

# When You Ride ALONE, You Ride With Hitler!

by Bill Edwards

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## Introduction

Most authors are either workaholics (the successful ones) or terrible procrastinators (the unsuccessful ones). I fall somewhere in between. I always had the desire and some ability to write, but my passion was tempered by a need to support and take care of my family. Family always came first and that was a trait I inherited from the characters of the non-fiction book you are about to read.

While I was looking for some public domain material to place on my web site the other day, I accidentally came across a wonderful poster from World War II. It had a picture of a man driving a 1940's era car with a transparent figure of Adolf Hitler sitting in the passenger seat next to him. The caption beneath both of them read, "If you ride ALONE, you ride with Hitler!" The message was clear.

During World War II things like gas, meat and most vital commodities were rationed out to the public so that the Armed Forces of the USA could be properly supplied to fight what became war on a global scale. Gas rationing caused the government to encourage people to car pool or take public transit to work and school. Posters like the one I saw were very effective in getting the message out to people and a patriotic America responded by doing everything they could to keep our soldiers well supplied.

Now in my fifties, I am obviously far too young to have lived through World War Two. However, I was born late in the lives of my parents and that meant that most of my relatives tended to be older. Many of them lived through World War Two and some were as anxious to tell me about those days as I was to hear about them. Being an only child meant that by the time I was eleven years old my best friends were books, a set of encyclopedias that my parents bought for me and television. Those things ignited a spark of interest in me that has burned brightly all these years and resulted in the writing of this book.

The late 1960s was a time when veterans and people that lived through World War Two had experienced their fill of the social upheavals, anti-war protests and open rebellion that marked a good portion of that decade. They were hungry to recall the simpler days of their youth, despite the fact that it included a World War. Although terrible and costly in terms of human lives and the utter destruction it caused, that war became a rallying point, object of nostalgia and time of remembrance for people who lived through it. Recalling those days made those people feel they were more patriotic and American than those burning their draft cards, bras or even our beloved flag.

I was always a curious person. Once I started watching television shows which were built around historical events, I was hooked. Because I lived less than a block from the elementary school I

attended on Long Island, I came home for lunch almost every day. I made it a daily ritual to watch a program that aired on local television around that time which featured various true stories from American History. It was a rerun that had once been broadcast on national television, but I didn't care. I would have been too young to understand or appreciate it when it first ran anyway. That program really peaked my interest and made me look to books, my set of encyclopedias and people I knew for more.

Another ritual I created for myself was having daily conversations with my grandmother on my father's side. She lived with my father, mother and myself on the second floor of our home. Grandma was elderly and by the time I was an adolescent, she could do little more than play cards once a week with her ever-shrinking group of friends or go shopping with us once in a great while. My conversations with her were based on whatever historical event had been featured on my lunchtime TV show and always seemed to bring her to life. She loved talking about what my folks called 'the good old days.'

My grandmother's name was Lou and one of her pet peeves was the price of groceries. Whenever she felt well enough to go shopping with us, she would comment on the price of essentials like bread and meat. My father often lovingly mocked her by saying, "Go ahead Ma, tell us how you remember when bread was five cents a loaf and tasted like real bread, and steak was ten cents a pound and so fresh it moored when you tried to cut into it!"

My grandmother didn't mind the good natured criticism and was proudly nostalgic. She enjoyed our conversations and loved to tell me stories about the 'old times' and her many years with my grandfather, who died when I was still an infant. Most of my peers did not relate well to older folks. All of us had been somewhat indoctrinated with catch phrases of the 1960s rebellion like, "Don't trust anyone over thirty." That wasn't me. I appreciated the first hand accounts of life so many years ago that were shared with me by my immediate family and other relatives.

Like my grandmother, I really didn't have too many other people to talk with when my friends weren't around. I really enjoyed hearing about her take on history and what life was like living through it. She could remember going to school one day and having her teacher read a story out of a local New York newspaper about a guy who was robbing trains out west, a guy named Jesse James. She also remembered a time when horses, not motorcars, dominated the streets of New York City.

When Neal Armstrong set foot on the Moon, my grandmother was watching it live on television and commented to my father, "They think this is something, but people were a lot more excited when Lindberg landed safely (after flying over the Atlantic Ocean by himself in an airplane)." That was Grandma! Despite the fact that she was disinterested and unimpressed by most things modern and hopelessly dug into the days of time past, the historical value of the stories she told me did not go unappreciated and made me hunger for more.

My parents were equally chatty when it came to discussing their lives and what things were like when they were young. That, combined with the national nostalgia over all things World War Two that seemed to permeate the days of my adolescence, brought me to the point that I was ready to write this book and share the stories I heard with you. These are individual memories of

national events and are true.

Another inspiration for writing this book was the story of how another book was written. The story of Sea Biscuit, the famous race horse. It was written a few years ago by a woman who suffered from a debilitating form of fatigue. Despite her disability, she managed to write the book as her energy levels allowed. The book became a wonderful film which I thoroughly enjoyed. I am partially disabled and can relate to her situation because I often suffer from quite a bit of fatigue myself. However, now that my kids have grown and moved out, I have the time and no excuses for not writing down what I hope will be an educational and inspirational experience for you.

