

## An Immigrant Story

My parents' story is an immigrant story. My mother, whose name was also Margaret, was brought to the US from Berlin, Germany as a babe in arms in 1896, arriving in New York City at the tender age of only two months. The family settled on the Upper East Side which was, at the time, an almost entirely German community. Another child, a son, was born a few years after their arrival. My grandfather, who worked as a tailor, set up a small shop and went about making a modest yet comfortable living for the family.

Despite the security that my grandfather had found for his family, he was never satisfied with his life in the city. His dream was to own property out in the country. One day, my grandfather saw an ad in the local newspaper for land available for purchase in southern New Jersey for \$3,000. Now, \$3,000 was a lot of money back then, but still, my grandfather was intrigued. He could have acres and acres to call his own; he could make his dream a reality. He contacted the agency in charge and, sight unseen, put his entire life savings into the purchase. By the time he was finally able to get out there to inspect his land, the deal was done and there was no one to complain to - at least, no one who would care - that the land he now owned was nothing more than a swamp. My grandmother, incensed over the decision and with no bucolic fantasies of her own, declared after one visit that she would never leave New York City for that "God forsaken place."

My grandmother died in her late forties, having made good on her promise to remain a city dweller. My grandfather continued to work as a tailor in New York City for much of the year but spent part of each summer working on his land, trying to convert swampy pastures into a working farm. It was that dream of his that brought my mother out of the city and into New Jersey, where she found work as a receptionist at the same resort my father would end up at not long after.

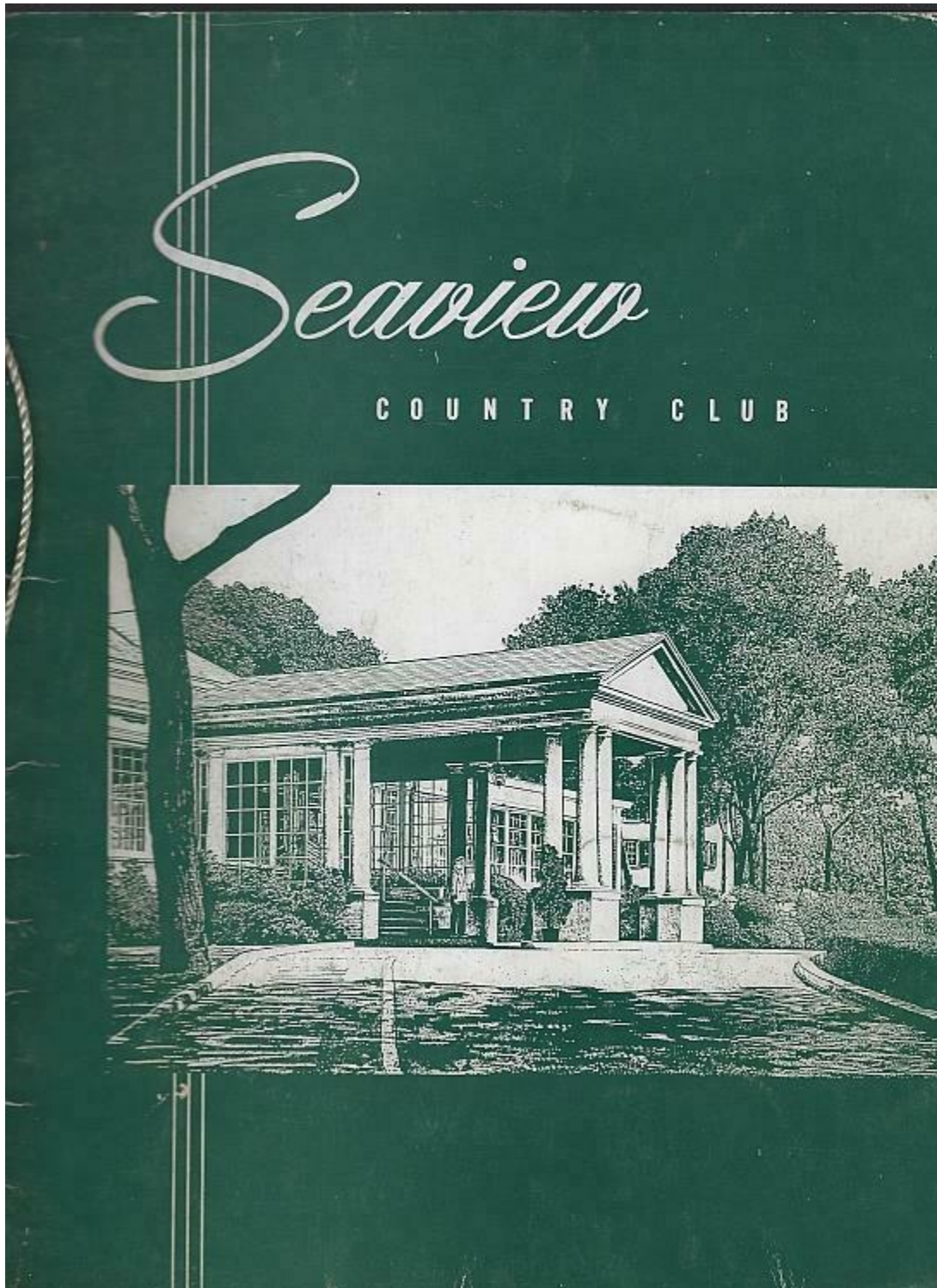
My father arrived in New York in his early twenties. He had grown up in Switzerland, in a part of the country where both German and French were spoken. My father chafed under the iron will of his rather tyrannical father and the heavy burden of duty that came with being the eldest son. His family ran a hotel in the resort area between Switzerland and Austria and my father, having completed culinary training in France, was expected to return to Switzerland and take up his role within the family business. Instead, in 1922, he infuriated his father by fleeing to America in the hopes of finding fame and fortune in Hollywood.

