

A Pathway to Freedom

Barbara Feigin tells her story of fleeing Nazi Germany with her family to America, a place where she could dream big and work hard to achieve whatever she put her heart to

By Jeff Minick

“The thing that really impressed me as I was growing up was first of all their great elation and joy in being in a place where there was freedom,” said Barbara Feigin, speaking of her parents to *American Essence*. “Freedom was a tremendously important thing—freedom to be who you want, to do what you want, to read what you want, to say what you want. They had come from a place where that didn’t exist at the time, and so that was hugely important.”

In her recently released memoir, “My American Dream: A Journey from Fascism to Freedom,” former advertising executive Barbara Feigin, who lives in New York, begins with her family’s flight from Nazi Germany. In 1940, when she was 2, her parents, Eric and Charlotte Sommer, took her and a few personal belongings and fled the country of their birth and the growing persecution of Jews. Facing hardships all along the way—a lack of adequate food, cold and creaky railway cars, caring for a toddler for weeks in transit—they spent 17 days crossing Russia and Siberia, boarded a ship to Japan, and, from there, sailed for another two

weeks across the Pacific—first to Canada and then to Seattle. There, a group of Quakers working with a Jewish organization helped to settle the family in the small town of Chehalis in Washington state.

Life in the Land of Liberty

Though Ms. Feigin remembers little of this desperate journey, in 2013, her sister Carolyn called with some amazing news. She’d found a journal belonging to their father that detailed the prelude to their escape and the obstacles they’d encountered on their flight from oppression and death. This treasure, along with copies of letters written to relatives in Germany describing their new life in Chehalis, inspired Ms. Feigin to begin writing her book.

“They arrived in Seattle with \$10.50 for the entire family and the clothes on their back,” Ms. Feigin recollected. “They had no connections, no money, no job, no nothing. My parents did not speak English, but they found my dad a job in the Sears Roebuck Farm Store. His job was to uncrate these big stoves and put the pieces together, and



Ms. Barbara Feigin
at her home in
Manhattan, New York.



Ms. Feigin at around 4 years old, with her parents in the town of Chehalis, Wash., where they first settled down.

that's how we came to Chehalis."

Both parents worked hard, lived frugally, and saved their money, but it was the freedom of America that meant the most to them. When Ms. Feigin was 8 years old, her parents became full-fledged citizens, breaking into tears of joy during their naturalization ceremony. They wanted to be "real Americans," going to the high school football games, for example, and planting a Victory Garden during the war. When her father had saved enough money to buy a car, a Studebaker, it was a high point in the family's life. "He said, here in America, even the shop girls have cars. And so a car was a hugely symbolic thing for my father. It really symbolized becoming a true American," Ms. Feigin said. "And of course, it was a pathway to freedom, to go wherever you wanted and to see whatever you wanted and to do whatever you wanted."

New Adventures, Expanded Horizons

Ms. Feigin's mother often repeated these words

to her during her adolescence: "Dream big; work hard; never quit." As she writes in her autobiography, "My parents continue to emphasize how important it is to be in America because America offers freedom to be what you want, to do what you want, to strive for what you want to achieve. They remind me of the importance of education, telling me again and again that education is the key that opens the door to opportunity."

Ms. Feigin took their words of wisdom to heart and made them a guiding light in her life. After graduating from high school, where she served as assistant editor for the school's newspaper, she entered Whitman College on a scholarship. In 1959, her academic success and her mother's advice to "dream big" led her across the country to the Harvard-Radcliffe Program in Business Administration, where she embarked on what she described as "the most profound experience" of her life, "one that will completely transform my sense of the world and my mindset," she writes in her memoir.

While her academic studies prepared Ms. Feigin for her career in advertising, the city of Boston also served as her classroom, introducing her, she writes, "to people with intellectual energy and curiosity" and to "cultural and historical wonders and experiences I've never known." Cocktail parties, regular forays to listen to the Boston Symphony, friendships formed with men and women from very different backgrounds, and simply living day-to-day in a city "electric with excitement": All these and more brought an education all their own.

And it was here, too, that she met Jim Feigin, who was enrolled in the Harvard Business School. The two eventually married, had three sons, and remained in love until the day he died.

