

A Country Girl by Marion Polusky-Nakash

In Prieska where we grew up, we were one of 3 Jewish families. My parents had a double story hotel which my dad had built, with bricks from his own brick factory. Thanks to his popularity, my parents were accepted by all and even the staff who didn't like my pedantic mom, adored my dad and no one left his employment. My parents bought a farm & decided to employ a manager for their hotel and move to the farm. I was in grade 2 and the first family my sister Lynette and I boarded with were strict Christians and we all had to pray before each meal and at night.

At the end of the year, Lynette left for CT to join my older sister Ruth, and I went to board with English friends of our parents, who to my dismay turned out to be nudists. I was whisked away to board with the music teacher, a very nice lady who had a monkey chained outside her back door who kept me entertained.

At the end of that year, I was placed in the Prieska Boarding School, where I encountered terrible cruelty amongst the girls (not against me). My roommate had been stripped, and they tried to push a frog up her - can you imagine! As a result, the two of us had a private room, whereas the rest of the boarders slept in dormitories. Now that I think back, the ringleader was never expelled and continued to boss the girls. A year later, I was sent to a nearby village De Aar, to a Convent, as my English writing and reading was weak. I lived there for 2 years (grades 3 & 4) and in Grade 5, I went to Good Hope Sem. Cape Town, where my sisters were also located, until completion of my schooling.

Back to my parents: My dad was the kindest, smartest, warmest and most handsome man in Prieska and we had a very close relationship until he died. I was the one who held his hand when he was dying, that's another story. My mom was a good person as well but very strict, sadly she only hugged us to say hello and goodbye perhaps because she came from a broken home herself as her dad lived in the USA - we never asked why or when and today, I wish we had but it's too late.

I grew up as a real tomboy and really enjoyed my childhood despite never knowing real warmth from my mom. The only time she ever kissed me was hello and goodbye, never mentioned the word love, but I do realize that she did. I guess we have our maternal grandmother to blame - she was a real Russian tartar, whose husband ran away to the USA twice, leaving his 4 children behind. Apparently, he simply couldn't live with her.

As a child I was the spiritual one, the one who loved the African fables and superstitions, who maintained that the fairies and birds spoke to her. To this day, I'm very attracted to spiritual things, have done many workshops, love crystals etc. I'm also the artistic one of the family so I guess that's what made me less pedantic and the dreamer.

Growing up in Prieska was fun as our town rested along the banks of the Orange River and as kids, we loved to walk over the swing bridge that made most of us giggle. We played

Hopscotch and other outdoor games that kids don't really play today. I enjoyed climbing a lot and used to climb up the pine trees on our farm, as well as any wall that was available. I never felt any antisemitism and the only time I was made fun of was because I was plump and called "fatty boom cracker" as most of the other children were skinny. I think in our old age the tables have turned – I'm the thin one and the others are possibly the fatties.

At the age of 10 I was sent to a Convent in a nearby town called De Aar. At the Convent some of the nuns were gentle and others not. I'd never been into a synagogue so was unaware that Jews don't kneel to pray. When I went home after my first term, my mom told me not to kneel during prayer. Naturally there was a bit of a commotion, but the nun relented. We had to attend church services and if we refused, we had to wait in a dark classroom till the others returned. I still remember the prayer "Holy Mother of God" and didn't mind going to church as the Chief Pastor (Monsignor) was very handsome! However, I never took communion.

We slept in big dormitories and were allowed to bath once or twice a week. There was a stand with round holes in it, big enough to place our small basins in and a space for a glass holder in which we kept our toothpaste, brush & combs. After waking up, we stood in line in front of a square basin with a tap to fill our basins with water and return to our given "hole" where we brushed our teeth and washed our faces, then again stood in line to empty the basin before replacing it on the stand.

The thing I loved about the convent was the baseball field where I played whenever I could. My worst memory was being forced to eat cabbage boiled with beetles in it. When no-one was looking, I used my hand to cover my mouth and remove the cabbage, dropping it on to my napkin. There was a tiny tuck shop, so my mom gave me pocket money, but most of the girls received tuck parcels from home, which I would have preferred. The thing that shocked me the most was when I discovered what the weird material pads strung up on a line outside were. These were pads the nuns used when they had their periods, but as there were young boys at the convent, I still can't fathom why they blatantly hung them out for all to see!

Coming from an Afrikaans medium school, my English reading and writing was atrocious despite speaking English at home. My class teacher Sister Adlerika, a huge unattractive woman, whose name is the only one I still remember, was a nasty lady, who enjoyed hitting us on our calves with a ruler or clothes brush for whatever she thought was valid. Every week we had a 20-word spelling test and whoever got more than 2 or 3 mistakes got punished, so guess whose name was always on the list. Eventually, I got away from her clutches. At the back righthand corner where I sat there was a small bookshelf with English books and I began reading, sometimes even during class, whilst hiding the book under the desk cover that flipped open. My English improved tremendously, and the hidings stopped! At the convent, boys were allowed to study till the age of 12, but the girls could study until matric. Sister Adlerika had her desk on a platform, probably so she could spy on us all from high. Behind her hung a huge picture of Jesus. One of the boys in our class hid the clothes

brush & ruler behind this picture and whilst she was searching for them, one of the boys opened the window and Jesus came flying onto her desk, clothes brush and all hitting her head. Naturally, we had to stand in line for punishment.

We suspected that she was a lesbian as she kept on asking us if we were already 'big girls', meaning did we have our periods or she would say: "Oh there is a mark on your shirt", then spit on her finger and pretend to remove the mark near someone's breast. However, she was a wonderful artist, who taught me how to draw and paint, and she was behind my love for reading books. For those reasons I'll always be grateful to her and even remember her name. Coming from an Afrikaans medium school, my English reading and writing was atrocious despite speaking English at home.

I ended my adventures at the convent at the end of Grade 6, when I was sent to Good Hope Sem. a girls' school in Cape Town, joining my 2 older sisters. Good Hope had a boarding house, where we slept 2 girls to a room. Guess what else - when I got into trouble for refusing to eat cauliflower and after chatting to our wonderful Head Mistress, I was exempted!

My mom's family kept in touch with us and visited. We travelled home by train at the end of each term, which was fun as there were other children from different schools & towns as well. In those days most Jewish children whose parents lived in country towns were sent to boarding schools in the larger cities.

It took me a while to fit in at school as at first the girls laughed at my heavy Afrikaans accent, so whenever we had to recite in class, my teacher kindly called me to stand next to her and told me to breathe in and take it easy. Slowly, I made friends, proving myself at sports and gymnastics. In matric, I even became a Prefect & House Captain, plus achieving other titles- not bad for a country bumpkin like me!

Today, despite having been in Israel for many years, I still have my S.A. accent but not an Afrikaans accent when speaking Hebrew.

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