His plans to make it as a star got derailed by the more compelling need to earn a living. He found help through the Helvetica Lodge, a fraternal organization established to provide social opportunities and aid to those of Swiss heritage. Using his connections there and with the Swiss Hotel Association, he found work as a chef. He landed at the Sea View Country Club in Absecon, New Jersey, a glitzy, Gilded Age resort catering to Continental types, frequented by such moneyed luminaries as the Morgans and the Vanderbuilts. It was there that my parents met.

My parents never talked much about their courtship. Perhaps it was their shared Germanic ancestry that drew them together; I don't know. I saw little evidence of their love story in their married life, and I believe that their relationship proved to be a disappointment to them both, particularly my mother. But that is getting ahead of the story.

Despite my father's estrangement from his father and step-mother (his mother died when my father was twelve or so and remarried a stern woman with whom my father would never form a bond), he decided to take my mother to Switzerland for their honeymoon. While there, his family made every effort to enlist the new bride to convince my father to return to his role in the family business. They did not find a willing accomplice. My mother, as politely but as frankly as she could, explained to her Swiss German in-laws that while she might have been

born in Europe, she was an American through and through, and *that* was where she intended to make her home. My father never went back to Switzerland again.



*Vintage Dinner Dance Menu from the Seaview Country Club*

**Growing Up in Absecon**

*"She had found only two traditions of the American small town. The first tradition, repeated in scores of magazines every month, is that the American village remains the one sure abode of friendship, honesty, and clean sweet marriageable girls."*

Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*

My parents returned to southern New Jersey and set about building a life together. They bought a little bungalow in the small town of Absecon, the same town where the Sea View was located. Our house had three bedrooms and one very small bathroom with no shower, only a tub. The front of the house faced south and my mother took advantage of all the natural light to fill the sunroom with houseplants. Behind the sunroom was a small living room and dining room, and a kitchen with a pantry off to one side. The house sat close to the street, so our only real grassy area was out back, where we had a small yard with swings and bikes and other playthings. It was all very mainstream, small town American. Very homogeneous. Very white. Very Christian. If you have ever read *Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis, you get the idea.

My brother came along in 1926. Six years later, on March 10, 1931, I was born. My birth came right in the heart of the Great Depression, but we were luckier than most. The clientele the resort catered to was somewhat insulated from the worst of the economic ravages of that time, so my father was able to keep his job. My parents lived frugally but were always secure. Though the Depression did leave its mark, even on our sheltered corner of the world. Atlantic City began to show the first signs of what it would later become, beginning its gradual decline from the fashionable hub where elegant young people would go to show off their latest finery to a city defined by haves and have nots, the latter gaining prominence with every passing decade. But that shift would be years in the making, and at the time I was born, both Atlantic City and our nearby little town still glittered with promise and can-do American spirit.

