

## A RECORD OF MY EARLY YEARS

When referring to incidents that occurred at three or four years of age, it is very difficult to distinguish between those events as they actually took place, and between the various versions related by friends and family when reminiscing about the past. I do recall living on a farm in a small town in Austria. We had a few chickens and a cow, just enough to provide us with daily necessities. Our family consisted of my parents, four sisters and myself. Each of us were assigned specific duties which we performed as thoroughly as possible, considering the age of the youngster involved. My job was to collect eggs from the chicken coop. Dawn found us performing our tasks to permit sufficient time to attend school.

The farm contained a variety of fruit trees. At the peak of ripeness, several laborers were employed to harvest the crop. Members of the family also helped, but only if school was not interfered with. My parents were extremely conscientious about our education. After the fruit was loaded on my father's wagon, he would go forth to sell his product.

School was located about three or four miles from our home. Transportation was only provided if the weather was horrendous. I assume this daily trek was the foundation for my extensive walking to this day. School consisted of two large rooms, the first, to cater to students up to the fifth grade, and the second for the higher grades. Each age group was handled separately. When instruction was completed, the students were assigned written exercises which required deep concentration to prevent them from being disturbed by instruction to the next age group.

I overheard conversation concerning my father's proposed visit to America. I assumed this was a nearby town. Finally the time for his departure was imminent, and then I was told that I would not see him for over a year, that he was traveling this great distance to establish residence for us. Fortunately, other members of the family were already ensconced in America, and they would assist him in performing this task. Amid tears and a great deal of instruction, my father was on his way. His absence was very traumatic for a period of time, and then we adjusted. Correspondence from him was our constant reminder of this very important person. Finally a letter arrived with the message that all was ready for our entry into the new world. After several weeks of preparation, we arrived at a departure point to board a ship headed for the new world.

Shortly after we started on our voyage all five sisters contracted a very virulent type of fever – I think it was called black fever. The medical authorities on the ship ordered us transferred to the infirmary for treatment. My maternal grandfather was a doctor and my mother had acquired a great deal of medical knowledge from him. She refused to have us removed from her care and requested that our food be placed outside our cabin door and the empty dishes could be returned there. I distinctly recall that my mother would immerse towels in the ocean through the portholes and would wrap them around our bodies to reduce our body temperature. We all recovered from the dangerous aspects of the disease, but there remained the telltale facial scars as evidence of what had

gone before. Several children on the ship contracted the same disease, turned the entire area into an infirmary. Because of the facial scars the doctors on the ship were certain that the medical authorities at Ellis Island would compel us to remain there until all evidence of the disease was completely eradicated. In recognition of the contribution my mother made in the successful treatment of the other patients, a small ship was provided to us to bypass the authorities at Ellis Island and to transport us directly to the mainland.

My father had rented a residence for us on 82<sup>nd</sup> street, Manhattan. We spend most of our time at the Metropolitan Museum of art, located on Fifth Avenue of the same street. We were very eager to learn the language of our adopted country. The most important tool to accomplish this was achieved by borrowing books from the children's section of the library, in addition to a dictionary which the librarian made available to us. My parents joined in this effort. In a short time we became fairly proficient in speaking the language, and were were delighted with our conquest.

The apartment house we lived in was a six-story walk-up. The landlord was an elderly gentleman who had great difficulty climbing the stairs to reach his tenants on the upper floors. About six months after we moved into the premises, my parents suggested to the landlord that they would collect the rents and supply necessary services to the tenants in exchange for non-payment of rent by them. The landlord was delighted to accept the offer. In addition to improving ordinary services available to the tenants, my mother provided medical care when necessary. She had acquired a great deal of medical information from her father who was a physician. The tenants were delighted with the improved services, and acquainted the landlord of their joy. He owned two additional apartment houses on the same street and suggested my parents might wish to extend their care to those houses, for which he would compensate them. The entire family was involved in this new enterprise. All rents were paid in cash, and the tenants were provided with receipts indicating payment. We were all involved in preparing the receipts prior to the due date of the rent.

