

Chapter1.

PROLOGUE: MY EARLY YEARS

I presume that I am as normal as the as the next person, since I remember so little of my early childhood. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, on January 5, 1925, although my mother disagreed with my birth certificate, which said January 3. Many years later, I finally got the government to acknowledge on my passport that January 5 was OK for me!

One of my earliest recollections was about falling in love with Lillian when I was about five years old. She was a beautiful woman, who owned a tricycle we both could share, and we started together in kindergarten. The romance did not last. It was in the depths of the Depression, and my father (Gustave H.) was already sick with Parkinson's Disease, and unable to work. My mother (Fannie Geller H.) was taking care of my sister Dorothy and me, and was pregnant with my brother Arnold. We had little money. All in all, it was not an auspicious beginning. We lived in the Bronx at that time, but shortly thereafter, moved back to Brooklyn. Most of my memories are of Coney Island and Brighton Beach, where I spent most of my early life. I went to public schools there (PS 100, and Abraham Lincoln High School), as well as Hebrew School, as demanded by my mother, until my Bar Mitzvah. I disliked Hebrew School, but attended daily, after regular public school hours, from ages 10-13. I know I fidgeted and misbehaved, and often received blows on the backs of my hands with a ruler, bestowed by my teacher for my unruly behavior. I did not return to a synagogue with any regularity for about 50 years after my Bar Mitzvah.

Most of my childhood was not very happy. I grew up essentially without a father. My father was a master machinist, and one of my earliest toys was a micrometer he brought for me from his shop. I did not have many toys, but I remember the micrometer and a toy cannon that shot corks at cardboard targets. I was probably six years old at that time. My father had been drafted for army service after America entered World War 1, and was stationed at Camp Upton in Long Island (as I was a generation later) for a short time, before he was released from service because of his essential work as a machinist and foreman, for a company involved in defense production. While still at home in my young life, he was confined to a wheel chair, and by the time I was 10 years old, he had been hospitalized, and remained so until his death in 1947. In those days, there was essentially no effective treatment for Parkinson's Disease. His disease was not the type often seen in older people. Rather, he had been infected with influenza virus during the epidemic of 1919-1920, and developed encephalitis, and subsequently, Parkinson's Disease, giving him a severe form of the disease at an early age. I have no doubt that my father was a caring and loving man, but he was broken and depressed because he could not care for his family. He was born in 1892 to a prosperous, educated Jewish family in the pre-World War 1 Austrian-Hungarian Empire. They were apparently petroleum engineers in the town of Drohobycz. (After WW1, it became part of Poland. After WW2, it became part of the USSR, and after the dissolution of the USSR, it became part of the Ukraine. Another branch of the family Heimberg (my great uncle's family) came from Vienna. My father emigrated to the USA about 1910, in his late teens. He had been called up for active duty in the army of the Emperor Franz Joseph, but did not wish to serve. Since conscripted service was for an indeterminate period of years, he left the

country. He was the only one of his family to emigrate, leaving behind his father (my grandfather) Joseph Baer Heimberg, his wife, brothers Jacob and Benjamin, his sister, and their families. Unfortunately, all perished in the Holocaust at the hands of the Nazis. Much of his history of the Heimberg family is documented in the files of the Holocaust Museum (Washington, DC). This wonderful family, whom I never knew, sustained us in the years before World War 2 (1939), by sending money to America to help support us while our family was on “relief”, welfare, when we were all young children.

My mother, Fannie Geller, was born into a middle class family from Chortkov, a small town also in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (now Ukraine). This town was about 100 km from my father’s birthplace, but they met in the USA. Her father had died of pneumonia in Europe at a relatively young age. His wife, my maternal grandmother Tillie, had two sons and three daughters. After my grandfather’s death, the oldest son was sent to the USA to establish himself, and then was to bring the rest of the family to New York City, all prior to World War 1. My two uncles died in this country of infectious diseases before I was born. Momma had two sisters, Sylvia (Cohen) and Anna (Wexler). They were never really close, and were often argumentative. Although there were four cousins from these aunts, we lost touch, and I have had no contact with them since I was a teenager.

