

For those seeking more than just the bare bones...

An Expanded and Embellished Obituary about Elka

or

“Such is life, and it gets sucher and sucher”

(Something Elka's father said, which she loved to repeat)

Elka Fink was born Elka Myra Person on 17 October 1928 in Groningen, Holland to parents Bernard Person and Rosa Citroen Person and older brother Alexander Dunbar. She was told that "Elka" was a Hebrew or Polish rendition of the name of her late paternal grandmother Helene (pronounced heh-LAIN-a). Because she had trouble saying her name, she called herself "Ekkie," and this is what many others called her since she was a young girl. From what I remember her saying about the "Myra" part, her father chose it because of something called a "myrovista," a panorama in a rotunda where you can stand on a viewing platform and see a 360 degree mural above and around you. I believe Elka said there was a myrovista somewhere in Holland that her father was very fond of. When I looked this up, I found an article describing this sort of art (but never using the word myrovista) and mentioning that the Panorama Mesdag in The Hague is noteworthy. I'm guessing this was what inspired my grandfather to give Elka her middle name.

<https://www.amusingplanet.com/2016/07/historic-panoramic-paintings-and.html>

The family moved to The Hague when Ekkie was about 1 ½ years old, so all of her memories of Holland were of her time in The Hague when they lived on Sijzenlaan (the name of Elka's street).

I discovered some things Elka wrote in 1990 and 1994, and I've incorporated some parts of them here. (Elka also requested that I include some of her favorite stories.)

In 1994, Elka wrote about herself:

Early Montessori school reports from Holland said that she had an almost magnetic influence on others in the sense that she stimulated others to learn and accomplish. At age 6 she was described as having "an enviable temperament, cheerful, quiet and very well balanced - her pleasant nature has contributed greatly to the agreeable atmosphere in the class." It was felt also that she had a natural grace and great musical sensitivity.

Elka was devoted to and close with her parents and her brother and frequently saw her maternal grandmother Mathilde (Tilly); her other three grandparents died before she was born. Her father was the youngest of seven and her mother the third of six, and most of them and their families lived in Holland. Elka had very happy memories of lots of uncles and aunts and cousins constantly visiting while she lived in The Hague. She had a favorite uncle, her mother's

younger brother André, who was in the Dutch Resistance and died at the hands of the Nazis and who Elka still cried about 80 years later.

Elka also wrote this about herself in 1994:

She recalls that in Holland a Dutch Nazi newspaper would occasionally be delivered to every house on her street. If her father were present, he would tear it to shreds in the street while yelling obscenities at the delivery man.

Elka's father was first a journalist and then editor-in-chief of a Dutch weekly newspaper, a paper with a strong anti-Nazi editorial policy. After covering the Hitler trial in Munich in 1924, Elka's father's sense was that Jews might not be safe in Europe for much longer, so he found himself work in New York at the United Nations. He and Elka's mother tried to persuade family members to leave Holland, but very few believed the seriousness of the Nazi threat. Under the shadow of Hitler, the family sailed to England and then the United States on the Veendam, arriving at Ellis Island in March 1939 and settling in Great Neck, Long Island. Elka remembers that her parents protected her and her brother from the reality that they were escaping from Europe and instead created the narrative that this was a big adventure.

Once in New York, Elka's father was a foreign correspondent for three Dutch newspapers and was the commentator for Dutch radio for the United Nations. He delivered daily broadcasts to Nazi-occupied Netherlands during World War II using CBS shortwave radio under the name "Piet Hein." Elka's maternal grandmother Tilly, who was in hiding in Holland, wrote to the family in Great Neck, "I heard Bep sing." "Bep" was the nickname for Elka's father, and because all mail was censored by the Nazis, this was Tilly's way of letting them know that she had heard his broadcasts on her illegal shortwave radio. Her father contributed to the morale of many Dutch people during the war, and, Elka wrote in 1994, "*He received hundreds of grateful letters after the war.*"

Elka's father's death notice was 5 paragraphs in the New York Times; he was kind of a big deal:

<https://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/11/obituaries/bernard-person-winner-of-dutch-honors-in-war.html>

Elka came to this country with very little English. ("*Lex and I had an English tutor in The Hague, and we claimed that the only two words we learned were 'desk' and 'radiator'.*")

In the summer of 1939, she and her brother Lex attended summer camp and came home with impressive English skills. She attended Kensington Elementary and graduated from Great Neck High School in June 1946.

