



Amaryllis

Fall 2019

Ellen Cohen

I will always be a midwife

Back in the 1960s Ellen Cohen did what many of her high school friends did. They went to college, married young, had babies and dropped out of school to stay at home and take care of them. She lasted one semester at Radcliffe and then her schedule was determined by full-time mothering. She still planned to return to college eventually...it was just that eventually had no date in mind.

“But when did midwives enter your thinking?” Her husband, she explained, came from a Sicilian background and in Sicily most babies were born at home delivered by midwives. In fact, his own aunt, although born in the U.S., had been attended to by his great aunt. Ellen was fascinated when she’d describe the many ways that midwives were able to make laboring mothers feel more comfortable.

Both of Ellen’s children were born in hospitals in New York City. Because she is a person who asks questions she was confronted with a growing reality. Ob-gyns tend not to give specific answers. Rather,

they reply, “Let me worry about that. Do what I tell you to do and you’ll be fine.”

Much more information could be found talking to that growing pool of other mothers just like herself...sitting on park benches and in nearby playgrounds. Books were also flooding the markets. British doctors spoke about training pregnant women to learn how to relax their own bodies, how to breathe, how to position themselves, how to use their own muscles to contract or bear down. After all, pregnancy is a lengthy process and a well-informed woman can use that period profitably.

Childbirth preparation was big in the Soviet Union and a French doctor had a tremendous impact too. Margery Karmel’s *Thank you Dr. Lamaze* was on many young mother’s go-to read list. Childbirth, much shorter, can be assisted by someone nearby providing soothing comfort as well as practical assistance.

Midwifery was getting an American audience. That was it. Ellen wanted to be able to deliver babies herself. “In 1973 I entered the program at the City University of New York’s Bellevue School of Nursing as the first step toward

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my dream of becoming a midwife.”

Doctors dangle stethoscopes around their necks. Patients know what that person does. At Bellevue how do you know who’s a nurse? “My sheer white pillbox with its skinny black velvet ribbon informed patients the wearer was a nurse.”

Four divisions of the hospital’s OB-GYN service...gynecology, newborn nursery, postpartum, labor and delivery. “As new nurses we spent weeks rotating through them all; then months rotating back again at different times, different days, different shifts. The tasks in my workaday destination quickly became routine. There’s nothing like routine for laying the groundwork for what’s ahead.” Sounds...simple things like voices. Some are soft, others brusque. How do the hearers react? “Four years at Bellevue sharpened my sensitivities.”

“In 1983, fresh out of SUNY Downstate nurse-midwifery program, I arrived at Lincoln Hospital, my home for 7 years. Maternity was on the 5th floor and included the labor and delivery unit, the postpartum ward and the newborn nursery.”

Looking through old photographs Ellen is quick to smile remembering the constant support provided by co-workers. “Most of them are determined to have you succeed...to have you become better than good.”

St. Lukes/Roosevelt Hospital was a private non-profit Manhattan hospital. They provided services for members of several unions, city workers, religious groups and United Nations staff. “These were private patients but as a staff midwife I attended many of them. It was exciting to expand my own non-verbal vocabulary. Tone and gesture provided soothing comfort as well as pantomimed instructions for patients speaking a wide range of languages.”

At a time when many did not realize that women could be infected with HIV Ellen was recruited to work at **The Center for Mother and Baby Care** where HIV positive pregnant women, mothers and their chil-

Amaryllis. Take the bulb... store it safely....re-pot it....put it out there and watch it burst into bloom.

dren received care. It was a small department that provided testing, medication and participated in research to prevent transmission of HIV. Listening to patients and keeping their condition confidential was essential. “For me knowing that I was out there making a difference fueled my energies.”

“The thrill of being a midwife, of working with a mom not for hours, days or even weeks but often for months, while that unborn is still developing right up to the magic moment when you first deliver that baby, umbilical cord still uncut, and place it in its mother’s arms... never ceases to gratify me.”

“Mid 1994 until 2005 were my final working years. At Columbia Presbyterian I was a part of the staff of midwives caring for normal prenatal and family planning patients. In its peculiar way sort of a back to beginnings it blends together years of experience along with that never-ending thrill.”

As I said goodbye, Ellen’s final words were, “Although I no longer care for pregnant women and deliver their babies, I will always be a midwife.” ©

in our neighborhood . . .

Chelsea... definitely walkable. Alive and lively...places to go and things to see. Take a chunk of it...say 14th Street to 30th from way west over to 5th...wander at will.

Snack as you stroll? Tacos are big. Tucked between Gristedes and McDonalds is Taco Bandito. Near the Muhlenberg Library at the NE corner of 7th Avenue is the spot where some say the hot dogs holler take me!

Prefer Pizza? Detroit Pizza on the south side of 23rd and 8th Avenue guarantees you'll notice it with its giant row of flashing bulbs. There's also 2-Brothers Pizza at 25th and 6th.

