

Hail to the Chiefs!

Harriet S. Lazarus

When my grandmother, Hedwig Kramer Stricker, was brought over from Neuleiningen, Germany, to Cincinnati in 1844 at the age of four, I do not suppose she thought very much about America's government or Presidents. Seventeen years later, in 1861, she was standing in a large crowd on Third and Vine streets in front of the Burnet House, Cincinnati's best hotel, listening to Abraham Lincoln speak. He had just been elected President of the United States, and was on his way to Washington, D.C., to his inauguration. I have read that there were threats against his life, and that he had to be smuggled into Washington from Baltimore at night, even in disguise. But apparently in Cincinnati he was able to speak openly to large crowds, as he did from an upstairs balcony of the hotel. There was an old print made of this occasion, which my mother had hanging in her home. But it is gone and will have to be searched out again in antiquarian shops, at historical societies, and at antique shows.

Demonstrating her profound patriotism during the Civil War, my grandmother is listed, in 1863, with many other ardent citizens, as working for the Great Western Sanitary Fair.¹ Its purpose was to raise money for wounded soldiers of the Union Army and their families. Sanitary Fairs were held in many cities, and were forerunners of the Red Cross. They were functions of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, an agency of the federal government. But they were financed by the private sector.

My grandmother worked at a booth of the Phoenix Society,² listed under "German Organizations." The booths at the Fair were run by people from all segments of Cincinnati society, for "every church or congregation, every benevolent association, ladies aid society, and all other humane organizations, of whatever name,"³ were invited to participate in this massive effort of support for the Union soldiers and their families.

The Phoenix Society actually was a Jewish social club. There were

several Jewish groups represented, as well as every other denomination. The Phoenix Club building of a later date still exists today, as a fine restaurant on Ninth and Race streets. Many names listed as working at the various booths or on committees are very familiar to a Cincinnati. Their descendants in many cases are still around and reverberating — making waves.

One group should be noted, listed under the heading “Colored People’s Circular.” A moving statement of a desire to be part of this civic activity states, “we propose to give a concert and supper ... the proceeds to be given to the Great Western Sanitary Fair.... We invoke the earnest cooperation of all; for the cause in which we labor is the cause of liberty, of humanity, of God.” The name of William H. Parham stands out, a name still associated with African-American publications today in Cincinnati⁴

I mention this Fair and my grandmother’s involvement in it to show how quickly immigrants became proud Americans, and how eager they were to work for their new young country. So eager were they to demonstrate their American patriotism, that they passed along very few stories about life in the old country (Germany and others). They did not look back, but forward to their lives here, and their fond hopes for the freedom and opportunity that were their reasons for emigrating. It has been for us, their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, to rediscover the places of their origin and their lives over there. Without Hitler and other twentieth-century scourges, we might not have had the incentive to dig out our pasts, before America.

The next person in our family, to my knowledge, to have direct contact with a U.S. President was my mother, still Madeline Rollman at the time. My brother, Sidney G. Stricker, Jr., had a letter written to President William Howard Taft from his brother, Charles P. Taft, as follows:

Charles P. Taft
 A. S. Taft
 Times Star Building
 Cincinnati, Ohio

June 10, 1912

Personal

The President
White House
Washington, D.C.

My Dear Will:

Mr. Henry Rollman, his daughter and Mr. August Nuernberger, are visiting Washington and wish to pay their respects to the President. They belong to the firm of Rollman and Sons Company and occupy our building on the northwest corner of Fifth and Vine Streets, and for almost forty years they have never failed to pay their rent on time. They have a fine mercantile record and I am sure you will like to meet them.

Your affectionate brother,
Charles P. Taft

Apparently in this earlier day, private citizens could have personal meetings in the White House with their Presidents. In any case, my mother did go to the White House with her father to meet President Taft. She received a fine photograph of him inscribed thus: "To Miss Madeline Rollman, a Cincinnati girl with my best wishes, William Howard Taft." The date is June 13, 1912.⁵

My husband, Simon Lazarus, Jr., had his own first moment of glory visiting the White House when he was a young boy, eleven years old. The President was to have been Warren G. Harding. He was a native of Marion, Ohio, as was my husband's aunt, Meta Marx Lazarus. They had been neighbors and friends in their early years. Through this connection and probably business or political connections in Columbus, Ohio, my husband and several of his young Fred Lazarus cousins were invited to meet President Harding in the White House. But before the meeting could take place, President Harding died. However, President Coolidge did receive them. He invited them to a children's party at the White House (1923 or 1924). For entertainment there was a magician, who caused a tree to grow oranges. The magician tossed oranges out into the audience. According to Fred and Maurice (Mogie) Lazarus, the children

promptly lobbed the oranges back—a story easy to believe. I have heard other tales of life among the Lazarus young, and their early acts of terrorism.

