

THE BEGINNING OF ME

by Gladys Kaminsky

The entire United States was rejoicing, not because I was about to be born, but because the World War was over! Since I was the eighth child, my parents had run out of people to name me for, so they chose Gladys, to honor the joyful times.

We lived at 1472 Brook Avenue, The Bronx, New York. It was a railroad flat, which means that you could roll a ball from the front room to the back room. All seven rooms in the apartment were one behind the other like railroad cars. Of course I was born at home. There was no such thing as prenatal care. In order to save money, they got a beginning doctor. He did not see his patient until she was in labor. The day I was born, my mother scrubbed all seven rooms on her hands and knees. She then prepared a bountiful Sabbath dinner, consisting of gefilte fish, chicken soup, roast chicken with potatoes, apple pie, and cookies. All this and much more was done by 3 P.M. on that Friday afternoon. Then she allowed herself to go into labor. I was born at 7 P.M. It was November 29th, 1918.

On the other side of the birth-room door were my father and six siblings, eager to see me and get their hands on me!. They passed me from one set of arms to another, and even threw me up in the air to express their delight. To this day my brother Dan talks about what a beautiful baby I was, with cheeks pink and soft as rose petals.

When the excitement subsided I was returned to my mother. That night I was very fretful. When nursing did not help, my mother began to diaper me in the dark, so as not to disturb my father. What she felt was stickiness. A well-experienced mother, she knew a baby should not feel like that! She had my father turn on the light and discovered it was blood! The tossing about had opened the tie on the umbilical cord. It was a good thing for me that my mother searched for the cause of my discomfort! I was quickly retied, and all was well.

At that time my parents had been married over 20 years. My mother was 41 and my father 45. My oldest sister, Helen was 19 and a teacher in the New York City school system. Next was Mae, 17, working as a stenographer. After them was Blanche, who lived only a year and a half, and died of diphtheria long before I was born. Arthur was their first son, 14 years old and working as an errand boy. Dan was 10, Ethel 8, and Ruth 6, all still in school. The younger children thought the doctor had brought me in his mysterious black bag! When the doctor arrived, Ruth begged him to let her see the baby. "Just let me see if it is a boy or a girl!" The doctor said: "I'll show you the baby when I come out!"

We were poor in worldly goods, but rich in family, health, and tradition. My father was a highly skilled cutter, pattern maker and grader in the making of ladies' clothing. A pattern-maker takes the sketch made by a designer and creates a pattern, from which a cutter cuts the cloth. The pattern is in one size, and a grader makes patterns in all the other sizes desired. However, this was a strictly seasonal industry, so his skills were needed less than half of each year.

When the season ended, money was spent as little as possible, just for food and rent. When the money was gone, they pawned their

few belongings and then the butcher, the grocer, and the baker extended credit. As soon as he went back to work and received his first pay, they began to pay their creditors. When they were all paid up, they retrieved their things from the pawnshop. The only exception was if things had been so bad that they pawned not only my mother's diamond engagement ring but her gold wedding ring as well. In that case they got back her wedding ring first. It really upset her to have all those children and no wedding ring!

Somehow or other, they managed to get new shoes for all the children before Passover and before Rosh Hashanah every year. My parents often did not have enough money left to get new shoes for themselves for the holidays, but they felt their sizes did not change, and the children's did.

Of course children's shoes do not always last six months, but they had to do. Often we put cardboard in our shoes to cover the holes in the soles. This didn't bother us, because everyone we knew did the same thing. Shoes that don't fit properly tear holes in the socks, and my mother spent her evenings in an easy chair, darning socks. That, to her, was resting.

When I wanted a penny for candy, if my mother, thinking of what else she could buy with the penny I asked for, said "No", my father always was a soft touch, and gave it to me!

Now in 1987 a penny buys nothing, but in my early years three cents bought soup greens - which included carrots, parsnip, celery root, parsley, potato, celery, and a white root with aromatic flat green leaves that we called petrichka, which I later learned was another kind of parsley - enough for three cents (in addition to free beef bones and a chicken) to make soup to serve all nine of us for two nights! And deliciously! This was a standard for Friday night supper. On Fridays food was always cooked for two days, since one could not work on the Sabbath to prepare other foods. My mother made the noodles for the soup. I liked small square noodles because they did not slip off the spoon like other noodles, and she always made some for me.

