

## 5. THE MAGIC OF BANK STREET AND MY PARENTS, OTTAWA, 1936

My first encounter with Beatrice was at the water cooler of the national statistical office, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (DBS). It was she who spoke first. Someone was telling me about an adding machine, that being a technology just coming over the horizon, and she intervened, saying "My father has an adding machine." When I showed interest she suggested that I come over and he would show it to me, and she told me the address. I said I would, and promptly forgot the whole matter.

But then a few days later I was walking south on Bank Street shopping for camera film and met Beatrice, who said something like "O you are coming to see me!" I muttered something, and we went on together and then entered the establishment called "Ork's Bakery" at 369 Bank Street that was her family's source of livelihood. Plainly a very small enterprise at best, and in the thirties such a place was always on the edge of bankruptcy. We went past the counters into a back room, windowless, called the office of the bakery, where its accounts were kept, and that was in addition the only available living room for the family.

There the family were sitting down to a tasty dinner, and I was invited to join. For Jews feeding a poor scholar gains one merit, and if there is an unmarried daughter in the family the stranger is doubly welcome.

What gave the place its magic were the people who lived there or who came through. Beatrice's parents were impressive: her father, Henry Orkin, could read and quote from the Hebrew Scriptures and had the long memory required for Talmudic scholarship. He had a fine voice in which he could sing the sacred texts. Her mother, Olga Orkin, spoke five languages and had great knowledge of the countries of Western Europe, having lived most of her youth in Belgium. She had a passion for reading that was almost morbid, and that along with a good memory, generated over the course of years vast knowledge of diverse subjects. Beatrice had the same merit to a point where it was almost a defect. She was occupied in building a poetry anthology whose development to date is now, over sixty years later, published on her web site. I have said of Beatrice as well as of her mother that if there was a Department of Facts in the University they could have a Professorship in it.

Her oldest brother Phil was informed on just about every scientific discovery of the time, especially in biology, and could discourse on them fluently. Her second brother Lionel played the flute, and was well-connected in Ottawa, including among his friends the Dominion Carillonneur and the Master of the Mint. He was the most sociable member of the family. Her youngest brother Mark was distinguished by his ready wit--he ultimately settled down to the practice of law. And Erele Armstrong, a neighbor who was an ardent law student was always ready with a judicial opinion when matters of law were adjudicated at the dining table. Gerald

Rickwood, who had been in my mathematics class at McGill and whose father was a church organist and whose knowledge of music was vast, was a frequent visitor. It was he who had the vision to see that Beatrice and I would make a good match.

When these people conversed I did not notice the lack of windows, or the paint roughly applied, or a rat now and again scampering across the floor. In fact these were positive features, for they made me think of informal scholarly gatherings on the Left Bank in Paris, Stumbling on it in the middle of Ottawa, that in those days was a cultural desert, seemed simply magical, and if Beatrice came out of this family she was certainly worth knowing. Gerald Rickwood encouraged me in this belief. And so started my courtship.



A photo of Nathan and Beatrice Keyfitz (unknown date). Source: [http://www.fields.utoronto.ca/programs/scientific/keyfitz\\_lectures/fienberg.html](http://www.fields.utoronto.ca/programs/scientific/keyfitz_lectures/fienberg.html)

But when my parents came to Ottawa from Montreal and to 369 Bank Street to see what I was up to, they were aghast. My father (like others of his generation entering the United States and Canada about the turn of the century) had painfully worked up from the bottom of the social heap, from a status of penniless immigrant, door to door peddler carrying his stock in a bag on his back. After a lifetime of hard work he had fulfilled the promise of the New World, arrived at secure middle class status, and was proud of having the appurtenances that signify it--starting with the house at 3454 Addington Avenue in Notre Dame de Grace in Montreal.