Elka remembered this story later with laughter, but at the time it confused her:

"I had a Latin teacher at Great Neck High named Mrs. Fogg. She may have been a good Latin teacher but she should not have been teaching. On my first day in her class in eleventh grade, she said to me, 'Why don't you go back to Abyssinia or wherever it is you came from!'"

Elka liked to tell the story of how, in the high school yearbook, the journalism staff put one adjective next to each senior's photo. They planned to put the word "sweet" next to hers; she objected and told them she preferred "interesting."

Most of Elka's family on her father's side and a good bit of family on her mother's side, as well as many friends, died during the Holocaust. In 1994, she wrote:

Leaving the security of my homeland at age ten, then the Holocaust and the brutal death of many family members -- these probably had greater impact on me than any other events in my life.

Elka became a US citizen in Mineola, NY on 17 March 1950.

(Here's a detail that's fascinating to me: on her naturalization papers, nowhere does it ask for "race" or "color." It asks about "complexion" (!) and it says "medium." I compared this with my father's father's naturalization papers in 1936: on his, it asks about "color" and it says "white," and it asks about "complexion" and it says "dark.")

Here's where I'll begin to highlight some of Elka's close friendships. Some friends died before Elka did, and the rest were corresponding with her until her death. Three close friendships that began in the 1930's in Holland lasted the rest of her life: Puck, Carla, and Betty. Betty was Elka's closest friend from her street in The Hague. After Elka moved to the United States, she and Betty corresponded by mail during WWII, and Betty saved all of her letters; Elka reread them much later with Betty in Holland and shed many tears. Elka told me that she thinks she learned how to wrap packages extremely well because she observed her mother sending packages of food and clothing to Betty's family, and many relatives in Holland, after the war. Over the last 70 years, Elka and Betty visited one another many times in Albuquerque and Bellingham and Holland (and we and Betty's children have continued their friendship and visits).

Two more of Elka's lifelong friendships began in her fifth grade class in Great Neck: Helen and Ellen. Elka thought it was fascinating that all three women married lawyers and all three women did "social work" sorts of jobs ("*We picked each other out in fifth grade!*").

Elka attended Wilson College (in Chambersburg, PA) for two years (collecting several lifelong friends there, no surprise) and then transferred to NYU Washington Square, graduating with a BA in Sociology in 1950. At NYU she met Hanny, another cherished friend who also ended up living on the West Coast. Elka then attended Adelphi College (later called University) School of Social Work and graduated with a MSW in June 1953. She worked as a medical social worker at the Neurological Institute (part of Columbia University Hospital) in NYC from 1953-1957. Elka's closest friends in NYC from that time were Muriel, Dotty, Joyce, and Priscilla.

Elka married Myron Fink in May 1955 in her parents' apartment on Central Park South after a whirlwind courtship. She had been engaged to someone else, but that wedding was called off, and soon afterwards she met Myron. Here's a borrowed paragraph from Myron's Obituary:

In early 1955, Myron was fixed up on a blind date by a friend and met a young social worker, Elka Myra Person, who had come to the US from the Netherlands in 1939 and had grown up in Great Neck, Long Island. Elka thinks that she told her mother after their first meeting, "I've met the man I'm going to marry." Elka introduced Myron to A.A. Milne, and they read Winnie the Pooh together in Central Park in the spring of 1955. Three months after meeting, they married on May 8 in Elka's parents' apartment on Central Park South. This man, heartbroken so early, found himself a gem.

