

“Stories”

Margarethe Luther

Translated from the German 1/07/05



Margarethe at home in her dining room in Marietta 1966

This account of my mother's first years in the United States after our immigration in 1955 was miraculously found in 2006 in Holger's basement four years after her death and sent to me for safekeeping. Her impressions were written down in German, even though by ~1985 when this was apparently written she was quite fluent in English. I have translated her stories, which is what she called it: "Geschichten". Some of this also comes from her later writings in English. My comments in Italics.

Stories

Prior to our emigration to the United States I had asked several people how things are over there. A Danish minister said it is wonderful. The official who brought us the message that we were going to be allowed to immigrate stared into space and gave me the cryptic answer, "Everything is quite different!" I read the report of a German journalist about New York and he called the city: horribly-beautiful. A relative of mine wrote to us that we should on no account come there because it was terrible!

All these answers were true as we saw later; it just exactly depended on one's perspective. In former years America was called the land of the antipodes – we did find that everything is exactly upside-down compared with Europe. While people do not walk with their heads down and their legs in the air, opinions, customs and tendencies were, as I said above, exactly reversed. In the beginning one was often shocked, confused, and didn't know which way to turn, made mistakes, and felt very uncertain of oneself – "unshaven and far from home", as we used to say. Here everything goes: the good and the bad, and I have stopped getting excited about anything after 30 years in America.

On the 12th of July we arrived in N.Y. on an old troop transporter. My aunt, Prof. Senta Bernhard, met us in the harbor. Her only son (*Winfred*) was with her and brought us straight to the Adirondack Mountains where she owned a summerhouse in gorgeous surroundings. We enjoyed it very much there and recovered from our refugee existence. In the beginning of September we drove in two cars with my cousin and her son, to Marietta, Ohio, where our sons would be going to school.

My aunt Senta taught Modern Languages at the college in this town. She had rented a house for us, which was situated far out of the city "in the devil's gutters". There was no public transportation like in any small towns, and so we had to see how we could get someone to give us rides: the boys to school and both of us to work. This beginning like all beginnings was hard.

The people were exceptionally nice to us in every way. They helped us with clothes, furniture and all kinds of household items. Everybody wanted to help; that was wonderful.

In Marietta there was a public library with some branches in the surrounding villages; about 12,000 books in all. The librarian offered me a job there and I accepted with alacrity. Of course I had to start from the bottom. First there I had to learn the Dewey Decimal System,

to re-shelve books, make lists, take care of customers. Later came learning to mend books and to repair torn pages. Little by little the librarian (*Miss Palmer*) discovered that I “didn’t come from the village” and had only learned to herd geese and slop the pigs. She also noticed that I was polite to customers and that I liked children. Then she found out that I could paint and do calligraphy and now it began to go forward.

I had to write all posters and notifications and together with her we did all the book exhibitions for diverse occasions. I had to paint huge posters for those. Then she discovered that I could write. We had to come up with a weekly report on new acquisitions for the Marietta newspaper. When she couldn’t find time to write about non-fiction, which was her bailiwick, I had to do the report. Fiction was handled by another lady; I called her the “Princess of Navarra”, more about her later. Sometimes this was due from one day to the next. Friday a.m. the word would come: “Margaret, you will have to write the column for Monday; I have a meeting”. Meetings are sacred in America. How often have I read a book all through the night, and then written the report before 10 a. m. early on Saturday when it went to the editor.

People liked my reports, they were very different from the ones they were used to. Then came the day when I was sent into the holy of holies: the catalogue room where the new acquisitions were classified in accordance with the Dewey Decimal system and the corresponding catalogue file cards were typed. And there the fun started.

Our schools had given us a Liberal Arts education. Here this is not the case. There is no Liberal Arts education, unless you do the reading yourself. My predecessor was old and wished to retire. After starting to work there I discovered some very strange things: Easter Island was filed under the number for Mexico and an American city had moved to South Africa. My hair stood on end. There were a few German books too. Under the heading of German Literature I found Goethe’s “Faust” next to the “The Secret of the Old Madam”, by Marlitt, in alphabetical order along with other similarly “impossibly bad” books. At first I didn’t dare say anything; but then I thought: “Many visitors from Germany come here; they will laugh themselves silly. This won’t do.” At this point I was proud of “my library”. So I went to the librarian, Miss Palmer, and told her with great apprehension about my fear of being laughed at. She only hissed: “Just throw all that out”.



