What’s My Secret?

Mother was carrying the many parcels she’d brought while Bib and I lugged some of the parcels as well. I was dragging myself along. I was only five years old and these packages were very heavy for me. I came to a point of exhaustion and almost collapsed on the sidewalk. Mother told me to abandon the parcels. With all the other recent losses in her life, what difference would another one make?

By the time Father returned with baby Eugene from San Francisco to Utah, Mother, Bib and I were long since gone. The colony by then was also largely dissolved. One of the few remaining families was that of Dad’s brother, Nathan. While Father worked his farm during the day, Nathan’s wife and one or two other women whose families had remained took turns taking care of Eugene. In this way they helped raise Eugene for the first three years of his life. However, the only consistent person in Eugene’s life was his father—to whom he became overly attached. Many years later my son met and married the granddaughter of one of the families who’d helped to raise Eugene those first three years. Thus, my granddaughters’ great-grandmother helped to raise Eugene those first three years!

There was considerable excitement in my grandparents’ home when we finally arrived in Detroit. Grandma and Grandpa had a grocery store and the family lived in a few rooms in the back but there was not enough room for us to live with them. So Mother, Bib and I moved in with a young couple, Sara and Albert Goldberg, who lived two blocks away from the store. They had no children at the time and seemed eager to have us live with them. Mrs. Goldberg would look after Bib and me while my mother worked. They were always kind to us and I recall our life with the Goldbergs with only good feelings. We lived with them for about three years, from 1915 to 1918.
What’s My Secret?

I was enrolled in kindergarten at the Dwyer Street School. I remember the teacher said my name should be Lillian Blue instead of Lillian Brown because my mother always had me wear blue to complement my blue eyes. One time when I was six years old I swallowed a penny. I searched my poop because in those days you could buy a lot of candy with a penny. Bib was concerned that I find the penny, too. But, alas, I never did.

Mother had a job as a ticket collector at a movie house, so she was gone during the afternoon and evening. Tickets were three cents at that time. I recall a man who was interested in Mother and he would often come around, but she didn’t care much for him. One time I overheard her tell my grandparents she couldn’t trust him; she said she didn’t like his attitude toward us, her children. The underlying truth, I feel sure, was that she was still in love with Benjamin. Sometimes I speculate about how different my life would have been had her attitude been otherwise.

World War I was raging but it didn’t appear to affect our daily lives. I don’t recall any unhappy events that affected me then that were related to the war. We’d look up to the sky and see an airplane. How exciting! In those days airplanes were still a great rarity. Bib and I would often walk the two blocks to visit Grandma and Grandpa. Their son, my Uncle John, was going to medical school at that time. When he came home from school he’d grab a loaf of bread from the store and consume it all in a few minutes. I’d marvel at how he could do that!

After working in the store stocking shelves, Grandfather would go to the bedroom in back to lie down and take a rest. I would tease him by sneaking into his room and tickle his toes as he tried to nap. He was always a gentle, warm, and loving man. However, on these occasions he’d get very annoyed with me and jump up to chase me back into the store. I’d run through the aisles and thought for sure he would slap me hard if he caught up to me. Luckily, I ran faster than he and made sure he never caught me. At the end he would always laugh with me. In her free evening moments Grandma taught me to sew and helped me make doll clothes. She was very sweet and gentle toward me and I loved being near her.

Aunt Helen (photo 5), the youngest of my grandparents’ children, was born about the time my mother and father married and was only two years older than I. Because we lived near each other and were so close in age, I regarded her more as a sister than an aunt. Often Helen, Bib, and I would go to the Saturday afternoon movies, where I invariably fell asleep. When we came home different family members would ask me what the movie was about. I would turn to Helen and Bib because I didn’t know the answer. This was an ongoing family joke for many years.

On one side of the grocery store was an empty lot full of weeds. Kids would find burrs there and throw them at each other. One day, the grocery deliveryman was leaning into the back of his wagon. Some boys threw the prickly burrs, using the man’s backside as a target. He became very angry and turned around. The boys began to run away. I had been an innocent observer. But when the other kids started to run, so did I. Unfortunately, I wasn’t fast enough. The deliveryman caught me and slapped me very hard on the cheek. He poured all his venom into that slap. I can still recall the sting and the injustice of being punished when I was totally innocent.

This was 1917 and most contagious diseases were not yet under control. Helen came down with scarlet fever and was taken to the hospital, where she spent two weeks in recovery.
What's My Secret?

