

“The Girls” in Chicago

RUTH HELLER STEINER

Ruth Heller (Mrs. Albert) Steiner, of Cincinnati, the author of the following memoir, comes of a distinguished rabbinical family. Her father, Maximilian Heller (1860–1929), served for more than four decades as rabbi of Temple Sinai in New Orleans, taught Hebrew literature at Tulane University, presided over the Central Conference of American Rabbis from 1909 to 1911, and was honorary vice-president of the Zionist Organization of America from 1911 to his death. His son and Mrs. Steiner's brother, James Gutheim Heller (1892–1971), was for more than thirty years rabbi of Isaac M. Wise Temple in Cincinnati, served as president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in the early 1940's, held the national chairmanship of the United Jewish Appeal in 1945, and was president of the Labor Zionist Organization of America in the mid-1950's.

In her memoir, written in December, 1954, Mrs. Steiner lovingly recalls the lives and careers of her father's equally remarkable sisters, Ernestine Heller (1865–1955) and Louise Heller (1866–1958). The memoir, recounting in some detail the lives of two devoted Jewish women in Chicago at the turn of the century, is a notable contribution not only to an understanding of the Heller sisters themselves, but of their generation as well. It is a fascinating story focusing on a way of life that has long since died, but even today moves us deeply by its pathos, its courage, and its magnificent idealism. Can we ever hope to write a real history of American Jewry without recounting the trials and achievements of women such as “The Girls”?

Anyone who knows a member of the Heller family must have heard references to the two maiden aunts in Chicago, or, at the very least, an anecdote or two related to them. My father, their senior by five and six years, always called them “the girls” even when he and they had advanced to an age that made the appellation a mild joke to his children (I shouldn't think twice about it now). My childhood memories of them are associated with carefree family vacations, whose length is one of the advantages of a rabbi's household. Either in Chicago or at some inexpensive resort in Michigan or Wisconsin,

they would take time from their busy lives to join us, and there would be the feeling, so memorable in the life of a child, of being adored and cherished whether one happened to be good or pesky.

Both of them were rather short in stature and had deep contralto speaking voices, which their brother particularly liked. Both had an unexpected sense of humor, flavored with Bohemian and German expressions. I have never been called "Hashele-Ponem" or "Schnoodle-Hanges" by anyone else, and don't know what—if anything—they mean; but I do know that, spoken in tones of mock contempt, they had power to warm the heart.

Aunt Louise, the younger by all of eleven months, was especially appealing to a child. She had a slight but comfortable tendency toward curves, and her voice was gentle; she was not above helping one play with dolls or talking baby talk to the pet cat or dog. Aunt Ernestine's humor had a sharper edge, and her brown eyes a keener glance; we more fully recognized her qualities as an aunt when we got into adolescence—when, for instance, on being scolded for a messy bureau drawer, one saw her march in from the kitchen with a large spoon to demonstrate how she stirred the contents of her drawers. "I like them best," she proclaimed, "when I can see one end of every kind of object sticking out and can grab hold of it!"—you'd think her sister-in-law, my mother, would have resented that sort of interference in the bringing up of young ladies, but then she, too, was under the spell of the Aunties.

Last month, with this descriptive sketch and a visit to Chicago in prospect, I reflected on the unique quality of the Aunties and of their lives. I was conscious of many gaps in my knowledge of their long careers—Louise is almost eighty-nine now, and Ernie almost ninety; and I set aside extra time and wrote them of my desire to interview them, for one doesn't catch an Auntie unawares—she's much too smart and perceptive. "Don't be worried, dears," I wrote, "the Inquiring Reporter will be just your little"—(but I shall spare you the baby-name that I used; certain things should be confined to family).

I should have known better. I found them firm in their refusal to be parties to even the least formal biographical treatment. After we had settled down in their pleasant two-room kitchen and dinette apartment at the old Madison Park Hotel, I moved their two canaries in their separate cages into another room, as I always do; the Aunties are somewhat hard of hearing these past few years and the louder I

talk, the greater the inspiration I afford those birds, until we almost deafen one another. I took my long, yellow pad in hand, but I did not get to use it.

