

**Harryet Candee: Originally we met when your son, Jacob, was a camper at Natchez in West Copake, owned by our good friend Marc Schaffer.**

**Sonia Pilcer:** Yes. Many moons ago. Jacob now works in West Hartford, and Marc opened the restaurant and Club Helsinki with Deborah McDowell in Hudson.

**I loved the book LITTLE DARLINGS, same for the film. Did you go to camp as a teenager ( pre-teen), and how close from actual experience was this book to your life?**

**Sonia:** My least autobiographical book. I worked as a counselor in camps, actually at Camp Kadima in Great Barrington, but was not a camper. An editor assigned me to “novelize” the film script of LITTLE DARLINGS, about 120 pages of dialogue, into a real book. It was a challenge as you can imagine. But the book of my youth is TEEN ANGEL, my first novel.

**I love the nostalgic look of the book TEEN ANGEL! The one with the teenager on her back and her legs up into the blue horizon... Her hair, her style — Its so—-70s!?**

**Sonia:** Actually it’s the Sixties. The book has just been re-issued in a 35th year anniversary edition. And though it’s my firstborn and I was in my 20s when I wrote it, I love that book and was reluctant to let go of my heroine, Sonny Palovsky. So much so, I re-introduced her and her family in a novel I wrote twenty years later, THE HOLOCAUST KID.

**Can you talk about being born in Germany and how you were personally affected by the Holocaust.**

**Sonia:** My parents, both from Lodz, Poland, met after the war. They were orphans from large families, married in 1945, and were forced to escape from Poland because anti-Semitism was still rampant. Ironically, they went to Germany for safety. They wanted to come to the States, but because of strict quotas, they didn’t arrive until the 1950s. They lived in the Landsberg Displaced Persons camp, where I was born. In fact, I wrote a poem “Refugees,” which ends:

*We were fevered by visions of roots like fingers  
implanted in the earth’s belly.*

*Two by two, we boarded the boat, Noah’s grateful beasts,  
to salvage what was left.*

*America! America! America!*

*We chanted the magic word of passage.*

*Our daughter sat quiet as baggage.*

I guess I always knew there was something unusual about my family, but since I grew up with other survivor families in Washington Heights, I thought all Jews spoke with foreign accents. It kept me alienated from Judaism, but when we moved upstate, I discovered a rich and creative Jewish life in Great Barrington.

**Living in the Berkshires and in New York City must be fun for you. Has the juggling between both locales had an effect on your writing? Is there a connection you can make between your new novel, THE LAST HOTEL, and your life in the Berkshires?**

**Sonia:** I haven’t thought there was a connection, but I did write the THE LAST HOTEL while spending most of my time in the Berkshires. I suppose I was remembering a city that no longer existed. My New York when I was young, when I was full of promise, and though the city was tough and scary, there was so much life there. It was terribly exciting. But living in the Berkshires now, I really appreciate the sense of community here. A visit to the co-op and I’ll see half a dozen people I know. Some will mention reading the latest installment of THE LAST HOTEL.

**How did the idea of serializing your novel come about?**

**Sonia:** David Scribner and I talked about it before he even began to publish The Edge. I had been aware of Dickens having serialized his novel. I’d been a fan of Armistead Maupin’s TALES OF THE CITY. And the form of this book — the fact that every chapter takes place in a different suite in the hotel, in the lobby, in the basement, in the elevator — it was just too tempting!

So every Thursday evening, I send the next suite for him to publish. Sometimes I send a photograph I take with my phone during my wanderings. We’re up to our 25th installment, I think, and there’s still more.

**I-LAND: Manhattan Monologues is based on New York City of the 1980s. It was designed by you as a string of monologues that are connected. How were you inspired to create this kind**



Photograph by Barbara Dockett

## WRITER SONIA PILCER

**of book? What did you find the most interesting in the various stages of writing? What kind of research was involved? Sonia, and where in the world did you discover a sense of humor lies underneath every human condition?**

**Sonia:** I’ve always felt that humor is the way to get at serious things. It disarms the reader, and then you throw in some difficult truth. “Make them laugh!” the Catskill entertainers sang out. And spending our summers in the Borsht Belt probably contributed.

