



Elizabeth Meyer Lorentz
1913 - 2001

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Elizabeth Meyer Lorentz was a free spirit. The second child of banker and *Washington Post* publisher Eugene Meyer, she was born into a formal family, but never found herself constrained by rules and expectations. An obituary published in *The New York Times* at Mrs. Lorentz's 2001 death describes her as a "screenwriter," and though she did indeed write for the movies, choosing a single label for a life as colorful as that of Mrs. Lorentz does injustice to her formidable legacy.

'Bis,' as Elizabeth was always known, was born in New York City in 1913 to Eugene and Agnes Meyer. Her parents—an unlikely pair—had first crossed paths at a gallery exhibit of Japanese prints in Manhattan in 1908, and as family lore has it, Eugene declared his intentions to marry the tall, striking Barnard graduate the moment he saw her. Indeed, their wedding was two years later to the day.

THE MEYER & ERNST FAMILIES

The 32-year-old banker was not an obvious choice for the 21-year-old writer and arts aficionado, who considered herself something of a bohemian.

Eugene hailed from a distinguished Jewish family with roots in Strasbourg, France. His father was a partner at Lazard Frères, the investment bank, and his mother, a rabbi's daughter; they raised their three daughters and one son in California and New York. Eugene himself was a serious and determined young man who by 1904 had founded his own investment firm and amassed a large fortune. He would soon go on to found Allied Chemical Co. (now a subsidiary of Honeywell) and serve as the first president of the World Bank. His decades-long commitment and multimillion-dollar investment in *The Washington Post*, a failing paper when he bought it at auction in 1933, made it the journalistic powerhouse it remains to this day.

Agnes was the youngest child in a family descended from Lutheran ministers from Germany. She described her upbringing in Pelham Heights, New York, as “puritanical and austere.” Her daily routine included an ice-cold bath that was considered “vital to the formation of a sturdy character.” As a young girl, Agnes worshiped her father Frederick, an attorney, who would take her on long sunrise walks during which they’d discuss music, theater, and art that would inspire in her a lifelong appreciation of the arts.

Even after her fateful gallery encounter with Eugene, Agnes was determined to experience the world. She set off in 1909 with her girlfriend Nancy for what was meant to be a six-week stay in Paris. Her friendship with Edward Steichen, whom she knew in New York, opened many doors for her abroad. She met Gertrude Stein (a “humbug,” she said), Pablo Picasso (“superficially clever”), and Madame Curie, whom she found truly impressive after a fencing encounter. It was during Agnes’s stay in Paris that she first met Constantin Brancusi and Auguste Rodin, who would become life-long friends. Decades later, Brancusi would figure importantly in Bis’s life, too.

Agnes returned from Europe to marry Eugene in a small Lutheran ceremony in 1910. They started their family shortly thereafter. Daughter Florence was born in 1911, followed by Bis in 1913, Bill in 1915, Katharine in 1917, and Ruth in 1921. Though Agnes embraced the notion of motherhood and family life, she found the reality difficult, and worked hard to maintain her individual identity and continue her intellectual pursuits. Katharine Graham, her father’s successor at the helm of *The Post* wrote in her memoir, *Personal History*, that Agnes described herself as “conscientious, but scarcely a loving mother.”

A CULTIVATED CHILDHOOD

The Meyer family lived in New York City, spending summers and many weekends at Seven Springs Farm, their estate in Mount Kisco, New York. Bis



Portrait of Bis c. 1920. By Edward Steichen.

began her formal education at the Lincoln School, which was, from its founding in 1917 to its 1940 consolidation with the Horace Mann School, a laboratory for progressive educational theory. Its research-intensive methods, practical curriculum, and appeal to members of the City's social elite—Rockefellers as well as Meyers—made it unusual for its time. Bis fondly remembered the Lincoln School as a hierarchy-free environment that provided respite from the formality and expectations of home and family, and in her memoir she recalls speaking her mind freely as a four-year-old member of the student government.

