

The bravest woman I know

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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“A ship is safe in harbor, but that’s not what ships are for.”—William Shedd

On a cold, January day a little more than 60 years ago, a 20-year-old woman with a penchant for adventure boarded a ship bound for Sweden.

Her mother, siblings and friends waved good-bye as the vessel steamed out of New York City harbor.

The traveler was my mother who, after graduation from high school, worked until she had enough money to pay for a trip to Sweden.

Pages of a worn diary about her voyage on the S.S. Queen Mary relate rough seas and seasickness, snow, roommates from Sweden and Finland and a handsome waiter.

Once she arrived in her parents’ homeland, she lived with relatives for a year with trips to Denmark, Germany, Belgium, France and Norway.

My mother learned Swedish and how to ski and she traveled with an aunt who shared her enthusiasm for adventure.

They rode trains, ferries and ships and bicycled—meeting other travelers from faraway places. Her diary tells of a South African who seemed more than a casual acquaintance.

While in Norway, she heard First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt speak.

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“So much unexpected has happened, I can’t believe it’s me half the time—a chance to see the wife of a great president from my own country,” she writes, describing a gray-hatted Roosevelt who wore a lilac-colored dress with a fur piece around her neck. “She spoke well.”

When her money ran low, my mother worked in Sweden until she could pay for passage home.

She met my father a few months after her return, mustering enough courage to marry him and move from her beloved Connecticut to the plains of Nebraska.

During my father’s political career, they traveled to many interesting places throughout the world. She met many first ladies, presidents and heads of state.

But it wasn’t the same as a single woman in 1950 journeying solo across the ocean to visit faraway lands.

“We saw the sun rise, bright and glorious, marking the changing day of my life,” my mother writes about the day she sailed to Sweden.

Wizard headmaster Albus Dumbledore, in a Harry Potter book, tells Harry that “choices show what we really are, far more than our abilities.”

My mother is, by far, the bravest woman I know.