Chapter 1

Coming of Age

I was 16 years old and Pop and I were having an argument. As he raised his right hand to hit me, I moved to his left side grabbing his arm, and from behind him grabbed his right arm. I locked my hands around him and pinned both arms against his body. "Pop, I can't let you hit me."

Pop had done some boxing as a young man, but I was a wrestler. He tried to loosen his arms from my grip, but when he realized he couldn't he grudgingly said, "Guess you think you're pretty strong — does that make you feel good?" It didn't. As a matter of fact, it made me feel awful. But I couldn't turn the other cheek then, and have never been one to do so since. It is just not in me to let anyone hit me. What's more, Pop had never attempted to strike me. Hell, he seldom ever raised his voice to me. I was his favorite son — the one who could do no wrong. On the other hand, Pop never appeared to be pleased with my brother Billy, who was six years older than me. He never took Billy hunting or fishing as he did me. Billy was not the athlete or sportsman I was. Whatever Billy did, Pop hollered at him, threatened him with his razor strop, whipped him or locked him in the hall closet. I made sure I didn't do what Billy did. So, whatever I did do, Pop was pleased with me. Perhaps those early years were the beginning of the Marine in me.

I was the second son of Bill and Alyce, and according to my birth certificate, I was born at 10 p.m. on September 27, 1935, at Westlake Hospital in Melrose Park, Illinois. That same year, a gallon of milk cost 47 cents, a gallon of gasoline cost 11 cents, and the average price for a new home was $6,296. A new car cost $580, the average annual income for a family of four was $1,518, and the Dow Jones measured a hefty 144 points. In Geneva, a Czech became the President of the League of Nations' Council. The founding members of the League numbered 42 nations, and the Council consisted of four nations. Later, the League was replaced by the United Nations, with its own Security Council. In Berlin, the swastika was adopted as the national flag of Germany. Alabama defeated Stanford in the Rose Bowl, Omaha won the Triple Crown, the Detroit Tigers won the World Series, and the Montreal Maroons won the Stanley Cup.

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America was largely a country of immigrants from the four corners of the globe, but predominantly of European descent. The largest migration occurred during the late 1800s and very early 1900s when several million people left their homelands throughout Europe and came to the New World seeking a better life. When they came with only the clothes on their backs and a small suitcase or kit, they displayed incredible courage and ability to go from "rags to so-called riches." They wove their way into cities and towns across the country, integrated themselves into new cultures, studied in different schools, and ultimately took their places in every conceivable type of business, from shoe repair to banking.

Americans owe their very being to this tide of hard-working people who sacrificed all they had to give their descendants a better way of life. Most had to learn a new language and an entirely new way of living as they toiled day in and day out, often for seven days a week, earning pennies —not for themselves but for their offspring. In this same spirit of passing on what one had to their children, each generation to follow was

expected to do the same. They were no longer German, or French, or whatever country they came from. They were American, and they adopted the American way of life.

Among these new Americans were my ancestors. In 1903, my paternal grandparents and most of my aunts and uncles came from the Bohemia Region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which is located in the western part of Sudetenland (near the Krusne Hory Mountains), in what is now the Czech Republic.

But my immigrant story begins well before that. According to DNA tests conducted by the National Geographic-sponsored Genographic Project, my 'Adam' came from East Africa, specifically Kenya and Tanzania. When my male ancestors migrated north, current populations show 40 percent of the men now living in the Czech Republic got there via western Siberia, and 35 percent of the males now in India and eastern Iran belong to the same DNA group. My 'Eve' came from eastern Kenya, first migrating to what is now the Congo, and then heading straight up through Anatolia eventually settling in Germany and Switzerland. Only a small percent ventured into Iran, East India, and Finland. Maybe this migrant narrative, encoded in my DNA, explains my unusual affinity for the people and land of these countries visited during my travels.

As long ago as the late 1700s and early 1800s, my ancestors lived in towns 40 — 75 miles northwest of Prague, in what is now the Czech Republic. My earliest known ancestors were my four great-great-grandparents, born about 1815 in Svinarova, Pecinov, and Pochvalov.

Years later, when browsing through my Uncle Tony's scrapbook, I came upon an article and picture from a 1932 edition of the Svinarova newspaper describing my great-grandfather's 80th birthday party. The party was held outside a restaurant and attended by more than 30 people, all in traditional Czech clothing — dresses and bonnets for the ladies and suits and fur hats for the men. Alan, my great-grandfather, was described as a man who loved to dance, tell jokes, and talk politics. Guess that's where I acquired those same traits!