Bill Edwards, January of 2012

Dedication: I dedicate this book to all the Soldiers and Americans that caused our nation to make it through World War Two and helped free the world from evil. - Bill Edwards, 2012

### Chapter One: The Time Before

My parents and I lived on the first floor of our home. Their names were Arthur and Liz. The second floor had a large bedroom where my Grandmother Lou lived, another area that served as a recreational and sewing room, and a huge walk-in storage closet loaded with mementos from the lives of my parents and other relatives. I loved to go into that closet and dig through everything. My parents were mildly annoyed by my curiosity-driven family history hunts into their stuff, but I always managed to talk my way out of trouble by asking questions about some of their favorite mementoes.

One day I was looking at a box of large, old photo albums and came across a smaller photo album that read like a story. It belonged to my mother. The story began with her and a couple of friends taking a scenic boat ride up the Hudson River to West Point. Each photo had a small caption hand written underneath it and I could see she and her friends were having a great time. When I asked Mom about it later, she said she was around fifteen at that time and on Spring Break. The year was 1941. Liz and her friends planned to stay for several days at the home of a friend of my grandparents. She had a really long and complicated Finnish name, so everyone in the family just called her Pat and she was fine with that.

A look at the photos taken after they were back on dry land revealed that Pat's house was a garden style home with a lot of history. She was married to a man who taught at the West Point Military Academy and the house might have been a perk of the job, my mother wasn't sure about that. Either way, the girls were having a terrific time. They visited the academy, went to see a movie in town, did some shopping, had a couple of picnics enjoying the amazing view of the Hudson River from the hills above, and met guys.

Liz took a shine to a boy named George. He was a cadet getting ready to graduate from West Point. Pat's husband introduced them while Liz was touring the academy and there was an instant attraction. He was a few years older than she was, but my mom was always mature for

her age. She was also smart. At fifteen she was preparing to graduate high school in less than a year and was already planning to attend New York University on a scholarship. George was also smart and ambitious. The two had much in common including the fact that both of their families came here from Scandinavia.

From that point on the photo book was filled with pictures of Liz and George at West Point and other places after he graduated. My mother's friends made a point of playing the part of chaperones and photographers and took great pleasure in teasing their friend about her guy. Several photos were taken during dances at a place known as Finn Hall in the Bronx. The hall was a popular meeting place and event center for people of Scandinavian heritage.

My mother grew up in the Bronx (a borough of New York City). During the days of her youth there were probably more farms in that city within a city than big apartment buildings. I recall seeing some photos of her roller skating up on the roof of an apartment building. When I asked about it, she told me that she lived there with her parents and her sister Helen. Her parents were the building Superintendents.

Like so many people of their time, my grandparents had come here from another country. They were Scandinavian and arrived at Ellis Island as a married couple from Finland. Within just a few years, most of their brothers, sisters and other relatives followed and all became U.S. Citizens. My grandfather Frank served in the Scandinavian Navy before coming to America. He was also a skilled Master Carpenter and that, along with the fact that my grandmother Amanda and her sisters were excellent professional cooks, helped them make it through the Great Depression of the early 1930s.

Frank and Amanda managed to keep working even in the darkest days of the depression. Their first break was the Building Superintendent's job which paid no money, but provided a free apartment with paid utilities. Though jobs for carpenters were scarce, my grandfather kept busy by tending to the apartment building and receiving some food or small tips in return for doing jobs that went beyond his Superintendent duties. He also scared up a couple of bucks here and there by painting rich people's apartments and homes, or making them some custom furniture. My grandmother and her sisters cooked for those same wealthy people that mostly lived in Manhattan or Long Island and had been fortunate enough to shun the stock market or get out of it before the bottom fell out.

Despite the daily gloom and doom economic news of those dark days that was delivered by the newspapers and radio reports, my mother and her family recalled that time with appreciation, thankfulness and a certain amount of satisfaction. They were working people, with a work ethic who thought it a shame not to be working. They loved America for being the kind of place that provided people like them with the opportunities they found here.

There were only two times that I saw my grandparent's faces grimace when talking about those days of my mother's youth. The first was when they spoke about a man I will call Swen. He lived in a part of Finland near the Russian border where many Swedish people had settled and was one of my grandfather's cousins. As a result, he spoke Finnish, Russian and Swedish. Swen grew up in a family that owned a farm. The work was hard and the days were long with little

financial gain to show for it all. He couldn't wait to leave and did so when an opportunity to enroll in a trade school presented itself.

The trade school he attended was located in Helsinki, Finland, but some of the students were Russian. They were not well liked because Russia had always been an oppressor of the Finnish People. While most of the Russians were glad to be free of Stalinist Rule and in a country with a more democratic style of government, some of the students were obviously Communists who regularly declared the glories of Mother Russia's Communist Utopia.

I'm sorry to say that Swen became enamored by the stories he heard about how everyone in Russia was equal and all were busy building the perfect society. Before he could act on his desire to actually go there and experience that great experiment in Socialism, he was forced to come to America. His parents came up against hard economic times and had to sell their farm. There was not enough money for Swen to remain in trade school or stay in Finland. Instead, my grandparents sponsored his family's entrance into America with the guarantee of a job working for a wealthy family for whom my grandmother cooked and often babysat.

