

Grandma Pearl's Suitcase: Pearl Zsupnik Fein's Adventurous Life

By Melanie L. Proctor, JD

In December 1986, Pearl (Zsupnik) Fein died in Los Angeles, California.¹ Her surviving family packed up her retirement apartment, filling a 1970s brown plaid Monarch suitcase with papers, quarter-inch tape reels, and demo records. The suitcase made its way around the state, passed from one relative to another, and in 2023, arrived in El Cerrito, California.²

The long-forgotten suitcase was brimming with tapes and records, written compositions and biographical notes. Its contents told Pearl's story, from her youth in Chicago through her travels in the United States and abroad until she eventually settled in California.

Pearl was born 22 October 1900 in Chicago, Illinois to Geza and Schifra (Szamat) Zsupnik.³ Geza had immigrated from Malczo, Austria-Hungary in about 1889.⁴ A record from a Hungarian synagogue gives his profession as "kocsmáros," which translates to innkeeper or tavern-keeper; in Chicago, he peddled junk.⁵ Schifra (or Sofia) followed in 1897, bringing four children with her.⁶ Pearl's birth was followed by a brother's, completing their family.⁷

In 1922, Pearl married Harold Fein, a first-generation American⁸ and an attorney.⁹ Pearl worked as a dance instructor, but after she wrote a well-received ditty for the Chicago Bar Association's annual review, her attention turned to music.¹⁰ In 1935, her song "Lonely Street" was recorded by the Jack Shilkret Orchestra with vocals by Dick Robertson.¹¹ She claimed the song won "orchids" from later-to-be-infamous gossip columnist Walter Winchell, who was known to bestow praise with the phrase, "Orchids to you."¹²

Pearl and Harold had two children, Susanne and Monroe.¹³ Pearl's mother had died when Pearl was just seven years old.¹⁴ That early loss, and Pearl's experience as a mother may have later inspired her song "Mommy:"



The Zsupnik family in Chicago, around 1904-05. From left: Schifra, with Sam in her lap; Geza; Pearl. Courtesy of the author.

*I see her in your baby eyes of blue
Hush-a-bye... Please don't cry
Dad-dy miss-es mom-my same as you
And the songs... she used to do
With rock-a-byes
He tries and tries
To chase the tear drops from your eyes
Your dad-dy needs your mom-my same as you
But the angels love her too.*

World War II brought changes to the Fein family as it did all Americans. While their son, Monroe ("Monnie") Fein, served in the United States Navy¹⁵ Pearl served on the Music War Committee chaired by Oscar Hammerstein in New York City.¹⁶ She had a hit with her 1942 composition "Yankee Doodle Ain't

Doodlin' Now," a song celebrating America's fight against fascism. It was recorded by singer Buddy Moreno and California bandleader Dick Jurgens.¹⁷ Pearl recalled people dancing to the tune at the Aragon Ballroom on Lawrence Avenue in Chicago.¹⁸

Pearl and Harold's marriage ended in divorce before 1947.¹⁹ An undated handwritten song titled "If I Could Turn Back the Clock" speaks to the pain of an ended marriage:

*If I could turn back the clock would I do just as I did
Would I say that we were thru, would I walk away
from you...
But many fish were in the sea
Then you caught one, the one to take the place of me*²⁰

After World War II, Pearl traveled to Europe. In January 1952, she traveled by air; later that year, by ship.²¹ Little is known about her time there, but it appears that on the second trip, she initially stayed in Dorchester, England.²² She returned from France via the *Queen Mary*.²³ If the post-war European travels impacted her music, it was not captured by her papers. Pearl's composition range was wide, including an homage to her Hungarian heritage and music that reflected her affinity for Hot Springs, Arkansas.²⁴ With Murray Bloom, she also wrote music that crossed religions, like "God's Christmas," recorded in 1960 by the Dimensions and approved by Cardinal Richard Cushing, Archbishop of Boston.²⁵

Her 1958 song "What's a Matter?" may have been recorded by Elvis Presley. Pearl's notes indicate that she and her friends heard Presley sing "What's a Matter?" on the radio. The existing demo record appears to be a good imitation of Presley, but musical professionals do not believe it is him. Pearl's notes indicate that she declined to relinquish the copyright to "What's a Matter?" which may explain why she and others heard Presley sing it on the radio and then it disappeared.²⁶ While that version of the song appears to be either lost to time or stored in a vault, others can be heard through the Discography of American Historical Recordings.²⁷

Political rally music was also in her repertoire, including "The Hole in Sole of His Shoe," for Illinois governor and then-presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson II.²⁸ The song refers to an iconic moment in the governor's presidential campaign, when Steven-



A selection of the published songs, recordings, and papers found in Pearl's suitcase. Courtesy of the author.

