I’ve been motherless for almost 10 years, but I occasionally listen to recordings of my mother, Marcia Goodfriend, just to hear her voice. I especially love Mom telling the story of the organ grinder’s monkey jumping onto her head and clinging to her hair when she was 5. The best part is my mother laughing hysterically while trying to describe this momentous event.

During my 25 years of conducting oral history interviews, I’ve heard about hundreds of mothers — the fabulous, the absent, the affectionate, the adventurous, the nagging, the generous and the inspiring. What follows are excerpts from some of the stories I’ve been privileged to record.

Grandma’s Door Was Always Open

My father, Robert Goldhamer, was born in 1918. His maternal grandparents, Leba and David Klein, and his aunt, Helen Klein, lived with his family from the time he was born, so it was quite a full house.

“During the Depression, there were many homeless, jobless men who were drifting around the country. We referred to them as ‘bums.’ They were unshaven, dirty and unkempt. Often, when I would come home from high school in the afternoon, I’d find my tiny grandmother in our
kitchen with two of these men seated at the table. Grandma would be serving them meat, potatoes, vegetables, soup, dessert and a beverage. She did this with absolutely no fear for herself or the house. There was apparently a sign on our gate that meant ‘good food.’ They would come to the back door and knock. Grandma would let them in, serve them, and they would leave. She didn’t speak English, so there was little conversation, but she knew what they wanted and she gave it.

My mother would come home from work and find men sitting at the kitchen table with her mother. Mom was very upset to have these wild-looking strangers in her house when Grandma was alone. When she asked my grandmother how she could let these men in the house, all Grandma would say was that the poor men were hungry.”

A Natural-born Leader

August Maymudes’ mother, Golde Kusher Maymudes, was born in 1903, in what is now Poland. She came to America with her family in her late teens and met her husband, Abraham Maymudes, at a union meeting. They moved west to Boyle Heights, where August, his brother and sister grew up.

The word that comes to me about my mother is ‘stoic.’ She just did what had to be done without question or hesitation. She was never undecided; she always knew what to do — at home, in her work and in organizations she belonged to.

To make extra money, she worked as a machine operator in the ladies’ garment industry. She was a leader, both in terms of her skills on a sewing machine and her
ability to handle conflicts. Everyone else had one chore to do — sew a buttonhole or make a sleeve or a collar — but my mother was a model maker, which meant that she sewed the entire garment. She wasn’t modest; she was totally blind to the fact that she was at a higher skill level than others.

She was a natural union leader for the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union. She would speak up to the boss to demand toilet breaks or better ventilation or a longer lunchtime. She never progressed in the union because she never campaigned to be an officer — she just did whatever was needed. She was highly respected and very active. I remember, as a child, often helping her send out union mailings. At 60 years old, my mother was suddenly nominated and elected president of the Emma Lazarus Society. She’d been a member for 40 or 50 years and didn’t aspire for office, but this occurred simply because she was so highly respected.

My primary memory of my mother was that, good or bad, she accepted whatever fate put in front of her.”

An Unexpected Seat at the Wedding Banquet

Sophie Hayeem Miller was born in 1934 in the Jewish community of Bombay, India (now Mumbai). Her mother, Emma Sassoon Hayeem, had a tremendous influence on Sophie and her five siblings.

“My mother was a Baghdadi Jew who was brought to India to marry my father, a lawyer in Bombay. Women in general were treated as property. My mother was trained to cook, cater to her husband’s needs, have children, raise them as Jews and oversee the household.

My mother’s native language was Arabic. She didn’t learn English until we children began to teach her. We would tease her about the way she spoke English with her lovely accent. I remember she could not say the word ‘spectacles.’ When my father asked for his spectacles, we would find them for her to give to him. She would hand them to him and say, ‘Here, Hayeem, put on your testicles.’ We always had fun with our multilingual background.

There were six of us children, and while growing up, we never had enough cookies, ice cream and other desserts that are so readily available to children growing up in this country. We considered ourselves ‘deprived,’ and I believe we were correct. If we knew there was a Parsee (Zoroastrian) wedding nearby at Mongini, an Italian confectionery hall that catered weddings on the premises, my mother would take us to gaze at the desserts from the outside. To us, this was sheer ecstasy, and we would stand outside Mongini’s and drool!
One day, my mother told us to dress in our finer clothes, and she took all six children to see an actual wedding at Mongini’s. She said, ‘We’re not going inside the hall. We’re just going to look from outside.’ But, when we were standing there, someone at the door asked her, ‘Are you from the bride’s side or the groom’s side?’ Though surprised, she calmly said, ‘The bride’s side.’ We were motioned in to sit on the left side of the hall with the bride’s party. We were given delicious Indian ice cream and wedding cake! We sat in our seats and displayed our best etiquette. ‘Please’ and ‘thank you’ were on our lips in between every mouthful. My mother was a very ‘proper’ lady. She put on her best British air and, as soon as we finished eating, she said, ‘We have to go now. Thank you.’ She then shook hands with everybody and took us all home. What a party we had!”

Born with Mom’s Funny Bone

Gladys Sturman, co-publisher of Western States Jewish History Journal, laughed a great deal during our interview. As she talked about her mother, Rose Mitzman Freiman, it became clear that her sense of humor was probably genetic.

“My mother was born Rachel Mitzenmacher in 1897 in a village between what is now Poland and Ukraine. They lived in a one-room house with a dirt floor and thatched roof, and the six children slept on the top of the oven. They were dirt poor. My mother had no education in the old country. She could read Yiddish but not write it.
When she was 13, my mother came to America with her father. They lived in separate boarding houses for 10 cents a week and her landlady served sardines every night, which must have been inexpensive then. Once they were here, my mother’s name became Rose Mitzman. She worked in a factory, sewing buttons for 10 cents a day. It was a hard life.

My mother always struggled with English and never learned to read. Since she couldn’t read my report card, I used to joke that I could tell her that F and D stood for ‘fine and dandy.’

She developed colon cancer when she was 50, and she suffered with it for 13 years. When we first learned she had cancer, we were all sitting in the living room crying. She’s looking at us, and she says, ‘Why are you crying? Kings die. Presidents die. What? Did you think I wasn’t going to die?’

She was in a tremendous amount of pain at the end, but she somehow had a sense of humor about it. That’s the kind of unusual woman my mother was.

I know my parents loved each other very much. My father took care of her every minute and never left her side. I remember she would tell him, ‘When I die, I want you to go out with Molly Friedman. She’ll be good for you. But don’t wear that terrible brown jacket! And don’t laugh that loud way you laugh!’

He didn’t listen to her instructions, and he didn’t go out with Molly Friedman. He married my husband’s Aunt Tilly instead.”

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