After a honeymoon in California, they lived in Riverdale, NY until Myron was offered a job in Los Angeles at Loyola Law School, so they moved to Santa Monica in September 1957. Their son Paul was born there in 1958 and their daughter Anji in 1960. In Los Angeles, Elka met the woman she always considered her Best Friend: Evelyn (whose daughters Elka was in touch with for many years after Evelyn died).

Rachel and Norma were two other close friends Elka met in Los Angeles and knew for the rest of her life. (Thirty years later, one offered me temporary housing in Boston for several months before I found an apartment of my own, and the daughters of the other flew my mother to their mother's 70th birthday party as a surprise.)

When Myron was offered a position as Law Librarian at the University of New Mexico, the family moved to Albuquerque, NM in September 1963. Elka and Myron spent 31 years in Albuquerque (1963-1994) in the house with the orange door, where Elka worked as a medical social worker at UNM Hospital from 1967-1988. She was the coordinator of the UNM Hospital's Birth Defects Clinic, which dealt almost exclusively with children with spina bifida. She followed patients with this diagnosis from the time of their birth (and she maintained relationships and correspondence with some of the families up until the time of her death).

Two of Elka's closest friends in Albuquerque were Barbara and Connie (with whose children she was still corresponding at the time she died). Her Albuquerque friends were many, and I am only mentioning two because I would forget important others if I attempted a list. Steve was another good friend who also moved to Washington State.

In Albuquerque, Elka was involved in many volunteer activities: New Mexico AIDS Services, where she was a "buddy" to the mother of a patient with AIDS; as a literacy volunteer; and with the Center for Attitudinal Healing. She sang in the UNM Chorus for years and loved the Albuquerque Symphony and the Santa Fe Opera.

In 1994, Elka and Myron made the very wise choice to move to Bellingham, WA to be closer to their children and grandchildren. They bought a house 1.3 miles from their daughter and created a lush, gorgeous outside and an artsy, comfortable inside. They both felt that moving to Bellingham was one of the best choices they'd ever made. We celebrated their anniversary of the move each August 22, which was the day they had arrived with Paul in Bellingham in 1994 (and found all the hearts we had put all over their house, some hidden in places they didn't discover right away).

Elka lived 27 ½ years in Bellingham. We will celebrate that date without her this August 22, still filled with gratitude that she was an everyday part of our lives for so long. We shared meals, walks, talks, vacations, birthday dinners, spontaneous "do-you-want-to-come-over-for-cookies-I-just-made?" evenings, and theater and music events, and she and my dad were an active part of my children's lives as they grew up, attending their assemblies, plays, concerts, games, and graduations. She was my emergency childcare rescuer, gave kids rides when I couldn't, and acted as a baking consultant by phone when Julia was creating something she wanted to surprise me with. Many of my friends got to know her well and claimed her as a friend of theirs also, as well as some of my children's friends. Bellingham people might associate her with afternoon Rummikub and Mahjong games with great snacks, volunteer activities (with the Literacy Council, Hospice, and as a member of the Caring Committee of Congregation Beth Israel), lunches with the Golden Girls, her regular attendance with Myron at Whatcom Symphony and Bellingham Festival of Music concerts, and time with lots and lots of friends, often with ice cream and her famous fudge sauce. Two of many friend groups Elka was part of (playing Rummikub or Mahjong or having lunch out or in or watching movies or just visiting for hours and hours) were BEARS (Bernice, Elka, Anne, Rosalie, Sylva) and JEP (Joyce, Elka, Peggy) but she also had Susan, Naomi, Harriet, Lorina, Joan, Jo, Linda, Lee and many more close women friends (and one man: her close friend Walter) -- there aren't enough acronyms to mention them all.

I've mentioned many of Elka's close friends, but I also want to be sure to include family members she loved deeply over her lifetime: Hetty, Kitty, Alexandra (Sandra), Sally (Babe), Barbara, Lisette, Paulien, Ruth, Pammy, Harriet, Jane, Judy, Nancy, Leslie, Doris, Sondra, and Polly.

