

Polio, Nazis, and Me

At age eight, my brother was hospitalized with polio symptoms. The diagnosis came between the beginning of the Truman Administration and the end of World War II.

Next door to us in Lakewood, Ohio lived the Marcinkowskis, a family of Polish descent. My parents spoke of them in a derogatory way and discouraged me from playing with their daughter, Lena, near my age of five. Polish sentiment was not on my radar those days.

On the side of the Marcinkowski's house, I noticed insignias that fascinated me. Swastikas, they were called. Someone had drawn these. Of course, I had no idea what that symbol represented. I would trace the insignia with my finger. My mother caught me in the act. She told me that the drawing was a Nazi sign and Nazis were very bad and took people like the Polish and many others to prison and didn't let them out.

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When my brother didn't come home one night, I thought the Nazis had captured him, sent him to prison, and I would never see him again. The next morning my parents explained that Ronnie had been admitted to the hospital with polio symptoms. We couldn't see him because the virus was very contagious. The next thing I knew a yellow sign with big black letters had been nailed to the left of our front door saying, **“QUARANTINED.”**

I identified the Q” as another Nazi symbol. At five years old I didn't ask questions, and arrived at some wild conclusions—like my family soon would be captured and thrown into a forever prison.

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Mom began emptying the kitchen cupboards and washing every glass, plate, bowl so as to not spread the virus to the family. I doubted that would stop the Nazis' pending arrival.

I did go with Mom to the hospital once. We stood outside, she held my hand and looked to a window on the top floor. She called my brother's name. "Ron, can you hear me? Ronald! It's your mother! Unfortunately, he never came to the window.

During the quarantine, we were confined to the house for what seemed like months. I kept waiting for the Nazis. I got my dolls ready, complete with coats and hats. But what would happen to my brother?

At night we listened to news on the radio. I heard a lot about war, Nazis, and polio. I heard about iron lungs, I heard about death. I was scared for us (even if we weren't Polish) and the Marcinkowskis. But again, I didn't ask questions. Everyone seemed to be on edge. Then I learned my brother was paralyzed. That meant his legs didn't work.

Mother cried and my father didn't want to hear it. He was a stiff-upper-lip kind of guy with a temper. I was afraid. Mother bawled. She called polio an epidemic. Lots of people were catching the virus and we had to stay home until the scare lifted. In addition to his legs, Ronnie's shoulder and arm grew stiff.

I had my dolls to comfort me in my room.

Then a miracle happened. After weeks of not being able to move, Ron started to improve. Eventually he came home. He limped and one arm wasn't right. But soon the paralyzed parts began to move. No one could explain how this could happen. Patients

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died or were placed in iron lungs but my brother completely recovered. The doctors scratched their heads. My parents insisted Ronnie was misdiagnosed.

However, the kids on my street turned their backs to me and neighbors didn't want to have anything to do with us. This included the Marcinkowskis. No invites from Lena for hopscotch, jump rope or paper dolls. Our family now *persona non grata*. Polio all too contagious and deadly. We stayed to ourselves long after the quarantine.

Then I heard on the radio that the war had ended. The Nazis never came for us and my brother returned to school. I went to kindergarten that fall.

Eight years later in 1953, Jonas Salk developed the polio vaccine. All school kids had to line up for the dreaded needle. We shook with fear as our turn came.

A decade after, polio cases dwindled to next to nothing and I forgot about the epidemic and its effects on our family.

Until now. Five weeks short of eighty, I am quarantined once again. Another virus has jeopardized the entire world. I know I am in a vulnerable category. I wear a mask when I must go out and abide by social distancing mandates. I no longer have dolls to comfort me. My brother is eighty-three, living in New York City while I am in Seattle. Coasts apart, we have little contact these days. I keep wondering if COVID 19 takes him back to the virus that struck him seventy-five years ago.