

Robin Bloom, NOVEMBER 17, 2015

Dr. Ruth on love, life, and living-



WHYY's Maiken Scott speaks with Dr. Ruth Westheimer Monday. (Photo/ Matthew Christopher)

She may be small, but her message is large: Don't be afraid to take risks.

Famed sex therapist, media personality, and author Dr. Ruth Westheimer visited Philadelphia for the opening of a play at the Walnut Street Theatre about her fascinating life story. On Monday evening, as part of the National Museum of American Jewish History's annual Dreamers and Doers speakers series, the 87 year-old firecracker sat down with WHYY's Maiken Scott to talk about her new book "The Doctor Is In: Dr. Ruth on Love, Life, and Joie de Vivre" and about the resilience and perseverance that drive her.

Born Karola Siegel in Germany in 1928, Dr. Ruth recalled how her father was taken by the Nazis when she was just 10. She was then sent by her mother and grandmother on the Kindertransport to Switzerland, where she lived as an outsider for six years.

Upon finding out that her family had perished in the Holocaust, she emigrated to the British Mandate of Palestine where she joined the Haganah, a Jewish paramilitary organization that would later become the Israel Defense Forces. As a scout and a sniper, she fought in Israel's War of Independence in 1948 and was wounded in action by an exploding shell.

In 1950, Westheimer moved to France, where she studied at the Sorbonne and taught psychology at the University of Paris. In 1956, she moved to the U.S., settling in New York City. While working at a Planned Parenthood, Dr. Ruth discovered that many questions about sex were not adequately answered. She decided then that she would become an expert in what she calls the "interesting subject matter" of sex.

Launching a 15-minute program on radio that eventually expanded to two hours, Dr. Ruth became a cultural icon who ushered in a new era of open and frank talk about sex.

When asked how she carried on after losing her parents at such a young age, the illustrious psychologist credited the love and education she received in her early childhood and her own joie de vivre that sustains her. Whether receiving a call from renowned maestro Zubin Mehta or learning that Maiken Scott's son shares the same name of her late father, she cited the small, unexpected things in life that have made her smile.

Her philosophy is one of trying and taking risks, just like "Leopold," the subject of her children's book. "A turtle can't move unless it sticks its neck out," she said.

Known for her chutzpah, Dr. Ruth suggested that Sigmund Freud could have benefited from taking a sex education course with her and told all 500 audience members to "go home and try a new position with your partner and then write me and tell me all about it."

"Becoming Dr. Ruth" is onstage at the Walnut Street Theatre through Dec. 27. Dr. Ruth will be in attendance for talk backs with the audience on opening night -- Tuesday, Nov. 17 -- and Dec. 21.