

My Mother Turns 95. And She Never Wore Black

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

On May 3, 2014 my mother will, Lord willing, turn 95. It will be a low key affair, but as long as there are some fresh flowers for the photos we will be good to go. "I can hardly believe that after all I have been through I would live this long and live to have it so good," she regularly tells me. "And... I am not old," she laughs. "Yes, my dear sister," Tante Hulda, who turns 90 this October replies, "but you are old. Just look in the mirror." My mother, always wanting to have the last say, concludes with, "But I don't feel old..."

I look at an old black and white family photo taken on the deck of the ocean liner "Seven Seas" in port at Bremerhaven, Germany, July 1961. We are posing as we depart for Montreal, Canada, as someone in the throng below has insight to snap our picture. An opportunity had come to immigrate to Santiago, Chile at the same time that Dr. J. G. Neufeld of Toronto, (now of Abbotsford B.C.), saw my father's name listed in a Canadian newspaper as recently having arrived in Germany in 1955 after long years of exile in Kazakhstan. Dr. Neufeld immediately recognized my father as a cousin and sent word that he would sponsor us to come to Canada. "The church group didn't really want us to go to Chile with them anyways," my mother would relay to me. "They considered us refugees. And Oma felt that God was leading us to Canada." Joy was mixed with sadness as my mother left her mother, and 4 of her siblings and all of their families all behind. "We vowed that we would never depend on social assistance from the government in Canada. Not ever," my dad told me many times over the years. "Canada has so many opportunities. If a person cannot make a go of it here, they won't make a go at it anywhere." I was taught from a young age to not take living in a democracy for granted, as my parents taught by example by regularly casting their electoral votes. My mother daily thanked God for freedom. It was instilled into us that Canada was the "best country in the world." In grade 4 as my daughter was studying Canadian government, the teacher asked what type of county Canada was, expecting the response "a democracy." My daughter quickly raised her hand and blurted out that it was "the best country in the world." My dad also became a union guy familiarizing himself with his contracts and regularly attending meetings. Having worked for far too many years for no pay he never questioned joining a union.

As we recently celebrated the 4th birthday of my great niece, she shrieked as she opened the large box of assorted Disney Nail polishes I had bought her. "Yes, remember how Oma always hated it when we wore nail polish," my now adult niece laughed. "She would get so mad!" "Oh, by the way... I was visiting mom yesterday," my brother continued, "and she was wearing nail polish. Pink!" My eyes rolled as my aunt shrugged her shoulders. "Just let it go, Louise. They meant well." The next day as I visited my mother I gently removed the layers of her pink nail polish, while trying not to smudge my own. I held back sudden tears of sadness.

As I burst into puberty, battle lines were drawn with heated discussions over piercing of the ears, the wearing of makeup and nail polish, and the wearing of pants. "Yes, the staff had your mother in pants yesterday. And they were black," a staff member announced to me recently. "Pants? She doesn't even own any pants!" I snapped. After the initial shock wore off a shadow of sadness once again swept over me. My mother never ever, wore black. Not even to funerals. She preferred bright colors and prints, especially floral, with lace trims. She didn't even own a stitch of black clothing. On occasion, in the tomato fields or while climbing fruit trees she

would don a pair of my father's khaki work pants. Being more robust, they never fit her quite right and we would always chuckle. On Sundays after working a busy shift at the hospital, I was happy to peel off my hot support hose and dress uniform, only to disappoint my mother as we arrived for "Fastbar." "It's Sunday. You need to be wearing a dress," she would deeply sigh...

My aunt calls me and excitedly announces that she has purchased some long woolen socks for my mother. "I hope they are not black," I say as she reports that they are navy blue. Dark navy blue. Several days later I quiz my mother on the socks as she frowns, "Yes, and they were black!" I make a mental note to add the socks the accumulating donation pile in our garage. I smile to myself as I recall the comical way my mother would relay the eating habits of the nomadic Kazaks as they lived amongst them. "Yes, they would all sit in a circle and eat out of a big bowl with their hands. UUGGH! And then the women would reach down into their long stockings and grab a hand full of body lice. I can still hear the crunch as they ate them." She would shudder.

Her long naturally dark black hair was always neatly pulled back in a bun as in the mornings my mother would emerge fully dressed for the day. With an assortment of pins and combs her low bun was always "poofed out" with some sort of hair device. Years later I watch my teenage daughter pull back her long naturally blonde hair into a poofy bun. "Looks good," I tell her. "How do you get it so poofy?" She pulls out some type of hair device. "This is called a 'sock bun'," she tells me, as she expertly pins into her bun. My daughter reminds me of the upcoming Blood Donor Clinic as she is excited to be able to donate for the first time, now being of age. "Yes, it has been 6 months since I got that second ear piercing," she reminds me. "So now I shouldn't be disqualified again to donate." She adds, "Mom, you really should get your ears pierced sometime." I sigh in response. My young co-workers again comment, "What do you mean you don't have your ears pierced? Really?" as they closely study my face.

As my mother folds her hands to pray "Vater Segne diese Speise," I am reminded of the way she would look at her hands and remark "when I think of all the work these hands have done," as she turned them over in her lap. Without a trace of arthritis her short fingers sport 2 gold rings. One a wedding ring, the other a family ring. I smile as I again of the time she killed a snake with the hoe in the backyard of our suburban home as she was hanging out the laundry.

I am again at the local dry goods store run by a local Old Order Mennonite Church. I am looking for feather ticking to redo some of my mother's pillows, and, as always, they have exactly what I need. I hesitantly ask if they have any white tulle, and surprisingly the friendly young woman wearing the plaid dress and white cap pulls down several bolts. As she measures it out I don't have the heart to tell her it is for a wedding veil I am making for the daughter of a friend, as I know all too well that women of her culture wear black when they wed. We have a discussion about quilting and I ask her if she has ever made a blue jean quilt. I immediately realize how dumb the question was. I look up at the ceiling where dozens of little girls' fancy dresses hang. Every time I look at them I am surprised, knowing that this type of attire is only for a short season of time, as once the little girls grow up they will don the conservative floral dress of their superiors. I purchase a pink infant's dress for an upcoming baby shower. I again comment on some new bolts of fabric she is unwrapping near the counter. "Yes, the women are getting away from floral prints for their dresses," she tells me as I gasp. She rings up my bill as I grab a can of enchilada sauce from the array of Mexican canned goods.

My mother lies in her bed looking out at the early evening sunset. There is a bird flying about in the bay window. "Every evening he comes here," she tells me. "It's as if he is coming to wave good night to me." She pauses, then adds, "It's amazing with what one can occupy their mind one has lots of time on their hands..."

As I would excitedly relay upcoming plans to her over the years, my mother would always admonish me some wisdom. "Don't plan for tomorrow. We don't know what tomorrow will hold. It is all in God's hands..."