Much of what I've written so far is "not just the bare bones" but it's still about the "bones" of Elka's 93 years of life. I'd like to focus for a bit on what made her Elka (the "insides")...

Her smile was gorgeous. She loved the French movie "Forbidden Games," the Italian movie "Tree of Wooden Clogs," the Mike Leigh movie "Secrets and Lies," and Gregory Peck in "To Kill A Mockingbird." She valued being on time. She didn't particularly like hydrangeas. She loved the view from her Bellingham dining room table with pots of colorful annuals and little bunny statues. She never wanted to fly a flag because patriotism felt like nationalism which reminded her of the Nazis, but she was very grateful that the United States allowed her family a safe haven. She loved to match-make, not in a traditional romantic way but introducing people she thought would really like each other. She liked getting to the Farmers Market before it opened so she would get a good parking space. Her foot was a bit heavy on the gas even when she saw a red light ahead, but I believe that she never had a car accident. She loved pansies' "*little faces*." She liked to watch "Sunday Morning" with Charles Kuralt and then Charles Osgood, and she hated to miss "60 Minutes" on Sunday nights and kicked us out, if we were there for dinner, right as that stopwatch on the TV screen began ticking. She didn't like wearing hats. In the last couple of years of her life, after expressing great regret about never having been a reader (and

possibly because she was stuck at home because of COVID), she began to read books I brought her from my shelves or the library; the list she proudly made of books she had read "Since February 2020" had 30 titles, and her list "2021" had 50 more titles! She particularly loved (and wants to recommend) both the movie and the book "Just Mercy," and she also just recently discovered and adored Chaim Potok's writing, and particularly, "My Name is Asher Lev" (though she told me, "*I'm not sure you'll like it, and that's OK.*") She liked the saying, "Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous," even though she didn't really believe in God (although she wrote in 1990, "*What does appeal to me is the concept that God is the love and the goodness that is inside each one of us*"). She was not religious but identified very strongly as Jewish.

She loved wearing (and looked great in) reds and purples. I found the ad for the wedding dress she wore (from Bergdorf Goodman and advertised as a bridesmaid dress) glued in an old scrapbook: "they virtually floated down the aisle in long-bodied, bouffant-skirted organdies, embroidered in alternating rows of flowers and lace... (Headdress at \$10.95, comes in dress-matching colors)" !! -- and I wore her dress when I got married. She always used a brownie recipe from my brother's second grade mimeographed recipe book to which the mothers in the class had contributed, and the book is still intact, covered by the construction paper cover he had crayoned on. She made beautiful dinners for my father for almost every night of the 64 years they spent together before he died. She loved feeding him and he loved everything she fed him.

She sneezed incredibly loudly -- it shook the house. She was a member of the New York Society for Ethical Culture. She was fascinated by new ideas like preferred pronouns and people identifying as neither male nor female; she didn't really understand but was very open to learning. She had a great story about living in a women-only rooming house, I think in the East Village but I'm not sure, during her last year at NYU (her mother told her, "You need to have a social life, and commuting from Great Neck isn't best for you!") She had her own room in this large house/apartment. All the residents were single women, and the understanding was that they would not "entertain men" in their rooms. I think my mom had a man sleep over, and a note was left for her by her door the next day about how they only wanted to have "women of character" in the rooming house; it was like a warning. She thought it was hilarious. I think as I go through her things I may very well find that note, because she saved many treasures!

When we lived in Albuquerque, she used to get these mouth-watering Dutch honeycakes in the mail from a company in Holland, Michigan. I remember watching her ritual of cutting slices and spreading oleo margarine on them with her little Dansk knife; at that time she considered butter very fancy and probably not good for us, and I remember when we were in a restaurant with little pats of butter she sometimes brought them home in a paper napkin! When my friends slept over, the breakfast we were greeted with the next morning was almost always flensjes, a Dutch crêpe. My friends from that time (it's no surprise I still have some of those!) still talk about this. We spread powdered sugar or jam on them, rolled them up, and cut them

into sections with a fork. My mom stood at the stove with her spatula and made as many as we wanted.

