Me'arba Kanfos Ha'aretz

From the Four Corners of the Earth

International Alumnae Remember
Stern College for Women

Compiled by Marga Marx
Edited by Yael Malka Farzan

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ISBN: 978-0-578-15725-2

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Printed in Canada by Noble Book Press Corp.
Bound by Sefercraft Quality Bookbinders, Ltd., Brooklyn, N.Y.

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STERN COLLEGE FOR WOMEN · YESHIVA UNIV
Yeshiva University
ISRAEL HENRY BEREN CAMPUS
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The following essays tell the stories of fifteen international alumnae of Stern College who accomplished their hopes and dreams here. This book is dedicated to the parents of these women, who courageously sent their daughters abroad—some during good, peaceful times and others under very dangerous and difficult circumstances—to receive a wonderful Jewish and secular education.

Marga Marx

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Preface

Personal writing, memoirs, serve many purposes. Generally these purposes are about the individual writing the narrative, and the short memoirs contained in this volume are of that nature. They tell the stories of fifteen women whose journeys brought them to Stern College of Yeshiva University. The writing is straightforward and honest. Yet the narratives also tell another story, the story of how a remarkable women's college, Stern College, transformed their lives.

We hear the voice of Blima Svatek Dalezman, who lived a "double identity" surrounded by the majesty of Prague, and Olga Pantukhova Segal, raised in Vorkuta, a mining town one hundred miles north of the Arctic Ocean. These women, and many others, lived and studied at Stern College, while deepening their Jewish identities, strengthening their Torah knowledge, finding their career paths, and establishing the foundations for their future families. In the process, they enriched the entire Stern College community. They took the best we had to offer, and they gave us their best in return. We are so very proud of them.

I am also personally proud to have worked these many years alongside Mrs. Marga Marx, a remarkable and wise woman and a fellow Stern College alumna. In times good and stressful, she nurtured, supported, and challenged our international students to grow Jewishly and to find their unique strengths.

This book, their narratives, gives tribute and brings honor to her efforts.

Karen Bacon, PhD
The Dr. Monique C. Katz Dean
Stern College for Women
Yeshiva University

Acknowledgments

It is almost impossible to acknowledge all the people at Stern College who were involved over the years in the lives of the writers of the following stories.

Firstly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dean Karen Bacon, who diligently helped me from the beginning to the end of this project. Dean Bacon is a true role model of Torah U'Madda, and she is an inspiration to all at Stern College.

Dean Ethel Orlian and the entire academic staff guided the students throughout their college experiences. Rabbi Ephraim Kanarfogel and the Judaic teaching staff were greatly involved in the Jewish studies programs. Rabbi Tzvi Flaum and Rabbi Shlomo Hochberg, *mashgichim ruchanim* (religious advisors) at Stern, were dedicated mentors for many of these women. Mrs. Esther Zuroff and retired Dean Zelda Braun diligently led the Office of Student Affairs. Betty Kam was always ready and willing to help in the office when needed. Naomi Kapp directed the Career Development Center, which provided the students with much guidance toward choosing their respective professions. Rachel Kraut, Shana (Glasser) Beigelman, and the entire University Housing and Residence Life staff made life in the dorms comfortable for the students who were so far away from home.

Regarding the development of this book, Ms. Bernice Leber, Esq. advised us with legal issues and proofreading. Dr. Jeffrey Gurock greatly assisted us in putting the project on track. I was also very fortunate to be introduced to a senior student (now an alumna), Yael Malka Farzan, who worked with me throughout this time. I am sure her name will be seen as a writing star in the near future.

Last but not least, I thank my dear husband, Moshe; my children, Chavi and Yosef Fink, and Esther and Pinchas Katz; and my grandchildren for always being there for me and believing that the book *will* get finished!

Marga Marx
International Student Advisor
Stern College for Women

Editor's Note

In the spring of my junior year at Stern, when I was asked to edit this collection of short memoirs, I felt very privileged to have been chosen for the task. It was an honor to have worked alongside Mrs. Marga Marx in memorializing the stories of these former international students during their years at Stern.

Additionally, this project had significance for me on a personal level. As the daughter (and granddaughter) of immigrants, I was raised with the stories of my parents' émigré journeys to America woven into the fabric of my childhood, and these family stories often came to mind as I edited this anthology.

In sharing the memories of their journeys to and through Stern, each of the alumnae included in this anthology has a distinct voice. In our editorial method we were careful to keep these original voices intact as much as possible, since part of this book's unique appeal is the diversity of these women's dialects, expressions, and narrating styles. In fact, it was this concept of honoring the narrators' most natural voices that led us to choose the diary-like design of the book.

I was certainly inspired by these essays. I hope you are, too.

Yael Malka Farzan

Introduction

It has been a great honor and privilege for me to be the International Student Advisor at Stern College for more than three decades, initially under Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm and currently under President Richard Joel.

Family and friends frequently ask me, "What do you do with these students, and where do they come from?" The answer to these questions is the theme of the following stories written by Stern College international alumnae from various parts of the world during different times of history.

I myself was born in Germany during the dark Holocaust years. My family, after having suffered endless heavy losses, was fortunate to receive a visa to the United States from Mr. Max Stern, *a"h*, who led us to the shores of freedom. We did not know then that I would be graduating from a wonderful institution by the name of Stern College for Women, founded by the same person who brought me to the United States. Many of my family and home experiences prepared me for the task ahead to provide guidance to and empathize with the international students.

For many of these students, the obstacles to overcome are enormous. They include issues related to culture change, language, finances, religion and, most of all, separation from family and roots far away, especially in times of stress and danger. Included in these memoirs are stories of escape from war and dangerous countries. Teenage girls left their homes and families by various means—camels, horses, trains, and airplanes—which led them to safer places. Upon arriving in the United States, they were eligible for political asylum, which provided them security and other benefits. Life was very difficult and challenging for these single girls. In some cases, families were fortunate to leave together and were granted refugee status, thereby receiving more assistance. In other cases, many girls reunited with their families after several years.

Most international students come to New York and Stern College to broaden their education, expand their career opportunities, and experience a whole new lifestyle. Opportunities for higher education, combined with a curriculum of Jewish studies, are not available in many countries. These young women coming out of high school are eager to fulfill their dreams of coming to New York and living a life of opportunity as they believe it to be.

The educational systems in countries such as Israel, France, Venezuela, Colombia, Russia, and other Soviet countries are quite different than those in the United States. Attending colleges in those countries directly train students toward their professional goals and careers. In the United States, however, one has to attend college followed by graduate school, depending upon the student's choice of profession. Testing methods are very different in the United States. For example, multiple-choice tests are unheard of to many foreign students. Additionally, the financial costs of books and supplies can be a heavy burden.

At Stern, we are aware of the diverse needs and differences of international students, and the deans and faculty help in many ways. Although most international students learn some English in their home countries, and incoming students are required to take the TOEFL (Test Of English as a Foreign Language) before being admitted, it can still be very difficult for students to think in one language and simultaneously write in English. Added to the problem, students are learning Jewish studies at various levels. Thus, one of the main goals of our Writing Center is to provide tutorial help for international students who may need the extra assistance with English.

Presently, international students enter Yeshiva University by obtaining a student visa, which permits them to study in the United States. Student visas necessary for entry to and study in the United States are arranged by our office, the Office of International Students and Scholars, together with US Immigration. International students are not permitted to work outside of the university, and therefore often struggle financially. After graduation, students are entitled to Occupational Practical Training for one year, until they become sponsored by their employer or attend graduate school, if they choose to stay in the United States.

Choosing a career can be very difficult for all college students, but the issue becomes even harder for international students, depending upon where one wishes to live after graduation. Career counseling is available to help international students with this question. The well-connected career advisors also help the women write their résumés and prepare for interviews.

Aside from academic work, there is also a highly active social life for international students. Weekly Shabbatonim are arranged and sponsored by various International clubs, such as the Latin Club, Israel Club, French Club, and Canadian Club. Spending Shabbat with friends as well as rabbis and teachers becomes a

meaningful experience. Students who attended various seminaries in Israel also enjoy Shabbaton reunions, together with an Israeli guest speaker and friends. The pre-Purim "Supperette" is a yearly event that brings back international alumnae to address the current international students at Stern. In the spirit of Purim, delicious food is served together with professional entertainment. We also host an annual Chanukah Chagiga that is extremely popular on both campuses.

Living in the dormitory is a challenging but rewarding opportunity for international students. New York City has much to offer in terms of kosher restaurants, museums, cultural events, shopping, and so many other things. Life is very different and exciting.

The following stories will illustrate the above-mentioned in the students' own words, and emphasize the extreme courage and *emunah* (faith) of the writers. These young women, and so many others like them, were eager to receive a higher education combined with Jewish studies and understanding. How their lives developed so beautifully over the years is truly an accomplishment.

In the American Jewish and Israeli communities at large, most people are descendants of past Jewry around the world. We are all related or connected somehow, and we seem to find much in common despite cultural differences. While the memoirs are very different and specific to the backgrounds of their origin, what they each have in common is the inspiration and sparks felt by these women for Torah and for Israel. It is this that has led them to a new life of opportunity, freedom, and Jewish fulfillment.

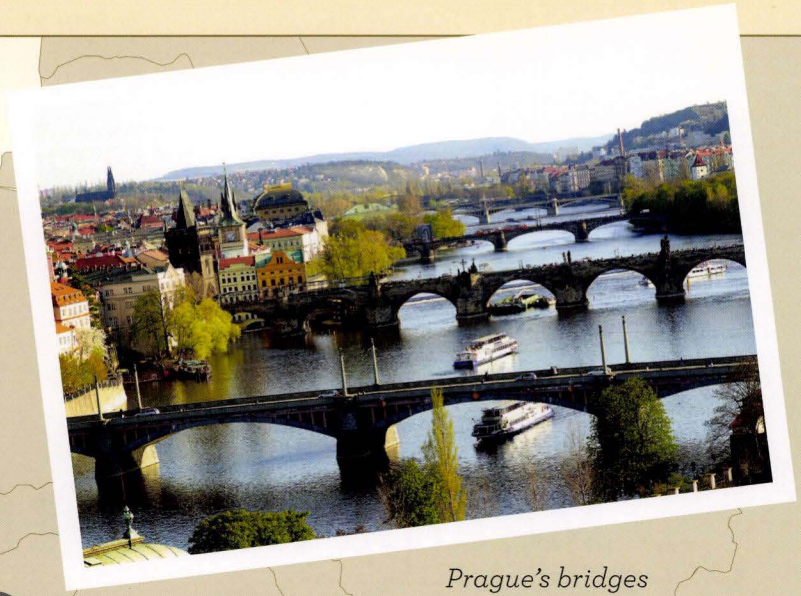
The international students at Stern College have greatly succeeded in accomplishing many of their dreams and goals far away from their home countries. Some have returned to their homelands, or to Israel, and many have settled in the United States.

The following stories relate the experiences of these students who have come to Stern from all four corners of the earth —מארבע כנפות הארץ.

Marga Marx
International Student Advisor
Stern College for Women

Me'arba Kanfos Ha'aretz

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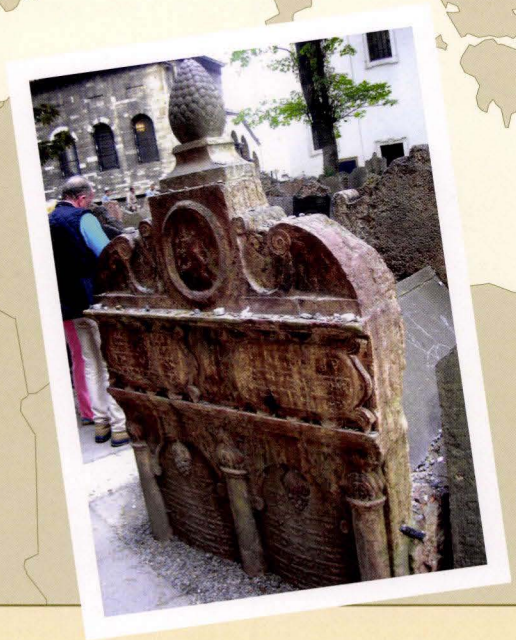


Prague's bridges

PRAGUE,
CZECH REPUBLIC



My daughter and I in Prague



The tombstone of the Maharal

A Double Identity

Blima Svatek Dalezman

Prague, one of the most popular tourist destinations for Jews and non-Jews alike, is a city known for its beauty, history, and culture. The Jewish community in Prague is almost a thousand years old, and the same area in the city has served as the center of Jewish life for close to a millennium. In the old Jewish cemetery, victims of pogroms are buried next to great Torah Sages, such as the Maharal, the Kli Yakar, and the Tzemach Dovid. Down the street from the old cemetery is the famous Altneu Schul. To this day, the seat where the Maharal used to sit is still there, never occupied.

It is no wonder that Prague is one of the favorite cities to visit for many observant Jews, including many of my friends. However, not that long ago, life in Prague was far from charming, and for Jewish people who were unwilling to hide their identity, it was downright oppressive. Those who grew up in Prague after the war and even those in generation X went through a "double whammy"; they were being oppressed by the communists, while growing up in the shadows and lingering effects of the Holocaust.

To begin to understand what it was like, one should first be aware of some of Prague's recent history. First the Nazis came, attempting to make the city (and the rest of Europe) *Judenrein*, free of Jews. When the Nazis were finally defeated and

the remnants of the Jewish people started to gather in Prague and recover from the tragedy, the communists took over.

The Czech Republic was one of the last areas to be liberated after the war. Many survivors of death marches ended up in its territory; the ghetto of Theresienstadt was not too far from Prague. Once liberated, most Jews gathered in Prague. Many parents and relatives of my American friends, as well as my parents, my remaining relatives, and even my father-in-law, all ended up in Prague. The Czechs were quite nice to the survivors; agencies such as the Joint (the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) opened branches in Prague; and the community slowly started to rebuild.

Under communism, the once-glorious Jewish community withered to about five hundred people, with an average age of 65...

However, this rebirth was short-lived. Less than three years after the defeat of the Nazis, the communists came to power. Those who saw what was coming went westward and crossed into the American sector of Germany. Those who were too ill or preoccupied with trying to catch up on their schooling got stuck. Unfortunately, my parents were among these "stuckees." Under communism, the once-glorious Jewish community withered to about five hundred people, with an average age of 65, most of them broken by the Holocaust. They were often the only survivors of their families and had rebuilt life in Prague from nothing.

It seems that in every generation there is someone who is afraid of the Jews and tries to get rid of us either physically or spiritually. The communists tried to control everything and everybody, Jewish or not. They controlled what we read, what we saw, what we said, what we wrote, and even tried hard to control what we thought. But they seemed to be particularly obsessed with controlling the Jews.

The communists slowly but surely dismantled most of the Jewish institutions that had reopened after the war. They forced consolidation of all religious activities to the community center, because that way it was easier to keep an eye on those who practiced. Their goal was to instill fear in everyone. The communists set up elaborate networks of informants, so that neighbors and sometimes even family members spied on one other and reported them to the secret police. The Jewish community wasn't immune. Many from its ranks were recruited to spy on their fellow Jews. Non-Jews, pretending to be Jewish, were also inserted into the community.

By the time I was born, communism was firmly established and had completely influenced people's lives. Even the city's beauty was shrouded at that time. The city and the sky always seemed grey, and any joy in life was gone. When I was a child, the kosher butcher had closed down, and kosher meat was only available through the Jewish Community Center. I used to accompany my mother on her "shopping" trips to the JCC. That is where we got meat, wine, and matzos for Pesach. The only kosher restaurant was part of our community, and the government permitted only two synagogues to be used for services: the Altneu (Old-New) Synagogue, which is now the oldest functioning synagogue in Europe, and Jeruzalemska, the Jubilee Synagogue on Jerusalem Street. The rest of the synagogues (miraculously preserved by the Nazis during the war, as the area was supposed to become a museum of an extinct race), the Torah scrolls, the silver objects looted by the Nazis, and other Jewish artifacts became incorporated into the State Jewish Museum.

From very early on I was taught to live with a double identity.

I was born in the 1960s. From very early on I was taught to live with a double identity. I was one person at home and among my Jewish friends, and another

person outside the safety of our apartment. My family and I lived a materially comfortable life in an apartment not too far from the city center. But no one in our apartment building was allowed to know that we were Jewish. We were too afraid to affix a mezuzah on the outside door.

Despite our caution, people figured it out. One day the word "Jew" was engraved into the wall next to our apartment. Among those who lived in our building was a family originally from Sudetenland. While I was friendly with the children, my parents completely avoided contact with their parents. When I was much older I found out that the husband had taken part in medical experiments during the Holocaust. He had been stripped of his medical degree and had served a number of years in prison after the war.

Growing up Jewish, I knew from early on that we were different from the non-Jews. Our families were small and self-contained. None of my Jewish friends had extended family. We were very jealous of those who had a cousin or two. When I was little I used to think that aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents were only part of the non-Jewish world. My parents, who had gotten married late in life, had a number of Jewish friends close to their age; however, none of them had any children, or maybe one at most. I always felt terrible for them, and they became our surrogate aunts and uncles. Only much later did I find out that they did have children. However, once their children turned eighteen or finished university, they escaped to the west to build normal lives for themselves.

Every Sunday we used to get together with our friends at the Jewish Community Center. We played games, talked, and just socialized in an environment where we could be ourselves. For a few years, there existed a Sunday school, where we learned Hebrew and the like. In the summer, one of the youth leaders organized a two-week summer camp in the country. These get-togethers lasted

until the mid-seventies. Then the government forbade them, too. But by the time we stopped gathering at the community center, there were very few of us left anyway. After the Soviet-led invasion of 1968, whoever was able to leave had left, and those who were coming of age kept immigrating to the west. (Today, there is an email group, "The Children of Maisel Community," that organizes annual get-togethers for those who grew up in Prague after the war and now live all over the world.) Religious customs and laws were taught to us at home through everyday life. My parents told us many stories from Tanach and the Midrash, and also instilled in us a love for Israel and the Jewish people.

When I was in my early teens, I knew that there was no future for me in Czechoslovakia and that it wasn't a place to raise a Jewish family. I decided that as soon as I reached the age of eighteen and would no longer be considered a dependent of my parents (meaning that the government would no longer hold my parents responsible for my actions), I would leave the Iron Curtain. At about sixteen and a half, I began preparation in earnest. I spoke English quite fluently, as I had attended a school for gifted students focused on foreign languages. The next step was to choose my destination. While I would have loved to move to Israel, that was not practical. At that time, Israel was considered one of the key enemies of the communists. There would have been little chance of seeing my parents again. I briefly considered other places in Europe, such as England or France, but the United States seemed like the best option. I heard about a large Jewish community and complete freedom. As a plus, I spoke the language.

I decided that as soon as I reached the age of eighteen and would no longer be considered a dependent of my parents, I would leave the Iron Curtain.

I knew that I needed some contacts in the United States to help me when I arrived there. So I focused on acquiring those. During my last year of high school, I found a summer job, which subsequently turned into a part-time job, as a guide in the Jewish Museum. Once there, I met many Jews from all over the world, including many Americans. I still remember an old Jewish couple from New Zealand who tipped me with beautiful sea shells. I had them made into a ring and necklace that I treasure to this day. I met a girl who had just graduated from Stern College and a number of other people from the New York area. I took their contact information and now had people to call upon once I got to the United States.

As I was close to completing high school, I began to put the finishing touches on my plans. I could not just take a trip behind the Iron Curtain, nor could I obtain an exit visa as the Jews of the former Soviet Union did, so I had to sneak across the border. The only possible way to do this was to leave via the former Yugoslavia. While that country was officially communist, it did not follow the Soviet Union doctrine so closely, and many people crossed the border to Austria or Italy without any issues.

I thus booked a trip to go to a seaside resort in today's Croatia. I had even met a tourist from this town in the museum, and I took his contact information, too. I felt that I did my preparations.

As the date of departure approached, I was a bit apprehensive. I knew that I would have to make my way to the United States on my own, without relying on my parents. I wasn't sure when I would see them next. I knew it would be at least five years or probably more. Then, about two weeks before my scheduled departure, I received a subpoena to appear in the offices of the secret police, the Státní bezpečnost (*StB*). I did as I was asked, and my interrogation was not too bad. I naively believed that I was off the hook. I denied knowing any of the people they asked me about and used the "Holocaust card" when asked why I was a practicing

Jew. I told them about Hitler wanting to wipe the Jewish race off this planet and suggested that if that were to happen, Hitler would have won. The secret police had to agree that one could not let Hitler win.

At this point I was leaving in less than a week. I knew that I would not be able to take any clothing or additional money, as there was a possibility that I could be searched at the border. About two days later, my preparations got interrupted again with another subpoena from the *StB*. This time, the interrogation was scheduled for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, a day before my scheduled departure. This interrogation was not as pleasant. Two members of the *StB* were playing a good cop/bad cop routine. When I denied knowing the person they asked me about, they produced a snapshot of me talking to that very person. At that moment I realized that someone I considered a good friend was really a non-Jewish implant in the community—and that she set me up. Incidentally, the person I denied knowing, and was photographed with, became a Chief Rabbi of Czechoslovakia after the fall of communism. I was threatened that if I would not become an informant for the police, I would be imprisoned. This episode dispelled any doubts I had about my decision to leave. I was to leave the next day. I had all my paperwork in order, but I wasn't sure if the office that interrogated me knew of my upcoming trip.

I had thirty dollars and twenty-four hours to get to Austria.

The day after Rosh Hashanah, I embarked on my trip. I said good-bye to my father, who went to work. My mother only accompanied me to the tram station, as I was afraid that she would become too emotional at the departure area. There, I boarded the tour bus, which left immediately. Thank G-d the police did not come for me. We crossed the border into Hungary; I was still on the bus. After almost a twenty-four-hour journey, we arrived in Croatia. We left the bus and had an hour

to explore the port of Split. We were in the old city, which was crowded. The tour went straight, while I turned a corner and then another corner, and all of a sudden I was on my own. I had thirty dollars and twenty-four hours to get to Austria.

I reached out to the contact I made in Prague. He helped me navigate the train schedules and get a ticket for Zagreb, and he encouraged me on my flight to freedom. I got to Zagreb in the middle of the night, and the next morning I went to the Austrian consulate to get an Austrian transit visa. I knew I was lacking proper communist bloc exit papers, but I wanted to make sure that if I left Yugoslavia, I would be able to enter Austria without any problems. I had to meet with the Austrian Consul, who granted me a two-week transit visa and wished me good luck. I then went to the main train station. The next step would change my life forever: I took a train from Zagreb to Gratz, Austria. As the border separating Yugoslavia from Austria—oppression from freedom—approached, I grew more and more nervous, and I could barely breathe. Would I be taken off the train and sent back to Czechoslovakia and imprisoned, or would I make it to safety? I kept repeating in my head the few psalms I knew by heart, as I could not take a Jewish prayer book on this journey. Then the train stopped for passport control. I could hear the Yugoslav immigration officer approaching, opening my compartment. As if on an autopilot, I handed him my passport. I was pretending that all was in order, even though I did not have the required communist bloc exit visa...and then the man turned around and left, never touching my passport. The train started to move again, and I saw the border post. The Austrian officers came in, checked my papers, and with a wink, greeted me: "*Willkommen in Österreich.*" Indeed—welcome to freedom. I did not

Would I be taken off the train and sent back to Czechoslovakia and imprisoned, or would I make it to safety?

know whether to laugh or cry; I thanked G-d for giving me the opportunity to lead a life as a free, religious Jew, to be able to study Jewish texts, and to one day send my children to a Jewish school.

I arrived in Vienna late Friday afternoon and promptly called my parents' friends, inviting myself for Shabbos. At this point I did not even have a change of clothing and I had less than ten dollars remaining. On Monday I contacted HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, an organization that helps Jews resettle in Israel, the United States, or in other countries. In less than two weeks' time, I was on my way to Rome, where the immigrants waited for refugee visas. At this time I did not know that because I was only eighteen, I needed a special sponsorship to get to the United States. I also did not give much thought to the fact that I may need money.

