

## Trumpeltier

“Heisgeliebtes Trumpel-tier” is a German term meaning “hotly beloved trampling animal,” e.g., like an elephant...and this is what my parents lovingly called me at when I was at the age of 14 or 15 years old...with valid reason. I had reached my full height of 5 feet, 5 inches and was thus at least several inches taller than any of my classmates, including boys. My feet were a tremendous size 8 and were completely out of control, my hair was a long, extremely thick mass that tended to stick straight out, my gait was heavy and lumbering and you could hear me all though the house, awkwardly stomping down the stairs every morning, for breakfast.

“You can always hear Hertha galumping down the stairs. The whole house shakes when she comes.”

No doubt about it, my gait was heavy footed, and ungainly. I was clumsy with my big feet and I had trouble managing my suddenly ungainly body. I definitely felt like a bull in a china shop and, on top of it all, I was serious, quiet, and withdrawn.

Greta, my sister, was 2 years younger and small and graceful. She had sparkling eyes, a joyous smile, and an outgoing personality. In other words, she was known to be cute and adorable, which she was. Everyone immediately loved her.

My parents had two daughters who were as different as night and day. In order to make life easier for me, they decided that I was to have dancing lessons—not “ball room” lessons but “modern dance” lessons, which were just becoming popular at that time. Isadora Duncan introduced this type of dancing with great success. She danced barefoot—none of these tight ballet shoes or high heels for her—with gauze tunics and long scarves that flowed gracefully in the breeze—the absolute opposite of the formal tutus of the ballet dancers—no rigorous contortions of the acrobats—all natural flowing beautiful motions. My parents thought it would be just the thing for me to get some coordination and grace in my movements.

Surprise! Surprise! Their klutzy daughter turned out to be the star pupil. Something clicked and I became the “lead “dancer” of the class; and then, of the school. Finally, to my great delight, I was asked to perform with the professional dancers of the Isadora Duncan group in New York City, which was run by Elizabeth Duncan, Isadora’s sister. This was followed by a scholarship for the teacher’s workshop. I was the only non-professional in the workshop and the only teenager.

I worked hard: twice a week, I left school in the early afternoon, catching the 3:15 train for NYC, to go to the class for dance teachers. I would dance from 4PM until 6PM, then take the train back to Mt. Vernon and have supper and do my homework. On Saturdays, I would teach a class. This was my schedule for two years...no time for the usual High School extra activities. I was busy, happy ... I did well in school and made the National Honor Society.

My social life under those circumstances was nil. However, I was no longer awkward with my body or my feet. In fact, I became rather attractive. And I wanted to become a dancer—a dancer???

This was quite a shock to my academically reared family. This was not what they had planned, but they took it in their stride. They said that I must learn different types of dancing as well, such as ballet, tap, and Spanish dancing.

So, in my junior year at High School, I was also enrolled in the Metropolitan Opera School for their ballet corps. How I ever got accepted in that school is a complete mystery to me—I knew absolutely nothing about ballet; and suddenly I was in a class with professional ballerinas!!!!.

Let me tell you about a rapid fall from grace....THIS was IT.

The classroom was a dirty, dusty, ill-lit room in the back of the old Met Opera House. I went up the narrow dark stairs and entered. The ballet mistress was a sour looking, extremely thin woman in her forties, dressed all in black. She had her black hair pulled severely back into a small bun at the nape of her head. She was facing 15 young ballerinas and held a long black stick in her hand. With this stick she was pounding out a rhythm (bang, bang, bang) accompanied by an out-of-tune upright piano that played by a thin, balding, hunched-up wisp of a man whose skin, hair and clothes were all a nondescript pale gray. With a piercing voice, she was calling out the steps for the ballerinas to perform, banging the stick to keep them and the pianist in time.

“Position un (bang bang) position deux (bang, bang) pliee (bang, bang, bang)” etc.

I had no idea what she was saying.

The first few weeks were sheer hell....I tried to learn what these steps were by just mimicking the other girls—about two beats after them.

The mistress left immediately after class and never offered to help me—no one else did either. This type of dancing was completely foreign to me—the positions were the classical ones—beautiful but very unnatural and not at all what I had been doing, which was flowing, expressing natural motion. And my feet hurt so. I was not used to having my feet crammed into toe shoes. When I went en pointe (toe dancing), it was absolute torture!

After a few weeks of this, I realized that I was in a class with dancers who had been doing this since they were 5 years old. In the wings were their pushy “stage-mothers” who were well versed in this world of “dog eat dog,” trying to get their daughters onto the stage. No one was about to help this naïve newcomer who could threaten their chance for success. My parents were as unfamiliar with this world as I was. I was floundering in the ballet world. This was not the world I wanted to be in.

By now I was a senior in High School. Academically, I was the second highest in the class of 500, I had received a bevy of honors and enjoyed studying and learning.

I loved modern dance, with its graceful, unrestricted, loose movements and bare feet, but I did not enjoy dancing ballet with its tightly choreographed, precise, unnatural positions on toes, in slippers that hurt.

Could it be my feet that lead me on to life’s path?.

It was time to make a decision of what to do next.

I chose to go to college.

I now believe that, deep in my heart, I knew that I would *never* be a top dancer. In all probability, I was also influenced by my family’s background. My grandfather was Theodor Escherich, the well-known and admired physician from Vienna who discovered *Escherichia coli* and who had Freud, Jung, and Wagner-Jauregg as friends and associates. My great-grandfather Pfaundler was a physicist and professor at the University of Innsbruck. Hugo Eisenmenger (my father) was an electrical engineer and my mother, Sonni, had her Ph.D. in physical medicine. I think my parents were relieved when I finally chose the route they had expected their children to take.

I applied to Swarthmore College, a small liberal arts college with high academic ratings, founded by Quakers. Due to my good academic standing in high school, I was accepted .

The die was cast.

My dancing days were over

I set my sights to becoming a physician . . .