The hallways were illuminated by gas. At dusk, one of us was provided with a long stick which had a metal object at the end. This was inserted into the gas fixture. A slight turn provided the light. Early in the morning, the reverse had to be performed to extinguish the light to conserve gas. Fortunately there were five children in the family so there was no shortage of helpers.

The landlord was glad to be relieved of the details in conjunction with operating the property. He suggested to my parents that they might like to take over the entire management of the premises, which could be achieved by leasing them. This initiated my parents into the real estate field, which proved immensely profitable. I recall one instance in this connection. Operating expenses seemed to increase constantly. My mother suggested to my father that a small increase in rent would compensate for this. My father strongly objected and proclaimed, "the tenants have difficulty paying the rent as it is, and I don't think we should increase their burden;" certainly a rare reaction by a landlord, then and now.

At about this time my brother was born – the only native-born member of our family. He was my responsibility, and I had to watch over him when he was out of doors. I could be relieved of this task by attempting to put him to sleep. I would place a handkerchief over his eyes to help hasten the process.

My parents enjoyed corresponding with their relatives in the “old” country. They placed particular emphasis on the fact that military service was not compulsory in this country. This produced a tremendous surge of immigration. The visitors would stay at our home for a short period of time until they found their own quarters. The ones already in residence here assisted in finding employment and accommodations for them. I would frequently take them to the Museum. The thing that disturbed me most was conversing with them in a foreign language which immediately stamped them and myself as green-horns. I tried to have them whisper, but this was not always effective.

A 17-year-old cousin was among the immigrants. Since he could not establish his own residence, he lived with us. Finally he secured employment as a kitchen helper at Paramount Studios, which included maintenance. At mealtimes, he was busy in the kitchen, but at the slightest lull he would watch the making of films. After a few weeks of observing this process, he would make suggestions to the director which obviously had merit. He was transferred to that department, and then to Hollywood. Shortly thereafter he became one of the most prominent directors in Hollywood. He claims responsibility for advancing Deanna Durbin to stardom.

Most of us attended a public school a few blocks from our home. We found ice-covered concrete sidewalks difficult to deal with. My father would walk us to school. He would carry our books and we would put our hands in his overcoat pocket to keep warm. A classmate of mine flaunted a pair of white kid gloves before me, and offered to exchange them for the heavy knitted gloves I was wearing. I thought wearing them was an indication of being a real native. I eagerly accepted the offer, but soon realized the awful made. Instead of providing warmth, they seemed to have the opposite effect. Almost instantly my fingers practically froze. It was useless to try to recover my gloves, for the girl was on her merry way, I am certain much more comfortable than I was.

Almost on entering this country, my father explored the possibility of becoming a citizen. He was not yet eligible to apply for this honor, but he spent considerable time preparing for it. This presented a very trying time in our home, for the end result was the most important undertaking. Fortunately all worked out well, and the day arrived when he was to be legally endowed with the citizenship of the United States. We all joined him at the time of the presentation as we felt that we too were being honored. I still remember this event with trepidation. To celebrate we had dinner at our most favored restaurant, preceding the event with a champagne toast. The other guests in the restaurant looked at us in wonder, and when they inquired, we proudly informed them of our new exalted status.

Finally all the relatives who wished to emigrate to this country did, and my parents were free to conduct their own affairs. They were extremely successful in the

real estate business, and accumulated a great deal of money. All traces of foreign lineage were no longer in evidence. My sisters were all employed as secretaries, and I enrolled in a high school which required a three-year attendance to equip one to be part of this profession.

Just prior to graduation from this school, my typewriting teacher suggested that a fellow student and I come to his room after the conclusion of the period. He informed us that he considered us the brightest pupils in the class, and suggested if we wished to secure employment, his brother who was in the chemical business had two openings. We had our interview, and our future employer suggested that we start the following Monday.