I arrived in Rome during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, on Hoshana Rabba. I did not know anyone. Since that evening was Shmini Atzeret, I decided to go to a synagogue. Rome is a very large city, but it just "happened to be" that the only Ashkenazi Orthodox synagogue was about a five-minute walk from where I was staying. After services, I struck up a conversation with the rabbi, a Lubavitcher emissary from the United States. He immediately invited me for all of Yom Tov. To this day I can still visualize that first Simchat Torah in a free country: young people, children dancing, everyone singing...one could feel the simcha, the happiness, in the air. The scene was in huge contrast to the Simchat Torah I was accustomed to in Prague, where barely a minyan of old men would be solemnly walking around the bimah, struggling to carry the Torah scrolls, with no new generation in sight...

I spent three months in Italy, staying with another Lubavitcher couple near Rome, teaching English and aleph-bet to the children of Russian immigrants. When the sponsorship issue arose, the couple arranged one for me through their

uncle in the United States, who set me up at a Lubavitch girls' school with a dormitory in Brooklyn.

Finally, I arrived in the United States on Chanukah. I could not believe that my quest for freedom was finally completed. Now it was time to turn to another chapter of my plan and push forward. I had two immediate goals: to receive a secular education, so I'd be able to provide for myself, and to close as many gaps in my formal Jewish education as possible.

To this day I can still visualize that first Simchat Torah in a free country: young people, children dancing, everyone singing...

One of the contacts I made in Prague suggested that Stern College was the perfect place to do both. It offered a college degree and provided a solid Jewish education that I could tailor to my needs. My friend helped me acquire a scholarship to Stern. In January 1981 I eagerly moved into the Stern dormitory on Thirty-Fourth Street to begin the spring semester. As the reader can picture from my story so far, I came from a different world—what a culture shock Stern was! At that time in Europe, my few friends who were in universities spent their free time discussing and debating anything from philosophy to politics, arts and culture. In contrast, the major concern of a number of Stern girls, who grew up in a much more carefree world, was what to wear on their next date or whom should they go out with next.

Yet despite the initial cultural differences, Stern proved to be an excellent starting point for me. I received a great education, both secular as well as religious. The faculty was first-rate and the administration was exceptionally caring. The school's goal was to produce thinking, open-minded women, who were comfortable with their Jewish identity and able to succeed in the "real" world. To this day, I remember some of the material I learned in school and I enjoy sharing

it with my family. Stern also allowed me to gradually adapt to life in America. I befriended girls from many different backgrounds, experienced American Thanksgiving with my friends' families, discovered Mother's Day, and started to worry about what to wear on my next date. Between Stern, my contacts from Prague, and people I met once in the States, I was fortunate to receive a broad exposure to the Jewish community within the greater New York area. I had the opportunity to spend Shabbat everywhere from Washington Heights, the Upper West and East Sides, Williamsburg, Boro Park, Flatbush, Crown Heights, and even the Nitra community in Mount Kisco. These experiences helped me develop an appreciation for the diversity of the Orthodox spectrum.

My life circumstances that I described weren't mine by choice. Sometimes I wondered, "Why me?" This was especially the case when seeing other students who seemed to come from easier and more carefree lives. While I came from a loving home, where my father provided for all of our material needs, my parents could not help me in any way in the United States. I was totally on my own and sometimes I felt very alone. However, there was never a moment that I regretted my decision. I concentrated on my studies and was busy with part-time jobs. Unfortunately, as a result, I was too busy to experience the extracurricular activities and other opportunities that Stern had to offer.

After graduating from Stern, I went to work for Bellcore, a telecommunications research arm of the regional phone companies. I was lucky to be part of their graduate study program, so instead of heading to work, I went to NYU to receive my master's in computer science. Bellcore paid my tuition, books, and a partial salary. For the first time in four years, I was able to just focus on my studies. As soon as I finished graduate school I got married and went back to Bellcore as a senior software architect. Over time, as the industry evolved and the company changed, I moved to the business side, running one of its product lines focused on

IP technology and the Internet. I pursued additional business education. My professional focus is now on applying technology and innovation to business growth, helping communication service providers to grow and optimize their businesses.

In the fall of 1989, communism fell; the Berlin Wall was torn down and Europe was free again. In 1990, when Václav Havel became president of then-Czechoslovakia, one of his first moves was to renew diplomatic relations with Israel. On his first official visit to Israel, members of the Jewish community, including my family, accompanied him. There was also an amnesty for those that defected. I have been able to go back to visit and my parents have been free to come and visit me. When communism fell, my parents were too old to move to another country and rebuild their lives, but they were able to enjoy their grandchildren. When my children were small, my parents visited every one to two years, and they also came to celebrate my sons' Bar Mitzvahs. As my parents grew older and my children bigger, I started visiting them at least once a year, sometimes with my family. My mother passed away in 2006.



My son and father in front of the Jeruzalemska shul, where my father is a gabbai

I have tried to instill in my children the values that I have formed growing up— values gained through my life experiences as well as those from my years at Stern. I expect them to obtain a secular education and contribute positively to

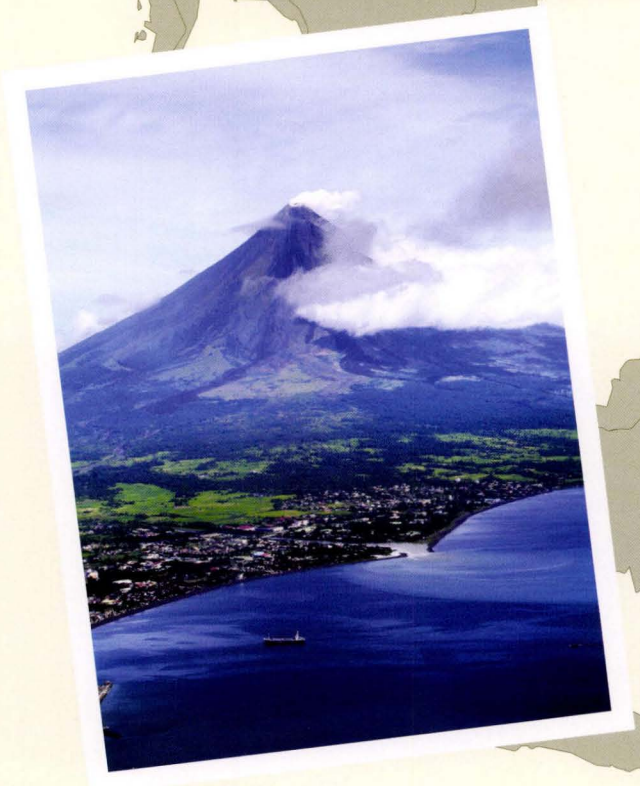
the world, without compromising their Jewish values. To this day I am grateful to all those who helped me along my journey. In retrospect, my experience at Stern provided me with much more than an educational foundation: It has shaped my values, my attitudes, and my outlook on life, and has helped me build the self-confidence and self-reliance needed for success.

YEARS AT STERN: 1981–1985



Manila Bay

MANILA, PHILIPPINES



The Mayon Volcano in the Philippines, world-renowned for its perfect cone-shaped peak

Leaving the Islands: Philippine Firsts

Vicky Acriche Turek

My grandparents came from various Judeo-Spanish backgrounds to live in the Philippines, via Egypt and Turkey, before the Spanish-American War of 1898. My family considered itself second-generation Filipino. Life in the Philippines was very comfortable. Although we enjoyed a high standard of living, the small, traditional, and committed Jewish community offered limited long-term educational opportunities. Today the community has grown and evolved to the point where the services of a full-time rabbi are retained. He also serves as *mohel* and *shochet*—hopefully not confusing the two roles!

In my days there, the role of spiritual leader was filled by my next-door neighbor, who labored selflessly for the community. He taught us the Tanach and arranged for kosher food to be available, especially for Shabbat and Yom Tov. Anti-Semitism was completely unknown to us. Although my sisters and I lacked a formal Jewish education, we were fortunate to have attended the International School, where we studied with children of foreign diplomats and of local distinguished families.

Subsequently, Israeli families moved to the Philippines. The men were agricultural specialists, and their wives were schoolteachers. We began receiving some basic Hebrew instruction.

I first heard about Stern from our religious leader, who had a daughter ten years older than I was. She had attended Stern and recommended that I look into it. My parents and I liked the idea that Stern was a small all-girls school. When we came to New York to visit, we all thought that Dean Bacon was caring and inspirational. They decided that they wanted me to attend Stern at least for a year—contrary to our original plans for me to attend the University of Southern California.

I arrived in the States as an immigrant. The transition to New York life was challenging, despite the fact that I had been to America several times previously to visit family in New York and Los Angeles. The language was not an issue for me.

In the Philippines there are only wet and dry seasons, with the occasional typhoon. I had never felt cold weather before in my life. The first time I experienced snow in New York, I wondered how to walk through it! This led to my first purchase of a winter coat and my first pair of boots.

There were other transitions, too. In the Philippines we did not wander far, so we were not familiar with public transportation. I was no longer so sheltered, and while feeling somewhat lost, I grappled with the bus and subway routes.

The first time I experienced snow in New York, I wondered how to walk through it!

I was fascinated by the American shopping process. Back home, I never knew what it was like to walk into a store and buy clothing. In the Philippines, we would open a magazine, find a pattern in, say, *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar,* and ask a tailor or seamstress to make it for us. It was an anomaly for me to try on clothing in stores.

In my first year at Stern I took up residence on the seventeenth floor of Brookdale Hall. My roommates were all from New York, and while they would have been challenged to find the Philippines on the map, they were very friendly

and welcoming. One friend with whom I have maintained contact was from Rego Park, and I sometimes spent Shabbat with her and her family. On other occasions I would spend Shabbat with my friend from the Philippines, and other times I would just stay in. There was a nice group of girls from Seattle with a Sephardic (Turkish) background similar to my own. We often made Shabbat together.

At Stern, I intended to major in communications and pursue a career in public relations. The English department (in particular, Professors Peninnah Schram and Laurel Hatvary) helped shape my major by combining business and communications. Although I already had two years of credit from my high school (due to the baccalaureate system), I stayed at Stern for four years because it was a great opportunity for me to learn more about Jewish practice.



From right: My sister Rachel (SCW '92), my sister Sarah, and I

I enjoyed all my Judaic classes immensely, especially those taught by Rabbi Saul Berman and Rabbi Kenneth Hain. I thought Rabbi Jacob Reiner, who taught Jewish history, was remarkable. He would just sit down without notes and speak to the class for the whole period! I was also very close to the Sephardic Program director of Yeshiva University, Hacham Solomon Gaon (*z"l*), who was the Chief Rabbi of the Sephardic communities of the British Empire. Every Thursday I would have lunch with him in the Stern cafeteria, even after I graduated. Understanding that I was coming from more of a traditional family background, the teachers were very positive regarding my religious growth. They invested their time in a very nurturing and caring manner. As a consequence, I became more knowledgeable and observant.

I also joined many of the extracurricular clubs while at Stern, including the yearbook committee and *The Observer*. I started writing for *The Observer* during my senior year. At that time the Arts and Culture column commenced and I was asked to be the kosher restaurant critic. In those days the field was somewhat more limited than it is today. There was not much beyond Moshe Peking, Bernstein's, and Lou G. Siegel. The singular most challenging aspect of the assignment was having to sample Uncle Ben's rice rather than the real thing! At the time, Ashkenazi food was somewhat foreign to me. I was accustomed to Sephardic and Filipino-inspired dishes and, of course, *real* rice! The cafeteria food, therefore, definitely took a little getting used to.

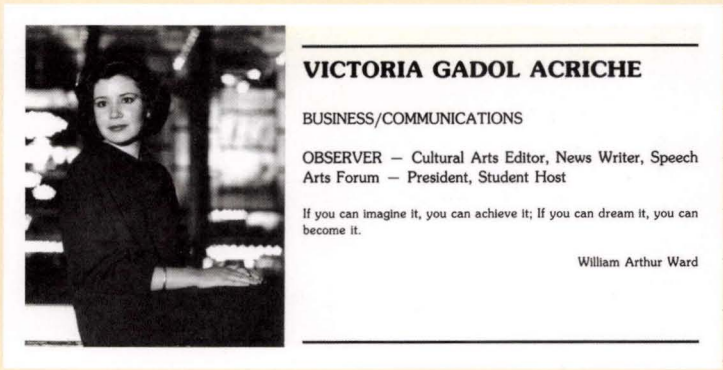
I was accustomed to Sephardic and Filipino-inspired dishes and, of course, real rice!

I was homesick initially. I spoke with my mother a lot on the phone, and Mrs. Marx was always very supportive. My homesickness improved when my younger sister came to New York to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology the following year. My parents rented us an apartment in Gramercy Park that was equidistant for us to attend our respective schools and afforded us the opportunity to spend quality time together. My two youngest sisters followed me to Stern and graduated in '88 and '92. We all reside in New York.

My family received our immigration papers the year I was to attend Stern. As I was already a permanent resident, I was gainfully employed each summer. (I ultimately became a US citizen in 1991.) One year I was a concierge at a building on Thirty-Sixth Street. Another year I worked in a doctor's office. Thereafter, I interned in the public relations department of an organization that subsequently became AMIT. I came full circle back to AMIT later in life—more on that later.

During my senior year at Stern, as part of my Speech Arts class, I coordinated a panel discussion on what it was like to be observant and pursue a career.

Interestingly enough, this panel led to my career path. One of the panels included a woman, Rhonda Barad, who had recently established the New York office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC), a major Jewish organization. In her capacity as executive director, she helped me get an entry-level position that grew to include many duties as the office expanded into the eastern regional extension of SWC. Among my duties were coordinating and managing a network of Holocaust survivors who would visit inner-city schools to address students. I found the experience very fulfilling and remained with the organization for ten years. It was at an SWC event that I met the man (also a foreigner, from London) who would become my husband. We were married in 1992 and moved to New Rochelle, where we currently reside, in 1994. Our community has grown considerably, and we completed a new shul five years ago. In fact, I am now neighbors with a friend from Stern, Miriam Ambalu (now Bodek), as well as several others. My husband and I are active in our community and have served, and continue to serve, in various capacities. I am a homemaker and volunteer for my children's schools. I currently serve on the executive board of AMIT, an organization that synthesizes my love for, and bond with, Israel and its youth.



Stern College yearbook photo

I now have two children; my son graduated this year from SAR High School and hopes to attend Yeshiva College next year, after a year of study at Orayta, a yeshiva in Israel. My daughter graduated this year from Westchester Day School



My family, 2014

and hopes to attend SAR High School in the fall.

YU and Stern have represented central components of my life. In this unique institution reside an amazing group of people and an inspiring set of core values. The high level of Jewish and secular education and love for Israel enabled and ennobled me to become a citizen of the world without making any sacrifices in my modern orthodox Jewish lifestyle.

The faculty created such a nurturing environment for the international students who came from such disparate backgrounds. There were women in my year who escaped from the former Soviet Union and Iran. Stern created a cohesive structure of community and belonging for all of us. While it was not always smooth sailing, I chose to stay for four years even when I did not have to. Stern was an enjoyable experience, and I knew that remaining there would help me develop my Jewish identity.

Moreover, the experience was immeasurably enhanced by an administration that truly cared about each and every individual student—each and every person. My life was changed by the care, guidance, and direction provided by Mrs. Marga Marx, Dean Karen Bacon, Dean Ethel Orlian, Mrs. Esther Zuroff, and

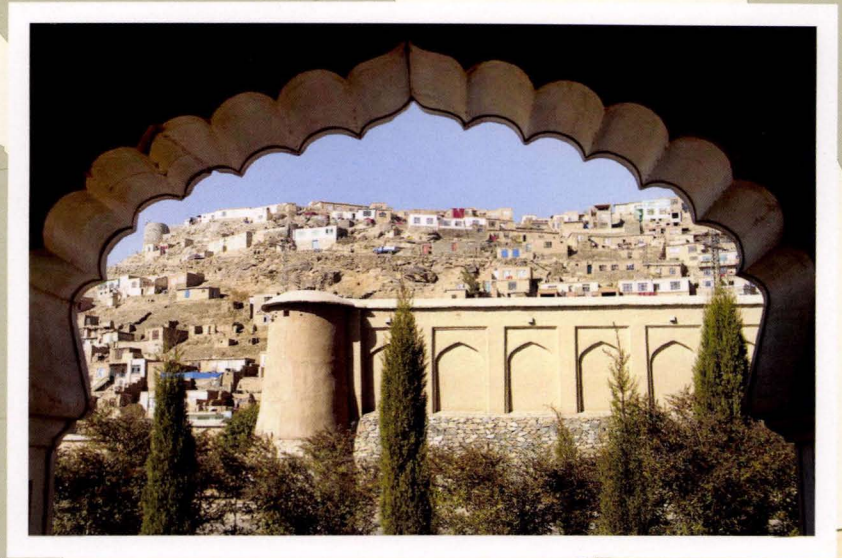
numerous others. I am forever grateful to those caring individuals and the institution that they represent.

YEARS AT STERN: 1981–1985



My husband, David, and me

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN



An Afghani village

From Afghanistan to Einstein

Miriam Ambalu Bodek

I was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in the 1960s, during a time when the country's Jewish community was extremely small. There were only about six or seven hundred Jews in all of Afghanistan, and most of them, including our family, resided in Kabul.

The size of the Jewish community during my years in Afghanistan reflected the effects of significant immigration to Israel after Israel's statehood in 1948. As Afghanistan's Jewish community dwindled, Jews migrated to Kabul from cities like Herat, where my parents were born and where there had once been a large Jewish community. Kabul's Jewish community surrounded the city's only synagogue, which today is home to Afghanistan's sole Jewish resident.

I attended an all-girls public school in Kabul that was sponsored by the French government. Just as Khaled Hosseini describes in *The Kite Runner*, the school year ran from the spring through the fall. Schools were closed in the bitter, snowy winter months to avoid the challenges of heating the school facilities. While public schools were closed, Kabul's Jewish students did not have a winter recess. Instead, the Jewish community used the public schools' three-month hiatus to provide us with a Jewish education and held classes for us in the synagogue compound.

In the public school, we Jewish children faced many challenges. Some teachers required us to sit through Islamic lessons. I also felt that some teachers singled out Jewish students for not completing assignments or speaking in class. Non-Jewish children occasionally excluded the Jewish students from play at recess and sometimes taunted us. For this reason, my siblings and I socialized primarily with other Jewish children outside school.

Although we were born in Afghanistan, we felt like outsiders. We sensed that we were transient residents of Afghanistan.

And indeed, in less than fifty years, Afghanistan's Jewish population evaporated. Jewish migration from Afghanistan came in two principal phases. In the 1950s, many Jews immigrated to Israel and other countries following Israeli statehood. The balance of the community left in the late 1970s after Mohammed Zahir Shah (Afghanistan's last king) was deposed and the threat of a Russian invasion loomed.

My father feared for our safety as the country became increasingly unstable. In particular, he worried about my brothers who were nearing draft age. My family left Afghanistan in two waves. I left Afghanistan in January 1976, after I completed the seventh grade, and immigrated to Israel, traveling through Iran, which had diplomatic ties with Israel at the time. My mother brought me and two of my brothers to Israel through Iran. I remained in Israel with my grandparents, and my brothers traveled from Israel to New York to live with an uncle. My mother returned to Afghanistan.

In 1978, my parents and the rest of the family left Afghanistan for London, where they waited for green cards before travelling to New York to join my brothers. I lived with my grandparents in Israel for three and a half years until 1979, when my family reunited in New York.

Transitioning to an Israeli eighth grade and high school was both startling

and eye-opening. Israel was so much more progressive than Afghanistan. Israel's modern, open society was quite a revelation. Most of all, I reveled in being in the Jewish state, surrounded by other Jews.

After joining my family in New York, in the fall of 1979, I started eleventh grade at the Yeshiva High School of Queens (YHSQ) in Jamaica Estates. This school later became part of Yeshiva University's High School for Girls.

I first learned of Stern College during my senior year at YHSQ. However, at that time, attending college was not a high priority within the Queens Afghani Jewish community. Consequently, immediately following high school, I worked in my brother's office as a secretary. (Today, I must note, the Afghani Jewish community boasts many doctors, lawyers, and other professionals with advanced degrees.) It didn't take me long to realize that attending college would open doors and provide me with opportunities that historically were unavailable to Afghani women.

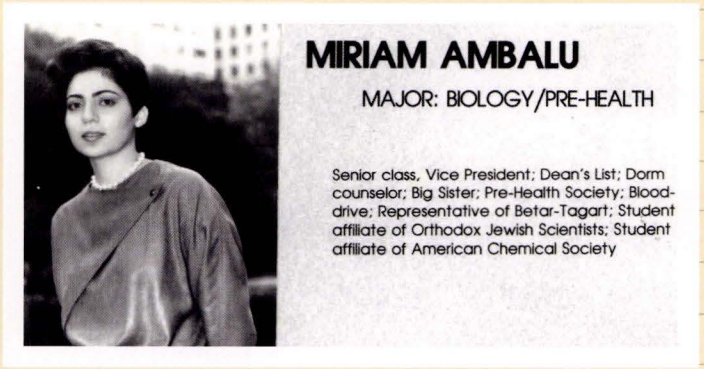
Of course, I applied to Stern College, where I could meld my interests in Torah and Madda studies. At Stern, the wealth of science and pre-med courses piqued my interest. I thrived in this environment. It was very exciting to be among other ambitious and highly-motivated observant women. I particularly enjoyed the research I undertook with one of my biology professors, Dr. Betty Rosoff. I was also enthralled by organic chemistry. Dr. Lea Blau was an outstanding professor, and I had the privilege of joining her in presenting our research project at a conference.

It didn't take me long to realize that attending college would open doors and provide me with opportunities that historically were unavailable to Afghani women.

Others who meaningfully added to my college experience were my advisor, Mrs. Marga Marx, and my professor, Dr. Meir Havazelet, a very fine man whose history lectures were fascinating. Many other teachers, deans, and administrators were integral to my positive experiences at Stern.

In the early 1980s, Stern was much smaller than it is today. I believe there were fewer than six hundred students. However, the intimate environment enabled me to develop strong bonds with my classmates.

Living in Brookdale Hall in Manhattan was also a great experience. I lived in the heart of one of the world's most exciting cities, visited its diverse neighborhoods, had access to great museums and theater, and had friends in the dorm from New York, Texas, Tennessee, the Philippines, Venezuela, Israel, and Iran, among other places. I fondly remember joining my friends for midnight ice-cream runs after the library closed. I even became a dorm counselor during my senior year. I still keep in touch with several classmates, including some living in Israel. In fact, I see some of my classmates each Shabbat at the Young Israel of New Rochelle.



Stern College yearbook photo

The culmination of my pre-med studies at Stern was marked by my acceptance to the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. My family and I were so proud of how much I accomplished at YU and the tremendous opportunities that the university provided me and other young women. At Einstein, my classmates included many friends from Stern and Yeshiva College. Several of my Einstein

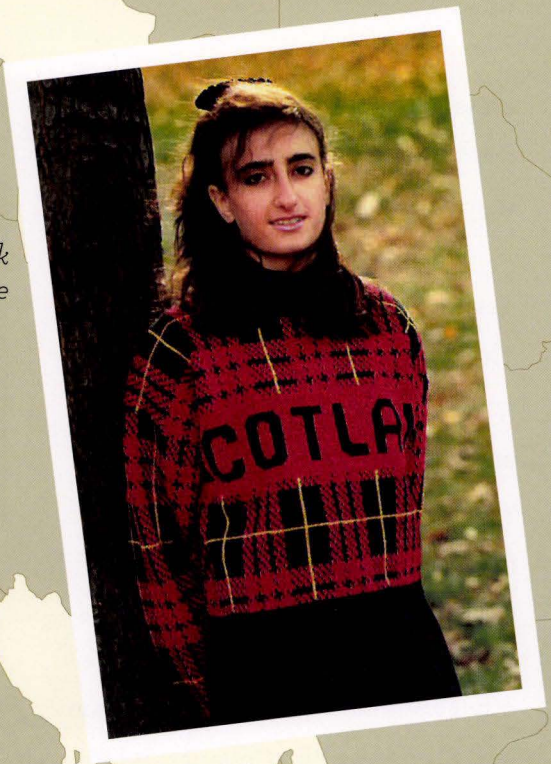
classmates also now live in New Rochelle, and it is wonderful to see them in shul each week.

