They Survived the Spanish Flu, the Depression and the Holocaust

Two extraordinary women — one 101, the other 95 — lived through the worst of the 20th century. They have some advice for you.

Just ask Eva Kollisch, left, and Naomi Replansky about survival and resilience. Credit...Mary-Elizabeth Gifford

By Ginia Bellafante March 2020

For most of us, it is almost impossible to comprehend the ferocity and regularity with which life was upended during the first half of the 20th century. Plague and conflict emerged on an epic scale, again and again. Loss and restriction were routine; disaster was its own season.

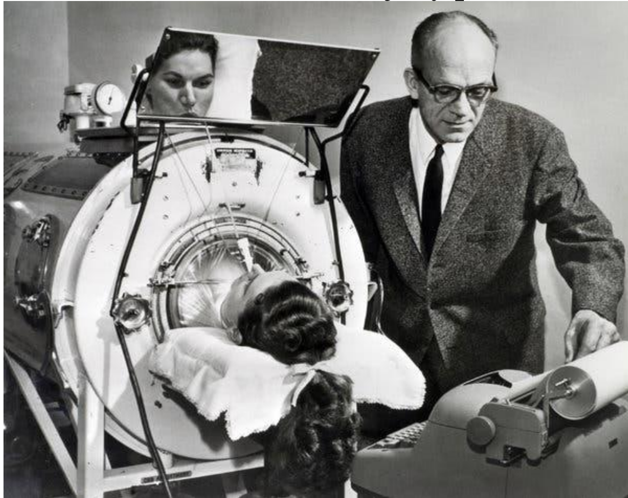
At 101, Naomi Replansky, a poet and labor activist, has endured all of it. Born in her family's apartment on East 179th Street in the Bronx in May 1918, her arrival in the world coincided with the outset of the Spanish flu.

The Spanish flu, which claimed tens of millions of lives, many of them children under the age of 5, was hardly an isolated public health emergency. Polio had been designated an epidemic in New York in June of 1916. That year 2,000 people died of the disease in the city. Of those who lived, many would have had all too vivid memories of the typhoid eruption that gripped the city nine years earlier.

Until a polio vaccine came into use in the 1950s, outbreaks occurred somewhere in the country nearly every spring. Public gatherings were regularly canceled; wealthy people in big cities left for the country. By the early 1920s, Naomi's baby sister was stricken, leaving one of her legs permanently paralyzed.

Their mother had pinned hope on the aqua therapies deployed by Franklin Roosevelt in Warm Springs, Ga., but that hope came in vain.

“It was a morale booster, a jolly place,” Naomi told me recently, “but not curative.”



Polio was an ever-present threat for decades. Here, a victim assisted by an Emerson Respirator, better known as an iron lung.Credit...Popperfoto/Getty Images

Later, when she was 12, her 15-year-old brother developed mastoiditis. In the absence of antibiotics to treat it, he died quickly of what is essentially an ear infection.

Last weekend, as New Yorkers were absorbing the enormity of the current crisis, Naomi and her 95-year-old wife, Eva Kollisch, were at home in their one-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side, listening to Marian Anderson on vinyl. The album was “Spirituals,” and they were tended to by one of their regular aides.

They were not unsettled. “Confinement doesn’t bother me,” Naomi wrote me in an email. “My shaky frame can handle more confinement.”

Naomi and Eva were introduced by Grace Paley at a reading of her work in the 1980s. They were well past middle-age, long after the tragedies and social disruptions of the previous decades had touched them each with such intimacy. When catastrophe is sequential, it eventually trains its survivors to greet terror with the serenity of the enlightened.

Both Eva and Naomi experienced anti-Semitism at a young age. Eva, who was raised in a family of wealthy Jewish intellectuals outside Vienna, recalls being beaten by a group of children for being a “dirty Jew” when she was 6. During her childhood in the Bronx, Naomi was privy to the fascist radio broadcasts of Father Coughlin, which were always emanating from the open windows of East Tremont during the summer. Her grandparents had escaped the pogroms in Russia, coming to America at the turn of the century when the habits of immigrants — considered filthy and ignorant — were continually blamed for the spread of disease.

The first of Eva's own upheavals came with war. A year after the Nazi annexation of Austria, in 1939, she fled via the Kindertransport, a series of rescue efforts that placed Jewish children in British homes. Eva, then 13, traveled with her siblings first by train to the Netherlands and then by ship to England.

"The minute we got to Holland it seemed so wonderful that there were kind people there on the station platform," Eva once told an interviewer for a feminist oral history project. "They gave you orange juice and smiled at you."

At first she had thought of it all as an adventure. "And then, when we were in England," she said, "I very soon realized that I was extremely lonely." Eva and her brothers were dispersed to different homes while their parents stayed behind. In 1940, the family escaped the Holocaust and reunited in America, landing in Staten Island.

By then Eva's parents had lost everything, and so her mother worked teaching English to refugees for 25 cents an hour in order to earn the money to become a masseuse. Her father, who had been a prominent architect in Austria, sold vacuum cleaners.

Throughout their lives, Naomi and Eva have exhibited a kind of fearlessness ably nurtured by misfortune. After she graduated from high school in New York, Eva went to Detroit to work in an auto factory.

"Lithe and nimble, her job was to leap onto the hoods of Jeeps rolling down the line and attach the windshield wipers," her daughter-in-law, Mary-Elizabeth Gifford, told me recently. In the evenings, she was a labor organizer for a Trotskyite group. She hitchhiked across the country.

Naomi graduated from high school at the height of the Depression, in 1934. For years she worked in offices, on assembly lines and as a lathe operator before she summoned the resources to go to U.C.L.A. She was an early computer programmer; her first collection of poetry, published in 1952, was nominated for a National Book Award. She maintained close friendships with Richard Wright and Bertolt Brecht, whose work she translated.

Sexism and homophobia made their inevitable intrusions. Eva's mother thought that she should run a hotel or a beauty parlor. But Eva was fiercely ambitious for a certain kind of urbane, cerebral life. Eventually she became a professor of comparative literature at Sarah Lawrence. She married two men; she had a son with one of them; she was a lover of Susan Sontag's.

Until the emergence of the coronavirus, Eva and Naomi were out often. On most days they took long walks. They were active in a Buddhist Sangha at a meditation center. They shopped at the farmers' market and ate vegetarian lunches at Effy's on West 96th Street.

They find themselves longing for what has been lost more than they dread whatever might come, and they worry more for their “generation,” as Naomi put it, than they do for themselves, even though Naomi had a bout with pneumonia six years ago.

As a poet, Naomi preferred the order of formalism. In the “Ring Song,” she uses light verse to convey the abruptly shifting rhythms of deprivation and contentment, the sense that happiness is ultimately a human reflex as much as it is an aspiration:

When I live from hand to hand

Nude in the marketplace I stand.

When I stand and am not sold

I build a fire against the cold.

When the cold does not destroy

I leap from ambush on my joy. …