

The “replacement child”

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Judy Mandel and her older sister, Linda. From "Replacement Child"

In the four years she spent writing her book, “Replacement Child: A Memoir,” Judy Mandel found out some chilling things about the 1952 airplane accident that devastated her family.

American Airlines Flight 6780 was descending into Newark Airport when it struck her parents’ Elizabeth, N.J., apartment building on Jan. 22. It was about 3 p.m., just after Judy’s oldest sister, Donna, had come home from school. The pilot of the plane lived down the street. Judy’s mother had entertained two friends, who left 10 minutes before the crash. On the plane, along with 22 others, was the former Secretary of War under FDR, Robert Porter Patterson. Judy’s father was at work at his jewelry store a mile away.

As the crashed sheared off the top of their three-family apartment house, splashed it with jet fuel and leveled the home next door, Judy’s mother quickly grabbed her 2-year-old daughter, Linda, and raced down the stairs to the street. She started to run back to the house for Donna, 7, but was barred from the inferno. Donna and 30 others – including all plane passengers - died in the carnage.

Born two years after the crash, Judy Mandel believes she was her parents’ replacement for their oldest child. Her job, she says, was not to make waves, to be the “easy child” who could make the family whole again and allow Judy’s parents to focus on badly scarred Linda, who underwent several reconstructive surgeries.

“(Writing) was kind of a journey for me,” says Judy, 55 and a resident of Connecticut. “Through the years, I got the story piecemeal. I had to do my own research to discover the details. We never really talked at length about the crash.”

With help from newspaper clippings and other mementoes her mother left behind, as well as honest talks with Linda, who went on to marry and have children of her own, Judy Mandel came to terms with many things: a distant relationship with her father, who neglected to pay her compliments or show much affection out of deference to the scarred Linda; her own failed relationships; and her part in a family history that did not include her.

“I finally did see I was part of the recovery for them,” says the former *Hartford Courant* reporter. “I had really negated my role, thinking I was outside the nucleus of the family because I wasn’t there for this major event in their lives.”

Find out more about Mandel and her book at www.replacementchild.com. E-mail her at judymandel@gmail.com. Find the book at Amazon.com for \$11.53. And read a Q&A with the author at www.bestbooksreviewed.com/content/view/72/1/