Even with the children in school in New York, Eugene and Agnes spent a good deal of time in Washington, D.C., pursuing their respective ambitions. In 1917, with war looming, Eugene offered his services to his friends Justice Louis Brandeis and Bernard Baruch. Joining him in the capital, Agnes grew increasingly involved in her studies of Chinese art and took on the social obligations of a political wife. Bis lamented her parents' near-constant absence during her early childhood. Until they moved to Washington,

she and her siblings stayed in the City, living with Mademoiselle Otth, their governess, and a beloved nanny whom they called Powelly. Bis remembered a small bulletin board in their home's entryway that alerted the children to the comings and goings of their parents.

Despite the family's frequent separations, the pleasures and privileges of being a Meyer were many. Family life was enhanced by the periodic visits to Mount Kisco of her parents' illustrious friends. Edward Steichen was a frequent visitor to the Meyer household and favorite playmate of the children, who nicknamed him "Man." In Bis's mind, "being in Mount Kisco meant Steichen," and she relished the fact that he "always challenged the breach between kids and grown-ups, and landed halfway in between." Steichen's portraits of the family can be seen in Kay Graham's memoir, and they appear frequently in exhibitions of his work.

Bis also credited her parents' absence with the unusually strong bonds among the siblings. As she tells it, the children didn't harbor any resentment toward their parents—it was just the way things were. After all, she remembered, "Mother had to manage his life, her life with him, her life on her own, and then her life with us." She even calls her "the master juggler of these divergent worlds."

After completing third grade at the Lincoln School in New York, Bis and the other Meyer children joined their parents in Washington in 1921, where they took up residence in a sprawling red-brick mansion at 2201 Connecticut Avenue. Enrolling at Friends' Select School—now Sidwell Friends—Bis was promoted to the fifth grade, where as a younger member of her class she recalls always feeling "socially behind." Eventually she transferred to the Potomac School.

During the year, Bis's schedule was busy, packed to the hilt with horseback riding and German lessons, and later wrestling, tennis, and violin. (The latter two would become lifelong passions.)

During summers at Mount Kisco, the childrens' schedules were no less active: Mornings were spent on math, grammar, history, and language lessons, while afternoons were devoted to music and athletics. Bis particularly relished her position as the top tennis player in the family, and the only child who could beat their father. She savored this time with Eugene, as their contact was more commonly mediated by her mother.

The annual trips from Washington to Mount Kisco were a production. Bis recalls eight-hour train rides from Washington to New York with an entourage that included canary cages, goldfish bowls, and towers of baggage. The family's driver would meet them at the station with their Pierce Arrow for the remaining two hours of "motoring" to Mount Kisco.

Another important feature of her childhood were the exotic trips she would take with her mother and siblings each summer. A 1922 expedition to New Mexico made a particularly strong impression on her, and quite literally broadened her horizons. In her memoir, Bis fondly described being allowed by her usually strict mother to roam the "rugged western landscape." She wrote with wonderment: "Everything here seemed to expand to another vista, another adventure." During a nine-day camping trip in the Southwestern desert with Tewa guides, she took deep pleasure in being her "natural self," and at the trips end, sadly accepted that it was time to "bid warm goodbyes and depart for the ways of civilization."

Throughout her teenage years, Bis continued to keep her parents and teachers on high alert, earning her first speeding citation a full year before she'd reached the legal driving age on a joyride through Fairfax, Virginia—then a one-building outpost—at 60 miles per hour.

At Miss Madeira's School, Bis was known among her high school classmates as being athletic and "brooking no nonsense from boys." She developed an athletic physique as a result of her interest in wrestling, and remembers once shocking

her friends by flexing her neck muscles to such an extent that she burst a choker necklace, sending its beads flying across the locker room floor.

When confronted about her outrageous behavior, she recalls telling her mother, “I’m going to do what I want to do.” She wrote: “I resented adult power and met power with power, in whatever way I had power. Somebody had to break the rules.”

THE INDIVIDUALIST AS A YOUNG WOMAN

After graduating from Miss Madeira’s School, Bis attended Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. She matriculated in 1929 and was a sharp but distracted student, deeply involved with her tennis and violin lessons. She wrote a letter to her mother deriding Vassar as a “ghastly den of purity” and thought of dropping out to become a tennis pro, but had second thoughts.

