

## It Takes Many Miracles to Make a Life

### Sophie Freud



*Sophie Freud*

One of the things that encouraged me to write my book, *Living in the Shadow of the Freud Family*, was that I found—I actually knew there was—in my mother’s estate the 40 letters that my mother wrote my father during the period that he was prisoner of war and she was waiting for him to come back. That was how their courtship started. I felt that these letters from her, from WWI, needed to be preserved in some way, which led me to the need for a book.

It took me eight years to write this book, which I did want to write before I die. I’m pleased that at least I could reach this goal and I loved doing it.

I was born in Vienna in 1924. That was a long time ago. I had the experience of being born into a family that was to become famous. My father was the son of Sigmund Freud, and my mother came from an affluent assimilated Jewish family. Father became a prisoner of the war at the end of WWI. My parents married right after the war ended and father had come home from Italy. The marriage went downhill very fast.

I lived the first 14 years in Vienna. In some ways, you know, there is so much misery in the larger world, in Africa where people have nothing to eat, no place to live. In comparison, I had a very privileged childhood. Everything is relative, right? I had a privileged childhood in comparison with the majority of children in this world, but I did not grow up in what one would consider a very peaceful home.

My grandfather was old by then, and sick. He gave me and my brother maybe ten or fifteen minutes’ audience once a week to look us over and ask a few questions. It was a formal but very important and benign relationship. These grandparents kept an eye on the tumultuous household that my mother and father had created. There was his protective presence even if I did not have that much actual contact with my grandfather.

When the Germans invaded Austria, it was all left up to my grandfather whether we would emigrate. Now, I don’t understand why it was all up to him, because I had a brother who was then 17 years old and actually in immediate danger. When grandfather decided to emigrate, the whole family got visas with him, allowing us to emigrate quite early. The Anschluss was in March 1938 and we left

Austria in May, one of the early departures. The persecution of Jews had started instantly and in November the Nazis organized the first major ugly pogrom in Vienna later called the Kristallnacht. You must have heard of it, the night of broken glass. We were spared that experience.

My parents decided to immigrate to different countries. My father thought it was a good opportunity, I think, to get out of the marriage so he and my brother went with my grandfather's family to London. My mother and I went to Paris. The family split up at that point. My mother had sisters in Paris. In my first book, *My Three Mothers and other Passions*, I wrote about my aunt, my mother's sister, who welcomed me to Paris. I saw her as a second mother, who really helped me a great deal at that difficult time of transition, which would have been much harder without her. She was a scintillating colorful woman. She also had a bad marriage, but she chose to stay with her husband.

I then went to school in France, to a regular lycée, the public school, and tried to learn French as fast as I could. I'm not that gifted in languages actually, I have especially no talent for new accents, but I did manage to catch up. We arrived in Paris in May 1938. Then in September 1939 this strange war started. I mean, during the first year nobody could have observed that countries had declared war on each other. Both sides stood still and prepared for war. They called it *une drôle de guerre*, a strange war.

In the spring of 1940 the war really started, and my mother and I left on bicycles just two days before the Germans invaded Paris. The trip across France became one of the big adventures of my life. We ended up near the coast, near Bordeaux. I kept looking back to see if the German army was behind us, but they must have taken a different route.

We stayed that summer in a village where I learned to make bricks and read all the French classics. The armistice had divided France into an occupied zone and a non-occupied zone. Luckily we stopped in a non-occupied zone, but it was a frightening situation, given our status as Jewish refugees. In the fall we went to Nice, which was not occupied at the time, and I was able to return to school in Nice.

I worked very hard to become a good student there. In Vienna I had been very lazy; I had only been interested in my friends and having a playful time. In Paris I was busy learning French. But then in Nice I wanted to become a really good student. I don't know how I got accepted at the public lycée because at that point Jewish children were no longer admitted to public schools in France but somehow, in spite of my being not only Jewish but foreign, I was admitted. I still don't know how this happened. All the teachers were very nice to me and they were super-fair, you know. I received prizes and academic honors, so that is a happy memory. I wrote about this in my book; I wanted to be sure to include what good grades I got.

My mother's sisters, who had lived in Paris, were by then in New York and helped us to get visas. We arrived in Nice in September of 1940 and left in January 1942. It was very lucky because the Germans invaded all of France soon after we left and we got away just in time. It was around the same time that America declared war. So we thought, "maybe we don't have to leave."

