

FELICIA BRILL



Three doctors, three midwives, aunts, uncles and grandparents attended Felicia Sussman's birth in Vienna, Austria.

Meanwhile, Felicia's mother, Giselle Sussman, never forgave her own mother for leaving Vienna to be with family in Poland for Giselle's birth. "Being from Poland was like a stigma," Felicia says. Viennese Jews were very chauvinistic." Moreover, Giselle's Polish birth certificate hindered the family's efforts to immigrate to the United States in 1938.

Felicia's grandfather, a Polish Jew whose ancestors had emigrated from Turkey to Poland, owned three stores near the Sussmans' apartment. "He was the one who instilled love of Yiddishkeit [Jewish culture] in me," Felicia says. "He babysat for me, and when I started school, he bought me a leather satchel and told me I could be a doctor with it."

The Sussmans' three-bedroom apartment was fancy by Viennese standards during the Depression. Felicia had a nanny. Her mother, a former legal secretary, had household help. Her father, Julius Sussman, traveled with his chauffeur during the week, representing a Norwegian animal-feed company. On Sundays, Felicia's 40 aunts, uncles and cousins generally gathered at her grandparents' home.

Felicia played piano, learned ballet, sang in a choir, belonged to Youth Aliyah and went to opera, theatre and movies. She made her first Jewish friends in Hebrew school. The Sussmans belonged to a Conservative synagogue. Felicia's grandmother would not eat in their home because Julius Sussman refused to keep kosher.

Felicia was 12 when her gymnasium teacher, wearing a swastika in his lapel, accused her of cheating and hit her with a book. Felicia studied in a Jewish school, where she hoped eventually to teach, until 1938 when the Nazis turned it into an office for the SS. Felicia was 16 when her father – and later she and her mother – escaped to Prague. Ultimately, Julius Sussman died in Treblinka. Giselle Sussman committed suicide in England nine months after giving birth to a son.

Felicia made her way to Portugal. In 1942, a visa from a distant relative enabled her to reach Ecuador. There, she supported herself as a dressmaker, nanny and nurse and met her future husband, Victor Brill, a refugee artist from Germany. They were married in 1949 by a justice of the peace in an outdoor ceremony. Their son, Danny, was a year old when Felicia's uncle in Chicago sent an affidavit for them to come to America.

Victor Brill found work as a commercial artist. Felicia managed stores, sold insurance and worked for the government. She and Victor, who passed away in 1995, have two sons, Dr. Raymond J. Brill in Kansas City and Daniel A. Brill in Toronto, and two grandchildren. The Brills moved to Kansas City in 1989 to be near Ray.

Of all her experiences, Felicia says the loss of her mother affected her most: "She was only 22 years older than me. We were so close, like sisters."



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein

Excerpt from *From the Heart: Life Before and After the Holocaust ~ A Mosaic of Memories*

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