

Ethel Pesin 1915-2013

Ethel Pesin was beloved by her family and friends and was the dedicated matriarch of her family and of the Friends of Liberty State Park. She felt passionately about her family friends, LSP, and peace and justice in the world. Her late husband Morris, is known as the “father” of LSP, and Ethel was a strong park advocate.

Ethel Pesin, was born on Jan. 16, 1915 in Orangeburg, SC where her parents, Louis and Dora, had joined relatives after escaping from Czarist Russian persecution in Riga, Latvia. Because Ethel’s parents couldn’t stand the prejudice toward African Americans, they moved North when she was six. After 2 years in upstate NY losing their savings in a cousin’s car repair shop, they came to Jersey City in 1923, where Ethel’s parents rented space from another cousin for a dry goods store at Wayne and Brunswick Streets in downtown Jersey City’s Italian Village. They lived at 499 Jersey Ave. near the library. Ethel Pesin was loving, sweet, warm, thoughtful, energetic, cheerful, independent, and determined. She gave help and encouragement to all who knew her.

Her kind and hard-working parents earned a reputation as people with hearts of gold.

They often let families pay for clothing when they could afford it, and sent care packages to WW2

soldiers. Ethel attended PS #3 which went through 7th grade and attended PS #9 for 8th grade. She graduated Dickinson High School in 1931 and was inducted into its Hall of Fame in 2008. Morris Pesin and she are the only couple in the Dickinson Hall of Fame. She attended Syracuse University and got her degree in public school music education in 1935. She was the music teacher at Snyder Junior High School for a year and taught at Lincoln High School for two years before working as a successful private piano teacher. One of her students, Jerry Herman, a famous Broadway composer and lyricist who wrote

the lyrics and music for “Hello Dolly”, “Mame” and “Cage Aux Folles” mentioned Mrs. Pesin on a PBS documentary as being his first music teacher and the “best” piano teacher in town. It was a joy to hear her play her favorite classical music pieces.

Ethel married Morris Pesin in 1938. They had met at a public meeting to support the anti-Fascist forces in Spain, and they enjoyed a 54 year marriage. They both came from families who were involved with community, labor, and social causes. Ethel and Morris shared a deep concern for a more fair and loving world.

Ethel’s and Morris’s values and examples of respect for others, self-reliance, and hard work guided their two children, Sam, a preschool teacher at JC’s Garden Preschool Cooperative and the president of The Friends of Liberty State Park, and Judy, a community-minded bank vice president with Chase who recently got her Masters in Social Work. Judy’s husband Lou recently retired from UBS. Their daughter Dara works as a college recruiter for a NYC company and their son Daniel, a lawyer and his wife Sarah have a son, Joseph, who is 3 years old.

She and Morris and her parents Dora and Louis co-owned “Pesin’s”, the popular, high quality children’s’ clothing shop for infants through pre-teens, on McGinley Square from 1947 to 1974. As Morris became busy with Liberty State Park and his City Council work, Ethel ran the store. Ethel and Morris visited several continents. She had to twist Morris’s arm to go on vacations, but she prevailed. She once told him to renew his passport or to not come back home that day.

Ethel and Morris raised their children emphasizing the Golden Rule, the importance of family, and of activism in their advice and examples. Often on Sundays, the family would visit with one or more of Morris’s 6 siblings and their families. The Pesins were

especially close to the family of Morris's sister Edith and her husband Judge Allan Horowitz, and also to his charitable sister Sarah and his brother Meyer, Jersey City's Corporation Counsel under Mayor Gangemi.

Ethel was extremely supportive of the 1957 dream of her husband Morris to transform Jersey City's waterfront wasteland of decaying piers and abandoned rail yards into a beautiful Jersey City waterfront park. They shared the vision for Liberty State Park as a family park for people of all colors, cultural backgrounds, and religions to enjoy behind Lady Liberty. After the 18 year campaign to create LSP, spearheaded by Morris, the "father" of LSP, Ethel fought with countless others to ensure the park would remain non-commercialized and non-privatized. Morris often stated that he could have done nothing without his wife's strong encouragement, sacrifice and their shared values.