Upon returning home she talked of the fun she'd had in the hospital, with many toys and good food. I really envied her. A few months later I became very ill and was quickly diagnosed with diphtheria; this was just prior to the development of the diphtheria vaccine. An ambulance came for me and I recall all the neighbors and their children looking on. Just as Helen had said, the stay in the hospital was great fun. There was a large collection of toys given to the child patients (which they could not take home) and we had ice cream every night. In order to prevent contamination, families who came to visit would be on one side of a thick glass partition and the children would be on the other side. We were able to communicate only by signals. As I got better I realized what a delightful vacation this all was!

I recovered and approximately two weeks after admission was to be released. The children also released that day had already left, so I was the only one remaining in the waiting room. I recall my feelings of abandonment and loneliness. Then at a distance I saw a lone figure in a long black coat, slowly walking toward the hospital. It was Grandfather and I was so happy to see him! But his demeanor appeared so very sad, even from this distance.

Years later I realized that his disheartened gait that day probably reflected his disappointment in this new world where the streets were "paved with gold," and that the dear old man's dreams had crumbled. There had been a double betrayal by his wonderful son-in-law: the failure of the colony shattered Grandfather's hopes for a better world for the beleaguered Jewish immigrants, and his hopes for his daughter's marriage to the amazing Benjamin were also now extinguished.

As the war went on, the Red Cross encouraged children to learn how to knit socks for the soldiers. Always eager to learn something new, I joined the group of girls who were knitting. Later, after the war was over, I remember the Red Cross honoring the little girls who had knitted socks for the soldiers. They had us ride in a car in a parade celebrating the war's end. I had my Red Cross cap on but felt very embarrassed. Already I was aware that I was different, that I didn't have a family like other kids did. I remember sliding down in the seat so that I wouldn't be seen.

My friend Sonya and I had a game of searching for pennies in the weeds along the train tracks not far from Grandma's home. One day we wandered several blocks across the tracks into a poorer part of the neighborhood, an area called Hamtramck. A man sitting in an abandoned car waved lollipops at us. We approached the car and he lured us into the front seat. He wanted me to sit next to him. I didn't realize at first that he was exposing himself. Then he asked me to touch him. Sonya and I became frightened, jumped out of the car, and ran all the way back to Grandmother's store. This incident caused considerable excitement in the neighborhood, along with severe warnings from Grandmother and others never to go there again!

Over the years we were in Detroit there were frequent letters from Father. In his beautiful flowing script he wrote how much he loved us and wanted us to come back to Utah. No doubt negotiations for our return were going on between Grandfather and Father. This probably was with Mother's participation. She must have been conflicted, however, because she realized Benjamin was raising Eugene. She also knew that the colony was almost disbanded, meaning that the women who had been her friends were no longer there. And she was painfully aware that returning would mean accepting and raising Eugene as her own child. Still, she consented to going
What's My Secret?

back, partly on the advice of her father, but primarily, I am sure, because of her ongoing great love for Benjamin. I only knew what we were told and believed the story Father had written to us—that Eugene was a “war orphan” who would now be part of our family.

The trip from Detroit to Utah was still three days and two nights by train. It was the summer of 1918 and I was almost nine years old. All I recall from the trip was my feuding with Bib. He must have been very flattered by my admiration but at the same time resentful of me always wanting to do what he did. At one point while on the train, when we got into a physical fight as Mother struggled to get in between us, I tore his shirt. I felt such satisfaction at having done that!

We arrived somewhere in central Utah where, to my recollection, the train made a special stop in an open field. There was my father, Benjamin, waiting for us. He was so handsome! Visibly choked with emotions, tears flooding his face, he hugged Bib and threw him into the air. Not having seen us for about three years was obviously overwhelming. I have no clear memory of Father’s greeting to me or to Mother, but I do recall standing to the side and realizing Bib’s elevated status now with both my parents. No doubt this further intensified my lifelong wish to be as “great” as Bib and in such a way that my father would give me as much love and recognition.

We drove to Salt Lake City, where Father had rented some rooms for a couple of months. He worked for a short time selling Prudential insurance, and I enjoyed looking at the advertising folders. I remember having a lot of fantasies about some day going to the Rock of Gibraltar (which I later did in my adult life). But the insurance connections apparently didn’t go well. The next job he had was cutting up potatoes; the eye of the potato would be placed in the ground to start a new plant. Father showed Bib and me how to cut them. This form of work went on for a short time, again with no great financial success.

Then the decision was made that we would go back to Gunnison, in central Utah, about ten miles from where Clarion had been and where a few of the original colony families were still farming. Dad had purchased some farmland with another local farmer, Joe Peterson. Together they initially planted wheat, and later sugar beets.

Next he decided to build a house on the land. I don’t remember where we lived while the house was being built. As I now realize, Dad must always have had an inflated concept of his own abilities. He designed the house himself. I only remember it as a jumble of a few small rooms, with doors in odd places, one interfering with the kitchen sink, etc. Mother and I would both say that “he knew everything”—she in sarcasm and I in admiration. The house was completed and we moved in with our few possessions. Even with the “crazy” architecture, it was actually considerably less primitive than the original little cabin in Clarion.