"Never," Aunt Ern began in her deep, firm voice, "never write a biography of a still-living person. Imagine what I might do next year, and what a liar I would make out of *you!* For a mild example, here's George Jean Nathan just now getting married for the first time at the age of seventy-two. Now," she continued, "if you were only lucky like Daphne du Maurier, that would be different. *She* had a great-great-grandmother who was a prostitute."

When I uttered a feeble protest and a plea, Aunt Louise became suddenly serious, and with tears in her eyes she said softly, "Besides, our childhood was so sad we could not bear to talk about it."

Whereupon they did talk, for an hour or more, now poignantly, now lustily. Much of what they said was familiar to me; some of it, even incidents of my father's early life, was entirely new to me. I dared not interrupt by grabbing my pen and pad or by interpolating too many obvious questions. And so, despite additional chats with some of their lifelong friends, my Profile is a mere uncompleted sketch, with here and there an undefined or even possibly misplaced line, and a vague background. I feel reasonably sure they knew tacitly that I would go ahead with my project, but I am certain that they would not want to read these lines or even hear about them, ever.

LEAVE YOUR MONEY WITH ME

The Aunties came to America from Prague, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, when they were eleven and twelve years old. Their father had gone on ahead to see about settling the family in Chicago, where they had distant cousins and a few acquaintances. With them on the journey were their mother and their two older sisters, Anna, the beauty of the family, aged eighteen, and Sabina, aged fifteen. Their only brother, Max, then aged seventeen, was in Germany, where he was to complete his studies in the *Gymnasium* and go on to—and through—medical school.

This was in the year 1877. The great immigration of Germans and Austrians to America, an immigration in which both Jews and Christians participated, had taken place approximately from 1840

to 1860 and was caused by oppression at home and a yearning for freedom in the new land. The emigration of the Heller family was occasioned neither by political conditions nor by racial persecution, but simply to gain a new start financially in a country of greater opportunity.

The family had been in comfortable circumstances. My grandmother's family—it bore the name Kassowitz—was well known in the beautiful old city and had produced several chief rabbis, the most honored status in the old ghetto. Her parents had doubtless thought they were insuring for her a distinguished future when they did the entirely conventional thing: they married her to a handsome young Jewish scholar whose learning was far beyond his years, but who had never had to engage in anything so mundane as the earning of a dollar. A large dowry secured a comfortable home in which to raise a family; two generations had passed since the Jews of Prague had had to live in a ghetto, and the home was on a quiet, tree-lined street. The Kassowitzes purchased for their daughter a business dealing in cloth for men's suits; the shop was supposed to engage part of her husband's time and to have the benefit of her more watchful eye. The Aunties remember their father's visible annoyance when the bell on the front door of that shop would clang, announcing the nuisance of a customer, and with what regret he would lay side the volume he was perusing. Also they remember their governess, Frau Toni, a poor woman who would pawn the family's holiday silver late every fall and always manage to retrieve it before the next Rosh Hashonah.

When an uncle had borrowed and lost what remained of the dowry and the customers of the store had almost completely stopped interfering with grandfather's studies, the family decided to sell the house and go to America.

There is a kind friend and neighbor who steps into the picture here in an almost classical fashion. Her name gave no warning that she was one of the Fates; indeed, she was a Kassowitz, although no relative; a solid citizen who owned, with her husband, a Bohemian glass works. And her refrain was, "Leave your money with me. Your husband is already in America and you are crazy to carry it with you on the boat! You, with four children to watch over!—I'll send it to you when you get there." And grandmother agreed. The memories of the long ocean crossing, on which, in order to conserve resources, they traveled in steerage, were of hunger, seasickness, and dirt. But

what did that matter? At the other end of the journey would be America, an America slowly recovering from the financial panic and industrial depression of 1873, where capital was needed and newcomers who were not part of the usual penniless hordes could acquire a business and live decently while it was growing. They camped temporarily in the crowded apartment of friends and waited for the money to come so that they could buy furniture.

When time went by and none of their messages to the kind friend in Prague were answered, they got in touch with cousins of hers in America and learned that the Bohemian glass factory had gone bankrupt and all their money was lost with it. From those tidings they turned to survey an America very different from the one they had anticipated—an America in a period of growing-pains: the growing was on the part of the great industries of the North, the pains were suffered by labor and by the poor, labor not yet strengthened by unions, the poor not yet protected by social legislation. The South was just pulling out of the carpet-bag period that followed the Civil War. Indian wars were still raging in Montana.

