

How We Became an American Family

a memoir

M E Y E R L E V I N

COMPILED AND EDITED BY
NAOMI LEVIN TORPEY AND MARK TORPEY

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My Sylvia

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I Meyer Levin, am 82 years old. My dear wife, Sylvia, is 77. We've been married 58 years. When I look at her dear face today, I see the same sweet, darling face that was there when I first met her when she was 18. I loved her then for her youth, her beauty, and her innocence. I love her more now.

In those days, my friends and I would meet on a certain street corner. We were not delinquents, but many people referred to us as "corner bums." A few evenings a week, I would notice this pretty little girl pass this corner. She never looked our way, but we certainly looked at her. I, being the "bravest roughneck," would throw snowballs in front and in back of her. Never would I hit her. I must have annoyed her terribly.

Imagine my delight when I saw Sylvia at a dance one Saturday night. She was dancing with my cousin, who had two left feet. She didn't mind being rescued. She allowed me to take her home that night. I knew then that I would never let her out of my sight.

We lived a few blocks apart, and I became her steady visitor. There was one problem, however. She had other admirers. I had to dissuade them somehow. I won't reveal my tactics, but soon I was her only one. The more I saw her, the more I loved her. At a very early age, her mom



Meyer and Sylvia, engagement, 1935

was left a widow with four little tots. Sylvia's dad died when he was only 37. He was in the fruit and produce business. His display was mostly outside the store. He caught a cold and pneumonia one severe winter and never recovered. It's little wonder that Sylvia's mom had some fear that her daughter was going to marry a fruit man, a huckster, who would work very hard as her own husband did. She did not dislike me, and Sylvia would not listen to her reasoning.

That summer, in June 1935, my own dear mother died. Our relationship became more serious. In

a sense, we were now engaged. My poor father and my two younger brothers, Phil, age ten, and little Mark, age eight, lost their mom, and Pop lost his wife. How could we go on from there?

An idea crept into my foolish mind. I spoke to Sylvia. We both wished to be married. We would live together in Pop's house. Sylvia would take care of everything. I didn't once give a thought about what I would be subjecting Sylvia to; she was herself only a child of 19. She was too much in love to be dissuaded. Her mom knew better. My sister, Celia, with a family of her own and working in her grocery business from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., also knew better, but nobody spoke up.

On October 27, 1935, we were married. There was no music, no flowers, no dinner, and no wedding dress. I think there were no more than 15 people present. We were to spend three days in Atlantic City for our honeymoon. After two days, my impatient father telephoned for us to come home. We had to go to work. More stupidity and more inconsideration followed. Sylvia's mom came almost every day to help with dinner. Pop, with his stomach ulcers, was a disgruntled man. He became tired of his diet and somehow considered it Sylvia's fault. Brother

Phil was a spiteful child and hard to manage. Little Mark was a sweet, loving child and was particularly fond of Sylvia. After ten months, we realized that the situation could only get worse. We had to find a place of our own. Truly, if I had been wiser and more considerate, I would not have subjected Sylvia to such an ordeal. Still, had I done the sensible thing, we would have lost out on 58 years of a wonderful, loving, sweet, and most interesting, happy marriage.

We moved into a two-bedroom apartment. We had to share the bathroom with the family who sublet the rooms to us. The husband had a fruit store downstairs. On the weekends, he sprayed a foul-smelling disinfectant that was hard to live with. Still, we were so happy. We had each other, and we were young.

My sister, Celia, and her husband, Joe Litvin, a good-hearted man, took in Pop and our two little brothers. She knew it was her obligation and not Sylvia's. She was the one who told me if I wanted to save my marriage, I had better get Sylvia out of that situation. That's how things evolved.

One night, I came home from work to find Sylvia very upset. The people from whom we rented skipped out. They didn't pay their rent and moved out in a hurry. We were alone in the building on the second floor. Fortunately, another apartment was available nearby. The only problem was they objected to an icebox on the second floor. Within two days, I had Sears deliver an electric refrigerator. We were very happy. We even had our own bathroom now. Sylvia was now pregnant. On March 23, 1939, our son, Arnold, was born. Naturally, our life did change. The kitchen became a virtual laboratory making formulas for our child. Wet diapers were drying all over the apartment. When I was at work, Sylvia had to drag the baby carriage up and down a full flight of stairs. Only the young have the strength and endurance to raise children. All this, my dear Sylvia accepted like a trooper. She never complained.

When little Arnold was about nine months old, my father, once again, became caring and considerate. He said we needed a home. I agreed. Sylvia thought we were out of our minds. As it turned out, we did find a home for sale for the "enormous" price of \$1,600. It had a



Meyer kept this photo of Sylvia and Arnold with him while serving in the army.

porch! Pop and Celia each loaned us \$500. We obtained a mortgage for \$1,000 and, for a mere \$400, the home became our dollhouse. We couldn't have been happier.

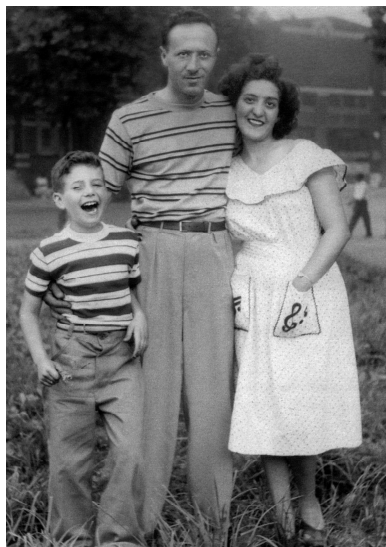
On July 1, 1942, my father, my partner, suffered a major coronary attack and died in my arms. The war was raging in Europe and the Pacific. I was drafted. I could have avoided the draft. I could have gone to work in the Philadelphia Navy Yard, as most married men did, but I didn't. Again, I imposed an unfair hardship on Sylvia. Again, she took on the responsibility without a complaint. For the next 30 months, she had to raise our son without me.