I have vague memories of exactly how Eugene came into our lives in Utah. Even though we were told that he was a war orphan, I could see he was abnormally attached to our father. Whenever Father would come into the house, Eugene would hang onto his legs as if with glue. I did try to accept him as my brother; even so, I recall that during those early days there were several incidents when both my parents rebuked me for being unkind to Eugene. I was jealous because he demanded and received so much attention from Father. On one of these occasions when I said something nasty to Eugene, Father came close to slapping me—but he never did. Eugene would often come over and hug me. Because he was such an appealing,
lovable little kid who was starving for affection, my hostility
toward him eventually diminished. As we grew emotionally
attached to each other, I came to think of him as my real little
brother.

Especially because of the kind of child Eugene was, my
mother, who loved children, became very attached to him and
she treated him lovingly. Actually, she would have continued
raising him indefinitely if the future had not developed as it
did. I’m sure at times she came to regard him almost as her
own, and a mutual feeling of love developed between them.
Sadly, she was the only constant mother figure he would ever
have in his life.

Since there was a new sugar beet factory in Gunnison, Dad
decided to plant sugar beets on some of the farm property. The
young sugar beet plants grew very close together, so the process
of thinning was essential. Dad showed Bib and me how to thin
the beets, paying us a small sum for our work. How long this
“child labor” went on I don’t recall. But I thought it was fun—at
least in the beginning.

In the fall, when Bib was only twelve, he had to learn how
to drive the old Ford because it was necessary for him to take
us to school in Gunnison, more than ten miles away. As Dad
tried to crank the car in the morning, very often it just wouldn’t
start. So he got the idea of attaching a horse to the front of the
car. The horse would pull the car for a short distance and the
motor would then start. Next Bib would stop the car while Dad
detached the horse and it would saunter home. We continued
on in the car, making one other stop to pick up the Palley family
kids along the way. Somehow, even with these stops, we always
managed to get to school on time.

The following summer was time for Bib’s Bar Mitzvah.
His thirteenth birthday party was a spectacular event for this
farming area, to which Dad invited all the neighboring farm-
ers and their families, along with the few remaining families in
Clarion. I remember him moving about with great pride during
this event.

In elementary school, Bib would glorify every activity that
occurred in his class. The next year, when I got to the same
class with the same teacher, it was pretty much like my previ-
ous class. What was I missing? When I went a little too far in
trying to keep up with Bib, he would attack me. I always fought
back and would always lose. Sometimes the fighting would get
so furious, Mother would force herself between us to get it to
stop. But I wouldn’t be deterred in my quest to be as good as
Bib—ever.

On the whole, life on the farm was very lonely, and it must
have been much more so for Mother; Eugene was too young
to attend school and so was home with her. She was no farmer
and had never been very interested in farming issues. Dad, on
the other hand, was jubilant about being a farmer again, even
though this project of growing wheat and sugar beets was prob-
ably no great success.

Because Mother was unhappy being without adult con-
tact so much of the time, after living on the farm for a couple
of years it was decided that we would move again, back into
Gunnison. We rented a single-family house on a side street next
to the Mortenson family, who were Mormons. Dad was per-
haps appeasing his own conscience for having brought Mother
from the large city of Detroit to the isolation of the farm. At
least now she had neighbors on either side. While we lived in
town Dad continued with the farm work. This was probably
our only source of income. Every day he would drive his ramby
old Ford truck out to the farm.
I recall Dad asking me if the Mortensons were good Mormons. And I said they were as good at being Mormons as we were good being Jews. He stated that it was quite smart of me to make this observation. I felt his response as another expression of his love for me. Mother was acutely aware of how much I loved my father and how I enjoyed his ways of making me feel important. I assume that she must have pondered many times Father's worship of me and mine of him. And in her moments of self-pity I became the target of her anger. I don't recall how old I was or what incident provoked her when she first called me a "couse, like the other one" (meaning Annie.) The word means "whore" in Yiddish. But she never called me this name within my father's hearing.

Once I was walking to town with my father. I think we were both trying to escape mother's yelling. We passed the yard of a neighbor lady. This woman and her young daughter were making soap. We heard the lady yell some abomination at the girl. My father said to me, "You know she's upset, but that's not the way to be." He was obviously also talking of my mother in order to console me. He understood me and I adored him for it.

