



Photo by Gideon Levin

# Sonia Pressman Fuentes

## if not now, when?

by Jeanette Friedman

**S**onia Pressman Fuentes is a petite dynamo living in Potomac, wintering in Sarasota, and a lawyer for a long time—since 1957. She retired in 1993 to become an author and public speaker on various issues ranging from her memoirs, her role in the second wave of the women's rights movement, her life, how being an immigrant affected her life, and how she built a life in retirement.

Sonia arrived in America in 1934 with her Polish parents, who had lived in Germany since 1913. The family—consisting of her parents, Hinda Leah and Zysia, and her brother, Hermann, who was 14 years her senior—had lived in Berlin.

With the advent of the Nazis, Hermann immediately realized their potential danger and told his parents that they must leave Germany. Zysia snorted that they had lived in Germany for 20 years, were prospering in their haberdashery business, and he had just bought an apartment building as an investment. He figured Hitler was a passing phenomenon. Unconvinced, the 19-year-old Hermann left on his own to join a cousin in Antwerp. (Though he had wanted to get to England, there were no visas available.)

Eventually his parents asked him to come back to Berlin because they thought things would get better, but Hermann told them that the papers were reporting German Jews returning to

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Germany disappeared when the Nazis greeted them at the train station. Nevertheless, he said he would return if they ordered him to do so. His mother ordered him to come home, and he began packing his things for his return when she called and said that he should stay put, that the three of them were headed for Antwerp. No one ever figured out what triggered their change of mind, but it saved the family.

Before they could leave, Zysia sat down with a few members of the Nazi Party and gave them the store and the apartment building for a fraction of their worth. They then permitted the family to leave. Unbeknownst to the authorities, he had already sent money to banks in other European countries. Once in Antwerp, Zysia spent months trying to restart his business, even going so far as to thinking about moving to the *Yishuv*, pre-Mandate Palestine. Nothing seemed to work.

Zysia was an incredible businessman, but essentially illiterate. Yet somehow, in Antwerp, he learned to read Yiddish. One day he read a newspaper article about ships that were leaving for America and asked Hinda why they didn't go—they had cousins in Brooklyn and maybe they could go into business together. Astonishingly, though Sonia and Hermann were born in Germany and their parents had lived there for decades, the family managed to qualify under the Polish quota and were soon issued visas. They boarded the SS *Western Land* of the Red Star Line and arrived in America on May 1, 1934. HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, met them at the dock and helped

them get settled in the Bronx, at 500 Southern Blvd.

Zysia soon went into the men's clothing business in Manhattan and took in a partner. Things didn't go well, and the pace of life in “the city” was too much for him. One summer, they took a vacation in the Catskill Mountains, about 100 miles from the city's center. When they got back to the Bronx, Zysia decided that the family was going to move to the mountains. But Hinda, who had grown up in the cosmopolitan cities of Warsaw and Berlin, said she wasn't going to become a country mouse. Zysia left the house and Hermann didn't like the way his father looked. Following him, Hermann watched as he saw his despondent father jump into the Harlem River. Hermann had bystanders call for help and Zysia was pulled from the river, incoherent and drenched. Hermann brought him home, told Hinda what happened, causing her to change her mind about moving to the country.

In 1936 they moved to the village of Woodridge, New York, where they rented a *kuch alein*, a rooming house with a communal kitchen. Women and their children were there for the summer, and husbands came out on weekends. After five years, Zysia checked out Monticello, a larger town further west, and bought 50 acres of land on Port Jarvis Road. There he built the Pine Tree Bungalow Colony—25 bungalows, a swimming pool and a handball court. From the time Sonia was a child, they spent their winters in Florida.

Sonia was valedictorian of her graduating class at Monticello High School in

1946. She won a few scholarships that earned her a place as a student at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. She received her B.A. in liberal arts and was Phi Beta Kappa, but she couldn't find a job in Manhattan until her parents prevailed upon her to study shorthand. She became a secretary, one of the six or seven jobs women could get in those days—secretaries, nurses, social workers, telephone operators, retail sales clerks and teachers. She worked for different companies for several years and went to Florida each year to vacation with her parents.

