

Rags to Riches to Rags:

Prologue

by Jerry Ratch

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My grandfather rode with the Czar's army. He was abducted from a village in Austria, trained to pillage and drink, plunder and rape, and ride the best horses that could be had. They were given the best vodka and the sharpest swords. They were all just boys, really. His name was Otto Joseph, the same as his first son, my father. They rode hard, partied all the time, and pillaged everything in their path, all for the glory of the Great Russian Bear. And they enjoyed the high life immensely until one day when he met and fell in love with a short, dark-haired Jewess during one of their pogroms in a little village in Bohemia. If it hadn't been for little Anna Kviz he might have died doing whatever the Czar wanted him to do, happily, without a thought for life, or family, or love at all. He might have died dumb and happy, as my dad was fond of saying.

The Czar did not approve of the Jews, not at all. And he would send his army into the tiny villages of the Bohemian Empire as often as possible to root out that people, at the bidding of the Church. And so my grandfather fled to America like many did from 1903 to 1906, to escape those pogroms. But he had already learned how to laugh deeply at life, from the belly, just as he had learned how to drink at such a young age. And that unfortunately would be his ultimate downfall in the end.

But it was not until the Great San Francisco earthquake in April of 1906 that his calling and great opportunity came to him, and he went west with his wife to make a great fortune re-roofing houses there after the quake. He became so wealthy that when he returned to Chicago and began a family there in the Bohemian ghetto on the South side, near the stockyards, he bought the very first automobile in Chicago and drove around that city with the top down showing off

his first-born son Otto Joseph, Jr., my father, who was born in 1909 at their home on Honore Street, assisted by the same midwife, named Lizzie, who would go on to help with the birth of my mother Bessie in 1911, in a house at the other end of the very same street. What are the chances of that, you might ask? Well, in those days, probably quite good.

So that was how Grandpa Otto Joseph Sr. sailed from rags to riches after coming to America. But then what could go wrong after that American success story, you might ask? Well, plenty actually. Plenty.

But you could always hear that high-pitched, zany laughter of his, I am told, which was irrepressible.