I am very grateful for my Yeshiva University experiences. The faculty at Stern and Einstein not only taught me the skills that enabled me to achieve so many wonderful goals, but also provided me with a strong Jewish education and identity. While I was the first in my family to go to Stern College, other members of my extended family have also attended (and some are attending) Stern, Yeshiva College, and Einstein.



Graduating from Albert Einstein College of Medicine

YEARS AT STERN: 1982–1986



My yearbook picture

BEIRUT, LEBANON



Besides for being the national symbol, the cedars of Lebanon are often mentioned in Tanach.

A Dream Come True

Aline Saad Benjamin

My name is Aline Saad Benjamin. I was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1967, which was a time of turmoil in the Middle East. We lived a somewhat comfortable life in Lebanon until the civil war broke out in the mid-seventies. Most of the Jewish community emigrated at that time. Some went to different countries in Europe, such as France or Italy; some went to the States; and some went to live in Israel. But my parents stayed in our homeland throughout the war.

I am one of five children in my family. Our lives as children consisted primarily of school. We went to school every day, came home, did our homework, and the cycle began all over again the next day. Our social life was nonexistent. We did not fraternize with the rest of the student body. During the summers we went to the beach club, where we swam and played only with one another. At times, the fighting in East Beirut got very bad, so we escaped temporarily to the west or to the mountainous regions.

Many times I wondered why we stayed in Lebanon. I'm not sure if there is one good reason, but my guess is that my parents were too scared to leave and face the unknown. In a way, I can understand. My father was orphaned at a very young age. He was the oldest boy in his family, so he had to work hard to provide for his siblings. He worked many years to get to where he was by the time

I was born. And I guess it was too hard to part with the product of all his efforts and relocate.

Finally, in 1985, my parents decided that they no longer had too many choices, and we had to leave Lebanon. My siblings and I were getting old, and we had to move if we wanted to think about getting married and having families. By that time, my older brother was already living in Paris with an aunt. (Since older teenage boys in Lebanon could potentially get mixed in with the militia, my parents had been afraid to keep my brother with us, so they had already sent him away.) In short, our family was able to acquire visas to the United States, and in January 1985 we landed in JFK. We knew our lives were going to change. We were going to be Americans from now on.

That first evening when we arrived at our apartment in Brooklyn, nothing was familiar, and I wondered if I would ever feel comfortable in this new place. After a few days had passed, my parents started to ask people they knew from the community about schooling, specifically regarding where they should send us. *Where should we start?* they wondered. My younger siblings were easier to place, because they were younger and fit nicely into their respective grades. They were accepted to Magen David Yeshivah in Brooklyn. They still, of course, needed a lot of work to catch up to the students in their classes, especially because they barely knew any English and knew no Hebrew at all. But with a lot of perseverance, my two younger sisters both ended up graduating with honors. Then they went on to the prestigious Yeshivah of Flatbush High School, from which they both graduated four years later.

I, on the other hand, was seventeen years old. I was a year shy of receiving my Baccalaureate, which is the high school diploma in Lebanon. When I visited the yeshiva high schools, I was not accepted. I was told I was better off going to public school since I also barely spoke English and did not speak Hebrew. I tried my luck

with the public high school, but after they counted up my credits they said I would need another three years to graduate. I was not satisfied with the answers I got from these schools.

I was with my sisters when they were being registered for school, and coincidentally I mentioned my story to the rabbi. He said that he thought Yeshiva University might be a possibility; why don't I try to call them? Immediately, he picked up the phone, called an acquaintance of his, and arranged an interview for me with an admissions officer at Stern College. I was ecstatic.

My goal in life was to become a doctor, and now I had a possible shot at it. The day of my interview, I met with Ms. Marla Silver. I had never been in this kind of situation before. Not knowing about the dress code, I arrived at my interview wearing a pair of jeans and a shirt. I was a shy and scared but very determined young girl. I was determined to get what I needed to get. I told Ms. Silver very plainly that I wanted to become a doctor. (*How can you help me?* I asked.) To my disappointment, she told me that I need to complete four years of undergraduate college, and then, *if* I was accepted to a medical school, I would have to complete another four years. I looked at her and said, *I think I am ready.*

She formulated a plan for me. I was to take the TOEFL exam and then get a GED diploma. After that, I would be admitted as a student at Stern in the fall. I found the courses that would prepare me for these two tests, and that is how my schooling started in the States. I worked in the morning and went to classes in the afternoon, and that is how life went on for the next few months. I was able to pass both tests, and in September I matriculated at Stern College.

At first it was so intimidating. Even though I had passed the TOEFL exam, my English was still a little shaky. I remember going into the first biology class and thinking, *This professor talks so fast*! It was so difficult to follow the lecture, and it was a challenge to try to catch everything they said. I tried different ways

to get the most out of it: I taped some classes and tried to listen to the recordings at night when I went home, and then I translated these tapes into French. In other classes, I took as many notes in English as I could, translated them into French, and then studied those notes. I did this for every class. My focus was intense. I had my goal in my head and nothing was going to sabotage it. I would constantly remind myself that with every class I finished, I was a drop closer to the goal.

I started the first semester with about sixteen credits. I had some Judaic studies credits already, so I took chemistry, biology, and French. I also had my ESL class. School was not easy and I struggled in the beginning. But as each day came and went, I started to feel more and more comfortable. I felt like a sponge, absorbing anything and everything I could get my eyes on: from the English language, to the sciences, and of course the Judaic studies. I always loved learning languages, and I already spoke my native Arabic and French fluently. Hebrew, a Semitic language, proved to be easy for me to learn. Professor Hanoch Dubitsky was my Hebrew teacher, and I loved learning in his class. Some of the Judaic studies were totally foreign to me, though. For example, I never learned any Chumash, and though in Lebanon my family and I kept holidays and basic kashrut, I lacked in my Jewish education. So this was also a big part of my learning adventure. Considering the circumstances, I was pleased with my achievements. Thinking back now, I was tough on myself: I always told myself I had to do better, and that I should take on more credits, read more...



From 1987-1988, I was secretary of the Sigma Delta Rho Research Honor Society. (Far right)

I was so lucky to have met Mrs. Marga Marx, the advisor for foreign students. She was my first friend in the school. She was an advisor, a confidante, and a great helper.



Members of the Sephardic Club, circa 1988. I am fourth from left.

Slowly I also got to know the other students in the school. Some were foreign students like me, and some had stories a lot more complicated than mine. Some of these girls had families living close to them, while some were on their own. I joined the Sephardic Club, and since there were students there who spoke French, I felt comfortable among them. I got to know girls from South America, Colombia, Peru, and Iran, among other countries.

I did not dorm in Stern. That was not even negotiable at home. But even though I wasn't dorming and almost everyone else seemed to be living in the dorm, I did build some relationships that are very special, and I am still in contact with some of these girls today.

My parents were not opposed to my studies, but they were not so convinced I was going through with my plans for medical school. My extended family kept commenting on how ridiculous I was being about medical school (*What are you thinking? Why waste your time?!*), but I did not care. I had to keep my eyes on the prize, so to speak. I started to meet with the pre-med advisor. He was not too encouraging. He actually was trying to convince me to find an interest in other places, because he thought my chances of making it to medical school were grim. He thought I would not be a good candidate. How wrong he was! Some days I would think, *What if he is right?* On days like those, despair would win the best of me. That is when I would

find myself in Mrs. Marx's office. She would comfort me and then help me refocus. She did not have a clue, though, of how hungry I was for my goal. I continued on.

In the summers I worked at various places. One year I was privileged to work in a research lab at Mount Sinai, and I felt the excitement, the thirst. I had to make it. Time was running out so fast.

I was lucky to have chosen to major in chemistry, because my teachers were very supportive. There were not many students majoring in chemistry when I was a student. But I can honestly say that each professor in the department was an amazing and dedicated teacher, whether it was Mrs. Cecily Dobin, Mrs. Ethel Orlian (now Dean Orlian), or Dr. Lea Blau. The four years went by, and before I knew it, I was preparing to graduate. Baruch Hashem, (thank G-d), I was accepted to SUNY Downstate and New York Medical College in Westchester, while being waitlisted for Albert Einstein College of Medicine. However, SUNY Downstate in Brooklyn ended up being a perfect match for me.



Speaking to international students about my medical practice when I returned to Stern, as an alumna, for a pre-Purim Supperette. (Far right)

When I finally started medical school, it was almost surreal, like living a dream. I was able then to dorm. I came home every Friday afternoon and returned to the dorm in downtown Brooklyn every Sunday night. I remember how hard I had to work to get certain things done.

I realized when I started at Downstate that leaving Stern had been tough. Even though I had some difficult times during my years at Stern, everyone was like

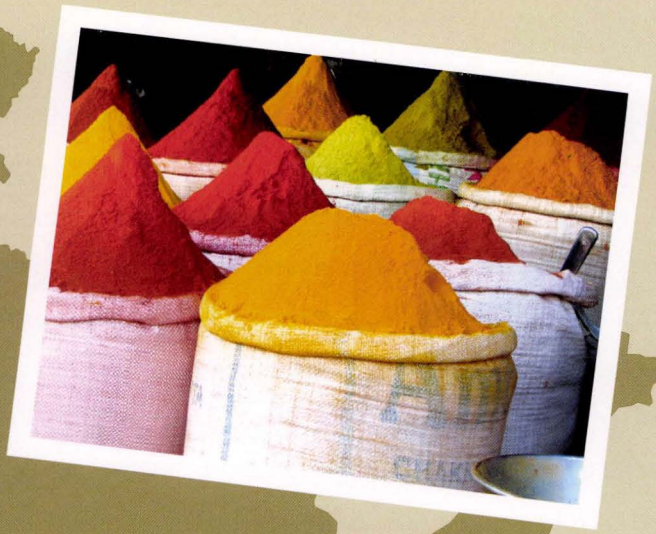
one big, extended family. Everybody sort of knew everybody. Whether it was someone in student services like Mrs. Braun or Mrs. Marx, or the security guard in the front, I felt like I was at home in that building. I can honestly say that for the first time in my entire life I was comfortable somewhere and felt like I belonged. While in Stern, I can say I had no fears other than academic ones. I had no enemies. Stern helped shape me into a better Jewish person.

In addition to my medical school studies, I now had another challenge. I was trying to get married. My prospects, however, were not great. I dated here and there. Not so many men in my community were interested in a physician as a spouse. I was ready to give up on this whole matter until one day an old friend called to set me up with someone who she thought might be a good prospect. He was a dentist, and he was also looking for a wife who had some education and was from my community.

This person ended up becoming my husband. We got married at the end of my third year in medical school. My husband is my best friend, and we are similar in many ways. He had immigrated to the States from Egypt when he was sixteen years old and also had a rough time in school until he graduated from dental school. We now have four beautiful children. My first two boys were born during my first two years of internship and residency in Maimonides Medical Center. Seven years later, we were blessed with our first girl, and then our second. Of course, their childhood and lives are very different than ours.

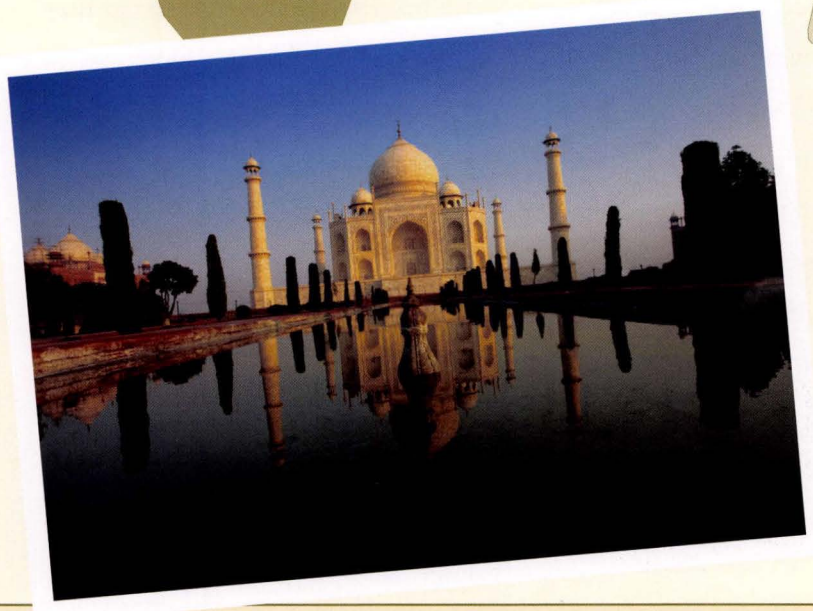
Currently, I am working in my own private practice in Brooklyn, with a specialty in internal medicine. I love my career, but of course my primary job is being a mother and a wife. Although I had many obstacles along the way, I love what I do and would do the same again and again if I had to.

YEARS AT STERN: 1985–1989



Indian cuisine is characterized by a multitude of spices, such as curry.

MUMBAI, INDIA



The Taj Mahal

Mumbai Meets Manhattan

Ilanit Benjamin

The history of Jews in India reaches back to ancient times. Jews came to India more than two thousand years ago and lived peacefully with the other religious groups there. Nowadays, there are three main groups of Indian Jews: Bene-Israel, Cochin, and Baghdadi. The members of my family are Bene-Israel Jews, who many consider to have been part of the Ten Lost Tribes.

I grew up in a suburb of Mumbai called Thane. Thane is part of the Maharashtra region of India, located on the western coast, which borders the Arabian Sea. Of all the cities in India, Thane boasts one of the most active Jewish communities, with 40 percent of the Indian Jewish population living in or around Thane. When I left India, there were about five thousand Jews residing there, but now there are approximately six or seven thousand.

The center for many Jewish communal events and resources is an old, famous synagogue in the city called Shaar Hashamaim (Gate of Heaven) Synagogue, of which my father is the rabbi. The synagogue was founded in 1878, and Jewish religious life continues to revolve around this synagogue until today.

In the 1800s, the Jewish community of Mumbai was invigorated after a family of Iraqi Baghdadi Jews by the name of Sassoon came to India and founded (among other Jewish institutions) a Jewish school called the Jacob Sassoon High

School. Years later, both of my parents became teachers in that school, but the three-hour commute each way precluded my younger brother and me from attending. Instead, we went to a secular British school nearby. With India being home to about two hundred million Muslims, Hindus, and Christians, I had many multicultural friends at school. Although I was the only Jewish girl in my grade, the environment was always a progressive one. I was never challenged for missing school on Jewish holidays or penalized for revealing my Jewish identity. There was full freedom of religion, both among my peers and general surroundings.

My family has a very traditional approach to Judaism. My father, Rabbi Abraham Benjamin, has deep roots in India. He was born in India and had his Brit Milah, Bar Mitzvah, and wedding at our synagogue. My mother, also from India, came from a very devout home herself; her own father was very religious. She even accompanied my grandfather every morning in Elul to pray *Slichos* in synagogue. Their family was accustomed to entertaining numerous guests in their home every Jewish holiday, and my mother continued this tradition once she started her own family. My aunts and uncles would join us every week. Our family also hosted communal sedarim on Pesach. Living in Thane was, in many ways, similar to living in the Jewish shtetls of old. In fact, people even baked their own matzot for Pesach!

Although I'd never attended Jewish day school, I did grow up learning some basic Hebrew words from my parents, who were both fluent in the language. Their knowledge of Hebrew stemmed from their studies in Israeli yeshivot in the 1970s. After studying in Israel (my father in yeshiva and my mother in seminary), my parents became very involved in Jewish education. They moved to Mumbai to secure teaching positions in the high school, and they naturally passed their knowledge onto their children. In this way, my brother and I received a basic Jewish education at home. Because my parents were both so well-educated religiously, I learned

more about traditional Jewish practices, and had more significance placed on the value of a Jewish education, in comparison to other Indian Jewish teenagers.

By the time I completed high school, I realized that it would be a good idea to select a college that would allow me to learn more formally about my Jewish background and deepen my Jewish identity. My father, who was very active in our community, was also familiar with the Jewish scene in the tristate area after learning in a yeshiva in New Jersey years before. He recalled a stellar Jewish university in the region. Ultimately, my parents decided that Yeshiva University, with its emphasis on Torah U'Madda—its formal Jewish education and its strong secular education combined—would be the most viable option.

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The next thing I knew, I was at Stern. I had obtained my visa immediately; I was eighteen years old and quite excited to come live in America. Since I've always loved meeting new people, I was especially excited to be immersed in this new environment where I could expand my social circle. Little did I realize what was in store for me. While I expected to meet many American students, I was shocked by the startling quantity of Jews, all from eclectic backgrounds. I had never been around so many Jews in my life. I had barely even interacted with non-Indian Jews back in my home country!

Naturally, living with American Jews was a big culture shock and learning experience for me. The hardest part in understanding this whole new lifestyle was acclimating to entirely different social norms and methods of communication. The eastern culture I had grown up in, with its more traditional and formal value system, was vastly different from the more laid-back western culture most of my

peers were accustomed to. For example, in India, one is expected to have a deep respect for elders to the point that referring to an elder by his or her first name is considered disrespectful. In New York, interactions were much more casual. Also, despite India's urban culture, Indian society doesn't emphasize "going out" to enjoy oneself. While we had movie theaters and other popular venues, arranging get-togethers was rare, as most of our time was spent with family and friends at home. The idea of personal space is also different in these two cultures. It is well known that Indians are more communal, so although I was friends with my first roommate, who was from Kansas, I had to remember that Americans kept more to themselves.

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There were other adjustments, as well. Since India is near the equator, temperatures hover around eighty-six degrees Fahrenheit all year. Its warm and tropical climate is similar to that of Hawaii. Thus, Thane always looked and felt like a beautiful paradise. Not surprisingly, New York weather was something I had to quickly adjust to—and am still adjusting to until this day!

I also found American dishes to be quite different from their Indian counterparts, as Indian cuisine is characterized by a multitude of spices and flavoring. Additionally, I wasn't used to the American culture of "dining out." Indians usually only eat homemade foods, and besides, no kosher supermarkets or restaurants existed. If we wanted kosher chicken, we'd have to go to a designated place outside the shul, where the butchers would sell it. Usually, it was reserved for holidays and Shabbat exclusively, the sale occurred only on Thursdays, and it would take

extensive time and effort to *shecht* and prepare it. The prevalence of chicken in American food was thus overwhelming. As for meat, I had never tasted it until I arrived in America. Keeping in line with India's culture of respect, many Indians refrain from cooking or eating meat since the cow is traditionally considered sacred in India.

I soon found out, though, that New York is the proverbial mecca for kosher food. Growing up in a Sephardic Mumbai, I had never met Ashkenazi Jews before, which meant that I had never tried gefilte fish and cholent, either. I had no idea what it tasted like until I tried it one Shabbat at an Ashkenazi family's home in Queens. Another cuisine-related shock I experienced was during Passover, when I simply ogled at the variety of Kosher for Passover food available in the States. Coming from Thane, where food had to be imported from Israel because we had such a meager selection back home, it was unbelievable to experience my first Passover program in upstate New York. It was a lavish feast, complete with a plethora of Kosher for Passover cereals and cookies!

Though there was a lot to get used to those first few years, most of my friends were out-of-towners like me who were going through the same adjustments. There was a certain comfort in the fact that although we were all from different parts of the world, we were in the same boat, living in New York without our families. I made friends with students from Germany, Denmark, Russia, Switzerland, South Africa, France, and South America. My social circles were also widened when I became president of the Sephardic Club and an active member of the European Club. Going outside one's comfort zone and learning to interact with people from different cultures is never easy, but it's always worth it. The one difference between us was that that there was no language barrier for me. Since I went to a British school, I was fluent in British English, and I spoke an even more formal English than the Americans at Stern! I still keep in touch with many of my

friends from Stern, such as my Persian friend from New Jersey and my best friend from Germany, who now lives in England.

I initially wanted to study computer science and engineering, but I ultimately majored in math and minored in finance. In India we never received letter grades, as we were marked on a basis of numbers out of one hundred. Since the schooling system in India is very competitive and I was inculcated with the value of academic excellence from a young age, obtaining as high of a numeral grade as possible was always what we schoolchildren strived for. When I received my grades at Stern, I remember being surprised by not receiving an exact score; a grade "A" could denote anywhere from a 92 through 100!

In addition to the secular academics, the religious curriculum was also very different from what I was used to. Stern opened up a whole new way of learning and thinking for me. While I always knew how to read prayers in Hebrew, I had never spent time interpreting them in depth until I studied at Stern.

I also grew religiously through my experiences on Shabbat. I stayed in for Shabbat most of the time, but I also loved visiting different Jewish communities. Individuals from all walks of life invited me into their homes, and because of this I had the opportunity to visit many Jewish communities on the East Coast. These families were fascinated by my background: Many had never even met someone from India, so it was intriguing for both of us. Whenever they invited me, I went. To this day, I still spend holidays with these hosts, many of whom have become like second families to me.

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That was my way of seeing America: through its communities. I didn't go sightseeing, and I didn't go home for vacations because it was too expensive and difficult to fly back and forth to India. Truthfully, this meant that I did not miss

my family much, because I always thought of my time at Stern as an opportunity to explore new places. In the summers, I found things to do as well. I worked in Camp Sternberg one summer and attended Neve in Israel the next.

Although it seemed a lot to take in at first, it was all quite exciting and I was always striving to acquire all that I could from the experience. Mrs. Marx, of course, helped a great deal with the adjustment. She was the first person I met here, and I became very close to her. She was the go-to person for international students, and she helped us foreigners acclimate ourselves to American society. Kind, loving, and patient, she was (and still is) perfect for the job. She understood what it was like to be a foreigner, and her own background helped her perform her job with understanding and compassion.

After graduation, I accepted my first job as an actuarial consultant, but after two years I switched to investment banking. Investment banking was quite an intense and emotionally-draining experience. Although I worked on Wall Street for three years, it felt like fifteen. It required long hours; I was living on planes and out of suitcases, traveling to hotels and interacting with businessmen and CEOs of Fortune 500 companies at the age of twenty-four. Additionally, it was the first time I was exposed to the secular culture of working in America, which was in itself a small culture shock after being in the insular and protected "bubble" of Stern. I eventually quit my job on Wall Street and went in search of something more meaningful.

At this point, many of my fellow colleagues in my program were applying to business schools for their MBAs, so I began helping some of them study for their GMATs. Colleagues would come to me from all different investment banking firms, asking if I could tutor them. Both of my parents were teachers, so I found that teaching came naturally to me, and I realized I loved it. I even started tutoring men and women who were years older than me. This job experience

definitely gave me confidence and taught me to believe in myself no matter how old (young!) I was.

Currently, I work as a full-time private tutor. Besides for GMAT tutoring, I prepare students for the SAT and other standardized tests in subjects like physics, chemistry, and statistics. Some of my clients and clients' students even went to Stern as well. It is interesting how my career path has ultimately mirrored my parents'.

At this point, I want to expand my career by taking education into the New Age. School systems will change and evolve to adapt to technology in the near future. I want to prepare students for that kind of education, as well as inspire the next generation, by broadening their minds and expanding their horizons.

While I have been successful with my career here in New York, I do sometimes think back to India, in which a small Jewish population remains. I currently live on the Upper West Side, which is a burgeoning place for young people and other international Jews. Fortunately, I have a lot of friends here, which makes it convenient for us to get together. Although I am not yet certain whether I will stay on the East Coast, returning to India would now be too much of a difficult transition. Nothing is definite, though, and the future holds many mysteries for me.

