

Marie

When I was a little girl she was my favorite aunt. She was different from all the other aunts which surrounded me with love and criticism. She had charm, elegance, humor, and although at that time I could not define it, she was good company. Growing a few years older, I had a "crush" on her. It was the age when young girls fall in love with older women, the time before they realize the opposite sex. Some of my early crushes were teachers, some were women I met or only admired from the distance. All this changed by the time I was fifteen, when boys showed interest in me. But my aunt Marie, married to my mother's brother, remained my close pal and friend until the day when we received the telephone call from New York that at last she had found peace at age 93.

Marie was not of our faith, and around 1920 this was unusual in a big family as ours. Several generations had lived in the same city, and there had never been an intermarriage. My grandmother - as I was told later - was adamant in her opposition to her son's marriage to his lady-friend. He had contracted syphilis at an early age from some previous relationship, and Marie nursed him back to almost complete recovery by feeding him lots of cottage-cheese! He had lost the sight of one eye, but ^{otherwise} recovered completely from this dreaded disease. He was an intelligent, capable businessman and not only made a very good living for Marie and himself, but helped in and outside of the large family, whenever help was needed. It took several years until my grandmother accepted the situation, and seeing that her son was happy and that everybody in the family loved Marie, she at last reconciled herself to the fact that her son had a right to choose a wife he loved.

In 1933 the political scene in Germany changed drastically. As Hitler took over more and more power, the danger for mixed marriages increased. It appeared in the beginning that a non-Jewish partner might ~~be a protection for a marriage~~ ^{be a protection for a marriage} from the threats of the new regime, but in 1937 it was obvious that mixed couples had either to separate or leave their country or go underground. Marie, always an optimist and despite a limited education at school, had the idea to move East, to Czechoslovakia, to escape the political threat. She convinced her husband that going East was the solution for saving their money and their lives. She made a home for her husband and herself in Prague,

where she had several friends who helped her in finding living quarters.

We received short letters telling us that they ~~are~~^{were} comfortable, and that they would mail small packages to us in the United States. These packages arrived for several months, containing postal-stamps. My uncle hoped to salvage some of their savings by speculating in stamps - which according to stamp-dealers in the U.S. were practically worthless! We saved all these packages, hoping that sooner or later we could hand it over to them, hopefully in America. How wrong we were... In March 1939 Hitler moved into Czechoslovakia which formed the beginning of the savage drive into Hungary and Poland. We received no further news from Prague... The next message was a postal card from Italy, written by Marie. (In just a few words) she told us that she reached Italy, after having stayed in Prague alone, her husband had chosen to move further East, to reach Poland. They had agreed to meet in Italy at a certain address, hoping that travelling separately would be less hazardous than as a couple. She had received a short message from a friend of her husband that he had witnessed my uncle's end on a forced march from Krakow to an extermination camp. Would we help her to come to the U.S.?

We organized a meeting of whatever was left of this part of the family, and decided despite our moderate circumstances to pool our resources and send her the required affidavit for immigration into the U.S. Since none ~~of~~^{for} us was a blood-relative of the prospective immigrant, the amount required by the Immigration Service was higher than if it would have been ^{for} a mother, father, brother or sister, but we accomplished what we had set ^{to do} out for and in 1947 Marie set foot on U.S. ground. After several weeks of adjustment she was able to find a position as a housekeeper in a dentist's family in a suburb of New York. Her knowledge of English was almost nil, but her personality made people like her immediately. After having improved her knowledge of the language she was offered a position as a companion-lady ^{with} to a well-to-do older lady in New Jersey. This job she held until the lady died and her services were no longer needed. She had become part of the family, she prepared the food for the Jewish holidays, she participated in the various rituals as if she was born with this background. Her summers were spent in a luxurious hotel in Atlantic City where she had a comfortable life, just to be with the lady who had hired her. From then on she was ^{with} working with people who wanted companionship and people who were terminally ill. She always was on the spot when needed.

With the help of a restitution organization in New York, and using her own wits, she was able to handle her financial claimstowards Germany. ^{to this compensation} She was fully entitled ~~to~~ due to her husbands terrible fate. ^{(payments of} The monthly indemnification and the the Social Security from her work in the U.S. enabled her in her later years to lead a comfortable life. She travelled, visiting friends and relatives in Israel, California and returned several times to Germany where she had cousins, but she would never consider to return to her native country permanently.

Knowing that the day would come when she had to make a decision what to do in her "real" old age, she was already in her high eighties, we tried to get her interested in looking for a place to retire, an idea she opposed violently. She lived in a small furnished room in Midtown Manhattan, in a most dangerous neighborhood. Attacks on the elderly were a daily occurrence, but she was not afraid. A mugger once grabbed her handbag and she ran after him and got it back!

Glaucoma and several other ailments did not deter her to walk 20 blocks for a luncheon date or a shopping trip to the department-stores. She always dressed in good taste and chose good quality. The beauty-parlor was an important factor in her life, and blond was the color of her hair to the very end. At last, when she had her ninetieth birthday we induced her to apply for admission to one of the best retirement-apartments, where she also would be taken care of in case a nursing-home was required. She was accepted and we again travelled to New York to assist her with the moving of her belongings to the home. We knew that she would adjust, and she did. She loved it from the first moment on, to have her own little apartment where she could make her breakfast, but had her meals during the day with the other occupants of the building. She made friends as fast as she had made them in her younger years, and we just hoped that her great wish, not to have to move into the nursing-home would be fulfilled. And her wish came true. The telephone-call from New York, on a freezing cold morning informed us that she had closed her eyes for ever, and that the intended transfer to the nursing-home was cancelled.

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Flying to New York, to ~~arrange for~~ the funeral arrangements, our thoughts were with the past. We intended to invite the few friends she had left to attend the memorial-service she had wanted and which she had planned - but nobody was able to come...It was below freezing, the streets were icy, and the people who knew her, were afraid to leave their homes. We had to cancel the service and begin the task of liquidating her apartment and take care of the immediate necessities. By looking over her papers we found a yellow sheet of stationery, and in her handwriting it said: (translated from German)

"No mass will be read,
No Kaddish will be said,
Nothing will be said, and
Nothing will be read
On the day of my death".

This originally is a poem by Heinrich Heine.