



Beate Sigriddaughter's story of

Sigrid



My mother, Sigrid Herta Rausch, maiden name Pietrzyk, was born on July 1, 1914, the fifth of nine children born to a chain of three consecutive married couples. Her mother had remarried when her first husband died. My mother was the first child of her mother's second marriage. They were landowners, raised horses, poultry, pigs, and owned a brick factory.

When my mother was four years old, her mother died from complications of a flu. The hospitals were overcrowded with wounded soldiers, so she was in private care. Just before her husband went to bring her home, she had taken a bath and gone to lie down. She never woke up again.

My mother remembered the scent of pine wreaths in the reception hall. At the grave, held by a young servant, my mother asked: "Who will now give us our bread?"

A year later, in November, her father told her she was now getting a new mother, and she was to call her "Mama." Her new mother was twenty-one years old, only five years older than the oldest sister.

The family lived one kilometer from the nearest village, Gross Kessel in formerly East Prussia, now Kocioł in Poland. Much of my mother's childhood was spent in fields and forests, walking with her beloved father, who was also a game warden, and her father's favorite dog. She loved lying in the grass, with bluebells, daisies, wild carnations, and the vast blue sky overhead. One day, many years down the road, she told me she had never wanted to grow up.

At elementary school in the village, she often substituted for her teacher when he was hung over. Fellow students sometimes tried to bribe her with unappetizing sticky bits of hard candy. A more palatable side benefit of her early teaching career was that she was recommended for the academic branch of secondary school, which she entered, as was customary in Germany, at age ten. Each day she took the train to school in Johannisburg, the closest sizeable town. An extracurricular career in drama came to an abrupt end when she was about to give a eulogy in an after school pretend funeral pageant. A teacher unexpectedly entered the room where the train-bound students waited for their train. The girl playing the part of corpse fell off the chairs forming her bier and onto the many school property flower pots that had been arranged around her. The girl was unscathed, but the flower pots were not.

My mother's fifteen page hand-written memoirs, which she began writing in her seventies, end with her school days and include a puzzling episode of a girlfriend stealing from her and my mother's guilt at having to turn her in to save her own honor. I know the rest of her story from tales shared on quiet evenings over a glass of wine, often thinned with sparkling water.

After school she hoped to work for a bank. Her parents said no, which is puzzling because at least one of her older sisters was allowed to learn to be a housekeeper. But my mother stayed home.

While visiting her working sister on a distant estate where the sister was learning her trade as housekeeper, my mother met my father. She was seventeen and often told the story of how young men had involved her in a snowball fight, and my father kept defending and rescuing her. He had just finished a two year walking tour through Germany, finding work here and there, and recently he had joined the Nazi work service, helping out with farm work at the moment. My mother's parents considered him a drifter and did not allow her to continue contact with my father, much less marry him. My parents got engaged secretly and kept in contact through secret letter-writing.

After seven years, my parents married in February of 1939. Perhaps it was their loyalty, perhaps it was the imminence of war—my mother's parents relented and gave their blessing. Soon after the wedding my

father was off to war and only got to visit my mother infrequently for short periods of time. For a time, my mother lived in Silesia with her mother-in-law, then in a house of her own. Her oldest son was born in January 1940, her second in September 1943. A daughter was born in December 1944 and died in March 1945 from pneumonia when my mother with her youngest sister and her three children left what was to become East Germany on one of the last trains heading west and taking civilians. The train was bombed. My mother threw feather beds and her own body on the children. My oldest brother still remembers the blinding light and the feathers flying. The family survived the bombing, but the baby girl succumbed to her pneumonia. She was left behind in a mass grave in the town they were passing through, which we visited at least once a year while I was a child. My mother also wished that her first daughter be listed with her on her gravestone later on, and this was done.

In May 1945 Germany surrendered. Once, hanging laundry, my mother saw American soldiers come across the grass. She pressed her white sheets into my brothers' small hands to hold up in token of surrender. My father found out from the Red Cross an approximate area where my mother might have gone. He ended up working on a farm where she had left behind some belongings while passing through. Meanwhile she lived with the boys and her sister in a schoolhouse converted into a refugee camp. One day she bicycled back the forty kilometers to get her belongings at the farm and was reunited with my father. She spent the night with him at the farm under the rafters where the hams were hung to cure. She remembered, with gruesome glee, the maggots that would drop on them throughout the night. But they were together. "Like a miracle," was one of her favorite phrases.