Some recordings of Pearl's songs can be accessed via the Internet today.

"Yankee Doodle Ain't Doodlin' Now" — Dick Jurgens Orchestra with vocal by Buddy Moreno (1942)

<https://bit.ly/YankeeDoodlin>

"Ave Maria / God's Christmas," — The Dimensions (1960) <https://www.discogs.com/release/9819704-The-Dimensions-Ave-Maria-Gods-Christmas>

"Sing A Song of Funnies" (Part One) — Ireene Wicker and the Marjorie Mayer Trio (1948)

<https://bit.ly/SongFunnies1>

"Sing A Song of Funnies" (Part Two)" — Ireene Wicker and the Marjorie Mayer Trio (1948)

<https://bit.ly/SongFunnies2>

The demo records and tapes found in Pearl's suitcase were digitized by the talented Mark "Wally" McClellan of Oakland, California in 2023. A small collection can be heard on SoundCloud, at <https://bit.ly/GrandmaPearlsSuitcase>

son's crossed legs exposed a hole in the sole of his shoe. (Michigan photographer Bill Gallagher caught the image in a lucky shot that won him a Pulitzer Prize.)²⁹ In response to the recording, Governor Stevenson sent a note reading "With thanks to Pearl Fein from the depths of my soul! Adlai Stevenson, Chicago, 1960, P.S. And thanks again for the glorious record!"³⁰

Pearl's copyrights show she lived in Chicago, New York, Miami Beach, Hot Springs, Arkansas, and Los Angeles.³¹ Her musical, "Yesterday Ended Last Night," starring a young Linda Glick, was staged off-Broadway in 1973.³² In 1983, she received a \$200 special award from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers for off-off Broadway show tunes, besting Dr. Seuss by \$50.³³ Pearl had written dozens of songs by the time of her death at age 86. However, it was her 1948 album of children's music, "Sing a Song of Funnies," that she celebrated as a key event of her musical career.³⁴ Her pride in that accomplishment makes sense: she loved telling her grandchildren and great-grandchildren stories, especially about a magical fish that bubbled jewels.³⁵ A recording made decades later of Pearl singing with her son Monroe, his wife, and their children, was discovered among the tape reels in the suitcase.³⁶

Pearl lived vibrantly, producing two children, five grandchildren, and a multitude of great and great-great grandchildren, many of whom live in California today.

Genealogical Sketch

Pearl Zsupnik was born 22 October 1900 in Chicago, Illinois. Pearl died 16 December 1986 in Los Angeles, California. She married Harold Aaron Fein on 28 May 1922, in Chicago, Illinois. He was born 17 May 1896 in New York City, New York.³⁷ Pearl and Harold divorced before 1947. He died 20 July 1987 in Chicago.³⁸

Descendants of Pearl (Zsupnik) and Harold Fein:

1. Monroe Fein, b. 22 May 1923, Chicago, Illinois; d. 25 July 1982, Los Angeles, California; m. 1949, Malia "Malca" Haroon.³⁹
2. Richard Fein, b. 1 December 1953, Massachusetts; d. 3 July 2022, California.⁴⁰

3. Susanne (Fein) Shender Cohen Batko, b. 5 October 1925, Chicago, Illinois; d. 6 July 2021, Chicago, Illinois; m. 3 May 1944, Martin H. Shender, div. before 1953; m. 18 June 1953, Edward Cohen; div. bef. 1964; m. April 1964, Emanuel Batko.⁴¹