Once he arrived, Swen found work at a factory in Long Island City while his folks worked at an estate on Long Island as caretakers. He learned enough of the basics from the trade school to become a fine journeyman tool and die maker. He always had a natural talent for working with machinery and metal. Swen was proficient as a sheet metal worker. He inherited and shared the good work ethic that was a trait of my family. What he did not share was a true appreciation for the opportunities America afforded him or the politics and love of democracy that my family had.

Swen reluctantly became an American citizen. Almost as soon as he did, he sought out meetings attended by Communists. Those meetings were plentiful back in a day when most people knew little about the way things really were in Russia. Even when the young Communist converts heard bad things about Communism and what it was doing to that nation, they did not believe the reports. They assumed that those kinds of stories were merely propaganda fed to the media and public by huge companies that made millions off of cheap labor and didn't want people to know the truth about the great Socialist Utopia that they believed existed in Russia.

Despite his insistence that workers in the U.S. were enslaved and exploited (and I am sure some were and still are just as they have always been in every nation), Swen made a decent wage. It was enough for him to afford his own roomy apartment in Jackson Heights. It was also enough for him to grow chubby on from all the food he was easily able to purchase at stores and restaurants within walking distance of his place. There was even enough left over for him to buy books and pamphlets sold at the Communist meetings he attended. Those were filled with wonderful stories of the equality of people and the many opportunities that existed in Russia as a result of having a Communist government.

After several years and a few promotions at work, Swen managed to put away a small stash of money that he hoped would fund a trip to Russia, the land of his utopian dreams. With cash in hand, he managed to secure a one way ticket to Soviet Russia after navigating whatever paperwork and permissions that were needed to get him there. Before anyone in his family could

react to his decision, he was gone.

Nearly a year went by before my grandparents mailbox was suddenly flooded with urgent letters from a friend of Swen who managed to get out of Russia and move to Finland. His friend told the tale of a man who had made the biggest mistake of his life. Instead of finding paradise, Swen landed himself in the middle of a time of purges and poverty. If he ate four times a week, it was a good week. He shared an apartment with two other families that had no heat most of the time and he was being worked nearly to death in a cold factory. He was starving, sick and desperately wanted to return to the USA.

My grandparents hated talking about Swen so I am not exactly sure how they did it, but Frank and Amanda somehow managed to get him back to America. I know that it cost them some money and that they had to sponsor him with the promise of a job. Whatever happened, it took another couple of months to get Sven home. When he arrived back in America, he was a broken man who looked at least ten years older than his actual age and many pounds lighter. Fortunately, his former employer took him back. Little is known about what happened to Swen overseas. My grandparents and my mother said that he no longer bragged up the great social experiment that was Soviet Russia and, as far as anyone knows, did not attend any more Communist meetings.

Swen never spoke much about anything after his almost fourteen months in Russia and rarely showed up at family events. By the time World War Two broke out, Swen was probably too old for the draft, but tried to enlist anyway. It was the damage to his health that occurred in Russia which kept him out of the U.S. Military. He did continue to work at the factory job which was considered essential employment for the war effort and that, I'm told, gave him a certain sense of satisfaction. Ironically, his factory made (among other things) parts for armaments used by the Soviets against the Nazis.

Sometime in October of 1941, my mother became extremely ill. This brings me to the second thing that made my grandparent's faces grimace whenever they talked about events that occurred during the days of her youth. The doctor diagnosed Liz with some new type of pneumonia or infection he could not pin down and her chances of surviving it were considered poor. Her condition was so bad that the doctor refused to move her out of their apartment and to the hospital for fear that the cold temperatures and bad weather conditions outside would kill her.

By the time her doctor made his fifth trip to their apartment, Frank and Amanda had given up on hoping that their youngest daughter would survive her illness and recover. However, they were in for some potentially good news. The doctor arrived with a colleague who was seeking permission to try a new thing called Penicillin as a treatment for her illness. Left with few options, they agreed to the request.

My mother remembers it like some kind of a miracle. One day she was so sick that words could not describe how she felt, and a few days later she was all better. Within less than a week my mother was up and around. She was more than ready to resume her romance with George. He was away at flight school during the time when she became ill and returned a few weeks after she recovered.

George became a part of the U.S. Army Air Force. He received his wings and was now a military pilot. Much to his disappointment, he would not be flying fighter planes, but was assigned to ferry bombers from place to place as they were needed for training and other duties. He had a couple of weeks of leave coming and used them to visit Liz after hearing about her illness. My mother gave strict instructions for her parents and friends to keep the news of her condition from George. She didn't want him to worry or be distracted from his pilot training by her sickness, but one of her friends decided he should know and sent him a note just after he completed his training.

The two weeks that Liz and George spent together were wonderful. His family lived just sixty miles away from hers and he took her to meet his folks over the Thanksgiving holiday. They were impressed by Liz and loved that she was Scandinavian just like them. After that trip, George spent a few days with his parents while Liz returned to the Bronx to go back to school. She turned sixteen that October and was in her Senior Year.