My advice to Stern students (especially foreigners) is to make the most of your college experience. New York City is the best Jewish environment outside of Israel. Embrace its culture, learn about the different communities, and explore. Definitely say yes when people invite you for Shabbat. Don't be afraid to get outside of your comfort zone. My advice to Americans is to welcome people who are living here without their families, who don't have a home base and are still figuring themselves out. Invite them to your weddings, your houses. Let them see your American Jewish lifestyle. I credit much of my growth in Stern, and the person I am now, to the American families who embraced me and welcomed me into their homes. Although I came to Stern overwhelmed by the new lifestyle and

culture I found myself in, I evolved into the person I am today by persevering through the obstacles from the onset and learning to develop friendships and interact with others. Overall, my experience at Stern was very beneficial on many levels: emotionally, intellectually, and culturally.

YEARS AT STERN: 1994–1998



The Judenplatz (Jewish Square) in Vienna's Innere Stadt (Old Town)

VIENNA, AUSTRIA



The Vienna Opera House



Panorama of Vienna

A Home Away from Home

Gila Liska Russo

It is oftentimes not until you leave a place behind that that same place suddenly feels like home to you. This was certainly true for me, both with respect to my hometown, Vienna, as well as Stern College.

My childhood years in Vienna, Austria, were happy and thrilling years, but also character-building ones. The Jewish community in Vienna, once a center of Jewish intellectuality and enlightenment, had been ravaged by World War II and was slowly taking steps toward healing by rebuilding its community centers, shuls, and school. The Zvi Perez Chajes Gymnasium was the elite Jewish school prior to World War II, and it was reestablished by the first post-war generation in 1980, merely two years before I was to enter first grade. It was a community school for Jewish children from all walks of life. Its aim was to provide an excellent education while instilling a sense of Jewish identity as before the war. So, while in America it would have been unheard of for a *frum* girl to attend a co-ed school with nary a focus on *limudei kodesh*, I was privileged to attend an Austrian gymnasium in the true sense of the word, studying Latin, sciences, French, world and art history, philosophy, and—in Sigmund Freud's Vienna—of course, psychology. Jewish studies (such as Hebrew, Jewish history, and Tanach) were treated academically, like any other subject matter. However, to ensure a solid Jewish

upbringing, I also attended an extracurricular Bais Yaakov *cheider* school with three other girls about my age.

Through these various experiences, one of the most important lessons I learned was to appreciate the values I was taught at home while at the same time respecting those with a different set of values. Both at school and at home it was made obvious to me that to judge another's religious beliefs and practices was not up to us. As one of only a few Orthodox girls in my school, and later as a *madricha* at *Bnei Akiva*, I felt that it was my task to lead by example without judgment and censorship. I learned this at home, as my parents hosted Jews from all walks of life—whether they were visiting rabbis or refugees from Iran, American tourists or Russian immigrants. Everyone was welcomed with open arms and open hearts.

Politically, the eighties were a strange time for Jews in Austria. I was raised with the knowledge of anti-Semitism around us—we had police and security in front of every shul, old-age home, and school. An attack in the late seventies on the Great Synagogue prompted the leaders of the Jewish community to design our school with bulletproof double doors. Men would wear hats or remove their kippahs on the street. But rarely did I feel overtly threatened. Perpetuating the legend of being Hitler's first victims during the *Anschluss*, instead of acknowledging its willing participation, Austria avoided the assumption of all responsibility. Indeed, this is why Austria refused to follow Germany's lead in making amends through returning stolen property or compensating through *Wiedergutmachung*. The government also refrained from prosecuting any citizens accused of war crimes, making Vienna therefore the battleground for Simon Wiesenthal and his organization.

As a child, it seemed to me that most Austrians silently resented us, as our very presence served as a reminder of their shame and guilt. In 1986, these repressed, guilt-ridden undercurrents came to a head when Kurt Waldheim ran for president of Austria and succeeded, even though his sordid past as an

intelligence officer with the *Wehrmacht* (along with his public denial of it) was brought to light. International outcry finally forced Austria to come face-to-face with its past and its guilt, and I felt that as a Jewish child I personally should have a role in this debate. Thus, I participated with my friends in many demonstrations, panels, and information sessions, and tried to raise awareness with the general Austrian population as well as the Jewish community.

Given the limits of Jewish life in Austria, we were all raised with a great love for Israel—our true homeland. Many of us thought of making aliyah once we finished school, and we planned accordingly. We became fluent in Hebrew and, upon high school graduation, took the Israeli *Bagrut* to facilitate entry into Hebrew universities.

I attended Michlala University in Jerusalem and majored in psychology. The major was a very hands-on, practical program, and after a year, I felt that I needed a more theoretical and academic background before I ventured further into this field. My mother, herself a Stern graduate, suggested I give New York, and specifically Stern College, a try. For my parents, New York was only a natural choice, as they had met in New York when they were both college students: my father studying in Torah Vodaas and NYU Law School, and my mother majoring in art history at Stern.

Arriving in New York was thrilling and scary at the same time. Since I knew no one yet in Stern College and was unfamiliar with the American university system, I found it hard at the beginning. My English was not the best, and I was writing most of my papers in German and then translating them with the help of a dictionary into English. The girls I was rooming with were as strange to me as I probably was to them, and our cultural differences sometimes didn't make for the best living arrangements. Shabbos was especially hard, as many girls went home while I had to find placement.

The Office of International Students was instrumental in getting me settled. I remember many a visit to Mrs. Marx's office with questions and concerns. In fact, I once had to call Mrs. Marx on a Sunday at home, as I had forgotten to get my student visa signed and was being held at JFK as an illegal immigrant on my way back from a visit home. Within minutes, Mrs. Marx had tracked down the dean of students and had him fax a signed copy and affidavit of my student status to the Immigration and Naturalization Service office at JFK.

As I immersed myself in my studies, the quality of my professors and the wide variety of courses I was able to attend more than compensated for any difficulties in the initial adjustment. I loved taking rigorous Jewish history, philosophy, and Tanach classes while simultaneously pursuing my secular studies. Even today, when I come across my old *Moreh Nevuchim* with my notes in the margins, I can hear my professor's words as if it were yesterday. On a recent family Pesach spent in Italy, a lecturer talked about the *Baalei Hatosfot* that originated in Italy and brought to mind a Stern class on that very same topic. Being taught educational psychology by a bearded professor in a *beketche* was instrumental in teaching me that there is no contradiction in being a religious Jew and pursuing a professional career. Over time, I had the good fortune to be inspired by outstanding personalities while also making many lasting friends.

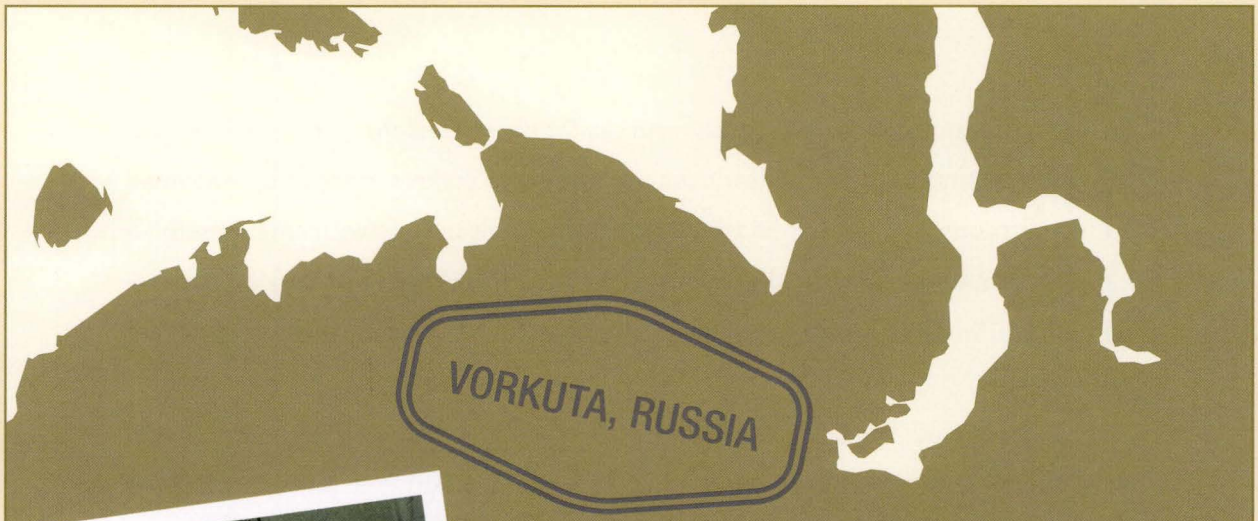
I took full advantage of all that New York City had to offer by visiting the museums, rollerblading in Central Park, and attending the theater and opera. The fast pace of the city that never sleeps was in tune with my inner rhythm as I rarely slept, either. Between classes, studying, and exploring New York, there just never were enough hours in the day. Coming from a city where the government regulates business hours and mandates a nine-to-six workday with required blue laws, it was energizing to be able to go grocery shopping at 11:00 p.m. or grab a coffee at 3:00 a.m. while on a break from an all-night study session. Sitting in the Stern

library at night, looking up primary sources for some Halacha paper—while staring out the window at the yellow cabs and the New Yorkers zipping by—seemed so incongruous and yet felt so right. Gradually, I fell in love with this incredible city and its natives, specifically my future husband. Making New York my permanent home did not seem that much of a sacrifice, though it was far from Vienna in every sense.

I graduated from Stern College with a double major in philosophy and psychology a few months after getting married. I continued my education by attending law school and subsequently a graduate program in criminal justice in which I eventually ended up teaching; and the rest, as they say, is history.

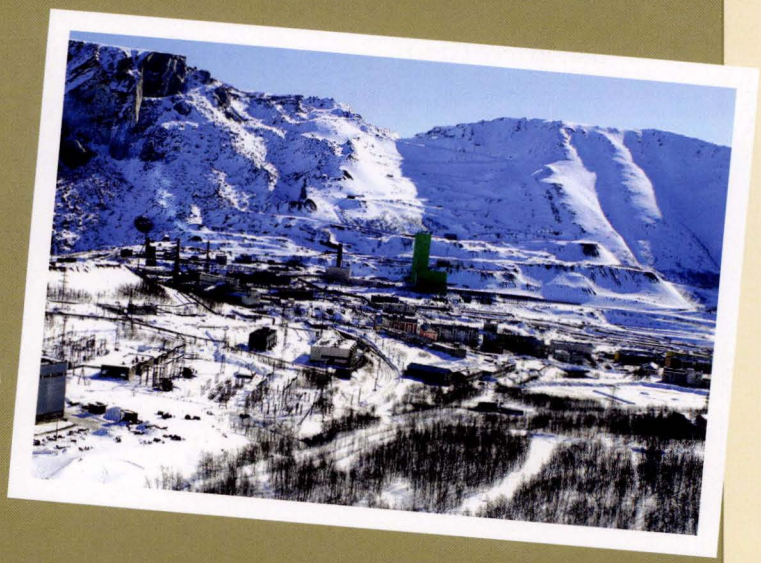
Now that I am older and have children of my own, the New York rat race has lost some of its appeal, and I sometimes yearn for the more sedate pace of Vienna. Similarly, when I come across an old textbook, or walk past my old dorm on Thirty-Fourth Street, I yearn for those hectic but truly stimulating college years. But I know that both Vienna and Stern have instilled in me a sense of self, a sense of purpose, and a sense of identity that I can now pass on to my children.

YEARS AT STERN: 1996–1998





Vorkuta is a small mining town located one hundred miles from the Arctic Ocean.



At the entrance to the dormitory for physicians where we lived until my parents received from the government a private two-room apartment that housed our family for the next fourteen years. (I am eleven months old in the photo.)

The Foreigner from the Arctic

Olga Pantukhova Segal

I was born in the beautiful city of St. Petersburg, Russia. My parents, both born and raised in St. Petersburg, ended up raising me and my three younger siblings in Vorkuta, a small coal-mining town of 350,000 people located one hundred miles away from the Arctic Ocean shoreline. The town was established in 1932 to support the Vorkuta Gulag, a Stalin-era prison camp. Both medical school graduates, my parents were sent to Vorkuta as part of a government program to employ young physicians to provide medical services in remote regions. In spite of the harsh climate (with winter temperatures as low as negative twenty to negative forty degrees Fahrenheit) and the isolation of the town (it being the last stop of the railroad with no drivable highway reaching that far up north), my parents loved living in Vorkuta and remained there for almost fifteen years.

They stayed perhaps because it was a melting pot. Vorkuta was mostly a city of young people of different nationalities who were born elsewhere in the Soviet Union and moved there to build their lives in a place that promised openness and new opportunities. My parents, just like others, did not experience anti-Semitism or cultural stigma socially or professionally, and were able to advance their professional careers to the degree that may not have been

possible in their native "well-established" St. Petersburg. No one had roots in Vorkuta. The only people born there were the children of prisoners.

As mentioned, the climate was severe. We had snowfall nine months of the year, and summer averages were in the fifties. If we wanted to see the local Eskimos and reindeer, we had to travel south from where we lived, to warmer temperatures! The government even paid higher wages to Vorkuta's residents as an incentive since it was considered a health hazard to live in such a harsh climate. Adults and children alike wore fur all the time—it was not a luxury but a true necessity. If on the rare occasion a prisoner escaped from the prison camp outside the city, the authorities did not spend much effort searching for the inmate, as being out in the open tundra meant an almost-certain freezing to death. Nonetheless, we loved the snow and felt that our childhood was idyllic. As kids, we prayed for the days of severe temperature drops, as it would mean school closures for everyone. We were then free to play to our hearts' content (in the snow, of course!).



First grade: Notice the pose and the uniform. Boys wore dark suits. Girls wore aprons, special collars, and sleeve-cuffs that had to be washed and sewn back on by hand weekly. The required posture included a straight back and hands placed in front on the desk.

There were also better housing opportunities up in the Arctic Circle. One had a higher chance of acquiring an individual or "private" apartment in Vorkuta, when compared to the rest of the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union,

several unrelated families used to live together in communal apartments (*kommunalkas*), where strangers shared bathrooms and kitchens. In other situations, two or three generations of one family lived in a single room of a government-mandated apartment. In fact, within a year after their arrival to Vorkuta, my parents were able to receive their own two-room apartment from the government, which is where my younger siblings and I spent our years growing up. Still, every summer we traveled down to St. Petersburg to be with our relatives and to take advantage of the abundance of cultural institutions—the theatres, operas, ballets, and museums...

I went to public school up until the age of fourteen, as there were no Jewish schools in the Soviet Union. Growing up, I did not even have a concept of being Jewish. All I knew was that there was "an exotic nationality" in my family, something vague and strange, akin to being an Eskimo.

However, this all changed after the fall of the Iron Curtain at the end of the eighties, when my uncle and his wife were finally permitted to return to Russia for a visit after living in Israel for more than fifteen years. Prior to this visit, Israel did not exist in our minds; it was absent on the Soviet maps, and we did not learn about it in school or speak about it. All I knew about my uncle was that he was living abroad in some faraway country, and that he sent us care packages once in a while. Only when he came back for that visit did I have the mental capacity to realize that my mother's brother Veniamin was living in *Israel*, and our Eskimo-like nationality was really called *Jewish*.

Israel did not exist in our minds; it was absent on the Soviet maps...

My uncle's epic visit from Israel was monumental in our lives and proved to be a turning point for many of our family and friends. Most of my relatives living in St. Petersburg made aliyah in the nineties as a result of that visit, and some



Fourth grade class, 1986. We are now old enough to become "Pioneers" (a.k.a young communists-in-training) and proudly wear the signatory red neck scarfs. I am at the second desk in the center row.

of our Jewish family friends even decided to move solely based on my parents' account of the visit. My parents considered moving as well and made a trip to visit Israel.

In 1992, my parents heard of a Jewish school in Kishinev, the capital of Moldova, one of the former Soviet Union republics. They thought it would make sense for their daughters to attend a Jewish school for the summer in order "to infuse us with some Jewishness" and to learn the "Jewish" language in preparation for making aliyah. At this point it is important to note that being Jewish in Russia is considered a nationality—not a religion. In the recent 2010 census, "Jewish" is counted as an ethnicity (0.5%), in the same category as "Russian" (80.1%), "Ukrainian" (1.3%), and "Belarusian" (0.8%).

And that is how, at the ages of thirteen and fifteen, my younger sister Sima and I took the three-day-long train ride from Vorkuta down south to Kishinev to attend the school. "Yeshivas Kishinev" turned out to be a boarding school organized by the Agudath Israel of America and run by the amazing Rabbi Moshe Eisemann to enable Soviet Jewish children to gain exposure to Judaism. My sister and I, as newcomers to the school, were quite behind all the other kids who spent the prior academic year at the yeshiva, so we had to catch up rapidly. One of our talented teachers, Mrs. Estie Tesser, was able to teach us the aleph-bet and basic Hebrew reading in a mere two hours after our arrival to the Yeshiva. Once we were able to read, my sister and I plunged into learning the foundations of the Jewish religion, tradition, and culture. For the first time in our lives, we began to have a clear understanding of what it meant to be Jewish.

As that summer came to an end, my parents changed their minds about making aliyah, but nevertheless allowed us to remain at the Agudah school for the next academic year. This was a major decision on my parents' part, as it meant missing a year of secular studies in the regular government school system.

Every once in a while, the heads of the Yeshiva would choose a few students who seemed especially interested in their studies to offer them a higher level of education in the States. Agudah found Jewish schools throughout the United States that were willing to admit and sponsor such children from Yeshivas Kishinev. My sister and I were offered such an opportunity to continue our Jewish education, and we were placed in Bais Yaakov of Baltimore.

Thus, my sister and I left Russia in 1993 and spent the next two years living on Yeshiva Lane, in the heart of the Baltimore Jewish community. I lived with the wonderful family of Rabbi and Mrs. Chaim Dovid Lapidus, along with their seven young children and a boarder from Mexico! My sister and I had a great time, but coming from a very secular background straight to Yeshiva Lane was quite a

culture shock. I also missed my family, and the sudden and complete separation was difficult. Yet the Lapidus family was always very gracious. In addition to providing for all my needs, they permitted me one ten-minute phone call per week which, at that time, prior to Skype and the Internet, was quite expensive at five dollars per minute. Today, my host family and I still continue to maintain strong ties, attending each other's simchas and getting together for many Yomim Tovim.

Everything in America seemed strange to us at first. My sister and I could not follow verbal colloquialisms, and although we had reading proficiency in English, it was still difficult to carry on conversations. No one could pronounce our names properly, the dress code (and even table manners) were different, the sink faucets turned the "wrong" way, and we could not recognize many of the foods. I remember shortly after our arrival, still dizzy from the long airplane ride, I was greeted by a "hello" and wide smile of a sweet girl. I almost passed out seeing scary metal pieces coming out of her mouth—I had never seen braces before! Looking back, I recognize the humor of the incident, but at the moment it was pure shock. Youth has its benefits, though, and within a few months, my sister and I adapted and functioned well in the new culture.

I left Russia when I was sixteen, having missed the last academic year of the ten-year Soviet public school system while attending the Yeshiva in Kishinev. My Russian classmates were about to graduate high school and were applying to universities. When I arrived to the United States at the age of sixteen, I found out that I had to complete four years of the American high school curriculum in order to receive my American high school diploma. To avoid spending another four years in school, I geared up and completed the four-year secular curriculum in two years: ninth and tenth grade in the first academic year, and eleventh and twelfth grade in the following academic year. Thus, I was able to graduate on time with my American high school classmates at the age of eighteen! I remember

writing two separate essays simultaneously at night for my English composition homework and reading Beowulf and Shakespeare at the same time for the English literature classes. I studied the intricacies of the English grammar under the guidance of the strict but superb English teacher Mrs. Klapper, who expected no less from me than from my American-born classmates. Looking back, I cannot thank this teacher enough for her approach, as it helped me with all my further studies. Even now, my American-born husband usually turns to me rather than to a dictionary when he has a spelling or grammatical question.

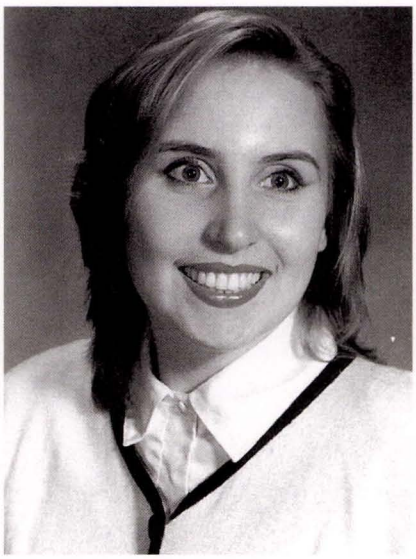
The Jewish studies curriculum was even more of a roller-coaster ride than the English curriculum. When we started our studies at Bais Yaakov, my fourteen-year-old sister was placed in the third grade for Jewish studies, while I, a sixteen-year-old, was "advanced" to the fourth grade. The desks were a bit tight, but I kept up with the nine-year-old girls, memorizing the Pirkei Avot by heart in the first two months after my arrival. After this feat, I was "upgraded" to the eighth grade, and then to the eleventh and twelfth grades. Along this journey, I had many amazing Jewish studies teachers and classmates who educated and inspired me. After two years in Bais Yaakov, I received my diploma. I then moved to New York and started at Stern.

The desks were a bit tight, but I kept up with the nine-year-old girls, memorizing the Pirkei Avot by heart in the first two months after my arrival.

Rabbi Yosef Wolk, the head of the family where my sister lived in Baltimore, was the moving factor in my becoming a Stern student. He told me about this amazing Jewish college and drove me (while in his seventies) several times from Baltimore to New York to visit the campus and attend interviews. Rabbi Wolk helped me fill out college applications, guided my SAT studies and, since my

parents could not support me financially, conducted extensive networking on my behalf to locate scholarships and loans. Unlike most other Russian-born Stern students who arrived in the States with their families as immigrants, I was on a student visa, so I did not qualify for any government aid and was only eligible for private loans.

Thus, I was honored to be accepted and moved to New York in 1995 to begin my studies at Stern. While some students tried to graduate as soon as possible, completing their studies in a mere two or three years, I was the opposite. I wanted to stay as long as possible and take as many courses as I would be allowed. I never wanted to leave! As long as I was eligible for loans, I maximized all the time I had at Stern. I audited classes, took the highest number of courses permitted, and made private arrangements with professors to "listen in" on courses. I attended classes in any and every topic I was interested in—from French and Spanish languages to marketing, medieval art, and Modern Issues in Halacha.



Stern College yearbook photo

During my fourth year at Stern, I bravely wrote a letter to the administration asking for permission to remain an extra year with the same financial arrangement, and received it! Thus, I was a proud Stern student for five years and loved every moment of it. I ultimately graduated with about 180 credits, a double major, and a minor—and that does not even include all the courses I sat in on or audited.

At Stern, I became friends with many international students. Aside from the Russians, my closest friend was from Venezuela, and my roommates came

from all over the globe. After my educational growth at Stern, I think the greatest growth was cultural—being able to learn from and connect to people of different backgrounds. While at Stern, I served as vice president of the International Club, as well as vice president and president of the Russian Club. I found out about all the free and student-discount tickets available, and visited every single museum and gallery I could. Every week I was at the theater, ballet, or opera; I tried to do it all. As a leader of various clubs, I also felt compelled to encourage my fellow students to join me on my cultural escapades in this magical place.

I was now able to record myself talking about school and my life in New York as I was hurrying from place to place. Then, I would mail the audiotape to Russia.

In my "spare time" I volunteered in various places to further my interests in psychology and medicine. I was a smoking-cessation intern at a psychiatric ward in the Bronx Veterans Affairs Hospital, where I led groups to help counsel severely mentally ill inpatients. I also volunteered at a suicide hotline in Manhattan, and became a simultaneous interpreter at Maimonides Hospital.