Other early ancestors were also born and raised in similar Czech towns. Many died of tuberculosis or the black plague, and their burial sites are unknown. Pecinov was allegedly bombed during World War II, but it was actually demolished in the 1960s, and is now the site of an earth mine where clay pottery such as dinas and chamotte are made.

To establish the mine, graves were dug up and some of the deceased were moved to a cemetery in Nove Straseci: however, none of my family graves were found there. My wife, Carole, and my sons, Todd and Dale, have visited these towns with me. We have visited the homes where my great-great-grandparents were born and raised, the graves of my great-grandparents, and the coal mine where four generations of Hrebiks worked (including my grandfather, Josef and cousin, Joe). When the Soviet Union took Czechoslovakia in 1968, Joe had to provide for his family, so he continued working at the mine and became a member of the Communist Party. He and his wife, Vera, even lived in Afghanistan for two years during the 1970s, while Joe taught the Afghans how to incorporate electric lights and electricity in their coal mines. In 2000, Joe showed my sons and me the closed coal mine near Pecinov; he warned us to be careful what we said because the caretaker of the mine was a Communist with whom Joe used to work. Joe feared his former colleague might report our visit to the Party, which is still a viable political party in the Czech Republic. Cousin Joe was ever mindful of the Cold War years (1945-1991) when the Soviet Union occupied most of the Eastern Europe countries. Travel in and out of those countries was strictly controlled by the Russians and you had to be very careful in your personal life to not run afoul of the Communist Party. All relations with the Soviet Union and its neighbors and the Western world were conducted at arms length, and with great diplomacy. During the Cold War years of 1945 through 1991, Vaclav Havel, a writer, had become the leader of the opposition against the ruling Communist Party in what was then called Czechoslovakia. In 1989, after Havel had been imprisoned several times, once for four years,

the student-led Velvet Revolution took place culminating with the Soviet Union's withdrawal from the country. With the formation of the new democratic government, Havel was released from prison and elected president. It was a great day for the country and its people.

While we were in Prague on this same visit, Dale arranged for Todd and me to be invited with him to a cocktail party hosted by his former professor and poet, James Ragan, at then Czech President Vaclav Havel's family apartment, overlooking the Vltava River and Charles Bridge. Havel and Ragan were childhood friends. Though Havel wasn't there, we admired his pointillism poems displayed on the walls and enjoyed conversation with several of his long-time friends that lasted long into the night.

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In August 1903, Josef and Antonia, my paternal grandparents, accompanied by three daughters and one son, left their home in Pecinov, bound for America. Josef's passport, number 9542184, stamped by the U.S. Consulate in Bremen, Germany, indicated the family sailed from Bremen aboard the ship Main on September 17, 1903. They were traveling on a ticket that would first take them across the ocean and then transfer them to a train bound for their final destination in Southern Illinois. The family was identified as number 24 on the ship's immigrant and steerage passengers' list. Inside Josef's passport was a vaccination card that read, "To be punched by ship's surgeon at daily inspection." Evidently, the daily inspections were intended to ensure that all necessary inoculations were completed prior to arrival in the New World. The card showed 12 small holes had been punched by the time they arrived at Baltimore, instead of Ellis Island, on October 2, 1903. Upon arrival at Fell's Point in Baltimore Harbor, they spent a couple of days processing before boarding the train. During that time, they had the opportunity to visit the Bohemian Club and gather information about life in America. In 1914, St. Wenceslas Catholic Church was built on the site of the Club.

Armed only with the knowledge Josef gained from his parents, who had spent a number of years in America before returning to Bohemia to die, he and his family carried a few satchels of personal belongings and made their way to a new Bohemian enclave growing in the coal-mining region of Southern Illinois. Their former life was now only in their memories. They would never again see their family and friends left behind in Novo Strasece where Josef was born; In Holesovice, Antonia's birthplace; Or Libusin and Svinarov where their children were born. They were now in America and would raise their children to speak English and to be Americans.

Their new home was Mt. Olive, Illinois. Josef worked in the local coal mine and made wine from his vineyard, which he sold to supplement his income. Antonia became the regional licensed midwife, bringing hundreds of babies into the world, including several of her grandchildren. She was fun-loving, the first on the dance floor and the last to leave. They had nine children, but the first, Bill, died within two months of birth. Pop was the second Bill; it was common to name the next same gender child after the first who died.

Every month, Mt. Olive saw more Bohemians, Montenegrins, Croats, Germans, and Serbs move into their respective neighborhoods, almost as if ordered to segregate. But in actuality, as it is today, people preferred to live near others with whom they shared a common language and customs. Most of the Bohemians chose the unstructured farm and woodlands to the west of town.