My mother's memories of her school days were sweet and sour. She entered school barely able to understand English and unable to properly speak it. That made Liz an object of ridicule among the other students who constantly referred to her as a 'dirty foreigner' during her first several years of classes. She was fluent in Finnish because that was the primary language spoken in her household, but had to learn English. She not only learned it, but worked hard at perfect pronunciation until she had no accent at all.

By the time she was in High School, my mother spoke and was fluent in English, Finnish, Swedish and French. She also was conversational in several other languages. Her intellect shone, but never as brightly as her sister's according to her teachers and parents. Liz was always being compared to her older sister Helen, who was a genius. Helen had perfect grades, perfect attendance and managed to win every academic award that her school offered. Despite her accomplishments, it was Helen who was the first to disappoint her parents.

Rocky was a rough character from the other side of the tracks. He was half German, half Scandinavian and all trouble. Known as a local wise guy who easily lost his temper and sometimes made a few extra bucks collecting for the neighborhood loan sharks, he was the kind of older teenager that everyone wanted their daughters to stay far away from. Fate, however, had another idea.

My mother often helped her parents with their Superintendent duties by scrubbing the lobby floor in their apartment building or taking out some of the trash. Helen also helped, but she was pudgy compared to her sister who was thin as a rail. Helen was a little too pudgy to get down and properly scrub floors, so she cleaned the many mirrors that lined the lobby of their building. On one particularly warm summer day in 1939, Liz was scrubbing the hallway floor and working up a real sweat in the process. Just as she was finishing, Rocky and another boy walked in. Liz gave them a disapproving look.

Rocky's friend was a young Italian hood named Sal. His father was rumored to be a member of the Mafia. Sal was considered to be a young Mafioso in training and took every opportunity that

reputation provided to him. He ran errands for the mob and was always dressed to the nines in the best clothes and most expensive shoes. Rocky headed for the stairs on a mission to collect some money owed to one of Sal's associates by someone on the third floor. Sal headed over to where Liz was scrubbing the floor and stepped on her hand.

Sal said something about teaching dirty, sweaty foreigners a lesson so that they knew their place in society while he kept his foot on her hand. Liz yellowed at him and that caught the attention of Helen who was cleaning mirrors on the other side of the lobby. She came running and rammed into Sal knocking him away from Liz. Sal was about to hit her when Rocky intervened and smashed him in the chest. Rocky's biggest pet peeve was that he hated men who hit women. He watched his father abuse his mother that way for years and when he got old enough to do something about it, split his dad's head open with a bat.

Sal looked shocked as he lay on the floor, but even he was afraid to take on his friend. Rocky was probably better thought of among the local mobsters than Sal or his father was, and had lots of friends that were as bad or worse than him. Sal mumbled an apology to the sisters and told Rocky he would wait outside. Liz and Helen had no interest in speaking with Rocky and immediately went up to their apartment to tell their parents what happened.

A short while later Helen came back down to put away the cleaning materials she and Liz were using in the lobby and was surprised to see Rocky sitting on one of the chairs placed there for residents. She was a bit chubby, but had a beautiful face. For Rocky, their earlier chance encounter had been love at first sight. Not so for Helen. She ignored him then and for several days afterward despite his attempts to get her attention with flowers, gifts and cards.

Rocky graduated high school the year before and had a job that kept him busy working at a local club and restaurant where he washed dishes and cleaned up whenever he wasn't running errands for the mob. He made decent money, but had no one to spend it on. Rocky was an only child whose mother passed away the previous summer from cancer. Just after that his father left the family for parts unknown. Rocky moved into a rooming house and saved his cash. For all his faults, he never drank very much except for a few beers and did not gamble.

It took awhile, but Helen finally responded to Rocky's attempts to get her attention and the two started dating. By November of 1940, Helen and Rocky had been together for a year and a half. Although she was scared to death of having sex, Helen eventually gave into Rocky's badgering about it and became pregnant. This was a real problem which was far more severe for a single girl in those days than it is today.

For one thing, Helen was going to a prestigious local college on a scholarship. If the staff found out she was pregnant, she would probably lose the scholarship and be kicked out of school. For another, her father would almost certainly try and kill Rocky. It was a NO WIN situation all around, so Rocky and Helen eloped and got married somewhere out of state. Helen placed her education on hold feigning illness to get a temporary leave from school.

Helen called her parents and told them what happened over the phone. After a lot of yelling and negotiating, she and Rocky returned to the neighborhood as husband and wife. They moved into

a modest apartment in her parent's building and she gave birth to her daughter Ingrid a few months later. Helen managed to get back into school while Rocky returned to his club job and shady side work.

Despite her situation with Rocky, Helen was still held up as the banner child of the family by her parents and all the teachers at Theodore Roosevelt High School. It was there that she struggled to live up to and beyond her sister's academic accomplishments. Not only did she eventually equal Helen's grades, but Liz signed up for every club or participated in every special event she could in order to get some award, certificate or notice in the school newspaper that would set her apart and above Helen.

One of the duties my mother had was as an usher for all of the activities that took place in the school's auditorium. It was an unusually large venue that not only served Roosevelt High School, but was used as a regional theater for most scholastic events like graduations or special programs sponsored by the local school board. One such event was very memorable and my mother had several photos taken by her sister on that special day.

