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Norma Barzman lived an amazing 103 years across the twentieth century and beyond

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Her parents Samuel and Goldie Levor welcomed her into life on September 15, 1920 in New York City, ten years after her sister Muriel. She sometimes regretted that she was expected to replace Linda, another sister who died in the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1919. After school in New York and France, she attended Radcliffe College. There she met and married Claude Shannon, who was later known as the father of information theory. A romance which quickly ended in divorce.

In September 1939 her mother rushed to fetch her in France where she had hoped to cover the outbreak of war, as a journalist, an episode she evoked in 2005, in Le Havre, the port of embarkation to New York, during the wedding of her son John. After the death of Norma's father, the family moved to Los Angeles in 1941. There they were guided by her cousin Henry Myers, a writer and activist in progressive causes. She was drawn to the fight against Nazism, for women's equality, against racial discrimination and worked as a journalist for the Los Angeles Examiner. She met and married Ben Barzman, a screenwriter, in 1943. She agreed with Ben about progressives in Hollywood : : "we're making a difference. We influence producers to make pictures about real people. About women. We keep out the 'Stepin Fetchit' characters. Movies are less bad because of us."

Because they had nurtured hope for a world of peace and social justice after World War Two, they were angered by the onset of the Cold War, and blamed what they saw as reactionary warmongering forces in the United States for it. When the various committees influenced by Joseph McCarthy issued a subpoena for Norma and Ben to testify about « communist subversive activities », they and many others in the same situation decided to go abroad for a while. They took the stand that the Fifth Amendment allowed them not to answer questions that might endanger their civil rights and then force them to testify against other people. They left with their first two children, Luli and John, in 1949. Once in France, Norma gave birth to Aaron and four other children (Daniel, Paolo, Marco and Suzo). Things were difficult initially but they were part of a community of exiles (Joseph Losey, Jules Dassin, John Berry, Michael Wilson and others) and were well connected to European intellectuals and artists. At one point, their US passports were confiscated by the embassy.

Eventually, Ben was able to work in France and England, on various films including Time Without Pity (against the death penalty), Blind Date, El Cid, The Fall of the Roman Empire, The Blue Max, The Heroes of Telemark. Norma wrote some screenplays that were produced (such as the movie Finishing School, episodes of the British TV series Robin Hood). She collaborated on films or projects with Ben (for instance Never Say Goodbye) and they co-authored a novel, Rich Dreams.

Norma was proud to have been one of the first women in France to experience « painless childbirth » and to raise a large family. She was interested and inspired by the events of May 1968

and their aftermath in France (she even wrote a play about it). For years she'd been increasingly skeptical about alleged Soviet achievements and then outraged especially after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the 1968 Polish Communist Party antisemitic campaign. In 1976, the couple decided to return to Hollywood after a quarter of a century. But the scene had changed and many projects they initiated did not come to fruition. Ben died in 1989.

Norma wrote a column for the Los Angeles Times, « The Best Years », and was active in various feminist causes to restore the contribution of women notably in the film industry. In 1999 Norma participated in protests against the Academy awarding Elia Kazan an honorary Oscar, because of his collaboration with HUAC during the McCarthyite witch-hunt ; she decried a « lifetime achievement award » ; to a man who « had broken so many lives ». She lived in Beverly Hills, where she wrote *The Red and the Blacklist* (2003) and *The End of Romance* (2006) and gave interviews. She was still a sort of mentor for quite a few people, giving advice on personal and professional matters. Visitors remember how she kept abreast of family and world events until the very end, and liked to work on the New York Times crossword puzzles with relatives and friends.

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P.-S.

- barzmanj. 23 janvier 2024 : <https://barzmanj.wordpress.com/2024/01/23/norma-barzman-lived-an-amazing-103-years-across-the-twentieth-century-and-beyond/>