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My father, Bill, was born and raised in White City, a small coal mining town three miles west of Mt. Olive. It was here that he met and married my mother, Alyce, who was of German descent.

My maternal family came from Hassloch, Germany. Six generations married and lived there starting with Peter Stahler, my great grandfather seven times removed, who was born in 1649. In 1842, my maternal great-great-grandparents, Johann Jacob Stahler, son of the Burgermeister and master baker, and Maria, who had been living in Hassloch, immigrated to New Baden, Illinois. There they married and became farmers. Peter Wolf, father of Maria, served in the German Army for an unknown period of time until 1845, having fulfilled his military duties, he was granted permission to travel abroad. Soon after, he immigrated to America. My great-grandfather, Jacob G. Stahler, was five years old when his father died. Maria was left to raise their nine children and run their 110-acre farm. In January, 1865, just shy of his 16th birthday, her oldest son, Jacob, joined Captain Sam Schimminger's Company D, 149th Regiment of the Illinois Infantry Volunteers fighting for the Union Army in the Civil War.

The four-year war resulted in 630,000 dead and more than one million casualties. Jacob was one of the casualties who did not recover sufficiently from his injuries until January 1866, when he received an honorable medical discharge. Upon returning home, he helped his mother run the farm until 1872 when he married Mary Wolf and became a blacksmith on Hanover Street in downtown New Baden. Jacob also served as a policeman, and was known for growing fine grapes in his vineyard. Their brick house survived the 1896 tornado that leveled more than half the town, and it was not until the mid 1970s that the house was torn down to make way for the local Post Office. Ironically, the Post Office burned down 10 years later.

Both Bill and Alyce came from coal-mining families. The year after they were married, Wall Street experienced the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression began. The newlyweds, along with Alyce's two brothers and their wives, decided they did not want to be coal miners; they wanted to live and work in a growing big city. After all, Joe Kennedy made his fortune bootlegging whiskey from Canada, and Al Capone gained notoriety expanding the Mafia from his Chicago headquarters. Bill and his two brothers-in-law had more legally acceptable occupations in mind. Moving to Maywood, a western suburb of Chicago, the three men worked as bakers. Alyce's brothers soon changed occupations. Only Bill stayed on as a baker.

Bill was short — only 5 feet 6 inches tall. Maybe that was why he always wore a hat? Or maybe it was because his hair was so thin on top his bald head was clearly visible? Whenever he left the house, he had a fedora set jauntily atop his head. There was a cream colored straw hat with a brown headband around it for summer, and a grey felt one with a dark grey or black band around it for winter. Unless the weather was exceedingly hot, Pop wore a suit and tie with a freshly ironed hankie tucked carefully in his front breast pocket with the corners of the hankie sticking up just right. For warmth in winter, he wore grey felt spats over his shoes for warmth. Cold or snowy weather called for an overcoat, wool scarf, leather gloves and galoshes. When it rained, he wore rubbers to protect his shoes.

At work, he wore a tall white baker's hat — the top puffed-part starched to stand up and spread out. His short-sleeve white shirt, with a singlet undershirt underneath, was also starched and ironed with crisp creases down the outside of each sleeve. White pants were provided by the bakery, fresh and clean every day, along with long white aprons folded and tied at the waist. His white work shoes remained at the bakery, full of splattered dough, icing, and so on. His white socks came home for washing once a week.

Pop was a quiet man who never said much. But when he was frustrated, he shouted. One day, he and Mom were arguing in the kitchen. Pop was ironing his white uniform, and Mom threw a glass pitcher at his head, which made him bleed. Pop said not a word, finished ironing his uniform, and then went to the bathroom to bandage his wound. I never saw Pop strike Mom, and suspect he never did because she definitely would have said something. Pop never drank at home during the winter, and one case of Schlitz lasted him all summer. (Years later, when I was home on leave from the Corps, I took Pop out for dinner and smiled when he ceremoniously ordered, "Mogen David on the rocks, please.")

Pop wore wire-rimmed glasses and had one eye that looked slightly askance from the other. He read his paper daily and often listened to the radio. Though he didn't have a good singing voice, Pop was often heard singing a few short phrases from the great standard of the day, "Bye Bye Blackbird." As the years passed, Pop wore a very strong hearing aid in each ear, and his legs started to bow.

Mom was a beautiful woman of medium build with long, light reddish-brown hair worn in two braids wound in circles around each side or across the top of her head. Almost every year, she cut and sold her braids and started all over again. She wore typical house dresses and aprons around the house, but always had very pretty dresses, gloves, and a hat to wear when she went out shopping or socializing with friends. When World War II came along and nylon was invented, she bought nylon hose and garter belts from a door-to-door saleswoman. Her shoes were always very pointed and stylish, as was her purse, which hung from her wrist. She wore minimal makeup or jewelry.