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We almost didn't leave because we were used living in Nice. I loved my school and desperately wanted to finish my French baccalaureate. My mother had found some work in her field and was very afraid of poverty in America. But, fortunately, we did leave. A dear friend who stayed behind later got deported to Auschwitz.

We went from Marseilles to Casablanca, where a Portuguese ship was to take us to America. It was the only way to reach the U.S.A. at that time. Then a strange thing happened, that gave me several chapters in my book. The ship was delayed by a day and by the time it arrived, our American visas had expired. We had to wait in Casablanca for new visas for eight more months.

Being in Casablanca was a very happy time for me, the happiest time in my adolescence, the only happy time in my adolescence because I was invited to live with a local Jewish family who had a daughter of my age and who had many friends that she shared with me. I was even able to take and pass my baccalaureate examination. Finally we got the renewal of our visas. We flew to Lisbon—the first flight of my life—where we waited for another month and arrived in the United States in November 1942, starting my American life at age eighteen.

My mother settled in New York City where her sisters lived. All through, I was completely focused on getting a university education. I tried to get into Hunter College, but my mother was not yet established as a resident in the city. Once again another miracle happened, and Edward Bernays who was my grandfather's nephew, came to my help. He sent me to Radcliffe College, paying the tuition and everything, because we came without any financial resources to this country.

So I started at Radcliffe College which merged with Harvard while I was there. I landed in this prestigious University without knowing anything about its reputation. All I wanted was to continue my education. It was a really hard time, because first I had no money, and second, I didn't know English well enough. I knew it enough to get by, but not to really succeed according to my standards. It took me a while to get established. It was hard. It wasn't, you know, about having a good time in college. It was about survival, and managing to pass the courses and so on. After a while it became easier and I was able to graduate with honors. It took several miracles for me first to get out of France alive and second to get this education, which I wanted so desperately.

Many American boys wanted to go out with me but I was not going to date any strangers, so I didn't accept any dates with American boys. Instead I married quite early a German immigrant whom I had known in France as a way of, you know, having some island of familiarity in this strange new country.

I got married in my senior year, and of course finished college. My husband, Paul Loewenstein, served in the Navy at the Washington Naval Research Lab. I applied to social work school and got accepted at Simmons, and we moved to Boston after his discharge. Simmons was a stronghold of psychoanalysis at that time. All our teachers were psychoanalysts, something I later changed when I eventually joined the faculty.

I finished social work school, had one year of experience, a job at the Boston Family Society, and then I had my first child. I had wanted to have some basic work experience before starting my family. Eventually I had three children, but went back to work, on a part-time basis. It was a busy life, between raising the children, managing a household, and part-time work, which I increased as the children got

older. My jobs were connected with parents and children. I had jobs in child-guidance clinics and worked for five years as an adoption worker in a child welfare agency. I also worked a few years at a mental hospital for children. Because of my own experience of how difficult the relationship between teachers and parents could be, I ventured to launch a course that would help teachers of young children deal with parents. It was my first course. I made up a syllabus—handwritten at that time—and contacted the head of the teacher training department at Tufts University. They said, “Sorry, but we have somebody who is teaching something similar. If you want to teach one class, we could arrange that.”

Then, that very teacher who was teaching “my course” got sick, and they needed a substitute. This was yet another miracle that started my teaching career.

As soon as I was teaching my first class, I knew that I had finally found my true calling. You know, it was very strange, the students responded enthusiastically. They must have realized that it was my first teaching experience but it went very well. I stayed with Tufts a number of years, until I started to teach full-time at Simmons. I devised different courses around children and parents, but I still remember that first course because it was such a crucial experience.

Then when my oldest child went off to college, I also went back to school. I went to the Heller School for Social Policy at Brandeis University, conveniently close to home and very easy to reach with my motorscooter, obtaining a Ph.D. in three years. It was my entrance to a teaching career.

Happily, upon graduation, I was offered a teaching position at Simmons. They even made me chair of the human behavior sequence. It was a perfect fit for me. The faculty member who had been in charge of the human behavior sequence before me had not taught himself, but he had hired psychoanalysts to do the teaching. I said good-bye to the psychoanalysts, revised the entire human behavior sequence, and took over with my own teaching, turning the school in a somewhat different new direction.

Some faculty members were very angry, but on the whole, I had a very satisfying career at Simmons. It was really a very positive experience. I got along with most of my colleagues and my students; you know, ups and downs occurred, but they let me do what I wanted.

I had an impact on the school with the series of new courses that I developed, expanding from psychodynamic theories into systems theory and we went through the lifespan of families, not just individuals. I taught many different things at Simmons. I taught group therapy and family therapy, and I made sure that I got extra training in all these areas.