An economist, Horace White, wrote of that very year 1877: "The industries of the nation were never in the memory of living men so smitten with paralysis. The farmers almost alone held up their heads. All else was a weary and aching mass of unemployed or half-employed capital and underpaid labor, to which commerce gave the generic name of 'glut.'" He might have added that whenever laborers threatened to band together to achieve better conditions of employment, the employers replaced them with a segment of the steady stream of immigrants pouring into the country.

The great, sprawling new city of Chicago paid its poor citizens less attention than it did its newfound golden crop of hogs. In this bewildering dog-eat-dog new world, the newcomers settled down in a tenement apartment, sleeping at first on the floor and using packing cases for furniture. Their father was a man of great pride; there were strict limits to what he would accept from friends. Big baskets of fruit or food (a vivid memory to my Aunts!) stood untouched until they could be given away, for no such charity could be accepted. But he himself earned only an occasional pittance teaching in a Talmud Torah, from the day of his arrival in America until the day of his death, toward the end of the century. His admirers in the learned Jewish societies used to exclaim about him, "Pearls come

from his mouth!" "Yes," comments Aunt Ern dryly, "cultured pearls, but of no value."

And so the women and children had to take over, and the concerted efforts of all were needed just to keep going; eventually the strain permanently ruined the health of some of them and probably blotted out the life of one of them. It was of this time that the Aunties found it hard to speak, and I could not press them. I did find, however, in browsing over documents describing the period, that children were in greater demand than adults for many forms of employment. They could be paid even less and, in immigrant families, they learned English faster than did their parents. Jane Addams speaks of seeing a child of four in a sweatshop, a ragged little bundle of misery, pulling out bastings from dawn to dusk. And employment opportunities for women (save in the teaching field) were almost always menial, with what are to us almost unbelievable hours and pay. In New York, the proprietor of A. T. Stewart's, the leading department store, was considered a forward-looking man because he instituted the first clearly marked prices on his merchandise; most of the garments he sold were manufactured on the upper floors of his store, and nothing was thought of the fact that his sewing girls worked from 7:30 A.M. until 10:00 at night and were paid \$5.00 a week.

The two little girls worked in factories on looms—and have never, to my knowledge, spoken of it since. Their sister Sabina died. The lovely Anna at times worked actually on a treadmill, pushing primitive wine machinery around in an endless circle. At times she and the mother peddled whiskey from door to door in the cold winter, and it is thought that perhaps that is why in later years both of them developed tuberculosis, Anna in severe form and grandma in milder form. One of my own childhood memories is the wistful expression on both their faces when we children were embraced by other members of the family: we had had to be warned to keep a distance away from them.

HURED, SAID THE PROFESSOR

The whimsical touch of fate, in the case of my father in far-off Germany, was transmitted by the hand of a small child (and *this* I had never heard before). One day a boy was playing with a ball in the home in America and threw it at the wall; it hit a picture of Max,

the cherished only son, smashing the glass and arousing in his mother a superstitious conviction that if he stayed in Germany something dreadful would happen to him. He was ordered to join the family as soon as he could get a boat, and his leaving Germany wrote finis to his ambition to be a doctor. Later, he was awarded a scholarship to the Hebrew Union College, and he threw himself into his rabbinical future with all his ardent nature. He was eighteen when he came to this country. Why, I wondered, with all of European Jewry Orthodox, was the family content to accept Reform Judaism so speedily? Why did they never keep kosher in America? It seems that grandfather's set of Jewish convictions included a rather unusual one to the effect that Judaism was a living, changing, developing religion and that the times demanded change.

The fortunes of the family began gradually to improve. A solid citizen, a good man, married Anna, who accepted him dutifully, though probably without love. And then came a turning point in the lives of the two little girls, now fifteen and sixteen—their first opportunity to demonstrate their quality to sympathetic eyes.