Settling into their new life in Maywood, they started a family when my brother, Billy, was born in 1929. As the Depression invaded every aspect of life, they must have decided to delay expanding their family until I came along six years later. For weeks, Pop and Mom had discussed what to name me. Mom went into labor before they had reached full agreement on the subject. She was being wheeled on a gurney into the delivery room as she called back to Bill, "I don't care if it's a boy or a girl: I'm naming it Kay." Forceps were required to birth me, resulting in two slightly irregular, blotchy scars on each side of my temple — the right scar more noticeable than the left. My head was a full display of curly black hair, which turned straight and light brown two weeks later. Mom was true to her word — my middle name is Kay. I never found out why they didn't use the masculine version of Kaye, as in Kaye Kaiser, a popular band leader, singer, and movie actor at the time.

Just prior to my arrival, Pop, Mom and my older brother, Billy, were living in a very small, two-room apartment in a rented house on 4th Avenue in the village of Maywood. Maywood wasn't always its name. According to the Proviso High School Alumni Directory, the first town meeting took place in April, 1850, and the town of Taylor in Cook County, was renamed Proviso Township in 1852. The name Proviso was directly derived from the Wilmot Proviso anti-slavery bill before Congress, which restricted slavery in the lands yet to be acquired from Mexico at the end of the Mexican War. It wasn't until 1869 that the first village in Proviso Township took the name Maywood. Colonel William Nichols, and a group of eight men from Vermont, bought the land for $100 per acre, and selected Colonel Nichols as the first President of the Maywood Company. The name May was inspired by Colonel Nichols, in memory of his daughter, May, who died shortly before he moved west. The "wood" part probably came from the wooded land. Other villages soon sprang up around Maywood, such as Melrose Park in 1882, Forest Park in 1884 (then known as Harlem until 1907), and many others. In 1903, a high school population of 30+ students from Maywood and Melrose Park attended school in the basement of the First Presbyterian Church of Maywood until fire destroyed it. The Maywood Opera House served as a temporary high school until 1906, when it was moved into four rooms on the top floor of the newly built Public School Number 1, later named Emerson Grade School, located at the corner of Fourth Avenue and Washington Boulevard. In 1910, the Maywood and Melrose Park High Schools became part of the Proviso Township High

School District. In 1911, Proviso High School was built on the corner of First Avenue and Madison Street, at a cost of $10,000. In 1958, the original Proviso High School became Proviso East High School when Proviso West High School was built further west, at the intersection of Wolf Road and Harrison Street.

The EL train tracks ran right through our side yard, no more than 35 feet away. Though the famous Chicago EL ran along the ground out in the suburbs, it got its nickname from the elevated tracks which run between buildings throughout the Loop in downtown Chicago. The noise from the train was deafening as it ran by every 15 minutes and blew its whistle around the clock. But this was the only rent Pop could afford, and besides, he could walk to work at Thorhaug's Bakery just two blocks away, where he had been employed since the Crash.

Tens of thousands of people lost their jobs, businesses went bust, banks closed and people couldn't withdraw their money. On Wall Street, stock brokers and big investors jumped out of windows. There were long lines in the cities where food was given out in minimal portions on a daily basis. Hobos rode the rails from one town or city to the next in search of work and/or food. The country was in the worst depression ever known and it appeared the economy was unable to right itself. By 1933 and 1935, respectively, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to provide jobs. The WPA provided jobs for unemployed heads-of-households — of which 15 percent were women. They were paid the prevailing rate for the regions of the country where they worked; they built roads, bridges, highways, and Hi-Catoctin (later renamed Camp David). The CCC provided jobs for young men (18 through 25) from unemployed families. They were paid $1 per day to build conservation projects, such as parks and campsites. Fortunately, Pop's job as a baker was saved because food production was essential to the economy, even in the middle of the Depression. President Roosevelt also instituted his weekly radio fireside chats, broadcast from the White House. Many Americans gathered close around their radios to hear words of encouragement and hope from their beloved President.