Imagine my surprise when I was digging through the family photo box in the storage closet and found a photo of my mom and several other people escorting a very young and stick thin Frank Sinatra into her school auditorium. I am still unclear of exactly what the occasion was, but he came to her school to perform a few songs for the young people that attended Roosevelt and other nearby schools. Needless to say, the auditorium was filled and there was standing room only.

Although he probably was not as famous at that time as he became later, Frank Sinatra was still a powerful attraction for young people who enjoyed listening to his smooth voice and the songs he sang with soulful lyrics. My mother was not overly impressed with him, but was happy when she received a letter from the school thanking her for doing her duty as an usher so well and helping to make that special event such a smooth and successful one.

Another special event was on the horizon, one that was far more memorable and one which nobody expected or saw coming. The tragedies that took place on September 11, 2001 were often referred to as the Pearl Harbor of this generation. Likewise, I guess I could say that the events which took place on December 7, 1941 were the 9/11 attacks of that generation.

## Chapter Two: Dad and the Gypsies

My grandparents on both sides were second generation Americans. My grandmother Lou's parents were born in the Jackson Heights section of Queens, New York City. Their parents came to America from Scotland. My grandfather Bill's parents were born in Brooklyn, a borough of New York City. Their parents were born in Manhattan and moved to Brooklyn where they owned a barber shop and a small grocery store. Their parents came here from Austria.

Bill was born in the late 1800s. He didn't attend school for very long because the lure of making money and the many jobs available in a city growing faster than the people that lived in it was just too great to ignore. He loved to read and did so during whatever free time he had. By the time

he was a young teenager, Bill probably knew more about American History and other subjects that interested him than most high school graduates of his day. He was tall, good looking and honest to a fault.

His parents sold the barber shop and grocery store that had been passed on to them by their parents while Bill was still a young teenager. They had to do this because both became quite ill by the time they were in their late forties. They were afraid that Bill was still too young to try and successfully run those stores and thought it best to sell them while they were still highly valued. Despite rough exteriors that gave the impression they were all made of steel, his grandparents and parents had all kinds of health problems that, I'm sorry to say, were passed on to him.

Although his parents stashed enough money away from both of their store's profits and the sale of those businesses to make it through the rest of their lives in a comfortable manner, their health conditions were starting to chip away at that nest egg. Bill saw this happening and knew that he needed to help support the family. By the time he was fifteen, he had several jobs including working in a stable where he repaired carriages. Bill also made a commission on tack that he rented or sold, but his real love was working on anything mechanical.

After cars started to replace horses, Bill found his niche. He had an almost unnatural grasp of everything that made an engine work and became an excellent mechanic. By the time he was in his late twenties, he owned his own car repair business. His reputation for honesty and his ability to solve difficult mechanical problems made his business a resounding success. His shop was located in Brooklyn and it was there that he met the love of his life.

Lou had three sisters and no brothers. She was the youngest child and sadly, was saddled with the duty of taking care of her parents as they grew older and became ill. She never really had a chance to get out and meet the right man. By the time she was in her late twenties, her family considered her an 'old maid' that would probably never marry. Fate had other ideas.

She managed to stay in school into her teens, but Lou finished the remainder of her education at home so she could care for her parents. They lived in a row house on a street where all the homes looked very much alike. It was a working class neighborhood and her father had worked hard as the manager of a dry goods store for many years. During that time he socked enough away to purchase a nice car which he used to make some extra money ferrying people around who couldn't drive, wouldn't drive or needed a quick ride somewhere at almost any hour of the day or night.

After he became ill, he loaned the car out to a neighbor who took over that small side business. He drove people around in his spare time and split whatever profits were made with Lou's father. One day the neighbor volunteered to drive Lou to a family wedding in Brooklyn. They were within blocks of arriving at the church when their vehicle broke down. A police officer told them about a repair shop that was just a block away. They went there and that is where Lou and Bill first met.

I wouldn't say it was love at first sight, but Bill was certainly attracted to the pretty young

freckle faced blond who came into his shop that day. He repaired their vehicle while the neighbor waited for the job to be done. Lou walked the short distance to the church and made it in time for the wedding. The neighbor didn't have enough cash on hand to pay for the repair, so Lou borrowed the money to pay the bill from a relative at the wedding.

During the time they waited for Lou to return from the wedding, Bill asked him about Lou. When he found out she was not married, he decided to ask her out. They were both in their late twenties and neither had been able to find enough time to met someone they really liked. Lou was used to being asked out because she was pretty, but most of the men who did the asking were not the kind she wanted to associate with. Bill was different. Something about him caught her attention, so she stepped out of character and agreed to go out with him.

The two started dating and were married within a year. Bill sold his car repair business in Brooklyn and opened a new shop in Jackson Heights. He moved into the home that Lou shared with her parents at her insistence. Both sets of grandparents lived long enough to see the birth of Edward, their first grandson. Two more children came along including my father Arthur who was their youngest.

All three of Bill and Lou's children did well in school, but none showed the interest and passion that Bill had for anything mechanical. They helped out in his shop from time to time, but all had different goals and wanted more out of life than their father's repair shop could offer. My father's brothers were interested in professional careers. One became a lawyer, the other an engineer. My father's passion was numbers. He was good at math and made any kind of accounting challenge look easy.

