

Grandma Rose Watched the Fights

by Sheila Luecht

My grandmother was a Hungarian matriarch and my dad was her oldest son. While I was his youngest child, the interesting thing was my grandmother never had a little girl. So a couple of times I got farmed out to her for one reason or another and took some short term respites at her home. It was an old neighborhood in Indiana and her house was on Plummer Street. My father had done a lot to her house for her. He built her a mud room on the back and a nice porch on the front. Her backyard always had a garden and everything was nice and neat and clean. It was not a large home so that might have been kind of easy.

She had a claw foot tub. I remember getting into that thing more than once. You had to climb over the rolled sides like you were getting on a horse. The feet were claws. The whole thing was white. There was no shower. You had to dunk your head to wash your hair. Grandma seemed not to know too much about little girls.

She even admitted that to me one day, " Do you want some pigtails or something in your hair? I don't know much about what little girls want, I never had one."

Well, I tried them out. I didn't like them much. They were too tight. I got them out fast. I remember that once I had curlers in my hair and my mom was getting my sister and I ready for a fancy wedding. I cut those suckers out. She rushed me to the barber and I wore a pixie hair cut. (for several years).

Anyway Grandma was a card. She was very stern looking and tough. However, she was something else. I remember going to Goldblatt's (a department store) basement with her to their deli. She knew how to order cold cuts, let me tell you. No bubbe in New York had anything over on her.

She would lay out all those white paper wrapped meats and let us have at it for lunch. We made sandwiches and put mustard and pickles and such all over everything. The only thing was, you had to eat what you made. No waste allowed. The depression was not that long ago and you could not waste food.

I remember once she got worried about me putting sour stuff with sweet and that I like to eat a mustard sandwich. No meat. I was a bony little girl. Tall and thin, that was me. My dad laughed and then she did too. I enjoyed that stuff. She made all kinds of delicate sweets as Hungarians are apt to do, if they are bakers. I never got into the poppy seed stuff as much as the nut stuff. She would roll this dough into coffee cakes with swirls of that filling, smear the tops with a white icing and yum. I didn't even drink coffee, and I liked them.

Once my mother came with my dad to pick me up and we had the fights on TV. My mother was kind of freaked out, suddenly the TV was off. But not before I saw those chubby men on the small black and white screen punching each other out and some guy with a white shirt and black bow tie trying to break them up. You see, I remember it fifty some years later, that's what happens when you act like something is not for kids to see!! They remember it.

Grandma had birds for pets. She only had one at a time. But that was enough. My mother tried to do that too, I think for my dad. She deemed them too messy and we did not have one for very long. I have one today.

My Grandma and my mother did not get along well. My Grandma had some power that my mother did not and that was a source of aggravation mom had with my dad. However, after years of struggling with each other, they did get along. Once I was going to Hungary and my Grandma got me a dictionary so I would be able to understand more. We had words with each other and I never took it. She had a habit of trying to put my mother down and I decided that I was old enough not to allow her to do that in front of me for no good reason. So I told her so.

I think she later thought about that. Just as she loved her son, I loved my mother. Just as my dad loved her, so the same kind of protective honoring love existed. Right or wrong, it was there, the elephant in the room.

When my father died, she was devastated. She told me it was not right that a child died before its mother. She was very old and very weak, made more weak by her sorrow. I had never thought how that there is a kind of order in life, and that she expected her children, especially this important son to outlive her. I understood her pain in a new way.

She and my mother really mended fences a lot over time, especially after my father's death. My grandma did a wonderful generous thing for my mother. She gave her money that was intended by my father for her upkeep. She gave this generously and with grace to my mother. My mother did not expect anything from her and in fact was helping her with things she needed, as my father used to. My mother did not need this money, she had been well provided for and had an income of her own.

After my twins were born, we visited her. She was so excited to see them. Still living in the very same house with the claw foot tub, we sat in the room that once held huge family dinners.

I was amazed at her clarity and ability to do things. She offered the twins a cracker, but they were still too small for that. In the end she told us family stories about a Hungarian settlement that was flooded out that they had been a part of, she told us so many little family stories that I was amazed that she could remember them. Stories recalled in that afternoon, were fresh like yesterday to her.

Recently as I followed her and my grandfather on ancestry.com, trying to trace my grandfather from Austria/Hungary, I was amazed to learn that perhaps she did have a little girl. One who perhaps did not live long according to the census. Her name was Helen. It is hard to know for sure because everyone who would know is long gone. It could have been a relative's child living with them at the time.

All I know is life has a way of slipping past, people are born, they die; sometimes they used to watch the fights...

