



Heidi Tadey's story of

Hildegard



That I'm even here to tell this story is a fluke, since both my mother and my grandmother before her never really intended to be mothers at all. And I'm here to challenge the well accepted belief that all women are wired genetically to want to be mothers, since the history of the women in my family seems to ascribe more credit to the environment – read “dashing young men”.

In the early 1900's, my maternal grandmother was one of three spinster sisters who lived in Berlin, Germany, at the time of Kaiser Wilhelm. They all eschewed being married, and therefore of wanting to be mothers, in favour of becoming successful businesswomen. They were the women's libbers of their time, running a lucrative haberdashery, fashioning military uniforms complete with gold filigree epaulets and all manner of gold braid trimmings.

It so happened that a “dashing young” Russian officer ordered just such a uniform one day, and from the dalliance that ensued between him and my grandmother, my mother, Hildegard Aschenbrenner, was born on October 1, 1907. And even though the young man was quite willing to do the honourable thing, my grandmother did not relish the idea of moving to faraway tsarist Russia.

Of course, young, single mothers were not the norm of the day, so my mother was bundled off to be raised in my grandmother's brother's family, along with his two daughters, where, according to her stories, she enjoyed a wonderful childhood, feeling very loved by parents who were not really her own. It was only at age sixteen that she was told that the kind gentleman she thought was her father, was really her uncle Willy, and that the independent aunt whom she much admired, was really her mother.

It never occurred to me, while she was alive, to ask her what she felt about this revelation. All I know is, she moved in with the three spinster sisters and decided that she too would similarly never marry but be a career woman. She trained to be a bookkeeper and started working at the prestigious Deutsche Bank.

By this time it was the Roaring 'Twenties and Berlin was in its heyday; what with the movie industry being born there, famous directors and movie stars everywhere, the Three Penny Opera playing to packed houses, Marlene Dietrich in the Blue Angel. My mother loved every minute of this glamorous lifestyle.

She herself was very attractive, vivacious, and fun-loving, which is what typifies a true “Berliner”. Her amiable, down-to-earth personality appealed to men and women alike, and she always had many friends. She was a great singer and dancer and could tell countless funny anecdotes, so she was always the belle of the ball.

One of her favourite party venues was Café Resi, a giant dancehall that could hold a thousand revelers. Current speed-lunch dating establishments have nothing on this place, which featured telephones on every table with which you could flirt shamelessly with other patrons, pneumatic mail tubes through which you could send little gifts to anyone you fancied in the room, and even a carousel!

Here, in 1939, just prior to the start of the Second World War, she, like her mother before her, also met a very “dashing young man” (five years her junior) – an architect from a well to do Viennese family – and, against all her previous resolutions, got married! She was the ripe old age of 32, pretty uncommon for those days. They had some happy years together, my mother often visiting Vienna, but after enlisting in the German army, he sadly never returned from the Russian front.

Felix and mother lived in a rather luxurious two-bedroom apartment at that time; it had a bathtub, central heating and a beautiful balcony. When my grandmother and great aunt (two of the original spinsters) were bombed out during the war, they moved in with her.

Life was very hard and dismal for three women on their own, so when my mother met another “dashing young man” (this one seven years younger) from Graz, Austria, who persistently pursued her, she gave in rather quickly and married him, even agreeing to start a family. After all, who knew how much time anyone had under the circumstances?

And for all his other faults, such as a pretty volatile temper, my soon-to-be father was very enterprising, hard working, and always a good provider. He fashioned pails and other containers from sheet metal (which was his trade) and bartered them in the countryside with the farmers for food, thus ensuring my expectant mother, grandmother and great aunt never had to starve during the war. Finally, after the end of the war, in September 1945, I was born, and Hildegard, at age 39, became a somewhat reluctant mother (although she told me, she never regretted it).

As far as I can remember, my mother always worked outside the home. One interesting job she had was repairing the runs in nylon stockings, which were a very expensive commodity at that time. She manned a little booth at the thrice-a-week market in front of the Berlin Schöneberg City Hall (the same one where John F. Kennedy later proclaimed “Ich bin ein Berliner!”). Shoppers came there for all their fruit and vegetables but also to buy all sorts of wares and services from the loud hawkers in the square. I sometimes accompanied her and was fascinated by the strange machine with the little electric needle that bounced up and down and pulled together the ladders on the stockings, just as the ladies were delighted to retrieve their nylons, almost good as new, at the end of their shopping trip.

