

Love from the Fire

The woman slowly shifted her feet across the wooden floor of her Oak Park home, making her way to a painting of a regal man. Her hand trembled as she lifted her gnarled finger to the man's face in the painting. She then weakly gestured to another painting, one of a regal woman, crafted in a similar fashion. These were her parents.

“Yes, both of them. All of them.” She said, with an air of bewilderment. “All of them died in the war.”

Lialin “Oma” James, 88, was a just little German girl during the dawn of World War II, where her mother and father were taken from her in the duration of World War II's violence. She is currently unemployed, living with her daughter whose name is also Lialin. It is for this reason that she prefers being called “Oma,” the German word for grandmother. Just minutes into the interview, Oma was on the verge of tears remembering her parents, each teardrop glimmering like old jewels in the wake of a storm.

The old woman sat at a table, speaking in a very thick, sweet German accent. Her voice was a saccharine melody, a musical piece worn by time and tides of new musicians.

“My mother and father were very strict—they wanted a proper woman. Loving, but strict,” Oma said. “You sat straight in the presence of men, you accepted what they offered.”

As a little girl, Oma was thrust into a world of modern royalty. Ladies were required to respect and obey men, dress properly in their presence, and above all, serve them. It was a life that not many could love, not even someone like Oma.

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Period 1

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“We were a wealthy family.” Oma said slowly. “My parents—they had standards for me. When we were asked to smoke, we smoked. We didn’t have to like it. When I refused I was punished.”

Then came the war. Oma’s practices as a proper little girl were scattered across the battlefield. They would not be collected again. Oma was living in a neutral area during the war, but nevertheless, German soldiers plowed through the town, burning down homes as part of the war’s enormous collateral. These were not German Jews, but normal German people, victims of the unprejudiced judgment of warfare.

“I remember when they came, and I remember what they did.” She paused, with not a look of sadness but one of confusion. “I remember there was fire. I remember the fire. And [my parents] were killed.”

Burns could be seen from her knees down to her toes, disfiguring her lower limbs. She shifted in her seat, her mouth slightly open as she grasped for more words. Oma managed to survive the fire, as the German soldiers were not concerned with killing individuals, but only with the purging of the town. Oma remembered those that had not been so fortunate.

“There were so many in the war that obeyed them. They followed them. And they were killed.”

By October 1941, emigration from Germany had been officially cut off. Oma, however, managed to board with a poorer family in her neutral hometown until the end of the war. Oma later married an American professor, and consequently moved to America.

“I just love him,” Oma said, as she drew in her sketchbook. “He is happy. I love him.”

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Lying before Oma on the table was a small sketchbook, filled with numerous colorful drawings. She unsteadily flipped through each drawing, eager to show off her talents as an artist. Her fingers were like type bars in a world-worn typewriter, quickly and eagerly emanating from the imagination, yet occasionally coming to an exacting halt. Her drawings followed a single character, a white rabbit searching for mysteries and clues.

“Art was my love as a little girl. It made me happy.” She said. “I love to draw. There is so much to love.”

Oma’s daughter sat at the table with Oma and smiled at her drawings. The two talked to each other in German momentarily, as Oma’s hand trembled on the drawing pad, still producing beautiful and organic lines.

“Aren’t they amazing?” Lia James, 45, said of the sketches. “She’s an amazing woman. She’s been through so much...and she’s still going!”

Nearby was Lia’s daughter, Elena. Elena, 7, paid no attention to the drawings, but desperately wanted to be the center of attention.

“My grandma’s as old as dirt!” The two parents laughed at this, while Lia put her head down in embarrassment. “But I still love her!”

Oma, like any other person who has experienced great tragedies, has learned to love anybody who will accept her affection, even after great personal calamity.

“I believe I love everyone. They’re all so good to me.” Oma said. “I remember these terrible things, but I only love.” The bright, blue jewels again faced with wake of the storm, but she smiled. “It is the only thing to do.”