

## A Depression Personality

My two grandchildren display perplexity while observing my behavior or hearing me impose restrictions—such as asking them to turn off the lights or TV when they leave a room. At dinner time I become annoyed if they waste food. They wonder why I save a variety of objects which everyone else discards. They are amused when I proudly display my 75-year-old Richman Brothers scotch plaid scarf or other ancient clothes. If they ever question me about my peculiar attitudes, I say, “I’m the product of the 1930’s Great Depression.”

Our family, under the energetic, astute leadership of Frances, my mother, lived through those days without experiencing hunger or basic necessities deprivation. The sole family income came from my father Matt’s two days per week of work at the Wheeling [West Virginia] Steel Mill. On that meager income we managed to fulfill basic needs and occasionally help a family of relatives. In our town of about one thousand people, Tiltonsville [Ohio], nobody displayed obvious hunger, although many lived on a severely restricted diet. Relatives and neighbors staved off such dire situations. Government, during that period, had no welfare programs.

Frances developed our system of survival. In our large backyard we maintained about 20 chickens which provided eggs and an occasional chicken dinner. We had much more garden than lawn. An adequate variety of vegetables fulfilled our spring, summer and fall needs. For the rest of the year we depended on dozens of jars of Frances’ canned vegetables, fruit, and jams (from berries I picked).

From the local grocery store, Atlantic and Pacific (A&P), we obtained ingredients such as flour and grains and other food or household goods. The Minosi Meat Market kept supplying our meat needs. Once a week I would accompany my mother, while pulling our wagon, into those two cornucopias of food. For meat we bought the cheapest cuts of beef, pork, or lamb. Frances usually also managed to get free “scrap meat”—soup bones, kidneys, and liver.

Our typical meal consisted of fried or roasted meat, home made beef or chicken soup, potatoes or rice or barley, a vegetable, and Frances’ white bread. For dessert we ate our canned fruit or apple sauce. A special treat would be Jell-O or pudding. When relatives visited, or on holidays, we consumed a festive meal consisting of roast chicken, soup, and a green bean or peas dish; salads which could be lettuce, cucumber, or tomatoes with green pepper; warm baked bread, and for dessert, strudel or *potica* (a nut cake). Our daily fare often consisted of stews, *sarma* (stuffed cabbage) or *jzpren* (a bean, barley, and ham dish).

My mother had the reputation as one of the best cooks among our relatives. We enjoyed watching her make noodles and especially seeing her skill while making thin dough for strudel or *potica*. A Depression-economy technique was boiling the whole chicken (not too long) to make the broth for noodle soup, and then roasting the whole chicken.

Another Depression-era process, making family clothes from purchased cloth, occupied much of Frances’ time. She kept my four sisters in clothes fit for ladies of the middle class.

The Depression experiences induced what might be considered my eccentric attitudes. At times the family does not appreciate my Depression hangovers. My clothes are from ten to seventy-five years old. The only clothes purchased within a decade are socks and underwear. My closet is a hoarder's landfill. At home I love to wear my worn, tired, shabby clothes. Helen will not allow me to mingle with humanity unless I pass her inspection. I don't know whether I should be grateful or resentful for acquiring some of my Depression attitudes.

My mother maintained a compulsion to save, so she always had money for emergencies. For what little money people had, they no longer trusted banks, so "mattresses" became the family's bank. Her minute cache suddenly increased manifold when we sold our duplex home in Tiltonsville and moved to Cleveland. We bought a house in the Polish sector of that ethnic-dominated city. I liked not only our location, one block from the superbly dependable 79<sup>th</sup> Street streetcar line, but our four-aces address—1111 E 78th Street. Matt obtained a full-time job at Chase Brass & Copper Company. A year or two after I graduated from nearby East High in 1936, we moved to the suburb of Euclid, within walking distance of Matt's workplace.

Our move into suburbia preceded the mass transformation of white and Black races' living areas—during and after WWII. Factories attracted Black workers from southern states. Cleveland's transformation took 40 or more years to complete. From my personal perspective, I think it has been a social tragedy to lose the beauty and culture of a multi-ethnic environment. In the past, I've written about my experiences within varied ethnic communities. I enjoyed cultural European visitations without leaving Cleveland.

My parents never had a credit card or acquired modern hi-tech accoutrements like the telephone, radio, and TV until induced by pressure from their teen-aged children. Due to my parents' financial style and the Great Depression atmosphere, my personality has taken strange detours off common highways. Though I am a dedicated hoarder of materials that could be used or worn later, I consider myself a non-materialist. If our home burnt down I wouldn't miss my hoarded material. Our children, Lisa and Carl, are slowly divesting material things in order to enlarge our living space.

In spite of being a relic from the Great Depression, I might still achieve some positive recognition from my grandchildren after this Depression [the 2008 Crash] hits bottom. They might begin to enjoy my peasant meals and even eat leftovers. Another change could occur—they may turn the lights and TV off when they leave a room, without my prompting.