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Endnotes

1. "California, U.S., Death Index, 1940-1997," database online, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/2262964:5180>), entry for Pearl Fein, d. 16 December 1986. All websites accessed 6 September 2024.
2. Pearl Fein Collection, privately held by author.
3. "Cook County, Illinois, U.S. Birth Certificates Index, 1871-1922," database online, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/664274:2545>), entry for Pearl Zsupnik, 22 October 1900.
4. The dwelling and family numbers appear to have been corrected with a different pen than originally used. 1900 U.S. census, Cook County, Illinois, population schedule, Chicago, enumeration district (ED) 525A, sheet 3-B, dwelling 8, family 325, Geza Zsupnik; imaged, "1900 United States Federal Census," *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-DT7-TM7>).
5. "Slovakia Church and Synagogue Books, 1592-1935," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-62NS-SRC>). Also, Glosbe (<https://glosbe.com/hu/en/kocsm%C3%A1ros>), "kocsmáros." Also, 1900 U.S. census, Cook Co., Illinois, pop. sched., Chicago, ED 525A, sheet 3-B, Geza Zsupni, occupation junk.
6. 1900 U.S. census, Cook Co., Illinois, pop. sched., Chicago, ED 525A, sheet 3-B, Sofia (41), Harry (19), Benn (17), Joseph (15), Jennie (13), in household of Geza Zsupnik. The census indicates the remainder of the family immigrated in 1897.
7. 1910 U.S. census, Cook Co., Illinois, Chicago, ED 777, sheet 18-A, dwell. 123, fam. 326, Gaza Csupnik; imaged, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/4792017:7884>). Although Geza still worked as a junk peddler, the household included a servant.
8. "Cook County, Illinois Marriage Indexes," imaged, *Ancestry* (https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2273/images/32570_230666__0001-00201), entry for Pearl Supnik and Harold Fein, 28 May 1922.
9. 1920 U.S. census, Cook Co., Illinois, Chicago, ED 1474, sheet 7-A, dwell. 69, fam. 186, Harold A. Fien (sic); imaged,