When I was around 10, I started reading to her while she was making dinner in the kitchen: I remember reading "Anne of Green Gables" and how she cried and cried when Matthew died. She liked keeping her house clean. She did her dishes with a soapy rag instead of a sponge, and she preferred doing them herself to using her dishwasher because she loved having warm hands. She was quick to clean up after a meal, and sometimes she took our drinking glasses before we were finished. In our house now we say, "You Elka'd my cup" when our cups disappear prematurely. She loved baking and then trying to figure out who she should invite over because she had so much cake! If she had a little bit of cream cheese to use up, she had to make rugelach. I was part of a phone conversation she recently had with her friend Muriel from her social work days in Manhattan (Muriel always used cake mixes from a box), and Muriel reminded her that my mother had told her, "*I make everything from scratch. I even make my own eggs!*" She made her grandchildren cookies for their quarter, half, three-quarter, and full birthdays each year. With the three-quarter cookies, she gave them cookies with one quarter cut out, and they wanted to know what she had done with those quarters!

She listened to KHFM in Albuquerque and KZAZ in Bellingham. She loved chamber music especially, but she also loved symphonies with soloists. Her favorite composer was Brahms. Other favorites included Mozart, Fauré, Schubert, Handel, Chausson, Dvořák, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Debussy, and Bach. Any memories my friends have of being in my childhood home include, "There was always beautiful classical music playing in the living room."

Her father jokingly began calling her "widow Lincoln" at age 11 when she learned about Abraham Lincoln in school and "*sort of fell in love with him.*" As she wrote in 1994: "*It was the slavery issue that was especially troubling to me. I have always, as long I can remember, been concerned with peace, freedom, and justice issues.*" Her parents gave her a framed engraving of Lincoln for her twelfth birthday because her grandmother in Holland sent money and asked them to choose something for Elka's birthday; that portrait has always hung on a wall wherever Elka lived. I discovered a few hours after Elka died that she had died on Lincoln's birthday. She would have loved this.

She loved Chinese food when we were younger in Albuquerque and then switched her allegiance to Thai food once that became familiar to her. She was very amused by a story someone recently told her about an old wealthy woman who was admonished by someone for being impolite and who said, "I'm rich and I'm dying and I don't have to say thank you!" (She was not rich and constantly said thank you.) As a child and teen, she played recorder and piano. In her 20's and 30's, she played some tennis. She tried cross country skiing when she lived in New Mexico. She could knit; maybe she could also crochet but I'm not sure. She taught me how to hem things but didn't do any other sewing. She was an excellent weeder and loved being in her garden. She followed recipes to the letter. I learned recently from something she wrote in 1990 that she had always wanted to take ballet lessons and to act but had been afraid

to try either one. In that same paper she wrote that the five things she valued most were peace, harmony, order, honesty in people, and warmth-genuineness.

She thought it was peculiar that people said, "The thing is, is that..." and "at this point in time." She never touched a computer or smart phone and proudly proclaimed herself a Luddite. She was often right in guessing what time it was, even to the minute, out of nowhere. We sat down for a home-cooked (by her) family dinner almost every night of my entire childhood. She usually used Good Seasons salad dressing mix and for 50+ years served the dinner salad in a green and orange flowery fiberglass bowl that would certainly now be called "vintage." She made a fabulous marinade with orange juice, soy sauce, brown sugar, and scallions, and when we were younger we often requested marinated flank steak for our birthday dinners, which she had my dad cook on an outdoor barbecue because it made a mess in her oven. She and Todd sometimes met at her house in the afternoon to eat coffee ice cream together. She loved Deals Only and the Bellingham Grocery Outlet, and she and Todd traded information about what treasures they had discovered there. She was no nonsense and very practical. She cried easily when she was moved.

