**My early years: The 1940s and 1950s**

I was born on March 23, 1940 in East Los Angeles. My father was then an engineer working for the Los Angeles County Engineers. My mother had just stopped being employed as a pattern maker for a clothes manufacturer in Los Angeles. Earlier my mother had worked for Catalina swim suits and family legend has it that she had designed their first two-piece bathing suit. Both of my parents had been left-wing activists in their teens and early twenties. By 1940 they had settled down to raising a family and making a living in a very traditional American manner. My father worked, my mother stayed home (for the most part) and took care of the house and children. That left little time for political activism.

My mother’s father, Louis (Lazar) Henkin (Genkin), was born in 1891 in Odessa Russia and moved to New York in 1912 to escape Czarist Russia. His parents paid smugglers to get him out of Russia. Two of his brothers organized for the overthrow of the government on the ship Potemkin. One fled to Paris where he met my grandfather and together they went to the United States. The other brother was captured and sent to Siberia. He was later freed by the new government in the Soviet Union. Later he was killed at the orders of Stalin. My grandfather Lazar died in 1991.

My mother’s mother was Elizabeth (Liza) Klorstein. She was born in 1890 in Chernigov, Belarus. My grandfather’s father died of starvation in Czarist Russia. My father’s father, Max Hittelman (Hottlman), was born in 1890 in Warshaw, Russia and arrived in New York City in 1906. He died in 1967.His mother, Lena Resnikoff was born in 1889, also in Russia. She died in 1949. Her father’s name was Israel Mordechai Resnikoff.

My father died at the age of 99, my mother at 100, my father’s brother (Dr. Joseph Hittelman) died at the age of 101, his sister Celia Frimkess (Hittelman) died at the age of 99. I am not looking forward to living that long as I saw that life at 99 is not so great.

My parents and grandparents were all life-long non-religious Jewish political radicals. I was raised in their tradition.

My mother and father were both born in the United States in the state of New York, my father in 1913 in Rochester and my mother in 1914 in the Bronx. My father died in 2012 and my mother died in 2014. My parents met as children after their families had moved to Los Angeles. Both families were politically active and moved in the same circles in their Boyle Heights neighborhood of East Los Angeles. As a result, my parents knew each other from an early age. They only became lovers after high school. Before that, my father saw my mother as a friend of his sisters and mostly as a pest that was around their house a lot.

My father was not allowed to graduate from high school because of leaflets he was found to be handing out. At the time he was a designated driver for visiting left-wing leaders who needed to avoid the grasp of the Los Angeles police red squad.

Even though my father did not receive a high school diploma, he did end up with a bachelor’s degree in Engineering from the University of California at Berkeley after attending Los Angeles City College and UCLA.

My mother was involved as a young woman in street guerilla theater activities. Her group was coached by Will Geer who later became known as “Grandpa” in the Walton family television program. My mother was injured in an auto accident while traveling to Chicago to perform street theatre. She was put on a train and much to the disappointment of her parents, chose to travel to stay with her boyfriend (my father) in Berkeley. She continued to live in San Francisco while my father studied in Berkeley. In 1935 my father was working at June Lake in California and called her to tell her to get the marriage license and he would drive down to meet her in Los Angeles. They got married and drove back to June Lake to spend the winter. In 2010 they celebrated their 75th wedding anniversary.

My father’s father (Max Hittelman) was a great speaker and fund raiser for left-wing causes. His wife (Lena) worked behind the scenes. My mother’s parents (Lazar and Liza) were both active and did the everyday support work that is needed to sustain any political movement. I was inspired by the work of my grandparents and I have always sought to duplicate the working styles of both sets of grandparents - taking on a leadership role while still doing the menial work necessary to sustain a movement. I have found great satisfaction in doing both.

Liza and Lazar worked in sweat shops all of their lives. Liza was accomplished at knitting and sewing and always was able to get work. Lazar was less skilled and worked at a number of menial jobs. Grandpa Max was more of a capitalist and did everything from selling woolens to painting signs to building houses. He was able to help his two sons attend public universities. My uncle Joe became a doctor and my father an engineer.

Both my uncle Joe and my grandfather Max were called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950's. Uncle Joe was banned from Cedars Hospital but continued to serve as an important Boyle Heights doctor. Grandpa Max was proud to be called before HUAC as he felt it meant that his political work had real value.