While my father, Sidney G. Stricker, admired President Woodrow Wilson tremendously and worked for him politically, I do not believe he ever met him. But when Speaker of the House Nicholas Longworth died in 1931, President Hoover attended the funeral in Cincinnati. My father was determined that his children should see their President. He took us to Winton Place,⁶ where the President's private railroad car was waiting—close to Spring Grove Cemetery. As the train went past and President Hoover stood on the observation platform at the rear of the train, I snapped a picture of him with my beloved Kodak Speed-Graphic camera, inherited from my grandfather. Someday I shall find that picture, inevitably misplaced during these sometimes frenzied years. It may turn up yet, among my souvenirs.

My own memories of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whom I never actually met, start with listening to his first inaugural address over the radio, March 4, 1933. I was sick in bed, staying at my cousin's house. The day was miserable—raw, sleety, end-of-winter Cincinnati dirty weather. I was fourteen years old, listening intently to a new and exciting President. I remember well his ringing words: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." This buoyant, confident leader with the spellbinding voice and smile and the upbeat message sent thrills through a very young girl, as he did through an entire paralyzed nation. Even though I was not totally aware of the Great Depression, yet I sensed the anxieties of the times. And I knew right away that this President was going to make a difference. He was indeed "The Happy Warrior."

A few years later—January, 1937—we were in Washington, D.C., escaping from the horrors of the all-time great Ohio River flood. We were staying at the Hotel Mayflower, where one of the President's Birthday Balls was held. These balls were fund-raisers for polio, the disease that had severely crippled the President. We attended the ball at the hotel, which President Roosevelt did not but Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt did. It was my first time in her presence. My undying admiration for her was ignited, reinforced by some deep

follow-up experiences down the road. I have never ceased to regard her as the outstanding woman of my lifetime.

The next time I saw Eleanor Roosevelt was at Emery Auditorium in Cincinnati—November, 1938—where she was to give the first lecture of the Wise Temple Forum. According to a lead article in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*,⁷ among the welcoming committee at Union Terminal where she came in were Mr. and Mrs. Jeffrey L. Lazarus. Also dropping in to pay his respects was an old personal friend, Judge Robert S. Marx. She paid a call on her anti-New Deal cousin, Alice Roosevelt Longworth. The visit was in the nature of an olive branch—both ways.

Mrs. Roosevelt was to be introduced by Mayor James Garfield Stewart.⁸ He arrived very late. Mayor Stewart was known to imbibe spirits, and this was one of his more spirited nights. His introduction rambled all over at embarrassing length. He referred tastelessly to this distinguished First Lady as “Eleanor.” Mrs. R. retained her dignity and her cool. But I remember my sense of outrage at the disrespect and rude conduct of our mayor to a woman I revered. It was politics at its worst.

Surely one of the most pragmatic examples of presidential contact in our family belongs to Fred Lazarus, Jr. It was he who in 1939 persuaded President Roosevelt to move back the day of Thanksgiving from the last Thursday in November (November 30 that year) to the fourth Thursday, which was November 23. Thus the number of shopping days before Christmas was increased by a week, and the football schedule of Ohio State University was all fouled up. When his brother, Simon Lazarus, Sr., asked in a rage: “What damn fool did that?” Mr. Fred blandly replied: “You’re looking at him!”⁹ It was hard to determine what was more important—Christmas sales or Ohio State football.

My brother, George Stricker, was a soldier at Fort Riley, Kansas, in the Cavalry Replacement Training Center, early in World War II (1942–43). He was privileged to see his Commander-in-Chief come to review the troops. It was Easter Sunday, an early spring day. The President’s visit was a complete surprise to all but the commanding officers. It meant a great deal to the men—in training for the rugged times that lay ahead for them. Their President cared.