She did all her math in Dutch, like balancing her checkbook, and she enjoyed speaking Dutch and being told that her Dutch was excellent! She said that she felt most alive when in Holland speaking Dutch: "*Dutch is the language of my heart.*" She never learned to type. She wrote letters with a ballpoint pen on a white writing pad and folded the papers in thirds and put them in a small envelope: her "signature" letter. She signed many letters with just "E" with beautiful, confident loops. She liked making her own note cards with photos she had taken in her garden using a paper cutter and a glue stick. She clipped interesting articles and comics from the newspaper and often photocopied them and sent them to friends. She saved many letters and cards she received and spent the last several years of her life rereading her lifetime of correspondence, filing some away, and, when she thought it might be of interest, sending her friends' adult children their (deceased) mothers' letters.

She loved the music of Ronnie Gilbert (of The Weavers), Joan Baez, Paul Robeson, Mahalia Jackson, and Andrés Segovia. She sometimes used melodramatic words to describe things: "*That's disgusting! It was horrid! I think that's obscene! How repulsive!*" She was a contradiction in that she was incredibly compassionate and loving and she was also incredibly judgmental and critical, but only people who knew her very well were aware of that.

Artists she loved included Miró, Renoir, van Gogh, Kandinsky, Monet, Chagall, Braque, Matisse, Vermeer, and Munch. Probably her very favorite artist was Käthe Kollwitz: my mother was moved by her sketches and sculptures of mothers trying to protect their children from the horrors of war. Their home was filled with oil paintings and charcoals by Paul Citroen, a cousin of her mother's who was a well-known Dutch artist.

In the spring of 2009, she and I spent almost three weeks in Europe together -- one of the highlights of my many years with my mom. Everyone marveled at her. "I hope I can be just like

you when I am 80!" We walked miles and miles through Paris and Amsterdam and Berlin. We often slept side by side in narrow beds. We ate a lot of salads with arugula, we wandered art museums and sculpture gardens and historic places, and we cried together at Jewish World War II memorials. We got lost a lot because neither of us has any sense of direction. And the reason I'm sticking this paragraph in is...

**I want to encourage anyone reading this to plan an adventure with someone you love NOW!
Please don't wait.**

During her 27 years in Bellingham, she preferred turtlenecks ("*I'm always cold*"), sometimes even in the summer. She died wearing a turtleneck, which was her choice of what to wear once she stayed in bed.

She loved nothing more than Bread Farm focaccia with sliced turkey and cheese. She loved many kinds of bread, and she loved chewy things, and she loved salty things, and she loved to talk about how much she loved chewy salty things. Good bread and good cheese were all she really needed for a complete meal. Her favorite cheeses were Dutch goat milk cheeses.

She started working when I was in second grade, which made her a very unusual mom among my friends. She was also unusual among all the moms I knew in her disinterest in fashion and makeup and diets. I don't think she ever wore nail polish. She was beautiful but never seemed aware of that. She never wore makeup except for bright red lipstick. She occasionally wondered if she might want to pierce her ears but never did. She loved wearing necklaces. She had lovely skin and was proud to say she had never used any creams or lotions on it; she told Julia that she and her mother both used rose water.

She answered to many names. She was *Ekkie* and *Ekje* and *Ek* and *Ekster* to loved ones from Holland. My dad called her *Elk* and *My Love* and *My Sweet* and *My Darling Elk*. Paul called her *Moo-Moo* and *Mookie* and *Meanie-Moo* and too many other slightly different variations to list. Julia, Kareem, Ezra, Noah, and Rachel called her *Omi*. Jasper called her *Great Omi* (as in "Great Omi is very old. She will die soon"). I called her *Mom*. I wonder how long it will be until I can say that simple sweet name without feeling like crying.

