

Helen Slater Zager Autobiography

Written by Helen around 2006, covering her early life up to marriage to Dan.

Before I Was Born

A large ship passed the statute of liberty and docked at Ellis Island. The long and arduous trip from Europe was crowded with excited immigrants, among them my dad, Harry Pultsoff. He had hitchhiked across Europe from Russia to avoid military service. He worked in many small farming communities to earn enough to keep moving on. It was 1899, and my dad was 19 years old.

I know nothing about his learning the American language, but I heard lots about his getting a room in which to live in Philadelphia. It was across the street from a factory where he immediately got a job fixing the sewing machines. He knew nothing about the work, but a newfound friend taught him each step of the process. He quickly learned that most employees of the factory were immigrants, and had no food available to them during the workday. Somehow, he got the essential equipment into his one room and cooked chicken and chicken soup all night for the workers. I don't know how they found out about it, but they flocked to buy his culinary delights for 15 cents per person. He continued to work at the factory all day, bought more chickens after work and started cooking. All the immigrants worked 10 hours a day, 6 days a week.

Some time after achieving his cooking business success he decided to move out of the room, and keep it only as a mini restaurant. It was in the course of his hunting for a new room, that he met my mother, Lena Rosenthal. She was the oldest child of the Rosenthal family. Her father had a stationery store. He was a tall husky man, but his wife, Sarah was just 5 ft. tall. The Rosenthal's had a room to let, which my dad rented. He always said, "the room wasn't special, but I had my eye on that oldest daughter."

He had a difficult time convincing my mother that he was the man for her. He bought her ice cream, which she had never tasted. He offered to take her to all the events of the day, but she often refused. Finally she told him that she was a college educated American, and marrying an immigrant was out of the question. But he won her over. He promised her that he would buy her a house of her own. She knew no other young woman who lived in a house that she owned.

Finally, in 1909 they married, almost 10 years after they had met. They went house hunting and bought the promised house. He also got my mother her own bank account. Every five years or so from that time on, Lena got a new house. The houses got bigger, and she became an expert in remodeling them. She also changed the family name from Pultsoff to Palsov.

My Arrival

Harry and Lena had three daughters, of which I was the youngest. Mazie was born in 1910, Libbie in 1914 and Helen in 1920. Dad always said he loved all his daughters, and never cared about having a son. Two other teenage girls lived with us for many years named Leah and Doris Schwartz who were older than all of us. Their parents had died in a train accident. Dad loved having all these women around.

Early Memories

I must have been under five (still not allowed to cross the street) when I visited the grocery store around the corner from where we lived on 29th street in the Strawberry Mansion section of Philadelphia. The owner of the store was a Mr. Fox, and he was one of my most welcoming and sweet friends. Along with food, he sold single sheets of paper for coloring. I think they cost a penny each. I remember one picture of a house with lots of windows, one of an airplane and one of a bowl of roses. I would visit him with my penny, and he would bring out all my choices. If there was one sheet that was bent, he would give that to me for free. I was so thrilled. I would take my pictures home and work on them until they were finished. The next day I would go back to show my finished coloring and he would praise my work.

One day I walked around the corner to see my friend and the shades were drawn over the windows. There was a note on the door but I couldn't read it. I ran home and my sister Mazie came back with me to read the sign. It told of the death of Mr. Fox. I was horrified. Mazie told me a little about death, but I wasn't satisfied. I went back to the store again, and peeked through the slits uncovered on the windows. I wanted to see if Mr. Fox was dead, but he was nowhere to be seen. I asked everyone in the family for more information, but never could believe that I would never see him again. It was my first experience with death.

My dad always worked 6 and sometimes 7 days a week. I always sat on the step in the front of the house waiting for him to come home on the streetcar. He would hug and kiss me, and make me so happy. He always brought me a little something. Sometimes it was a tiny piece of halva, or perhaps a miniscule piece of chocolate. I think they were leftovers from his lunch. I could do no wrong in my dad's eyes. He was my constant defender. My mother was the strict law enforcer.