Soon after my arrival, Pop received a $1.50 per week pay raise, and we moved to a two-bedroom apartment above the Lido movie theatre on Fifth Avenue. Access to the apartment was through a glass-paneled door on the sidewalk level and up a flight of stairs to the second floor. When we opened the solid wooden door, we could see two windows on the right overlooking the street and we faced the living room wall filled with mounted animals Pop had shot. There were two pheasants, a rabbit, a squirrel climbing a tree limb, an owl perched on the crest of a wooden moon, a soaring eagle with wings spread wide, a groundhog, and an opossum. The apartment was heated with hot-water radiators in each room — the hot water coming from a large boiler in the basement of the apartment building. A valve on the floor at one end of each radiator was used to turn the hot-water on and off. The steam hissed as it entered the radiator at the beginning of each winter. Sometimes we had to turn the small knob on top of one end of the radiator to allow the steam out. We held a cup under the spout to catch the water after the steam was gone and then turned the knob off once the radiator was full of water. One day, when I was two years old, I grabbed hold of the hot radiator in the living room, not realizing it was hot until I had severely burned my right hand and started crying. A large raised scar on the palm side of my right index finger reminds me of that fateful day. A few months later, I was trying to pick up a very heavy iron horse doorstop, when it fell on the base joint of my left index finger. A large horseshoe shaped scar reminds me of my second serious injury. I was adventurous, and more accidents would befall me later in life.

Passing through the living room, there were two small bedrooms to the right and left of an equally small kitchen with a sink, two or three cabinets above the sink, and room for a small enamel-top steel-legged table with four chairs. The back door, next to the sink, led to an iron fire escape into the alley behind the building. The small landing outside the back door was where the milkman left a bottle or two of milk each day. I

remember hearing the milkman making his rounds up the various apartment fire escapes and the bottles clanging in the steel cage he carried, which held about 9 to 12 bottles. Because the milkman came early in the morning, before daylight, Billy and I took turns during the cold winter days, getting up and bringing the milk inside before it froze and busted the bottles. The milk was pasteurized to kill bacteria, and it allowed for the milk to be shipped longer distances without spoiling from the dairy farms to towns and cities. One or two inches of cream rose to the top of the milk bottle, indicating how fresh the milk was. A downside to pasteurizing was that the dead white blood cells and bacteria often formed an ugly dark sludge at the bottom of the milk bottles. This problem was solved by the development of homogenization, which happened in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Homogenizing the milk spread the sludge throughout the milk, making it invisible to the eye. Ironically, the bacteria and white blood cells were the healthiest part of the long-gone fresh untreated milk.

Life in the apartment building was fun. Instead of playing in a yard, we kids rode our tricycles in the alley and on the sidewalk, and ran up and down the noisy fire escapes, hiding, and playing cops and robbers. Al Capone, "Machine Gun" Kelly, John Dillinger, and other gangsters were well-known and imitated by many boys.

Located between the apartment entrance and the Lido Theatre was a restaurant with a doughnut-making machine visible through the sidewalk window. I was fascinated with the machine and the doughnuts, disregarding the advice fitness expert, Jack LaLanne, offered many years later, "If humans made it, don't eat it." The baker dumped large globs of dough into the first machine, which cut the dough into shapes. Then the metal-grated conveyor belt passed the doughnuts through boiling hot grease, where they were fried. Exiting the fryer, the doughnuts were topped with chocolate or vanilla icing, powdered sugar, or strawberry jam. At the end of the 12-foot long line, two ladies placed the doughnuts on sheet pans and put the pans on slanted shelves behind the cashier's counter for sale. It was very common for people to come into the restaurant just to buy doughnuts. Billy and I would usually get a couple of pennies or a nickel once a week to buy doughnuts. What a treat they were!

When I was three, there was a Halloween costume contest at Emerson Grade School, just a few blocks from the apartment. Mom dressed me as a little gypsy girl, even curling my hair with a curling iron. She must have still wished I was a daughter. So there I stood on the stage with a bunch of girls. Pictures show I did have a cute face and a darling costume, but I looked like a girl. When the senior judge came over to congratulate the "little darling gypsy girl" and asked her name, I was upset and responded, "My name is Richard and I'm a boy." To demonstrate proof I was a boy, I lifted my dress and showed my Red Rider shorts hidden under the dress. "See, I'm a boy." To the utter delight of Mom, and my own embarrassment, I still won the girl's prize. It was a doll which I promptly threw in a trash receptacle when we left the school.

