# I REMEMBER SEABROOK

Reet Sikkemae

In 1944, my mother fled Estonia with my sister and myself. She remarried while we were in Germany and had 2 more daughters. We spent the next 7 years in Germany going from one DP camp to another until we settled in one that had people of many nationalities so that when we came to Seabrook, I had already been exposed to multiple nationalities and thought this was just great.

Finally we were accepted by the U. S. for immigration in 1951. We arrived on a battleship in New York after a very rough voyage and much seasickness. Our sponsor was in Lincoln, Nebraska where we headed straightway. When we got there, our sponsor turned out to be the town character who did not have anything and who had lied about being able to sponsor us. We were told, after waiting 7 years and traveling thousands of miles, that we had to return to Germany. But thanks to the church coming to our rescue, we were able to stay.

The job situation was not good and on top of that my stepfather became ill so that after a while our financial situation became desperate. Someone from Seabrook sent us an article from the Estonian paper stating that there was a need for 250 workers at Seabrook with housing possibilities. We packed up what little we had and got on the bus to N. J. When we got close to Seabrook, we didn't know when to get off the bus but I pointed out that there was a large tower with Seabrook on it so we must be there.

After we got off the bus, we somehow ended up in Parvin's camp temporarily until there was housing available in Seabrook. Our second home was at Hoover Village. We had been prepared for this kind of living conditions by the various DP camps but it was still hard to take so my mother signed up for a bungalow immediately. There was a waiting list but we got the house very soon.

My stepfather got a job in the fields for very low wages and was on a waiting list for an opening in the plant. Since we arrived at Seabrook in the spring of 1952, most immigrants and the Japanese people had already been here awhile so that when my mother finally got a job at the plant, she had a very high number in the union and not get as many hours as the other workers and this caused ch financial hardship- especially in the winter time. Once my epfather got into the plant, things were much better but these were ears of frugal living for which we had also been prepared by the DP camps. On the other hand, whereas we had nothing and were not able to buy anything as DP's, now we were able and it was a thrill to go to the stores in Bridgeton to shop. Every thing we were able to

buy was so memorable and meaningful. That is why our parents had a hard time throwing out things that may have been worn out or out of fashion later on.

The first 11 years of my life were times of great fear and high anxiety which I can remember more clearly because every event was a traumatic experience and it was the greater picture that one focused on. Here at Seabrook though, the greater picture disappeared and one started to focus in on personal problems which now occupied one's time so that the general picture is blurred and out of focus, but what I do remember and know is that I wouldn't have wanted to grow up anywhere else but this mini international village.

I remember Seabrook as a nice safe place to live and grow up. What made it even more special was that we came from similar backgrounds. We understood each other and it, on the whole, endeared and bonded the people together whether they realized it or not.

I remember the house in Hoover Village as being so dusty, because of the dirt outside, that I had to wet mop it 3 times a day. Crickets and water bugs were everywhere. We used cardboard paper rolls from the factory for the bed spring frame to sit on as there were no regular beds. The bathrooms were my worst nightmare. We had experienced every kind of awful bathrooms in the DP camps but I don't remember any that didn't have doors on them. I never wanted to go in there when someone else was there. If I went in and someone came later, I always wished I had a bag over my head. It was so humiliating. What made it even worse was the 3 steps you had to go up which made it seem like a throne and when someone came in, I could almost feel a huge spotlight going on over my head.

Our next home was a bungalow on First Street. It had a large metal grate in the center of the house in the middle of the living room about 3' x 3'. This was where the heat came up from a large coal burner in the basement. This had to be attended often but it still managed to go out by morning and another fire had to be lit early especially on cold winter mornings. At those times I was glad I wasn't a grown up and didn't have to go down at 5 am to start the fire. Sometimes in the winter the front of the heater would be red hot and the grate above would burn your bare feet if you stepped on it but the center of the house would only be warm. The water was heated by a small stove separate from the large heater. The coal was in a bin in the basement which was filled via a chute through the basement window.

There were huge water bugs everywhere especially in the basement. When you turned the light on there was a scurrying to every part of the basement for a hiding place. You had to wait for the traffic to die down before venturing downstairs. We stuffed the space under the basement door at night hoping to keep them from coming upstairs. The lucky person who had to get up in the middle of the night would usually step on one before reaching the light switch. That was followed by wild dancing and squealing before the light came on. There was no lack of crickets either.

I remember the milkman delivering milk in bottles early in the morning (Rainiers) and the Le Sturgeons bread man delivering bread to our door. Also the fruit and vegetable truck that came around the streets and the bane to all parents- Mr. Softee.