By the time my father graduated high school his neighborhood started to change. It remained very much of a working class enclave, but an area nearby started to go downhill fast. That area was once the home of small factories and other businesses. As the depression took hold, most of those closed and the buildings started to deteriorate. Before long, out of work men, toughs and gypsies squatted there much to the consternation of the local police precinct.

My grandfather Bill managed to keep the family's finances stable and his repair shop in Jackson Heights alive even during the depths of the depression. But things changed. He had to place steel gates on the windows and doors of his shop to protect it from robberies at night. Thieves knew that the car parts and tools Bill had inside were worth money and that made his business a target of any local hoods or thugs who felt that had the guts to try and rip him off.

My father was attending college in Manhattan. He goal was to become a CPA (Certified Public Accountant). He was already doing all the books for the repair shop and watching over the family finances. Those chores and school kept him busy. One night on his way home from college, Arthur was accosted by three toughs as had headed down the stairs from the subway platform. They were Gypsies who threatened him with a knife, demanding whatever cash he was carrying.

Arthur wasn't the kind of guy who looked for a fight, but he never turned away from one either. He took on the toughs, was badly beaten and went to the hospital with several knife wounds.

They also paid the price. Two of them needed stitches and the third had a broken arm. It was Arthur's good fortune that the police happened by and broke up the fight before he was mortally wounded. The cops knew all the neighborhood trouble makers, so it was easy to figure out who started the ruckus. The toughs were arrested after being treated for their injuries.

My father stayed in the hospital overnight. He was sent home the next day and recovered quickly, but from that point on he was troubled by the fact that he couldn't even walk home from the subway without being accosted by toughs. It made him worry about his parents. His brothers were married and living their own lives by this time. When he wasn't around, his folks were alone and as vulnerable as he was to being attacked or robbed.

Arthur talked about what happened and shared his thoughts with his parents, but they dismissed his concerns and said that it was just a random crime that would probably not be repeated. After all, they lived just blocks from the Police Precinct and the cops were starting to put a lot of pressure on the out of work men, toughs and gypsies that lived in the abandoned buildings nearby.

Less than a month later a woman was attacked as she walked home from the store around six in the evening. She made the mistake of taking a shortcut to her house through a small park that was adjacent to the area where the squatters lived. The woman, who was just nineteen years old, was robbed and beaten. She was about to be raped, but the attack suddenly stopped. Some athletes from the local high school came to the park to throw a football around on the grass. It was late summer and still very bright out at that time of day.

The football players saw the woman being attacked and ran to her rescue. Her attackers were toughs in their early twenties armed with knives, but they were still no match for the football players who were high school seniors and built like battleships. The athletes beat them mercilessly while the woman ran home and called the police.

By the time the cops arrived, the woman's attackers were laying motionless on the ground being kicked and punched by the football players. The cops pulled the athletes off of the toughs, but said nothing and let them go their way. They arrested the toughs, brought the woman in for a statement and kept them in the local precinct overnight.

The athletes told the tale of what happened to their parents and at school the following day. The incident set everyone in the neighborhood on edge. By the end of that day my father, his father and everyone in the repair shop knew about the attack on the woman the night before. By the end of the next day people who came into the repair shop had some new and very interesting information to share about the woman who was attacked.

It seems she was the daughter of a local politician who was the brother of a cop. That was very bad news for the gypsy toughs who were the attackers. Although no one really knows exactly what went on while they were held at the local police precinct, one thing was for sure. By the time they were transferred to a central booking point elsewhere in Queens, they were in worse shape than police found them in at the park.

The attack on the woman set off a firestorm in my dad's neighborhood. People were angry and no longer willing to put up with the shanty town filled with toughs and shady characters which came to exist in the abandoned buildings nearby. My dad and the woman were not the only ones that had been attacked. At least a dozen other neighborhood people had been recently mugged and many local businesses were experiencing break-ins and robberies that hardly ever occurred before the squatters showed up.

The end came quickly for the squatters in the abandoned buildings. Less than a week after the woman was attacked, a mysterious fire started which resulted in the complete destruction of most of the structures in the area of the abandoned buildings. The squatters disappeared overnight. My father said that he had it on good authority that police dressed in civilian clothes went in, cleaned out the squatters and drove them away in trucks. No one knows what happened to them, but no one cared either.

By the time dad completed his first year of college, my grandfather Bill began to get sick. It started with some fatigue and progressed to the point that he couldn't work on cars anymore. Doctors believed he had a heart problem. Since his side of the family tended to have weak hearts, this came as no surprise. Although the other mechanics that worked in Bill's shop took up the slack, they weren't as committed or talented as he was.

Instead of starting his second year of college, my father tried taking over the day to day operation of the repair shop. He did a great job managing everything and keeping the books, but dad knew very little about auto repairs and parts. Although the shop continued to turn a profit, Bill decided to sell it to a friend who already owned a shop in Astoria and wanted to open one closer to his home in Jackson Heights.

Bill's decision to sell his business tore his soul out. He loved being a mechanic and all the challenges that working in an industry where the technology was constantly changing brought his way. My father was left in the lurch by the sale of his father's shop. He planned to stay on and try to keep the shop running for as long as he could. Without that opportunity, he was left with the need to find work at a time when the nation was still trying to recover from the Great Depression.