The Ethical Culture Society, started in New York by Dr. Felix Adler, had among its humanitarian projects a training school for girls, to enable them to acquire skills toward decent livelihoods and better pay. In Chicago, Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch's Sinai Congregation decided to start a similar school near Michael Reese Hospital and called to Chicago as its head one of the educators whom Felix Adler had induced to come to America. When Louise was brought to Professor Gabriel Bamberger by a young friend who taught in the school, he looked keenly at the small, sickly girl whose expression must have been one of almost unbearable longing. "Can you sew?" he asked. She answered humbly, "My mother crochets and embroiders very well!" Whereupon, to her surprise, she was hired as a teacher.

Aunt Louise taught in that school for twenty-two years. After she had been there for about seven years, Professor Bamberger sang her a song, or so she claims, but here I fear she is guilty of one of her rare anachronisms, for the song was "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden, Are There Any More At Home Like You?" I have checked on it; the *Floradora Girls* was not performed until 1900, and this incident must have antedated it by four or five years. At any rate, she eagerly answered, "Oh, yes, my sister Ernestine, who is just finishing a night-

school course in office work." "Hired," said Professor Bamberger, "to take care of our office"—and we'll leave Ernie there for awhile, where she too was happy for many years, and go on with Louise.

The Girls' Training School was a social service project, in addition to a teaching one. In the course of her years there, Louise wrote a book on sewing that is delightfully obsolete now, with its corselettes and night caps, but which established standards in its time. And we need to remind ourselves at this point that after leaving Europe at the ages of eleven and twelve these girls had no formal education, save for occasional night school courses, and that Louise was considered a semi-invalid until she was in her late thirties. Among the tasks of each teacher at the school was to "adopt" one family whose daughter was a pupil, to interest herself in each member of that family and do what she could to help them. "Do you know how many years I kept my family?" Aunt Louise asked me slyly. "No," I answered, being certain that whatever I guessed would fall short of the mark. "Forty-two years," she sighed. "They're all dead now."

After eighteen years, Louise felt that she wanted to leave the training school and fulfill her long-held ambition to be a trained nurse. She consulted Professor Bamberger, who closed his eyes in deep thought. "My child," he said, "tomorrow morning I will tell you what are my conclusions on this problem." Evidently the good man had a struggle with his conscience overnight; whether he or his conscience won I shall leave to you, for when he called in an anxious little teacher the next day he announced weightily: "No, my dear, you must continue with us here, to help us bandage and heal the distressed souls around us."

Louise held him in such veneration that she waited until after his death four years later to enter nurse's training at Michael Reese Hospital. It was against the pleas of the older members of her family, who had always regarded her as a sickly girl and the nursing profession as a menial occupation. Her shrinking from pain and suffering was well known to them, but perhaps they underestimated the hard core of determination that underlay the gentle exterior. She was thirty-seven years old and the other members of her class eighteen and nineteen; nevertheless, she graduated as valedictorian, which fact she dismisses with the words, "the superintendent liked me." One of my own memories of her is the tone of high pride with which she has always spoken the words, "I am a nurse."

Louise's nursing career was varied. She was at one time head of the Social Service Department at Michael Reese Hospital, and at one time she nursed at the Home for the Friendless, a terrible name for a merciful institution for the care of the unwanted poor of all ages in the Jewish community. At the Home for the Friendless, she was forever smuggling sandwiches to bad boys who had been put to bed without their supper. In the men's ward of the hospital, it was she who by patient questioning discovered just what it was that an old man had lost: he kept calling them his "unmentionables" and insisted he couldn't get along without them; but he broke down in embarrassment whenever he tried to name them. "My unmentionables!—I've lost my unmentionables, he kept insisting. "Of course," pronounced Louise correctly, "it's his false teeth!"

There is one incident of which she has never been able to speak with dry eyes. She volunteered to care for a little baby overnight and to hand it over to its adoptive parents the following day. One has only to see her with a young child or an animal to sense the yearning tenderness of a woman who has had to find other channels for an intense need for children of her own. It required only a few hours of the presence of that baby in an improvised bureau-drawer bed to give her the illusion that it was hers; relinquishing it the next day, she once said, was the hardest thing she has ever had to do.

