

# Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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## **A CHILDHOOD IN MANHATTAN** by Kay Silberfeld

When, by myself at about four years of age, I roller-skated into the lobby of our apartment building at 166 East 96th Street, the elevator operator seemed surprised to see me. So was my mother when she opened our apartment door a few minutes later. Where was my governess? I said I didn't know. But of course I did know: I had left her behind in the park and sped off for home. What a great ride and a successful way of getting rid of a much-disliked governess.

The downside of living in the City at a young age was not being able to go out alone. But, living in the city had its pleasures. There were rides on the Third Avenue El. One of my favorite trips was to go with my mother all the way to my father's law firm in lower Manhattan. From his high-up office windows, I looked down at the ships in the harbor. For some reason, the comings and goings of the United Fruit boats were of particular interest.

This excursion could include going to the Fulton Fish Market and having lunch at Sweets, a very old seafood restaurant with waiters who wore shirts and ties and aprons and who themselves looked very old. And after lunch, we next might go by a sidewalk shop where bearded men dressed in robes sold their native Turkish candy. It tasted of honey and the way I thought flowers would taste.

Another special visit was to my grandparents' penthouse apartment. The living room had large glass doors that opened onto a terrace where I played, often with my two cousins. One game was to run around the corner of the long terrace, re-enter the apartment by the back door into the kitchen and "surprise" the people waiting for us in the living room.

It was from that terrace, as my father later told me, that on May 6, 1937, he saw the German airship, the Hindenburg. It was flying over the city on its first, and as it turned out, only trip from Frankfurt to New York City. My father claimed he shook his

fist at it and, moments later, the airship with its hydrogen fuel exploded into flames while attempting to land at Lakehurst, NJ. Thirteen of its thirty-six German passengers and twenty-two members of its sixty-one-member crew perished.

On many of those visits to our grandparents, we might listen to “Uncle Don Reads the Funnies” on the radio and would play with the large collection of dolls dressed in native costume, acquired by my grandparents in their travels. On one particularly memorable visit, my cousin Pat and I were told to choose our favorite dolls to take home.

Other special outings were to the Museum of Natural History to visit the great whale and to the Museum of the City of New York to see, and envy, the extensive collection of elaborate doll houses. I also remember seeing a model of the then newly built Empire State Building, the tallest building in the City.

All outings didn’t end happily. On a visit to the monkey house at the Central Park Zoo, a monkey terrified me when it reached out from its cage to try and grab my balloon, which, of course, popped. Most of the time, a Hudson River ferry-boat ride with my father was one of my favorite treats but not the trip when my hat blew off into the river. I was probably not sorry to lose the hat, but was worried about my mother’s expected reaction.

And, there was a Christmas season visit to the “Wizard of Oz” movie which was scary enough, but my fear was compounded when I saw a Santa Claus moving through the audience. I broke into tears, tried to hide, and refused to shake his hand.

And this would be an incomplete City story if I did not mention all my scraped knees from playing in the street during school recesses.

When I was six, we moved to the country with its own adventures.

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## **SAVING HALF AN HOUR** by George Kurz

When I was growing up, my family had a lovely summer home close to the beach in Margate, NJ, about four miles south of Atlantic City. Many Philadelphians spent their summers at the seashore along the South Jersey coast where it was usually significantly cooler than in the city, an important consideration before the widespread use of air-conditioning.

Before superhighways were built, the most popular means of transportation for commuters like my father was by train on the Pennsylvania-Reading Seashore line. Trains ran from Atlantic City to a station right by the Delaware River in Camden. From the train, it was a short walk to a landing where a large waiting ferry

transported the passengers across the river to downtown Philadelphia. During rush hour, some trains made no intermediate stops and completed the run in just under an hour.

In 1944 at the age of 15 with my dad's encouragement, I joined him on the train trip to Philadelphia several times a week. It meant getting up to make a very early train and arriving back in Atlantic City around 6:30 p.m. My days in Philadelphia were spent helping in the office of a company my dad had founded 30 years previously. It was a small custom-house brokerage and ship agency firm with only three or four employees. I got to do a wide variety of office tasks, including typing letters soliciting business from potential new clients and going to the custom house and to ships in port at various locations on the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers. At the end of the day, I met my dad in his office, and we set off for the ferry to Camden and the train back to the seashore.

My father was proficient at both typing and shorthand. Since these were subjects not offered at my school, he urged me to study them during the following summer at the Philadelphia Secretarial School. Accordingly, in 1945, after my junior year in high school, I again traveled with my dad to Philadelphia, this time on a regular three-times-a-week schedule.

