The Great
How a child of immigrants coped with hunger and uncertainty in the 1930s

The era can be summed up in two words: breadlines and debt. For the people who lived through it, the Great Depression was a time of devastation and uncertainty. After the stock market crashed in October 1929, millions of Americans lost their jobs and homes. By 1932, at the height of the Depression, the unemployment rate had reached nearly 25 percent.

That year, Eleanor Kadis* was 12 years old and living with her family in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her parents had emigrated from Lithuania when they were in their teens.

“My father was a realtor, in a town that was industrial,” Eleanor recalls. “[After the stock market crash] everything stopped working. People didn’t pay their rent, so he couldn’t keep up financially. We lost our home, and he lost properties that he had invested in.”

The family ended up “in a much lesser house,” Eleanor says, “in a neighborhood that I hated.”

Eleanor’s mother did everything she could to help feed and clothe her four children. “I remember that my mother bought a coat for herself,”

*Eleanor Kadis is the author’s mother.
Depression

Eleanor tells JS. “After she wore it for a while, she refashioned it for my older sister, and she wore it. In the end, my mother turned the coat inside out and stitched it again so that I could wear it.”

Many of the family’s meals consisted of potato pancakes and French fries because potatoes were cheap and filling. A small garden provided fruits and vegetables. But still there was not enough.

One day in 1932, Eleanor was sent to the local supermarket to collect food for the family—butter, flour, and bread. As she stood in the long line, holding the coupon that her mother had given her, she started to cry.

“I knew how proud my parents were,” she says. “Taking a handout was the last thing they wanted to do.”

“Fear Itself”

Like countless children across the United States, Eleanor feared that things would get worse.

“I was worried about my parents,” she says. “One time, some official came around to collect a tax. It was about $2. He was so overbearing, and I was scared to death that my father would be arrested for the $2. He wasn’t, but you know how a kid thinks. It was a very scary time.”

In cities and towns throughout the country, the outlook was increasingly bleak. Factories and mills were shutting down. Many banks had closed their doors, and farmers were unable to sell their produce. As a result, more and more people were standing in breadlines, hungry and homeless.

Things had to get better. So said Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Democratic candidate for President in 1932. Roosevelt, then the Governor of New York, ran against the Republican incumbent, Herbert Hoover, whose response to the economic downturn was considered woefully inadequate by many people.

After a landslide victory, Roosevelt took office in March 1933. His Inaugural Address, which was broadcast on radio, gripped the nation. Roosevelt reminded Americans that the country had seen tough times before and had always risen to the challenge.

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” the new President said, “nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror, which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life..."
leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves.”

In his first 100 days in office, Roosevelt sent 15 major bills through Congress. They included:
- the Glass-Steagall Banking Act, which protected investors and gave the Federal Reserve additional power to regulate loans made by banks;
- the Civilian Conservation Corps, which put young men to work on such projects as planting trees and building dams;
- the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, which provided states with funds for the needy; and
- the Public Works Administration, which led to the building and restoration of schools, courthouses, bridges, and other projects.

Roosevelt’s economic recovery programs, instituted between 1933 and 1938, were known collectively as the New Deal.

Some New Deal programs were successful. The Works Progress Administration (WPA), for instance, put people to work building highways, streets, parks, and other vital infrastructure. Later renamed the Works Projects Administration, it also brought meaningful assignments to artists, actors, and writers.

Other programs didn’t fare as well. But Roosevelt’s actions and his radio broadcasts, known as “Fireside Chats,” gave people hope and helped them to survive.

Eleanor Kadis’s father was able to get a job building roads. He also opened a pool hall, where Eleanor sold fudge. But the money he earned was still not enough to support his family, and, after high school, Eleanor had to go to work.

“A [clerical] job came up at a hospital,” she recalls, “and it paid $12 a week. Someone ahead of me got the job, and I was so disappointed. Then another job came up at City Hall for $18 a week, and I got it. It was like a gold mine!”

Her one regret: “I never could go to college, and I had desperately wanted to go.” In every city in which she worked, from Boston and New York to Washington, D.C., she took courses at the local college or university.

“Invisible Scars”

By 1939, the worst of the Depression years were over. But it was not until the U.S. entered World War II, in 1941, that the nation’s economy really began to recover.

For children like Eleanor who came of age during the Depression, “invisible scars” remained. “Ever since then,” she says, “I’ve been very mindful that things can change quickly, without warning, just like today.” Still, the lessons she learned proved just as valuable.

“I learned not to waste food, not to be extravagant about material things, and to conserve our natural resources,” says Eleanor, now 89. “My entire life, I was not in a position to be wasteful with my resources, and I think I’ve been just as happy, perhaps more so, than people who are surrounded by luxury.”

—Suzanne McCabe