Mutti in the Holy of Holies

In this country public libraries customarily have a Story Hour for children between 4 and 6 years of age. Miss Palmer’s niece was in charge of Story Hour; but as she had suffered a

number of nervous breakdowns and repeatedly was forced to cancel, Miss Palmer said that I should take over. I vehemently refused because story tellers are required to have some training including Child Psychology and what not. Miss Palmer insisted. To be sure I had told lots of fairy tales to my sons and other children as well, but never professionally. However she kept on insisting and pressed a very charming children's story into my hand and said: "You don't have to memorize the story, but you must know it, be able to tell it, and you must show the children the pictures". I relented; fortunately it turned out well. I had 12 children there. Then Miss Palmer gave me a stack of 6 books about professional story telling for thorough study. At last I came across the book, which gave me the key. It was written by the most famous story teller in the States. It said: "Be inside the story". That was it; that's what I always had done anyway. I was ready.

Every child was supposed to wear a tag with his name on it at the beginning of Story Hour. I thought that was unimaginative, I wouldn't be able to read it anyway at a distance; so I changed that. I drew the principle characters in the stories I planned to tell, and then my husband took a pile of colored papers and sawed the figures out with his fret saw. My workday was stretched from 7:30 a.m. till 2 a.m. at night with cooking, occasional house cleaning, laundry and ironing. It was a gigantic success. Every child was allowed to choose such a figure and take it home. Collections of these figures were made. The number of participants grew steadily. Soon I had 60 children. I was given an assistant to keep order, and we had two Story Hours, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. This only helped a little bit, because those children living near the library would come to both performances. To allow them to move around between the two or three stories, depending on their length, we played games. I translated all song games into English, or we arranged frog races or played "Hide and Seek", or the "Giant Snake".

When the children started school I had a "family reunion" for Christmas to which the "alumni" returned. I wanted so very much to show them a real German Christmas tree with lighted candles on it. However, that was forbidden because of the fire danger. I thought: laws are made so that you can cleverly go around them. I therefore decorated one of the walls with evergreen branches and mounted the candles there. You should have seen the eyes of the children! Miss Palmer came to look, but she didn't see a thing; she played along. She disappeared and had seen absolutely nothing.

Then I told my very favorite story: the one by Felix Timmermans, "Saint Nicholas in Distress". Even grown-ups who happened to drop by commented on this beautiful story. This story got to be famous in Marietta; it was so famous that the pretentious AAUW (American Association of University Women) invited me to tell them this Christmas story. I



The children of Story Hour

was very afraid of these pretentious ladies, but Timmermans is a real poet. You could have heard a pin drop. Afterwards I got great, though undeserved, praise.

Our Story Hour in time got to be an event. Many mothers told me that their children lived from one Thursday (Story Hour day) to the next. The little girls came dressed in tulle and silk and the boys in cowboy costumes and elegant clothes. One boy wore very new, dark blue, long pants with sharp creases, white shirt, and a rust-colored tie – dressed to kill! I started my story. Suddenly I saw that he was fidgeting uncomfortably; he twisted like a snake that wants to shed its skin. Then he got up, opened the pants, and let them fall – obviously they were too small. The little girls began to titter. The boys watched and understood, because when pants are too small and bother you, then you have to get rid of them. So he sat there in his underpants. I continued story telling as though nothing had happened. But, horrors, it was not the new very smart outer pants that were too small; it was the underpants! So he got up and began to get rid of those too. My assistant rushed to him like a swallow and shouted in horror: "Gentlemen do not undress in society!!" The little boy looked around astonished; how can a person enjoy an interesting story when his underpants give him pain?



Mutti in the Story Hour basement

Once a very sweet little Negro boy came into our Story Hour. He almost ate me up with his huge eyes; he didn't miss a single word. When the children had gone and we started to clean up, there was a big puddle under his chair. A person cannot be expected to go to the toilet when such beautiful stories are being told! This was the greatest praise I've ever received. Unfortunately his mother was so ashamed that she did not allow him to come back. All my pleas remained useless. I still am sorry for my very best listener – he was such a sweet little child and so very fond of stories.

Richie Prince, the son of a professor at the college, loved me desperately. Everybody complained bitterly that he looked only for me and didn't want to acknowledge anyone else.

Richie very much loved the Dr. Seuss books. The one he wanted was always out. It ended that I went to the bookstore and bought the book for him. That was the beginning of a great friendship.