When I look back, I think Sylvia's burden was heavier than mine. To make ends meet, she got a job at a children's clothing store, working for a greedy, tyrannical, ignorant man. In those days, the only available

fuel was what was known as “bootleg coal.” It was 50% slate and would not burn. The fire would go out overnight, and Sylvia had the miserable task of making a new fire every morning. That was truly a hardship. She had to see little Arnold off to school in the morning and rush like mad to be on time to bring him home. She had to work. The allotment check was not enough. She had the trials and tribulations of nursing a little boy when he had fevers and toothaches, etc. She was alone. I piled all of this on her frail, young shoulders. To this day, I’m not sure I did the right thing.

During all of this time, Sylvia and I had two wonderful months together. After my basic training at Ft. Knox, Kentucky, married men were permitted to send for their wives and live near the base. Sylvia and little Arnold, now four years old, came to Ft. Knox. Despite the fact that the town was overcrowded with soldiers and wives and rooms were overpriced and unavailable, we found an attic in a farmhouse. We could not afford the rent and found another couple in the same predicament willing to share the expense with us. It wasn’t the best arrangement, but it was all worthwhile. We were in an attic, but it was heaven to us. Arnold had a wonderful time chasing Cherry, the cow, and scaring the chickens.

Soon, the bad news hit us. We were going overseas, and no one was permitted to leave camp. I had to see and tell Sylvia. I had to get out of camp. I felt like a fugitive, avoiding the MPs. I got to the farm about midnight. We packed cartons and suitcases all night. We shed tears. Our hearts were broken. How she would manage all of the luggage and little Arnold at the same time, was beyond me. But she did. She was very brave. She was out of money, and I never had any. She



“I’m home! A dream come true.”

Arnold, Meyer, and Sylvia, 1946

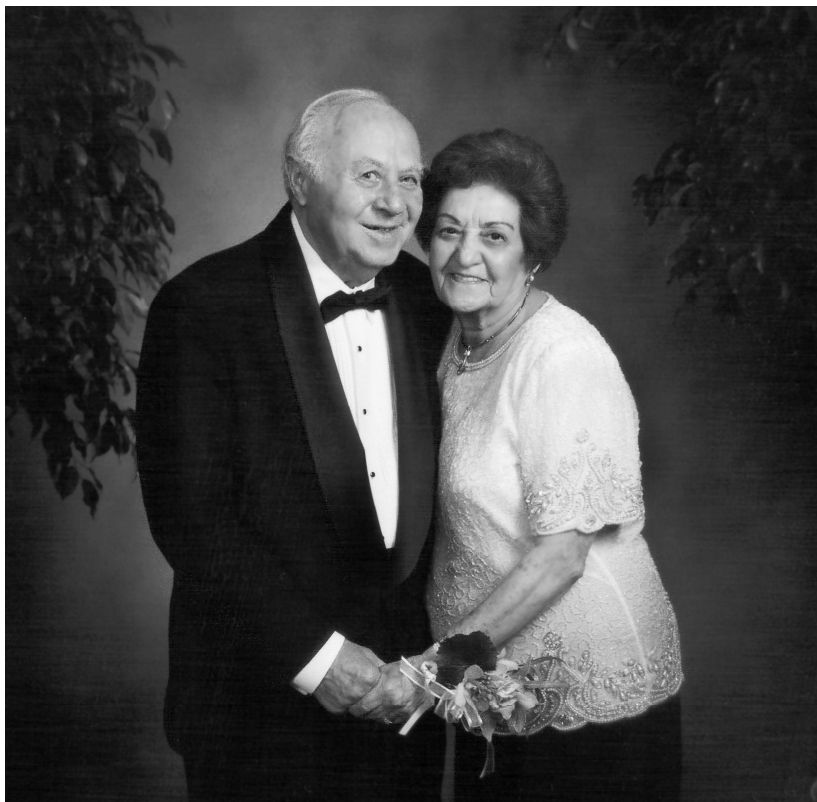
was compelled to wait a few days until her mom mailed out her allotment check.

It was a sad parting. It was 5 a.m. I had to be back at camp. It was a country mile to the bus station. A pack of dogs followed me all of the way. They nipped at the heels of my boots. I had a lot to worry about and paid no attention to them.

I was sent to the French region of Alsace and attached to a tank outfit. I served as the cannoneer and escaped death more often than I care to think about. We were 120 days on the line without a break. Finally, it came to an end! I had to serve another year with the occupation forces. I came home in April of 1946. My son, at this time, was seven years old. He greeted me on our porch. He had a little American flag in his hand.

Sylvia's troubles were not over. Soon, she suffered a miscarriage. We rushed her to the hospital in the middle of the night. We had a very sleepy fellow with us.

On March 12, 1949, darling, tiny Naomi, our daughter, was born. For the next 44 years, we lived in complete harmony and bliss. Sylvia well deserved a little peace. These are truly our golden years.



Meyer and Sylvia, 1997