One year while there, she drove by the University of Miami in Coral Gables and thought it was a lovely campus where she could become a student. Then she reminded herself that she already had her liberal arts degree, and decided then and there to go to law school. She applied, was accepted and began her studies in the fall of 1954. She finished first in her class in June 1957.

Her first job as a lawyer was in the nation's capital in the Department of Justice's Office of Alien Property, which dealt with enforcement of the various “Trading with the Enemy” Acts and claims for the return of such properties. Then she went to work for The National Labor Relations Board in Washington, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles. When she came back to D.C. in October 1965, she found a job with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) that had opened for business on July 2, 1965.

“My coming to the EEOC,” says Sonia, “was not solely a matter of chance. As a Jew who had escaped from Germany, I

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naturally had an interest in the rights of minorities. Furthermore, I had been concerned with the rights of African Americans from childhood when I was struck by the segregated buses, water fountains, restrooms and benches, and the racist headlines and articles in southern newspapers as my family traveled through the South enroute to Miami Beach for the winter.

“In addition, from the age of 10, I had felt there was a purpose to my life, a mission I had to accomplish, and that I was not free as other girls and women were simply to marry, raise a family and pursue happiness. This feeling arose from three factors in my life: I had been born only because my mother’s favored abortionist was out of the country; my immediate family and I had escaped the Holocaust, and I was bright. To me, that meant that I had been saved to make a contribution to the world. But I had no idea what it was to be.

“Unfortunately, as I was growing up, there was no one with whom I could discuss such thoughts. As far as I knew, I was alone in having them. I felt that if I ever expressed such thoughts to anyone, my ideas would seem unbelievably arrogant. So, I kept them to myself and grew up essentially a lonely child. Years later, through the women’s movement, I learned that there were other girls and women like me who wanted to play a role in society. But as children, we were alone and considered ourselves misfits.”

At the EEOC, Sonia became an expert on sexual discrimination in employment, drafting some of the commission’s lead decisions and its initial guidelines. The commission’s purpose was to enforce Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited employ-

ment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin. The impetus for the act’s passage was racial discrimination in the United States—the prohibition against sex discrimination was only included shortly before the act was passed in Congress. There was no women’s movement before passage of the act.

Neither the country nor the commission was prepared to deal with interpreting and enforcing the sex discrimination prohibitions in the act. For the first year and a half, very few people wanted financial resources and time diverted from issues of racial discrimination, so they ignored sex discrimination issues. This frustrated Sonia, who was in no position to do anything about it herself. During EEOC’s first year, 37% of the cases handled alleged sex discrimination, something totally unexpected.

Enter author Betty Friedan, who came to the office to interview the general counsel and his deputy. At that time, there were only four people working in the Office of the General Counsel. When Friedan saw Sonia, she asked about the problems and conflicts in the office. Friedan was then working on her second book, the follow-up to *The Feminine Mystique*.

At first, Sonia said everything was fine, because she feared losing her job. Then Friedan visited again and asked the same question. This time, Sonia brought her into the office, closed the door and started to cry. She told Friedan how the office was ignoring women’s cases in order to concentrate on racial discrimination and added that what the country needed was an organization that would fight the good fight for the women of this nation,

one that operated like the NAACP when it fought for American blacks.

In June 1966, at a Commission on the Status of Women in D.C., women became upset when they were told they did not have the power to pass a resolution to support the reappointment of Dick Graham, a feminist, as EEOC commissioner. As a result, a small group of women caucused in Friedan’s hotel room and formed the basis for The National Organization for Women (NOW). The next day at lunch, Friedan wrote a preliminary statement explaining the purpose of NOW. The 28 women present each kicked in \$5 and NOW was born. On Halloween weekend, in 1966, men and women held an organizing meeting in the basement of the *Washington Post* building, where they drafted a statement of purpose and skeletal by-laws. Sonia was there. Another 26 people joined NOW that evening, and Sonia considers those 54 people NOW’s original founders.