On the other hand, a penny bought 20 licorice cigarettes that I loved. They were packed in a little box, and I made them last as long as possible. When money was plentiful, they got a real luxury for me - smoked sturgeon for Sunday morning breakfast, to accompany the bagels and cream cheese, whitefish, and herring. I was a poor eater, and whenever I was weighed at the corner drugstore I weighed 48 pounds from when I was 4 years old until I was 8, in summer clothes or winter clothes! The doctor said there was nothing wrong with me. I was wiry, he said. My mother sat with me for two hours to get me to drink a glass of milk! So when I somehow developed a liking for sturgeon, they wanted me to have it.

My earliest memory was being lifted up to stand on the dining room table, with all the family around me. This happened repeatedly. Then one time when I was stood on the table a great shout went up - my head touched the fringe of the lamp over the dining room table! Everyone praised me for getting so big!

My father was home about half of each year. When the season ended, he got fabrics at a low cost. The manufacturer knew that next season he would be using different fabrics and different colors. My father would cut clothing for the family, and either he or my mother

sewed them up. My mother had worked as a sewing machine operator before their first child was born. She had started at the end of her formal education, when she finished eighth grade.

My mother was forever busy with the housework. Cooking required daily shopping - small ice-boxes and no freezers - and everything had to be made from scratch. The kitchen was the center of our home, and many a long conversation was held while shelling peas, stringing beans, peeling potatoes, and watching Mama bake. On Fridays she would bake an apple pie and a yeast dough kuchen with cinnamon and sugar and a yeast dough horseshoe-shaped cake with raisins and nuts. I liked the apple pie crust but not the apples, so Mama made cookies for me from extra dough.

Papa was extraordinarily attentive to his children. He taught all of us to read before we started school. I don't remember learning how to read - it seems that I always knew how. I know that when I was recovering from measles complicated by bronchial pneumonia when I was six years old, my working siblings gave me a copy of Robert Louis Stevenson's book "Kidnapped", and I read it with no difficulty. There were three other books I read over and over when I was little. "Robinson Crusoe", "Little Women", and a wonderful thick book that was missing the front 5 pages and the last 5 pages, but made a great read nonetheless. It was only when I was sixteen years old that I got a book out of the library and discovered that the book I had read dozens and dozens of times was Jules Verne's "Mysterious Island"! At last I found out how it began and ended! We also had a very thick book that I loved - it was "The Book of Knowledge" printed long before I was born, when all knowledge could be fitted into one book!

Papa also taught me how to play checkers and cards. He always "gave me a show" which meant letting me do it over when I made a mistake, and letting me win most of the time. It was a remarkably effective teaching system. I learned how to play pinochle before I was six by sitting on his knee and watching whenever he played. I also paid out the pennies or collected them for him.

I also sat on his knee when he had coffee, which he liked with several spoonfuls of sugar and lots of milk. He let me dunk a roll into his coffee, and we ate together.

As you can see, I was very much indulged as a child - even spoiled. My siblings started to call me brat. When I objected to that word, they spelled it out, and that held me for a while. Eventually I understood that b r a t spelled brat, and I objected again, so they called me "b r a t x y z". That held me for a long time, because I couldn't pronounce it!

We had a very lively house. We had cousins by the dozens - an uncle figured out once that he had 65 nephews and nieces! Also, my parents encouraged all my brothers and sisters to bring their friends to our house. They bought apples in 25 pound lots and there was always a big bowl of apples on the table. We had a piano and Arthur taught himself to play popular tunes on it. We also had a record player - called a Victrola in those days - that played at 78 RPMs, provided you wound it up with a big crank on the side. A record ran three minutes, and I think it had to be wound up with each record. When it didn't work, Arthur took it apart, with my help, (or hindrance?) oiled it, and put it together. Somehow it worked!