Mad Men, Meet Mad Woman

Following her time in Boston, Ms. Feigin moved to New York, where she began her long and successful career in advertising, one of the few women at that time in that crew of "Mad Men," a nickname for Madison Avenue ad men. Her first triumph at Grey Advertising came when her team devised a new way of promoting Kool-Aid. After extensive research involving mothers and families, they recommended making Kool-Aid available year-round rather than just in the summers and adding Vitamin C to give it nutritional value. Once these recommendations were

followed, Kool-Aid sales surged, and for a time only Coke and Pepsi were more popular.

But the work that brought Ms. Feigin her greatest joy and satisfaction was with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Worried by the many teens who were dying or being injured from driving drunk, this government agency approached Grey Advertising and asked for its help in designing an effective ad campaign. After a deep study of teens, driving, and drinking, including the attitudes of young people toward alcohol and driving, Ms. Feigin and her team discovered the importance of friendship for them and came up with the slogan, “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk.”

“As soon as we started running this advertising,” she said, “fatalities among teenagers began to drop dramatically, and it was really such a wonderful, wonderful thing. I was so proud of it because this made a real societal difference.”

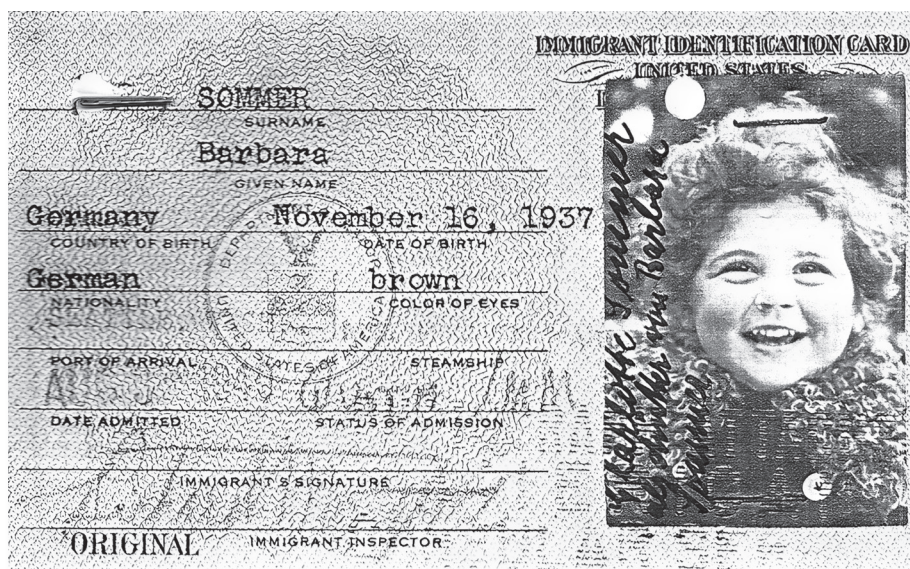


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Barbara Feigin in her memoir, ‘My American Dream: A Journey From Fascism to Freedom’

Passing the Torch

Like all of us, Ms. Feigin’s life was not free of stress and tragedy. She was 11 years old when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, and though she lived until 1963, her health was always a major concern. In her junior year at Whitman College, three of Ms. Feigin’s good



friends died in a car crash. On July 28, 1990—“the day my world came crashing down,” she writes in her book—Jim suffered a stroke and required care for the rest of his days.

Perhaps these hardships explain some of the words of advice Ms. Feigin offers to younger generations. She values the family as a source of strength, inspiration, and comfort. Like her mother and father before her, she believes strongly in the importance of education. She also considers optimism a valuable character trait. She then added, “I think it’s very important that people understand that there needs to be resilience. All of us in our lives face bumps in the road of one kind or another, you know, a lot of times dire, a lot of times unexpected, a lot of times confusing and confounding, but it’s so important to be resilient and to pick yourself up and move forward the best way you possibly can.”

In her epilogue to “My American Dream,” Ms. Feigin writes, “I am forever and always grateful to be an American, because only in America could the life I dreamed about and more become a reality. As my mother taught me so long ago, as all of life evolves and reveals itself, dream big; work hard; and never, ever quit.

“Let this be a guiding principle of your own lives as it has been of mine. And just one final thought: have fun and laugh every day. It will do your heart good.”

Ms. Feigin subtitles this epilogue “A Letter to My Sons, My Grandchildren, and Future Generations.” It is, in fact, wise and beautiful advice for all of us. ●

Ms. Feigin's immigration papers upon entering America.