

## MAVIS W. BLATT.....A CAREER?

### THE WAR YEARS

I was one-year old, living in London, when England entered into the second world war and consequently, as seen through the eyes of an innocent child, most of the memories are painless.

My mother took care of my brother (three years older) and me, as well as having to do her share for the war effort; she spent five hours a day polishing spectacle frames at a local factory. Obviously, one could deduce by this that the fighting Englishmen did not eat enough carrots. The strain on her must have been almost too great at times and, it was not until many years later, that I realized just how strong she was and is.

Every night when the air raid siren sounded, we would run into the brick shelter outside in the street along with the rest of the neighborhood people. It was a cold, damp place, wet and musty inside with no doors or windows and smelled most foul. Later we graduated to an Anderson shelter which was erected in the living room. The three of us, along with our gas masks, slept there every night, listening to the whistle of falling "doodle bugs" and hoping against hope one did not have our name on it. Unfortunately, the local church and some of our neighbors were not so lucky.

We did not remain in London for the duration of the war, but were evacuated to the north country - Wigan, Lancashire. Here in the countryside we learned what it was like to play in fields and feed the pigs penned at the end of the street.

My earliest memory of my father is when a total stranger, in uniform, tried so hard to make friends with me and I would have none of it. I remember thinking how nice he was, but why was I getting all this attention? I was painfully shy and hid behind the chair opposite him. Eventually he tired of trying to gain my confidence and gave his attention to other matters. Well, this did not suit me at all; I threw a cushion at him, which missed and would have been scorched in the fire, if it had not been for his quick reaction in grabbing it from the flames. Needless to say, we were firm friends from that moment on.

### RETURN TO NORMALCY

After the war years life gradually returned to normal. The bombed-out houses across the road were rebuilt, the church was replaced with a finer structure and grass grew high and hid the bomb craters left on the nearby hill.

Food rationing did continue for some time and we had to take our ration books to the shops to have the coupons removed

for that particular week's staples. Fruit was not to be found and I can still recall the gales of laughter when I first attempted to eat a banana - complete with skin.

The school system in England is very different from that in the U.S. I started school at five. At eleven years old I took an examination to determine whether I would go to a preparatory school and then, hopefully, on to college or whether I would attend high school with the option of going to a trade school at fourteen. The system works well for bright children in the less populated areas where there are ample openings available to continue on to higher education; however, in the London boroughs there were so few openings to be filled that it was taken for granted you would be attending high school. To the best of my knowledge only one person from my class went on to college.

The work tradition evolved over many generations in my family is that upon reaching the grand old age of fourteen, sons apprenticed with their fathers and became carpenters. When I reached fourteen, in the 50's, England was not ready for women's liberation and so I missed my opportunity to become a hard-hat. At the time the only available career which seemed of interest to me would be to go into the business world; accordingly, I asked my father if he would support me for an extra year to enable me to take a two-year commercial course. We were expected to contribute to the household expenses upon leaving school at fifteen; understandably, it was not a light decision and one much to be appreciated.

#### THE REAL WORLD

Sweet sixteen - look out world, here I come! My first job was in a bank. With great enthusiasm I began learning the large accounting machines used for posting ledgers and statements; eventually, over a three-year period, I worked my way up to supervisor of the "girls" in the office. In those days all business transactions were hand written and if you can envision Bob Cratchet sitting on his high stool in a cold, damp office, you have some idea of the environment. The hours could be erratic. If the Cash Book, which was a summary of all the daily activities, did not balance to the penny, we would remain at work until it was resolved. For this reason, I believe, we had tremendous esprit de corps.

Upon reaching the ripe old age of nineteen, I tied the nuptial knot and decided it was time to find employment with set hours and no Saturday work. It was very difficult for a young bride to get beyond the initial interview. Personnel people were sure that a baby was inevitable in the near future and I could not convince them otherwise. Finally, after another year with the bank, I found work as a secretary and statistical typist for a department manager in a large corporation.

My husband and I lived in a furnished apartment. He had no

formal training and not too many prospects, and I did not see much likelihood of advancing to any higher level in the jobs available to me. For those reasons, we decided there must be hope in the Colonies and went for an interview at Australia House in London. At that time, the Australian Government paid passages for immigrants. The catch was that they had to stay for two years or pay back the fare to the Government, which was not an inconsiderable amount of money. It was a six week journey by ship with ports of call at all sorts of exotic-sounding places. We had no savings and this seemed like the golden opportunity. Excitement ran high until we realized that with this major change, the chances of ever seeing our families again were miniscule. The bubble burst. We were torn with indecision.

### OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Shortly after, we interviewed at Canada House in London and a quick decision was made with the knowledge that we could come home without too much difficulty. It took four years to save enough money, all the while scrimping while continuing to live in the furnished apartment. When the day came to depart, it was the hardest thing I had ever done leaving my parents at the dock as the ship pulled away. The week's crossing was miserable replete with storms and high seas and my disposition matched the weather.

We arrived in Toronto with \$300.00, all our worldly goods in two suitcases, no place to call home, and no jobs. The first night was spent in a hotel and the next day we found an apartment from an ad in the paper. With one major task out of the way, we went to the labor office to find work. One thing about being a secretary, companies may not pay well, but there's always a position available somewhere. I became the major breadwinner, albeit very modestly. Unfortunately, this really did not change during the rest of our marriage. I carried the health insurance for both of us and was always hesitant to leave a job without having another for fear of sudden illness and no coverage.

My homesickness was extreme. I was so miserable I reached the point where I stayed in bed for a full weekend. I wrote home every week, and eagerly awaited the letters from my parents.

After eleven months, during the following Spring, a telegram arrived stating that my father, at forty nine, had suffered a heart attack and I should rush home. I had no money for the fare; if I had, it was extremely likely I would have returned home months ago. At that time, I was working in a bank and in desperation went to my manager for advice. The personnel at the bank were wonderful. A loan, with no collateral, was arranged that very day for me and my husband's fare, with the understanding I would return and pay off the loan. I was



overwhelmed. Sadly, I arrived in England after the death of my father, but was able to help my mother through a very rough period in her life.

Generally speaking, I was happy in Toronto, we had good friends and every weekend camped in the beautiful National Parks. My secretarial position was not a challenge, in fact rather boring, but work was not easy to find and I did enjoy my fellow employees.

After eighteen months, the United States began to sound exciting to my husband and with some reluctance I made plans to emigrate again. He had a brother living in this country who could sponsor us, so the emigration was accomplished without major difficulty.

We loaded our nine year old Ford (they don't make them like they used to), with all worldly possessions and once again set out to find a place to call home. We drove and camped across the country, zig-zagging our way through National Parks and other areas we thought would be interesting. I had a lump in my throat when I first saw the Pacific Ocean in Oregon; imagine me, Mavis, making it here.

California did not meet our expectations and so, we headed back across country via a different route. Boston is where we ran out of money, credit limit on our gas credit cards, etc.. Following our usual pattern, we found an apartment and I, a job in rather short order. My husband made the plans, I made the money, or at least covered the insurance.

#### A NEW START

After six years of marriage, we moved into our first unfurnished apartment in a small New England town. I was feeling like a displaced person and needed to put down roots. The job in an accountant's office expanded my knowledge to include limited accounting and income tax procedures. Ideally, I wanted to work in a larger organization where there might be room for advancement, so I applied to the local insurance company. They did not have a suitable opening for my skills, which by now were diversified and expanding nicely. Nonetheless, I persisted and every Friday called the gentleman in Personnel responsible for hiring clerical staff. I think he figured if anybody was that keen to work for the company, they deserve to be hired. I started work as assistant to an executive secretary, became an executive secretary, filled in for the President's secretary during her absences, and eventually was offered the position of Personnel Assistant - the very job of the man who had originally interviewed me.

Although I had no formal training in the field, nor did the company offer to send me to school, I did excel in the work and thoroughly enjoyed my duties (perhaps I found a home).

Upon reaching thirty, I took stock of my life and could not envision being so personally unsettled ten years hence. For although we now had our own furniture, and had lived in the same town for a few years, my husband was still ready to move anywhere at the drop of a hat. I loved the United States, the country and people, and this was now my home. The only decision was to move out, get a divorce and try for a life style that I needed and wanted for my own peace of mind. I had waited twelve years for my husband to settle down, and that was long enough. He remains a good friend, but someone who should never be married (at least not to me).

I moved in with a friend in a different town and took a position as secretary to the Boston Branch Manager of a large corporation. After some months of repetitious duties I became bored and applied for a job as executive secretary to the Vice President of Research and Development of a nearby company. I was of two minds, whether to accept the position or, rather sick of constant job change, stay where I was. Evidently someone up there was looking out for me; I accepted the position and in this company I met my husband of eleven years - but I am getting ahead of myself.

Believe it or not, I was reasonably settled in this situation. I worked for a man with considerable ambition who drove himself day and night. I typed scientific reports, carried out the usual secretarial duties and served as liaison between his Department Heads.

