

LEAVING HOLLAND BOUND FOR AMERICA

Setting the stage

The war (WWII) was finally over in early May of 1945. In July I turned eighteen. A close family member who lived in Staten Island invited me to study electrical engineering in Troy, NY at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in a term starting at the end of January. In preparation, my father arranged passage with the Holland America line. They issued a ticket without specifying the ship to be used or the exact date in January for sailing. I obtained a Dutch passport, my first, and a student visa from the recently arrived American Consul.

Later we learned that the vessel would be a converted "Victory Ship," a freighter slightly larger and considerably faster than the ubiquitous "Liberty Ships" which had provided the backbone of the US Merchant Marine during the war. They had been mass produced and built by several large West Coast wharves at the incredible rate of one complete freighter every two days.

Closer to departure, I was told to be on board at a designated pier by 6 PM on Tuesday. I arrived on time with my suitcases, but after saying farewell to my parents, I learned that there was to be a two-day delay, so I had to do it all over again on Thursday. Once aboard, I was assigned a cabin with two others, one an engineer with Philips (makers of everything electrical from light bulbs to more recently MRI's), the other an older person traveling with his granddaughter.

Very early in the morning I woke to the rumbling of our enormous diesel engine, and at 5:30 I went on deck. We were still on the Maas River and it was only after some 1 1/2 hrs later that I could see the end of the river and the approach of the sea. When we reached the boundary or "interface" of the two bodies of water, the ship briefly shuddered. I do not know whether it was caused by the difference in buoyancy between fresh and sea water or whether the engineer down below was increasing the revolutions of the engine at that precise moment, but the vessel did shake. A bit later the ship slowed and, by craning my neck, I could see a tiny motor boat alongside and a man descending a rope ladder, then nimbly jumping into the boat which immediately turned toward the still visible shore. A very short time later the last wisps of the land of my birth disappeared.

We were just a small group of humans surrounded by the immensity of the sea. But the gulls were with us always, sometimes screeching and other times sitting quietly on the stern. This being 1946, with no prohibitions against throwing waste or food overboard, the seagull activity became frantic and loud every morning when a crew member supplied the birds with the leavings from breakfast. I do not know if our gulls were Dutch, English, or Irish, but they were with us all the way to America. Of course, it is possible that they found an eastbound ship which could take them back to Europe. Maybe our gull nationality may have changed because of the American gulls hitchhiking on an outbound freighter who were able to return to NY harbor after spotting us.

Meeting Charlotte

It was June of 1946. I was eighteen. I had left Holland in January and after four months in the US, I was still a freshman at Rensselaer in Troy. Charlotte was nineteen, starting her senior year at Columbia's Barnard College in New York. The location was an SCM (Student Christian Movement) camp at Lake George N. Y. She attended as delegate representing Columbia's Episcopal Club of which she was president. My reason for being there was an invitation from our college chaplain. I had met him in January when, after having been in the US for all of three days, I had to participate in the freshman orientation. There were multiple questions, sheets, and multiple speeches by the dean, the athletic director, and even the president. When this was finally finished, I introduced myself to the chaplain and told him that of all the speeches his was the only one I had fully understood. This can probably be explained by the fact that my English pronunciation and verbal understanding at that point was the result of listening to the BBC and to my father who had lived in England during the 1920's. The chaplain, having no doubt studied homiletics in seminary, spoke in a fashion more familiar to me. At any rate I was invited to Sunday dinners by his wife and when the term was over, he invited me to participate in the camp as his guest.

In 1951 five years later, Charlotte and I were married. Our life together lasted for 58 years until she died in 2009. But this is how we met.

There was a square dance after supper. I had never been to such a thing before. I didn't know who or what my "corner" was and what in heaven's name "Do Si Do" was. Finally it was over, time to relax, but no, another non-understandable announcement was made: "We will have a 'Sadie Hawkins' dance." By screaming a question at someone, I found this meant girls pick the boys. Thoroughly confused by all this new stuff--- the noise of many young people talking, the funny cadence of the "Caller", the cigarette smoke--- it was obviously time to leave.

I never quite made it to the door. A blond girl in a dirndl skirt and a very determined manner took my hand, clearly indicating that I was to dance with her. I had no such intention and my face must have shown what I thought. Her first words to me were "Fix Your Face".

I must admit that I don't remember if I was shocked or amused, but I most certainly was intrigued and dance we did. A little later I did leave, but this time with her and we found a place without noise and smoke, the only sound being the quiet lapping of Lake George. Our talk was serious. We exchanged views about brothers and about feeling lonely. She certainly picked up on the latter and told me about her father, who as a young Scottish lad at eighteen had been sent to Chile in 1908 to work for an uncle in the Nitrate business. I think we talked until well past midnight, never even touching each other. But it must have been obvious to both of us that we wanted to continue to meet which we obviously did.

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Oct 2015