Uncle Joe was what the newspapers called an “unfriendly witness” and as a result lost the ability to send patients to Cedars Hospital in Los Angeles. Later Cedars’ apologized, and he again began using their facilities. He was a famous doctor in the left-wing community - both for his professional expertise and his political involvements. I think that he was called before HUAC since he was expected to be elected as the president of the Los Angeles branch of the American Medical Association. The Committee and other right-wingers did not want a “socialist” medical system in the United States. They did not approve of left-wingers in positions of power within the medical profession.

Grandma Lena died in 1948 and my sister who was born a year later was named after her. When my father returned from the funeral, I witnessed my father crying. It really broke my heart to see him so sad.

In 1942 my parents moved to Ontario, California. My father was hired to help set up the Kaiser Steel Plant in Fontana, California. In fact, he lit the first steel furnace at Kaiser. His job was considered a “critical civilian skill” and as a consequence he was not drafted to fight in the Second World War. He was a smart man and was given more and more engineering leadership roles at Kaiser. But there were limits as to how high he could go in the Kaiser operation given that he was Jewish. We later moved to Los Angeles when he was offered an important job with a company owned by an old friend of his.

Although there were some leftists in Ontario at the time, my parents were fairly isolated from political activities but that did not stop them from building humanistic and socially responsible values in their children. One incident that I remember well was when my elementary school was putting on a minstrel in black-face. I was in the 5th grade and was well accepted by my peers. My parents explained to my why they felt doing the show in black face was racist and that our family did not believe in judging people by the color of their skin. I was directed to go to school and explain why I could not participate. In the end, I did explain the issue to my teachers and ended up participating but not in black face (nor did any of the other kids appear in black face). I learned a very important lesson from this experience - that I could stand up for what was right and still have friends and the respect of my peers. It was a lesson I have carried with me my entire life.

My older brother Gene (who died in 2011 at the age of 72) was born in Los Angeles. My brother Walter and my sister Lena were born in Ontario. We had a good life in Ontario. We lived on a street completely surrounded by orange groves. My brothers and I walked to and from school without fear of assaults. It was an idyllic life for us but very confining for my mother. She took art classes when she could, played the piano, and painted pictures of the characters in the books we read on our bedroom walls. I only learned later what a limiting life she led in Ontario.

My parents always loved to drive to Los Angeles to see their friends and party. This gave us a chance to hang out with our cousins and to spend time with my grandparents. We always looked forward to hearing my Grandpa Lazar’s stories of his younger days in Russia and in the United States. Every story had a lesson attached to it.

All of my grandparents were born in and around Odessa which was under the rule of the Russian Czar. His rule was very harsh on Jews in particular. Grandpa Lazar’s brothers were both active in the overthrow of the Russian government. One was captured while organizing on the Potemkin and sent to Siberia. The other escaped to Paris. When my grandfather turned 17, his family decided he should leave the country. A major problem was the Russian army was drafting young men into the military. The military was a not a good place for the Jews, so my grandfather and his family made a plan for his escape from this tyranny. They hired a smuggler to get my grandfather out of the country but first my grandfather needed to join the military so that reprisals would not be taken against his family. Grandpa Lazar went to sign up, but they would not take 17-year-olds. He pleaded with them to let him join the army. He could not wait as his family had already paid people to get him out of the country. Lazar told the military recruiters that he wanted to fight for the motherland and fight for the Czar. The military officials were very impressed that a Jew would volunteer to serve so they let him into the army.

Grandpa Lazar, now in the army, was sent by train with other recruits on a train north. At every town they stopped, they got off and created bedlam. When they got to the town where my grandfather had arranged to meet his smugglers, they were not letting anyone off the train. He pleaded with the authorities to let him off as he needed to see his ailing grandmother who he said lived in that town. He begged them to let him see her before she died. They let him off the train and the smugglers got him out of the country. First, he went to Germany where a farmer took him in and wanted him to marry his daughter, so Lazar went on to Paris where he met up with his brother. The two of them then got on a boat to the United States. It was a hard trip and when they arrived at Ellis Island my grandfather’s brother had a skin condition. Lazar thought they might have trouble getting his brother into the United States, so my grandfather created a scene. The officials spent time on him but overlooked his brother and both of them were allowed into the United States.

