

## MARGARET

Of all the parts of this, my personal memoir, here is the most difficult one to write. Margaret was essential to my life and happiness for over 50 years - that's half a century. I think my life can be divided into three segments: Before Margaret; With Margaret; After Margaret. We first met in a laboratory class of a genetics course at New York University (Washington Square). We shared a facility that raised millions of fruit flies. The heredity of these *Drosophila* flies was the basis for many future discoveries leading today to the complete mapping of the human genome.

My attraction at the time was not the fruit flies, but Margaret. I was instantly smitten by this lovely girl. She was bossy, determined, and destined to be a dedicated scientist. We hit it off readily in the lab, and I made efforts to date her. I have no idea what she saw in me. I was skinny, sloppy, and poor as the proverbial church mouse. I had recently quit my job as a thermometer calibrator to accept a full-time teaching fellowship at N.Y.U. This was in 1945, as WW II was ending. The salary was microscopic, but it included free tuition. My attempts at taking a girl out to dinner would be a hamburger at a nearby student hangout near Washington Square - a place called "Prexy." Now long extinct, this was advertised as providing "A Hamburger With A College Education".

A major date was when I took Margaret out to a dinner at a Russian night-spot - *The Yar*. This also took the last of my meager cash and the full measure of my courage. At the northwest corner of Washington Square Park, I proposed - a less romantic and more inept proposal could not be imagined. Of course, she refused - but gently. I persisted and eventually we were married in a small ceremony at her Lutheran church on April 12, 1946. Our two mothers met there for the first time, and became instant enemies.

Margaret was born August 18, 1921 - which made her about 6 months older than I. Her full name was "Dorothy Margaret Cordsen." She disliked "Dorothy" and much preferred "Margaret," although she accepted the Danish "Grethe" or "Greta." She really hated the variety of other nicknames like "Peggy," and woe betide anyone who addressed her as "Maggie." Her parents were Danish émigrés who came from homes only a few miles apart, but met and married in the U.S. Her father was a true Viking descendent - a ship's chief engineer. In the U.S., he quickly rose to command cargo ships and oil tankers, eventually taking charge of a fleet of Standard Oil tankers based in Chesapeake Bay and New York harbor. He died when Margaret was only 16. He was a strict disciplinarian, and a devoted Lutheran. His premature death may have been at least partially self-inflicted. He treated himself with various patent medicines, including the then popular Calomel. Overdosing may have led to mercury poisoning, resulting in acute kidney failure. Margaret was then raised by her widowed mother in their small house in Staten Island - the lesser known fifth borough of New York City

Margaret's mother, Julia, was a tiny lady, but independent and feisty. What she never realized was that her daughter was equally independent and feisty. Margaret was strongly influenced by her science teacher in high school on Staten Island, and her ambitions were toward science and, especially a career in medicine. Her mother decreed that Margaret should attend a Lutheran college in Staten Island, and offered her financial support through her Master's and a new automobile of her choice. She refused to have all her science teaching from a single professor, turned down this offer, and went to New York University (Washington Square). There

she quickly obtained a scholarship that became a teaching fellowship, and she supported herself through to a Ph.D. Actually, she really wanted to go into medical school, but in those days women in medicine were restricted to nursing, and an M.D. was strictly a male domain in the U.S.

After getting her doctorate, Margaret was faced with the choice of a career in medical research or teaching. She was offered a position at a high level cancer research institution on the basis of her thesis work in endocrinology. By this time we were married and about to move to a house in New Jersey. She was also offered a teaching position at Rutgers University, an easy commuting distance. She truly loved teaching and chose that path, hoping to also continue scientific reach at some level. In a year, she moved to Fairleigh Dickinson University in nearby Teaneck, where she taught until taking retirement in 1976. That was a critical year in our lives, when we moved permanently to Sarasota, Florida.