In the past it was I who got bored with work and looked for other employ, but this time it was a different turn. After only seven months on the job, I was called into my boss' office on a Friday, and told the company was cutting back and two executive secretaries had to be ruffed. I had the least tenure, so with a glowing letter of recommendation in hand, I once again set out job hunting.

An interesting aside is that on the following Monday morning all the officers of the company drove to work in their brand new company cars. I had been sacrificed for a Buick Electra.

As mentioned, I did meet Bill at this company. As the result of financial liabilities and child support from a previous marriage, he was out to prove that a man can exist on a diet of bread and frozen ravioli.

In 1969 we moved in together under the assumption two could starve as easily as one. I took a position with another scientific company, where one of my duties was to set up seminars. I had a great deal of telephone contact with scientists all over the States. One of the job perks was to attend the end-of-seminar banquets held at one of the finer

Boston restaurants. At this period of my life a lobster now and again was greatly appreciated.

Bill and I married in 1972 and my life seemed to have worked out just as I had hoped. I was relatively settled and starting to put down roots in this "promised land".

#### A QUESTIONABLE DUTCH TREAT

Well, my next major happening was when Bill came home from work with the "Godfather" offer. He was being transferred to Holland - what a shattering blow! The last thing I wanted at this time was a return to Europe - a giant step backwards.

We left on January 2nd, 1973, two weeks after I found out I was pregnant. I was somewhat apprehensive, we were going to a small town in the south of Holland where English was spoken from May through September (tourist season) and then shelved for another year. We knew we were in trouble when, while trying to purchase a Dutch dictionary in the United States, we were informed by the "enlightened" sales person that they spoke German in Holland.

Tears were flowing as the plane took off from Logan and were never far away for the next four years.

One major salvation during this time was the International Club. Its members consisted of women from many different countries displaced because of their husbands occupations as well as Dutch women who wished to converse in English. I was Vice President the year we returned home, and in all probability, would have been President the following year.

When looking for an obstetrician, my primary concern was whether he spoke some English; my Dutch certainly was not birthproof. As it turned out, he was one of the most distinguished obstetricians in the country and I had wonderful care. Birth is either natural or natural, after all "we must consider the baby, drugs would not be good". During labor, the doctor spent more time showing Bill the fetal heart monitor than with me. Bill was served tea and cookies; I was given sympathy.

Bill traveled extensively during that first year, leaving for three week periods, and I was left home with my Dutch German Shepherd and my Berlitz. Initially the dog did not understand commands in English and pretty much ran the household, but made the bilingual transition a lot quicker than me. I seemed to have a mental block against learning the language and after four years only advanced to what I call survival Dutch.

After two and one-half years of renting a town house we decided to buy. It was a gamble, but in Holland you could get a one-hundred percent mortgage if conditions were right.



Billy was now two years, three months, and was not being immersed into the environment. I decided to put him in a Dutch nursery school to help him with the language and also the very different way of life. After all, the little kid would have to live and go to school there and I wanted him to be comfortable with it. The first day at school was tough. He was peeled from my arms, screaming bloody murder. I spent the entire morning pacing the floor. It was the right decision I think, because Dutch children start school, full days, at four years. When we left Holland, Billy was three years old and just starting to speak Dutch well. Not only did he look like a little Dutch boy, he was turning into one.

#### RETURN TO PARADISE

Our house purchase gamble paid off financially. We returned to the United States after four years and were able to put a down payment on a home with the profit. With Billy three, I decided not to return to job hopping, but rather to stay home and enjoy his developing years.

The cloistered life can get pretty dull; how many times can you clean the windows. Three friends and I decided to attend a tennis clinic but, one by one, they found reasons to back out. I had to decide whether to go it alone, or stay safely at home. That decision changed the pattern of my life. I now play on a team in the North Shore Tennis League; I feel very healthy and fit in my middle age, and tennis has given me more self-assurance.

#### THE RENAISSANCE

With the coming of the computer age several years ago, I did not want to be left behind and enrolled in the Basic Computer course at NSCC. Finding that I could handle college level courses, I took Cobol I, II, and Accounting I, and currently feel I could earn my Associate Degree. I took the CLEP English examination successfully and earned twelve work experience credits. The reason I'm doing this at this late date is primarily for my own satisfaction, although I don't rule out career application.

We have a business computer at home and I, along with a friend, are in the midst of planning the start of a word processing business. For better or worse, this paper represents my first attempt to utilize the word processor, but on the horizon look for "The Village Scribe". (Any referrals would be appreciated - rates on request!)

On overview, I wonder if this paper represents a life, or a career, but in the longer view, is there really any difference?