- Ancestry* (https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/6061/images/4300493_00954).
10. "Biography," Pearl Fein Collection. The two versions of Pearl's autobiography are undated but were likely written between 1948 and 1958 because they mention her 1948 children's album but not a possible 1958 Elvis Presley recording. *Ibid.*
 11. "Victor matrix BS-92274, Lonely street / Jack Shilkret Orchestra," Discography of American Historical Recordings (https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/200020485/BS-92274-Lonely_street), UC Santa Barbara Library, 2024.
 12. "Biography," Pearl Fein Collection. See also "Walter Winchell: The Power of Gossip," Public Broadcasting Studio: American Masters (<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/walter-winchell-biographical-timeline/15619/>). See also "Orchids to You — From Walter Winchell to the Present," South Coast Orchid Society, April 2020 (https://southcoastorchidsociety.com/orchidnotes_2020_04.html : visited 3 September 2024).
 13. For Susanne's birth, see "Cook County, Illinois Birth Index, 1916–1935," database online, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/2739533:1499>). For her death, see "Susanne Fein Batko," *The Chicago* (Illinois) *Tribune*, 21 November 2021, p. 27, col. 1; digital image, *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/image/782843119/>). For Monroe's birth and death dates, see "U.S. Social Security Death Index, 1935–2014," database online, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/18480385:3693>), entry for Monroe Fain, born 22 May 1923.
 14. "Cook County, Illinois, U.S., Death Index, 1878–1922," index, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/745453:2552> : viewed 3 September 2024), entry for Sophie Jupnick (1859–8 Nov 1907). Also, *FindAGrave* (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/111343412/sophia-zsupnik> : viewed 3 September 2024), memorial 111343412, Sophia Zsupnik (unknown–8 Nov 1907), 28 May 2013, Terenda Curtis Wyant; Sophia Zsupnik gravestone (Waldheim Cemetery, Forest Park, Illinois), digital image 28 May 2013, Terenda Curtis Wyant.
 15. "U.S., Select Military Registers, 1862–1985," database and images online, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/5386444:2345>), entry for Monroe S. Fein
 16. Arlene Wolf, "Composers in Chaos," *The Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), 18 June 1944, p. C-8, cols. 7-8; imaged, Library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83045462/1944-06-18/ed-1/>).
 17. An article on the Warfare History Network mentions "an excellent recording of "Yankee Doodle Ain't Doodlin' Now" was made by the Dick Jurgens Orchestra with a vocal by Buddy Moreno on January 26, 1942." Sheldon Winkler, "World War II Music," *Warfare History Network* (<https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/world-war-ii-music/>), June 2004. A version featuring Dick Jurgens as singer can be heard on *History on the Net*. "WWII in American Music: Axis & Allies," *History on the Net* (<https://www.historyonthenet.com/>), "Yankee Doodle Ain't Doodlin' Now," revised 16 July 2012.
 18. Interview with Pearl's grandson Stephen Shender by Melanie Proctor, 26 May 2024.
 19. Harold remarried in 1947. "Cook County, Illinois Marriage Index, 1930–1960," database online, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/1563534:1500>).
 20. Pearl Fein, "If I Could Turn Back the Clock," Pearl Fein Collection.
 21. "U.S., Departing Passenger and Crew Lists, 1914–1966," database with images, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/7258952:60882>) > 1948–1956 (NARA A4169) > image 1140: "Air Passenger Manifest," Air France 020/0125, New York Int'l Airport to Orly Field, Paris, France, departed 25 January 1952, Pearl Fein; citing NARA microfilm publication A4169, roll 150. Also, "U.S., Departing Passenger and Crew Lists, 1914–1966," database with images, *Ancestry* (https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/60882/images/42155_333353-01251) > 1948–1956 (NARA A4169) > image 1252: "List of Outward-Bound Passengers," R.M.S. Queen Mary, New York to Southampton, departed 8 July 1952, Pearl Fein, 51; citing NARA microfilm publication A4169, roll 174.
 22. "U.K. and Ireland, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878–1960," database with images, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/24835862:1518>) Southampton, England > 1952 > Jul > image 664: "Names and Descriptions of Alien Passengers," R.M.S. Queen Mary, New York to Southampton, arrived 14 July 1952, Pearl Fein, 51; citing National Archives of the UK, series BT26, piece 1288, item 201.
 23. "New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists, 1820–1957," database with images, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/3029301155:7488>) > 1952 > September > 02 > Queen Elizabeth > image 34: "List of In-Bound Passengers," R.M.S. Queen Elizabeth, Cherbourg to New York, arrived 2 Sept 1952, Pearl Fein, 51; citing NARA microfilm T715, roll 85.
 24. Pearl Fein Collection.
 25. "The Dimensions: Ave Maria / God's Christmas," Discogs (<https://www.discogs.com/release/9819704-The-Dimensions-Ave-Maria-Gods-Christmas>). Notes on Pearl Fein, privately held by author.
 26. Library of Congress, Copyright Office, Copyright Card for Pearl Fein, What's a Matter, 14 April 1958, EU 519440. Ardmore Music Corporation held the copyright for several years. Library of Congress, Copyright Office, Copyright Card for Ardmore Music Corp., What's a Matter?, words & music Pearl Fein, 29 July 1958, EU536718. Ardmore later quitclaimed the copyright to Pearl. Carlton Camarata (Ardmore Music Corp., Hollywood, California) to Pearl Fein (Hot Springs National Park, Arkansas), 14 April 1959; Pearl