Margaret was a truly devoted teacher. She cared for her students, and we would frequently get phone calls - some at wee hours of the morning - from students with personal as well as scholastic problems. Clearly she made the right choice in opting for a teaching career. We never had children, and always put them off in favor of other activities - especially travel (more on this in a separate chapter). Her students were her vicarious children. At Fairleigh Dickinson University, she taught a variety of courses in biology, and gradually rose to associate professor, but her well-deserved promotion to full professorship was deliberately held up by an anti-feminist chairman. He said to her "What do you need the promotion for? You have a well-paid husband." At which, Margaret screwed up her courage and stomped into the college president's office, and raised a ruckus. She received her promotion, promptly. The president was well aware that without her, the biology department would fall apart.

Prior to meeting me, Margaret had at least two romances in her life. One was to an older man, a medical doctor, who promised her a wondrous life in the Caribbean. He was from Jamaica and black. That last would have killed her mother. The second was a family chosen young man, a recent war veteran, of a Danish and Lutheran persuasion. They were engaged for less than a month before discovering they had nothing intellectually in common. She was still getting over the doctor when we met.

In the years 1952, 1953, and 1954, we spent our summer vacation period in Florida, at Marineland, just south of St. Augustine. Originally we went here primarily by invitation from the director of a marine laboratory that was associated with an aquarium. This was a public exhibit and the first huge oceanarium featuring dolphins, originally designed as a filming facility called Marine Studios. Eventually they had trained dolphins were performing tricks on command. This was the site of the creation of the original "Flipper television series. While I was doing my research into fish behavior, Margaret was observing the dolphins. At that time the dolphin tank housed a self-reproducing colony of about a dozen animals, with a hierarchy of an alpha bull, a harem of several females and a small group of young dolphins. Margaret, in association with the head keeper, spent many hours observing the dolphins and all their social interactions. Eventually, she published a long paper which has become the seminal study of social behavior in dolphins and other cetaceans. Many of the behaviors she described have been found to be normal to cetaceans in the wild. She may not have published much in the field of science, but what she produced was not only good science but were important contributions of lasting value.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Margaret C. Tavolga & Frank S. Essapian. "The Behavior of the Bottle-Nosed Dolphin

In the winter of 1956, Margaret's mother had a debilitating heart attack and had to be placed in an assisted living establishment. This seemed like a compatible place with virtually all the residents of Danish origin, and Lutheran. She was not happy there and we decided to find a house and include her. Julia helped finance the purchase, mostly from the sale of her place in Staten Island. In 1957, we bought a split level house in Closter, up in the northeast corner of New Jersey. For about a year, the three of us shared the house, and tension mounted. I think that the three of us were equally to blame. Julia was a tiny lady, but very strong-willed and opinionated. Margaret and I lost part of our precious privacy. We found a pleasant home for Julia, within a few minutes drive, and she was much happier in her independence. She died about a year later of another massive heart attack. Her wishes for a wake and funeral were followed, and as a result Margaret and I promised each other that when our end came, we should be quietly cremated with minimal ceremony. That was when we both joined the National Cremation Society.

Julia had accumulated a substantial financial nest-egg. This was a source of pride to her, as it began with a life insurance payment upon her husband's death. She thought of herself as being a shrewd business person, but the investments were made with the help of a good financial advisor and at a time (post-war) of a financial boom period. Her will left her entire fortune in AT&T stock to a trust that paid dividends to her daughter. There was a provision that if Margaret should predecease her husband (me), the income would go to me - as long as I did not remarry. In any case, the whole package would eventually go to the Lutheran Church. This was her way of retaining control from the grave. She could not have anticipated the splitting of the AT&T stock into the "Baby Bells," nor the deterioration of the dividend values. After lengthy litigation, the trust was revised to increase its value and income, but this was made possible by the intervention of the Lutheran Church looking ahead to its eventual gains.