But the post-war years in Berlin were bleak and good jobs were few and far between, so my father decided to emigrate to Canada in 1956. He worked for a year in the Alcan mine in Kitimat, but luckily we never ended up there but came straight to Vancouver. My mother, having been a big city girl all her life, told me many times how she would have hated living in a small town.

Life was very different in Canada. My mother, unable to use her banking or sewing skills, had to do menial jobs like cleaning houses and offices to help make ends meet. My father was also often out of work or having to work two or three part-time jobs at a time. It was demoralizing and very frustrating for him, and he often took it out on us, becoming verbally abusive. My mother was the rock in the relationship at that time, always optimistic and forgiving, and her Libran nature served to smooth things over.

I didn’t really see those good qualities in her at the time. As a teenager in a new country, I desperately wanted to fit in with my peers and was always embarrassed by my mother’s poor command of English and my family’s living conditions. Now I know how difficult it is to learn another language after 50 (her age when she came to Canada), since I recently tried to learn Italian, and I already knew Spanish and French!

Luckily she didn’t have to be a cleaning lady forever, as she finally landed a job in the 1960’s at Addressograph/Multigraph, where she used her typing skills to make little metal address plates that were used in mailing systems at the time.

Even though she was perhaps not fulfilled career wise, my mother found an outlet for her creative talents among her new friends in the Ladies Auxiliary at the German Alpen Club, where once again, on various bus tours and at regular meetings, she entertained the “troops” with her funny songs and humorous readings. Being more introverted than my mother at that time of my life, I wasn’t as amused by her antics as her friends, but, wouldn’t you know it, over the years I’ve turned into a bit of an entertaining storyteller myself!

My mother always believed in giving me space and never pressured me about anything, such as getting married, or having children, which I, following the family tradition, never intended to do anyway. The only reason I eventually got married was to pacify my father, who proclaimed, when I was about to travel through Europe with my boyfriend of four years, that I should get married or I would have to leave “over his dead body.” I really don’t know what got into him – it was 1967, I was 22. But since the boyfriend was a very nice “dashing young man”, – that old environment kicking in again! – I, like my grandmother and mother before me, also lost sight of some of my best intentions and got married after all (although at the end of our trip in Hamburg, my new husband’s hometown).

Eventually my parents ran a little mom-and-pop store in the industrial area by Main Street, where Science World is now, and they did a booming lunchtime sandwich business, catering to workers in the neighbourhood. My dad ran the front and my mother would be in the back, cheerfully assembling over a hundred Kaiser buns a day stuffed with pickle and liverwurst, Hungarian salami, and ham and cheese. They became very popular in that area, and after they retired (my mother was 72 – that’s what you get for marrying a guy seven years younger), McDonalds and Burger King must have heard about it and promptly opened up near their old location!

My mother was never a typical German Hausfrau; cleaning and cooking were not really her forte, and I seem to have followed in her footsteps. My father was pretty hard to please (he always felt he could do things better), so she didn’t argue when he took over running the household. She enjoyed her retirement as pretty well a lady of leisure, letting my dad do all the household chores, listening and smiling as he boasted about his expertise. Pretty smart, I’d say.

After my father’s death from cancer in 1991, my mother and I became much closer, both being single now and with more time for each other. Often we would go together to Musashi’s on Denman Street in the West End and gorge on sushi, something she loved! My mother was always up for trying new things and was open-minded about everything. And even though she was old enough to be my grandmother, she never acted old at all. She wore high heels right into her eighties and went to her grave in 1999, at the age of 92, still a platinum blonde, having tried titian red for a while in her fifties, but never succumbing to gray.

I’ve often reflected on my mother’s parenting style, or lack thereof. I can’t remember ever really being disciplined by her or being “taught” anything in an obvious manner. She always led by example or just by being. I never felt I had to lie or hide anything from her. She was always supportive and positive, and with her laissez-faire attitude would see the humour in everything. This was an unbelievable gift to give a child. And so the woman who never thought she’d want to be one, to me, became the greatest mother of them all!