My mornings began with a hearty breakfast at a Horn & Hardart cafeteria. The rest of the morning was devoted to classes. I did well, especially at typing, and that skill has been valuable. I am glad that my dad urged me to study there.

In the afternoons, I again went to the office of my dad's old company. Over the course of the summer, I learned more and more about the business.

During that summer, my dad learned about a small airline that offered passenger service between Camden and Atlantic City and between Atlantic City and Newark. Ready to try something new that had promise of greater efficiency, he looked into commuting by plane.

The taxi ride from his office across the Delaware River Bridge through the city of Camden and out to the airport took about 10 minutes longer than getting to the train in Camden. The process of checking in and getting on the plane in those days was so simple that it took no more time than boarding the train. The flight itself took about 20 or 25 minutes, and Bader Field, the airport at Atlantic City, was actually closer to Margate than the train station. Therefore, he figured he could save about a half-hour of travel time each way. He tried the plane and liked it.

The flights from Atlantic City to Camden and back became a routine.

On numerous occasions, I accompanied my dad. The planes were twin-engine propeller aircraft. They held, at most, 25 passengers and had a crew of two or three.

In addition to speed, the plane had two other advantages over the train. First, since trains were not air-conditioned, passengers often opened windows to get relief from the heat. The air that came in brought soot from the coal-burning locomotive. The air in the planes was clean.

Second, only on the trip by air did a flight attendant come down the aisle offering “coffee, tea, or milk?” The stewardesses, as they were called then, had time to chat with passengers and got to know some of the regulars.

However, the planes did have one drawback. Their cabins were not pressurized, and we had to chew gum on takeoff and landing to avoid ear pain from the altitude change.

In 1946, during his second summer of commuting by air, one evening my dad heard a news report that disturbed him greatly. A commuter plane had crashed en route from Atlantic City to Newark. It proved to be the very plane on which he had flown earlier that same evening from Camden to Atlantic City! No sooner had the passengers from Camden deplaned than another group had boarded, and

the plane set off on its fatal flight, manned by the same crew to which he had just said goodbye.\*

I had not flown often enough to get to know the airline personnel and had not commuted with him since the previous summer. I quickly brushed off news of the crash, but my dad was really shaken. He was especially saddened by the death of the crew members whom he had come to know and with whom he typically had exchanged friendly words each evening. He shuddered to think how close he had come to being on the last flight of that aircraft and decided not ever to fly on that airline again. He never resumed commuting by air.

\*The crash occurred on August 9, 1946, during an attempted emergency landing at Lakehurst Field.

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## **THE MORTON YEARS 1980-1996**

**by Claire Speciner**

(From Claire’s memoir “For the Time Being”  
selected by Kay Silberfeld)

Claire was in her late forties, her 29-year marriage ending, her children grown. She had an apartment in New York and a house in Great Neck on Long Island where she worked in a real estate firm. The musician Morton Gould also lived in Great Neck and was recently separated from his wife. Later, he told Claire that, from a

window in his studio, he would see her riding her bicycle down his street. Their face-to-face encounters occurred while they were walking their dogs. At one point Morton asked Claire for advice about selling his house. They dated for several years, gradually becoming closer.

“Morton started inviting me to travel with him,” she writes, “always to musical and/or music-related events.

“The first trip, and one of the most important, was to Tanglewood for the three-day celebration of Leonard Bernstein’s seventieth birthday. There were concerts open to the public and private dinners, luncheons, and receptions. The first event was a formal dinner under white tents at the Highwood estate, honoring Lenny’s mother, Jennie Bernstein. A prelude to the evening concert featured 11 commissioned songs as tributes to Bernstein. The concert followed dinner followed by a party at Blantyre where Morton was greeted by Beverly Sills, who proceeded to remind him of his father’s flirtation with her mother.

The next day, lunch took place at Seranak, formerly the estate of conductor Serge Koussevitsky, founder of the Tanglewood Koussevitsky Music Shed. It’s a lovely house with a full porch overlooking the lake, Stockbridge Bowl. Lunch was set up under a white, oblong tent. At some point

during the lunch, composer Lukas Foss came over and told us that he’d gone inside the house and into the bedroom, found Koussevitsky’s boots and tried them on.

“On Saturday, we had a meal on the lawn of conductor Seiji Ozawa’s house: the most delicious Japanese food I’ve ever had. After the evening concert we had supper back at the Inn. I noticed violinist Midori at a nearby table with her family, gathered up all my courage, and approached this young girl to tell her how beautiful her performance the night before had been.