The only time I remember going out with my dad alone was at Christmas time. We didn't really celebrate Christmas but he always took me downtown to see the decorations that I truly loved. He also bought me a new doll. The other children in the family weren't taken along. I felt so special. One year he bought me my most favorite doll named Patsy by the manufacturer. She moved with me for the rest of my life. When my beautiful baby girl was born, of course I named her Patsy. I was living in California by then. My Philadelphia friends sent telegrams of congratulations, and they all said they knew the baby's name without being told. It had to be Patsy.

One of my most exciting times was starting school. How I waited for that day. Our house faced a street that ended a block away. Every day I would sit and watch all the children going to school and wishing I could go with them. Jules Segal who was a close family friend came and took me to school. But I wasn't old enough. Somehow my mother had a birth certificate for me that said I was a year old than I really was. I started school living the age lie, and carried it with me through high school. I never forgave my mother for that. I graduated from high school the month I turned 16! The authorities thought I was 17, like the other graduates.

School Days

I have few recollections of my elementary school days. I think I liked recess the best. I remember the gatherings of all the students in the outside yard. The principal, Miss

Yerkes would talk to us from the top of the slide. All the little boys would gather under the place where she stood, high above us. They were always trying to look under her skirt to see her underpants.

We moved from the Strawberry Mansion section to Wynnefield. It was a wealthier area with gardens. My mother was delighted with the dozens of different flower bulbs that she could plant. I remember having two little friends, and one had a white fur coat. I was so envious.

By the time I was in junior high we had moved to a still bigger house in an even fancier neighborhood. I made lots of new friends, some of whom I have today. We started a club, the Shim-Sham-Pal-Kohn-Stein club. The Shim was for Grace Schimmel, Sham for Doris Shamberlin, Pal was my Palsov, Kohn for Ruth Kohn and Stein for Esther Goldstein. Esther died from something I don't remember in her 20's after writing six cookbooks. Grace married a rich doctor, Ruth married Henry Kaplan who joined her father's false teeth manufacturing company and Doris married Leo Kingston who was a VP of Bell Helicopter from whom she regularly stole money. She claimed he never gave her any money so had no choice. This all sounds vaguely like the YaYa Sisterhood, (one of last year's best selling books).

We had wonderful times together. We went to the movies Friday nights and into downtown Philadelphia shopping on Saturday afternoons. At 16 Ruth got her own new convertible, and somehow we all fit into it. We had lots of parties at our houses with the neighborhood boys, but we girls were much more interested in each other than we were the boys.

The girls considered me the luckiest of all, because I always had some money. My dad's theory was that a child could only learn to handle money, if they had some to spend. So, I always had an allowance usually more than the rest of my group. I was very cautious spending it. I was always saving for something.

As I got further into my teenage years, I became disgusted with my family. Though they were active in the synagogue, their behavior was less and less consistent. They went to Friday night services but came home and played bridge, which was not appropriate behavior. I went to Sunday school but questioned everything the teachers said, and was constantly sent to the rabbi's office. He was never angry with me, and instead we became friends. He was always interested in my questioning of religion. He could never convince me that it was important to be religious, or that God was important in one's life.

High School was fun. I was involved in various productions in the drama department and after school clubs. I walked to Overbrook High School, about 5 miles, in all kinds of weather. We even had to walk over a long railroad bridge with no railings. We were always laughing about how we might be blown off the bridge into one of the railroad cars below.

Since Ruth had a car, we started playing hookie every couple of months. We went to Atlantic City, 60 miles away several times, went to the movies, and drove to strange neighborhoods we had never seen and other adventures. Grace never came with us. She was the only "A" student among us, and she was much more motivated toward success.

My home life was not wonderful. Mazie got married when I was 11, and moved out with Ben, her new husband. The next year she had this wonder baby who was the joy of my life. My life experience had never included an infant, and I was totally smitten. But the house without Mazie was different for me. She had always been my big defender against Libbie who was cruel to me. By this time Libbie was a big teenager and had boyfriends. She constantly made fun of me when they visited and told them how stupid and ugly I was. I visited Mazie at her new apartment, and watched her wonder baby Larry grow. I was sure there was never another baby in the world as special as he. Mazie's apartment was a haven for me. I could visit whenever I chose and avoid sister Libbie.

