

Funeral of Irene's mother

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, January 2014

Yesterday, on a sunny but crisp winter's day, I attended the funeral of Irene's mother. Today would have been her eighty-seventh birthday. "Yes, I will meet you in the lobby of the nursing home shortly after 10 AM," I had told my eighty-nine-year-old aunt, who lives in the adjacent apartments. "We will attend together." My aunt seemed more than pleased. The next morning I found her pacing about anxiously in the lobby as I entered the secured front entrance and stomped the snow off my boots, thankful I had procured a coveted parking spot.

As we approached the receiving line towards the casket, I made a quick mental note of who was who, hoping to avoid any embarrassment on my behalf. Irene's elder sister headed up the line, followed by the younger "twins," all of whom I hadn't seen in at least forty years. And then there was Irene, along with her husband and their grown son. Irene and I had been friends since childhood, attending Sunday School and also German classes together on Friday nights. We always had a crush on one boy or another, as we always had a very large variety to choose from. Of course, alas, they barely even acknowledged the fact that either one of us even existed. Living only several blocks apart we attended public school together and often visited back and forth, especially on Sunday afternoons. Our families also had something else in common. We all spoke German fluently in the home and both of us had an Oma living with us. Irene's mother was a spry, thin woman with a tight perm and I noticed very early on that she wore pierced earrings, the dangly kind. This intrigued me greatly. As Irene and I played with her Barbie dolls or chased her younger twin brothers around the house, her mother and Oma kept busy in the kitchen. I knew that they had survived the horrors of WW 2, just like my family, and I had the utmost respect for them. Then, as is all too common, Irene and I went our separate ways. She married shortly after high school and had a son, while I went off to college to pursue my profession. She continued to work in the ladies dept. of a local department store, and often when out shopping, we would have a quick chat about our lives. She had trademark long blond hair, and as the years passed, our fleeting conversations began to focus on our parents and their ever evolving needs, and recently she had shared with me that her mother had moved over into the long term care section of the complex where she lived.

The strains of piano music led my aunt and I down an adjacent hallway to the chapel, where again I was pleased that we got seats, although not together. As the family filed in, I scanned the crowd where again I saw many familiar faces. I sat beside Mr. Tiessen, who had worked with my father for many years at a local factory. There was Miss Nickel, a retired school teacher, and Miss Barkovsky, a retired x-ray tech. One row up were the Penners, who had lived on our street during my childhood. I still remember their phone number, 6-6868, because this is the number that accidentally became permanently engraved in Mrs. Penner's dining room hutch as her daughter and I played school together. Let me add that Mrs. Penner was less than pleased, even though her daughter did become a teacher. The funeral opened with a German hymn that was unbeknownst to me. I was glad that I had remembered my glasses. The eulogy followed and one of the twins read his mother's life story. Born in the Ukraine in 1927, she had a happy childhood until her father was wrenched from the family in 1937 as atrocities were beginning to be inflicted upon the Mennonites in the Ukraine. Deportation to Germany followed where they weathered lean years, then on to Paraguay, South America and finally to Canada, where several other relatives had settled in the 1950s. A granddaughter, with long blond hair like Irene's, stood beside

her father with her head on his shoulder and sobbed quietly as the obituary was read. She reminded me much of my own teenage daughter and I wondered how much this granddaughter really knew or comprehended of her Oma's life story and that turbulent period in our history. It was announced that the unfamiliar hymn we had sung had been one Mrs. Wiebe had loved ever since she had first heard it sung in church as a young girl growing up in the Ukraine. The pastor spoke about heaven and the gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. "She will celebrate her birthday tomorrow in heaven," he smiled. Several more comforting German hymns were sung in harmony and then the service was over. As my aunt and I walked out together she repeatedly pointed out to some of her friends, most of whom I knew, "this is my niece," as I smiled and we kept walking. I disappointed her by announcing that I could not stay for lunch, but that I would go to the grocery store for her, which I did. Several hours later I returned to her apartment with her delivery, along with a bunch of green seedless grapes which I had picked up for Miss Nickel.

As I drove home, I again vowed to seriously scrounge around in my cupboards for the life story of my aunt, an account she had written out and given me several years ago but has long since been misplaced. I made a mental note to tack it on to the top of my lengthy to-do list for 2014.