Momma had a soft spot in her heart for animals, mostly cats. We had several stray cats over the years, and she was the only person I have ever known who fearlessly bathed a cat! I learned about sex when Whitey gave birth to kittens. When I was about ten years old, we adopted a stray dog, a terrier mix pup, and he immediately became my dog (Pal). A few months later, I was walking Pal in a park near our home, when he had a

seizure. I bent down to pick him up, when he inadvertently bit me on the face. I carried him home, but he died a short time later. I was devastated. My face and lips became swollen, and my mother took me to the emergency room at Coney Island Hospital, a few blocks away. They cleaned my wound, and later came and picked up Pal's body. A week later, a diagnosis of Rabies (Hydrophobia) was made. I now owe my life to Louis Pasteur. I was required to take the Pasteur treatment, which meant that for 21 consecutive days, I received a subcutaneous injection of rabies antitoxin in the abdomen. I had to take the subway by myself (Momma was working) from Coney Island to downtown Brooklyn to the Health Department to get the "shot". This was exciting, but it always hurt my belly going back home. The only good part, was that I was released from school early each day, so that I could get to the Board of Health on time.

My mother, God bless her, worked endlessly to provide food, clothing, and shelter for her children. She worked in the home while we were on welfare, and as soon as possible, worked long hours in the garment industry as a seamstress. She found it hard to cope with all of this, and as a result, offered little emotional support and love to her children. The facts of ordinary life for her were too devastating. If I sometime appear cold and uncaring, I am my mother's child. The poverty, hard work, loneliness, in the midst of the national depression, was too much for her. Eventually, as she aged, she lived alone in an apartment, and shut out the outside world. None of us could do anything to change her outlook. I escaped by leaving home at age seventeen. Dorothy escaped by marrying early in haste, and subsequently, divorcing her husband shortly after he returned from the army. Dorothy, however, more than any of us, did what she could to help momma. As a result, as a teenage boy, I grew up mostly on the streets, with little

guidance from my mother, and none, of course, from my father. I learned little of social graces or behavior. I had to learn by myself, and that was often difficult and embarrassing. I was ill prepared to face the world.

My saving grace was my high school education. I discovered that I loved learning. I loved math and science, history, and languages (Latin, German, and of course, English), and my mother encouraged it. I also loved art and drawing, and actually won an art scholarship, for a weekly art class at NYU for a year. My social life in high school was nonexistent. I had no proper clothes, or money, except what I could earn, which put a damper on my social life. I guess I was a nerd or geek, in more modern parlance. I had little time for sports, and no sports equipment. My mother looked on sports as wasted time, and demanded that I fill any “free time” with a part-time job to help support the family. I did manage, however, to play beach football (no equipment, no shoes, one ball!) with friends, and an occasional pickup game of stickball on the city streets. On occasion, I managed to sneak into Ebbets Field to watch the Dodgers play. I also worked, at times, as a delivery boy for a drug store, sold ice cream on the beach, picked up balls on a golf range, made cloth-covered buttons in a factory, and was a carpenter's assistant in a woodworking factory, among others. But we still managed to enjoy life without money. Swimming at the beach was only a walk away. I would frequently walk two miles to our local branch of the New York Public Library, and I was a ravenous reader. We could go anywhere in NYC for five cents on the subway, and the parks, museums and zoos were free. Local movies cost ten cents for a double feature, but I could not afford to go to my high school football games unless I sold pennants. It was only with each passing year, as a teenager, that I began to resent our poverty, and envy

those who had a father and more affluence. I guess I sublimated a lot of my envy by my academic and extracurricular activities (working in the Biology Laboratory at Abraham Lincoln High School as an assistant), and dreaming of going to college. I truly loved working in the biology laboratory, without compensation. My only reward was the Biology Medal on graduation. I still have it!