Whereas in Baltimore I spoke to my parents once a week, at Stern I would have way too much to share to fit into a ten-minute conversation. The problem was that I still could not afford lengthy phone calls to my parents, who were craving to know every detail of their child's life in a faraway land. This difficulty resulted in a memorable purchase: an audiocassette recorder! I was now able to record myself talking about school and my life in New York as I was hurrying from place to place. Then, I would mail the audiotape to Russia. My parents listened to hours of uninterrupted stories of my daily happenings. Their feedback: "It is very interesting, but why are you always panting?!"

Fast-forwarding to life after college, I was accepted to Albert Einstein Medical School. I met my wonderful husband, a fellow Einstein student, at one of the Einstein Shabbatons, and we were married during our last year of medical school. After four years of medical school and five subsequent years of grueling training, I became an adult neurologist with a subspecialty in sleep disorders and expertise in stroke. We now have five amazing children and live in Teaneck, New Jersey. Who would have ever thought that a girl growing up near the Arctic Circle in Russia would end up raising a Jewish family in the suburbs of New Jersey?!



My family, Purim 2014

I appreciate where this journey has taken me but I make sure to embrace my roots, too. For example, my family and I try to visit Russia yearly. My children attend local yeshiva day schools and take private Russian classes after school.

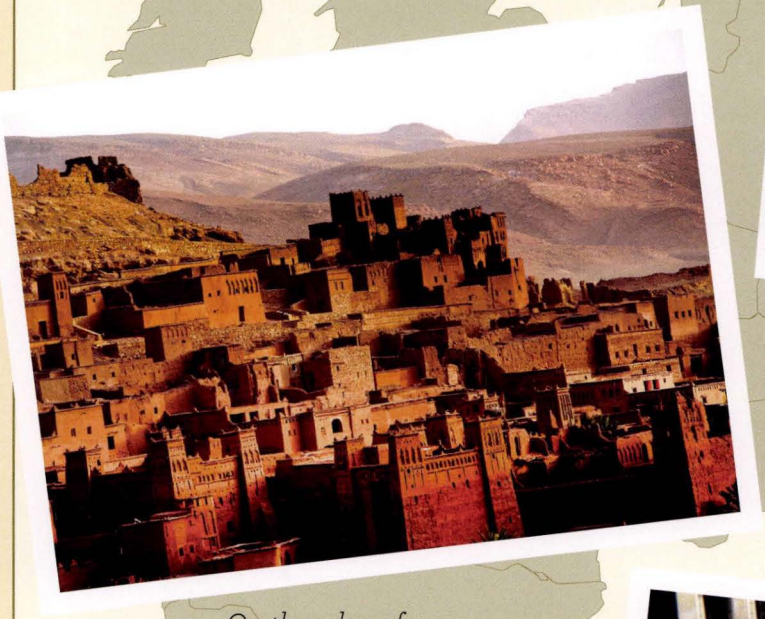
Looking back, my years at Stern were definitely a highlight of my life and yielded lifelong connections. I cherished my years at Stern and the numerous friendships that ensued. I still keep in touch with many student friends as well as some professors from Stern. For instance, I love interacting with my French professor Dr. Pauline Kra and recently visited her at her summer house with my entire family. I continue to keep in touch with International Student Advisor Mrs. Marga Marx; it's a lifelong relationship that I very much appreciate.

Furthermore, Stern College helped shape me as an individual. Specifically, my Judaic classes at Stern, as well as the overall environment of a Jewish institution, helped me grow and mature as a Jew. As a whole, my years at Stern enabled me to find myself as a Jew, as a professional, and as a member of society.

YEARS AT STERN: 1995–2000



My parents, siblings, and I at a café in Casablanca



On the edge of the Sahara desert in Morocco



I was the first Moroccan to attend Stern. Seen in this picture are the Moroccan underclassmen who came to celebrate my graduation with me.

CASABLANCA, MOROCCO

A Long Way from Casablanca

Sarah Wizman De Louya

I was born in the legendary town of Casablanca, Morocco, in 1978, at a time when the Jewish community was down to 2,600 people, compared to 800,000 at the beginning of the century. I am the oldest in a family of seven children.

Growing up, we all attended Jewish schools, summer camps, and sports clubs. Long Shabbat and Yom Tov tables filled with a myriad of my mother's delicious meals highlight my childhood memories. My father would always come home from synagogue with travelers or needy people. My mother cooked and baked everything herself because kosher goods were scarce; visiting family members would occasionally bring us cheese and candies. Although hospitality and generosity seemed normal to me, I came to realize my parents' valuable qualities as I grew up. I am so impressed with the balance that they managed to instill in us. We integrated the value of money and hard work, even if we never lacked anything. We practiced Judaism closely and proudly, while knowing enough of society. We learned the importance of finding and pursuing a career, without forgetting to start a family. However, the anxiety of inevitably living apart from one another shadowed my beautiful world.

Although Morocco is recognized as the most tolerant Muslim country today, it did inflict upon Jews pogroms and forced conversions, and hypocritical

cohabitation remains. The community nest consistently empties itself from its graduating youth, which has to promptly adapt to a better life elsewhere and acquire autonomy without looking back.

Thus, before I turned eighteen, I was the first one to leave my home and comforting roots; my youngest sister, Mikhal, was only eighteen months old. Half of the people from my class moved to France and the other half to Israel. I moved to Paris with the dream of becoming a medical doctor. As per the French system, each medical school accepts a thousand students the first year, and only the top ten percent are allowed to continue. After a relentless year, I was struck by my first ordeal: I was ranked 103, and they selected 102 students. However, Hashem had a bigger plan for me...



My brother's Bar Mitzvah at our synagogue in Casablanca

After some deep thinking, I decided to leave France and pursue my aspirations in the North American school system. I opted for Montreal, Canada, because I had extended family living there and because I would also have the benefit of enrolling in Francophone universities. After a week, I realized how complicated it was to enroll anywhere in the middle of July. Serendipitously, I met a Yeshiva University student who encouraged me to share the opportunity of not only studying sciences, but also continuing high-quality Jewish studies in the heart of Manhattan. I immediately called the

Yeshiva University international student director, who agreed to accept me on the condition that I pass the TOEFL English test and the math portion of the SAT.

In July 1998, I arrived at Brookdale dormitory. My New York adventure had begun. My first language being French (I also knew Hebrew and Arabic), I had only taken English as an optional course in the last two years of high school. For one semester, I taped my classes and transcribed all of them. Teachers graciously provided me with more explanations of the material during office hours and also agreed to extend exam times. I would carry my English–French dictionary, along with my lipstick, in my handbag at all times. I struggled a lot to communicate with my roommates, but eventually I befriended extraordinary girls from all over the map.



On my wedding day. Karen Briman, a"h, *is second from left.*

Despite intensive studying, I enjoyed a great social life. My closest friends were originally from Venezuela, Mexico, and Brazil. My Mexican friend Karen Briman, *a"h,* was the peppiest and simultaneously the wisest girl I have ever known. I cried very much when she passed away in 2010. Her words still ring in my ears and comfort me: "Everything is for the good," she always said, and "keep as discreet as possible."

My Stern College experience would not have been the same without the precious help of Mrs. Marx and Mrs. Braun, who always managed to find time

to listen to me and assist me financially, as they assisted other international students, in paying for books. Dean Bacon helped me validate my French credits by the World Education Services, and she (unbelievably!) helped me fit all my premedical requirements in one year. I progressed in English and even wrote an article called "Epilepsy in the Talmud" in *Derech HaTeva*, the Journal of Torah and Science. In 2001, I proudly graduated summa cum laude with a major in biology and a minor in arts, and an award for excellence in natural sciences.

Halfway through my bachelor's degree, my life took another unexpected twist when I received a call one night as I was babysitting. My friend's cousin had given my phone number to a young Jewish Moroccan from Montreal, who was graduating from law school. We spoke on the phone for a month before I flew to Montreal for Purim. Eric matched me perfectly: He was funny, hardworking, ambitious, and affectionate, and he was not intimidated by my impulsivity and strong will. By the summer of 2000, we were engaged, and I moved to Montreal in 2001 to get married. My plans for medical school had changed again. Before leaving New York, I had taken the MCAT and applied to medical school in Canada, but during the admission process, I started a master's program in biomedical sciences at the University of Montreal. I co-wrote an article that year, in *Pediatric Research*, about the role of CMV in Crohn's disease, and I was finally accepted to McGill Medical School in 2002. After six years of perseverance, I had started to perceive some light at the end of my long circumvallated tunnel. The happy turnout of my life was, after all, worth the suffering.



My husband and I on a visit to the artisan city of Fez, Morocco, soon after we were engaged

In 2004, after having completed two years in medical school, I gave birth to my first princess, Noa. Maternity leave gave me the first opportunity in many years to enjoy free time and put my mind at rest. However, when I resumed school, I had to juggle between the guilt of leaving my daughter in day care, remaining a performing student, keeping a healthy relationship with my husband, cleaning, and cooking. My husband was supportive; his family tried to help us with Noa, but we could not afford housekeeping. At that time, my parents and siblings lived in Morocco, except for my brother Messod who was studying in Montreal, too. I had paved the North American way for my parents, who subsequently sent my sisters Esther and Deborah to Stern College for Women. In 2007, I graduated from medical school and was accepted into the competitive program of pediatrics at the University of Montreal. Soon after starting residency in 2008, I was expecting my son Raphael, who lit up my life further. Motherhood has been such a beautiful gift. With constant exposure to disease in my profession, I came to appreciate the sole ability to have children, and, all the more so, healthy ones. Eric, Noa, and Raphael became the center of my existence; their love erased all the hardships of residency. Nevertheless, I continued to wrestle with my multiple roles.

Overcoming all these difficulties, however, did not prepare me for the tragedy. One day after Passover 2011, as I woke up from a twenty-four-hour call, my little brother Itsik (who had also moved to Montreal to study) knocked at my door and fell on the floor, sobbing. An accident had happened in Morocco. My brother Messod and my sister-in-law Mikhal, who were living in China for the past four years but were visiting my parents in Casablanca for the holidays, were killed in a terrorist attack in a Marrakech café. That morning, they had decided to take a vacation for a day, and had left their two-year-old son, David, with my parents. We flew that night to Morocco, and we buried our beloved couple the next day in Yerushalaim.

Sorrow, anger, and denial were tearing me apart. I did not understand. I could not stop asking why. The bereavement was even harder, as my parents were forced to leave Morocco and immigrate to Canada to take care of David after battling through a humiliating custody litigation. I had no choice other than to hide my internal turmoil in order to support my parents, spare my own family, and take care of my patients.

Right before our catastrophe, I had just found out that I was expecting my third child, and we had started building our house. I was so confused between life and death, creation and destruction. More and more pressure was crushing me, but I had to keep stronger than ever. I could not fail anybody around me. My beautiful Emanuelle was born in December 2011, and as my children, along with my nephew, blossomed, happiness slowly emerged again.

During and after my maternity leave, I devoted myself to study for my pediatric licensing exams, which I took in June 2013. I had simultaneously pursued a Fellowship in Infectious Disease and two research projects, in congenital CMV and clinical follow-up of HIV-exposed children. Unfortunately, the overwhelming emotional strain and educational expectations took a toll on my performance on exams. Life had taught me another lesson of indulgence and compassion for "myself."

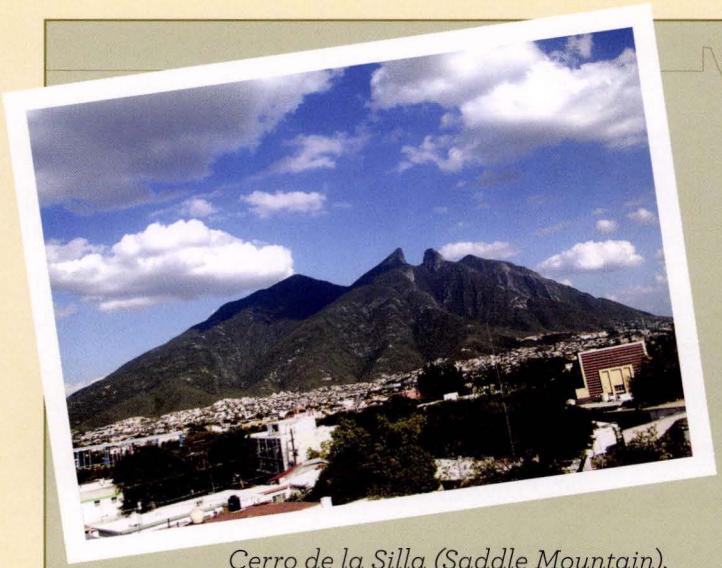
I passed my exams and graduated as a pediatric infectious disease specialist in February 2014. I was so proud when my children went up on stage with me to receive my diploma that June. I have finally closed the student chapter of my life, and I now intend to work as a community pediatrician and be active in public health projects such as vaccination and infection control. I also wish to expand my family, *Be'ezrat Hashem*...

I believe that life is a succession of events, good and bad, with an unknown purpose, but with the choice of reaction. To survive with a sound mind, one needs

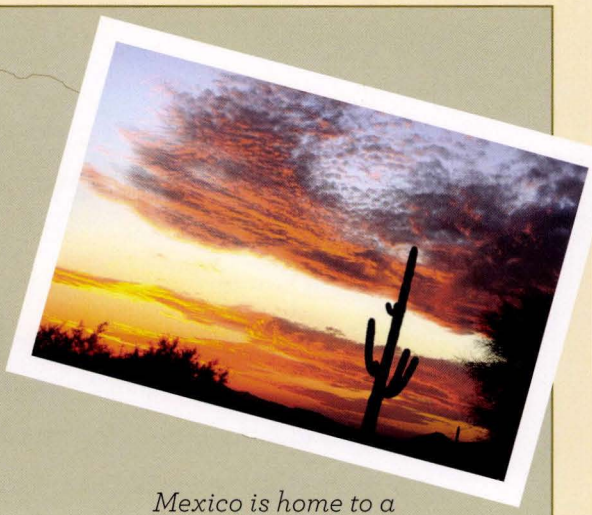
to make the best of what is given to us. Every minute counts and should be filled with kindness and hope. Judaism is a way of life and an excellent manual to interpret life at its best. One should invest in conveying strong values to the next generation and, therefore, one needs to invest in education. Education shapes one's personality and identity. Attending an institution like Stern College for Women is one of the best choices that I have ever made. My parents and my husband supported me in my dreams, and I hope to be able to help my children achieve their goals, too. With a positive mind-set and determination, no obstacle is too great. Strength and resilience grow with the challenges of life.

I believe that life is a succession of events, good and bad, with an unknown purpose, but with the choice of reaction.

YEARS AT STERN: 1998–2001



Cerro de la Silla (Saddle Mountain), Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico



Mexico is home to a number of arid deserts.

MONTERREY, MEXICO



Graduating from Stern. To my right is my mother, my brother Moises, and my sister Denisse. To my left is my father and my Bobe and Zeide. They all flew in from Mexico for my graduation!

Stern Señorita

Saritt Back Yedid

I was born in Monterrey, Mexico, a city located in the north of the country. In Monterrey there is a very small Jewish community with only about 120 families. Because the city borders Texas, Monterrey is more organized, well kept, and generally more "Americanized" than other Mexican cities. We also have beautiful mountains, clean air, and much greenery. I believe that the city's economic success has a lot to do with the high work ethic that many of its residents have.

In Mexico, the Jewish people have contributed to enriching the country in many areas such as medicine, architecture, and commerce. For this reason, the Jews in Monterrey generally live very well. We are allowed to have a synagogue and a Jewish school and to practice our Judaism. Vista Hermosa is the neighborhood where most of the Jews live, and the JCC, synagogue, school, and wedding hall are all in the same enclosed place. I went to the only Jewish school in town, and we used to go to shul every Shabbos.

When I was a little girl, we had no difficulties. We could go out at any time and we even left the door of our house open all the time. Nowadays, times have changed, and there is a lot of insecurity. Many people have moved from big houses to small apartments, and people are afraid to go out at night. Because of this fear, most of the Jews in Monterrey have left to more populated Jewish communities

like Mexico City, San Diego, Miami, or Israel. Left with just a handful of Jewish families, the once-private Jewish school has opened to non-Jewish children as well. It is a difficult time for the Jewish community there.



Celebrating a birthday in Schottenstein Hall with other international friends (Courtesy of Sarah Wizman De Louya)

After high school, most of my friends from Monterrey moved to Mexico City—some for college purposes, others to move out of their parents' homes and find their own places. But when I finished high school in Monterrey, I went to Yerushalaim to study for a year. I wanted to stay in Israel for college but I also felt it was too far away from home. My family convinced me to try Stern College after my uncle from Miami suggested that I apply there. They thought Stern would be a great option since I would be in a Jewish environment and still not be too far from Mexico. My uncle gave me the contact information, and I prepared for all the admission requirements. I took my SATs and was the happiest person alive when I received the phone call that I was accepted. I was really excited to live in New York, and my parents flew there with me to help me get settled.

I was thrilled, but at the same time nervous, to be in such a big city without knowing anybody. Right away, though, I met a lot of people. It was easier for me to be friends with the out-of-town students because we often stayed together in the dorms for Shabbos and understood one another's feelings of being away from

home. I had friends from Morocco, Iran, and Belgium. I was in the International Students Club, so I had the opportunity to organize a lot of Shabbatonim and restaurant dinners with different Sephardic speakers. It was fun to have so many religious friends and to go out to eat at different kosher restaurants—there was nothing like that in Monterrey. In the beginning, none of the food had any flavor or taste for me (in Mexico we eat chili and salsa on everything!), but I gradually grew used to it. In the cafeteria, some of my favorites were the salad bar, the tuna wraps, and the pretzels with mustard. I loved those pretzels!

Living in New York was an enriching experience. It was exciting to be in a place where there were so many Jewish people, and just so many *options* in general: options for food, shuls, friends... I was very happy about the Jewish life there.

It was fun to have so many religious friends and to go out to eat at different kosher restaurants—there was nothing like that in Monterrey.

In terms of academics, the first year was hard. It was difficult to write papers and exams in English. But I worked very hard, and it got easier every day. My major was speech pathology and audiology. The class that I enjoyed the most was ASL, American Sign Language. The teacher was deaf and very funny. I decided to major in speech because I could speak Spanish and English well and thought it would be great to work with Hispanic people living in the United States. At that time, I thought I would definitely end up living in America even after I graduated college. I also loved that I had the opportunity to learn *limudei kodesh* while also earning my BA in speech.

I didn't realize how cold it could get in New York — I didn't bring enough clothing for those infamous winters. Also, the days grew dark so early here! Back

home in Monterrey, we had later sunsets. Many of my speech classes at Stern were in the afternoon, so I sometimes stared out of the windows from class into the night sky, wondering where the day went.

When I finished my senior year I went to Mexico City for the summer, and there I met my husband Moshe, a Jewish Syrian Mexican boy. We got engaged, and four months later we were married. Although I always planned on staying in America, my husband and I now live in Mexico City and, Baruch Hashem, we have three kids.



You can tell that this was a cold winter night in New York! (Courtesy of Sarah Wizman De Louya)

At this moment I am a mother and a wife, and I am taking different courses in education. In general, it is easy to have a Jewish life in Mexico City; the community is growing and there is a vibrant religious life. We have different schools and synagogues, many Torah classes, and a variety of kosher restaurants.

I feel really blessed that I had the opportunity to spend my college years in a wonderful place such as Stern College for Women. Mrs. Marx, the international student advisor, was always there to listen and to help us with anything that we needed. Although life can get difficult sometimes, I always think to myself that if I was able to adapt to New York City and learn how to study everything in English at such a young age, then with the help of Hashem, I have the security and confidence to overcome

any difficulty that will come up as we move on in life. I feel that I am a more mature and open-minded person, and I try to be more empathetic and friendly when interacting with people, especially those coming from out-of-town areas. I think this is the greatest lesson that I learned at Stern College.

If I could give any advice to the young women at Stern, I would tell them to take advantage of every second that they have to learn new things and meet different people, and always do everything to achieve their personal goals.



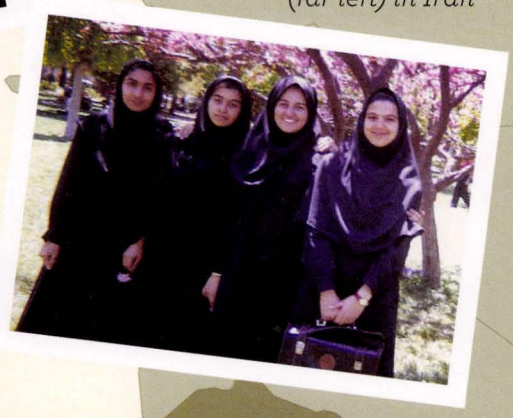
My family, Mexico City, 2014

YEARS AT STERN: 1999–2002



Naranjestan Garden, Shiraz

My friends and I (far left) in Iran



SHIRAZ, IRAN



Besides for being known as "the city of flowers and nightingales," Shiraz is also famous for its wine.

A Family Complete

Farinaz Golda Sedaghat-Mairzadeh

I was born in Babol, a small town in the plush, green northern part of Iran by the Caspian Sea. My parents moved there after they were married, before the onset of the Islamic revolution. I was born in the midst of the political turmoil and uncertainty, so my parents decided that it would be safer for us to move to a bigger city with a large Jewish population, and we moved to Shiraz. Often called "the city of flowers and nightingales," Shiraz is the poetic capital of Persia and the birthplace of well-known poets such as Hafez and Saadi. The city also boasts extensive historical and beautiful architecture. It's a shame the new regime did not share the people's sentiment for the arts and culture.

All their lives, my parents put their children first and worked extra hard to provide us with the best. Although we only had mediocre financial means, my sister and I attended the best schools and always had what we needed, even if it meant my parents had to do with less. I remember my mother stood in line once for fifteen hours just to get me into the best English class that was available in our town at the time. Because there was limited space in the class, she wanted to make sure a spot was secured for me.

I had a wonderful childhood in my earlier years, and my sister and I were loved by our parents more than we knew what to do with it! Before the Iran-Iraq war,

we were normal kids with no worries in the world. We had wonderful neighbors, whose children were always over at our house for play dates and sleepovers. My sister and I, on the other hand, were never allowed to go to other people's homes for sleepovers—my father was very traditional in that sense.

I remember my mother stood in line once for fifteen hours just to get me into the best English class...

By the time I was seven, the Iran-Iraq war was in full swing. We would hear sirens go off many times a day, after which we had to stop whatever we were doing and seek shelter in bunkers, basements, and closets, praying that the rockets wouldn't hurt anyone. Schools were canceled for weeks at a time just to keep the children safe, because no place was off-limits from the Iraqis.

I remember very clearly how the sirens went off one beautiful fall afternoon. I asked my mother if we could go to our neighbor's house in order to stay together. The second we entered our neighbor's house and they closed the doors behind us, we heard the most deafening explosion. It felt as if the whole world shook. The power then went out, and after a brief moment of silence, all we heard was people screaming. A veterans' hospital on our street corner was the target. My father stayed behind to assess the damage to our home, and a family friend took me to stay with a relative. No cars were allowed in the streets, so he had to carry me. And even though he purposefully covered my eyes with his hands, I could see the heartbreaking surroundings through his fingers. There were roofs destroyed, doors blown off, and glasses shattered. I saw wounded people being carried on stretchers and people trying to pull survivors out of the rubble with their bare hands. The war ended a couple of years later, but I will never forget that day or those images.

While in Iran, my mother was a midwife in one of the major hospitals in the city. She worked very hard, loved her job, and was very well respected among

her colleagues. Yet despite my mother having been one of the few midwives with a master's degree, the hospital administration never gave her the well-deserved promotion she worked so hard for, just because she was Jewish. It is sad that one of my first memories from my homeland is the hard truth of religious discrimination through my mother's experience of being held back in the professional workforce, despite all her efforts. My parents tried hard to instill in us from an early age that we can achieve anything we put our mind and heart to, yet I was witnessing through my mother's experience that it wasn't necessarily true.