“Concerts in the Shed featured the most famous conductors and guest artists in the music world—all friends of the Maestro. Lenny conducted the final concert on Sunday afternoon. Our seats were second row, center, too close but close enough for Lenny, who while taking his intensely emotional bows, looked down at Morton, pointed to him, blew him a kiss, and said, quietly, ‘Morton.’

“Morton had a conducting schedule that took him to the major cities in the U.S. During the years of his ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) presidency, there were other travel responsibilities, as well. When I could, I traveled with him or met him wherever he might be. In those years, I was working, going to graduate

school, and later, starting a private practice in psychotherapy.”

One trip Claire went on with Morton was to Fort Worth. Morton had been invited to write a piano piece for the 12 semifinalists at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition.

They attended the Kennedy Center Honors for many years. Then in 1994, Morton was one of the honorees. That celebratory weekend included “a luncheon at the Kennedy Center on Saturday, hosted by the President of the Center; a formal dinner at the State Department, hosted by the Secretary of State, at which the actual awards are presented (a medal on a ribbon); Sunday brunch at the Ritz Carlton Hotel (where the honorees are housed) hosted by the producer of the show; a lavish White House cocktail reception preceded by a Blue Room event at which each honoree is introduced and lauded by the President and First Lady; the show, which is televised; and a supper dance which follows and ends the weekend’s festivities. The show consists of 15-minute segments about each honoree which include a narrated biographical video and tributes and performances by performers who have worked with the honoree or are his/her friends. They are spoken, sung and danced. Each segment ends with something quite spectacular.

“At every event, the honorees are praised, but they are not permitted to



*Morton presents President Clinton with a saxophone and a piece of music for him to play on it.*

*Note: Claire’s memoir is in the Resident Authors Section of the Pennswood Library.*

respond, not even with a verbal thank-you. Their responses are usually facial, crossed hands on the chest, or blown kisses. Sometimes an honoree is overcome and cannot respond.

“In life, events sometimes happen to shake us out of any sense of privilege. When we arrived back at the hotel, after this unique evening, the paparazzi were waiting. People on the street were clapping. Morton got out of the car and stepped onto the curb. ‘Look here, Mr. Copland, look here.’”

In 1995, just six months before his death, Morton received the Pulitzer Prize for Lifetime Achievement in Music Composition at a luncheon in the Low Memorial Library at Columbia University.

On February 22, 1996, Claire received a letter from The White House, signed by Bill Clinton:

“ . . . Morton was an American treasure. For eight decades, as composer, conductor, and performer, he enriched our cultural life with the gift of his music. Whether composing for orchestra or band, ballet or Broadway, he brought to his work a distinctly American flavor and exuberance. And with vision and generosity, he took every opportunity to advance the work of our country’s young composers. I will always cherish the saxophone composition that Morton wrote and sent to me last year—a remembrance that spoke so eloquently of his charm and warmth and kindness. Hillary and I join you in mourning the loss of this great and good man, but we can all take comfort in knowing that his extraordinary creative legacy will live on for us in his music . . . ”

*Note:* Claire’s memoir is in the Resident Authors section of the Pennswood Library.

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**UPON REREADING  
ECCLESIASTES**  
by John Wood

It has been said,  
Have you not read,  
For everything there is a time:  
A time for love.

A time for hate.  
A time for water’s burst,  
A time to settle in dry earth.  
A time to sow,  
A time to reap.  
A time for slings and slaughter space,  
A time for common quenching at the  
spring.  
All that seems balanced,  
The way things really are  
and therefore right.

Perhaps about this world too long,  
Too slow to know the score;  
Yet, have no wish to know the end.  
By decade, then by day,  
The sun more quickly to its  
western bier.  
In those winter years,  
That curtain drop looms near  
And dark of night breeds fear.  
It seems we are deceived—  
Time for each a finite.  
Cannot be pocketed or banked.

There is not time for everything.  
There is no time to waste.  
No time to hone a mean rebuke,  
To furrow fields of hate.  
No time to harrow killing fields,  
To sow the seeds of enmity,  
Assuring war our fate.  
Still, time to light a darkened path,  
To plant a velvet rose.  
Still time to stretch in outreach,  
With love to press a hand.

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# **TOWARD A NEW NORTH STAR**

**by Tony Panzetta**

“When I have fears  
that I may cease to be.”

One of John Keats’s sonnets begins with these attention-getting words. Keats, orphaned early by the death of both parents, died at 25, and his words were a harbinger. Stricken by tuberculosis and facing what was then inevitable death, he created the sonnet which has currency regardless of the age at which one reads it. When read now in the eighth decade of my life those words take on meaning beyond poetic appreciation. I am now in my years of declining optimism about a long future.