After a church service attended by President Roosevelt, the top

brass, and two men from each unit, the Chief rode in an open car all around the huge camp. The entire army personnel stood at attention, thousands of men saluting as he rode by, smiling and touching his familiar slouch hat to them, wrapped in his navy-blue cape. Every soldier, mesmerized, said: "He looked right at me!" It was a sight never to be forgotten. As my brother tells it: "When you are a soldier, rank is everything. And this was the Commander-in-Chief!"

A poignant footnote to this story: My brother was overseas in Germany when President Roosevelt died. When the sad news broke, every soldier, as if by signal, dropped his weapon to the ground. It was a spontaneous act of deep grief for their Leader:¹⁰ During the war years, we lived in Washington, D.C. One steamy summer night, we were taking a little ride up Connecticut Avenue to cool off. A large black limousine pulled up next to us with diplomatic license plates, "Number One." Inside sat Mrs. Roosevelt all alone except for the chauffeur — no escort, no security. Just a rather lonely figure, out also to cool off, and perhaps get away from some White House chaos. At least that was the way I sized it up, knowing nothing but the surface.

My next personal encounter with Mrs. Roosevelt, and far and away the closest one, involves more of a story. It was during the 1950s. She was at that time our United Nations ambassador and chairman of the highly sensitive Commission on Human Rights. She was a figure of great world esteem on her own. My brother Sidney was working for Schenley Industries in New York. One of his associates was Buzzy Roosevelt, born Curtis Dahl, son of Anna Roosevelt and grandson of the Franklin D. Roosevelts. Sidney brought Buzzy out to Cincinnati on business. He stayed with us on two occasions. He liked good steaks. So once we grilled on our backyard terrace, and once we took him to a well-known steak restaurant in Reading, Ohio, called Wheelman's Rest. He was a delightful and appreciative guest. After his second visit, he said he would like to do something for us in return for our hospitality. Not hesitating a minute, I said, "Well, I would like to meet your grandmother." Buzzy said that could be easily arranged.

On our next visit to New York, Sidney and Buzzy set up an invitation for us for tea with "Grand-mère" — Mrs. R. We were to meet her in her apartment in the Park Sheraton Hotel at 5:00 p.m. on a

Tuesday. Both Si and I dressed with meticulous care — understated but elegant. We arrived with Sid and Buzzy promptly at 5:00. Mrs. Roosevelt rose to greet us. I was awed by her height, as well as by her great presence. But her smile was gracious and warm.

Her attire was very informal — a loose gray dolman-sleeved sweater with boat neck, and a gray flannel skirt, quite rumpled. I especially noticed her hands, large and bony with an assortment of rings. She dispatched her secretary, "Tommy" Thompson, to have the tea cart brought in. Then she proceeded to continue an interview she was holding with some television representatives about a proposed talk show she wished to host. I learned afterward that the talk show never came off; Mrs. Roosevelt was too controversial a figure for TV in the reactionary Joseph McCarthy climate of the early 1950s.

We sat and listened, had our tea and sandwiches, and took our leave. It was one of my most indelible hours.

In 1945, the Truman family lived on Connecticut Avenue in Washington, in a large apartment building across from where we lived, on Chesapeake Street. At that time, there was no official residence for the Vice President. The day after President Roosevelt's funeral, my sister Madeline and I stood at the entrance to our street and watched Bess Truman, daughter Margaret, and Mrs. Truman's mother (Mrs. Wallace) enter the White House limousines, as they departed their modest apartment to become the First Family and begin a vital new era in American history. I believe that President Truman was there as well, although I cannot say for sure. It was a lesson in the unpretentiousness of this great man and his family, and the smooth transition of government power in a time of great national crisis.

The Eisenhower years found our part of the family somewhat sidelined, backbenchers. It was Uncle Fred Lazarus and his son Ralph who went to the White House at this time. But I do remember being in New York once when President Eisenhower was speaking at a dinner, and seeing his motorcade move swiftly down the street where we were staying in the East 50s, the President leaning out of his limousine and waving to the crowds, we waving from our hotel windows above the crowds. He too looked radiant and larger than life.

There was one White House visit that I did not recall until recently. It was my husband's part as a member of the executive committee

of the American Retail Federation in 1958 to meet with President Eisenhower. The entire delegation was photographed in the Oval Office with the President. Their message to him was one of optimism about the outlook for business in the coming year. It was an honor to be part of this group, many of whom remained Si's friends when he left retailing and returned to the private practice of law. The photograph remains an example of the nonpartisan participation in government that is possible in our free society.

