

### 35. BEATRICE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

What one remembers: Novel by L. Trilling, *Middle of the Journey*, of which I remember only the little girl and her recitation at the school concert of Blake's poem, and how the meaningless, stupid interference of the completely uninteresting central character leads to her death -- all I remember of Trilling's only novel. I was much taken with some of T's ideas at the time -- well, they were important then. How to explain this? Whittaker Chambers! Who he?

How do you start writing a memoir? And why? I think of Ruth Jaeger a couple of years before her death throwing old letters, a lifetime of correspondence with her parents who had lived into their nineties, and other family letters, including her surviving brother, then well into his nineties, into the fireplace, in that fine old house whose address I can no longer recall. The house where we met every Monday to play duets. After Nathan and I moved to Vienna -- we always called our place of residence "Vienna" although we never lived there beyond a few weeks before we moved to Baden bei Wien (so that Wally wouldn't have to climb stairs). We spent a month in that funny inn in Baden waiting for the Wilson house in the Trostgasse to be available. We had a lease for the two years because they expected to stay in Saudi Arabia, but after a year IBM decided they could use Wilson's personality and charm more advantageously in Europe and called him back.

You can start with your earliest recollection. I couldn't have been more than three or four when I woke up one morning -- it must have been about 6 a.m. because it was still dark. Someone, a man with a lantern, walked by my window, the light from the lantern following him on the bedroom wall. I knew -- how did I know? -- that it was the hired man on his way to the barn. It must have been on the farm in Dugald, Manitoba, which my father had bought soon after I was born. I don't remember anything more. I probably felt asleep again. Why does this memory stay with me? Nothing happened. I wasn't scared. That's all.

My memories of Winnipeg are few and scattered. Years later I knew that my parents had settled there immediately after their marriage. He had been living in Montreal with the family of his older brother Jacob. Why did he want to move so far away from them? He had two brothers in Montreal, both much older than himself -- the eldest, Samuel, was twenty-two years his senior, with a large family. Jacob was nearer to his own age, married, with three children. Papa was about 36 or 37. He had already quarrelled with Samuel because of his refusal to change his name to Freedman, the name Samuel had taken years before when he slipped out of Lithuania to avoid service in the Czar's army. He was angry with Jacob for the same reason. He thought it outrageous that three brothers should have different surnames.

The break with Jacob was more mysterious. For one thing, Papa always spoke of Jacob with great affection and never spoke of Samuel at all. His nephew Harry, Samuel's eldest son, was

two years younger, already married and a father. One of us must have asked Papa about his reasons for leaving Montreal; his only answer was that one day Jacob looked at him in a certain way -- he never described it any more fully than that -- and he decided to move far away.

In Winnipeg Papa opened a store that sold millinery and ladies' clothing. It must have prospered, for he soon sold the house in Winnipeg, where three of four children were born, and found the farm he had always dreamed of owning. His business was prospering; the future looked bright. Then he acquired a partner, a man whom my mother mistrusted at first sight, but Papa never thought anyone else knew anything and my mother least of all. A few years later a suspicious-looking fire broke out in the store during the night. The police started an inspection and the partner disappeared. My father was arrested and charged with arson, and my mother, with three young children and another rather obviously on the way, was left to handle the situation as well as she could. With no legal advice or experience she set about trying to raise bail for her husband. First she appealed to a business acquaintance who, reluctant to get involved and ashamed to tell her so, kept her waiting for hours in his office on the pretext that he was expected to arrive at any moment (he was in fact there all the time). At the end of the day she appealed to another business friend she knew slightly--"a Christian", as she repeated with gentle bemusement when she told me the story many years later, whose immediate response was, "Of course. How much do you need?" At the subsequent trial the judge threw out the case and kindly advised Papa to be a little choosier the next time he did business with a plausible stranger.

I don't think Papa learned anything at all from this experience or from any other experience. He was an infuriating man in many ways, but Mamma loved him with heart and soul and he adored her. I don't believe they ever quarrelled. The oddest outcome of all from this drama was that the "pregnancy" that undoubtedly won her the sympathy of judge and jury at the trial turned out to be a misdiagnosed and neglected ovarian cyst whose removal very nearly cost her life. One year later my youngest brother Mark came into the world. I remember how we three children stood in the hall awaiting the birth of the baby sister Mamma had promised to give me. I remember how the door opened and Papa came out, his face shining with tears and relief, and said a little shamefacedly "It's another boy".