We had a rose trellis in the front of the house by the porch which one of our cats used to climb up onto the roof. One day she was missing. She never left our property so I suggested that maybe she fell down the chimney so we went down to look. Sure enough, she was in the chimney and black with soot. She was a white cat but now she was completely black all over. My mother said there was nothing to be done but wash her. She had her work uniform on and was to have left. This made her late to work. I can just see the faces of the fore ladies when she said she was late because she had to wash the cat- one they probably hadn't heard yet.

There were very few cars in those days, so we took the bus to Bridgeton and occasionally to Philadelphia. I remember on the way home from Philadelphia, looking for the smoke stack and water tower to know that we were close to home. One family that we knew had a car. They took us to Parvin and Cow Town. Later with our own car we went to Sea Breeze and Moores Beach- both feeding grounds for horse flies. A Latvian friend of my sister's introduced us finally to the real beach- Stone Harbor. We had many excursions there. The speed limit was 25 most of the way there so it took almost 3 hours. Everyone slept on the way back.

We went to Vineland's Landis Theater occasionally. I remember it as a long trip too because of the speed limit. On the way back it was hard not to fall asleep. Another long trip was to union Lake in Millville to go swimming. We went there quite often too as it was closer than the shore. The best part of these trips was stopping at the custard stand by Woodruff Church on the way home.

During the summer, there were excursions to Parvin which were my favorites as I liked going swimming immensely. My first year at Seabrook School I was kept back in school because we came to Seabrook 2 weeks before summer vacation. And because I didn't

know how to speak English, I was made to take English lessons with the other foreign kids during summer vacation. When I saw the other kids get on the school bus in front of the community house to go to day camp at Parvin, while we were inside learning English- I swore I was going to learn it so well that I would never be deprived of my summer fun again. And I did learn it well so that later in school I was asked to explain grammar to kids who could not understand the teachers explanation.

There were also very few TV sets but we knew a couple of families that had one and started to spend a lot of time there. My mother didn't like us staying out so late and coming home in the dark so she bought us one too. That was a real thrill as was our first car as well as many other firsts that we were now able to afford.

My sisters did not go to the day care center so I had to watch them. We went to the Community House to watch Howdy Doody and Willie the Worm. Got books from the library. I attended movies shown there. Played some Ping Pong and Volleyball. During summer vacation, I took a blanket and toys and took them to the school ground to play so that our parents could get some peaceful sleep for a few hours.

I remember the dormitories before they renovated them by removing the center and making each into two apartment buildings. They also took out the hallways completely. The nurses station behind the Community House. The housing office where I was sent to pay the rent or to report a plumbing or other problem. The snack bar inside the community house was where we bought comics and candy bars. This later moved next to the General Store which to us was known as the Japanese's Store because it stocked a lot of Japanese food and gifts. We bought the vases, ash trays, and tea sets for birthday presents. A visit at the store of the Oscar Mayer wiener mobile.

Each day after school I went to the General Store. Occasionally, my mother and I walked down to Chiari's Store which to us was known as the Woods' Store- and is to this day- because the first one was a large white house in the woods which later was moved to Old Burlington Road (That in itself was a novelty to see a house that size put on wheels moving along the highway.) It was then replaced by the present Chiari Supermarket and the trees replaced by the parking lot.

Even after I got my bicycle, I still walked to the store until my mother bought a basket to put on it. That made life for me a lot easier.

I remember the construction of the new bungalows or "villas" as we knew them. The method of putting together these prefabricated houses was also of interest. I never did see how the roof was done though.

Near the general store was the shoemaker's shop which also got a lot of business from us.

All in all, my childhood was mainly spent as mother's helper and doer of chores as there wasn't much time for play so that when I got my most prized possession- my bicycle- I was able to go further in less time and explore the whole village in the little spare time left for me. My older sister gallivanted around with the older kids and was forever going to one dance or another so I don't remember her doing much around home.

Though I was young I was constantly aware of the hardships our parents endured. The long miserable hot hours at the factory and the little sleep they got. I was silently relieved whenever my mother got home early so that she would get rest but not realizing the financial hardships this would cause because of the short days. Later I appreciated it even more from first hand experience.

Since we lived on First Street, most people who went to the factory on foot or in cars, all passed our house. The lively steps going in and the weary steps coming home. I remember us children standing on the sidewalk watching the foot traffic coming from the factory to see our mother finally appear.

Many people lost their health from this strenuous work and living and usually spent the winter recuperating in and out of Drs. offices and the hospital.

I remember going swimming in Sunset Lake also until the Polio scare. Lining up in school to get the Polio vaccine. After that we never went swimming in the lake but only the ocean.

I remember the greenhouses across from the factory where I went to get roses. A flower store in Deerfield where I went to get birthday flowers for family. One time I had a flat on my bicycle on the way over so that I had to walk it there and back for fear of having it stolen if I left it at the Roadside until I returned.

Once I got my bicycle, I spent every spare moment on it, and riding is still a favorite pastime of mine.

