. But at the same time, it was physically and mentally challenging. We endured basic training, learned how to shoot guns, throw hand grenades (scary!), and handle Uzi submachine guns. Because of my high school diploma, the Air Force put me in charge of the inventory for the airplanes, special rations for pilots, and all the equipment they needed to function effectively. My schooling had paid off (again), and those two years in the Air Force still bring warm memories of youth, energy, excitement, and dedication to a purpose.

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Courtesy Erica Miller

As a young adult, I had learned to speak Russian, Romanian, Hebrew, my native German, and some English, all of which helped me land a prestigious position as a guide in the Israeli Government Tourist Information Office (in Tel Aviv) from 1956 to 1958. Our office helped visitors with their sightseeing schedules and assured that tour companies met our high standards. Those were exciting times, and I enjoyed dressing the part and experiencing the nightlife in Tel Aviv.

Toward the end of that job, I traveled to Naples, Venice, Rome, Vienna, and London before heading to New York and then to Los Angeles in 1958 to visit my sister. My intent was only to vacation there because I believed very strongly that all Jews belonged in Israel, my homeland, to which I was fiercely loyal. But fate had different plans for me.

I soon fell in love with Los Angeles and viewed it as the land of opportunity. Finding a husband was the first step in making the commitment to stay in California. After a series of comical and off-putting matchmaker mistakes, I met Jerry Miller, and we were married on June 5, 1960. The wedding almost didn't happen because of a (now) hilarious chain of miscommunications, not the least of which was that my groom, who waited two hours for me to arrive (my chauffeur got lost), didn't understand one word of the ceremony, which was conducted in Hebrew and Yiddish.

These and other cultural differences made our first few years together a little rocky, but we worked it out. I went to American Jewish University and received a certificate to teach Hebrew. While it was apparently not the norm for an American wife to work at that time, it was important to me.

With the help of a loan from my parents in Israel, Jerry and I bought a small home. And in 1961, we convinced them to come to the United States when our daughter, Diana, was about six months old. They lived with us and took care of Diana, which allowed me to go to school to ultimately attain my Ph.D., a lifelong dream that had brought me to the United States. We eventually paid back the loan my parents made, but what they gave us was more than money. By being so close to both their daughters in the United States, they helped make us a family. And by the time my second child, Johnny, was born in 1964, we had all settled into our lives.

When I first came to the United States, I felt like a traitor to my former homeland. I used to be very judgmental toward Israelis who left for faraway places to make new and easier lives for themselves abroad. I

even had nightmares and refused to become an American citizen. But my attitude finally changed with our family's achievements, and I began to live my life with purpose and vigor, really experiencing this land where dreams came true as a place where we could all thrive. I became an American citizen in 1969.



Courtesy Erica Miller

And in 1978, I finally earned my Ph.D. It wouldn't have been possible without my parents and my supportive husband, who stuck by me through thick and thin. And while our family was finally successful (both of my kids would go to law school), there were moments along the way that we experienced anti-Semitism. Life in the United States wasn't perfect. Still, it was better than any other place I had been, and I am grateful for every day that I am here.

In the past, I was not much for nostalgia. But I think I've changed my mind. While I don't dwell on the bygone days, looking at my life today affirms my belief that because of the good parts of our past lives, we become who we are in the process of ever evolving.

Dr. Erica Miller is a Holocaust survivor, entrepreneur, mental health professional and world traveler. Her three books are: [“Chronologically Gifted: Aging with Gusto,”](#) [“Don't Tell Me I Can't Do It: Living Audaciously in the Here and Now,”](#) and [“The Dr. Erica Miller Story: From Trauma to Triumph.”](#)