The children grew up. I was very busy with academic pursuits, but my husband enjoyed sports. He went skiing or sailing every weekend while I had to write my papers and book reviews, so we grew apart. After 40 years the marriage had really broken down and we parted, peacefully, but we parted. He sadly died a few years later.

In that realm, I was less competent than in my professional life. In my personal life I was so focused on academia, developing courses, writing papers, giving workshops throughout the country, that I neglected our relationship and did not take the time to nurture my marriage. I made a choice. As I told you, in France I wanted to stay in Nice, blind to what was going on around me, just so that I could

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continue my education. Many years later I was focused on my professional career at the expense of the marriage. I think that I did not neglect my children. I feel that I was a good enough mother but perhaps they don't think so.

I retired at the age of 68. I thought that I would work until I was 70, but Simmons at that time wanted to get rid of their old faculty and offered a generous retirement package. I took the package, retired, but then taught as an adjunct in our doctoral program for another ten years. So that worked out. I had created a challenging, ambitious course, offering two opposite viewpoints on every theory they were learning. Then I fully retired ten years later, in 2002, and I thought, goodbye teaching. I have to find a new identity.

I should mention that I had been so interested in teaching new courses, that I created a series of different courses about women's lives that I then taught at the Harvard University Extension Program in the evenings for about ten years. I had great success in terms of popularity. Year after year, up to 200 students filled the big lecture hall at Emerson Hall. Half of my "audience" took the course for credit and the other half came because they enjoyed my feminist ideas. They even brought their friends and lovers. It was exciting to go back to Harvard in this way.

I think I have some vibes that students respond to. It is part of my being. Perhaps it is my interest in the subject matter that is infectious. Anyway, it is something I can do that I'm not even quite aware of doing. Then there is this gratifying interaction. When you've taught a really good class, you have a high—do you? It is like an addiction and deeply satisfying. I was at that time a bit of a ham more than now. I enjoyed acting especially when I had these 200 people there, filling the hall. It felt like being on stage. So I enjoyed that part. But teaching is different in a smaller group, of course. In general different settings demand different teaching styles.

I was worried about giving up my identity as a teacher because it was such a central identity. I didn't have much beyond that. Even my love of reading was connected with using books for devising new courses. I was afraid of becoming useless and isolated. But retirement did give me the opportunity to finish writing the book about my mother's life and I loved doing that.

Actually the first thing that I did as soon as I retired, I enrolled in the program at the University of Massachusetts, in alternate dispute resolution, motivated by my longing for a more peaceful world. It covered conflict resolution through mediation, negotiation and arbitration. There were five courses in the program and I received a certificate. I wrote entire pamphlets for the papers assigned in the program. My poor teachers must have felt annoyed at having to read, for example, an 85-page paper on the reunification of Germany. But I did not pursue this any further although it was a very useful transition. I like to write papers and get good grades. I miss that at BOLLI.

Then I found the Brandeis Osher Lifelong Learning Institute program. I took a few courses, and they asked me very quickly whether I wanted to teach myself, and I eagerly agreed. Since then I have been teaching there. I'm back in what I've been doing all my life, but it's a bit of a defeat because I couldn't grow into some other life adventure.

Now I've found something that I call a "pass-time" in old age: to teach new courses and to take courses. But for me the teaching is more important than the learning, because I learn the most when I prepare a new course, although we do not

use teaching vocabulary. I am currently not a teacher, but a study group leader. I try to make my courses challenging and I'm always on the border of asking "study group members" to do too much reading. I have to watch that. But sometimes I watch it so much that I could have asked for more.

If I didn't have BOLLI, I think I would try to teach English as a second language, or try to look for other teaching opportunities. I was also considering as I retired to get another master's or Ph.D. in a different field. I even had an interview at Brandeis about taking a degree in comparative literature. I'm pretty sure that's what I would have done if I hadn't found BOLLI.

I'm not sure that I have a definite philosophy of teaching, but I have a few principles. One of them is to make sure each student has individual visibility. That's why here at BOLLI, I ask not to be assigned more than 20 students. I find that up to 20 there is enough time for each person's contribution. If there are more students, some will get lost. If they haven't said anything for a few sessions, I may suddenly ask, "what do you think about that?" I try to use and expand their thoughts in the discussion. I am pleased when I can manage to do that. The student then knows that s/he is appreciated. That is true for every age group.

