

Feathered Pillows, Peeling Paint, and Pride

My earliest memories find me at the age of three in the tiny village of Munchenberg, Germany, playing in a snow-laden street, dressed in a heavy toddler coat with an eared cap and mittens. As snowflakes tumbled down from the sky, I remember asking my mother who was shaking the feather pillows above us.

I see myself riding a neighbor boy's rectangular-seat wooden tricycle, knowing he wouldn't be back from school in time to catch me and beat me for doing it. In the weedy back yard of our tenement dwelling was a rock-filled lot with brambles and thorny, yet sturdy, blackberry bushes. Those blackberries were the sweetest I had ever tasted, and I often found myself filling my stained little apron pockets with them.

We had few belongings or toys, but I recall a doll I named Lisa. She had a cherubic face and cloth body with plastic arms and legs. I dressed her in a rag-tag style because there was no fashionable attire for her. She rode in a woven straw baby buggy with a fixed half cover. The push handle resembled the symbol for pi (π), and I made a point of placing one forefinger of each of my hands on each bar and letting my mittens, which were threaded through the sleeves of my coat via a string, hang down from the π .

Two of my uncles and their families shared the tenement apartment with us. Uncle Zvi would lure me into the warm tiny kitchen for my bath by opening the oven door and speaking to a mysterious little creature inside of it. Once in the kitchen, I was trapped, and my mother placed me in the basin of heated water. Many years later, I learned this was a DP camp where we lived while awaiting permission to enter the USA.

My next images come from aboard a freighter, the US General Hauser, making its way from Bremen to New Orleans in a voyage that lasted 16 days. Whenever I smell oranges, I am immediately taken back to the infirmary on that ship where I was kept while being treated for measles. I had no appetite, and my father would sneak oranges in to me for nourishment. They were sweet, juicy, and something I could easily swallow. They were my diet. Once out of the infirmary, I had to endure what everyone else did. That entailed sleeping on a mattress on a urine-stained floor, amid strangers and funny smells. I had no sense of how long sixteen days were, but as we were approaching the port of New Orleans, I was as excited as everyone else. We all stood out on the deck, watching the multi-colored houses pass by as we waved to no one in particular. I had been told we were going to stay with my Uncle Morris, my father's brother, in Los Angeles. Not knowing the difference between New Orleans and Los Angeles, I repeatedly asked my parents if each house we passed was Uncle Morris' house. They soon stopped answering.

A train took us to Los Angeles after we docked and debarked from the ship at New Orleans. We got off at the Alvira Street Station in East Los Angeles, where refugees entered the state. Many aromas surrounded me, all of them strange. There were foods I had never seen or

imagined. Piñatas were hanging from stalls, and people were speaking in a language I couldn't understand. Someone picked us up in his car and took us to West Los Angeles, where the more experienced and no longer new refugees resided. We entered a home so large, I couldn't believe it wasn't crowded with people. This was to be our home, for next couple of weeks or months – I can't recall which. The street was called Drexel, and I had not seen a more beautiful one. It was tree-lined, with each house having its own lawn and bed of flowers. There were lampposts that turned on at night and structures filled with food just a few blocks away.

Uncle Morris could speak to me in Yiddish, my mother tongue, but I couldn't communicate with his wife, Andre, or his three daughters, Lucy, Carol, and Maxine. They were my cousins, but I don't think they were happy to have us there. The first English words I learned were from Maxine, the youngest daughter and closest to me in age. The words were "Shut up." I repeated them over and over, until I heard Uncle Morris telling my father that I shouldn't be using language like that. My father replied with a musing, "I wonder where she could have learned that." Pizza was their favorite food, but not mine. It was so foreign to me with its goopy red sauce and stringy melted cheese. They must have thought me very weird. It was their staple.

Very soon, with hardly any English vocabulary to rely on, we found ourselves in an apartment of our own, in a downtown section of East Los Angeles. Where had all the beautiful homes gone? Paint was peeling from a wall in the living room, helped along by my little bored fingers. Whenever the landlord would enter the premises, I was supposed to run and stand in front of the peeled paint and hide it with my body. I got very good at it. We had an icebox that had enough room in it for some cubes of butter and bottles of milk which were delivered to our door. What service! My father started disappearing during the days. He was off looking for work in a strange city with no language skills and no work skills either. He had been a merchandiser of grains in Warsaw, and when he fled from Poland to Kazakhstan, he lost the family business and had no means to support himself, much less a family he found himself heading soon thereafter. I will never understand how he so quickly learned to sew and construct women's coats and jackets and eventually co-own a shop that manufactured these items. I have believed for a long time that there was no smarter, industrious, or loving man than my father. Many others agreed with me.

A series of moves took place that found us in various rentals, from a two-bedroom apartment in a dark green fourplex on Third St. with its landlady, big Mrs. Woofsey, to a small detached house behind the owner's house on New Jersey St. Mrs. Elster was the kind and welcoming landlady who allowed me to dig tunnels and trenches around the perimeter of our house and always spoke to me in a gentle voice. By that time, I was enrolled in a private academy on a scholarship from the Joint Distribution Center for immigrants, learning English, Hebrew, and the basic elementary school subjects. Even there it was cliquish and very strict. There my name was changed from Haya to Hava since there already was a Haya in my class. Hava translates to Eve or Evelyn, so I became Evelyn and was called Evie by my friends. The other Haya's English name became Charlotte.

During my time at the academy, my parents were learning English, and I was helping them, having now served as their translator for a few years. After five years of residency, they applied for citizenship. I remember quizzing them on the study questions they needed to master to pass the test. It helped me learn about the government as well. They were proud to become US citizens, along with me, in a public ceremony in a huge stadium. We all raised our rights hands and repeated some loyalty oath I truly didn't understand, but the importance of the occasion wasn't lost on me. I was now a legal member of this country.