

FATHER

There is a legend about two trees that stood side by side in the forest.

One was a sturdy oak, the other a feathery hemlock.

One day during a severe storm, a heavy snowfall lay down a thick mantle of snow covering everything. The feathery hemlock bent and shook off the snowflakes before they weighted down the tree; but the oak, with its rigid boughs, began to sigh, crack and eventually, limbs came crashing down.

My father was the oak, a man rigid in his lifestyle, locked into an exotic past, unable to come to terms with life in the New world. He was a gifted engineer from a well connected Viennese family: his brother was the personal physician to Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent to the Austrian throne. A footloose bachelor until he was 38, father was a well traveled witty cosmopolite. He had worked a few years in the Sudan, then in Yokohama, and was transferred to the United States in 1913.

Home on an extended six month leave, he met and married a wealthy 17-year old heiress. Together they planned a lovely future: the purchase of a small castle in Austria where they would raise a family. Before doing that, they returned to the states to complete father's engineering research. When his young wife became homesick, they went back to Austria to spend the summer.

World War I broke out that August (1914) with the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the Crown Prince. Suddenly everything was in a state of chaos.

Mother and father returned to Vienna from Molveno, where they had been vacationing. Father immediately reported to the draft station in Vienna, only to be told to return to his residence.

"But my residence is in America", he protested.

The man at the counter held up a rule book. "Here; it says with your draft status, you must immediately return to your residence."

The official held up the rule book, pointing to a paragraph, "Return immediately to your residence", he repeated. Their voyage back to the states in the turmoil of war was very hazardous, but they finally made it, running the blockade on a neutral Dutch ship zigzagging its way through the submarine filled Atlantic. Their return to America commenced poorly. Even before the involvement in the European war, the United States was very pro-Ally. All German words were altered: sauerkraut became liberty cabbage, Beethoven was deleted from concert programs; and worse, a German professor was stoned in Texas. False propaganda was circulated everywhere, German soldiers were shown eating Flemish children. Once war was declared on the Axis in 1917, things went very badly for my parents. Father lost his job as an enemy alien, they they were constantly followed by Secret Service men, and mother became pregnant.

For father, this was the beginning of his extensive exile in a, to him, "barbarian land". In all Cleveland, I remember him saying, there was not ONE bookstore. With little hope of return, encumbered with a spoiled young wife and baby, he felt he was condemned to stay in America, where he could, once the war was over, at least earn a living.. There was no work in what was left of the great Austro-Hungarian Empire, mother's fortune had dwindled with the loss of the war. There followed a staggering inflation, so little ^{was} left, not enough to support even a small family. ^{money}

This then is the background of my father and the reason he could never reconcile himself to living in America. It was a self-imposed exile, but an exile, none the less.

*Dear Julie & Betsy - This is how it all began.
Now you can understand the sadness in his portrait* 4/92
GRETA
NEELSEN