Louise's trouble with private-duty nursing was that her families rarely wanted to let her go. Two of them took her on European trips on the pretext that they really shouldn't travel without a nurse. She nursed for most of the important Jewish families of Chicago, and I well remember her pain on behalf of the Loeb family at the time of the Leopold-Loeb murder trial and her bewilderment that Dickie, a spoiled boy, but seemingly such a charming one, could have done such a thing.

Only this past summer at Martha's Vineyard, a casual acquaintance, on learning my maiden name, asked me if I were related to the Heller sisters in Chicago. "Oh, is Louise your Aunt?" she exclaimed in delight. "When I was seven she nursed me through an almost fatal attack of measles, and I truly believe that it was the consciousness of her hand around mine, hour after hour, that pulled me through. Do let's write her a note together."

Why did the Aunties never marry? It was the theory of their proud brother that no men really worthy of them ever presented them-

selves. Perhaps they have always been too strongly centered on work and family; and even though they worked apart from each other more often than together, even though there have always been hosts of friends, perhaps they have been too sufficient unto each other. Even now that they have lived together for so many years, their friends say that you can never come upon them that you don't find them chatting as though they hadn't seen each other for ages. "Louise is *so* nice," sighs Ernie, "and I'm such a bitch!"

BECKY, COME HOME

And now to return to Ernestine, whose years in the office of the Girls' Training School were brought to an end by the offer of a better job as head of the office of the Maxwell Street Settlement House. This community center was in a poor Jewish neighborhood, and although Chicago had grown and changed since 1877 from a frowsy upstart to a huge, disreputable goddess, she still had scant attention to spare for her poor, young or old. The very name Chicago was a byword for crime-breeding throughout the country. At just about that time, the *Chicago Tribune*—then a powerful voice raised for betterment—wrote: "At Maxwell Street Police Station the arrests of boys under sixteen average nearly sixty a month. Most are for larceny or burglary, many for hold-ups or gang warfare."

The unions had made some progress in their fight for decent conditions of employment, but then and for many years thereafter they had to buck the courts and the Federal government itself as well as the employers. The court injunction was being used as a weapon against strikers; the Sherman Anti-Trust Law was being diverted from big business, at which it had initially been aimed, and used to prevent the combining of subsidiary unions to achieve strength. Social legislation was still in its infancy.

Hull House had done pioneering work in its depressed Irish-Polish neighborhood, and Maxwell Street, with a distinguished Jewish board of directors, extended the deeply human technique of the settlement house to the poorest Jewish neighborhood. As at Hull House, its workers were residents—they not only worked within the doors which always stood open to their neighbors, they lived there and shared their daily lives.

How Ernestine moved up from office head to head worker, I

don't really know. She seemed to think the considerable jump, over the heads of trained personnel, was unremarkable, and she merely said it was because the former head worker transferred to another job. That can't be the whole story. It couldn't have happened today, what with B.A. and M.A. degrees and job analyses and all the semi-scientific paraphernalia of social work. But when she took over, a quiet force behind the keen, brown eyes hit that neighborhood and made itself felt for many years.

Ernestine had the advantage of understanding Yiddish, through her knowledge of German; she gathered around herself a group of workers whom she helped train and many of whom she still has as close friends. I saw her at work at the Maxwell House at a formative period in my own life, and it helped me toward a decision on my own profession.

The following clipping was handed to me by my cousin in Chicago; I have no way of knowing the year, or the paper from which it was taken:

ONE WOMAN'S WISDOM

by E. L. Valentine

Miss Heller is the amiable and greatly respected head of the Maxwell Street social settlement house. Her influence has permeated the region roundabout and it has come to be the common custom to refer to her as arbitrator of all the disputes that arise in the thickly settled community of which the house is the natural center.

The talent she has shown repeatedly in leaving both sides satisfied with her decision has gained her a reputation of the sort that Solomon of old enjoyed. But in nothing has her wisdom been manifested more strikingly than in an incident which happened a few days ago.

Mrs. Braunschwiger's little boy, Lester, had a penny—money is the root of all evil. Desiring to invest it in such food as would vary and supplement his rather limited culinary range at home, he approached the slot machine on the corner presided over by Mrs. Kohn, duly inserted the coin in the orifice provided and awaited the peanuts tacitly promised.