My father used to tell me stories of getting beaten on his way to school and being called names simply because he was a Jew. Looking back, I now realize that I didn't fully appreciate those tales, or my mother's experience, until I personally experienced anti-Semitism in junior high school. I could *feel* some people's demeanors change once they found out I was Jewish. For example, a religious studies teacher once told me, "You are such a smart, wonderful girl; it's a shame you are Jewish." In a country where even the Muslim majority is oppressed, not much can be said about the rights of minorities like the Jews. Yet notwithstanding these experiences, junior high school was also where I made friends for life, for which I am grateful.



With my mother

Friday was the only day of the week that we were off from regular school, so we had our Hebrew and Jewish studies then. It was work and school as usual

on Saturdays, but when we went home we tried to keep Shabbat as best as traditional Persian Jews could under the circumstances: no cooking, no driving, and no using our phones. The only holiday for which we were allowed to miss school was Yom Kippur, and even that was frowned upon. In short, there wasn't much of a Jewish life outside the "comfort" of our home.

In their hearts, my parents knew that we would be safer and have many more opportunities in America, so our coming to the States was only a matter of time. When I graduated from high school, I traveled to Vienna, Austria, through the Rav Tov International Jewish Rescue Organization. I spent eight months in Vienna. It was my first time away from my family, friends, and practically everything I knew. It took me a while to become comfortable on my own. I had cousins in New York who had already attended Yeshiva University and had nothing but high praises for the institution, so I knew even before coming to New York that I wanted to go to Stern College for Women.

I arrived in New York in October 1998. I stayed with a Chassidic family in Boro Park. I will never forget their hospitality and am forever grateful to them. That winter I attended Stern's open house and fell in love with the warmth of the faculty and students, further confirming my convictions about the school. There were students from all over the world who, like me, were trying to obtain a great education on their own with no support. This made me realize that I was not alone, and Stern College became my home away from home.

I started Stern College in the fall of 1999, and spent four amazing years there. I dormed at Brookdale Hall and loved every minute of it. I even became a resident advisor the last year I was there. Of course, it was challenging in the beginning, but with help from dedicated staff like Mrs. Marga Marx, Mrs. Zelda Braun and Ms. Rachel Kraut, soon everything fell into place. I will never forget how their doors were open every time I needed to talk. I much appreciated their

advice and the fact that they always made time for students who sought their help no matter how busy they were.

A couple of years later, my sister also left Iran and reunited with me at Stern College, and we began the process of getting my parents' documents ready for them to join us. Just when we seemed to be getting our lives back on track, we experienced the gloom of September 11—the day that seemed to change everybody's lives. I was coming back from my 9:00 a.m. class and had no idea what had happened yet. I went to the TV room on my way to the library and found out the terrible news. Naturally, I was glued to the TV and sobbing incessantly. Then it hit me that our phones did not work and that my parents must have been worried sick. So I used the computer to send a message to a friend of a friend and asked him to call my parents and let them know that we were okay. That night we were evacuated and moved to an area in the streets near the East River, where we huddled for safety. I remember holding my sister and two of my friends tight as I relived the horror of all the bombings and rockets from my childhood. It took an extremely long time before things went back to normal for all of us.



At an annual Stern pre-Purim Supperette for international students (right)

At Stern I majored in biology with a minor in psychology. I wanted to be a dentist from early on, but psychology also fascinated me and I wanted to keep my options open. I was president of the Sephardic Club, so I planned many exciting

dinners and even went on a very memorable trip to Washington, D.C. Our popular events would always sell out—I felt terrible turning people away from them!

By the time my fourth year rolled around, I had my heart set on biology as my major and ended up going to NYU Dental School. During my second year of dental school, my parents were finally able to join us in New York. The week they were supposed to come, I was still looking for an apartment for us to move into; meanwhile, I had to study for three midterms! I don't know how I did it, but by the grace of G-d everything worked out. I moved three days before they came and did fine on my exams.



At work in my dental office

I remember the first night they were in our apartment. I went into their room maybe ten times just to listen to them breathe, as I couldn't believe we were all together again after so many years. Although it was a beautiful reunion, it was very hard for my parents to adjust to life in America. They didn't know the language well and had been unemployed for a long time.

When my parents came here, I was already dating the most amazing man. We were very serious about our future together, but I was waiting for my parents to arrive so they could meet him and give their blessings for our marriage. Within a few months thereafter, we were engaged and planning a wedding. It meant everything to me that my parents were finally by my side again. I felt like all their sacrifices had paid off because they could see me happy.

My husband and I were married in December 2005. He stood by me and supported me all throughout dental school. After graduating from NYU and

completing a year of residency, I found a job some time later. Thankfully, I love my work and am currently practicing dentistry on a part-time basis. We are blessed with a beautiful baby daughter who is the love of our lives. I am taking the time to be with her and be there for her for now. I realize there is plenty of time to go back to work when she is older!



My husband and I

I truly feel that I owe a big part of who I am and where I am in life to Stern College for Women. The school gave me the opportunity to have a great education while learning extensively about our Torah and Jewish laws. But most importantly, Stern's faculty and staff taught me the true meaning of "love your neighbor as yourself." I try to go visit Stern once in a while and maintain my ties to the school. I am still very much in touch with Mrs. Marx. To this day, every time I pass by Thirty-Fourth Street and Lexington Avenue, I have a big smile on my face, and I hold my head high because I am a proud alumna and forever a part of the Stern family.

YEARS AT STERN: 1999–2003



Migdal David,
Tower of David



Rimon (pomegranate) is one of the shiv'at haminim, the seven species of Eretz Yisrael.

JERUSALEM, ISRAEL



The Kotel Ha'Maaravi, Western Wall

The Healing of My Scars

Miryam Sara Shushan Beda

I was fifteen years old when my family went to eat lunch at Sbarro Pizza in Jerusalem on August 9, 2001.

We had made aliyah to Israel from Aix-le-Bains, France when I was seven years old, and on that fateful day in 2001, my mom and four sisters decided to have a girls' day out. Sbarro, on the corner of Yaffo Street and King George Street in downtown Jerusalem, was crowded at one thirty that afternoon. There were lots of families, teenage girls, long lines, people laughing, chattering—the noise of life. We ordered, paid, and were about to take a table downstairs but were beaten to it by another family, so instead we decided to sit upstairs. My little sister and I went back down to the front of the line to get our food while two of my sisters parked the car. It was then, a mere one meter away, that a suicide bomber decided to take his life and the lives of fifteen others, including my little sister.

There was an enormous blast and the place went dark. People screamed: "*Pigua! Pigua!* (Terror attack! Terror attack!)" Everything changed. I couldn't move. I couldn't see. I almost couldn't breathe. I was looking for somebody to help me. I wanted to scream or get up to help myself. I wanted to believe that it was a dream. Rescue workers ended up coming to get me, and they carried me out to the

ambulance. There, one of them asked me my name and instructed me to remember hers. Something in me said to do what she told me, and I believe this is what kept me conscious.

There were 130 civilians seriously injured in that bombing, but I was told that of all the survivors, I sustained the most serious injuries. Since I was one meter away from the suicide bomber, I barely survived. Thirty percent of my body was covered in third-degree burns. More than sixty pieces of shrapnel, metal, and debris had to be removed from my body. There were tons of penetrative wounds to my lungs. I suffered two broken legs, popped eardrums, extensive nerve damage, and the loss of my spleen. Later, my surgeon said that I was moments away from death, and that if help had been delayed even by two or three minutes, I *chas veshalom* (G-d forbid) wouldn't be alive today. My little sister, who was ten at the time, was not as fortunate. She did not survive the bombing, and passed away on the spot.

There were 130 civilians seriously injured in that bombing, but I was told that of all the survivors, I sustained the most serious injuries.

It was the beginning of the Intifada, so suicide bombings were frequent. Every time we heard an ambulance go by, we would say Tehillim. But it was always *them* in danger, never us. All of a sudden, tragedy had encroached upon us.

Ironically enough, the only reason we went to the Sbarro at this location—and not at Ben Yehuda—was because my mother was afraid to be in the crowded center of town, lest there was a terror attack. The Sbarro bombing stood out from other bombings in that it was the first to occur at a restaurant, and it inflicted numerous casualties on civilians. An entire Dutch family, two parents and three children, were murdered. More than thirteen years after the attack, one

bomb victim is still in a permanent vegetative state. Ever since the tragedy, I have begun to appreciate every minute of my life.

I spent three years in and out of hospitals and therapy. Later, doctors called me a fighter and said I was optimistic. And although I knew I had a long recovery process ahead, I wanted to someday be able to have a normal life. So I decided to go back to school six months after the bombing. I was determined to finish high school. This goal, however, came with many obstacles. I would get tired very quickly. I also had to dedicate more energy to recovering from my injuries and going to therapy. Although I had loved school and always dedicated ample time for studying, my priorities changed after the bombing, and I simply needed more of my time allotted to recovering. I would go to school very early and leave at eleven o'clock, which allowed me to designate a large portion of my day to rehabilitation and swimming. Initially this was my daily routine; gradually it went down to four times a week, and eventually three times a week. For about a year and a half after returning to school, my day would be spent going back and forth from school to rehab and to the hospital. But, Baruch Hashem, the principal let me stay in school regardless of my difficult and busy schedule.

I was not very comfortable with my social situation during this time. In Israel, whoever knew me instantly associated me with the bombing, and they would always whisper about "the girl from the bombing who was injured." I felt as if everybody knew me—but no one got to *know* me. Yes, the bombing did change me. It is a part of me and made me who I am today. But I was getting tired of being seen for what happened to me instead of who I really was. My entire social circle was composed of people who were injured in a bombing or another terrorist attack, so our conversations revolved around bombings and the

I did not want to become, as I did in Israel, the "Sbarro girl."

political situation in Israel. I needed an escape. I just wanted to be seen as a normal person. I needed to prove that I was my own individual, regardless of what I had been through.

Right after the bombing, my oldest sister moved to New York with her husband and daughter. She had also been in the pizza shop with us, and pregnant at the time, but *thank G-d*, she hadn't been injured. She encouraged me to visit, saying that her door was always wide open, and I began thinking that it would be a good idea to take a break from my life in Israel and come to New York.

My brother had gone to Yeshiva University before me, so I started thinking about studying at Stern. I applied, but I knew I couldn't get my hopes up, because it was now already a week before college orientation. Yet when I heard that I was accepted, it was the greatest news I had heard in a long time. I was surprised, thrilled, excited, and scared. I knew that a religious university experience was what I needed after the tragedy I had barely survived.

I arrived at Stern at age nineteen in the fall of 2005. I had been to the States before to visit family, so New York was not new per se, but going there for college was the chance to start a new chapter in my life. When I first came, I didn't tell anyone about the bombing incident, not even my closest friends. It was a long time before I revealed my story because I did not want people to look at me differently, unsure of how to react to such a tragedy. I did not want to become, as I did in Israel, the "Sbarro girl."

Stern became the breath of fresh air I needed to start anew. In Israel I had been too consumed by my injury, and I never got the chance to think about the direction my life was headed in. (Because of what I went through, I never even thought that I'd be able to go on to receive a higher education.) I had thus dedicated no thought to the path of study I would take once I actually came to Stern. Fortunately, I was told that I did not have to choose right away, which was

refreshingly different than the Israeli system. After some time, I decided to major in marketing and minor in management information systems (MIS).

Initially, learning proper English was very difficult for me. I remember reading a 500-page textbook and having to stop to look up every other word. Although I passed the TOEFL exam with a high score, the level of my English education in Israel was in no way comparable to what was taught in American schools. I carried an English dictionary with me at all times, and I made a habit of speaking English whenever I could. I also tried training myself to *think* in English. Even watching English movies with Hebrew subtitles helped me to get a feel for the language.

My social life at Stern was initially a nightmare, too, because I knew *nobody*. I roomed in Brookdale with five American students who were completely different from me in every way, but then I switched to Schottenstein my second year and loved it. I lived in Schottenstein until I graduated. I had my own room, and it was a much better arrangement. While there were not many other Israelis at Stern, there were many French students. I quickly expanded my social circle by becoming part of the French-speaking community at Stern. We connected very easily with one another, mostly because we knew a common language. We were a fun group that was always meeting up, staying in for Shabbat together, and celebrating birthdays. It was these friends who contributed to my very positive experience at Stern, and I am still in touch with them today.

I was happy with Stern religiously as well. While I grew up with a religious infrastructure at home, I had more ritualistic freedom at Stern, which made me stronger. What I chose to do, I did with love. Also, I soon realized how practical and convenient it was to stay in for Shabbat on campus. While my friends and I ideally wanted to use Shabbat as a time to explore and meet new people, sometimes we just needed to rest because we would be exhausted from the week. We found that Shabbat at Stern was always a great time to see new facets of the city.

I never thought I would have the opportunity to attend—much less complete—university. My parents never had the means; it was always an unspoken wish, a battle. Attending Stern was one of the best experiences of my life, although it wasn't easy as an international student. When I felt these pressures, I used to talk to Mrs. Marx, who was always there for me. Considering the circumstances, and seeing all of my struggles, Mrs. Marx sometimes wondered if it would be better for me if I went back. Of course she meant well, but I always said I would never quit. In retrospect, I think it was those comments that intensified my desire to succeed. I had to do it, and I knew I would do it, and I needed to prove to myself that I could do it. I knew many girls who dropped out because it was too hard for them, but that wasn't an option for me. After four tough yet enjoyable years, I graduated. And if I had to do it all over again, I would, in a split second. It was the best decision I have made in my life.

I never thought I would have the opportunity to attend—much less complete—university.

Thank G-d, shortly after returning to Israel, I met my husband-to-be, and in February 2011 we got married. My husband works, learns in *kollel*, and is finishing *smicha*. He is also very involved with *kiruv* organizations; he teaches, lectures, and guides teenagers and young professionals. Last year, on June 4, Hashem blessed us with a beautiful, healthy baby boy, and Baruch Hashem, a year later, we were blessed with a gorgeous baby girl. I can honestly say that a huge part of my ability to lead the life I am living today is a direct result of my amazing experience at Stern College.

While at Stern, I was able to overcome the grievous tragedy I lived through, thanks, in part, to the amazing teachers and counselors. Stern was the last step toward my recovery, and my experience there helped me become the woman I

am today. Upon graduating, I felt that I had healed and gained the confidence I had lost, and I was then able to move back to Israel to live a normal, healthy, and successful life.

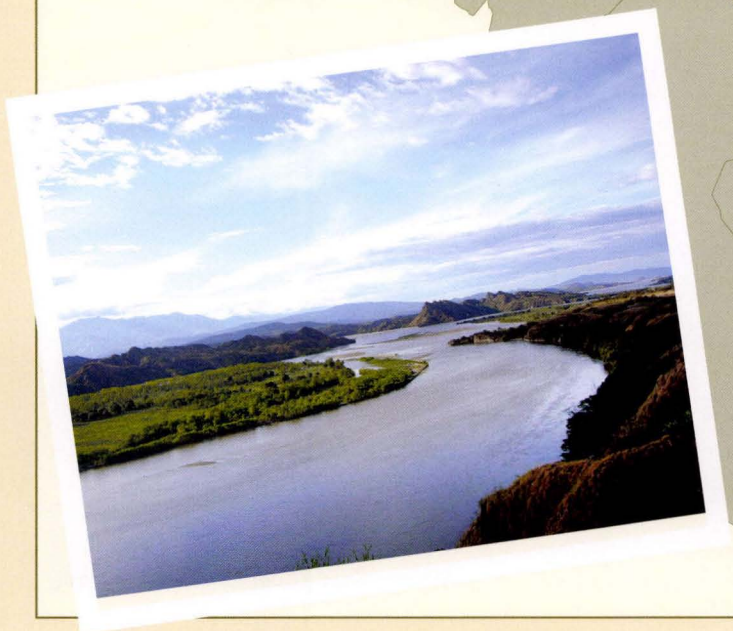
YEARS AT STERN: 2005–2009

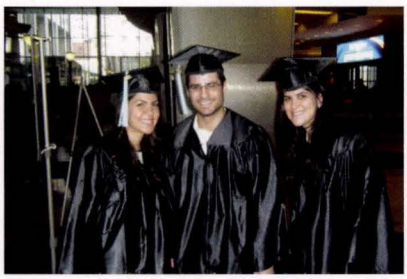


Barranquilla is located on the northern coast of Colombia, by the Caribbean Sea.

BARRANQUILLA, COLOMBIA

The Magdalena River flows through western Colombia, reaching Barranquilla.





At graduation (left) with the YU Mechina president and my BJS co-president

From Colombia to Columbia

Sophie Lachmann

I was born and raised in Barranquilla, Colombia, South America. Barranquilla's Jewish community consists of about two hundred families, and though the environment is warm and welcoming, the community is minimally religious. We have two synagogues, one Ashkenazi and one Sephardi, and we davened at the latter. My family was a little atypical for our community, as we were more traditional than the rest. I grew up in a shomer Shabbat, kosher home, and my siblings and I attended the local Hebrew day school, Colegio Hebreo Unión. Every Pesach, we hosted huge sedarim with numerous guests, which was a natural outgrowth of our warm, welcoming upbringing. My parents always instilled in us Jewish values and identity, and they always pushed us to seek a more vibrant religious life. And while they encouraged us to travel, they always wanted us to seek destinations with strong Jewish communities.

When we were teenagers, my siblings and I began attending a sleepaway camp called Or Haner. The camp, located in Baltimore, catered to South American Jewish teenagers; the director, Rabbi Moshe Filler, *z"l*, came to Barranquilla to recruit. Although I had been to the United States on vacations to Florida, my camp experience was totally different. I had never been exposed to so much religion at once, and I had never seen so many young Jewish people in one place. It was

eye-opening to know that there were cities where people kept all these Halachot and Jewish practices. For example, back home in Colombia, I didn't know that *tzniut* even applied to me. I thought it was reserved exclusively for rabbis' daughters—after all, they were the only ones I ever saw wearing skirts! At camp, I learned otherwise. When I returned to Colombia, I started making more of a religious effort, dressing differently and putting more time and effort into *tefillah*.

...back home in Colombia, I didn't know that tzniut *even applied to me. I thought it was reserved exclusively for rabbis' daughters...*

It was at Or Haner that my older sister discovered Stern. She met a Stern alumna who raved about the college, igniting my sister's excitement. My sister eagerly applied to Stern, was accepted, and loved her Stern experience. When it was my turn to choose a college, I knew right away that I, too, would attend Stern. My sister and I felt that Stern was *right*. It was a place that nurtured the values my family always held dear: the ability to grow religiously and to be part of a wider Jewish community. Stern was such a perfect match for our family that the rest of my siblings also shifted onto the YU/Stern path: my younger brother started attending the Marsha Stern Talmudical Academy (MTA), and my little sister prepared to attend Machon Maayan seminary in Israel.

Despite my anticipation, New York proved a culture shock to me, both in size and Jewish life. When I first stepped into New York City from quiet Barranquilla, I was completely overwhelmed by its magnitude. For instance, when I'd ask people for directions and they'd tell me to "take the B or the D or the F train," I'd beg them, "Tell me just one route; I just want one!" Our suburb in Colombia is small (we don't have a subway, train, or comprehensive bus system) so it was mind-boggling to me that there could be four ways to get to one place!

It was also shocking for me to discover the wealth of Jewish life that New York possessed. I could not believe the number of Jewish day schools that existed in such a small area. I just kept hearing name after name. And oh, the restaurants! We never had kosher restaurants back home, so "eating out" was exotic and new. Even now, seven years later, I still get a little excited each time I eat in a kosher restaurant!

I also had to get used to some lifestyle changes that came with living in a larger Jewish community. In Barranquilla, being a Shabbat guest was rare, as we were one of the few religious families in town. I didn't know that there were places where it was normal to be a guest at other people's houses! In fact, for my entire first year at Stern, I spent every Shabbat in the dorm because I felt uncomfortable imposing on people. I always wondered: Did people *really* want strangers in their homes? I finally realized that not only was it acceptable to visit other peoples' homes, but that many people actually *liked* guests. (Imagine!) From then on, I seldom spent Shabbat in the dorm again. I became a total nomad, wandering from family to family and from place to place. I traveled to friends who lived as far as Boston, and even Florida. Since both my upbringing and culture emphasized the importance of family—and because my own family was far away—I simply adopted my friends' families as my own, becoming a frequent fixture in their homes. Today, even after many of my friends have moved away, I still keep in touch with their parents!

Even now, seven years later, I still get a little excited each time I eat in a kosher restaurant!

In Colombia, there had not been many shomer Shabbat girls my age, and I entered Stern without a circle of friends. However, I immediately gravitated toward the other South Americans. In the beginning, when constant English

still overwhelmed me, I appreciated being able to revert to Spanish with them. I quickly became friendly with the other international students as well. Eventually, I discovered that Americans—and even New Yorkers—can be warm! My American friendships really helped me learn English, because even when I was emotional and would have difficulty expressing myself in a foreign language, I'd still have to push myself to communicate in English so that they could understand me.

I had not yet decided upon a specific career path when I arrived at Stern. I knew I liked biology, and I always knew I wanted to enter the health-care field. I reassured myself that I was only seventeen and I still had four years to figure things out. But the problem was that I couldn't keep up with my classes—I was getting low marks even in my biology courses! Besides having to figure out how to study from a textbook (in Colombia we relied more on class notes), I also had to improve my English proficiency. In my first semester of college, my notes were half-English and half-Spanish. I just couldn't write in English fast enough to keep up, because I had to go through the extra step of translating the language in my mind before I could attempt to put the information down on paper. On top of that, many of my classmates were pre-med students, so everyone was very academically oriented. During lectures, I was left struggling both to comprehend the language and to gather the vast quantities of information thrown at me. It was very, very difficult.

In desperation, I went to Dr. Gail Gumora, a member of the dean's office's academic advisement team. Dr. Gumora ran a study clinic. Once a week, she would sit with me and my biology textbook and teach me how to study. Her office was actually directly across from the office of Dr. Brenda Loewy, who taught my Biology Principles class. From across the hall, Dr. Loewy could hear me preparing for her class! I'm very grateful to Dr. Gumora for her patience and her help; I would not have been able to major in a science and attend graduate school without the study skills she taught me.

After my first semester, things got easier. I decided on a specific career path: occupational therapy. My decision to choose OT was concretized after I volunteered at the Multiple Sclerosis Clinic of New York University Hospital. I was running trips and game days for people with MS as part of a community-integration program; these activities encouraged them to venture out of their homes and participate in the outside world. I loved occupational therapy because I liked the idea of impacting someone's everyday life skills. It was also a great internship because it was just a short walk away from Stern. I remember once seeing a *frum* man working there, and being so surprised when I saw him again in Stern as my experimental psychology professor the very next semester—it was Dr. Joshua Bacon!

In addition to clarifying my career direction, I improved my English by taking an ESL class called Pre-Composition, which consisted of me, a girl from Ukraine, and a girl from Vienna. After taking that class, I progressed to the mainstream English Composition course. Of all the composition classes, I ended up in Professor Laurel Hatvary's! I was intimidated by both the professor, who was the head of the English department and had a reputation for being very challenging, and by my American classmates.

Again, I took advantage of the resources at Stern, this time by visiting the Writing Center twice a week—the maximum that was allowed (though I repeatedly asked if I could come more often!). Since I was there so regularly, I became very close with my tutor, Alex. Alex was very patient and really took the time to understand what I was trying to say and to help me compose it in the best way possible. Surprisingly, I did well in the English Composition class, and my hard-earned success was very rewarding. When I ran into Professor Hatvary a few years later, I told her how hard I had worked in her class, and she replied that she knew it. It was an extremely satisfying moment.