The year was 1938, and it was the first Christmas I remember. I helped Pop pick out the "perfect" tree in an open lot down the street toward the city park. To me, it was huge at five feet in height. When the tree was properly positioned in the living room, and water and sugar had been placed in the pan portion of the tree stand where the base of the tree trunk was pushed down on a spike to help hold the tree erect, out came the Christmas box. The box was about four feet long and maybe two feet high by three feet wide. In it were all my parents' Christmas ornaments — including an angel for the top of the tree, hangers, lights, tinsel, garland, the manger scene, and the Lionel train. The train track was mounted on two sheets of plywood kept under Billy and my bunk beds. Each board measured about two feet by four feet. The entire family participated in decorating the tree. First, the string of lights was placed carefully around the branches, closer to the trunk so the light would shine out and reflect off the ornaments. Next, the ornaments were removed from their boxes and placed on the tree. Woe be unto anyone who broke an ornament. There was no money to buy

replacements. The most dangerous time was placing the wire hangers on the loops at the top of each ornament to prevent the ornaments from falling off the tree. Next, the garland and tinsel were placed on the outer edges of the branches. One last check was made by everyone to make sure everything was properly placed on the tree. Pop then climbed the ladder and placed the angel atop the tree. She was so beautiful. The manger scene came next. It was usually placed on a table to the right of the front door. The two boards of the train track were pushed together, the train cars assembled, the electric switch to run the train was plugged into a wall outlet, and the train was tested. The very last decoration was a single white candle light, placed on the sill of the living room window, which faced out onto Fifth Avenue. Every time Billy and I went outside, we looked up in amazement and said, "Wow! That's our apartment."

By the time the decorating was done, it was time for Pop to go to work. He was still a baker on the night shift. When Pop left, Mom sat in the living room chair and watched as Billy and I changed into our pajamas, knelt before the manger scene and said our prayers to the baby Jesus. All the preparation typically happened about one week before Christmas. On Christmas Eve, Mom and her two boys would go to church. Pop had been raised a Catholic, but because Mom raised us boys Lutheran, Pop didn't attend church. Christmas morning came at the first crack of light. Reflecting back on the six year difference in our ages, it was a wonderful gesture of brotherly love that Billy kept me believing in Santa Claus. Overnight, the presents miraculously appeared under the tree, and we boys took turns opening them. Each got one present from his parents, one from his brother and one from Santa. Santa's was usually the one we had asked for most. I wondered how Santa knew I wanted a tricycle. Around the apartment I rode until the sidewalks were cleared of snow. But all the Christmas fun came to an abrupt end the day after New Year's Day. The tree came down and all the decorations were replaced in the box until next year, including each strand of 1/8-inch tinsel, which was carefully removed from the tree and deftly wrapped back around a piece of cardboard and slipped inside the box it came in. It cost too much to throw the tinsel out with the tree, only to have to buy new tinsel the following year.

By age four, I was wearing knickers and knee socks just like my big brother. Easter was when we got new church and special occasion clothing: a hat, coat, dress shirt, tie, knickers, knee socks, and shoes. Everyday clothes, including school clothes, came in late August, when we prepared for school. I usually got four or five outfits. We only got new socks after ours were worn out, which was after the holes in our socks had been darned three times.

Sometime during 1939, Pop decided the only way we would ever be able to own our own home was to reduce our rent by moving into the ten-square block of houses segregated for Negroes on the northern end of town. Not realizing the neighborhood was segregated, Billy and I quickly made friends with the neighborhood kids, though we could see they had different colored skin. It truly didn't matter to us. Kids were kids and friends were friends. Until, that is, the fall of that year when I turned five and it was time to go to school, along with Billy. Washington Elementary School was located across the street from our house, and that was where all our friends went. But Billy and I were told we could not attend that school because we were white. (The labels of "Black" and "White" were not yet used. They were "Caucasian" and "Negro.") Instead, Billy and I had to walk to St. Paul Lutheran School, located one mile across a busy highway and railroad tracks where trains served the American Can Company. I remember a large tree in a fenced yard of a house we passed every day. The tree was home to two squirrels. Ironically enough, one was jet black and the other snow white. Mom, being Lutheran, sent Billy and me to Sunday school at the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church where we were both baptized, and to St. Paul's Lutheran School, run by a very strict principal and several stern female teachers who somehow resembled Catholic nuns. I was left-handed and the first lesson I learned in school was to not write with my left hand. There was an unfounded stigma attached to anyone who wrote with his or her left hand, and children

were taught to write only with their right hand. Every time I started writing with my left hand the teacher smacked my knuckles with a ruler. I learned to write with my right hand, but my handwriting is essentially illegible. Some say they can't even read my printing. Not long after the school year began, I cut my right thumb open throwing a board that had a nail in it. For two weeks, I luxuriated in being allowed to write with my left hand.

When the school announced there would be a writing contest for students in all grades, I was thrilled. I loved competition of any kind, but my excitement was short-lived. The teacher humiliated me by saying my handwriting was so bad I was not allowed to enter the contest. The silver lining in this situation is that I became ambidextrous; I could write with my right or left hand, and I was proficient in using any type of tool, such as a hammer or saw, with either hand. I bat right-handed, throw left-handed, and kick with my left foot. Appearing a bit odd and alone, I was periodically laughed at for the difference, even by my friends.