Arthur had an Erector set, and we spent many wonderful hours together making things from it. The parts were indestructible, of solid steel, I think. I didn't realize how good it was until I bought a set for my children and read in the instructions to bend a girder to make a fender! No one could bend a girder of the Erector set of my childhood!

Arthur was home from work for some weeks when he had his tonsils out and a deviated septum corrected. It was then that he taught me how to make a paper airplane, a paper ship, and an aluminum foil cup. Many years later during World War II, one of my co-workers wanted to decorate a gym for a dance to entertain soldiers. She thought paper windmills would look nice, but didn't know how to make them. I said I know how to find out, and called my brother Arthur! Over the phone he gave instructions and I made one while talking with him, and then was able to teach windmill making!

When I was little, I would eat yolk of soft boiled egg but not if it had a drop of semi-liquid white in it! After years of that, I ate only the white of hard boiled egg, without a touch of yolk, and that went on for years. My mother made old fashioned oatmeal that had to cook for 20 minutes. She made it in milk, with sugar in it. I loved the milk, and she would patiently strain the oatmeal so that not a drop of oats was in my plate. Ruth loved the oat part, so of course nothing was wasted.

Housework in those days was so time-consuming. Mama washed all our clothes and towels and sheets and pillowcases for our many beds using a corrugated washboard in a deep washtub that was next to our kitchen sink. Later on they were made in one piece - a deep washtub and a shallower sink. There was a clothesline outside our window that was attached to the next building some 20 feet away. A piece of laundry was attached to the rope with wooden clothespins, and by means of pulleys the rope was moved so the laundry hung moved away and another piece could be attached to the rope. When it was dried it was all reeled in and the laundry removed one piece at a time. This put a limit on the amount of laundry that could be washed at a time, and of course the weather had to be right.

Now all that laundry had to be ironed - sheets, pillowcases, men's shirts, all other clothes, and handkerchiefs - probably a hundred handkerchiefs every week! That was the first thing that Mama allowed me to iron. From there I progressed to pillowcases - but never any further that that until I was married and in my own apartment!

The earliest irons I remember had to be heated on the stove. There were two in use at the same time - one being heated while the other was being used. When taken off the stove it had to be tested to make sure it was not so hot it would burn the clothes. The sound of the sizzle of a drop of water on it told Mama when it was just right.

If you were able to get the clothes off the line barely damp, they were ready to iron. However, if they got too dry they had to be sprinkled and rolled up so the moisture was evenly distributed - another time-consuming job.

Mama scrubbed all the floors on her hands and knees, with a pail of soapy water and a pail of clear water that had to be moved as she progressed, and changed when needed. Between scrubblings, floors were

swept with straw brooms that seemed to spread dust rather than gather it together, unless carefully used.

When I was eight months old we moved from Brook Avenue to 1005 Hoe Avenue, also in the Bronx, and it was from that apartment that I started school at the new P.S.75. Kindergarten was either unknown or unused, and I was started in first grade the September before I was six years old. I made the term by one day because anyone born after the following day had to wait until February to start. I don't remember being taken to school on the first day, but I do remember crying in the classroom. I guess I got over it, because I remember going to school with my mother watching me from our window - we were always up three or four floors because the rents were cheaper there. When I got across the one street I had to cross on the way to school, I had to turn and then was out of her sight, but she was satisfied to know that I got across safely.

Soon after I started school we moved around the corner, closer to school, to 985 Aldus Street. The reason for our move was the marriage of my sister Helen to Sam Gotlieb, which meant less money coming into the house. It was about this time that I realized there was something missing in my life, and I kept begging my mother for a new baby in the house. Everyone else in the family had a younger brother or sister, and I did not! When all my asking produced no baby, I started asking for a baby or a dog, and I did get a dog. We called him Rex, but my father called him Sooner, because, he said: "He'd sooner make on the rug than on the newspapers!" He was a poodle puppy, and he did learn his manners and was a good pet for a number of years. There was no such thing a dog food in those days - a dog ate whatever the family ate, and whatever was left over, although I think I was the only one who left anything over on my plate!