

A Time

To Remember Mom

By BEN MAIDENBURG

Marion is a smallish town which lies in the middle of Indiana's lushest farm area. Its Jewish population is tiny. Once it was much larger, but the young people have sought out the more swinging cities. Those remaining in Marion maintain a temple of worship but there is no full-time rabbi.

When services are held on Friday nights or on the holy days a student from the Hebrew Union College at Cincinnati comes up — to practice. Something like the horse-back preacher of old.

The young man who has been circuit-riding to Marion for some time was a friend to my mom, and so it was that when she passed away, he was asked to direct the service.

THE NIGHT before the funeral, the young man asked my three brothers and me to sit down with him for a few moments. He asked us to tell him what we remembered most about mom and what we would like for him to say, in the last sermon mom would "hear" on this earth.

All of us tried to say something. All of us remembered one thing or another about mom. All sought to convey something special. But it became apparent in a few minutes that we weren't talking about our mother alone, but about nearly everyone's mother.

And so if I devote today's article to my last "living" reminiscences of mom, I am not speaking of her alone — but of your mother as well. My mom was not one who stood on a special pedestal — a mother among mothers — except to me.

She stood on my pedestal only because for nearly six decades, no matter that I may have been 10,000 miles away, she was as close to me as she was the moment I squawked my way into life.

As most of you know, I wrote often about mom. Not because I needed to publicize her or wanted to, but because so many readers wrote me saying,

"Your mother reminds me so much of my own."

MY MOM — and so many thousands of others — represented an historic era. At a youthful age, she fled an unbelievably horrid existence in then Czarist Russia, with my father.

Because of her religion — and that alone — she was denied education, she was denied the bare scrapings of human dignity. She saw Cossacks, mount-

ed on ponies and swinging swords and waving firebrands, ride through her village, killing and burning.

She recalled to me often how she and others burrowed into manure piles to escape the vile excuses for human beings who killed for no reason understandable to the normal mind.

She had been brought up in a nation which was crumbling because there was injustice on every street corner;

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and where, when the pressures piled up on the Czars, they sought to put the blame on the tiniest minority in the Russian Empire — the Jewish people. And so the other ignorant people who thought the Czar was a "Holy Father" saved him by knifing men, women and children.

It wasn't until 20 years later that the people of Russia rose in the midst of the first World War, to overthrow the Czar and then — to their undying shame — accept a Communist rule that was, and has been only a scintilla better. I speak particularly of Russia only because I am recalling my mom. Any of you whose parents came from so many other Eastern and Southern European countries also know whereof I speak.

PERHAPS your people weren't butchered — but probably they were subjected to state-slavery, denied education and so on.

Under the Czars the Jewish people were oppressed beyond description. They were told that their presence was an anathema. But, oddly enough, Jewish people were NOT permitted to flee Russia so easily. By and large — unless they had friends in high places, or were able to ransom themselves, often via aid from relatives not living in Russia — they had to sneak out of the country. The Czars needed their punching bags.

I recall my father and mother telling us how they paid someone to sneak them across a river, how they made their way to Hamburg, Germany, and how they came across to the Promised Land in a cattle-pen-like steerage.

Courage they must have had. Worldly goods they did not. My father couldn't speak a word of English, nor could my mom. I suppose my father and mother could have sneaked into any other nation of Europe. No matter where, they would have been infinitely better off than in Russia.

But what little information came to them by word of mouth told of a free nation called America — a nation

Mom drilled into us the love of God

where they could live without fear of Cossacks making repeated visits to whet their swords on human blood. A nation where they could worship in freedom; a nation where, if a man had the guts, he could find a job or found a business.

I HAVE told you often about my father's first "enterprise." He went from door to door with a basket of notions — shoe laces, razors, and things like that — seeking to earn a few pennies. My dad used to tell me how when a friend asked him how he fared that first day, he replied, "I'd have done well if I'd had some not-today's. Every place I stopped they said, 'Not today.'"

My mom and dad could have remained with "their people" in New York or Philadelphia. But they had heard of the wide-open spaces of the West. My father had a distant relative in Piqua, O.

So, scrimping away earnings from notions and pressing pants, he bought railroad tickets. "Where to?" asked the railroad man. My father was going to Marion, Ohio — not far from Piqua. But it never occurred to him there might be other Marions. The railroad man sold him tickets to Marion, Ind., which was on the same old line.

And so my mom and pop got off in Marion, Ind., and being broke they remained. Pop started doing what he knew best — peddling with a pack on his back. And mom resumed having children.

To mom, the tremendous freedom she found in America was enough.

But her children gave her undreamed happiness. She cooked, baked, sewed. When my dad, having graduated from foot-peddling to a horse and wagon and then to a Ford truck (which he never really understood) and finally to a tiny store in Gas City, Ind., mom would work in the store too.

MANY'S THE time I recall mom struggling to Gas City, six miles from Marion, with a basket of food. We didn't have enough for pop to "dine out."

Mom was so busy taking care of my dad and the kids that she never got around to an education. The day she died she still could neither read nor write. She never spoke much about this. But she made certain of one thing — that her kids didn't monkey around with THEIR schooling.

My mom whipped me often for doing things I shouldn't have done. But she never whipped me as hard for pointlessly breaking a window as she did when I acted the fool in the school room. Mom's house was NO place to complain about a teacher. To her the teacher was a holy person; the school room was just as holy as the synagogue — perhaps more so.

After mom's funeral, they were going through the house and there — 45 years later — were still the report cards from school. She had treasured them to her last breath.

They found one card which showed fine grades on everything except typing. On that I got an "F" — for failure. Oddly, today I can easily type 100 words a minute.

MY MOTHER appreciated education. She KNEW what it was to lack it.

My mom was a religious person. My dad had always been extremely so and in their lives this particular interest was inseparable. I never heard my mom when she wasn't thanking God for something. She felt it and she meant it.

Mom drilled into us not only the love of God, but also the love of country. Oh, like others, she wept when three of us were in the service in WWII. But, I always felt that privately she was so happy that she could do something for the country which had given her so much.

Mom was distressed when my youngest brother got caught up in the pre-war draft. When I left, by train, for "the Army" mom ran two dozen steps alongside the train which carried me — tears streaming down her face.

When my oldest brother — too old for the draft — enlisted, mom was distraught. She often told the story. She said she prayed that he'd break a leg at the training camp.

He went to Ft. Belvoir with the Engineer Corps. And

what do you think happened? He broke the leg and was invalidated out of the service!

OTHER RELATIVES confirm another story about mom. She said she dreamed I was in a hospital overseas. When she wakened the next morning she went to my brothers and demanded "the truth." They confessed to her that I indeed I had been in this hospital (on Biak Island) but that they had heard just the day before from the Red Cross that I was out and on the mend.

Mom was tough, mentally and physically. I don't know how many times in the last year the doctors said her heart was about worn out. But she snapped back again and again.

Finally, as Gray's Elegy said, her paths of glory led to the grave. I'm sure that if she could just say a few more words she'd comment that she was pleased to finally be close to my dad.