July in Jerusalem, summer 2007. I am fourth from left, in orange. (Courtesy of Joshua Shirayanagi)

One program that really helped ease my transition to Stern and affected me tremendously during my college years was the Basic Jewish Studies program (then known as BJS, now called Mechina). BJS gave me a place where I felt comfortable. There, I was surrounded by other girls like me, international students and public school graduates who hadn't taken the typical "Orthodox high school, then seminary" path to Stern. A huge part of my Stern experience was participating in the BJS summer program, July in Jerusalem. I think I speak on behalf of many international students when I say that this extremely valuable opportunity directly impacted who we are today. Like many other international students, I hadn't gone to seminary after high school (many of us weren't aware that such a concept even existed!), so July in Jerusalem was the first time we BJS students were experiencing a formal learning program in Israel. We toured Israel, listened to inspiring *shiurim*, volunteered for *chesed* opportunities, and bonded among

ourselves. Even today, I think of that amazing summer with fond memories and much *hakarot hatov*.

I also am grateful to have become close with the program coordinators, Mrs. Shoshana Schechter—who had been my Tanach professor the previous year—and Mrs. Nava Orlian. During the month I spent with them and their families in Israel, I grew to view these two women as role models. They taught inspiring classes and led exciting trips, all while caring lovingly for their children. As I forged my own identity and figured what I wanted to become, right there before me were two strong, smart, and impressive women who were committed to their professions and their families at the same time. From them I learned that I didn't have to choose between my three priorities of career, religion, and family. Stern offered a harmonious balance between all of them. It was there, in Israel, that I realized I didn't have to sacrifice any of my cherished dreams. Even after July in Jerusalem, Mrs. Schechter and Mrs. Orlian became important mentors who offered me invaluable support. They were—and are—like my family.

I went back to Stern for the fall semester, but my July in Jerusalem experience was so meaningful to me that I had to go back to Israel. I spent the following spring semester in Neve, and it was—once again—an incredible experience. I learned a tremendous amount and again was exposed to a totally different world.

After Neve, I returned to Stern to complete my last two years. In my senior year at Stern, I became co-president of the BJS program. I was involved in planning Shabbatonim and I organized a *chaburah* program in which we set up BJS students with *chavrutas* from Stern. I was also a resident advisor in Schottenstein Residence Hall during my last year, which gave me the privileged opportunity of working with Rachel Kraut, the housing director. I had been close with her since my freshman year, and from the moment I met her I knew she would become an invaluable friend. I knew I could count on her if I had a bad day; every time I'd



2010 Israel Day Parade with President Richard Joel and Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. I am fifth from left. (Courtesy of Yeshiva University)

visit her in her office, she'd happily offer me support or encourage me to hang in there and keep going.

I graduated from Stern in the spring of 2010 with a major in biology and a minor in psychology. I started Columbia's occupational therapy program that fall, and I graduated three years later with my master's. I took the board exam and started working soon after graduation.

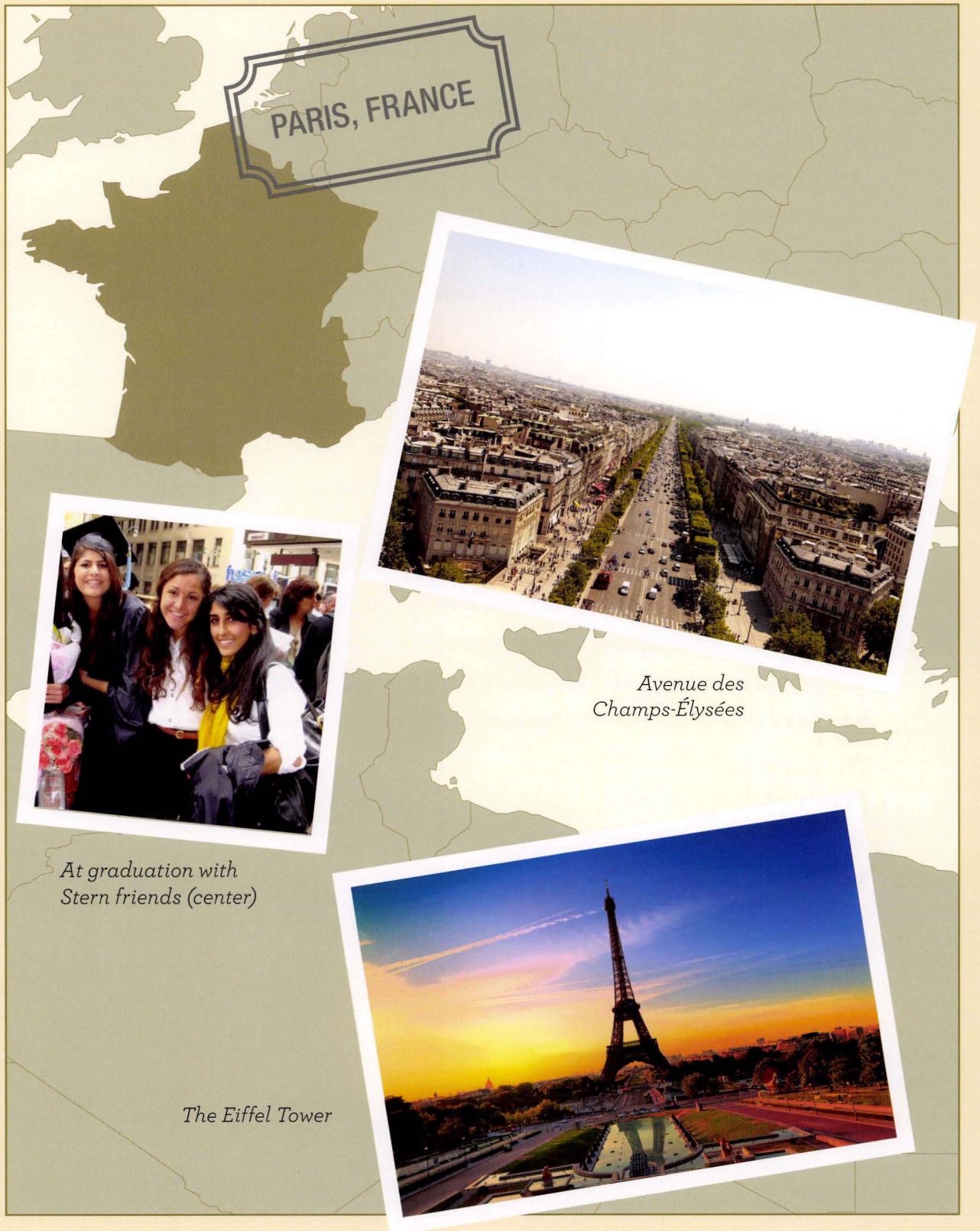
My advice to Stern students is to take advantage of the many resources that exist at Stern. The school is set up so that you can succeed in whatever field you choose. Stern has such amazing tools to offer, and places like the Writing Center, Mechina program, Career Center, and Counseling Center are there waiting for people to walk in! The teachers who have been there for a long time, like Dr. Harvey Babich, have been advising students for years. As a fresh immigrant,

grappling with fitting in while forging my own path, Stern's resources helped me so much. They supported me from my initial transitioning process all the way through my graduate school application process of obtaining recommendation letters, sending transcripts, and planning my future. Everyone at Stern had such a helpful attitude.

I now live in Washington Heights, near many of my Stern friends. Though I miss my family, I see my parents often; ever since my sister got married and moved to New York, they have become frequent visitors. I am a full-time occupational therapist, and I work in rehabilitation at the Hebrew Home in Riverdale. It's a very challenging yet rewarding job. I also love working in a Jewish place; the kosher cafeteria makes food much simpler and the environment makes me feel like I belong. It's nice to be part of a Jewish community, just like my parents always wanted for me and my siblings.

In a way, I believe, a community is an extension of a family. The warm sense of community was something I always valued about Stern, and having it again is a huge blessing. Ultimately, it has been this religious Stern community—my rabbis, Judaic studies teachers, and mentors—that I have benefited from the most.

YEARS AT STERN: 2006–2010



Avenue des Champs-Élysées

At graduation with Stern friends (center)

The Eiffel Tower

A Parisian Mademoiselle

Sarah Ohana Rapaport

I was raised in Paris, in the Champs-Élysées neighborhood of the city's sixteenth arrondissement, or district. The city is shaped like a snail, with different sections cut out in between the spiral. The sixteenth arrondissement touches the famous eighth, which encompasses the Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triumph, and Place de la Concorde. These tourist attractions are bookends to this expansive route, where outdoor cafés, restaurants, and classy luxury shops dot the street.

France is a beautiful place. The language is beautiful, the cuisine is delectable, and the style is chic—but it is not easy leading a Jewish life in Paris. While my neighborhood was very Jewish, with a number of shuls in the area, much of France is largely anti-Semitic. Since it's a secular country, with very strict laic laws, most forms of public religious expression are repressed. The French media is also, unashamedly, very pro-Palestinian. An inevitable tension exists between Jews and Muslims. Obviously, it isn't a good environment for Jews, and many have made aliyah to escape the religious persecution.

I attended public school in Paris until I was twenty-one, so I wasn't afraid of anti-Semitism like those attending private Jewish schools were. In fact, some of my best friends were Arab or multiethnic. Yet there was still an unspoken divide between us. Once, after relaying a trivial story about my day to a black

friend, he said, "You're a Jew; that's why these things happen to you."

I remember hearing about Stern when I was twelve from my older cousin Karen, who brought back glamorous reports. I was enamored and immediately began dreaming of going to this Jewish private college. I will admit that Western culture had a lot to do with it—I fell for all the movies about New York and America. More importantly, though, America was a free country, untethered by religious repression. But it was just a dream for me; practically speaking, I didn't *really* expect I would make the move.

The language is beautiful, the cuisine is delectable, and the style is chic—but it is not easy leading a Jewish life in Paris.

After graduating from high school, I attended law school (as France has no "undergraduate college") at the Sorbonne. La Sorbonne, one of the best French universities, is the Harvard of France; the Lubavitcher Rebbe is just one example of its famed alumni. But there were some drawbacks: Classes were held in huge amphitheaters, and students were extremely competitive. Grades were given as "pass or fail," making it very hard to move on to second year. Less than half the students in my class of fifteen hundred were accepted to second year, and unfortunately I wasn't one of the lucky ones.

As I re-attempted to pass my first year of law school, I became frustrated by the whole school system, and my dream of Stern was reignited. One day that winter, my neighbor messaged me via Facebook, saying he had heard rumors I was interested in Stern, and that he also wanted to come to Yeshiva University. "Let's apply together," he said. After hearing that, I became excited to have someone on my side and began wondering if this could really work.

Even though my parents didn't believe Stern would actually become a reality, they humored me and met with our neighbor's parents to discuss details. I

soon discovered that the first step in the application process would be to pass the SAT and TOEFL exams. I was fortunate to have a private tutor teach me English, and I enrolled in preparatory TOEFL courses in London. I stayed up all night studying for these tests and obsessing over Stern! I was dying to attend and kept calling Geri Mansdorf in Admissions, begging her to accept me.

Finally, a week before Stern's fall semester in August, I received my acceptance letter in the mail. I was ecstatic, surprised, excited, and anxious all at once. I called my parents, who were out on vacation, and shouted the news to them over the phone. My next steps were to get my visa, go to the embassy, book a flight, and pack—all in a week! But I did it. When I stepped off the plane in New York and got out of the cab into the light, I faced Macy's in front of me and the Empire State Building a few blocks down. I thought, "WHOA!" and just stood there grinning from ear to ear.

I went straight to Mrs. Marx's office. Apparently I had forgotten all the English I had studied for the TOEFL as soon as I arrived at Stern, because I just stood there babbling in French for five minutes straight! I remember Mrs. Marx calling over a French pre-med student in desperation, and asking her if she could please show me the ropes. This girl gave me a tour and answered all of my questions in French.

I faced Macy's in front of me and the Empire State Building a few blocks down. I thought, "WHOA!" and just stood there grinning from ear to ear.

It was so overwhelming to hear people speak English all day. Because of the language barrier, I spent most of my time with my Moroccan cousins in New York and other French-speaking students at Stern. The problem was that I would think in French and hear lectures in English. So for four months straight,

a friend and I reviewed entire classes together in English. It worked even better than my ESL class.

Language aside, I quickly realized Americans were very different from the French in other ways. I remember pondering how casual and comfortable New Yorkers are with their emotions. For example, they said "I love you!" to one another all the time!

My hardest classes were definitely Judaic studies. I was placed in the Mechina program because I came from public school, unable to speak or write Hebrew. I remember how extremely powerful the Mechina classes were, especially the classes taught by Rabbi Lawrence Hajioff and Mrs. Shoshana Schechter. There were also a number of French and international students in my class—some with as many as forty students—and our professors sometimes organized class-wide Shabbatons. They really took us under their wings.

University Housing Director Rachel Kraut had placed me in Brookdale with another French student, and we soon became best friends, staying roommates through our four years in Stern. In my third year, we also roomed with another girl, Lea, and we were the first (and only!) lucky students to get a Thirty-Fifth Street apartment!

There were many people who helped me at Stern. One person was Naomi Kapp, who introduced me to numerous working contacts and ultimately helped me find a job. Her door was always open, and she wouldn't hesitate to review my résumé with me ten times, if need be! Mrs. Marx, too, was unbelievably helpful with personal and financial matters. She coaxed me and my parents through the tuition struggle, and she was there for everything from finding funds for my books to helping set me up for Pesach in New York.

A lot of people ask if I ever missed Paris, but I am honest when I say I didn't. Firstly, I definitely appreciated America's freedom of individuality and uniqueness

when it comes to practicing one's religion. In France, people are scared to be "too Jewish." Many Jews just keep one or two basic mitzvot because the cultural pressure of secularism challenges their actions. But overall, gentile Americans respect diversity. Because of this open atmosphere, my time in America and in the American Jewish community at large was one of immense religious growth. Since I wasn't feeling pressured to be as "modern" as possible, I felt free to take on more mitzvot and Halachot. In fact, in the summer of 2008, I studied at Neve in Israel, which was a very enlightening experience. I was inspired by all my classes and enjoyed every second I spent there. When I returned to America (two semesters later), I was excited to apply all that I had learned.



With Stern friends (right)

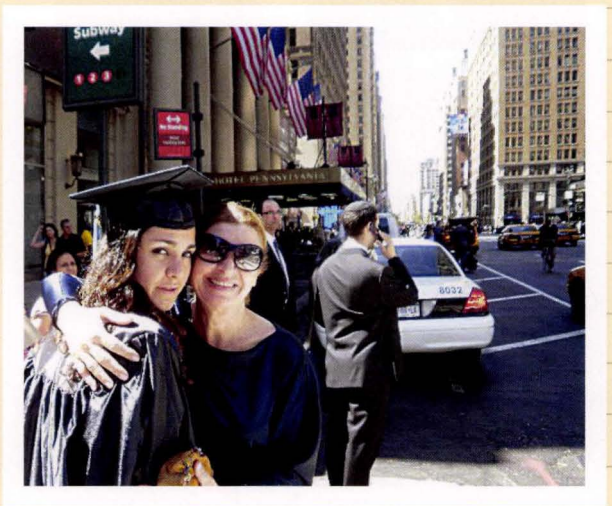
I also loved the idea of exploring new places, meeting new people, and immersing myself in new environments. In fact, my roommate Lea and I caught the traveling bug. The month before I went to Neve, I went back to Paris, worked like crazy in a restaurant, saved money, and used it for the upcoming fall semester. That semester, we took a leave of absence to travel abroad. Lea chose to tour China, and I chose Singapore.

It was during this trip that I also discovered the beauty of Chabad. Singapore has a very vibrant Jewish environment that centers upon the Chabad. Besides the Jewish day school, the Chabad offers many resources for its residents, like kosher food, Torah study groups, weekly *shiurim*, and Shabbat meals. It is hard not to be affected positively when seeing how generous and self-sacrificial

the Chabad families are—just for one lost Jew to have a place for Shabbat. My Chabad experience in Singapore was, in this way, very inspiring and impactful.

Because the national sport in Singapore is travel, I hopped over to Thailand during Sukkot. While in Thailand for a few months, I visited all the nearby countries: Malaysia, Bali, and Indonesia. At the end of my trip I joined Lea in Shanghai. The Chabad House families in each country I visited were so kind and warm to me, and by the end of my trip I fell in love with Chabad so much that I ended up spending the following summer in Mayanot, a Lubavitch seminary in Jerusalem.

Back at Stern, I continued my academic studies. It was hilarious: While in France I was considered the "worst" student, because professors dispense low grades left and right to be considered "competitive," here I was placed on the Dean's List every semester. I started having a lot of hope in what I could accomplish, so I decided to major in a very challenging department: math.



At graduation, with my mother

I ultimately graduated in January 2011 with a major in math and a minor in business, and I soon found a job selling advanced software for financial institutions.

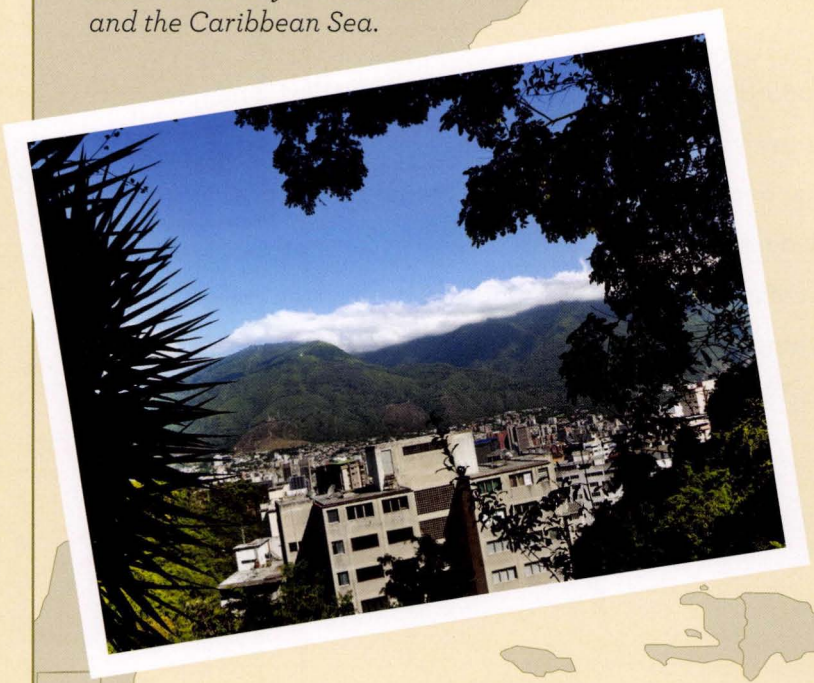
At the time, I was fortunate to live in Tel Aviv for three months while dating my soon-to-be-husband. He finally popped the question after I was sent back to New York to work, and we later got married in Israel. I quit my job when I became pregnant with our first child, but I later found a similar, temporary job in New York thanks to Naomi Kapp. The new

company assured me that I could come back for a full-time position whenever I felt ready.

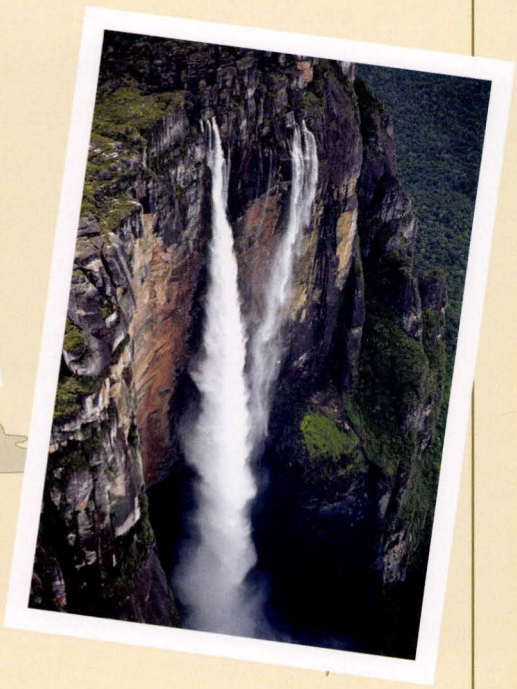
Stern gave me the opportunity to be a devoted wife, mother, and professional. I am able to raise my young children and have a nice job in finance available when I'm ready to go back to work. My religious growth and maturation while at Stern has also enabled me to be the woman I am today. I was so surprised whenever I heard Stern girls complain about anything, because I couldn't see how they found fault with something that was so amazing. My advice for Stern students? Just enjoy everything. This is a time in your life when almost everything is taken care of for you.

YEARS AT STERN: 2006–2011

The Ávila Mountains stand between the city of Caracas and the Caribbean Sea.



Venezuela's Salto Angel (Angel Falls) is the highest uninterrupted waterfall in the world.



CARACAS, VENEZUELA



My daughter and I, 2014

On Tales of Snow and Elephants

Orly Benayoun Farache

Born and raised in Caracas, Venezuela, I never imagined ending up in Stern. But I did.

I was born in 1988, and grew up in a beautiful Jewish community of eighteen thousand Jews. I went to Hebraica, the largest Jewish school in Caracas. Venezuela was one of the few countries that accepted Jews after the Holocaust and eventually gave them citizenship; because of this, many Jews ended up living there. There is also a strong Sephardic community in Venezuela, which I was part of. However, in the last ten years, the Jewish community of Venezuela has been getting smaller and smaller.

Venezuela is a beautiful and rich country that has fallen into the wrong hands—hands which have made irreversible damages in politics, economics, and society. Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the world and thus the cheapest oil (you can fill a gas tank in Venezuela for only twenty-five cents! That's right, it's cheaper than water!). The highest waterfall in the world, the Salto Angel, is located in Venezuela, too. From deserts to beaches, jungles to mountains, and deserted islands to rivers, Venezuela has some of the most beautiful landscapes and nature in the world.

Yet despite all of Venezuela's positive natural resources, President Hugo

Chávez and his followers have transformed it into a country full of crime, violence, social hatred, inflation, corruption, and chaos. Chávez came into power in the year 1999, and since then Venezuela has gone through an increase in poverty and inflation at its highest rates ever. This has made thievery and crime very common. So you get the picture: I can count on one hand the people in Venezuela who have not been robbed, mugged, assaulted, kidnapped, or been in any other way a victim of the violence. Because of the dangerous situation, and for many other reasons, most young Jewish people have begun emigrating from Venezuela and opting instead to live in other, safer countries.

I can count on one hand the people in Venezuela who have not been robbed, mugged, assaulted, kidnapped, or been in any other way a victim of the violence.

After graduating from high school, I decided I had to look for other options on the horizon, and I ended up going to Israel for a year-long program called *Shnat Hachshara*. During this year in Israel, I took leadership courses (*machon madrichim*), participated in seminars about Zionism, volunteered for Magen David Adom (the Israeli Red Cross), worked in a kibbutz, learned Torah in a Midrasha, and visited Poland. That year in Israel completely transformed my life and made me start asking myself what I wanted to do next. Now that my eyes were open to the world outside Venezuela, I did not want to go back.

I decided to go to college in America. First, though, that meant I had less than a month to prepare for the TOEFL and SAT exams. Even though my first language was Spanish, I ended up doing well enough to get into the schools I applied for.

I decided to start college at Florida International University in Miami. I met a lot of people and had fun, but it was still not the experience I was looking for.

That is when my brother-in-law, a YU alumnus, insisted I should transfer to Stern College. According to him, it was the best decision I could make. Not entirely convinced at first, I still followed his advice and applied for classes at Stern. I received my letter of acceptance basically three days before classes started, and I packed up my bags.

The feeling that I got as soon as the plane landed in New York was beyond description. A person like myself, born and raised in a beautiful country but still a country under development, was coming to one of the most interesting, amazing, and famous cities in the world! I still remember I could not believe I was going to live two blocks away from the Empire State Building.

But I did. I transferred to Stern in the fall of 2009, and I can honestly say that I will never regret following my brother-in-law's advice. The years I spent in Stern were incredible. I got to enjoy the best of the classes, with the best of the professors and rabbis. I got to meet a lot of different people and make many new friends. I had the chance to live the classic New York experience, I had the opportunity to study and live at a Jewish university (a concept totally nonexistent to us Latin American Jews), and I had the chance to grow as a person, as a professional, as a woman, and as a Jew.

