

# Elisabeth

## Misha Segal



“Everything happens for a reason and even if sometimes things seem to make no sense, the future reveals why it happened.”

—*Elisabeth Buchhalter Segal*

I grew up listening to those words by my mother Elisabeth; my mother, who was also my best friend and inspiration to my work as a composer.

Elisabeth was born in Vienna on October 31, 1920. (Many years later she would learn that day was celebrated far away by an entire country dressed up in funny costumes. She was tickled!) As a teenager, Elisabeth was Austria’s table tennis champion. At the age of 17 she played against one of Germany’s toughest competitors. Elisabeth won the first set, at which point her opponent threw her racket at the table, uttering, “I will not play against a filthy Jew.” Thanks to the anti-Semitic propaganda machine, all Jews had been degraded into an unclean caricature of hooked noses and large lips. A gasp could be heard from the audience at the opponent’s revelation: it was hard for everybody, including the judges, to believe that this young Austrian blond beauty, who looked to them more like Rita Hayworth’s sister than the propa-

ganda they were so familiar with, was really a Jew. Elisabeth's membership to the sports club was revoked there and then.

In 1938, Hitler invaded Austria. Elisabeth witnessed beatings on the street, men dragged by their beards for all to see. Her own skin melted off her fingers from being forced to scrub the streets and Nazi army barracks with lye and acid. Her parents, prominent business and property owners, refused to leave but urged their daughters to run. Grete, their oldest, made it to Australia. Elisabeth's first attempt to escape was thwarted. Her second attempt at the end of 1938 was successful, but very difficult: she and several hundred others traveled for more than two months on three different small, dirty boats manned by pirates who helped themselves to jewelry, shoes, whatever they could get their hands on. Final destination: The Promised Land. The last boat anchored about 10 kilometers from the shores of Nathanya. It could not get close to the shore because British soldiers were guarding the beach; they were known for sending Jews—who were attempting to “illegally” enter the land—back to Europe, back to the camps. But Jews already inhabiting the land tricked the Brits with booze and women, creating a distraction just long enough so all could jump ship and swim to freedom. It took several hours to account for everyone but they all made it.

*That* was my mother.

Elisabeth lost her parents to the Nazis but found strength to start a new life in Israel, where she met my Russian father and where I was born. She learned to laugh and live again. Her spirit could not be broken. In fact, after the war she was sent to Austria as part of a ping-pong team to represent the newly born state of Israel, the only girl amongst 11 men. She beat the Austrian champion in an exhibition game. Being just a few years after the war, the audience was still full of Nazis. The Israeli team wore the blue and white flag of their country, the Star of David, on their shirts and jackets. Elisabeth writes in her memoir, “...the same symbol they called

‘Judenstern’ which we had to wear as a sign of degradation and an invitation for anyone to abuse and torture us. Now we brought honor and respect to our beloved symbol and our flag.”

*That* was my mother’s spirit.

Elisabeth went on to lead a wonderful, rich life, traveling around the world, learning 5 different languages, doing international business and settling in New York City. It was many years later, in 1995, that Elisabeth was diagnosed with lung cancer. She had been coughing for a year. Her doctor insisted she had a pulmonary infection and so kept her on antibiotics for several months. When her condition did not improve, she insisted upon an X-ray. That’s when the tumor was discovered. It was big and delicately placed. She came to Los Angeles to have an operation to remove the affected lung. The operation was fruitless: the cancer had already spread to the lining of the chest and removing it would not solve the problem.

Her first oncologist gave her 6 months to live. As soon as he uttered the words “You should start preparing...” Elisabeth got up and walked right out. “Where are you going, Mama?” I asked. “*He* can start preparing” she said, “*I* am not going anywhere, definitely not in six months!”

We found another oncologist at USC/Norris, Dr. Isaiah Dimery, who was more encouraging. Elisabeth stayed around for six years, almost an unheard of victory, considering that the disease was quite advanced. Dr. Dimery became one of Elisabeth’s best friends and remains my personal friend to this day. “She is one of a kind,” he used to say. “If I had a bad day, Elisabeth would force a smile on my face. She would give *me* encouragement when it was *she* who actually needed it the most.”

