



Susanna Uchatius's story of

Maria



Marilyn... I got your notice at a very synchronistic moment... and so I decided to splat on the page and send it off to you. It did cross my mind that my mother might not like the idea of her world being splatted on the page and sent off for someone to read... but then again I thought... to bear witness is to validate in some way and I think my mother has in so many ways not been validated... and so... dot, dot, dot... I will validate away.

My mother was born in a small town in Austria, I think in 1921. Her mother was a Figl and her father a Uchatius. The family was rather aristocratic and very Catholic. Her uncle was the first Prime Minister of Austria after the War. All this aside she was one of three sisters... the middle to be exact. She trained at a nursing school run by Italian nuns and became a pediatric nurse in Vienna.

Then of course the War happened. The big WWII. She survived by working in a hospital. She has told me stories of taking the children down to the basement during the bombing raids and how foolish that was because the basement was roofed with hot water pipes and if they were ever hit they would have all been burned. She told me of a Russian woman, part of the occupying force, who left her ill baby at the hospital and it subsequently died in her arms for lack of proper medicine and nourishment. She told me she would make trips into the countryside to get food from her parents who still lived in Sauerbrunn, now 3 hours from Vienna, then perhaps a day's travel by train. This was often very dangerous because the Russians would often assault and rape any woman who crossed through their zone of Vienna. She told me the story of waiting for a train when along came a Russian soldier calling "Davi, Davi..." to any women he saw. (I don't know how to spell it but that's what it sounded like and it apparently means come with me.) There were some Austrian soldiers – I guess this was after the war – and they saw what was about to happen so they quickly gave her one of their coats and a hat and huddled around her so that the Russian could not recognize her. She said she spent the night sitting among them until they felt it was safe for her to get on a train. She has stories of how they would celebrate the cooking of an egg or any type of protein for that matter.

She married I think after... or was it during the war... can't remember. She said she married my Dad because his mother said the rosary and that way she knew that they were not Nazis. She said she did not date any men until she was 26 years old because the head nun said before that age it was not proper. Then she subsequently had I think three abortions with my father before they married. She was pregnant with my older brother when they finally married. Then I was born. She got my father, an engineer, a job through her family connections, but he was not happy and decided to immigrate to Canada. He left and she followed on a boat with us and my baby brother around 1951.

She arrived in Halifax but I believe her first home was in a one room hut in Saskatchewan... no running water and a wood stove. She told me of waking up one morning to see my baby brother with ice on his eyelids. Over the years my father flourished and my mother stayed at home. She sewed almost everything we wore – she sewed covers for all our furniture... anything that she could make rather than buy she did. My mother was an artist who never had the proper soil to flourish in. She painted in oils; she at one time had a loom and wove wonderful things; she even at one time had a potters wheel and made pots and so on. It is to her credit that she pursued these artistic endeavours in a vacuum....with no supportive artistic community.....that is remarkable in itself. My father did not approve.

My father's life soared and my mother's crashed. She sank into deep depression after the birth of her last two children at the age of forty something. She attempted suicide by slashing her wrists and was taken

away in a straightjacket. She spent years in and out of mental institutions... had horrific shock treatments they used to give people. In my father's last years he slowly sank into a domineering and vicious dementia (my mother does not acknowledge this) and he squandered every penny on futile investments. He had a stroke and she was reduced to taking care of him and living on whatever she could scrape from him. She would not leave until one day he finally hit her and she swallowed a bottle of pills to end it all. At this point the hospital would not release her to him and I was able to move her from Alberta to here to be near us. My father died shortly thereafter.

She now lives in a very small and caring home with nine other women. She walks everyday, she knits, she spends time with my disabled daughter teaching her knitting, drawing, and the rosary. She clings to this religious bent. She is well known in her very small circle of acquaintances. On the phone today she said she might walk down to the local Italian deli and get a good deli sandwich for a treat. She laughs wonderfully now but she can also be very critical.

The two of us went back to Austria this last spring. We had a small apartment and there I discovered the humor and also the obstinacy that were and are still her survival tools. She is a remarkable woman and I am astounded that even with so much shit in her life... a bad word seldom crosses her lips. Of course, as her supporting daughter I do sometimes feel any animosity is directed at me but altogether I cherish and deeply value the time I have with her. If anything... I am the lucky one and much of my strength I owe to her.

Well there we are... so it is and was. Oh yes... my mother's name is Maria... Maria Theresa Francl-Uchatius. And I am Susanna Uchatius. I hope I am doing the right thing? Yes... I think I am.