Although the sale of the repair shop would allow the couple to live modestly for years to come, there wasn't enough left over for Arthur to go back to college. Lou knew that Arthur would never ask his brothers for the money or accept it even if they offered, so she came up with another idea. Ever the optimist, she was tired of watching Lou languish in boredom around the house and Arthur search for jobs that he was unlikely to get, so she made a suggestion.

Recalling how her father managed to make extra money driving people around in the car he bought for that purpose, she suggested that Bill purchase a limousine. That sounded crazy considering the economic hard times that everyone was going through, but her suggestion made some sense. Bill was well enough to drive, he just couldn't do all the physical work and heavy lifting that being a mechanic required. When Bill wasn't driving, Arthur could take over. But there was the still question of where to find customers? Lou also had an idea about that!

She remembered her dad driving into Manhattan on Friday nights and over weekends to a parking garage with a special chauffers waiting room inside. The room was heated and comfortable. It was a place where chauffers with limousines parked in the garage would wait for their employers to call and be picked up or dropped off where they needed to go. It was also a place where chauffers and drivers with cars and limos for hire would wait for assignments offered by a dispatcher who booked the work and took a portion of the fees charged for his commission.

Bill's eyes lit up as he saw that the opportunity that Lou suggested was a real one that might just work out for the family. The very next day he took some of the money from the sale of his shop and bought a brand new limousine. Arthur was with him and both of them were rightly impressed by the shiny new vehicle and the profit potential it represented. Their next stop was a store that sold formal wear and uniforms.

Many years later my dad's face still shown brightly every time he told me the story of seeing those Chesterfield jackets and caps that chauffers wore for the first time. When he tried on one of the jackets, it felt like a second skin and he knew that this was something that was for him. Armed with the limo and their uniforms, Bill and Arthur set out to find work. It didn't take long after registering with the dispatcher in Manhattan before Bill got his first gig.

Bill drove a wealthy couple around Manhattan for an entire day. Arthur took over his duties for the evening and Bill was back at the wheel again the following day. The couple was thrilled with the service they received, loved the brand new limo and word quickly spread among the well to do that a reliable limo service with a suitable vehicle was finally available to them at a decent cost.

Lou learned from her dad that it was wise to charge wealthy customers a bit less than other drivers charged and allow them to tip. Rich people didn't get that way by shelling out top dollar for something they could get for less. They did, however, tend to tip very well when they were satisfied with the service they received. Bill took her advice and, as a result, was busy most of the time.

The limo business kept Bill occupied and pulled him out of the depths of depression to which he sank after selling the repair shop. It also made money, good money, which allowed my dad the opportunity to save up for his ultimate return to college. Lou was also happy because she watched her husband and youngest child working together at something they enjoyed. Something she knew would keep the family financially sound for years to come.

Things really came together for Bill and Arthur. So much so that they later purchased a second limousine and kept busy constantly. Bill eventually had to slow down a bit, so he brought one of his brother's sons into the business to keep up with the demand. His name was Wayne, he was looking for steady work, and he had a great personality that the customers loved. Bill took him on full time after just two driving assignments.

Arthur began to worry about moving his role in the business to part-time as he prepared to go back to college. He knew that would leave Bill in the lurch and create a need to hire another

driver besides Wayne. After giving the whole thing much thought, he just couldn't do it. He stayed with the limo business and was content to make the money he made. He could always take night classes at some point in the future.

Besides all else, the possibility of a large scale war breaking out in Europe was almost certain and there was little doubt that America would eventually have to get involved in it. Arthur was still young enough to serve in the military in some capacity if he enlisted. This was something he wanted to do because he would be the first from his family to have the opportunity to serve the country that gave him and them so many opportunities.

### Chapter Three: Americans Are Divided

My grandmother Amanda was a kind of Matriarch in her family. She sometimes bullied my grandfather Frank and was definitely in charge at home. She was also an advisor for many of her relatives, including her sisters. They came to her first before making any important decision. They wanted her advice, but more importantly, her blessing. I'm not sure how this all came about, but I am told that her mother was the same way and the transition of power from mother to daughter was seamless.

Letters arrived every month from Finland. Cousins and other relatives sought advice or provided news about what the Russians or Germans were up to in Scandinavia. Finns had no use for Russians or Germans, but would surely side with the Germans if they ever went up against Russia. They were considered the lesser of two evils after centuries of Russian oppression in that region.

The situation in Europe was creating big problems here in America. People were becoming divided based on their ethnic heritage. That divide always existed in terms of neighborhoods and other considerations, but was now becoming more pronounced. Many Americans traced their ethnicity back to Germany, but it was really just a minority of them that fully supported Hitler and were fine with anything he did. They held Bund meetings which were viewed with great suspicion by many Americans and, especially, by those in the U.S. Government.

My mother and her friends used to kid the girls at school whose parents attended those meetings by asking if the buns they ate there were the sticky kind and if they had been personally blessed by Hitler. Their ethnically German classmates whose parents supported Hitler ignored those kinds of questions and didn't bother responding to them. My mother and her friends believed that those girls had already been brainwashed into believing that all non-German Americans were merely mixed race trash that would be dealt with when the Third Reich invaded and took over the USA.

