

Readers Were Reminded Of Own Mothers

It was just six years ago this morning, that I last saw my mother alive. It was a little past midnight. She lay there in the hospital bed with tubes in her nose and arms, a frail woman of some years past 80, but still trying to fight off the attack of several ailments.

The nurses at the hospital in Marion, Ind., had said I could stay for only a few moments. Mom was unconscious and I don't know what difference it would have made whether I remained at her bedside for one minute or twenty. But that's the way they are in "medicine."

ANYWAY, like any other son, I held her hand and spoke to her. She lay there fighting for breath. The nurse came in and said I'd have to go. So I bent over and kissed Mom on the head, and I do believe she smiled at me through her closed eyes.

An hour later, the telephone rang and my older brother said it was all over.

You may wonder why I'm writing about this. Over the many years when I'd go back to Marion, I'd always return to work loaded with "ammunition" for a column. It was not that my Mom was so different from yours —



By
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fact is ever so many wrote saying that the stories reminded them so much of their own mothers.

IT WAS JUST that Mom was always reminding me of things that were; and trying to her last breath to lead her four sons in her version of righteousness.

For the benefit of those who didn't meet Mom through my columns, let me give you a fill-in.

She was born in a tiny town in Russia — during the awful days of the czars. Things aren't too much better in the Soviet Union today, but under the czars people of the Jewish faith lived through absolute hell.

If things weren't going right for the ruling classes, the Jewish people were blamed. They were a minority, of course, and so periodically the Cossacks and others rode through the villages burning and killing.

THE STORIES my Mom used to tell me were almost unbelievable. Starvation, denial of education, existing with one eye on day-to-day survival and the other eye on the possibility of the czar's soldiers sweeping into the village, with swords drawn and butchery the order of the day.

When she was quite young, my mother and father were married over there. While the czars used the Jewish people and other minorities for sword-practice, they also wanted them for soldiers. So my father was drafted.

But why should he serve a despot like the czar? So he deserted and sneaked across the border with my mother, into Germany and then to the U. S. That was at the turn of the century.

It took courage, as it did for every immigrant.

MARCH 23, 1975

MOM AND DAD used to regale us with stories of how they survived in their early days in America. One of my father's favorite stories was about the time he went ped-

dling, house to house, with a basket of notions — shoes, laces and such.

At every door where he stopped, the householder would say, "Not today."

That evening when he got among friends, they asked him how it had gone. My father replied, "If I'd have had some not-todays, I could have done some business. Everyone asked for them."

THERE WAS that story of how the family got located out in the then-tiny city of Marion, Ind. The fact is that he was heading for Marion, Ohio (the train ran through both Marion, Ohio, and Marion, Ind., and on to Chicago). But somehow, lacking in the knowledge of the English language, he got off when he heard "Marion!" called. There we were in Indiana and there we stayed.

There were two things in which Mom and Dad (who, by the way, passed on 26 years ago) believed without any reservations. Both beliefs came from their experiences in Russia. One was a conviction that from the Lord Almighty came good and from Him also came punishment. The other conviction was that next to godliness, education was a very close second.

I doubt Mom ever spoke a sentence without the words "Thank God" being used. She felt that if there was food on the table, God had put it there; if I was monkeying around and stubbed a toe, it was punishment from on high for not being a good boy.

MY MOTHER and father had had nothing in Russia except their religion! Once I asked my mother why, if God was so good, she'd been treated so abominably by the Russians. She gave me what seemed to be a most unsatisfactory answer, at the time: She and the other Russian Jews must have sinned.

After the czars had been overthrown in the Communist carnage, Mom one day reminded me that God had paid back her oppressors. I said to her that the Communists were hardly better and she replied that God would take care of them, too.

When it came to education, Mom was a tyrant. She never did learn to read or write the English language, she was so busy bringing up four sons — cooking, washing, cleaning the house and doing all the other chores (by hand, of course). Although Mom was a rough taskmaster, she never did get any of the boys to like household work.

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NONE OF THE boys ever monkeyed around in school. I think most of us were pretty fair students, but never good enough to suit Mom. If I brought home a "B" Mom wanted to know why it wasn't an "A." If I had a bum excuse, Mom was off to see my teacher.

I remember the time I was being a smart-aleck in school and dipped the long hair of the girl sitting in front of me in the inkwell we used to have on our desks. The girl complained, the teacher summoned 80-year-old Salmon Bowman, the principal.

Mr. Bowman bent me over his knee and whacked me black and blue with a length of bicycle tire hose. My brother peached on me when we got home, and Mom added to the injuries with a strap and a sentence of no supper that night.

THAT'S THE way she was, yet like any other of the old-time mothers, she could sit up by your bed all night if you had the sniffles. And apply her own private remedies, such as smearing your chest with goose or chicken fat.

Mom, to her last days, loved cooking. If someone came into the house, he didn't get out without a meal that was old-European, that is, tasty but heavy. To turn down Mom on a meal was a mortal insult to her.

Mom always felt that anyone who wasn't fat was suffering from what she called "consumption." A fat person was a healthy one.

ANOTHER THING about Mom was that she claimed she could dream of what was happening or was going to. And there were instances when we all felt she had this ability.

Once I got myself into a hospital overseas during the war. The Red Cross had informed one of my brothers, but he kept it from Mom. One morning, Mom confronted him and said she dreamed I was in a hospital and why was he keeping it from her.

Another time, my older brother insisted on enlisting though he was quite along in years. Mom was unhappy. She had two in the Army already, and wasn't that enough? So she saw my brother off to Ft. Belvoir with the wish that he'd break a leg in training and be mustered out. Not long after, that's exactly what happened!

As I said, Mom wasn't much unlike so many of the other oldtimers, and that, I think, is why I used to get so much mail about the columns I did on her, and why I still get them.