Such treatment wasn't nearly as bad compared to the day one boy was caught stealing a piece of candy out of another boy's book bag. All the students were brought down into the basement where the huge boilers and heating system equipment were located. The principal told all the students what the boy had done, took the boy's shirt off and whipped the boy with his belt three times. No one ever wanted to have that happen to them. And that was the only time I ever saw any student disciplined in such a manner.

At recess, two games were popular. There was one small hill on the playground which was actually just an open field located next to the school. "King of the Hill" was the game. Everyone tried to stand on the very top of the hill, and everyone else tried to pull or push them off. The object was to see who could stay on the top the longest. Being small, I was at a disadvantage, though I often got close to the top. Where Billy and I excelled was in the "Piggy Back Fights." Instead of getting on Billy's back, and having only one arm with which to fight, I got on Billy's shoulders and Billy grabbed hold of my legs as I wrapped my feet around behind Billy's back. We were now ready to fight other teams who joined in the game. I was great with my hands, being able to grab, pull and push other kids off their teammates' shoulders. The advantage was that Billy was fairly tall and I was small and light on his shoulders. Throughout the Fall of that year, Billy and I never lost at "Piggy Back Fights."

As Thanksgiving neared, a sudden tremendous pain surrounded and engulfed my ankles. The pain was so severe I was unable to walk. I was diagnosed with rheumatic fever, and forced to lie on my back in bed with pillows under my lower legs and feet to ease the pain. I missed the remainder of the school year, but was able to keep up by doing homework assignments brought home by Billy. Being in such a position 24 hours a day caused a different pain — loneliness. I ate in bed in my room and missed being out in the rest of the house with my family. I felt so alone in that room for all those months. After two months, I grew weary of the isolation, crawled down on the floor and out to the living room on my hands and knees, being careful to keep my feet and ankles elevated as much as possible to ease the pain. These sojourns didn't last long, but being with the others was worth the additional pain. When the pain finally subsided in late spring, and the disease had not killed me, I was informed I had kept up with my school work and would be allowed to enter the next grade in the Fall. But the disease had damaged my heart and my parents were advised to curtail my physical activities. I was also careful to avoid contracting strep throat, which could reactivate the virus and further damage my heart, resulting in death. I am now careful to avoid such contact, but at the time, I was not about to heed any advice that limited my physical activities. I participated in all sports, and when I entered high school, I forged Dr. Bengston's note indicating I was physically fit to engage in any sports activities.

After two years living in the Black segregated neighborhood, Pop saved enough money to buy a house. For $3,500, we purchased and moved into a large two-story house located at 1917 S. 6th Avenue in the south end of

Maywood. Billy and I attended Garfield Elementary School. It was around this time that I began spending a month each summer with my grandparents in White City. In 1904, the Consolidated Coal Company, which had several mines in the Mt. Olive area, opened the "Number 15" mine west of town. The company provided white clapboard houses set on concrete blocks for the miners to live in. Hence, the area became known as White City. Josef and Antonia Hrebik, my paternal grandparents, built their own small four-room house across the creek from the mine in 1903. The house, which still stands today, consisted of a living room, two bedrooms, a summer kitchen, small front and back porches, and a shed. Little has changed except for a larger front porch. A few years later, Grasshopper Park baseball field was built across the cinder street from their house. Pop, his brothers, and friends played many a game on Grasshopper Park. The White City Stars fielded some really good players, of which three made it to the Major Leagues. Frank Biscan played for the St. Louis Browns, Jess Dobernic played for the Chicago White Sox, and Mike Kreevich played for the Chicago Cubs. After thirty years, the field was no longer used. The only evidence there was ever a baseball field there was thinner grass around the infield and the remains of what were once a backstop, a simple shelter, and a bench for a dugout.

When Pop and the last two of his four brothers came along, Josef built another house about a quarter mile away across State Road 138. Over 100 years later, both houses remain occupied.