My father, due to his demanding work schedule at the hotel and, perhaps even more so, a naturally distant temperament, was a rare presence in our home. He was never the type of American father to take his children out to ball games or movies, and certainly was never one to get down on the floor and play games with us, as my best friend's father used to do. That kind of nurturing was left to my mother, who had stopped working when she married and later dedicated herself fulltime to filling in any gaps my father left. She was as warm and affectionate, if occasionally hovering, as he was cold.

Life, for us, revolved mainly around the church and its many social activities. My father never joined us, but the rest of us attended weekly church services at the local Methodist church and my brother and I went to Bible school in the summers. Weddings were another source of fun. Almost all of the weddings in town were held at one of the two churches in town - Methodist and Presbyterian - and unlike today, you didn't need an invitation to attend. Everyone was welcome. The ladies at the church would contribute cakes and teas and other treats for the communal feast - my mother might bake a strudel - and everyone would gather together to dine and dance and celebrate.

When I was home the thing I liked best was to play dolls with my best friend, Helen Jane, who lived across the street. (She later went by Helen and I had to painstakingly teach myself to call her that, but in those early years, I knew her as Jane.) Jane's mother was very particular and never let us touch a thing in the house, so we usually ended up at my house, where my mother would tolerate all kinds of mess in pursuit of a fun afternoon of play. We liked to take all the cushions off the sofa and chairs in the living room and create our own little world with our dolls. I had all sorts of dolls: dolls that looked like Shirley Temple, dolls with blond hair and brown hair, baby dolls and little girl dolls. I even had one you could give water to and she would wet herself, just like a real baby! But my favorite was Mary Lou, a baby doll I had been given when I was very young. You'd think after all that time playing with baby dolls I would have been more of a natural at mothering my own babies, but somehow it didn't quite work out that way.

Jane and I had been friends ever since we were old enough to walk across the street, and when we started kindergarten we walked to and from school every day on our own. It was such a different time back then. Of course, there wasn't very much traffic in our small town, but also people just didn't worry like they do now. So, once we knew the route, Jane and I were allowed to venture out on our own. We remained the best of friends all throughout elementary school and on into high school, when life for Helen (as I now had learned to call her) took a dramatic turn. But that is a story we will get to later.

Holidays were usually spent with my aunt and uncle and their three boys, who lived about 35 miles away. Sometimes we would go to them, and sometimes they would come to us, but for Easter, we were usually at home. We would dress up and go to church, then come home for a big Easter egg hunt and dinner, and then we all headed out to the Boardwalk for the Easter Parade. You've heard of the Easter Parade on New York's 5th Avenue? Well, this was our version of that. Mother would have on her new Easter hat, usually embellished with flowers or feathers as was the style then, and the rest of us would be in our fancy Easter outfits, dressed to impress the other parade goers - these days people might show up in sweatshirts and ball caps, but back then, that would never do.

One year, I remember, when I was seven or eight, Jane's mother made us coordinated outfits. Oh, they were so beautiful! Jane's was a lightweight crocheted dress jacket, yellow with white angora trim. And mine, made to match, was dusty pink with gray trim. Setting off together on the Boardwalk that day, we were as proud as peacocks, and we certainly got a lot of appreciative glances.

My brother was several years older than I, so we rarely did much together. He was often off playing sports or working on cars with his friends, and of course my father was usually at work, so that left my mother and me on our own quite a lot. Some of my happiest memories from those times are the trips she and I would take, just the two of us, to the city. Now that I live in New Paltz "the city" means New York City, but back then, living in southern New Jersey, when we said "the city" we meant Philadelphia. My mother might take me to see Betsy Ross's house or the Liberty Bell. Sometimes we would just go shopping. The highlight was always a trip to Wanamaker's, one of the first department stores in the entire country. The palatial store had nine floors of retail shopping and boasted what was, at the time, the world's largest pipe organ in its atrium. But the real attraction was the Crystal Tea Room, which to me, with its gilded facades and enormous glittering chandelier, was the absolute pinnacle of glamor. Sitting primly on my cushioned chair and carefully opening up the menu to choose something delicious to eat, I felt as ladylike and sophisticated as any of my father's wealthy guests at the resort.



*Wannamakers, early 20th Century*