Hummus is happening too. South of 17th on 6th is a place with nothing but.

Wanderers be prepared. Where to go when you've got to go... Restaurants say for our customers only...some libraries say out of order...other spots say nothing and leave it up to you to ask where is your restroom?

Be thankful for the supermarkets. Fairway's is right up front at its northern entrance door...Can't get closer than that. Whole Foods on 7th Avenue & 24th Street has just installed two newly updated restrooms. Both are m/w/handicap. Find them

located at the rear of the store adjacent to the aisle marked yogurt. Gristedes has no specific room but way in the back right corner of the store is a room marked employees only; that single occupancy room is available. Ideal's are located on the right side of aisle 9 so tucked away as to be easily overlooked. Trader Joe's is one of my favorites because while it's set way in the back at the far-right corner it combines water fountains with places to leave your shopping carts and then, best of all, nearby the free hot coffee of the day plus a tasty treat.

Not food shopping? Best Buy has it downstairs. Bed Bath & Beyond's is conveniently located next to Customer Service so it's findable whether you're coming or going.

Staying the course. A mid-April issue of *Chelsea Now* showed Gary, a barber, clipping away at a customer's hair in what's likely the oldest barbershop on the block. At 253 West 23rd Street it's clearly noticeable because of its traditional barber pole positioned at the left of the shop's front window. How about this for unique? Gary has been cutting hair there for 22 years.

A dog's life...all those sleep outside dogs under shedded area west of 6th Avenue on the south

side of 23rd Street are basically sharers... non-furred buddies get sleeping bag privileges come dark...seems they relocate Sundays...it's only day they're unseen.

Job hunting? La Maison au Macaron south side of 23rd opposite the old Saint Vincent de Paul now hiring. "Counter attendant inquire within" has been there for a number of weeks.

You can bank on it. A familiar face will leave the neighborhood. The Amalgamated Bank closed its 7th Avenue location on August 2nd. The nearest branches will be Union Square or 3rd Avenue, way east on 23rd Street. According to the present Branch Manager there will be no west side spots. The Duane Reade drugstore is the only neighborhood ATM that is free for Amalgamated Bank customers.

And still more places to sit and sup. Abacky, new on West 26th Street, offers Fusion Cuisine. What cuisine was being fused? A server said it was all Asian and included Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese, Malaysian, Szechuan, and Japanese. Korea wasn't mentioned; perhaps that's in a still-to-come category.

Just a few feet east of Home Depot is Chanson boasting a Mediteranean menu. The smiling

more neighborhood . . .

server said it was “food for a New York palate.”

First Saturday in June brought a big change on 23rd Street just east of 7th Avenue. The coming soon sign at the yet to be opened Westside Market had its doors wide open for business. Just inside the entrance was a smiling greeter offering taste treats of cheese chunks. (When asked for directions to fresh vegetables location she explained: “Sorry. I have nothing to do with the market. I work for another company.) Further down were coffee machines clearly marked Free Complimentary Coffee adjacent to a tray of bits and pieces of baked items. No cost cheese, snacks and coffee seemed a good beginning. Why not wander?

Narrow aisles make it maze-like which meant it was time consuming. The following Monday was a better bet. Curbside was a double-sided sign...We are Finally Open. Inside you were invited to “Enjoy a free cup of coffee with any

purchase.” Nearby baked goods included a range of rather small muffins for \$2.29 or, just opposite, an entire wall of bottled stuff. Surprisingly the place stretched way back and included rows of packaged products plus a wall of fresh vegetables, sealed meat possibilities, a dairy area, canned goods, a deli section... everything and then some.

Surrounded by so many supermarkets, pharmacies offering edible boxed goods and outdoor fruit and vegetable carts I found it difficult to figure out where they fit in the present scheme of things.

The 10th Precinct’s summer events always include their Annual Council Awards Ceremony. One of their officers explained that their own security officers work closely with security officers at nearby FIT and Penn South, both in their precinct. One of their Recognition Awards this year will be given to Raheem Soto from Penn South.

Sgt. Soto explained what had probably triggered this award. The Penn South security office had received a call from a woman. “Man fell off the treadmill and is not moving. We’re alone in the gym.” Immediately the entire crew got the alert.

Soto, making routine rounds, was just leaving Bldg. 1 and in the alley behind the 9th Avenue shops heading to Bldg. 5. Instead, he raced to the exercise room and began CPR. Minutes later Patrolman Richard Robe arrived and between them they alternated sets for 25 minutes. That’s when EMS and the NYPD arrived and EMS pronounced the man dead.

May 10-23 showed the **9th Workers Unite! Film Festival** here in New York City. There was an amazing array of 30 juried submissions presented focusing on global workers solidarity. Manhattan’s six venues included two here in Chelsea. ☺