Josef worked in the coal mine, but he also had a vineyard from which he made wine. During prohibition, which lasted from 1920 until 1933, the sale or consumption of alcohol was illegal. But not even the federal government could stop people from drinking. Private clubs, known as speakeasies, were prevalent in every city in the country. People made moonshine whiskey in stills in the mountainous regions of the country. The government agents, or *revenuers*, would venture into the mountains in search of the owners of the stills. The "moonshiners" quickly learned how to soup up their cars so they could escape. Eventually, the moonshiners started racing their cars to see who had the fastest one. Those original races have evolved into today's NASCAR races. In White City, several moonshiners were caught, including Pop's brother-in-law, Pete. Each moonshiner spent several months in prison for his illegal activities, but not Josef. Knowing something about making wine, Josef also operated a still back in the woods behind his house. His still consisted of a 20-gallon copper kettle with a dome on top, seated on a stand several feet off the ground. Copper coil tubing ran from the bottom of the kettle through a tub of cold water to cool the whiskey, ending about 18 inches above the ground. The whiskey maker poured mash, consisting of corn, raisins or plums, and corn sugar, into the kettle, along with some yeast, when it was available, to speed the fermentation. When the mash was fermented, it "cooked" down, and the whiskey or "white lightning" dripped out the end of the coil, estimated at 116 proof alcohol, or 58 percent alcohol. Josef's still was never raided. Talk was he paid off the revenuers, who had sympathy for the one small pleasure in life the coal miners could enjoy at the end of a hard shift down under.

After prohibition, Zippy's and Grua's Taverns opened next door to each other. Later, they were joined by Pete Sveboda's Saloon. On the corner was a grocery store, which had formerly been the mining company store. Prior to the store closing in 1898, miners bought goods there using company scrip. Of the three taverns, Mr. Grua's was the largest operation, importing a lot of liquor and beer from Germany and several Slovak nations. Upstairs was a big hall where the Bohemian Club met and held dances. Should you ever have the good fortune to attend an old-fashioned Bohemian party or picnic, you'll notice the older people who can barely walk, continue to polka long after the young folks have tired and sat down. After all, the polka was first danced in Prague in 1835.

Pop used to tell a story about when he, his brother Joe, and future brother-in-law, Harry Bellaver, chased livestock in the field across from their house. One day, they were chasing a horse that kicked Harry smack-hard in his face. Pop and Joe helped Harry into their kitchen and laid Harry on the wooden kitchen table, covered

with oil cloth, while Antonia cleaned up the blood. Harry's nose was so badly broken it never straightened. How ironic his crooked nose gave him a career in movies and on Broadway, culminating as the office-bound old police sergeant in the long-running television series, "Naked City."

When I stayed with Josef and Antonia, communication was difficult because they didn't speak much English and Pop never taught me Czech. I learned but a few words: Dobry den (hello), prosim (please), babicka (grandmother), dedecek (grandfather), ne (no), dobrou noc (good night), otec (father), matka (mother), ne dekuji (no thank you); and nashledanou (goodbye). So with a few words and a great many hand signs, we managed to communicate. Sometimes my aunts and uncles stopped by and that was fun because they spoke English to me.

Josef never owned a car his entire life. Whenever he needed to go somewhere beyond White City, which was almost never, he got a friend or son to drive him. During the day, I played in the woods out back, waiting for Josef to come home from the mine. As Josef walked down the cinder road toward his house with his lunch bucket swinging in his hand, I knew what was coming. On a wooden shelf above the kitchen sink, among other pots and pans there were two buckets, one small and one larger. When Josef came inside, he said, "Pivo" — Bohemian for beer. If Josef was alone, I grabbed the smaller bucket. If he had fellow miners with him, I grabbed the bigger bucket and off I went, down to one of the taverns on Route 138. Josef had a tab at each tavern. The bartender filled the bucket with beer, and I ran home as fast as I could without spilling any. The idea was to not let the beer get too warm in the hot summer sun. For other entertainment, I explored the woods behind the house and watched the cows in the field.

Nights were another story. Josef and Antonia had brief conversations, but they were in Czech. I usually just listened to the radio, drank my unsweetened Kool Aid, and waited to go to bed. It was the Golden Age of radio, which was the only source of news, weather, comedy, and music. Today we enjoy Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion" radio show which emulates those earlier shows when radio was king. One night, a couple of Josef's friends came by and gave him some money. Josef was the miner's neighborhood bank. He loaned money at an unknown interest rate, and had a book in which he recorded all the transactions. He was also the Bohemian Club treasurer to whom the men paid their monthly dues. After his friends left that night, Josef inexplicably motioned for me to accompany him into his bedroom and closed the door. He moved the bed and pulled up one of the floorboards. Underneath was a medium-sized leather bag with a handle. From the bag, he removed a big book, made some entries, placed the money he had just received into a cloth bag inside the leather bag, replaced the book in the bag, and put the bag back underneath the floor. After replacing the floor board and bed, he motioned to me with his finger to his pursed lips; meaning "be quiet, don't say anything about what you just saw." I never did say anything to anyone, but after Josef's death I asked my Uncle Tony about the bag. Uncle Tony said he gave it to the new Bohemian Club treasurer.