They felt that they were fitting me out to continue their upward social and economic climb. At some sacrifice they had me dressed properly for school and Sunday School at Temple Emanuel, most of whose members were wealthy citizens of Westmount, and saw me through McGill and otherwise launched on my career. And here I was in danger of falling directly back into the bottom status out of which they had so arduously climbed.

And they (especially my mother) pointed out that I had close friends in Montreal, Pearl Jacobs, daughter of a distinguished lawyer who was starting to make a mark in politics, Sylvia Blumenthal, daughter of an official of the Canadian Pacific Railway, Edith Jacobson, daughter of a manufacturer of office furniture, Beatrice Klineberg, charmingly plump sister of Otto

Klineberg, eminent psychologist working in Paris, Rebecca Ein, lively, freckle-faced and given to telling off-color stories. All these were classed as nice Jewish girls of the best families ("best" meaning well-off). Any one of them would carry the Keyfitz name to new social heights. I liked every one of those girls but did not think of them for marriage. An impartial judge would have judged all of them prettier than Beatrice, who wore glasses and a very plain hairdo, had a nose somewhat out of proportion and other features that distinguish her from beauty queens. Her family's total wealth would have been just pocket money in the families of my Montreal friends.

Why did I land on Beatrice? I was too young to take the choice seriously. Men I have known, less impulsive than myself, held off getting married until they could make a mature judgment. By their thirties, they proceeded cautiously and rationally before such a momentous choice. I can imagine them taking a pencil and paper, making a column for each of the lady candidates available, and in that column listing the pros and cons of each. And almost invariably making a decision based on that listing that affected their whole lives--and often disastrously.

By any "objective" criterion Beatrice was totally unqualified to be my wife, especially in that her education stopped after four years of high-school. I think I can see, long after the fact, what underlay my choice. It has been said that a marriage is the start of a life-long conversation. I seem to have understood that without being consciously aware of it. I now say that what contributes most to a marriage is not sex, not beauty, not wealth, but the partners being well informed, well-read, and capable of carrying on a natural, unaffected, and unselfconscious conversation.

(Incidentally, in only a minority of cases did a girl from the Montreal Jewish community marry a local youth. They almost always married someone from out of town, perhaps a young man they met at summer camp in Maine or Vermont. Was a kind of incest taboo operating here?)

It was in a supremely rational perspective that my parents viewed 369 Bank Street, starting of course from their own preoccupations. They were blind and deaf to the high style of thought and conversation that made for me the romance of the slum premises that Beatrice inhabited. To be fair, after a number of visits my father seemed to get some of the intellectual flavor of 369 Bank Street, or at least reconciled himself to my marrying down, but my mother never did. I suspect they discussed their concerns with their friends, especially with a couple called Wigdor, and there was a good deal of "tsk!, tsk!" as they exchanged evaluations of my eccentric behavior.

One of the things that surprised me about 369 Bank Street was the harmony. People were polite to one another. They listened to one another. Home at 3454 Addington Avenue was not like that at all. It was relatively luxurious with plush furniture in the living room, but it lacked an essential element of gracious living--people being nice to one another.

## **My Courtship and my first car, Ottawa 1937-40**

Eating was a major component of my courtship of Beatrice. In the evening, after I had taken the meager diet provided by Mrs. Kronk on Somerset Street (what could you expect for \$30 per month covering room plus three meals a day?), I regularly wandered up to 369 Bank Street, where as I have said good food and good talk prevailed.

Quite aside from this I would often pass by the Orkin bakeshop and be given a chocolate éclair or a cream puff out of stock.

For Beatrice all this was perfectly natural, but not so for her brother Lionel, who was responsible for the store. I remember once he complained "The stock is going down, but the cash register doesn't ring" that I thought showed a certain selfishness.