Often people say things that I would never have thought about, and I give them instant appreciative recognition. I am by far not the source of all wisdom, you know, how could one be? If the class is going well, people bring in wonderful insights.

At Simmons and Harvard Extension in many instances, my obligation was to convey information. At the BOLLI program I try to be mostly a facilitator, so that often I give up what I would have enjoyed saying for the sake of giving members of the class more space. It demands discipline not to take over a class with one's own ideas.

I find that almost my main function is to invent challenging questions. Usually I send out questions ahead of time and then I might write them on the whiteboard, and let them be the class agenda. Sometimes one question may take a lot of time, if it involves complex ethical issues. Other times discussions go off on peripheral tangents and I exercise some control. I am invested in a degree of intellectual order in the classroom.

I think most of us enjoyed my last course a great deal. We read about how German authors look back at WWII. One of the first books, which everyone thought was fascinating was called *A Woman in Berlin* and it was anonymously written by a journalist who was there when the Russians entered Berlin and mass-raped the women. It was very well written, completely un sentimentally and without self-pity. I asked the group, "well, do we feel sorry for these women, or did the German women, who were among the main supporters of Hitler, did they have it coming?"

This was one of the moral questions that we debated. Not everyone felt all that sorry for these women. One class member who had been in a German concentration camp said: "my sympathy is limited." This is just an example of the deep moral questions that were part of the course.

In the second book an author was writing about his brother who died in Stalingrad. So again we had the issue of guilt and do we forgive the next generation? Each book raised a different difficult moral question. What went well in this

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last course is that there were definitely some sharply different viewpoints that had to be reconciled although everyone was respectful of each other. I might have said: “you can see how there are different perspectives in our group,” and summarized the viewpoints of each side.

If the curriculum committee agrees, I shall repeat this course maybe in year or two, but meanwhile I am planning a new course, which I’m little worried about, for the next semester. I call it: “It was Hard to Grow Up.” All the books we are reading are written in the first person about grim childhoods. Choosing the right books makes for difficult choices. The last course before that I taught about psychotherapy. That was an easy course for me, as was the German course, being very familiar with all the background for these books. The “growing up” course will be a challenge for me because I was not a literature major; literature is only an avocation. Some of the books are very grim and on the verge of being unreadable, such as the book about child soldiers. Another book is on the practice of foot binding a century ago, in China. I have to be clever and think of compelling questions.

At BOLLI we have a very sophisticated crowd of people. Most of the members are college-educated and many have advanced degrees. This is another area of privilege: to work with a group of people who are already well-informed and literate and willing to put in the time to prepare for each class. If they haven’t done their reading they may feel guilty or embarrassed if I suddenly ask them for their opinion.

I send ahead readings and questions for the first class so that we don’t waste a minute of our time. I like doing that since I hate waste of any kind.

I’ll tell you one more anecdote of an experiment my students really enjoyed. It was a little unusual and I didn’t know whether it would work. In the course “Psychotherapy for Better or Worse,” we read Yalom’s book *The Schopenhauer Cure*, in which he describes group therapy. I said: “we’re going to have a group therapy session today. Half the class can be in the group and the other half are observers. Everyone can pretend to be who they want to be, nobody has to talk about themselves,” but people did anyway. I didn’t know whether class members would resent doing that, but they loved it and they still refer to it with pleasure.

In terms of advice, I’d say: don’t underestimate your study group members. You can ask unusual things of them and they might go with you if you have established a climate of confidence and trust.

Each beginning of class I try to highlight last week’s discussion. I secretly think of that as my personal time, my chance to express my own opinions but I also make sure to incorporate members’ specific contributions, if memory serves me, even by name.

It was a very democratic and fruitful idea to create a system in which we can teach each other. The principle is really excellent! We’ve always had adult education centers, also in Europe. But this is a little different. It’s the mutuality of the teaching and learning that is so special.

I have been very fortunate in my health, perhaps another miracle. I don’t want to take credit for it, but a little credit in that I take exercise classes that I dislike, have never smoked, never touched alcohol, and I don’t eat too much. I don’t know if these factors make any difference.

One shouldn't take too much credit for one's successes, since one is not that much in charge of one's own life. We could have a bomb drop on us tomorrow and end our various efforts. Things that we have absolutely no control over happen all the time to everyone. One needs a lot of assistance from the fates to be able to lead a good life, a lot of miracles.

I think that one has only 5% liberty in how to control one's life. The other 95% is politics, economics, biology, and accidental happenings. I have always worked very hard, but I am only taking 5% credit for what I have been able to do, if I take any credit at all!

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