Over her 25 years of teaching, Margaret developed close friendships with many of her students, some of whom achieved eminence in science, and kept in touch with their former professor and mentor. After we retired to Florida in 1976, she started a whole new career. It began with my buying her three orchid plants. It developed that she had a true talent and affinity for growing these plants. A major exhibit had recently been created in Sarasota: The Marie Selby Botanical Gardens. It specialized in epiphytic plants (plants that grew on other plants), and a major part of this included orchids, with thousands of species and hybrids. Margaret rapidly increased her collection until we had over 300 plants festooned in our screened patio area. She became an active volunteer at the Selby Gardens, working at their orchid identification center, and later a major contributor to their plant shop. She wrote up a set of instructions sheets that were given to customers when they purchased orchid plants, and these form the basis for updated care sheets still being used at the Garden Plant Shop.

Her care for the orchids was truly remarkable, and she was respected and admired by her colleagues at the Gardens. Everything bloomed for her. My contribution was to help in any

(*Tursiops truncatus*): Mating, Pregnancy, Parturition and Mother-Infant Behavior". *Zoologica*, Vol. 42, Part 1, pp. 11-31, pl. 1-3, 1957.

Margaret C. Tavolga. "Behavior of the Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*): Social Interactions in a Captive Colony." In: "Whales, Dolphins, and Porpoises", Kenneth Norris, ed. University of California Press, pp.718-730, 1966.

mechanical problems and keeping a computer record of the health and blooming behavior of her plants.

Although her scientific interests were still in marine biology - especially toward dolphin behavior, her connection with the Mote Marine Laboratory had to be only on a social level. After my retirement from City University in 1976, I was engaged in full-time research at the Mote Laboratory. The then director of the laboratory was adamantly opposed to husband and wife working at the same institution. The effect of this anti-nepotism rule was a loss to the Laboratory, but a huge gain for the Selby Gardens.

With the freedom from classroom scheduling, we were able to travel more and that included a few trips to France, and more to Denmark (all this in a separate chapter). This idyllic existence continued for several years, until her health began to fail. It began with severe arthritis - especially of her left knee, which made walking difficult. On our last trip - 1994 - a Mediterranean cruise - we had to borrow a hotel wheel chair, and we were unable to take any shore tours.

Aside from petty colds and other minor medical problems, our health was pretty stable. In 1954, during our summer in Florida, Margaret developed a gall bladder problem that required surgery. In those days, this was a major operation, and she was hospitalized for over a month. That was when we acquired our first car (in Florida): a 1938 rusty Pontiac. The following year, 1955, we bought a brand-new Ford.

Margaret had a coronary infarction in 1973, and was hospitalized for about a week, but recovered nicely. She was left with a "left bundle block" and an occasional need for a nitroglycerine pill. A good result was that we both gave up smoking, and I learned to cook.

Despite her pre-existing heart problem, doctors thought she was well enough (age 74) to have knee replacement surgery. By then, she was virtually wheelchair bound. The knee surgery seemed successful, but the next day she experienced either a pulmonary collapse or a congestive heart attack - never clarified by doctors. A lung specialist took the lead and she was intubated - for over a month! In the ICU ! Her condition, even after hospital discharge and months in re-hab, deteriorated - both physically and mentally. She was permanently on oxygen. I kept being told that her lung tissue was becoming "less flexible." What I found out later was that she had advancing pulmonary fibrosis - for which there was no cure. All I had left to do was to take care of her as well as I could, thinking and hoping for some signs of recovery. Eventually, she collapsed and died in the hospital. Any heroic measures to resuscitate were doomed, and she went quietly with the help of morphine - February 22, 1996.

Margaret was a major part of my life - 50 year's worth. We had our differences. She was originally a Republican but converted when she voted for Adlai Stevenson in 1952. There was hardly a cross word between us, in spite of our individual independence and separate (though related) careers. It was a happy marriage, with its high points and low points. At this writing, she has been gone for almost 18 years, but will always remain a part of me.