New York was the ultimate ethnic melting pot. For many who came to America, the Big Apple was their first stop and more than a few decided to stay. Nationalities split up into their own neighborhoods where they felt more comfortable with people that spoke their native language and shared a common ethnic and cultural heritage. This was fine until a war broke out and made people choose between their native and adopted nation. Such was the case when Hitler took power in Germany and began to have ambitions which extended far beyond his own borders.

Many ethnically German Americans that supported Hitler decided to return home. Others stayed hoping that everything would work out for the best for both nations. Some supported the isolationist movement which held huge rallies throughout New York City. These were designed to send a message to the President and Congress which said that Americans did not want to get involved in yet another European War that would cost lives and likely end up ruining our economy.

Neither of my parents or their families were very political. They were, however, very patriotic and felt that it was wrong to try and influence public opinion for or against war. Many Americans felt that these isolationist rallies were probably the work of Nazi sympathizers who felt that American involvement in any world war might bring victory to the wrong side. If America was attacked, most Americans believed that it only made sense for us to fight back and ally ourselves with the enemies of our enemies.

My father and his family lived in a very diverse and ethnically mixed neighborhood. Most of the people that lived there were second or third generation Americans who didn't feel all that much loyalty to the nations that represented their ethnic heritage. They were too busy trying to make a living and be Americans to worry about what was going on elsewhere. If war came it came and Americans would be ready to fight just as they always had been. That was the sentiment of most of the people that lived in his neighborhood.

My mother and her family lived in a neighborhood that was also mixed, but tended to be more Italian than anything else. The Italians living in that area had no use for Hitler. My grandmother Amanda and my mother recalled that many of the Italian women in the neighborhood referred to him as 'the little German with the big mouth' when they spoke of Hitler in English.

Apart from all the jokes, labeling and comments about Hitler and Germany, there was a real fear that America would have to go to war very soon. The Germans were stirring up trouble in Europe and the Japanese were stirring up trouble in Asia. It was a situation that would eventually explode into worldwide war and everyone in the USA knew that, one way or another, America would end up being someone's target.

Hope springs eternal and every so often there was news of some great diplomatic effort that might bring peace to part of the world and help keep America out of the war. By the autumn of 1941, these efforts had lulled America into a false sense of security. Despite the news of events in Europe and Asia which was printed in newspapers or broadcast over the radio each day, people formed their own opinions. My parents told me that no one they knew believed that things were as bad as they were really were outside of the USA.

Americans were in denial, but were about to get a very deadly wake up call...

#### Chapter Four: The Cat Jumps

It was Billy Mitchell, an officer in the Army Air Corps, who warned the U.S. Military that the next war would be fought with air power; not oversized, slow moving, water-based battle

wagons. He pleaded with members of then U.S. Congress and military commanders to invest in fighters, bombers and air craft carriers pointing out the vulnerability of warships and ground targets to air attacks.

Long before the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor it was Mitchell who noted Japan's keen interest in the military domination of Asia. He pointed out how they were developing warplanes and aircraft carriers. In a very prophetic remark that was offered over ten years before the surprise attack on Pearl, Mitchell told military leaders and the press that if we did not take the threat of Japanese air power seriously, they might just attack Pearl Harbor on some fine Sunday morning when we least expected it.

It was Sunday, December 7, 1941. The past week had been like a dream for Liz. George came back from his parent's house and the two spent several days together, dating and making plans for the future. Her friends took photos of the happy couple at the Bronx Zoo and other locations near Liz's apartment building. Those photos were carefully glued into the small album that started out as a memento of her trip to West Point and ended up as a visual diary about their time together.

George was set to report for duty somewhere down south, so it was certain that their relationship would have to be a long distance one with lots of letters and maybe a few calls as finances and phone lines permitted. With that in mind, George reluctantly took a train out of Manhattan which headed south on Friday, December 5th. The couple had already said their goodbyes the evening before and knew it would be too painful for both of them to say farewell at the train station.

Liz stared at the beautiful friendship ring purchased for her by George. It was the best she could hope for and more than she expected. Being sixteen years of age, still in school and with plans for college, any sort of official engagement would have been out of the question. She hoped to be a doctor one day. If Liz married George before finishing college, that dream would never come true. It was frowned upon for married women to become doctors in those days, although I have no idea why and my mother could never really explain that to me.

Amanda spoke to Liz in Finnish telling her to get her head out of the clouds and get her mind back on her job, and school work. Liz managed to get hired by a department store in Manhattan. She worked in sales, part time on weekends and a few evenings during the week. It was the busy holiday shopping season and stores needed as much help as they could get. Liz was still thinking about George as she headed out the door that Sunday to catch the subway train to Manhattan.

Her experiences seemed like a haze to her many years later when she gave me her account of the events that occurred on that Sunday, but my mother was certain that she heard the news of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor while on her way to work from people talking about it on the train. Not knowing exactly what to do, she stayed on board until the stop that brought her within a few blocks of her job at the department store.

Thinking it wise to call home, she tried to find a pay phone to use once she got back above ground from the subway station. It was no use, every phone for blocks was in use and there was a line behind everyone using those phones. She continued to the store and went in through the

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