Instead, she would take refuge in the City, sneaking out for weekend trips, racket and violin in hand. A friend pointed her to Felix’s, a speakeasy where she would become a regular and come to know many of the most influential artists and intellectuals of her time.

Bis majored in music, having considered economics, but determined that “young women didn’t really pursue careers.” Possibly the most important decision Bis made as an undergraduate was to spend her junior year studying abroad in Munich. The title she assigned to the chapter in her memoir about her life there is *Der Wilde Amerikaner*. Not surprisingly, it was a year that would forever alter her outlook and shape the direction of her life.

Thanks to family connections, Bis took up residence at the home of the Count and Countess Hoyos on Ohmstrasse, near the university. Not yet 20, she eagerly embraced the cosmopolitan glamor of old Europe and the energetic pace of student life.

Though she claimed to be uninterested in romance, Bis nonetheless had several suitors. One of them, Countess Hoyos' much older father, enjoyed taking her dancing; on weekends they entered rhumba and tango competitions. In her free time, Bis continued her music studies at the Music Academy under first violin Jani Szanto.

Bis soon became involved in the political discourse at student meetings. Special guests, such as the finance minister, spoke, and attendees representing all points on the political spectrum came to air and debate their views. Her mother, sensing the impending economic and political chaos, "entreated me to fly for the Swiss border at once if things started disintegrating," Bis wrote in her memoir.

Despite her political and cultural involvement, the year was not an academic triumph for the wild American, but she had become more serious about her violin studies. She determined to return home at the end of her year in Munich not to Vassar, but to New York City and Barnard, where she would continue her music lessons at Juilliard. She studied under Louis Persinger, started her own quartet, and performed with the Juilliard and Columbia University orchestras.

THE GIRL ABOUT TOWN

New York City was a perfect match for the creative, outgoing, and energetic young woman Bis had become. Though she'd lived in the City as a child and knew it well, she now discovered a new side of her hometown, one she enjoyed around the clock.

In her memoir, Bis wrote about evenings spent with Oscar Levant hopping from one musical venue to another, from Carnegie Hall to Town Hall and back again, to see performances by friends. With Levant, she met everyone who was anyone in music and theater. Guests at the parties they attended included the Gershwins, George Kaufman, Moss Hart, Irving Berlin, and other boldface names of the day.

She recalled late nights at George Gershwin's 14-room duplex apartment on East 72 Street, where "any occasion was occasion enough for a party." Bis got a kick out of the fact that Gershwin hung his own paintings among those of Picasso, Derain, Chagall, and Modigliani. As the night wore on, guests would straggle across the street to Ira and Lee Gershwin's place. Most parties were impromptu affairs, but Ira would once in a while throw an announced party—"always upon the issuance of a new dictionary," Bis recalled, "a lyricist's cause to celebrate."

It was around this time that she met the screenwriter Sam Behrman. She offered to write a film treatment of one of his plays, he agreed, and thus began a long collaboration and the beginning of Bis's career in film.

It was a bright spot in the midst of an otherwise difficult time for Bis. She'd suffered a pair of romantic disappointments. She found herself at the end of five years of college with no degree. She'd passed up careers playing tennis and the violin. She felt frustrated and later wrote, "Why should I excel at the violin or anything else if its real purpose was to make me more eligible for an appropriate marriage? A young woman wasn't really expected to succeed at anything but a proper marriage."

Encouraged by Behrman, she wrote to Alexander Korda, in London, offering to work with him on *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, which was just then going into production. Bis left for England in September 1934 on the SS *Berengaria*.

The move to London was all but seamless for Bis. She let a flat in Mayfair with her brother Bill, who at the time was studying at Oxford, and took up easily with the British counterparts of her artistic and literary friends in New York. She met Somerset Maugham, bantered on the set with H.G. Wells, and joined an orchestra. She reported on life in London as a "special correspondent" for the *Washington Post*, which her father had bought in 1933. And when *The Scar-*

let *Pimpernel* wrapped, she signed on to serve as assistant, translator, and script girl on *The Ghost Goes West*.