Just what took place in respect of Lester and the machine is still a matter of dispute. Lester averred that no peanuts were forthcoming whatever, and that the heartless machine retained the penny. Mrs. Kohn states solemnly that not only did a full penny's worth of peanuts discharge them-

selves into Lester's grimy hand, but he so shook the machine at a critical moment that he obtained another cent's worth on the spot.

The droves of children which pervade the neighborhood took up the side of their small fellow. Lester repeated his story to gathering crowds of urchins and future mothers of the republic and obtained their indorsement.

As a result the street was soon black with boys and girls who were pointing the finger of scorn at Mrs. Kohn and her slot machine and saying things that no small child should say about an elder person.

More than that, the mothers appeared also to take up the cause of their little ones and also pointed the finger of contumely at the peanut vendor and her apparatus.

The street was assuming the look of a riot when some cool-headed person bethought him of Miss Heller and rushed to the settlement house.

Miss Heller appeared, took in the situation at a glance, sniffed the air critically in full view of the gesticulating crowd, and remarked:

"I think I smell somebody's meat burning."

And the street cleared like magic, mothers taking their young.

Ernestine purposely kept the settlement house small and intimate and used the facilities of the nearby public schools and of her old hang-out, the Girls' Training School. She got the Marshall Field Company to lend their old busses for picnics in Lincoln Park. Many of the neighbors had thought, up to then, that trees and flowers grew only in the old country. One woman asked her wistfully, "When we move out of here some day, do you think we can arrange to get the right kind of fish for our gefillte fish?"

Across the street from the settlement was the Russishe Shul, the Russian synagogue, where a fight always developed at Passover time with the free distribution of matzos—the first to come grabbed too much, and the latecomers got no matzos. Those in charge asked Miss Heller to take over and called her thereafter the Queen of the Matzos. Nearby was a shelter house for the destitute, whose workers were always in hot water with the State Board of Charities over their mixed-up records and expenditures; she took on their application and record work in addition to her own and linked it up with that of the settlement. She supervised another separate project a block away from the settlement, a day nursery for young children of working mothers, and raised the money to replace its cold, inadequate building with a fine, modern one.

One of Ernie's deep concerns was the fact that the neighbors, liv-



Courtesy, Mrs. Albert Steiner, Cincinnati

Ernestine Heller
The Social Worker



Courtesy, Mrs. Albert Steiner, Cincinnati

Louise Heller
The Nurse

ing in cold, unheated tenements, bought their coal in bushel baskets which bulged at the bottom and did not really hold a bushel. Angry at the short weights, she established a coal fund so that her people could save and buy coal by the ton. A board member underwrote the fund, and when eventually Maxwell House closed, that fund was entirely paid up. There was one bathtub to a block in the neighborhood; she convinced the city that a fine gymnasium and swimming-pool were needed.

Everyone knew that the firm, practical Miss Heller was a softy, too. A tramp could sleep in the basement of Maxwell House if the shelter house turned him away. And her courage was renowned; at the nearby Jefferson Market, the politicians had always extorted fees from the small proprietors of stalls and stands. Ernestine brought charges against them, haled them into court, and cleaned up the mess, at very real risk to her life. Probably no mere politician could have taken on the consequences of any harm to her. One or two of the neighbors across the street used to tell her, "Your light burned so late last night! I never go to sleep until your light is out!"

Ernie has fond memories of the time a mother stood up at a settlement party and yelled for her daughter, "Becky, come home. You're engaged!" And one story that we loved when we were children was of the little boy who fell silent when the worker who filled out his admissions card asked him his father's occupation. "You won't tell?" he begged anxiously. "Indeed I won't," she promised. Still he couldn't speak. "If I get Miss Heller and she promises too, will you tell us what your father does?" "Yes," he breathed in relief. And when Miss Heller came, he whispered in her ear, "My father's the bearded lady in the Dime Museum."

In 1917, one of the members of the board of Maxwell House, Mr. Hugo Warner, offered to donate funds for a new building. When his life was cut short by a tragic automobile accident, his brother-in-law, Albert D. Lasker, offered to provide the money and wished to rename the house for Mr. Warner. It took a head worker with guts to refuse that offer, for the new house would have embodied many facilities for which she had longed for years. Ernestine saw that her neighborhood was changing fast, the Jews moving out, the Negroes moving in. Since the settlement was a member organization of the Federation of Jewish Charities, it should, she thought, move with its population. But as the Second World War broke out at that time,

there could be no new building, and it was decided to close the Maxwell House.