Once Richie came with a huge chrysanthemum bouquet and handed it to me. Never in my life did I receive such a huge bouquet. I was speechless. This bouquet must have cost his parents more than \$20 surely. Professor Prince, meanwhile, sat upstairs in the reading room when we had Story Hour and studied for his doctorate, so I quickly went upstairs in order to say thank you. Professor Prince sat huddled on his chair. I said my deeply felt thank-you. He did not look at me but just growled under his breath: "Richie picked all the chrysanthemums around the house". What should I do? Return the bouquet and break the boy's heart or accept them and break Professor Prince's heart. I decided for the latter. He was a grown-up; he would get over it with time.

This story set a precedent. In the spring another boy also bought me a "bouquet". It was a three-meter high willow wand with a single catkin on it. He was enthusiastic. I was astonished. Was it meant to be a bouquet or was it a fishing rod? But in Europe one doesn't thank for the gift but for the friendly intent. Which is what I did. The little boy was deeply satisfied with his offering. "Im Bewusstsein seines Wertes sitzt der Kater auf dem Dach" from Kater Murr. "*Aware of his worth, the tomcat sits on the roof*" by E.T.A. Hoffman who wrote the Nutcracker.

I had two little colored guys in my story hour who were constantly at war with each other. At that time I did not know how to cope with this situation. I learned it later on.

A little girl came to story hour who had an oldish face and looked malcontent. At the end of story hour she took off her leather belt and started to beat up a boy. I was terrified! At night I meditated about that matter, and I knew it: She badly needed love, which for some reason she did not get at home. I decided to give her as much attention as I possibly could. Next time she came in complaining vividly that she had hurt her finger badly. I could not see anything at all, but I understood. I took her to our first aid box, put a band-aid on with great care and soothing words, and she was happy. I continued to give her as much love as possible. She never beat up anybody anymore; she was a little lamb. Poor little thing!

We had our Story Hour in the basement so the children had to come down the staircase. Little Kim had decided to slide down the banister and with full momentum to jump on me. The result was that I lost my balance, so I meditated on this at night what I should do in order to prevent an accident. So I had a thought: to put my left leg way behind me to receive the onslaught with a bent knee. No accidents happened, God be praised.

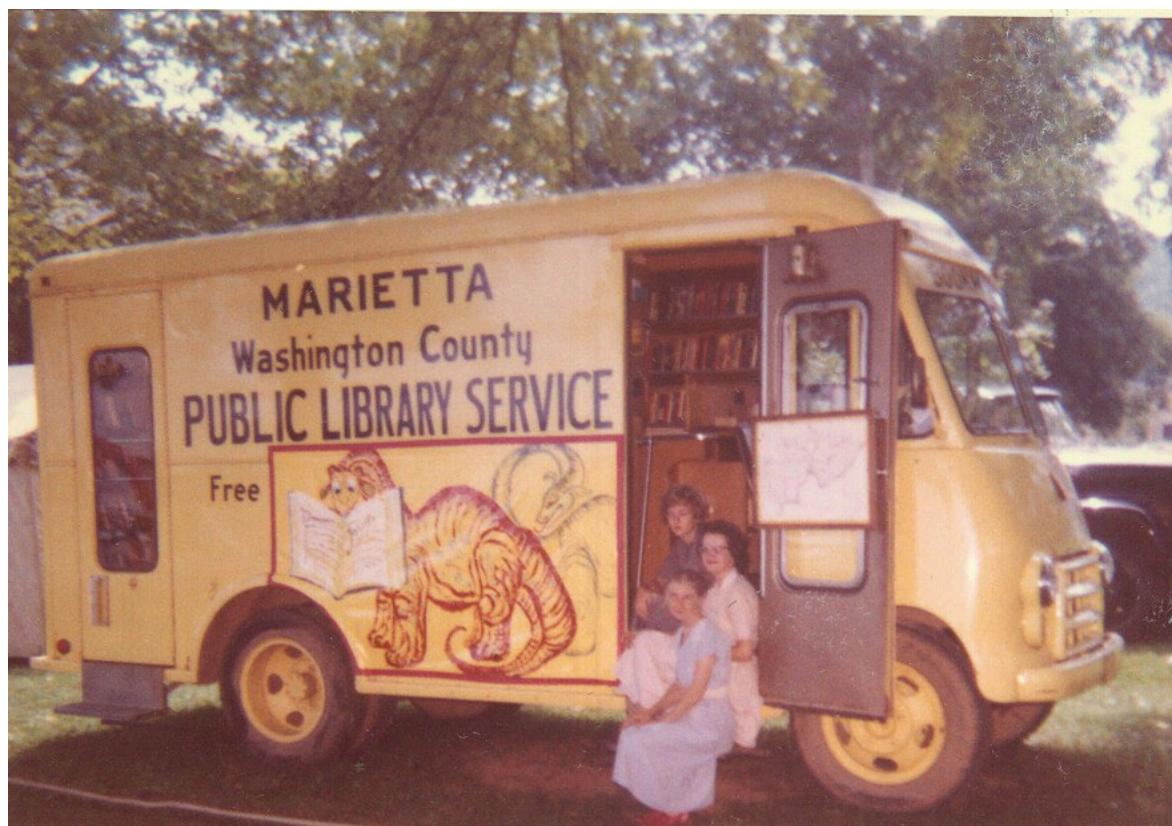
Once I was in real trouble, and I was getting very frightened. We played hide-and-seek again, and I was the one to seek. I couldn't find one mischievous boy, even though I prayed to all the saints. What had happened to him? I grew cold with fear. Finally I just shouted: "Richard, come out. You have hidden so well that I cannot find you. Come forth. You get a prize for hiding so well!" So then he came out. But gracious, what an appearance! His