After living in New York for a few years, Grandpa Lazar was able to get in contact with my grandmother who also came from Odessa. She came over and they were soon married. One of his brothers married my grandmother Liza’s sister. Liza was a great knitter and was able to get work. Lazar started to work in the printing industry but when a strike was called, he went out on strike. He was then blacklisted from the print industry in New York. He tried a variety of jobs including owning a small grocery store near a school.

When he bought the store, it was full of kids buying candy. After he took over the store he found out that the gate of the school near his store was usually locked. He sold very little merchandise and finally had to give up and sell the store back to the old owners at a loss. A few weeks later the store was up for sale again. By this time my mother was born.

Finally, Lazar moved to Los Angeles and tried a variety of jobs including selling oranges on the street. He would rent a horse and wagon, load up with oranges from downtown, and go out to the then suburbs to sell them. He was not successful and finally gave it up when his horse got away from him and bit a cop. When my mother and grandmother followed my grandfather to Los Angeles, they found that every cupboard was filled with oranges. My grandfather also tried being an ice man but that didn’t work out either. He spent the rest of his life working in sweat shop conditions making sofas, trunks, and other assorted items. He was well liked by the other workers and often spoke up for the other (mostly Mexican immigrant) workers to the Jewish owner of the factory. The boss never understood why “Louie” cared about the welfare of the other workers. I did.

My brothers and I loved to hear Lazar’s stories. Other stories he told were about his rowdy days as an elementary school student (he stopped going to school at age 11 to become an apprentice shoemaker). He once tied a kite to the tails of one of the teachers. He used to poke the non-Jewish boys who would sing anti-Jewish remarks while singing in a chorus. We loved to hear of his antics and disrespect for authority. Of course, we were all very obedient and respectful students ourselves back in Ontario.

My brother Walter played guitar and so did my sister Lena. She learned Russian folk songs from Grandma Liza and at the age of eight or nine, she was chosen to sing them on the Art Linkletter television show.

I have never been a great believer in “talent” but rather think that dedication and hard work are want really counts, but I must admit that there are talented people. I became most aware of this when I saw Lena’s daughter’s (my niece Hannah Enenbach) early feeling for music. She has both parents who like music and have perfect pitch. She had music playing in the house even before she was born. Given that experience and her natural talent, she was able to sit at a piano and compose music at the age of five. One Christmas season when she was about seven or eight, she came to Los Angeles for a week and my sister rented a violin for her to play. Within a few days she was playing music on the violin. I was simply amazed as I got nowhere after more than a month with a teacher when I was six.

San Antonio Street School in Ontario had both White and Brown students and there was not much overt racism. It wasn’t until junior high that I actually began to recognize racial divisions (except for the earlier encounter with the minstrel show incident.) I only attended Junior High in Ontario for a few months. I was shocked that the Latino kids would walk around the school in one direction and the white kids in another and sometimes fights would break out. My brother Gene and I were friends with two of the only African-American kids at the school. They did not have many other friends that I was aware of.

After Junior High in Ontario, I was enrolled in Thomas Starr King Junior High School in Los Angeles. I did not experience much outright racism in the mixed White and Latino student body. However, the classes were grouped by “ability level” and most of the students in my classes were White. There were gangs and fights at the school but the sides were not based on ethnicity. Mostly bullies picking on the clueless.

My sister and brothers and I grew up hearing the music of white musicians Glen Miller, Benny Goodman and Jimmy Dorsey. We heard music from Black musicians like Nat King Cole, the Ink Spots and the Mills Brothers. The Andrew Sisters, Frank Sinatra and Perry Como were also popular.

Growing up my siblings and I heard a lot of folk songs at home. One of my families favorite singing groups was The Weavers. They had been formed in 1948 and consisted of Ronnie Gilbert, Lee Hays, Fred Hellerman and Pete Seeger. They came out of the social/political tradition that Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, Leadbelly, Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry and others emerged from. Earlier the members of The Weavers and their friends had performed at many political and union rallies but now were actually making a living playing at the Village Vanguard in New York and recording for Decca Records. By 1950 they had a number of hit songs including Leadbelly's "Goodnight, Irene" and the Israeli song "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena." During this time, they got some criticism from their fans as they were performing fewer of their explicitly political songs. They popularized a number of folk songs such as "On Top of Old Smoky", "Follow the Drinking Gourd", "Kisses Sweeter than Wine", "The Wreck of the John B" (aka "Sloop John B"), "Rock Island Line", "The Midnight Special", "Pay Me My Money Down", and "Darling Corey".