Now an attractive and dynamic young man appeared on the presidential scene, with a wife of star quality equal to his own. He had brains as well as looks, and was as charismatic a figure as ever appeared in American political life. He brought a breath of fresh air to our political rallies and dinners. He had wit and humor along with his good looks. He came from an Irish Catholic background — a little at variance with the stereotypical WASP candidates of the past. He was an Ivy League intellectual but no stuffed shirt — not stodgy, not "safe." He was a wealthy man who had compassion for the underdog, carrying on the traditions of the Democratic Party of Roosevelt's New Deal. To many of the Old Guard or those of a more conservative bent, John F. Kennedy with his "Best and Brightest" and his "Irish Mafia" seemed threatening. To many he gave hope for a better world ahead.

Needless to say, my husband and I were flaming Kennedyites. We supported him wholeheartedly, and were lucky enough to be invited to his inauguration.

The day before the inauguration came on like Whittier's "Snowbound" — heavy blizzards in Cincinnati and especially in Washington. The friends who were to be our hosts called to tell us that all airports were closed. Even President Hoover, flying up from Florida, could not land. He was forced to return to Florida. If we could not get on a train, they advised us to forget about coming to Washington.

We did get on a train, probably by the skin of our teeth, carrying our suitcases, my ball gown packed separately in its own securely fastened Vogues and Vanities fancy dress box. That train ride was wild and hilarious, noisy and joyful. There were several high school or college bands aboard, scheduled to march in the inaugural parade. The music and hijinks went on all night, and did not bother us one bit. A splendid time was had by all.

The snow was so deep when we approached the Washington



Harriet and Simon Lazarus, Jr.

(courtesy of Harriet S. Lazarus)



Ticket to the John F. Kennedy Inaugural Ball

(courtesy of Harriet S. Lazarus)

area that the train stopped far out in suburban Silver Spring. We jumped out into snow up to our knees—and into the arms of our good friends who managed to meet us. There was no snow falling now, but the temperature was in the low teens, and the ice underfoot was thick and treacherous. It remained that way throughout the entire inaugural festivities, where much walking had to occur, and where one struggled to keep from freezing.

But attend we did, driven as close as possible to the inaugural grandstand by soldiers from Fort Belvoir, Virginia, hired by our hosts, Joseph L. Rauh and Robert Schulman. We were in limousines along with our hosts, plus the great playwright Arthur Miller and a prominent newspaper journalist and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Lindley. We attended a breakfast at the Old Senate Office Building given by Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois—warm for a moment—and then walked over the ice and snow for several blocks to a place where we could stand and watch Kennedy take the oath of office. Listening to the new young President say: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,” was a moment never to be surpassed in beautiful oratory. We agonized when Robert Frost could not see to read his poem because of the ice glare. We thrilled when our own rabbi, Dr. Nelson Glueck, delivered the benediction.

We thrilled when we finally found our heated cars and were driven home. We watched the inaugural parade on television, from the warmth of our comfortable digs in North West Washington.

That night again we braved the frigid air and ice when our cars had to let us out ten blocks from the ball in the National Guard armory. We mingled with thousands of Democrats clad in their gorgeous best, all happy to be there and staring in fascination as the entire Kennedy clan and Vice President and Mrs. Johnson appeared on a balcony—as glamorous a group as I ever expect to see. We were fortunate. I believe there were at least seven other balls, but Jacqueline Kennedy and others attended only this one. She was still recovering from the recent birth of John F. Kennedy, Jr.

One of my more beguiling memories is of strolling around the armory with Arthur Miller, having many folks come up and ask in disbelief, “Are *you* Arthur Miller?” He was always good-natured and excellent company utterly without pretense.

Camelot lasted too short a time, and the family torch passed

eventually to our son, Simon Lazarus III. I do not believe any of us ever met President Lyndon B. Johnson, although we were very close to Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas, who has been his personal attorney. We had and still have several friendly personal letters from President Johnson.

