

# The Doctor Is In

Famed 'sex-pert' offers tips on finding *joie de vivre*

By Lynn Wexler

“One of my secrets to getting the most from life is that I naturally forget bad things that have happened to me.”

— Ruth Westheimer

**A**t 4 feet 7 inches tall, Ruth Westheimer remains a giant in her field. And at 87, she's as active and feisty as ever.

Yes, the woman much of the world knows as Dr. Ruth still loves to talk about sex. After all, this Holocaust survivor and former Israeli sniper pioneered public sex talk way back in 1980, with her first radio broadcast, *Sexually Speaking*. Thirty-six years later, she still campaigns for sexual literacy and expression, and finds them most rewarding when practiced within the context of relationship and family.

Karola Ruth Siegel was born in Germany in 1928, an only child from an Orthodox Jewish home. She fondly remembers a nurturing environment, with loving and



indulgent parents and grandmother. It's that foundation, she says, that has held her in good stead throughout her life, along with the guiding and abiding principles and lessons in the Torah.

A self-described inquisitive child, she remembers creeping into her father's library to read his books, which piqued her interest in the subject of human sexuality.

On Nov. 9, 1938, however, the 10-year-old's world was violently shattered during Kristallnacht (*Night of the Broken Glass*). The Nazi rampage, considered by some historians as the start of The Holocaust, left dozens of Jews, perhaps hundreds, dead across Germany and thousands of properties destroyed.

Ruth's family responded to the terror by sending her out of the country to a school in Switzerland. Her father was already in a labor camp. The Swiss school eventually would become an orphanage for Jewish refugee girls. Ruth recalls her second-class treatment there. She was deprived of an education, and trained to be a maid. Teachers were alarmed by the garrulous child's willingness to discuss unmentionable topics, such as menstruation.

Ruth, 17 by war's end, never saw her family again. She believes they perished in the Auschwitz concentration camp.

She decided to go to what was then the British mandate of Palestine (now Israel) and to join the Haganah, the underground movement fighting for a Jewish state; her uncanny knack for consistently hitting a target led to her selection to train as a sniper.

"Yes, I was a very good shooter," she says in her trademark German accent. "I once went with my grandson to a county fair, where you shoot a water pistol at the clown's mouth. We came home with twelve stuffed animals and a goldfish."

Two years after her arrival in the Middle East, Ruth left for France. She attended the Paris-Sorbonne University and taught kindergarten.

With a \$1,500 Holocaust reparations check in her hand, Ruth and her then French husband moved to Washington Heights in New York City in 1956 (where she would live and raise a family for more than half a century). Ruth gave birth to a girl named Miriam, but the marriage that produced the child soon ended. "We had a great love affair," she says, "but it became clear that we were not intellectually compatible."

Ruth found herself raising Miriam alone and working as a housemaid to make ends meet. In the meantime, she took English lessons and studied for her master's in sociology from The New School.

*The Doctor Is In – Dr. Ruth on Love, Life, and Joie de Vivre* is her recently published memoir. She uses personal anecdotes and humor in the book to reveal her approach to living life fully. She also addresses the issue of being a single mom, citing the controversial 1990s TV sitcom experiences of leading character *Murphy Brown*.

"On TV, she could make it look easy," Westheimer writes. "And that might convince some single women that they could follow in Murphy's footsteps without significant consequences. While I never regretted a second of my years raising Miriam by myself, given the difficulties, it's important to me to discourage anyone else with the idea of charting the same course."

In her own life, Westheimer wanted to find someone interested in having a family. While on a ski trip to the Catskill Mountains in 1961, she met and eventually fell in love with Manfred Westheimer, a Jewish refugee and electrical engineer. They married nine months later, and soon had a son, Joel.

Ruth eventually earned a doctorate in family and sex counseling from Columbia's Teachers College, and followed that with post-doctoral studies in human sexuality at the New York Hospital-Cornell University Medical Center.



Above: Dr. Ruth with comedian, actor, singer, and writer George Burns, Right: Dr. Ruth the sniper.





Now known as Dr. Ruth, she lectured New York broadcasters about the taboos preventing open discussions and educational programs on contraception and unwanted pregnancies. The manager of WYNY-FM soon offered her \$25 a week to do a 15-minute show called *Sexually Speaking*. It aired just after midnight on Sunday mornings.

"The show was a hit so they moved me to a 10 p.m. time slot," she says. "The phone lines were jammed with questions about sex and intimacy. It was clear that people wanted and needed this kind of talk and information."

At one point, *Sexually Speaking* attracted more than 250,000 listeners a week, besting many drive-time shows. Dr. Ruth became a popular guest on *Late Night with David Letterman*, and the following year her radio show was syndicated nationally.

Critics notwithstanding, Dr. Ruth's influence expanded to television, books, newspapers, games, home video, computer software, her own website, speaking engagements and tweets. She launched Dr. Ruth's Vin D'amour, a line of low alcohol wines. She teaches at her alma mater, Columbia, and a play called *Becoming Dr. Ruth* has toured the country.

Westheimer says her goal is to empower women and men to talk openly and honestly about sex and sexual health, within the context of a meaningful relationship. In her memoir, she calls this her *Tikkun Olam*, Hebrew for "repairing the world" and bringing about healing.

"Since I was an orphan and lost everything at the age of 10, my work gives me purpose and an opportunity to help others," she says, "because I survived and one million-and-a-half Jewish children did not."

The essence of her work, she says, is to promote the importance of relationships and family. "Everything else ... sexual enrichment, different positions, all can be taught. But first there has to be a relationship."

She defines *joie de vivre* (French for "joy for life") as a quest for remembering positive moments over the negative ones.

Her recently published children's book, *Leopold*, is about a turtle that learns to allow *joie de vivre* into his life by embracing courage rather than fear.

"I believe in that image of the turtle," she says. "If it stays in one place, it's safe. But if it wants to move, it takes a risk and has to stick its neck out. The message for kids is to understand that when you step out of your comfort zone, you're able to move ahead and make things happen, for yourself and for others."

Dr. Ruth also loves Las Vegas, particularly when visiting her dear friends Larry and Camille Ruvo. Larry is founder of the *Keep Memory Alive Foundation* and the *Lou Ruvo Brain Institute*, in honor of his late father who had Alzheimer's disease.

"I'm not a gambler," she says. "But Las Vegas is about so much more than gambling. I enjoy the shows and visiting the museums. And I always get someone to drive me to the Red Rock mountains. It's a mitzvah to appreciate nature, which reminds me of a quote by Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch: 'When I come before the Almighty, I will have to answer for many things. But what will I tell Him when He asks me: *Shimshon, did you see My Alps?*'"

"I love being Dr. Ruth," the grandmother of four says, betraying no inclination for retirement from her psychosexual therapist role.

"I hope people will remember me for my guts – *chutzpah* as it's called in the Jewish tradition," she says. "I had the nerve to talk about things others were too worried to talk about. Along the way I hopefully helped to prevent unintended pregnancies and inspired people to a better sex life – even orgasms – until their late stage in life."



Left: Dr. Ruth on the Kibbutz, Above: Dr. Ruth with Shimon Peres, former prime minister and president of the State of Israel.