I remember hearing my friend Huck in Los Angeles play with Woody Guthrie’s friend Cisco Houston. I also attended a house party in junior high school with Huck where Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry played. These experiences formed a basis for my later musical interests.

It was fun to go to The Weavers concerts since they got people to sing along with them and Pete Seeger was great at prompting the audience on the lyrics in advance of each line of the song. Despite their attempt to do less political singing, The Weavers were blacklisted from television and radio appearances in the early 1950s as a result of being labeled “communists” and their brief period of nationwide popularity was destroyed. Pete Seeger and others were renounced in the blacklist publication, Red Channels, and each of The Weavers were placed under FBI surveillance. Later they would be “rediscovered” during the emerging folksinger/song writer phase of the 1960s. Decca Records terminated their recording contract and deleted their songs from its catalog in 1953.

In December 1955, the group reunited to play a sold-out concert at Carnegie Hall and a recording of the concert was distributed by Vanguard Records, and this led to their signing by that record label. In 1968 Pete Seeger finally got a chance to once again perform on television (on the very popular Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour). He sang a song called “the Big Muddy” which was really about the Vietnam War and President Johnson - “knee deep in the Big Muddy and the big fool said to push on.” It caused quite a stir as American sentiment began to turn against United States involvement in the war against Vietnam.

Another group I listened to was The Gateway Singers. Ernie Sheldon, born Ernest Liebermann, taught guitar to my friend Huck. Liebermann had been singing professionally since the mid 1940s when he joined The Gateway Singers in 1958 on the departure of Lou Gottlieb. Associated with People's Songs and People's Artists in the 1940s and 50s, Ernie Sheldon was one of the first musicians to record on the Hootenanny label. He was also a member of popular sort-of-folk group, The Limeliters. He was also an early editor of the progressive folk magazine “Sing Out.” I subscribed to Sing Out for years.

In the late forties and into the fifties my grandparents were very involved in the Los Angeles Committee for Protection of Foreign Born (LACPFB). Family history suggests that the Committee itself was established at my mother’s parents’ house in 1950. It was organized to defend the rights and liberties of the foreign born especially in light of the red-baiting by Senator McCarthy and others. The Committee worked for the repeal of the Walter-McCarran Law (1952) and in defense of many who fell under its assault on rights. Other regional committees were organized in high immigrant areas such as Detroit, Philadelphia, and Chicago.

The LACPFB set up a Bail Fund Committee for which my Grandpa Max was one of the chief fundraisers. He was often called on to provide bail for some leftist that had been jailed and always had cash stashed at his house for that purpose.

I learned a lot from watching Max on stage making a pitch for contributions. He was direct in asking particular people to contribute. He knew which people had been financially successful and didn’t hesitate to press them for contributions. He believed that people had a responsibility to stand up for what they believed in both physically and fiscally. I was able to use what I learned from Grandpa Max at union meetings where I served as the auctioneer for items donated by members.

From archives of the **Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research**: “The Committee's first high-profile case known as the ‘Terminal Island Four’ case (1951) became the focal point of the Committee's activity and set a precedent for the Committee's future involvements and activities. The case involved Harry Carlisle, David Hyun, Frank Carlson, and Miriam Stevenson, who were the first victims of the McCarran Law. The four were seized from their homes and work without warrant and held in the Terminal Island Detention Camp for six weeks without bail. In response, LACPFB set up special committees to raise financial support, picket in front of courts and Immigration Service headquarters, organize demonstrations and protests, and circulate literature to raise awareness and participation in the community. The Committee's political and legal activism was also heard in Washington with several of the Committee's cases going before the Supreme Court. Well-known civil rights attorneys like Joseph Forer, Ben Margolis, Seymour Mandel, and John Porter played an instrumental role in the Committee's defense activities.”

As the fight for civil rights moved away from the foreign born, the Committee redirected its effort toward fighting for the rights of African-Americans. The Committee changed its name to the Los Angeles Committee for Defense of the Bill of Rights and Protection of Foreign Born in 1967.