She enjoyed every opportunity to talk with interested people wherever she went, about her husband's founding of LSP, his legendary canoe trip and about the park's beauty. Ethel would often cry when talking about her husband. She shared his vision for a free and green park, as did the pioneer founders Ted Conrad and Audrey Zapp, and the Friends' first president John Tichenor, and all of us who continue to try to uphold the park's true purposes as a green urban open space behind Lady Liberty. She was always very grateful for people's involvement in protecting and beautifying the park and support for the Friends of LSP.

At a 1992 public memorial ceremony for Morris, Gov. Jim Florio appointed Ethel to the park's Public Advisory Commission. As a strong and dedicated advocate for a free and green People's Park, she was a leader in many park battles, fighting against the golf

course as a member of the LSP Public Advisory Commission, and opposing the commercial waterpark as a member of the park's Interdisciplinary Planning Committee. She felt great pride in the Friends of LSP's volunteer garden program which creates and maintains many gardens under the guidance of park gardener Maria Wakefield and with Michel Cuillerier, the Friends co-vice president with Eliza Wright, organizing many corporate employee volunteer days. When LSP turned 25 years old in 1976, the Friends, at its first luncheon, gave Ethel a Lifetime Achievement Award for her untiring efforts and dedication over decades.

Ethel contributed mightily to LSP – as constant supporter, unswerving defender and enthusiastic advocate. She was an honorary Trustee and invaluable advisor to The Friends of LSP, and worked on countless mailings, applying stamps and labels to tens of thousands of envelopes, and enjoyed selling Friends of LSP tee shirts at festivals.

Ethel was involved with many causes over the years. She was active with the “Hudson County Citizens Committee” in the 1960's. This band of civic leaders worked to “Save the Boulevard” from becoming a treeless highway under the leadership of Dr. Ethel Lawner, and worked to save the Hudson County Courthouse under the leadership of Ted Conrad. Ethel strongly felt that The People do make a difference and must try their best in working for their beliefs to make a better quality of life for all.

Ethel played piano at Academy House, a center for people recovering from mental illness, and she delivered Meals On Wheels for the Jewish Family and Counseling Service of JC, Bayonne and Hoboken. In the 1960's, she served one term as president of the JC State Teachers College (NJCU) Community Orchestra and served for a few years

on her condominium Board at 75 Liberty Ave. where she's lived since 1993.

Ethel loved attending the free summer concerts at Liberty State Park since the park's opening summer in 1976. The concerts, still thriving with the sponsorship of the JC Division of Cultural Affairs, were organized for 15 years by Morris as volunteer director of the City Spirit Office and Cultural Arts Commission. She rarely missed a Sunday or Tuesday evening concert.

Her greatest joy was enjoying life with family and friends. Ethel deeply valued her friends. She was a "friends' friend" – caring about them, listening, talking about life, making suggestions, and shopping with them. In her prime, she organized bridge games and parties and bought excellent merchandise for Pesins. She was very organized, determined and efficient. A bridge friend once told Sam that his mother was known as "The Little General". She was a benevolent general of course.

Her wisdom, goodness, and her great love have inspired and strengthened us throughout our lives. Her dedication to the family and her friends, and her exuberant embrace of life makes her a special mother, relative, friend and person. Ethel Pesin loved people and life. She was a blessing to all. Her golden heart has and always will light up our lives.

She inspired all who knew her. In her humility, she wouldn't have believed how positive and powerful her impact was on all those she influenced.

We must always remember our gratitude to those who came before us, and our responsibility to those who come after us. Ethel and Morris did so. Their ancestors would be proud of them, and they have left us a powerful example of love and community service for us to try our best to live up to.