Another favorite memory from those days was going to beg for bread to a mill that doubled as bakery. The local farmers would bring in grain and get loaves of bread in exchange. She swore the person at the bread counter knew she was not a local farmer; nevertheless the woman sternly looked at my mother and said, "And how many do you get?"

"Two," my mother said quickly. Her heart sang when she danced off with her two loaves of bread.

For a number of post-war years my parents lived with different farmers in Bavaria. My father, a carpenter by training, unsuccessfully tried to set up shop. Eventually he got a job doing carpentry work for a Lutheran evangelist group that toured Franconia with a circus size tent for two week long evangelism sessions.

In 1954, we moved to Nürnberg where we lived in a series of apartments. During the summer months, my father was mostly absent with his evangelism group and my mother managed the family. I was born in 1951, and sometimes my father's mother lived with us, so we were a small crowd, although one of my brothers was frequently away at boarding school. We lived in a two-bedroom apartment until the early 1960s, then abruptly upgraded to a five bedroom place in the same building, part of which we often sublet to make ends meet.

When my father was absent, things were sunny, though then we missed him. When he was present, in winter at first, permanently later, things became more volatile. He had unpredictable bouts of rages, not necessarily related to drink, although he liked his beer. He frequently beat the brother who remained at home. He never laid a violent hand on my mother or me or anyone female. The pain on my mother's face when my brother screamed out in the hallway was unbearable. But when I wanted to run out to help my brother, she restrained me and convinced me that I must not go. On other occasions she would use me, however, as a tool to mollify my father by sending me to make nice or ask forgiveness, often for things I hadn't done. I was small, cute and female, and this strategy usually worked.

She was not happy during those years. Her standard phrase of martyred complaint was: “What have I done to deserve_____” (children like this, a husband like this, a life like this). She was intent on doing her duty, which consisted of anything from waxing the flight of stairs to our fourth floor apartment, ironing my father’s underwear and handkerchiefs, deferring to my father generally, and competently doing their taxes when he got unnerved by the task and stormed off in frustration. She always finished them before he returned home from his long walk and then proclaimed that he had already done most of the work anyway, which was not true. This was an annual ritual. Officially she was always a housewife, but she took in piece work at home and also spent time working in a factory and as an aide in a nursing home.

She had migraines, high blood pressure, and ulcers, possibly her body’s defense against the endless duties she believed she had, because when she was ill she was forced to rest. The ulcers were so bad that eventually part of her stomach had to be removed.

She never quite shared my father’s passionate convictions, first as an atheist and low-ranking but enthusiastic Nazi, later as a born-again evangelist, for eventually he traded his carpentry for becoming a lay preacher and administrative church employee. She did go to church every Sunday, though, wearing her best suit and hat—always a hat—to sit in her pew and endure insults from the pulpit for being a particularly sinful member of the human race because of having been born a woman like Eve.

In her sixties she gave up suffering and martyrdom. She became vivacious, charming, and a delight to be around. I don’t know how this change happened. I lived in a different country by then.

She never spoke of her dreams or passions. If asked, she would have been embarrassed or uneasy. We all knew she loved dancing, though. Unfortunately my father would not dance. When they visited me in the United States, my then fiancé, a dance teacher, two-stepped with her at a country western bar in Santa Fe. She was ecstatic. Only she was fragile and soon out of breath. She sat down at our table, gasping. “But dancing!” my father grumbled.

Sometimes I feel I never really knew her. She was elusive. She rarely, if ever, spoke her mind, possibly so as to never disloyally undermine my father’s authority. At times I hoped she would outlive my father so we could become closer. This was not to be. In my dreams she tells me to study other women and put the fragments together, so as to know her better.

In May of 1992, with the Berlin Wall recently removed, my brothers took her and my father on a two week trip to revisit her childhood home in what was now Poland. She was euphoric. Much had changed, but she was back in her beloved “land of dark forests and crystal lakes,” to quote the song that starts off her childhood memoirs. Her hand-written pages are full of jumping fillies, delicate butterflies, the scent of pines, and the colors of poppies, cornflowers, daisies, and rippling fields of rye.

Back home in June, one Friday morning, she told my father she was tired and was going to lie down for a bit. Like her mother seventy-four years before, she simply did not wake up again.