mother is going to lynch me when she sees him! He was one big gray dust ball. Our janitor had apparently decided that he was underpaid and he never did clean up the basement. I always swept our room myself before the Story Hour, but in the adjacent room where there were endless shelves of books nothing was done. Richard had crawled under one of those shelves and covered himself with dust that had been lying there for decades. His mother must have been an angel; she said nothing.

Once three little girls had come up with the idea to paint my portrait – the way they saw me. I always stood in front of the children when I told stories and held my book turned up in front of me and showed the pictures. They had caught the essence quite correctly! I had a head of wild hair (from all that running around with them), and a huge open mouth with many teeth. The nose was missing because unessential. My hands held the open book. Vertical lines drawn under this: my dress – but no legs.

The time I was the storyteller to the kids of Marietta belongs to the most wonderful times of my life.

I need to add one more story about the library that Mu liked to tell: It was nearly Christmas, so she asked her story hour children if anyone knew how to say "Merry Christmas" in German. One little girl was extremely happy as she answered proudly: "Gesundtheidt!"



Margarethe vonGlehn Luther with one of her silhouettes
Undated photo, probably from around 1960



Mutti conducted weekly story hours for preschoolers at the Marietta Public Library where she worked. She prepared carefully for them, making several small drawings for each session. Vä would then cut these figures out of heavy paper by sandwiching many sheets between two pieces of thin plywood using a fret saw. Mutti would then paint each figure and distribute them to the children.

This was in the same binder with the material Mutti had saved about her story hours during the period October 1957 to May 1958, so I think it may have appeared in November of 1957 in the *Marietta Times*.

Her Silhouettes Are Considered Masterpieces

By LOIS Z. CRAIG

Mrs. Ferdinand Luther of Marietta is a dainty, diminutive woman who looks like she could be blown away by that proverbial puff of wind. But her scissors, to put it in modern vernacular, pack a tremendous wallop!

Members of the Ohio Arts and Crafts Guild and their friends will have the opportunity to see Mrs. Luther at work when they attend the demonstrations the afternoon of Nov. 7 arranged as a part of the Guild's annual meeting.

Mrs. Luther's remarkable paper-cutting artistry hangs as framed masterpieces signed with her maiden name, Margaretha von Glehn, in such places as the palace of King Frederik of Denmark, the art museum in Berne, Switzerland, and the Franciscan Monastery in Rome.

Oktober 17. 1957

Story Hour for the Pre-Schoolers

STORIES

Raffy and the Honkebeest
Georgie to the Rescue

Kissin
Bright

Games

That is the way we build our fire

African Game



December 5. 1957

Story Hour for Preschoolers

Stories

The cat who couldn't purr

Cameron

Bambi

Disney

The clean pig

Weisgard

Games

Have you ever seen a lassy

Poems

Missing . " Has somebody seen my mouse ? " "

Milne



Dec. 13. 1957

Story Hour for the Pre Schoolers.