In addition to being a founding member of NOW, Sonia also co-founded two more organizations: FEW (Federally Employed Women) and WEAL (Women’s Equity Action League). She also became involved with WIM (Women in Management) in Fairfield County, Connecticut and is a charter member of the Veteran Feminists of America. She currently serves on the board of the National Woman’s Party, founded in 1913 by Alice Paul to secure voting rights for women. Since 1920 it continues to fight for ratification of the ERA (the Equal Rights Amendment) and other women’s issues. The group’s headquarters are in the Sewall-Belmont House, one of the oldest houses on Capitol Hill, which also serves

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as a museum that is filled with suffragist and feminist memorabilia.

NOW worked hard to get the EEOC to enforce the sex discrimination clauses of Title VII. Its members picketed the White House and the EEOC filed lawsuits and generated lots of publicity about women’s rights. Sonia was the inside informer, who let a small group of NOW members know what women’s cases were not being handled correctly. NOW members would draft letters to the EEOC asking why things weren’t being done. Noone ever questioned the source. As a result of this activity, the EEOC began to enforce the sex discrimination prohibitions in Title VII.

While at the EEOC, Sonia also traveled around North America to talk about women’s rights. As a volunteer, she became an American specialist on women’s rights for the U.S. Information Agency, then still independent of the State Department. In that capacity, she traveled around the world giving talks and meeting with leaders of government, industry, unions, professionals, academia and women’s groups about the legal revolution in women’s rights in the U.S. Her articles on the subject were published everywhere.

Sonia married Roberto Fuentes, a human resources administrator in 1970. They had a daughter, who works as an administrator in an organization that owns more than 50 colleges. The family moved to Stamford in 1973, where Sonia went to work for GTE, a multi-national telecommunications company, becoming the highest paid woman in their

headquarters. Six years later, she divorced Roberto, and at the end of 1981, she and her daughter moved to Cleveland, where Sonia was put in charge of EEO and Affirmative Action for TRW, the multi-national conglomerate. She left at the end of 1985 and returned to D.C. to work in the legislative counsel division of the United States Office of Housing & Urban Development (HUD). Then, finally, she retired in May 1993. But she hasn’t stopped working.

She floundered around for about a year doing volunteer work and wondering what she would do with the rest of her life. Then she began writing her memoir: *Eat First-You Don’t Know What They’ll Give You: The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter*. It took her five and-a-half years to do the research and finish, but in it she tells the story above in much more intimate detail.

Imagine Zysia and Hinda with a *farbrenta* feminist on their hands. They didn’t even want her to go to college. They felt she should be a good housewife, cook and sew and get married at 18 and have children. However, despite their opposition, they still paid her tuition at Cornell and supported her throughout.

When she said she wanted to go to law school, they were against it, and so was Hermann. Sonia had \$1500 in savings, made it to Coral Gables, and began her freshman year. She didn’t know what would happen when she’d run out of money, so she wrote to her parents and let them know what she was up to, happening to mention that she was having difficulty getting around campus and

shopping because she didn’t have a car. When Hinda read the letter to Zysia, he went into the next room and packed his bag. Hinda didn’t know what he was doing and he said, “Didn’t you hear what she put in the letter? The girl needs a car. So I am going to buy her one.”

It was Rosh Hashana eve, and Hinda protested. But Zysia said, “I don’t care, I am going to buy her a car.” And he did. When he saw how she lived in a dorm with three other women, one of them really volatile, he went back to New York and told Hinda that they had to sell the house and move to Miami to take care of Sonia while she went to law school. And that’s exactly what they did. When she moved to D.C., they wanted to follow her, but she asked them to please stay put.

The book Sonia wrote was a success. Published in November 1999, it opened new doors for her, leading to increased speaking engagements and all kinds of recognition. She returned to Cornell 50 years after she graduated and spoke to two classes, one of which was using her memoir as a text book.

Since then, she has been inducted into the Maryland Women’s Hall of Fame and was feted at a reception by the Governor, First Lady and Lieutenant Governor in the Governor’s mansion. She was also awarded the Women at Work Award and has received many other kudos.

If Sonia had three wishes, what would they be? To go on living and be productive, equal rights for all people, and peace in the world. And for that, there is no time like NOW.

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