The monologue form particularly appeals to me. I can actually hear the characters chattering and I just have to type fast enough to get their words. With I-LAND, I turned the book into a theatrical play which ran in a small theater, the Thirteenth Street Repertory Theater, for over six years. I had the pleasure of seeing different actors interpreting my characters. Everyone seemed to want to play Lana Lamarr, my gorgeous transsexual character, on the eve of her operation.

**What do you think has rounded out your life? What experiences can you share with us that have inspired you to write them down and share.**

**Sonia:** Most of my books are about psychic survival. I have followed a heroine, not unlike myself, on her journey. It began with growing up in a tough neighborhood and joining a girls gang. That was TEEN ANGEL. I then wanted to explore the devastation of first love and first sex, which I did in MAIDEN RITES, based on my first relationship. I-LAND was a kind of joyful lark in the midst of when I was writing THE HOLOCAUST KID, and receiving countless rejections. THE LAST HOTEL, which is based on a hotel my father managed on the Upper Westside of Manhattan, became the repository of all these amazing characters I had in my head. Why not give them rooms at THE LAST HOTEL and see what happens when they all meet each other.

**Can you explain what you think works in order to become a successful writer? Like many arts that are out there, is writing one that you should have an early start in order to succeed as a professional?**

**Sonia:** I had the good fortune to publish early. I had taken a workshop at the Writers Community with C.D.B. Bryan, author of FRIENDLY FIIRE, who encouraged me to work on TEEN ANGEL. He said if I gave him 100 pages, he would show it to his agent. Then it became another 100 pages and continued this way until I finished. I don’t know if I’d call myself a successful writer, but I’ve had the opportunity to do my work and tell my stories.

**You teach writing yourself, don’t you?**

**Sonia:** I do. And that’s been one of my great pleasures to offer up to other writers what I know. I returned to teach at the Writers Community at the Westside YMCA, which had been so helpful to me. I also teach at Berkshire Community College in Great Barrington, and I work privately.

Mostly I try to encourage writers to write. To not judge the work or themselves too early in the process. Often I just say “Keep going.” That’s what CDB wrote on all my chapters. I also let them know that it’s a long, long path, and that talent will only get you so far. If you want to have a career as a writer, I suppose one has to have a gift, but more importantly — grit — despite indifference, rejection, distraction — all the difficulties a writer encounters in their work.

**Are you planning to ever write a novel about the teenagers in Great Barrington? What’s up next?**

**Sonia:** I wish I knew. Maybe I’ll write about the grey hairs of Barrington. I’ve had such great experiences curating WOMEN WRITERS OF A CERTAIN AGE at the Berkshire Women Writers Festival for four years, and at the Hillsdale Library. I’ve met amazing women.

I am interested in the process of aging. My father, a survivor of Auschwitz, died at nearly 95 a year ago. My mother, 92, is still going strong and plays a wicked amount of canasta at the Sterling Senior Lifestyle Center. In fact, I’ve acknowledged her group, the Knitters and Kibbitzers for their help with Yiddish words and expression.

Since my newest birth, I’m giving readings and book-signings of THE LAST HOTEL. My next reading and signing in the Berkshires is on Sunday, May 3rd, 5 PM. Congregation Ahavath Shalom on North Street in Great Barrington.

### SONIA’S BOOKSHELF

TEEN ANGEL (*Putnam*) originally published in 1978, now available from Intoprint.

MAIDEN RITES (*Viking*) 1982.

LITTLE DARLINGS (*Ballantine*) 1983.

I-LAND: MANHATTAN MONOLOGUES (*Ballantine*) 1987, now available from Intoprint.

HOLOCAUST KID (*Persea and Delta Books*) 2001

THE LAST HOTEL (*Heliotrope Books*) 2015

Available at your local bookstore and AMAZON.com

Or go to Sonia’s website: [soniapilcer.com](http://soniapilcer.com)