In the evening, after a good dinner, Beatrice and I retired upstairs, where there was a couch on which we sat and talked. Nothing more was possible on that couch because it sloped forward and tended to throw one onto the floor. Beatrice explained that her father had disassembled and then reassembled it, and in the process the springs had gotten reversed. Apparently there was no manual on how to put the couch together. In any case, Beatrice said unapologetically, almost boastfully, that her father when putting some new equipment together would first of all throw away the manual. His watchword was "what one fool can do another can" and his constant effort was to make himself independent of the whole world. The rugged individualism to which many a millionaire attributes his fortune, well, Henry Orkin really had it--but it brought him no fortune.

That was the first of the many visits in a courtship that had its ups and downs. At one of the low points on this rocky road I said something like "If we stay in Ottawa you would be a suitable mate for me, but if I go to some bigger place and take a more important job, then you wouldn't do." At this Beatrice said something like "If that is the way you feel then you don't want to marry me, and you can leave right now." The well-chosen answer brought me to my knees, and I apologized and the matter was never mentioned again.

I was lucky to have backed down on that: in the sequel we did travel widely, and wherever we were, on pleasure or on business, Beatrice not only fitted perfectly but was universally admired. Perhaps fitted better than I did!

1937 was the year I bought my first car, a 1929 Chevy; it cost \$200 that I had saved out of my \$75 per month salary between July 1936 and May 1937. It was what was called "closed-in," i.e. with a roof and windows, an innovation when it was marketed, but in 1937 old hat. Its impudently square shape stood out among the streamlined cars that then filled the roads. Notwithstanding its age I thought it would raise my standing with Beatrice--and any other girl

that caught my fancy. Learning how to drive it was no problem--Jimmie Henderson, my roommate at Mrs. Kronk's showed me the gas pedal, the brake pedal, the switch for the lights, and then he accompanied me as I took a short spin. That was sufficient practice driving to get me a driver's license (there was no test in those days). I now owned a car and could drive it legally, and was ready for such affairs of the heart as it would make possible. I took Beatrice on a drive, and promised many more of the same.

One of the girls that pleased me was Elizabeth Carmichael. A pleasant girl indeed, with an entertaining patter spoken in a crisp voice, who worked as editor in the same office as myself. I invited her out for a drive, and a few nights later she invited me to her residence. That car was working just as I had hoped.

She lived in a third story attic room, pretty much separated from the rest of the house, nicely furnished and dimly lit. When I arrived I found her in a strikingly low-cut dress, and I asked myself if she was not moving along a little too fast. I knew that she was engaged to Leslie Smith, a jeweler in Kingston, and I wondered what Beatrice, to whom I was half engaged, would think of all this. So the nearest we came to sex was sitting side by side on her couch and talking,

As to all Americans my car was not only an instrument of courtship, but something more, something deeply symbolic. And I felt it would not be really mine until I had taken it apart and put it together again. (This was among the things about myself that I understood better after my analysis--see below.) So I drove it up onto Mrs. Kronk's front lawn and started to dismantle the engine. First the spark plugs came out, then the pistons, and so on. When Beatrice came over I showed it proudly. She inspected my work, looked right through the engine block, seeing the ground through where the cylinders had been, and then said something like "You will never get it going again." If she was that hard-hearted and cynical before we were married, I thought, what would she be like after?

I am glad to report she was wrong. I put it together and after some struggle it went--kind of. With loud sputtering and backfiring. It was drivable--at least across the road, about 100 feet--where there was a gas station cum garage, and a mechanic, a villainous fellow who cheated me on that and on other occasions. As he worked I began to see the importance of getting the firing order of the cylinders right, something I had regarded as an unnecessary refinement if I had thought about it at all. But my new knowledge of firing order was never to be applied. This one experience fully satisfied my desire to take an engine apart.

I drove the car for another three years, with a trip 20 miles north of Ottawa for our honeymoon and many trips to Montreal, 120 miles east of Ottawa that I did in 4 hours. We suffered a flat tire or engine breakdown every week or two, but that was motoring with a car nearly ten years of age. In those days a car like that might have been bought new for something like \$2,000, driven

for two years by the original owner, driven for 2 or 3 years by the second owner, and so on, steadily dropping in the social and financial class of the owner. I was just about the bottom.