Stories

The Year without a Santa Claus

McGinley

Miss Flora McFlimsey 's Christmas Eve

Mariana

Games

Here we go round the Mullberry bush

Poems

Nursery Rhyme

"It"

Riley



Story Hour for the Preschoolers

Dec. 19. 1957

Stories

Tazewell

The littlest Stork

Tazewell

The littlest Angel

Games

Walking through the Library because of my cold



Story Hour for the Preschoolers

Dec. 26. 1957

Stories

Lullaby

Josephine Bernhard

Miss Flora McFlimsey and the Baby New Year

Mariana

Archie Angel

Margaret Austin

Poem

Words from an old Spanish Carol

Ruth Sawyer

Games

New we dance Leobiloo



Story Hour for the Preschoolers

on Jan. 2, 1958

Stories

Johnny Appleseed

Disney

The journey of a Pink Pig

from Farmstories by B. Jackson

Funny little Trinket

the same

Poems

Nursery rhymes

Games

That is the way we build our fire here in the land of Kikuju



Story Hour for the Preschoolers

Jan. 9. 1958

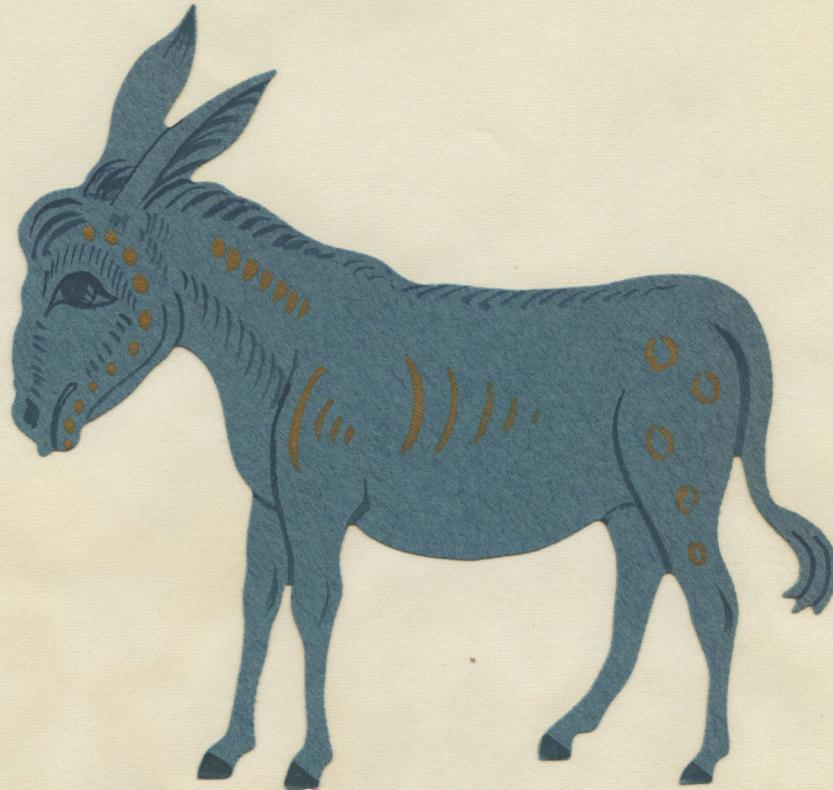
Stories

Cocolo
Cinderella
The Camel, which took a walk

Bettina
Perrault
Tvorkov

Games

London Bridge



October 24. 1957

Story Hour for the Preschoolers

Stories

T-Bone the Baby Sitter
The great big Noise
The noisy Clock Shop
The Town Musicians of Bremen

Newberry
Weir
Horton
Grimm

Games

Formed a serpent as we had no room to play.



October 29.. th. 1957

Story Hour for the Preschoolers

STORIES

Horace, the hound that howled

Collins

Epaminondas and his auntie

Briant

Cap'n Dow and the hole in the Doughnut.

LeGrand

GAMES

Walking around in a serpent.



probably 11/20/57



November 28, 1957

Story Hour for the Preschoolers

Gobble, Gobble, Gobble

Ellis

The Thanksgiving story

Dalgliesh

Games

Here we dance Looby-loo



Story Hour for the Pre-Schoolers

November 14. 1957

Stories

Pepper Moon

Wood

The little Igloo

Beim

Games

Oh, A-hunting will we go



probably Nov 20, 195

Story Hour for the Preschoolers

Stories

The little white kitten

a story which happened to me

The lazy Llama

Goodeow

The little duck who loved the rain

Mabie

Games

The Muffinman



Story Hour for the Pre-Schoolers

November 7, 1957

Stories

When the Mississippi was wild Le Grand

The lovely summer Simont

Mr. Wishing went fishing Wilde

Games

Brother dear come dance with me. Humperdinck