Leaving Home

With my friends I learned many things about going away to college, and the application process. I never discussed college with my family and after I was accepted at Penn State College, the sky fell in for me. My father wouldn't allow me to leave home. He never suggested it would be bad for me; only that it would be too hard for him. I was heartbroken.

Every year starting at age 6, I went to summer camp and that summer I went with my broken heart. I had a large group of friends there that I had known for many summers. I also had a good boyfriend, Phil who introduced me to a student going to the Philadelphia School of Design. I loved the idea of going there too. I took a whole semester to produce a portfolio, and by some miracle was accepted into the Dress Design department.

The first surprise of the school was going downtown every day to attend classes from 8am to 6pm. We had few choices of classes the first two years. Those assigned to us were the most uninteresting to me, because they were so technical. We had only one painting class but lots of instruction in fabrics, colors, and all the details of dress designing. Our classes were small and the teachers apparently were all professionals who were out of work. The course of study seemed haphazard and jumped around without much logic. The saving grace was my fellow students. Although they were all older than me, some were actually ten years older and attending the school so they could change careers. They were very interesting people. The men appeared to all be gay and the women very bohemian. The students made up all kinds of projects to pursue while we were "studying". A favorite was that you should come to class in one piece of fabric draped around yourself with only a single safety pin holding it together.

We did learn the basics of pattern drafting and perspective. Both were very technical and not interesting to me. We had little contact with the more advanced students so some of us would hide in the closets of the upper grades to find out what they were doing. There were no attendance records kept and by the second month half the class came only part time. I had my father watching over me so I did what I was supposed to do.

Many of the students were much more advanced and experienced than I was. They had previous art educations and had more savvy about the world, and the design field. However, I learned a lot from them, and several became good friends.

Off to the Big City

At the end of the second year, we went on a class trip to New York City over Labor Day weekend. We had two rooms for about twenty of us. We went through the clothing

manufacturing center in downtown and our guides told us how horrible it was to work in the city. They apparently had done no designing and were really messengers for the designers. Nobody seemed to care what they thought and their years of schooling had been a total waste. It was not what we wanted to hear.

Sunday morning we got the NY Times. The lead write up in the wearing apparel section was a big spread about a woman named Margit Neilsen. She had a huge workshop of artists and they made and dressed miniature fashion dolls for advertising agencies to use in displays. I knew that was what I wanted to do. Everyone dared me to go and apply for a job, so I did. I got a job but a fellow who went with me didn't. I was ecstatic, but told the interviewer that I couldn't start for ten days because I had to go home and get my supplies and clothes. (And convince my father that I could get along alone in New York.) My father was more pleased with the idea than I projected, but he said I would have to live with my Aunt Elizabeth, if she agreed. Fortunately, she did. I had spent numerous school vacations with her and we had a great relationship.

I was crazy excited. I neglected to ask how much the salary was. But they did give me a little booklet telling me all about the work, the hours and the conditions. You had to work 44 or 46 hours a week in any way you chose. For example, if you could stay awake for 44 hours you could work them consecutively or you could work 11 hours for 4 days. Since I had to go home every weekend, four days were perfect. The studio was open continuously.

The studio occupied three huge floors in an office building on 14th St. Very conveniently; 14th St. was a stop on the subway. Perfect. My aunt and uncle lived on 125th and Broadway, and one train ride would take me to work. I gathered up all of my supplies and headed for work 7 days after my interview. My design school friends turned green with envy.

My aunt provided me with a cardboard hatbox in which I was to carry all my work supplies. I had my own scissors, small and large, needle nose jewelry pliers, pencils, drawing pad and much more. I had to leave home at 7am and what a shock I had when I saw the subway. It was jam-packed. When the door opened the people behind me pushed so hard I was in the car before I knew it. The doors shut, and as they did I heard my hat box smash and all of my supplies spilled to the floor. It was so crowded, there was no room to bend down and try to pick them up. What a horror. As the train arrived in downtown the cars started to empty, and some remaining passengers helped me gather my things since many had rolled around. A man took his lunch sandwich out of its bag and put it in his pocket so he could give me his bag.