In Montreal I proudly took my father for a drive. Like many of his generation he had never owned a car and probably had not been in one very often. As we went along one of Montreal's smoothly paved and little traveled streets there was a noise, the rear end suddenly dropped down several inches, and the car limped along until I brought it to a stop at the curb. My father thought it was finished. But having had much practice by then, I was able single-handed to jack up the rear end and change to the spare tire. Within less than 10 minutes the car was under way again. My father was deeply impressed. That was the only time in all the years I knew him that he praised something I had done.

There was another occasion when I was able to do something that seemed clever (at least to those who didn't understand what was going on.). On a cold winter day we were driving along a solitary country road, when we came up another old car with a family standing disconsolate around it. I stopped in my usually helpful way. I raised the engine hood and saw that the gas was flowing but presumably there was no spark. I turned to the people around, and asked "Has anyone here a nail file?" Beatrice produced a nail file from her purse, and I scraped away at the points, circuit breakers in the electrical system. Then hopefully I asked the driver to try the engine-he did and it fired. We drove away amid effusive expressions of gratitude. As well as some awe on the part of my wife and children.

That undistinguished car carried some then or later distinguished people. I remember Sir John Boyd Orr, founding Director of FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Richard Stone, English economist and later Nobel Laureate, Richard Wright, author of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. I was probably the only member of DBS who had heard of them, and I went to some effort to catch them and drive them around so that I could have an hour or two of their company. They after all represented the outside world, where great thoughts came from and where great deeds were done. I took Richard Wright up the Gatineau Valley so he could look into the possibility of living there--thinking that Canada would be better for a Black than the United States, but in the end he settled in Paris.. I would wait for such people in the car while they called on senior government officials or did other business. A chance to talk to such people while driving them was the only return I expected for my trouble. They were voices from the civilized world.

The car had a recurrent problem, not serious but decidedly annoying. Going along the highway the engine would without warning lose power and the car would come to a stop. I learned to diagnose the problem: the gas tank was dirty, and every now and again enough dirt accumulated to block the fuel line to the cylinders.

"After all," it was explained to me, "an engine is very simple. It needs gas, and it needs a spark to ignite the gas. If either one is missing there is no power," Then what to do to get the gas flowing again? Pump it out so that it would carry away the dirt that was blocking it. And the most conveniently available pump was my mouth. I sucked out the fuel pipe, trying to swallow as little of the gas as possible. All this happened eight to ten times. Since then I have read that gasoline is decidedly not wholesome, in fact is a deadly poison. Like so many other crazy things I have done in my life I got away with it. Indeed enough to be worth a segment of this memoir with that title--Some Crazy things (See below)

After three years of more or less faithful service our Chevy came to an inglorious end. It was customary in those days to put one's car up for the winter, and I parked mine in an old covered space behind Ork's Bakery. As a son-in-law I took for granted this and many other privileges. In the winter of 1940 the roof was covered with more than the usual load of ice, and it collapsed, crushing the top of our Chevy down flat. Beatrice, surveying the wreckage said that it looked like a top hat that had been run over by a truck. But the engine and transmission were intact, and when the wreckage was cleared away it was drivable. I found a buyer for the corpse at \$25, cash in hand. The last we saw of our Chevy was its square rear end rounding a corner as it left on its own power.

This was life in the Thirties during the Depression. It shows how the Depression gave new meaning to the idea of the ancient Greeks that life is a constant struggle, an endless series of challenges, of puzzles. . Depression called on individual ingenuity-

For one who loves problems, it was a happy time.

This is not to argue for a Depression--far from it--but simply to assert that for people who seek life, and not merely money, happiness does not follow the course of the Dow Jones Index.