GLUECK UND CHUTZPAH

And now there began a nine-year chapter in Ernestine's life which Louise shared. In fact, they were never separated thereafter in their living or working. Ernestine was induced to accept the job of superintendent of a large institution outside the city, the Chicago-Winfield Tuberculosis Sanitarium. I believe that it was partly to honor the memories of her mother and her older sister that she accepted the position. The sanitarium was quite run down, had had much trouble with its heads, and had never had a woman superintendent. There were 150 patients, some paid, some free, and they appointed a committee of sixty who drew up a letter to the board. Ernie remembers the first and last line of that letter: "We will not submit to petticoat rule."

When she arrived to take over her new job, with Aunt Louise as head nurse and Miss Carrie Younker, her erstwhile second-in-command at Maxwell House, to back her up, she found that a considerable part of the staff had concurred in the decision of the patients. In fact, even the chef had walked out, and the newcomers spent their first night cooking great pans of jellied fish to serve the following day, when a new chef could be hired. None of them have been able to look a jellied fish in the face since then. The patients settled down very quickly, however. The job proved less strenuous than the headworkership of the settlement, but required mastery of many new skills, such as the supervision of dairy herds and a dairy and of extensive grounds and gardens. Ernie was fifty-three when she tackled it, but she took it in her stride.

In 1928, she and Louise felt that they could and should retire. They had saved carefully during all their professional years and had invested their money advantageously; they took a little apartment and began to enjoy what had been a rare luxury in their lives—leisure. They had always been members of Isaiah Temple, the congregation presided over by Rabbi Joseph Stolz, my father's and their good friend, and at the very first sisterhood meeting they were able to attend, the brightest ideas were put forth as to how the sisterhood could best make use of the well-known abilities of the

Heller sisters. I am told that Ernie stood up, asked for the floor, and said it in one sentence: "Ladies, we would like you to know that it was not because of our salaries that we gave up our jobs."

When I spoke of the year of their retirement as 1928, perhaps it rang a bell in the inner ears of many of you. There were others in that year besides the Aunties who had fancied their investments to be sound until 1929 came along. They had eschewed the dramatically rising stocks, and put most of their funds into real-estate bonds. I need hardly tell you that, when the bottom fell out of the market, many could not pay their rents, and the value on buildings and land—and therefore on mortgage bonds, in their case, Greenebaum Bros.—plunged too. Countless thousands met their changed fortunes with every variety of response from fortitude to suicide. The Aunties refused help from friends or relatives and looked for a job.

This time it was different. This time they were sixty-three and sixty-four. They wanted something well within their reduced physical capacity, and they were not going to be impeded by false pride in their leading positions in their professions. Louise went to the office of a former patient whom she had nursed at three different times in his life, Mr. S. W. Straus, the head of another great real-estate company. The receptionist waved her away impatiently, a little, modestly dressed lady in black. "Don't you understand how busy Mr. Straus is in these times? You won't be able to see him for days." "Just hand him my card and see what he says," asked the gentle voice, and there must have been something in it that got across to the girl, for she carried the card into the private office and out hurried Mr. Straus to put his arms around Louise and ask what he could do for her.

"My sister and I thought that in one of your apartment hotels there might be a superintendent needed. We believe we could run it for you and would like to live there." Within a matter of days, the Aunties were installed in a beautiful building, the Caryl Court, in the pleasantest of the twenty-nine apartments which had been made vacant by the Crash. Their rent was, of course, free, and they added to the small salary by taking on the job of housekeeper as well. They counted dirty linen with their usual meticulous respect for the job to be done, and the prosperous (or erstwhile prosperous) tenants had never "had it so good": true, when they were obstreperous, they were talked to just as though they were the Maxwell St. neighbors. But their needs were met with human kindness and efficiency, and not

one of them was ill without the speedy appearance at their bedside of a nurse who loved—and missed—her profession.

