

## The Three Phases of Joy Davidman

by Clara Sarrocco



C.S. Lewis

She is better now, up & about, and we have progressed very rapidly. In fact the great event is actually fixed - fixed! - do you realize that? I don't think I've ever been so bucked about anything in my life, she's an awfully decent sort.

Lewis, *Collected Letters* (105)

In that 1915 letter to Arthur Greeves, Lewis was referring to a young Belgian girl, a refugee of World War I, who was living at Great Bookham during 1915. While Lewis's feelings were lost on the Belgian girl, they were curiously prophetic about his relationship almost a half-century later with Helen Joy Davidman, who was born the same year the letter was written.

Joy (as she was known) was born to a first generation Eastern European Jewish family. Both her father, Joseph Isaac Davidman, and her mother, Jeanette Spivack, were products of Orthodox Jewish homes, but left their strict religious practices behind in their old world. They accepted a form of atheistic socialism, even though Jeanette did try to keep up the quasi-religious practices common among cultural Jews. Four years after Joy's birth, the family welcomed the birth of a son, Howard.

Both parents attended college and became teachers with the New York City Board of Education. Joseph eventually went on to become a school principal. During the Depression years when people were desperately seeking work, the Davidmans enjoyed secure and well-paying positions. Joy's life was materially comfortable but her father was a harsh taskmaster. He knew he had a gifted and brilliant daughter with an almost photographic memory but this was never enough. He constantly belittled his two children telling them that they would never amount to anything even as he pushed them for better and higher grades. At times he physically hit them when he felt that they did not perform to his satisfaction.

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Editor: Robert Trexler,  
100 Cowls Road, Amherst MA 01002  
e-mail: editor@nycslsociety.com  
web-site www.nycslsociety.com

Correspondence/subscriptions/renewals:  
Clara Sarrocco,  
84-23 77th Avenue, Glendale NY 11385

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