### **The wedding and honeymoon, Ottawa, October 8, 1939**

We traveled the rocky road of courtship for three years. That was the length of time it took for me to resolve the numerous doubts I had about committing myself to anyone for life, taking financial responsibility for another person. (Married women rarely worked in those far-off days, and in any case there were no jobs to be had.) With doubts still remaining we nonetheless were married on October 8, 1939. That was followed by 63 years of happy union and by now the last remaining doubts have been resolved.

My future in-laws paid for the wedding by selling the calf, whose name was Greta. It was a wrench to dispose of poor Greta, but there was no other way of paying for the License, the Rabbi, and the food and drink for the reception. The calf had just been born; if the birth had been

delayed, the wrench of losing what had become a family pet would have been less and they could have raised the money by selling , or at least mortgaging, the unborn and unnamed calf.

I was married in my office suit--a new suit was out of the question. Beatrice, however, did not consider her office dress suitable, and she bought a green dress. That is to say she put down \$1, and still owed \$7.50, which was to be paid at \$1 per week. But she had scruples about putting an unpaid dress on her back, and somehow was able to raise the \$6.50 due in time for the wedding.

We lived at the time with the Orkin family on the Metcalfe Road, in a half-finished house being built by my father-in-law with help from his youngest son Mark. It was plainly unsuitable for the wedding, being both too far away from Ottawa, and too conspicuously incomplete. The bakery at Bank Street was unsuitable for other reasons. Fortunately my father-in-law was able to arrange the loan for one afternoon of a relative's rumpus room, and my parents came up from Montreal for the occasion. The occasion was newsworthy to the point of attracting the attention of the Ottawa Citizen. When we told the Citizen reporter that the bride had worn a green dress and the decor of the room was blue, he said that green doesn't go with blue, and wrote that the decor was green. So much for objective reporting.

There must have been about 15 people for the wedding. The cake had been made and decorated with loving care by Lionel. The wine was poured and drunk with many toasts by the bride, groom, friends and relatives. When the groom (me) had finished his drink he put the glass on the floor and stamped on it. An old Jewish custom--presumably symbolizing the deflowering of the bride which was shortly to come.

After the wedding we escaped in our 1929 Chevy, dragging the required array of tin cans and other noise-making material. We went to a cottage about 20 miles north that we had rented for a week. There for the first time we came closer together than holding hands. It was a brilliant start for the subsequent 63 years--the joy of union more than offset the steady rain, the mud, the damp cottage.

After about three days we found that we had run down our inventory of food so that little more than a tin of beans and a couple of potatoes were left, tastefully displayed in the middle of the rough wooden table in the rustic cabin. Half of the week for which we had paid was still unexpired, but nonetheless we packed everything back into the Chevy.

We had parked the car at the top of a hill that would spin the engine for a start. But the slope had become too slippery to take hold on our treadless second hand tires. However with some pushing from behind by the local Quebec police, the engine fired, and we sneaked back into town and into the modest basement apartment in the Tweedsmuir Bldg. on King Edward Avenue that was to be our home for the next year. There in isolation we completed the week of honeymooning.



At the end of the week, when we were scheduled to return, we called our friends and relatives, and started regular married life. That consisted for me in going to work in the old DBS, for Beatrice after a short period of work in the Children's Aid, and for Dr. Burke in Health and Welfare, in cooking and (regularly from 10:00 to 1:00 p.m.) listening to the trials and tribulations of Ma Perkins, Big Sister, The Right to Happiness and others in radio soap operas.

There I had a darkroom and did photography with an old-style second-hand camera that had a handsome large lens. One pushed a coated glass plate through a slot, focussed with a little wheel, exposed for a number of seconds (fewer if one could bring more light on the subject).

I remember Lionel trying to get Loolie-Poolie, a short-haired yellow cat, to sit for a portrait. I remember also a one-eyed nondescript cat called Vulcan, a valiant and fearless rat-catcher, while other cats were afraid of the rats. So much for the history of the Orkin cats.