She was very devoted to her parents and brother and grieved their deaths deeply. In 1994, she wrote, "*After all these years I can still say that a large part of my heart remains in Holland.*" There are probably many things I do because of her that I don't recognize as European, although one I'm aware of is the way that I write dates, and another is how I sometimes forget that people here are only used to being kissed on one cheek. She sometimes said that she never felt fully Americanized. She thought it was very strange to put fruit in the refrigerator, crass to talk about money (what you earn, what something costs), and very confusing that "how are you?" was meant as a greeting but wasn't really a question. She missed my father terribly after he died, and she wore his Cornell ring on a shoelace around her neck and kissed his ring every morning and evening.

Fiercely independent, she often said, "*Zelf doen!*" ("I want to do it myself!") which she had said since she was very little.

(from my journal on 1/30/2022)

Her fingers were looking for her mint, moving around on the sheet, and I tried to show her where it was. She pulled away. "*I want to find it myself.*"

Me: "Zelf doen!"

Elka: "*Zelf doen even to the end.*"

Prompt:

What are the most important lessons you have learned in your life?

Elka's response in 1990:

*Never to assume **anything***

Life is not fair

Honesty is the best policy

Most beauty can be found right at home

Not to judge people too quickly

Cherish our good health

To value relationships

It's OK to live with ambivalence

As I have looked through her address book and old photo albums, I've been reminded of the friends Elka collected and kept in touch with all her life as well as some very close relatives. I've also been reminded, and somewhat comforted, by how many wonderful adventures Elka had as the energetic, red-lipsticked younger version of herself who, mostly with my dad at her side, walked through Bruges and Berlin and the Scottish Highlands and Paris and Oaxaca and London and Jerusalem and Amsterdam and many other beautiful cities. So many deep conversations, so many friends, a life partner to share with, very meaningful work, and delicious meals.

Elka wrote in 1994:

My story is of family, of homeland, of nurturing connectedness between the past and the present, between Europe and America, among family and friends. It is of connections broken but never forgotten, legacies, treating others with kindness.

Elka died on 12 February 2022 in Bellingham, WA, in the home she and Myron loved. She is survived by her son, Paul Cienfuegos of Portland, OR; her daughter, Anji Citron (Todd Citron) of Bellingham, WA; her grandchildren Julia Citron (Kareem Farooq) of Kirkland, WA, Ezra Citron of Seattle, WA, and Noah Citron (Rachel Santiago) of Madison, WI; and her great grandson, Jasper Citron of Kirkland, WA.

Prompt:

Imagine you are writing your epitaph. What things do you want to be remembered for at the end of your life?

Elka's response in 1990:

*warmth, compassion, concern for others
love of my children and grandchildren*

And a bit more before I end...

Elka was born at home in Groningen, Netherlands. I'm guessing she was born in her mother's bedroom.

During her 27 years in Bellingham, Elka's bed faced a wall with three portraits. Two of them were portraits of her mother, Rose (drawn by Rose's cousin, the highly-regarded Dutch painter Paul Citroen, who drew a lot of portraits of Rose) in her early 20's. In between the portraits was a pastel drawing of Elka (not drawn by Paul Citroen) around age 6. She has a bow in her hair and big brown eyes. She told me that she remembered sitting for this portrait and that it, alongside one of her brother, hung over her parents' bed until they died.

In 1994, Elka wrote about this portrait:

Hers now has great meaning for her. It is a wistful face beautifully and accurately painted ... she derives tremendous satisfaction from having it in her room and looking at it. It frequently makes her cry deeply and in a healing way.

There is something so right to me about Elka dying in her bedroom observed by these long ago faces. And there is a simplicity and congruity about being born and dying at home in your own bedroom. Birth and death not medical events, just bookends to the life that happens in between them.

The most important things I got from my mother were early consistent nurturing and a model for how to be in relationships, and those two things have shaped my life. So much of her being has taught me how to be: her mothering, her attending with genuine warmth, care, and presence to people and details, and then this unexpected bonus gift of a crash course on death and dying. She was a remarkable teacher. I have her inside me in so many ways, and still I will miss her for the rest of my life.

"My father would say, 'Such is life, and it gets sucher and sucher.'"