*That* was my Mama.

How did she do it? Straight from the hospital, on the way home, a day after open lung surgery, Elisabeth asked me, “Aren’t we

stopping for coffee?” She never let her physical condition interfere with her life. She never complained. As a matter of fact, after a chemotherapy session, Elisabeth would “spite” the cancer and go to a Broadway show or a concert of the New York Philharmonic. I would come for visits in New York and she would out-walk me. “Shouldn’t we sit down a second?” I would ask after a 35-block walk on the Upper West Side. She’d look at me as if I’d just suggested the unthinkable. “Mishinka, if we sit down, we’re going to be late for the movies....”

Over the years, we visited each other often and quite frankly, she was taking this much better than I was! I did everything I could for her; researched the latest treatments and clinical trials; accompanied her to important doctor visits and of course, played piano for her (if you are familiar with my *Female* CDs, that is the music I played for her), but it was she who kept the light shining long after the darkness came in.

*That* was Mama.

In the last year, Elisabeth was forced to slow down so I asked her to move in with me, my wife and our baby. Kicking and screaming, she left the city she loved. Upon arrival in Los Angeles, Mama, of course, continued to take care of me, ordering my (now ex) wife around if she fell short of her standards for how the house should be held; staying up with my friends and me until 2 am, drinking wine, talking politics and art.

It was only in the last 3 months that she became everything I didn’t recognize my mother to be. Yet, her eyes still shone and painful as it was, her smile could still light up a room.

One night in the last week before she departed, she was feeling especially sick. She asked to see her oncologist, Dr. Ronald Natale from Cedars-Sinai, so I called him. He came to the house, checked her and told me this was the end of the road. When I called the next day to thank him for coming by, his assistant was dumb-

founded: “Dr. Natale went to your home to see Elisabeth?” she asked. “Yes” was my answer, “and I wanted to thank him, it meant a lot to her”. “I’ll be darned,” she said, “I have been working for him for over ten years and he’s never, ever made a house call.” Later I asked Dr. Natale about that. His reply was, “I have never had a patient like Elisabeth before. I would come into the room and she would insist on finding out how *I* was doing. She never complained, was never phased by her condition. I came because I knew that if Elisabeth needed to see me, she must have really been in bad shape, so I *had* to see her.”

Mother’s Day, 2001 marked the day Elisabeth Buchhalter Segal left our lives.

The next year, to honor what would have been her 82nd birthday, I played a concert at Cedars-Sinai for the cancer patients. Dr. Natale saw Elisabeth’s picture on the piano and his eyes welled. That concert was the first of many around the country and none of them would have happened if it weren’t for Elisabeth. Even after her departure, she’s giving, giving, giving to other people. Elisabeth did not “fight” the disease. Her victory lies within the fact that she wouldn’t grant it any importance. “My life comes first. Diseases—they come last on my priority list.”

Elisabeth Buchhalter Segal was my mother, my best friend, forever my inspiration...and maybe yours, now, too.

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After studying film, philosophy and music at Tel Aviv University, Misha apprenticed under 20th century master composer Dieter Schönbach in Germany, studied composition and conducting at the Guildhall School of Music in London and graduated from the Berklee College of Music. In his native Israel, Misha’s jazz, rock and pop influences helped change the face of popular music, garnering numerous #1 hits. His classical compositions have been performed by the Israeli Philharmonic and the Israel Chamber Ensemble. Misha has created, composed and conducted scores for a variety of feature films including *The Phantom of the Opera*, and

the all time favorite kids' movie, *The New Adventures of Pippi Longstocking*. Also to his credit are numerous works for the small screen, which earned him an Emmy® Award.

His solo piano collection, *Red, White & Blue Female* is the core of Misha's *Beauty Found in Unlikely Places* concert series. The concerts and the music were inspired by his mother, a woman with an unbreakable spirit. Through these concerts, associated media interviews and Public Service Announcements, he forwards his mission of educating the public on lung cancer awareness issues and raising the quality of life of those fighting the biggest battle of theirs.