By the time I arrived at 14th street I was ready to start my career. I loved working at Margit Nielsen. The studio was full of famous painters and designers that I had read about in magazines. Everyone was friendly and always willing to help. The adjustment was easy. I was in charge of accessories for the little mannequins and most things I could make with wire and a few twists. Hats were easy to make because felt could be glued and painted any color.

Because people worked such different schedules, there was a pulley on the ceiling, and hanging from it were clothespins with workers names attached. Several people showed me how to make my nametags and a young energetic guy climbed up on the table and

attached them. If you needed information from someone you sent them a note on their clothespin on the pulley, and they would answer in the same manner. Jokes were sent around on the pulley, you could be asked out to lunch or a break. Some workers were always asking to borrow a buck. Our lunch usually cost less than 50 cents.

This was September 1938 and I was the happiest 18 year old in city. By the time spring came, I was sick of the routine, and when my contract came from the summer camp I had always attended, I called home. What was I to do? I had attended that camp for many years, and had a great job waiting to teach crafts and make stage sets. I was tired of being indoors so much of the time. I signed the contract and quit my job.

I had my usual summer camp experience including time with a camp boyfriend that I had since I was 12 and we worked well as a team. By the end of the summer I was satisfied to stay at home and rest up! My parents were both happy to have me at home again, and I got all sorts of special privileges with the car.

I was not thrilled about going to work anywhere immediately, but everyone was pushing me in that direction. Mine was not a family where she sat around and rested unless you were terribly sick. So, I started interviewing for all sorts of jobs. I soon found one that seemed interesting though I was totally unqualified. But, I GOT THE JOB!

I went to work for an organization called the Golden Slipper Square Club in Philadelphia. It was staffed by men who were high-level members of the Fraternal Order of Masons. My job was to do the artwork on their fundraising catalogue. It looked simple; though I had never worked on printing layouts, type size, etc. I spent a half-day with the printer, and since he was anxious to retain this big order, he taught me the job. Members of the organization contributed huge amounts of money (in the thousands, so that they would be viewed as being rich and successful). It was simple to satisfy the groups needs. Since the volunteers working on the catalogue changed every year, they were as new to publishing as I was. It was fun. The men were very easy to work with and the projected goal of raising mega-thousands of dollars was easily reached.

It wasn't long before various committee chairmen asked me to take over their work. What they wanted most was to have lots of meetings and programs that would entertain them. But the paper work mounted and after they gave me the check books and authority to write and sign checks up to \$5000 I told them that I needed some assistance. I hired two young women who knew all the bookkeeping routines that I knew nothing about. I could come and go as I wished, and with a wallet filled with my first earnings, I felt very successful.

I learned that the group provided a loan opportunity for members to open a new business. There was no interest on the money they borrowed for many years. It all seemed too good to be true, and that proved to be the fact. For example, if a member wanted to open a neighborhood pharmacy, he could borrow the money to buy the building and outfit the store. And many men did just that. However, the members did not agree to refrain from opening a competing store across the street. And so, in a short time, some poor members landed in bankruptcy court. It took me a while, but I finally realized that the rich member's businesses had no integrity and I could do nothing to change the situation. During my tenure there, the whole program collapsed. There were seven major store chains in the Philadelphia area, and the CEO of each belonged to the club.

There were always a few members who spent lots of time in the office, and several of them were more than a little attentive to me. But only one proved to be a really good friend, Larry Horowitz. He was in the midst of a divorce and had 2 small sons. He was 31, and since I was only 20, I thought him middle aged. But he had a great personality, and showed me a world I didn't know existed. He often treated me to some fancy lunch, and in a few months we were dating. At that time the club sponsored an officer's club at the YMHA. I was put in charge of that, but only went once or twice a week and found volunteers to do the work.

Larry and I saw every show, movie, attended every concert and ate in every special restaurant between Philadelphia and New York. But I knew from the beginning that this was a temporary situation for me. I disliked Larry's arrogance. He never ordered from the menu. He would order whatever he chose to eat and the chef would make it for him. He would never wait in line. He always slipped somebody a twenty-dollar bill and we got into the club or restaurant immediately. I was amazed at his total involvement in every Jewish organization. He contributed so much money that he was always feted with testimonial dinners but I never went to any of them.