I remember walking barefoot to Centerton Lake with a person of ill repute. All I wanted was to go swimming and that was my way of getting there- with an older person. When we got back, I had huge blisters under my heels from the hot road- this, I was told by my friend's mother, was punishment from God for having gone with

such a person. I didn't believe that for a moment but I was scared of my mother finding out why I had the blisters.

I remember walking to church of Sundays through the woods behind the apartments. Estonian Christmas programs and other ethnic events at Seabrook School. A community Christmas in the old cafeteria with an American Santa Claus. Attending the Estonian bonfire where the Municipal Building now stands. A carnival where the Post Office is. Roller-skating on the school's horseshoe drive.

I tried attending Estonian School which was held at the day care center building, but since it was on Saturdays, I did not like going to school one more day nor could I see the point in learning Estonian when we had hardly mastered English at Seabrook School.

I remember Trick or Treat nights at Halloween time and how a certain family sent out their kids for the year's candy supply each year. We only went out a few times as my sisters did not like to go, but I went out by myself after I heard in school how generous the Japanese were and what good stuff they gave out. Our crossing guard of many years gave out taffy apples so I had to go there too. Somewhere we even got doughnuts.

I remember having to play with kids appointed by our parents as proper but not being able to play with kids that we really liked. We had our rules and regulations about with whom we children could associate in our own ethnic group- never mind any other groups. At school everything was okay, but at home it was a different matter. In order to get away from all the grown ups' hang ups, I just got on my bicycle and toured the village and played with whom I could find. That had its dangers from the grown up snitches who would tell my mother that I was seen playing with such and so. Many of the grown ups' prejudices never stuck to me and I scorn such nonsense to this day. To be tolerant and enjoy the diversity of being was the purpose of us living in a community like Seabrook. How many saw that purpose I wonder?

My favorite playmates were the Japanese kids. They were quiet, polite, and peaceful, which appealed to my inner nature. I also liked the German kids a lot but I stayed on the fringe of my own ethnic group. Unlike our parents, I did not believe we would ever return to Estonia, so I didn't see any point in keeping to my ethnic group. The old songs and the dancing were beautiful but each ethnic event was like a funeral- things will never be again. On the one hand, I wanted to keep to the cultural heritage but at ethnic events I found it extremely painful to watch the older people cry so I stayed away more and more. There was just too much pain associated with

the past. The other cultures didn't affect me the same way hence my interest in all the others more than my own.

I remember Seabrook School best as a place you could play with all the kids of different nationalities. My favorite times were the school trips to historic places and elsewhere. We got on the bus early in the morning when it was still dark sometimes and came back late at night. The goodies you could buy to put in your lunch bag which one ordinarily could not buy. These trips instilled in me a deep appreciation of history and patriotism.

I remember the jacks we played on the sidewalk and the caterpillars that were all over the same in the spring. The jump rope, and marble games, the jungle gym, and merry-go-round. The prefabricated houses for the Kindergarten. The new school when it was built because we were the first to occupy it. We still had to walk to the big building for lunch and auditorium though. The food in the school cafeteria which was the best institution food I have ever experienced especially as it was strange food to us.

At Seabrook School we had music in the classroom and on Fridays we sang the songs again in auditorium. These were beautiful hymns, spirituals, folk songs, patriotic songs, Christmas songs, and others which I know to this day. This was very special since people from other schools never heard or learned any of them.

On the other hand, one extremely painful time in school was the teacher asking what we got for Christmas. We were overjoyed if we got a couple of new dresses a year while one American girl had a new outfit for every day for half a year before she started over and when it came to her Christmas list- it was quite lengthy. After something like that, it was extremely painful to get up and recite our one or two things especially if it was socks or underwear or some other necessary and useful item. We were happy and grateful when we got them but it was the tortures of hell when the other kids laughed. The tears flowed inside. Later in life, when the subject came up, I learned that some people overcame this trial by lying their heads off. I just felt sick inside, not just for me but for our parents who worked so hard and were so happy that they could give us anything at all.

I tried my hand at selling flower seeds door to door with very little success. My mother ended up buying most of them. We did have a lot of varieties around the flower beds due to that. At age 14, I got my social security number which I considered a badge of honor. I tried my hand at bean picking first. The morning was foggy and the plants were dripping wet. The mud sucked at my shoes and pulled them off at times. My hands were muddy and everything was

caked with mud. As the morning progressed, the sun burned off the fog and we started to bake. The mud dried up and cracked. An occasional frog would jump out and various bugs made me jump around. And that bottomless bean basket that was impossible to fill. I never went back. Strawberries were a lot more fun to pick and eat while you picked. These were for us and not for an income so it was just fun. Later it was Seabrook Factory, Sunny Slope, and Owens for summer work.

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