I was three months short of my fifth birthday when I faced this grave disappointment as bravely as I could. The baby was impossibly small and fragile, and his life was further complicated when my exhausted mother could not produce enough milk to keep him alive. The product of the cow had to be modified for his infant stomach with something called "gripe water"; one could only imagine what his appalling gripes would have been without it. His only comfort was to lie on Mamma's stomach, and his early weeks were spent as close to his original habitation as could be arranged. The mohel came to the house to perform his ritual and apparently made a poor job of it, and the poor baby had some unnecessary suffering in addition to his dietary difficulties.

No one ever explained this to me, but I had a long memory even then, and thirty-some years later when my own son was born I had the job done in the maternity hospital by the obstetrician to the consternation and indignation of the local man in Ottawa of that time. Beyond the shocked reactions of all four grandparents, there were no other complications. Mamma was sure that the doctor, however experienced and competent he might be at delivering babies, would not do the thing properly, but all went well. I had been permitted to stay in the hospital longer than usual because my husband was in Newfoundland on Census business; my room was close enough to the operating room that I could hear the little patients one after another being called down the hall and a few minutes later telling the world what they thought of the indignity that was being visited on them. When I heard "Baby Keyfitz" being called I quaked as I awaited the usual howls, but there was not a sound. What terrible thing could have happened? The nurse came into my room laughing to tell me that Robert had taken his little nip of brandy and sugar like a man and slept through the whole thing.

Personal Computers: When did they enter our lives? Of course we knew about Univac, which Nathan had encountered in the course of successive visits relative to his work in the Dominion Bureau of Statistics to the U.S. Bureau of the Census in Washington, and later at the University of Chicago there was a monster that occupied the (air conditioned) top floor of a building on (I think) 59th Street and spewed out pages of information extracted from statistics punched out on piles of Hollerith cards (often by your wife) in a room on a lower floor. That was if you were lucky, in which case the printout appeared in a roll of paper when you came to collect it several hours later. If the roll was several pages thick that was good news. If it contained only a page or two your heart sank. Someone had made a mistake. I loved dull routine jobs, as long as they involved machinery of some kind, and became quite skilled as a Hollerith puncher.

The University of Chicago computer was in operation 24 hours a day. It soon became routine in our home in Madison Park for Nathan to feel an irresistible urge to visit his new love at three in the morning rather than wait for me to collect the good or bad news the next day. Then came the event that changed our lives forever. For some reason that I no longer recall he was attending a conference in Calgary or Edmonton, Alberta. Suddenly I got an excited telephone call from a distant airport. He had arrived there early (or perhaps his flight was delayed -- this happened more often than not in those days) and sharing a bench with him in the waiting room was another delegate who had with him -- wonder of wonders -- a portable computer, perhaps the very first on the market, called Osborne. This he was more than happy to display. My orders were to lose no time in finding out where and how in Columbus it was possible to obtain this marvel and, if possible, order one immediately.

We were already familiar with computers and indeed had already bought one, a TRS80, from Radio Shack. This wonder, about the size and shape of a smallish present-day monitor, was operated by a computer language called Fortran and came with a thick manual and half dozen or

so programs for the buyer's amusement. These showed on the screen some stick figures or cartoons, some text which I no longer recall, and of course clear and simple instructions for making your own. Nathan caught on to Fortran right away and set TRS80 to work producing prime numbers. It was quite happy to go on doing this for hours. I was mostly interested in doing the few visual tricks that came with the instruction book and creating some rudimentary ones of my own. There was no printer and no way of connecting one. There must have been some way of saving your work, but I have forgotten what it was.

In any case, by dint of much telephoning I was able to contact a computer store in a shopping center not too far from our home. Yes, they knew all about Osborne. It was possible to order one and one might have to wait as long as a month. I forget the cost, but our children were grown and we could afford it. In the end we ordered two, one for each of us. The printer was more complicated; it produced something that looked like typescript--it worked like a typewriter, with keys striking a ribbon--I think it was called a Daisy Wheel, or something like that, and did beautiful work.

The computers arrived and we were immediately enslaved. The operating system came on four diskettes--in addition to the operating system, which was called cp/m, there was a word processor and a spreadsheet. No pictures, but a new art form arose that must have whiled away many hours of one's employer's time in offices all over the country and consisted in forming designs with the letter x, rather like cross-stitch embroidery and printing them on squared paper. I never tried to do it. It was ingenious, no doubt, but a waste of time that many found irresistible.

Another waste of time that one experienced by mistake was unfortunately irreparable -- forgetting to save one's work before turning off the computer. Usually once was enough to teach one a lesson, but some people never learn.