

Eulogy of Minerva M. Boehlen

I would like to thank all of you for coming this morning.

My mother meant something, something special, to each of us. I cannot begin to adequately describe that meaning, but I will try to provide a perspective of her life, as I understand it.

We came here today to observe my mother's passing to her eternal reward, but just as importantly, we celebrate, commemorate, and reflect on her 94 years of life. It was a life punctuated with both tragedy and triumph.

Mom came from a very meager beginning. Born in a tiny mountainous farming town in Bavaria very near the border with Bohemia (one of the few German towns where Christians and Jews lived peacefully side-by-side for hundreds of years); she was the first child of Andreas and Berta Peter. Mom and her parents immigrated to the United States in April 1914 and took up residence on Chicken Hill, an area of Pittsburgh. Her father, a skilled glass engraver and musician, could only find work as a school janitor. He spoke no English. About one month after arriving in the US, her brother "Billy" was born followed by her sister Mary in 1916. Pittsburgh did not offer what this young family desired and in 1917 they relocated to Medford, Wisconsin to begin a harsh life as tenant farmers. This would be the environment of my mother's formative years.

In our discussions about this time, my mother would describe the difficulties faced by her family, but never expressed being unfortunate or short-changed by life because her life was one of hope. Rather, she would tell me how they coped and ultimately succeeded. She spoke of her closely-knit family with lots of love, possessing the determination to make it and the relentless courage to put forth the required efforts. Rarely would she be the focus of the story. She remained in the background; a director or a puppeteer, unseen by the audience, but on whom success was dependent.

By the 1930s the family had grown to 7 children and faced the Great Depression. Being penniless was not new to mom's family. They lived off the vegetables they grew and often ate rabbit and small game as their only source of meat. She told me once she never wanted to eat "Hasenflecker" again. The 1930s also brought the introduction of tuberculosis to mom's family. The disease would claim her closest brother, Billy, at the age of 21, followed by her father a year later. Both mom and her mother also contracted TB. Shortly after mom's release from the TB Sanitarium, she met my father and they were married in 1935. My mother could not afford to purchase a wedding dress, so she and my father's beloved Aunt Mildred bought some satin and hand sewed an extraordinary gown. The lack of money did not prevent my mom and dad from taking over parenting responsibilities for four of mom's siblings as her mother was in the TB sanitarium. The house they lived in was dilapidated, so much so that the rugs would move when there was a strong wind due to gaps in the floorboards. A difficult situation, but again love, faith in God, determination and courage saw them through.

With the end of the Depression came new hope and the desire to have children of their own. But, mom's doctors advised against it, as they did not think she would be strong enough to go through a pregnancy with her history of TB. Mom's persistence prevailed; the doctors relented; and my brother arrived. My mother decided he needed a sibling, a playmate and once again she

pressured her doctors. They advised against it, but my mother was determined. I arrived in 1945. Mom didn't quite get her way though; I was supposed to be a girl.

In 1947 our family moved to the house at Crescent Lane and Potter Road in what was then the Glenview Pioneer Re-subdivision. She would live in that same house for the next 54 years and died there last Saturday. Our family confronted the same trials and tribulations as many families. There were times when money was short and things didn't work out the way they should, but we made it. She always told me, "God helps those who help themselves." And, you help yourself with faith, love, determination and lots of hard work. But life is not about just helping yourself and my mother never turned away anyone in need. My mother loved people and saw their inherent goodness. She did not judge. She did not discriminate based on race, ethnicity, social status or religious belief. She did not have the means to help those in need financially, but she freely gave of her time and many talents in whatever way she could. At one time or another, she helped most of us; some in small ways; many of us in very large ways. She was called on to change roles from grandmother to mother for both my brother's family and mine. She was a confidant, an advisor and often a mentor. She was an icon of encouragement, hope and trust.

Mom had very strong feelings about ethical conduct, honesty and religion. In modern day theological practice, much is said and written about ecumenism. My mother was a strong advocate of ecumenism during the 1950s, long before most of us knew the word, much less understood or accepted that concept. My mother, a staunch practicing Catholic, spent 25 years of her life working in the office of the Glenview Community Church. She believed in the sincerity of religious belief and respected others' beliefs, whether they coincided with hers or not. My mother also believed in equality; equality between the genders; equality among the races and nationalities; and respected the right of political self-determination. She lived her life in this manner and taught these precepts to her children. This may sound commonplace in the 21st century, but believe me, she was far ahead of her time in the 1950s and 60s. The term "politically correct" had not even been coined. She believed and taught these concepts because they were the right things to believe and learn.

My father's death was devastating to my mother. She was steadfast in her belief that they would be reunited in God's kingdom. That day has now come and I'm sure they are together.

Mom never thought of herself as old. Until the advent of her illness two years ago, her body was strong and healthy. Her activity level would rival those who were decades younger. We asked mom to stop shoveling snow the winter following her 90th birthday. She did, but not until a year later. Her mind, too, remained alert, spirited and youthful to the very end. She enjoyed discussing current events, the markets and business news. And, she would never pass-up the opportunity to engage my brother or I in a one-on-one political debate.

My mother, your grandmother, your friend, neighbor, or acquaintance was truly a remarkable woman. The world is better for her contributions. Historians will not remember her, but those she touched will never forget her. She was a role model, a teacher and a confidant. She was neither "agendaed" nor self-serving. She was more eager to forgive than find fault. She was generous, compassionate, tolerant and understanding. She sought peace. She was formed from the essence of goodness and kindness; and we will miss her, but she is in a better place.

Mark T. Boehlen
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