As time went on, I was feeling too confined. I wanted out of the relationship and he threatened all sorts of horrible things, like suicide. But get out I did. Larry's cousin was suffering from a severe depression. She was Helen Greenspan, a few years older than I and Larry asked me if she could spend her days in the club office with me. Her husband worked for Larry, and they were very involved, so I agreed. After one year, Helen Greenspan's psychiatrist suggested that she leave Philadelphia for a while to see if she could be on her own. The doctor, Sid and Larry scheduled a meeting with me, and I learned of the plan. So, Larry paid for Helen G and me to take a one-month trip across the country by train.

Meeting Dan Slater

A month or so before the trip, a blind date had been arranged for me by my good friends Grace Schimmel and Jay Portner. I had known them for many years and agreed to the arrangement to meet Dan Slater. He was living in Los Angeles, but was visiting in Philadelphia with Grace and Jay. The date was filled with small talk, but was not unpleasant. Dan thought the arrangement was for me to show him around the city, and generally keep him occupied. I had only one free day that weekend, but we made a plan. He arrived with flowers and a tourist guide. We went to all the usual historical places. We had a good time and Dan asked me if I ever planned to go to L.A. I had never given it a thought, but when the projected trip with Helen G. came up, I remembered his offer to host me on the west coast.

Helen and I got off and the back on the next train many times. We saw places of interest in the middle of country, followed by Grand Canyon in the snow. Everywhere we went some young men travelling alone would join us. Some of the men had recently come home from the army and had lots of horror stories to tell. Each day was another long story.

Finally, we arrived at the beautiful Los Angeles downtown train station but we had not yet made a reservation and so had to find a hotel. I was so thrilled with our trip I had not called or written Dan to tell him that I was coming and I wasn't certain of the date of our

arrival. When I finally called, he told me that Jay Portner had already called to tell him of my trip west. Dan, and his brother Walter (on leave from the army because of serious leg wounds) came to our hotel for a welcome party. They had made dinner reservations at a fancy Hollywood restaurant not far from the Hollywood Roosevelt where we were staying. In the course of the evening, Dan told me that he was a drug detail man for Endo Products, that his time was flexible, and since we had no car, he would take we two Helens to see the sights. Little did I know that he wanted to be with us every single day and evening. After our first few days were concluded, Helen G. left us to visit her friends the Taskers. We all went there for Sunday dinner, along with several other transplanted Philadelphians.

The days were beautiful. The sun always shone. People looked happier than their countertypes in Philadelphia. Dan had never been to the LA museums, but he was happy to go. After spending our first week in LA we decided to extend our stay. My biggest problem was Larry Horowitz who called me constantly and was very threatened by the extension of our trip. Dan was so different than Larry, so reserved and removed that I enjoyed not being suffocated, but missing the warmth that I had been spoiled by. Dan asked me if I would consider staying on indefinitely. I was shocked! Of course I couldn't consider leaving my wonderful job, my family and all my friends.

But as the days went on, I started to look at the relationship with Dan as my exit visa from Philadelphia. I was happier without Larry wanting to control my every hour. I was ready to brake away. By this time, my parents had recognized that even though they pressured me to marry the man with so much money and such prestige in their city, there was no hope for that.

I was honest with Dan about the close relationship that I was so involved in. I told him I was also in charge of running the Golden Slipper Square Club, and the Officer's Club at the Y, and that I really needed to go home. We talked for hours. It was like a debate. Whatever I objected to he would counter with a stronger point. By now we had become friends with Bea and Sam Tasker, and they joined the team of campaigners for my coming to LA. Bea was really lonely, as was Dan, and the other Philadelphians I had met. I called Ted Wasserman who was my private protector at home, and in his usual way he put everything in order for me. He suggested I set a date a few months in the future when I would make a decision. I would need some time to close things up with Larry, if need be, and then could come back to California. Then he threw me a whopper. He told me that he and Ada had decided to leave Philadelphia for LA! Wow!

The time was February, 1945. Dan called me many times and on one call informed me of his plan to come to Philadelphia to formally ask me to marry him. On May 30, 1945 we got married with a fancy wedding at the Warwick Hotel in Philadelphia. I left home scared, anxious and excited.

That adventure lasted for 25 years, and produced three wonderful offspring, the joy of my life.