Irma and Fred Lazarus III visited the Johnson White House when they attended a Symposium of the Arts hosted by Ladybird Johnson. There were to be 400 people dining on the lawn that evening. Rain was a serious threat. But with Irma's famous luck with party weather, the sky cleared. Irma received official thanks for talking to God or whatever she did to save the day. In a book where this evening was described, Irma was mentioned with special gratitude by the chairman of the dinner.¹¹

We did meet Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey. We were his escorts one night when he came to Cincinnati to speak at a meeting. We picked him up at Lunken Airport and drove him into town, where we had dinner at the Maisonette restaurant. He was delightful company — easy to talk to, and without a trace of self-importance. He had a small entourage, for reasons of security. His people drove cars behind us and in front of us. Only one of them had dinner with us — Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson of the state of Washington.

The Nixon and Ford years involved us not at all. That statement is not entirely accurate. In 1966, two years before Richard Nixon became President, his daughter Julie and our daughter Helen became members of the class of 1970 at Smith College. Like many other parents, we took our daughter to Northampton, Massachusetts, to help her settle in, and to attend the president's reception for incoming freshmen.

As we shopped in downtown Northampton for rugs, bedspreads, and other dormitory musts, who should enter the store but Mrs. Patricia Nixon and Julie? We were the only customers in the store at that moment. We all exchanged friendly smiles, just a little reserved. I felt that Pat was an attractive lady, not "plastic" at all, with beautiful brown eyes, and Julie was a charming young woman.

They were enjoying a great American autumn ritual — helping a child furnish her first college room. And being just ordinary people for a rare, cherished moment. We respected their privacy, and remember the incident with good feelings.

The year was now 1976. Simon Lazarus III had joined the Jimmy Carter presidential campaign team, writing speeches for Carter in Atlanta. Carter won the election, and son Simon became part of the Domestic Policies staff, working in the White House with his friend Stuart Eizenstat and others (Harley Frankel, married to Wendy Lazarus). He was able to take his mother to lunch in the White House mess on several occasions. There I saw many members of the Carter team. I especially remember National Security Council Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski in his tennis whites, and others equally illustrious, lunching informally together. One day I had a look into the Oval Office when President Carter was absent.

When Presidents Reagan and Bush were in the Catbird Seat, we were part of what our son Si and his friends termed "The Government in Exile." But all members of our family were not banished. The Justin A. Rollman family, my mother's brother, were staunch Republicans, and therefore on friendly terms with both of these Presidents. My aunt Josephine Rollman was known to pick up the phone and call President Reagan's office — and get an immediate response. Once, talking to Mr. Reagan's secretary about a trip to a country where there was much inner turmoil, she was told to speak to the President directly. Her astonishing answer was: "I'm too busy. Please speak to him for me yourself!"¹²

With President Clinton I'm still finding my way. But I do like Hillary Rodham Clinton, as I did Barbara Bush. I would not mind some kind of White House connection that way again.

So this is our presidential story, as close as I can gauge it. Perhaps some of our grandchildren will carry the torch even further — hailing our Chiefs in the future. Or even becoming Chiefs themselves.

Recently, when President and Mrs. Clinton were guests at the American embassy in London, my son-in-law Ronald Freeman was asked to attend a reception in their honor. In the absence of his wife, Helen, who was in Amsterdam with me, her mother, Ron took their daughter Nell to meet the Clintons. Nell had a chance to discuss Space Camp with Mrs. Clinton, the First Lady. Both Chelsea and Nell were back in Huntsville, Alabama, at Space Camp in the summer of 1996. If Nell Freeman, my granddaughter, and Chelsea Clinton both continue to go to Space Camp for a third year, and finally meet one

another, who knows where it could lead? As Bobby Kennedy said (quoting George Bernard Shaw),

Some men see things as they are and
say why.

I dream things that never were and
say *why not?*

Harriet S. Lazarus is a descendant of Jewish immigrants who came to America in the 1830s and 1840s. She has been involved with numerous Cincinnati institutions including the Public Library of Cincinnati and the Cincinnati Art Museum. She is also a long-time member of the American Jewish Committee.

Notes

1. *History of the Great Western Sanitary Fair* (Cincinnati: C. F. Vent, 1864), pp. 114-124.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 119. Entire book.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
4. *Cincinnati Herald*. CEO Marjorie Parham.
5. Courtesy of Mr. Sidney G. Stricker, Jr.
6. A suburban train station.
7. November 15, 1938. Courtesy of Cincinnati Historical Society.
8. Father of later Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart.
9. Biographical Memorial Essay to Fred Lazarus, Jr., p. 40.
10. Interview with George Stricker.
11. Interview with Fred Lazarus III.
12. Interview with Joan R. Musekamp and Katherine Hilker.