At the end of the first week I received the munificent salary of \$8. I arrived home elated. In the middle of the second week, on my lunch hour, I figured exactly how much money I had available for lunch, making certain to withhold five cents for the subway ride to my home. I had a tremendous problem trying to apportion the money for the main dish and the luxury, but finally I succeeded. I was headed for an unoccupied table when another customer crushed against me throwing the contents of my tray onto the floor. The man apologized and proceeded on his way. Another customer observed the incident, called the man back and remarked that an apology was not enough. He said "This girl may have spent all her money on her lunch, and will be deprived if you don't repay her." I wonder how he knew – he sure was psychic. The gentleman who caused the accident put his hands into his pocket and withdrew several bills. He gave them to me, and I realized they were more than my cost. I attempted to return the excess to him, but he was already on the other side of the restaurant. I can assure you, I no longer had any problem paying for the deserts I most desired.

On Saturday of the same week my employer called me into his office, gave me my salary, and then asked would I like to be his mascot. I had no idea what this involved, but assumed it was involved with my employment. I agreed, and he told me he had to go out of the office for a short period, and to wait for him. He gave my friend her salary and told her he had to go out of the office for a short period and she was free to leave as soon as he returned. When he left, I informed my friend of the mascot incident and asked her what this entailed. She explained all its implications, and suggested that I should leave with her. My employer returned improved tonsorially, with a box that appeared to be candy under his arm. As soon as my friend left I joined her, never to return. I wonder if my employer was able to get a suitable mascot for the candy. I wrote a searing letter to my typewriting teacher to try to prevent a future recommendation to another innocent student.

My next place of employment was with two brothers who were attorneys. They were extremely patient in teaching me legal language and some of the procedures. A restaurant located on the main floor of the office building was a client of theirs. They provided a free lunch to me as part of my employment. My choice was confined to the luncheon specials. At the end of approximately six months I informed my employers of

the approach of my birthday and suggested that they might like to help celebrate the occasion warranted a raise in salary. I was disappointed by this, and decided to leave. By this time my self-confidence was markedly upgraded, and I regarded the search a simple one.

The Florida real estate boom was receiving a great deal of publicity. My parents were persuaded to purchase land there to profit from the prosperity promised to investors. They disposed of most of their property. My brother had acquired considerable knowledge in the management of this business, and undertook the care of the remainder. They gave up their residence here and moved to Florida to be near their new venture. They purchased three hundred and fifty acres of undeveloped land in Hialeah. My parents were advised to hold on to the property for a short period of time until it increased in value. A cousin of ours was in the roofing business in Newark, N.J., and was compelled to abandon it because of ill health. My parents decided to take care of it until he recovered. Taxes on the Florida property were being paid, and all assumed there was no problem. My brother went to Florida to evaluate the situation and was horrified to find a family of squatters there. He attempted to have them evicted, but legal proceedings proved ineffective. Apparently there was a law which provided that if the owner of property made no appearance for a stipulated length of time, the land would become the property of squatters. Since legal proceedings would probably take a long time and the appearance of my parents was required, they took up residence there and acquired some employment to supply them with income.

At the termination of the legal proceedings, a small financial settlement was made. My parents used this to purchase a home in Newark, N.J. They continued to conduct the roofing business which they had abandoned a year or two previously.

My father had a birthmark on the toe of his right foot. It appeared to change in texture. My mother treated it, and it seemed to improve, but then it got worse. My parents sought professional advice. The physician concluded that the birthmark was malignant and advised amputation. My parents were horrified at this prospect, and chose to seek other opinions. These varied, and so they chose to treat it locally. Unfortunately, the disease progressed, and this wonderfully kind, empathetic gentleman expired. I don't think there are words that could adequately describe our grief. To try to assuage the pain, my mother became intensely involved in volunteering, which proved moderately successful.

In March of this year the entire family appeared at my mother's home to celebrate her birthday. We started to reminisce as usual, way back to the farm in Austria and our emigration to this country. My mother suggested it might be interesting to visit Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, since we failed to see them on our arrival here. The following Sunday was set aside to accomplish this. We enjoyed Ellis Island, and then proceeded to approach the Statue of Liberty. I was certain that she winked at me. I looked at the other visitors to see if anyone else observed this amazing incident, and apparently they had not, for nothing was said. I didn't mention it to my family. I know they would accuse me of an exaggerated imagination, as they always did.