My most pleasant experiences in Gunnison occurred while living in that house. I made friends with Helen and Lois Overfelt, two sisters who were about my age and lived up the street. Interestingly, the Overfelt family was part of a small Presbyterian community in Gunnison. Their local church was directed by Miss McGonagle, a tiny lady who'd been assigned to Gunnison after having been a missionary somewhere in Africa. I attended their church with them, learning about the Old and New Testament. I once won a prize for memorizing the titles of all the books of the Bible. It is intriguing to speculate what effect this might have had upon me, a little Jewish girl attending a Presbyterian Church in the midst of Mormon country.

We would often pack a lunch and hike to the railroad station where Mr. Overfelt was the station manager. He was also the local banker. Sometimes we would hike in the surrounding low hills and hunt for Indian arrowheads, occasionally finding one. Often on Saturday night, Mr. and Mrs. Overfelt went out to play cards and I would be invited to spend the night with Lois and Helen. In my home down the street we didn't have a bathroom, just an outhouse and a tub in the kitchen. Once a week we'd fill the tub for a bath. At the Overfelt home there was a complete indoor bathroom. The three of us girls would have fun taking a bath together. What luxury!

Once, the Overfels invited me to join them on an overnight trip to visit a Presbyterian college about forty miles away. From time to time my relatives in Detroit would send me some of Aunt Helen's clothes that she'd outgrown. So on this trip I wore one of these pretty dresses (blue with a sailor collar) and I felt very special. It was such an experience for me to be away from home and to sleep in a dormitory!

Bib and I planted a little vegetable garden in the backyard. The water for our garden could only be obtained at certain times. We would direct water coming from a canal to nearby ditches and finally into our garden. This was always a highlight experience because our assigned time was usually late at night. I think Bib was a little scared to go by himself a half-mile in the dark to the canal; that's why he would grant my wish to accompany him. Enviously and admiringly, I would stand by as he shoveled dirt to create a dam to redirect the water. Then we would run home as fast as we could to see if in fact the water was arriving as it should. The carrots and radishes we harvested were our sweet reward.
What’s My Secret?

Bib joined the Boy Scouts and wore that wonderful uniform. I had difficulty in acknowledging that I would never be able to do that. When he went backpacking with the scouts up to “Mary’s Nipple,” a nearby mountain peak, I would look up there at night and was sure I could see him sitting around the fire. The wonderful stories that he told when he returned! I think now that he exaggerated greatly about everything just to put it over on his annoying little sister.

Mother continued to be kind to Eugene, careful to reprimand Bib or me whenever we teased him. Periodically Annie would call Father from San Francisco and request that he bring Eugene to her for a visit. I remember the look on my mother’s face when one of these calls would come in. She would turn white with agony but never say anything. Surely Father must have had great respect for her at these times because of the way she accepted and loved Eugene. But evidently he never regained sufficiently positive feelings to ever re-establish an ongoing loving relationship with her. This was sad for all of us.

When I was about eleven or twelve years old we moved again, this time to the east side of Gunnison, renting several rooms from a Mrs. Jensen, whose husband had deserted her. Aware of my physical development, Mrs. Jensen showed my father a book about how girls mature physically. He read the book and attempted to explain it to me. I don’t recall Mother instructing me about the facts of life. Perhaps Father didn’t share this book with her, feeling that she might not have known English that well. She could read and write Russian and Yiddish, but it wasn’t until later years that she taught herself to read and write English more fluently.

The farm was probably not profitable, so another source of income for the family was needed. Dad was forever looking for new endeavors. He was also now becoming very much aware of the desperate economic circumstances of large numbers of farmers in different parts of Utah. He began traveling through the state advising farmers that if they sold their products (turkeys, eggs, and chickens) cooperatively they would all benefit. Dad discussed this concept of cooperative marketing with two Mormon men in Gunnison, Burt Willardson and Clyde Edmunds. Together the three created a business that subsequently became the Utah Poultry Association. Both Willardson and Edmunds were ardent Mormons. No doubt Dad believed that their inclusion in his project would help him get closer to the farmers, who were more likely to listen to one of their own than to an outsider like him.

As the cooperative marketing business grew, property was rented next door to the J. C. Penney store on the main street of Gunnison. Here a refrigeration system was established for the storage of eggs and poultry, which were beginning to be brought in from various parts of the state. Once again our family moved—from Mrs. Jensen’s house to the apartment above the refrigeration plant. We lived there comfortably in three or four large-sized rooms.

One day my mother had me washing the floors of the apartment. She left me there alone while she went to the store. I dumped wash water into the toilet along with the large bar of soap that was still in it, thereby plugging up the toilet. Water began overflowing into the kitchen. I became very frightened about not doing something correctly and worried about the punishment I might receive from Mother. I threw a few of my clothes into a little wagon downstairs and began walking out of town. I think my father must have discovered what I had done and set out to find me. Lovingly, he brought me back to the family.