- Fein Collection. Also, Notes by Pearl Fein, privately held by author. Also, Demo Record of "What's a Matter" and private notes of author, April 2023.
27. Discography of American Historical Recordings, s.v. Pearl Fein (<https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/names/203110>). Also, Pearl Fein Collection. Also, Kristin Robinson, "If Elvis Presley Wasn't A Songwriter, Why Was He Paid Like One?" Billboard (<https://www.billboard.com/pro/elvis-presley-publishing-deals-not-songwriter-why-credited/>), 29 June 2022.
 28. American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, ASCAP Biographical Dictionary (New York: R.R. Bowker Co., 1980), 152, entry for Pearl Fein; imaged, *Internet Archive* (https://archive.org/details/ascapbiographica00amer_0/page/152). For the copyright of the song, see Library of Congress, Copyright Office, Copyright Card for Pearl Fein, *The Hole in the Sole of His Shoe*, 20 October 1956, EU452053; imaged, *Virtual Copyright Catalog* (<https://vcc.copyright.gov/browse>).
 29. "A photographer with a common touch," *The Pulitzer Prizes* (<https://www.pulitzer.org/article/photographer-common-touch>).
 30. Pearl Fein Collection.
 31. *Ibid.*
 32. "The Weekend Windup," *New York Post*, 24 March 1973, page unknown, column 2; Pearl Fein Collection.
 33. Hal David (New York, NY) to All Writer Members of the Society, 11 Aug 1983; Pearl Fein Collection.
 34. Biographical Notes, Pearl Fein Collection. Both parts of the album can be heard on the *Internet Archive*. "Sing A Song of Funnies—Part One," *Internet Archive* (https://archive.org/details/78_sing-a-song-of-funnies-part-one_ireene-wicker-the-singing-lady-marjorie-mayer-tri_gbia0259036a), *Ibid.*, "Sing A Song of Funnies—Part Two" (https://archive.org/details/78_sing-a-song-of-funnies-part-two_ireene-wicker-the-singing-lady-marjorie-mayer-tri_gbia0259036b : accessed 26 May 2024),
 35. Personal knowledge of the author, Melanie L. Proctor. Proctor, a great-granddaughter of Pearl Fein, remembers hearing the stories.
 36. Family Music Night, Pearl Fein Collection.
 37. "New York, New York, U.S., Index to Birth Certificates, 1866–1909," database online, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/341918:61779>), entry for Harry Fein, b. 17 May 1896.
 38. "Fein," *The Chicago (Illinois) Tribune*, 2 August 1987, section 2, p. 6, col. 6; imaged, *Newspapers.com* (<https://www.newspapers.com/image/388838667/>).
 39. For Monroe's birth and death dates, see "U.S. Social Security Death Index, 1935–2014," database online, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/18480385:3693>), entry for Monroe Fain. For his marriage, see "Cook County, Illinois Marriage Index, 1930–1960," database online, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/1682703:1500>), entry for Monroe S. Fein and Malia Hassan Haroon, 18 April 1949.
 40. Richard was an accomplished dancer and physician. See Jeff Slayton, "Saying Goodbye to Dancer and Physician Richard Fein (1953–2022)," 22 July 2022, *LA Dance Chronicle* (<https://www.ladancechronicle.com/saying-goodbye-to-dancer-and-physician-richard-fein-1953-2022/>).
 41. For her marriage to Martin Shender, see "Cook County, Illinois Marriage Index, 1930–1960," database online, *Ancestry* (<https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/1783170:1500>), entry for Susanne Fein and Martin H. Shender, 3 May 1944. For her marriages to Edward Cohen and Emanuel Batko, see Personal Knowledge of Stephen R. Shender.

Juan Bernal and His Family

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43. Mission Santa Clara (Catholic Church, Santa Clara County, Alta California), Register, p. 269, Number 10.015, Juan Francisco Bernal, of the Pueblo, baptized 23 February 1840 at the age of 21 days; digital image, "The Early California Population Project: A Database Compiled and Developed at the Huntington Library."
44. Mission Santa Clara (Catholic Church, Santa Clara County, Alta California), Register, Number 10.211, Maria Gregoria de los Reyes Bernal, born on 6 January 1842, baptized on 11 March 1842; digital image, "The Early California Population Project: A Database Compiled and Developed at the Huntington Library."
45. "The Early California Population Project: A Database Compiled and Developed at the Huntington Library," Jose Tomás Bernal, baptized 26 December 1836 at Mission Dolores in San Francisco.
46. Mission Santa Clara (Catholic Church, Santa Clara County, Alta California), Deaths, Volume 2, Año de, 1846, p. 30, Number 7926, Jose, buried 24 January 1846; digital image, "The Early California Population Project: A Database Compiled and Developed at the Huntington Library."
47. "The Early California Population Project: A Database Compiled and Developed at the Huntington Library," José de Jesus Eulogio Bernal, born 10 March 1846 and baptized 3 May 1846 at Mission San Jose.