Peggy Lee summed it up simply with her lyrics: “And when it was all over I said to myself, Is that all there is?” I know that everyone dies sooner or later, but if I welcome death later rather than sooner, how do I make, that reprieve worthwhile? That is the challenge. I struggle for a definitive answer or at least an answer. That would, of course, be an answer that applied to me alone. There is no universal answer, only my mind’s construction which gives me temporary relief from the knowledge that I will cease to be.

The time has come, and I try to avoid being enmeshed in all the negative

aspects of growing old: fear, disappointment, invisibility, declining physical and mental abilities, loneliness and the final ending without the guaranteed solace of a heavenly afterlife. Let’s lump all that and more under the term The Great Decline. When I accept that I am within the great decline, what might A Great Enduring look like? To the extent that my honest engagement with the great decline allows, what personal attitudes, personal surrounding circumstances and behaviors may lead me to living the remaining time with some semblance of serenity and fulfillment? What might my Great Enduring look like?

To grapple with that question, I look first at my new surroundings. I am privileged to live in a setting that addresses the great decline by creating a culture designed to provide many of the requirements for serenity and fulfillment. These are the external circumstances that provide, perhaps, some of the answers. I live in a continuing care retirement community that provides secure and pleasant housing, access to educational and recreational activities, health-care support when needed and a culture of welcoming fellow travelers. But I know that I am privileged in ways that many are not, and if I mistakenly consider the external circumstances as the answer, then I have deluded myself. When I focus on my internal answers to the question, i.e. the

personal attitudes, values, commitments and relationships that I require to make it to the finish line, I must acknowledge that the Great Enduring is for me to work at, not others.

I believe that many of us come to this time of the Great Decline already equipped with enough of the internal resources to make it possible to achieve integrity, serenity and fulfillment. With the Great Decline, however, I am at risk of becoming bedeviled by my fear of death and depressed feelings, and therefore languish in that spiral of decline. The hobgoblin that offers relief as it obscures reality is the mental trait of **denial**. We all have this capacity to deny what is happening or what is certain to happen. In this case, it is the reality of the Great Decline that we deny. We link the future to the continuation of the present.

Is there something that can power the work of a Great Endurance? My realization that emerges from an honest reckoning is that the North Star I used as a young man will not be the North Star I will use today as an octogenarian elder.

William James said: "I am done with great things and big things, great institutions and big success, and I am for those tiny, invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual."

I have always strived for great things and big things. I have always strived to be successful while working in great institutions. Those days are over. Should my new North Star be to retire to the wonders of nature and fill my days with simplicity and appreciation?

I've never been so old before, so I have no template from experience to help guide me.

It would be misleading if I said I have a completed plan for how to live in what is left of this unpredictable and wonderful life. I still am pulled to the project, the task, the challenge. But now I have a restraining voice alongside, a voice of selective engagement. My new North Star is not perfect, nor is it destined to remain unchanged as I continue to face the unknowable realities that characterize the Great Decline. Nevertheless, I believe it is important to stake out a position despite its tentativeness.

*Take the road that is filled with simple pleasures and realize that I have nothing to prove to anyone. Engage with persons in life with whom I can build loving relationships of integrity and sharing. Loving and being loved do not depend on being young. Face the reality of decline and celebrate my remaining abilities as I am able. Never stop learning and creating.*

Those are the words of my new North Star. I have no grand all-encompassing plan going forward, other than those words. I am open to what serendipity has to offer and each day is now an open challenge. Some days are great, some not so great. Such is the stuff of the Great Endurance.

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## FAQS ABOUT “VILLAGE VOICES”

Q: How long can my article be?

A: Each printed page contains about 500 words. We'd begin to be concerned about length at about 1500 words.

Q: What kind of thing do you reject?

A: Items that are too confessional; pieces that are time-sensitive and can't fit into our publishing schedule; and things that we believe most residents would not appreciate.

Q: How much do the editors change the articles?

A: As little as possible. We put commas in and take commas out, make sure that the grammar is correct, and remove redundancies. If we worry that we might have changed the meaning, we consult with the writer.

Q: Does my submission have to be typed? Sent to you by email?

A: No. We have volunteers who will type up your article from your

handwritten copy and get it into our formatted Queue.

Q: What are the best topics to write about?

A: For months now, we've been printing wonderful stories about growing up in various places. We've had a lot of fun learning about brief encounters with the famous.

Pennswood residents have fascinating stories to tell. What's your story? Please send it to us.

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