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AP Language

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A Unique Childhood

On the evening of December 8, 2005, I sat down on a plush sofa, laptop in hand, ready to interview my grandmother, Hildegard Anwander Strache, before I had to rush home for dinner, a shower, and homework. I hastily found my list of questions that I planned on asking my Mema, but before I could utter even a word, she began openly relaying the incredible account of her childhood to me. I discovered more about Mema in this two-hour-long conversation than I ever expected or even hoped for, including many insights as to why she is the independent and determined woman she is today. When Mema was born in Ganghofen in Bavaria, Germany on November 11, 1926, she weighed less than three pounds and was no bigger than one of her native country's famous beer steins. She never enjoyed a stable home environment due to multiple changes in guardianship, and she received as much scorn as she did love throughout her early years. Mema learned to study hard in school, perform her job well, and always try her best in order to support herself. She realized the importance of hard work and perseverance at a young age due to the poor living conditions she grew up in and the hardships that came as a result. Although she came into the world as an undersized and helpless baby, Mema grew from these hardships and learned from her mistakes throughout her childhood to make her the strong individual I am proud to know today as my grandmother.

Mema's mother wore tight corsets during her pregnancy with my Mema to hide the shameful out-of-wedlock pregnancy from her high-society parents for an entire seven months. "It's a miracle that I wasn't crippled, and that my arms and legs still worked," Mema adds to the devastating account. Once Mema's grandparents discovered that their daughter was pregnant, they kicked her out of the house and forced her to support herself. Mema explains, "There was no love there, and I think that is part of the reason [my mother] couldn't love me." As a baby, Mema was put into an orphan home that was soon after closed down when government officials discovered its substandard living conditions and improper care of the numerous children living there.

When Mema was three years old, a devoted pair of foster parents took her into their family and treated her with the same tender care they gave to their two biological daughters. Mema reminisces, "I just loved them to death, and they loved me, much more than I can express." She lived with these foster parents for seven years, during which time her biological mother visited about once a year. Times were tough as an economic depression waged on, and Mema's foster parents found themselves extremely poor. Even after her foster father underwent a hernia operation, he had to ride his bike "miles and miles and miles" to work as a heavy manual laborer, a job in which he earned "very little money." Mema's foster mother knitted for a store as an extra source of income, but even with this, the couple hardly had enough money to sufficiently support their three daughters. The death of Mema's foster father forced her to leave this foster home, which Mema describes as the "hardest time in my childhood, when I had to leave, because I loved [my foster mother] so much." In the next several years, Mema moved about

between several foster homes, all the while feeling like she was just being “pushed here and there.”

A scarring and sensitive few years followed in which Mema lived with an abusive uncle and notes that this was “the most horrible, horrible time in my life.” In an attempt to escape this “cruel” uncle, fourteen-year-old Mema volunteered to participate in one of Hitler’s programs in which young girls stayed with families on farms for extended periods of time and offered their labor in return for room and board. Much to her disappointment, however, Mema was denied this opportunity because she was “very anemic” and had heart problems.

Instead, she wrote to her birth mother, who lived in Munich, and begged for assistance. Mema’s mother responded by saying she could use some extra hands around the house since she was once again pregnant, although this time within wedlock. Mema moved to Munich and was adopted by her mother’s new husband. This created a relationship between Mema and her new father which was uncomfortable at first since he was “a complete stranger” and Mema “had to kiss him good morning and good night.” Eventually, however, her father proved to be “very good, a lot better than my mother.” According to Mema, when a stranger would compliment Mema in front of her mother, her mother would deny that Mema was actually her daughter and instead respond with a statement such as, “No, she’s my sister’s daughter.” This emotional neglect, along with the fact that Mema’s mother hardly knew her own daughter, left Mema feeling “desperate for someone to love me.”

Mixed within the accounts of her various homes and families, Mema told me about the mischief she used to find herself in and the punishment she received for

disobeying authority such as her parents. Throughout her childhood, she “*loved* ice-skating, just *loved* it,” but was unable to afford her own pair of ice-skates. Instead she put blades on the bottom of a regular pair of shoes in order to make homemade ice-skates. She walked to and from school each day, and on the way there was a pond. In the winter, this pond froze over and seemed to be a very suitable place to test out her homemade ice-skates. The only obstacle standing in Mema’s way, however, was her mother, who ordered her to “come home right after school and *not* to stop at the pond.” Of course this just further enticed Mema to skate on the pond, so one winter day she sneaked her ice-skates into her backpack and stopped on the way home from school for a quick skate. Mema explains: “And bingo, I went to a place where it was not all frozen and fell through the ice.” She screamed as she struggled to stay afloat in the bitter-cold water, and “thank goodness, someone heard me and threw me a rope.” As if walking home in her wet, freezing-cold clothes was not punishment enough, Mema’s mother smacked a bundle of thin tree branches across her calves to make clear the severity of her disobedience.

In another similar instance of mischief, Mema watched her mother split wood with a sharp hatchet and asked her if she could split wood too. Her mother clearly objected, saying, ““No, you don’t touch this because you could cut your fingers,”” but then left for a moment to go inside the house. Once she was out of sight, Mema unsteadily picked up the heavy hatchet and was about to swing it down onto the wood when her mother came up behind her and, just in time to protect her daughter, grabbed the hatchet from her hands. As Mema recalls, “I got hit for that, too. I mean, this is just the way it is in Germany: you don’t cooperate, you get hit.” The tough love of her

mother and the standard customs of German society displeased Mema at the time in their heavy emphasis on discipline, but she later realized the importance of raising children with strict rules.

Since World War II was raging in Germany during Mema's teenage years, she recalls the frequent bombings of cities such as Munich. Regardless of what German civilians were doing or whether it was daytime or nighttime, when the warning alarm sounded, everyone in the city was required to enter the "subterranean" as soon as possible. According to Mema, this underground area was "ice cold," and she still felt endangered and frightened when she was in it because a hot water pipe or gas pipe could easily burst from the bombings. Once a different alarm sounded, people in the "subterranean" knew the enemy planes had stopped flying over, and they ascended to the ground. Damage was visible everywhere with buildings in flames and dead and injured people scattered among the streets. Mema briefly depicts this horrifying experience: "And the fire creates such a storm, just like a hurricane, and you can hardly breathe." The very next day, "the cycle starts over again."

This vicious cycle is the one that led to the eventual "breakdown" of my Mema at the age of eighteen. She experienced nerve and heart problems to such a great extent that she was submitted to a "sanatorium" buried deep within the mountains. The location of sanatoriums was strategic in that patients felt a sense of security in being isolated from the cities that were regularly bombed. If enemy planes did happen to pass over the sanatoriums, then they would see the giant red crosses painted on the roofs. The purpose of these crosses was to notify the enemy of the use of the buildings and discourage them from bombing the sanatoriums, where many people were in fact trying to *recover* from

the horrors of war. At the sanatorium, workers and patients alike called Mema “poor little girl” out of pity because she was the youngest patient enrolled there. No visitors were allowed for Mema or any of the other patients, although her mother did attempt to make two or three visits throughout Mema’s stay.

Mema’s childhood never ceases to amaze me. As I heard about her past familial life and her multiple changes of guardians, I became grateful for the stable lifestyle she established for my family by moving to America. As I listened to her tales of mischief, I began to see Mema in a different light: in that of a curious child rather than of a faultless grandmother. As I learned more about her daily wartime experiences, I was both impressed by her strength and grateful for her willingness to discuss these emotionally-draining topics with me. Mema surely has endured her share of hardships and trying times throughout her life, and I am convinced that she is better equipped to handle these situations due to her unique and demanding childhood.