The feeling that I got as soon as the plane landed in New York was beyond description.

I lived in Brookdale for one year and had roommates selected for me through pot-luck. One of those roommates ended up being my good friend and roommate throughout all my years in Stern. I remember it was so hard to communicate at the beginning with my roommates because I could not understand half of the things they said. But that is exactly what helped me learn English and speak it fluently. I remember I used to suffer from headaches because I was not used to speaking in English

24/7. The hardest classes were those that included numbers, like calculus, statistics, and finance, because I had to basically do math in a different language.

I remember I chose the bed next to the window. Waking up every day and seeing the New York City skyscrapers was an unbelievable experience for me. One of the experiences that marked me the most was the first time I saw snow. In Venezuela we are lucky to have the warmest of suns and the most beautiful blue skies. It never snows there; throughout the year the temperature ranges from seventy to eighty degrees. It's always spring in Venezuela. That is why it was so exciting for me to see snow for the first time. I remember it clearly: During my freshman year, I was in my room, about to fall asleep. All of a sudden, I saw through the window the whitest and most beautiful things I've ever seen slowly falling from the sky. It was around 2:00 a.m., and I went running down the stairs really fast just to feel the snow coming down my face, only to realize minutes later that I was only wearing my pajamas! I was so excited, I didn't have time to get dressed! Even the guards were laughing at me; nobody could believe that an eighteen-year-old had never seen snow in her life!

Another "running down the Brookdale stairs" anecdote happened when the elephants were brought back to the city for the annual Barnum & Bailey Circus.

I was writing a paper late at night, and suddenly I heard people screaming downstairs. When I looked through the window, I saw elephants. I could not believe my eyes: What in the world were elephants doing walking down Thirty-Fourth Street in Manhattan at 3:00 a.m.? I rubbed my eyes and looked again through the window, only to realize that it was really happening. I called my friends, knocked on their doors, and we all went running down the stairs to enjoy the amazing spectacle.

The friends I made at Stern will never be forgotten. I try to keep in touch with them, but it is hard sometimes because of the distance. They will always

be in my heart, though, because after sharing so many secrets, experiences, and special moments together, we became like sisters. We were like a family: We spent Shabbat together, shopped together, gossiped, laughed, cried, and took care of one another.

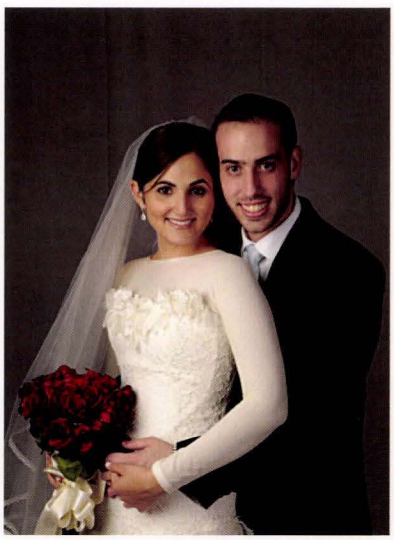
During my years in Stern, I went from being an engineering major to a marketing major, graduating finally as a finance major. Some of the classes I enjoyed most were the ones taught by Rabbi Lawrence Hajioff. I also enjoyed Introduction to Management by Mrs. Lisa Rosh and the classes taught by Mrs. Mindy Eisenman, Rabbi Ian Shaffer, and Mrs. Nechama Price. The finance classes were very challenging, and I enjoyed them as well. I was also very involved on campus: I was president of the Latin American Club and vice president of the Advertising Club. I was always around for Shabbat and participated in many *shiurim*, events, and Shabbatonim outside campus.

Stern made me eager to study more Torah and know more about Judaism. The interesting classes and *shiurim* made me want to study even more on my own. I became more religious when I was in Stern, and even though my views about Judaism and Torah have not changed, my lifestyle has. So you get the picture: I started Stern wearing pants and short sleeves; now I wear a wig!

In the spring of 2012 I graduated summa cum laude in business administration with a focus in the field of finance. I also received an award for excellence in finance. It is always a mystery to me how I had time to manage all those different things going on and, at the same time, graduate with good grades. But it can be done. And my advice for everyone at Stern now is that you can have both a social life and good grades. You can enjoy the campus life and the life outside campus. You have to take advantage of everything that's around you. You cannot give up one thing for the other; you have to get organized (even sacrifice some hours of sleep if you have to!), but you can and should meet all the people you

can, make as many friends as possible, and attend as many *shiurim*, events, and Shabbatonim as possible. You should take as much as you can from both New York City and Stern College.

During those years, a friend from Stern introduced me to someone who later became the most special person in my life: my husband, Yoel. I was in Venezuela during Succot break to visit my sister, and we dated a couple of times there. We continued chatting long-distance, and one day he ended up surprising me in New York. I was coming back from class and texting him (meanwhile, thinking he was in Venezuela), when suddenly I cross the street and see him standing outside of the dorm!



Our wedding

We were engaged the next Succot, a year after we met. After he left, we still visited each other whenever we had the chance, and we started planning our wedding. I still remember how the guards in Stern used to run behind me to give me the beautiful flowers that Yoel used to send to the dorm!

After graduating, I moved back to Miami to plan my wedding. Yoel and I got married in July 2013, and many of my Stern friends traveled to celebrate with me as my bridesmaids. After the wedding, Yoel and I moved to what we thought would be a more neutral place for both of us: not New York and not Venezuela, but Panama.

We now live in Panama City, a great place for young Jewish couples. It is also the birthplace of our beautiful baby, Yehudit Leah. She was born in May 2013, exactly a year after I graduated.

I work part time in the Panama City Hebrew School Library. I was hired specifically because I am fluent in Hebrew, Spanish, and English (the last of which would never have been possible if I never attended Stern!).



My husband and baby, with the Panama City skyline in the background

Looking back, I realize that who I am and where I stand right now is partly because of Stern. I now know how to be independent, how to manage my time, and how to react to the different situations of life. Stern gave me the ability to be a better individual, a better Jewish woman, and a better leader. Thanks to Stern, I realized that there is a whole world I did not know outside of Venezuela, and that there are many possibilities and opportunities. The rabbis and professors at Stern instilled in me a thirst for Torah and knowledge. Thanks to Hashem, and my friend from Stern, I met the man who is now my husband. At Stern I also met the people who are now my friends. Thanks to Stern, I moved to Panama, the place that I now call home.

YEARS AT STERN: 2009–2012



A day out on Lake Zurich

ZURICH, SWITZERLAND



The "Accidental" Rebbetzin!



The Swiss Alps

The Accidental Rebbetzin

Adapted from an article by Reva Kaiser which first appeared in *Ami* Magazine

Joelle Bollag Spinner

Stylish, but subtle, her sedate black twin-set offsets the thin, silver necklace draped around her neck. Her voice is soft, her speech articulated. Poised and chic, Mrs. Joelle Spinner, current resident of Berlin, Germany, exudes European sophistication. Married to Rabbi Josh Spinner, one of the revolutionizing contributors to the resurgence of Orthodox Jewish life in Germany today, Joelle is the lesser-known half of an indomitable pair, but an equal player in her own right. She's just unused to the spotlight.

In a lowered voice, Joelle confides how she would greet newcomers or visitors to the Berlin community. "I would introduce myself as 'Josh's wife,' " she laughs, confident in the ubiquitous recognition of her husband's name. Anyone familiar with the remarkable renaissance of Torah life in Germany during the past decade knows that much of it is credited to the commitment of Rabbi Spinner and his work for the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, an organization dedicated to rebuilding Jewish life in countries where the Holocaust and Soviet oppression left their devastating destruction. As a country with one of the highest rates of emigrated Jews from the former Soviet Union, Germany was prime for *kiruv*, as recognized by Ambassador Ronald Lauder. And Josh Spinner was his chosen candidate for the job.

Match Made in Heaven

Joelle grew up in Zurich, Switzerland. Following her year at Michlalah Jerusalem College, she studied at Sotheby's Institute in London and then interned for a year at Sotheby's in Tel Aviv and New York. Determined to pursue a career in the art world, Joelle acquired her BA in art history from Stern College, where she studied from 1996 to 1998. After graduating, Joelle was hired by the Commission for Art Recovery. This exciting opportunity utilized Joelle's language skills and art history background, making her the perfect candidate. The project, which focused on recovering art stolen during the Holocaust, was housed in the offices of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation.

And so, in the hallowed corridors of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, future *kiruv* rabbi Josh Spinner, preparing to establish Jewish revival in Germany, meets Swiss expatriate Joelle Bollag, who just happens to speak five languages, one of which is German. Josh found what was likely the only German-speaking, *frum* Jewish girl in New York who was willing to relocate to Berlin. After spending six months as newlyweds in Brooklyn so that Josh could complete his *smicha*, the Spinners moved to Berlin in February 2000.

"We moved from Boro Park to Berlin!" Joelle exclaims. "It was like moving from the land of plenty to the desert! I felt like I gave up on many things, plus I left behind a lot of friends and family in New York." Her friends thought she was crazy. But the plan was to try it for two years. "I thought it would be an adventure," Joelle explains. "But it's become our life."

A Home Away from Home

While Josh was starting the yeshiva and founding a *makom* Torah in Germany, Joelle undertook the role of surrogate mother to the teenage students who were leaving their families in other parts of Germany to move to Berlin

for the unfamiliar life of Torah and yeshiva. In the beginning, the Spinners ate every Shabbos meal with the *bochurim* in the yeshiva. Joelle baked their birthday cakes, tended to personal matters, made Yom Tov and Shabbos meals with guests packed around their table, and eventually, attended all of their weddings.

The Spinners were not just busy with establishing the yeshiva, but also with building the community. As pioneers, there were constant crises and emergencies that required the Spinners' attention, whether it was someone in the hospital who needed kosher food and advocacy, or the troubling news that there was not enough money to continue a crucial project. "There's always someone who needs you," says Joelle.

Nourishing through food was a natural conduit to nourishing souls, but it was a process that Joelle had to grow into. She explains that her parents are part of a generation that doesn't understand *kiruv*. "The truth is, I don't really understand it, either," Joelle says, with complete sincerity. "It's not something that I grew up with or saw or knew about. It was definitely not a concept in Switzerland."

But while she denies understanding what *kiruv* is, Joelle has managed to smoothly and sublimely transition into a life that's dedicated to it. "It happens naturally," Joelle says with a shrug. "I feel like I'm living my life, but I have an open house—that's how I'm doing *kiruv*. I'm showing people what it's like to live life as a *frum*, open-minded Jew."

Fortuitous *Kiruv*

Although Joelle believes her *kiruv* is indirect, the connections she forged with the yeshiva's first students, and those that she continues to develop today (primarily with the girls of the Midrasha, which opened in Frankfurt in 2001 and relocated to Berlin in 2007), are what have helped bring these individuals to



My family in traditional Swiss costume, Purim 2013

Yiddishkeit. In addition to Shabbos meals, Joelle invites the students to her home for coffee and a *schmooze*. She'll join the Midrasha on skating outings or will host a *melaveh malka* for them, or an *oneg* Shabbos for the yeshiva *bochurim*.

Joelle focuses on setting a positive example. "I'm myself; I don't put on a show. I don't pretend I'm something I'm not. That's what the kids see and that's what they like. They like genuine people and those who don't force them to do anything." Joelle believes that, with moderation in commitment and timing, the students will reach their destinations on their own. Otherwise, they'll feel that they're being forced and will withdraw.

Not everyone who has passed through the doors of these institutions has chosen to lead a *frum* lifestyle; the Spinners consider their work a success if students choose a Jewish spouse. They have attended weddings where the couple

may not be embarking on a shomer Shabbos lifestyle, but are being married by an Orthodox rabbi at a wedding with a kosher caterer. Before attending the yeshiva or Midrasha, these individuals would have known nothing at all about *Yiddishkeit* or Jewish identity.

With considerable credit given to the Spinners' remarkable *kiruv* efforts, the *frum* Berlin community has grown. In the past five or six years, about a half-dozen families have joined Berlin's yeshiva community and are sharing the *kiruv* load and contributing to the community's needs. In fact, Joelle's recently married sister just moved to Berlin. Joelle beams. "I thought I'd never have any family here, and now my own sister is down the block!"

Today, the Berlin yeshiva community has burgeoned to fifty-sixty young families with dozens of children and a growing school. But a challenge for Joelle that accompanied the growing community was the necessity to establish boundaries. There was only so much she could give of herself, while concurrently building her own family. "Your kids only need more of you as they get older," she says. "I need to be more focused on them."

Learning to Balance

Life has changed somewhat for the Spinners as Rabbi Spinner's responsibilities have shifted away from the yeshiva, with a greater focus on furthering the Lauder Foundation's mission and goals, politically and internationally. With a weaker connection to the yeshiva now, Joelle has focused her efforts on the Midrasha. Her home is still busy: She hosted nearly sixty people for the *seudah* last Purim and a recent Chanukah party brought 120 people into her home, though most of those guests were political acquaintances. Joelle is now becoming the female face of the *frum* community in Germany, as Josh works on developing and strengthening political connections.

And yes, Joelle also works outside her home. Soon after arriving in Germany, she took a job at the Jewish Museum Berlin, examining their collection for any problems with provenance. She now works part time as an event coordinator at the upscale Amano Hotel, managing its conference space bookings. Joelle enjoys the outlet and the ability to develop a side of herself outside her home and community. She also views this element of her life as helping to set an example for the women and girls of the community and to show them that it is possible to be *frum*, involved in the community, and concurrently successful at a career. "It can be done, it's possible. I'm there in a *shaitel* and skirt!" Joelle says.

Jewish in a Land with a Dark History

So, what's it like to be living in Germany and raising a *frum* family in the shadow of the Holocaust?

While Joelle and her family can't escape the country's history, it is not a constant cloud shadowing their lives. The Spinners are particular, though, to discourage the development of any national pride expressed by their daughters, aged eleven, eight, and three, who speak German, Hebrew, and English. They reinforce to their children the fact that they are Jewish first, and nationally, Swiss and American—not German.

Her daughters know that there was a war, wherein people were killed. But Joelle intentionally has not disclosed to them details of the Holocaust. However, being that they live in Germany, there are literally signs all around them. A new city project is affixing small plaques, called *stolpersteine* (literally, "stumbling stones"), on buildings all over the city to memorialize Jews deported from those residences. The children point them out in passing. While they are aware of the facts, her daughters have not yet parsed the stories that the *stolpersteine* really tell.

Joelle has not experienced anti-Semitism in Germany; contrarily, she has found that Germans are, for the most part, remorseful and respectful of their country's dark history. However, she has witnessed a selective blindness characteristic, in which people look the other way. On one occasion, a FedEx package once arrived on Yom Tov and Joelle tried to explain that she couldn't sign for it. "Impossible!" the deliveryman exclaimed. "How could there be people who can't sign?!" Frustrated by his words and the encounter, Joelle replied, "Yes, they do exist! And there could have been six million more." Joelle received her package.

The Simple Life

Moving to Berlin and helping to establish the *frum* community is an experience that has self-admittedly changed Joelle, who has been forced to reevaluate what's important in her life and in those she's building for her children. Having less available benefits her children, she declares. "They're growing up with a clear understanding of what's important and what's not," Joelle stresses. She teaches her children the core values of being a good person, being non-judgmental, and not compartmentalizing people.

Having grown up in a small European Jewish community herself, Joelle can relate to her children's experiences, although even in Berlin, they are receiving a better Jewish education than she did in Zurich. While Joelle attended a Jewish elementary school, there was no Jewish high school, so she studied at the public gymnasium for six years and supplemented her Jewish education with weekly private lessons. The gymnasium had classes on Shabbos, and Joelle attended, walking there in her Shabbos finery, only to sit quietly at her desk. But that experience taught her to set up boundaries and limitations. "I told myself, 'This is what I can do and can't do: I can study with these kids, but I can't party with them.' My children are now learning these boundaries, too."

Despite her own similar upbringing, Joelle still worries about her children. She is concerned that they may not be able to fit in with their peers later in life in other social situations (such as seminary and college), since they have been impacted by such dissimilar backgrounds and experiences. To combat this, Joelle has started sending her oldest daughter, Rebecca, to overnight camp in New York's Catskills Mountains to broaden her social exposure, an experience Joelle also tried as a young girl.

Following Hashem...Wherever He Leads

Joelle's childhood clearly molded her into the perfect match for her husband and the life they took on in Berlin. "I always say that if I didn't have that experience, I don't think I'd be able to live in Berlin now," she confides.

"One never knows what life has in store," Joelle muses. "I always thought I would lead one kind of life and here I am, living in Berlin doing things I never thought I would do...and I am happy and grateful for it. The truth is, I do not think I could ever do anything else anymore. Our kind of work is extremely rewarding because we see the outcome quite fast. The first time I was able to walk one of 'our kids' to the *chuppah*, I realized there is nothing else in life I would rather be doing.

"Of course, sometimes I *kvetch* and sometimes it is hard and sometimes I just want to pack my bags and leave. But then something amazing happens, one of the small miracles I have witnessed over and over, and I realize this is obviously just meant to be. This is the life Hashem wants me to lead. And He will support me and guide me and help me raise my children in an environment that may not always be perfect, because this is what I am supposed to be doing."

YEARS AT STERN: 1996–1998


CANADA
UNITED STATES
NORTH ATLANTIC OCEAN
SOUTH ATLANTIC OCEAN
Hudson Bay
Island of Newfoundland
Bermuda (U.K.)
Jan Mayen (NORWAY)
Norwegian Sea
NORWAY
Reykjavik
Faroe Islands (DEN.)
Rockall (U.K.)
North Sea
UNITED KINGDOM
IRELAND
PORTUGAL
SPAIN
Lisbon
Madrid
Barcelona
Algiers
AZORES (PORT.)
MADEIRA ISLANDS (PORT.)
Rabat
Casablanca
MOROCCO
ALGERIA
CANARY ISLANDS (SP.)
Western Sahara
MAURITANIA
Nouakchott
MALI
Timbuktu
CAPE VERDE
Praia
Dakar
SENEGAL
Banjul
THE GAMBIA
Bissau
GUINEA-BISSAU
Conakry
GUINEA
Freetown
SIERRA LEONE
Monrovia
LIBERIA
Bamako
Niamey
NIGERIA
COTE D'IVOIRE
GHANA
Yamoussoukro
Lome
Accra
Porto-Novo
EQUATORIAL GUINEA
SAO TOME AND PRINCIPE
São Tomé
Annobon (EQUA. GUI.)
Pointe-Noire
Equator
PENEDOS DE SÃO PEDRO E SÃO PAULO (BRAZIL)
ARQUIPELAGO DE FERNANDO DE NORONHA (BRAZIL)
Ascension (St. Helena)
St. Helena (St. Helena)
St. Helena (U.K.)
TRISTAN DA CUNHA (St. Helena)
Gough Island (St. Helena)
Martin Vaz (BRAZIL)
Trindade (BRAZIL)
Bouvet Island (NORWAY)
Gulf of Mexico
MEXICO
Matamoros
Tampa
Orlando
Miami
Nassau
THE BAHAMAS
Havana
CUBA
Turks and Caicos Islands (U.K.)
Cayman Is. (U.K.)
Cancún
Mérida
Guadalajara
Acapulco
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
Port-au-Prince
JAMAICA
Kingston
HAITI
Santo Domingo
British Virgin Islands (U.K.)
Anguilla (U.K.)
San Juan
Puerto Rico (U.S.)
ST. KITTS AND NEVIS
ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA
Guadeloupe (FR.)
DOMINICA
Martinique (FR.)
ST. LUCIA
ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES
BARBADOS
GRENADA
Port-of-Spain
TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
Caracas
Caribbean Sea
Aruba (NETH.)
Dutch Antilles (NETH.)
Willemstad
BELIZE
Belmopan
GUATEMALA
Guatemala City
HONDURAS
Tegucigalpa
San Salvador
EL SALVADOR
NICARAGUA
Managua
San José
COSTA RICA
PANAMA
Panama City
San Andrés (COLOMBIA)
Cartagena
Isla de Coiba (COSTA RICA)
Isla de Malpelo (COLOMBIA)
Upper Volta
VENEZUELA
Georgetown
GUYANA
Paramaribo
SURINAME
French Guiana (FRANCE)
Cayenne
COLOMBIA
Bogotá
Quito
ECUADOR
Guayaquil
GALAPAGOS ISLANDS (ECUADOR)
Manaus
Belém
Fortaleza
Teresina
Natal
João Pessoa
Recife
Maceió
Salvador
PERU
Lima
Porto Velho
BRAZIL
BOLIVIA
La Paz
Santa Cruz
Brasília
Goiânia
Belo Horizonte
Vitória
Campo Grande
PARAGUAY
Campinas
Rio de Janeiro
São Paulo
Santos
Curitiba
Joinville
Florianópolis
Porto Alegre
Antofagasta
Isla Sala y Gómez (CHILE)
Isla San Félix (CHILE)
Isla San Ambrosio (CHILE)
San Miguel de Tucumán
CHILE
Valparaíso
Santiago
Concepción
ARCHIPIÉLAGO JUAN FERNÁNDEZ (CHILE)
Córdoba
Rosario
Buenos Aires
La Plata
URUGUAY
Montevideo
ARGENTINA
Mar del Plata
Bahía Blanca
Puerto Madryn
Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas) (administered by U.K., claimed by ARGENTINA)
Stanley
Scotia Sea
South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands


Arctic Circle (66°33')
RUSSIA
KAZAKHSTAN
MONGOLIA
CHINA
KOREA
JAPAN
SOUTH KOREA
UKRAINE
Black Sea
GEORGIA
TURKEY
UZBEKISTAN
TURKMENISTAN
TAJIKISTAN
Dushanbe
Kabul
AFGHANISTAN
IRAQ
IRAN
SAUDI ARABIA
EGYPT
Muscat
INDIA
BURMA
THAILAND
VIETNAM
CAMBODIA
Hong Kong S.A.R.
Taiwan
Philippine Sea
PHILIPPINES
Manila
South China Sea
Arabian Sea
Bay of Bengal
SUDAN
ETHIOPIA
SOMALIA
DJIBOUTI
ERITREA
Mogadishu
Male
MALDIVES
Colombo
SRI LANKA
Melekeok
PALAU
Singapore
SINGAPORE
INDONESIA
Jakarta
Victoria
British Indian Ocean Territory (U.K.)
Diego Garcia
SEYCHELLES
COMOROS
Moroni
Glorioso Islands (FRANCE)
Tromelin Island (FRANCE)
Juan de Nova Island (FR.)
Europa Island (FRANCE)
MADAGASCAR
Antananarivo
Saint-Denis
Reunion (FRANCE)
Port Louis
MAURITIUS
MOZAMBIQUE
ZAMBIA
Lusaka
ZIMBABWE
BOTSWANA
Maputo
SWAZILAND
Mbabane
Durban
Port Elizabeth
UGANDA
KENYA
Nairobi
Mombasa
Dar es Salaam
TANZANIA
Kinshasa
Brazzaville
Cocos (Keeling) Islands (AUSTL.)
Christmas Island (AUSTL.)
Ashmore and Cartier Islands (AUSTL.)
TIMOR-LESTE
Dili
Kupang
Darwin
Alice Springs
AUSTRALIA
Great Australian Bight
Tropic of Capricorn (23°27')
INDIAN OCEAN
Île Amsterdam (Fr. S. and Ant. Lands)
Île Saint-Paul (Fr. S. and Ant. Lands)
French Southern and Antarctic Lands (FRANCE)
PRINCE EDWARD ISLANDS (SOUTH AFRICA)
ÎLES CROZET (Fr. S. and Ant. Lands)
ÎLES KERGUELEN (Fr. S. and Ant. Lands)
Heard Island and McDonald Islands (AUSTL.)