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PORTRAIT OF A GRANDFATHER

BY BARBARA HAUPT

"Katarina, we are either men or mice, but only the mice stay alive," said my grandfather.

Grandmother reflected. "Yes, and not only the mice, but the children of the mice, too, Johannes. Remember that. Wilhelm's courage doesn't make it any easier for Emma to bring up the little ones alone."

It was the dilemma of the times. My grandparents' neighbor had dared to speak publicly against the Nazi regime; and the following morning his body was found in the water under the dike, a hole in the back of his head. "Suicide," said the Free Press. His wife, left to bring up the eight children, swallowed her bitterness and accepted the galling monthly pittance of a "widow's pension."

Grandfather thought of Wilhelm's family and remembered other cases — cases in which a man was not assassinated for his mistake, but left alive to see his family tortured. Grandfather thought of his own family — and compromised.

"I think of what might happen to you, Katarina, and the children, and I keep my mouth closed," he said, like millions of other German fathers. "But I feel like a mouse." Still, Grandfather is not really made of submissive stuff. When it was dangerous to vote against Hitler in the false "free" elections, Grandfather did so, even though he knew that his vote would be included in the "unanimous" pro-Nazi vote. When listening to any foreign radio station was forbidden by the Nazi regime, under threat of arrest by the omnipresent Gestapo, Grandfather gathered his family around the tiny portable at three o'clock in the morning to listen to the muffled undertones of BBC. And when all German homes were commanded to dial in to Hitler's broadcast speeches, Grandfather turned on the radio full blast — and took his family to the movies.

My grandparents live in the small German seaport town of Husum, where my mother was born. Husum lies on the Danish border in the part of Schleswig-Holstein once known as Friesland, the home of probably the last Teutonic tribe to retain its independence. Always stubborn individualists, the Friesians lived in medieval times by the tradition of "Death before slavery," and resisted the influx of Christian missionaries until a very late date. They persistently refused to adopt the nationality of Denmark and Prussia though both alternately annexed the little country in more recent times. My great-grandfather Hans Carstens sent most of his sons to America, determined that the Carstens should not submit to the Prussian government and serve in the army of the Kaiser. His thirteenth son, Johannes, who is my grandfather, is the product of this Friesian tradition.

Typically Nordic in appearance, Grandfather is tall and slim and fair, with light blond hair, now white, and clear blue eyes at once intelligent and childlike. He talks with animation and enthusiasm and, being very sensitive, is easily excited, irritated, or made happy, by things which scarcely affect other people. Listening to the lovely strains of a Bach cantata over the radio, Grandfather is lost to the world; yet no one must disturb him by so much as turning a page in the same room. He is terribly annoyed when some article that he is looking for has been misplaced, and he early became the victim of the practical joking of his still pre-school-aged children. Often when he came home from work and, trying to hang up his overcoat, found the closet bare of hangers, he would call out in vexation, "Kateri-na! My kingdom for a coat hanger! Those children have hidden them all again."

But Grandfather's sensitiveness has more pleasant aspects than unpleasant ones, and he really loved his children. My mother recounts the long dark winter evenings of her childhood, when Grandfather played his violin for his three children, awakening in them an appreciation of good music which has never left them. During the afternoon the Carstens' house became a music conservatory, emitting the mingled blaring, squeaking, and screeching made by trumpet, flute, and violin novices — the three Carstens children. And often in the middle of night three drowsy little Carstens were gotten out of bed by their father to view an eclipse or just an unusually beautiful night sky; and, like their many generations of Friesian ancestors, they stood in awe at the mystery of midnight sun and northern lights.

Like most Germans, Grandfather likes to hike. The communion with nature which he experiences, hiking through the beautiful German forests and along the North Sea coast, is to him a religious experience. At one time when he and the children were hiking together, they came upon a giant anthill. "Kathy, Hilda, Gerhard — look," said Grandfather, with a gentle sweep of his foot upsetting the whole anthill. "Now watch closely." In seconds hundreds of busy worker ants were scrambling up through the sand. "Each little ant is doing his part — you see how already they have tunnels going down in? — and soon the hill will be just as good as ever." The children watched round-eyed as a drama of a highly organized and co-operative society unfolded before them.

One of Grandfather's simpler hobbies is one which has tried Grandmother's patience for years: his habit of marking with a red pencil the grammatical mistakes in every letter sent by her sister from Copenhagen. "Look, Katerina," he teases, "Frieda is really improving. She's just discovered that the German language has definite articles. Maybe next time she'll even get some of the genders right!" The whole family needs patience when Grandfather pursues his language studies. "Just listen to this," he may begin, looking up from his copy of "*Spoken Danish*" (bought so that he can learn to read the interesting Danish newspapers); and Grandfather is off on an enthusiastic dissertation on some point of Danish grammar, naively believing that everyone else is as fascinated as he is.

Grandfather's affinity for languages showed itself in his early childhood. As a young man he wanted to become a professor of modern languages, but unwillingly became a bookkeeper when his domineering father declared resolutely that no son of his would live on a teacher's starvation salary. Yet Grandfather, who has never been materially ambitious, could not really conform; and he still made language his life — the real life that came after work hours. Eagerly he devoured newspapers, magazines, and books in English, French, Danish, Spanish, and German and built up a stimulating correspondence in each of these languages. In his later years he has been delighted to find the same interest develop in his only grandchild, and he writes to me enthusiastically in English, German, and Spanish.

Languages are tied up with people, and one who loves the one is usually equally fascinated by the other. The time Grandfather

brought a confirmed Communist home to dinner, eyebrows rose sharply around the neighborhood and even Grandmother was shocked. Grandfather and the Communist enjoyed a stimulating discussion, vigorously disagreed with one another, and parted friends. On the other hand, when the more tediously dull among the Carstens' relatives and neighbors drop in and overstay their welcome, Grandfather's honesty makes him rude. "I have to write a letter now. I do hope you'll excuse me," he often says to one or another of these tiresome visitors, and promptly takes up pen and ink.

We still receive letters from Grandfather as frequently as ever, but now that he is seventy-five his handwriting is less firm. There are more enclosures too. Last spring Grandfather sent newspaper photos of the hundreds of crocuses pushing their sturdy heads through the snow in the Husum public park — crocuses planted five hundred years ago by the first Catholic monks. Another picture was that of a flock of gulls, circling gracefully over the North Sea breakers. And pressed in a letter this summer was a spray of heather, violet and faintly fragrant. The fact is, Grandfather is lonely for his daughter far away in America, and he knows how to make my mother homesick. Independent though he is, he wants to see all his children once again.

Fate and Grandfather's own wisdom and values have joined to give him a satisfying and happy old age. He works every day in his vegetable garden, getting hearty exercise and supplying his family with a simple, healthful diet. He still plays his violin and goes to the weekly symphony with Grandmother, enjoys his foreign correspondence and literature, and hikes at least two hours a day with Grandmother. And best of all, he is able to satisfy his undying curiosity about an ever-new world and express himself openly under a German republic where he is free to be himself.