Waiting for a new work permit to come through, Bis spent time in Paris, where she reunited with her old family friend Brancusi and spent a great deal of time with him in his studio working, talking, and drinking. The two were so close that he dubbed her “Morice,” a term of endearment he shared with his good friend Duchamp and other intimates the two considered possessed of true heart and soul.

Soon enough it became evident that the British work permit wasn’t coming through, and Bis decided to return to Hollywood to pick up where she had left off with Sam Behrman.

LIFE AND MARRIAGE IN THE ARTS

It was in Hollywood that Bis met Pare Lorentz, who was then working as a film critic. Having shunned romantic entanglements for years, she was finally ready to settle down. Pare was worth the wait. He hailed from rural West Virginia, and was smart, handsome, and serious—a refreshing change from the wealthy, connected young men who had wooed Bis in New York and London.

Lorentz’s film criticism earned him widespread recognition, and in 1936, the Roosevelt administration invited him to Washington, D.C., to discuss how they might use film to “bridge the communications gap between government and the public.” They wanted him to create films that would provide “quality dramatization of the goals of the New Deal to win the minds (and votes) of the American people.”

The Plow that Broke the Plains (1936) and *The River* (1937), attracted global attention, and secured his place in cinematic history. *The River* won Best Documentary Film at the 1938 Venice Film Festival; James Joyce was quoted as saying that its narration “contained the most beautiful prose I have heard in 10 years.”

Bis at the opening of the Pare Lorentz Film Center at the FDR Presidential Library and Museum.



In the introduction to the book *FDR's Movie-maker: Memoirs & Scripts*, William M. Drennan, Jr. writes of Pare Lorentz's work that "it is the quality of these presentations that developed an audience and enabled them to be shown in commercial movie houses all across this country. And it is the clever montage of stock photography and fabulous original cinematography and the masterful use of an original score that make these productions such important technical achievements in the history of film."

Even today, as Peter C. Rollins writes in *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*, Lorentz is credited as being among the first filmmakers to use "intellectual montage," juxtaposing images and sounds to evoke particular ideas in the viewer's mind.

Pare and Bis were married in 1943.

THE POWER OF NETWORKING, OFFLINE

Pare and Bis eventually moved back to New York City, and then to Westchester County.

Later in her life, and especially after Pare died in 1992, Bis became deeply interested in the concept of networking, having come across the

writings of Yale professor Seymour Sarason, one of the fathers of community psychology. As the result of her work with Sarason, Bis would become instrumental in the practice of “designing configurations of people” to optimize the organizations and networks in which they operate.

Mrs. Lorentz had served for more than 15 years as trustee and chair of the long-term planning committee of her local hospital, and she found that Sarason’s work captured the essence of what she believed made her so effective in her role. She believed passionately that it was her innate ability to play the role of “coordinator” that enabled her to see and foster connections among people, which she did on behalf of the hospital.

Eventually, she would co-author two books with Professor Sarason on the topic. Both feature a main character named “Mrs. Dewar” (do-er). In *Crossing Boundaries: Coordination, Collaboration, and the Redefinition of Resources* (1998), Bis and Sarason wrote: “A good coordinator thinks while she talks, about how to mentally place a person within a network; follows through on each match, even if she has to place that first phone call herself; takes pleasure in making a match—her reward is an inner integration reflecting the outer one that takes place; and puts herself second—isn’t afraid to chase people down and demean herself to make a connection.”

Incredibly, it was this work with Sarason that would define Bis’s legacy and let her set up the Elizabeth Meyer Lorentz Fund in The New York Community Trust through her will.

Today, a portion of her substantial bequest is dedicated to preserving the legacy of her husband’s work by supporting documentary filmmakers. The remainder is devoted to promoting the role of coordinator wherever it can benefit organizations that enhance New Yorkers’ quality of life. It’s an unusual commitment, but one that suits a life so unconventional and creative as that of Elizabeth Meyer Lorentz.

PARE LORENTZ DOCUMENTARY FUND

Made possible by The New York Community Trust



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The New York Community Trust

is a community foundation, helping New Yorkers achieve their charitable goals and making grants that respond to the needs of our City.

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