After a few years the real estate bonds began to come to life and the Aunties gave up Caryl Court and retired once more, this time for keeps. They could afford one room (with an “in-a-door” bed) plus bath and kitchenette, in the Elmo, a dingy, old apartment-hotel on Harper Avenue; somehow their spirits kept it from being a depressing place in which to live. There were the two loud-mouthed canaries; there was the temperamental, fat, white French poodle who dominated Louise. There were several of their good friends who immediately moved into the same building and established a nightly canasta game, at a quarter a corner for the evening. There were the sick neighbors for Louise to watch over and to bake custard for, and the diabetic woman who lived over the little grocery store across the street and had to be given her insulin shot daily.

And there were the Jewish grocer and his wife, who depended on them to keep track of the bewildering war-time ration tickets, as well as check on bookkeeping; to say nothing of the Elmo’s hard-up young couples whose children always had a loving welcome in that room and who were occasionally bundled off to the movies for a respite, while a free and expert baby-sitter took over. And then there was the party telephone, in use by two unknown women whenever the Aunties picked up the receiver; but Aunt Ern soon found a remedy for that! (This story got into the *New Yorker* sometime ago—I don’t know how.) She would await a pause in the interminable conversation and suddenly say, “Well, goodbye now!” Each party thought the other had said it, and amid choruses of “goodby,” both women would hang up.

During one of my visits I found Aunt Louise in a state of acute worry over the fate of a stray cat she had picked up; she had found a home for it with the shoemaker on the next block, but his wicked landlord would not let him keep an animal. And Bootsie, the poodle, would not allow her to keep a cat. “And it’s such a nice cat!” she kept repeating sorrowfully.

My first cousin, Mrs. Carrie Weil (their only other niece), helped the Aunties move only two years ago to the far more spacious and pleasant apartment they now enjoy in the Madison Park. She helped them go through boxes of stuff that had been stored for years and years on their shelves; the idea was to throw away as much as possi-

ble, but usually each object was examined, saved from the trash basket, and put back into the boxes. Carrie told me of a bookmark a little schoolmate had given to an eight-year-old Ernestine in Prague; of a pair of high lace shoes Ernie had bought when she sprained her ankle in Washington thirty years ago, but had never worn; and of a little chain about which she would say nothing at all—Carrie was sure some young man had given it to her so very long ago.

The McCarthy-Army hearings on TV were a constant treat to them. They hissed the villain, Joseph R. McCarthy, and sighed like bobby-soxers when the kindly-faced, elderly lawyer, Mr. Joseph N. Welch, appeared. Once, after an absorbing three-hour showing, Ernie remarked as she left the room: "If this will have accomplished nothing more in America, it will have succeeded in ruining my kidneys."

The Aunties would never consider living higher up than the second floor because they want to see people, not trees. Their resident canasta game has followed them into the Madison Park. In an adjacent apartment lives Miss Carrie Younker, who worked with Ernestine for so many years. She, too, has retired long since and makes it her mission in life to do for them anything they will allow her to do; she and they can signal one another simply by knocking on the wall that divides their apartments. Carrie Weil, seventy-five years old herself now, wanted to move into the Madison Park too, but, devoted as they are to her, they wouldn't permit it: she has a very decided temperament, and they were afraid of an attempt to boss them, so they permitted her to move only as near as the Fairfax, just across the street.

Outwardly these two women seem changeless, and the many who know and cherish them rejoice that that is so. Actually Louise suffers much from physical ailments about which she rarely speaks. Her legs have long been bent and bowed from arthritis, and she walks with difficulty. I can never forget an afternoon when I went with her slowly down the street and some tiny boys, playing on the sidewalk, looked up and laughed at her waddling gait. Louise turned around and laughed as hard (and as sincerely) as any of them. "Yes, isn't it funny?" she called and then ambled off, exaggerating the motion for their benefit.

* * * *

At the close of my abortive interview with the Aunties, Ernestine remarked, "If I had to sum up our lives, I'd call them a combination of luck and nerve—*Glueck und chutzpah*." I reflected that many words could be used, but that the one which I would choose if only one were permitted me would be *character*.

This coming April, Louise will be eighty-nine and Ernestine, who lives in fear of having a fuss made over it, will be ninety. "Really," said Louise recently about her sister, "isn't she remarkable for her age?"

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