

2019

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### **Recommended Citation**

Six, Ellen (2019) "Seven Taverns to the Schoolhouse," *The Tuxedo Archives: Vol. 2013* , Article 22.

Available at: <https://scholar.dominican.edu/tuxedolit/vol2013/iss2/22>

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# Seven Taverns to the Schoolhouse

## Ellen Six

The day that I was born my parents looked at me and said, “You will go to college,” a noble ambition to fulfill when you are only two hours old. To both of my parents, who had emigrated from Lithuania, education was the magic key that would free me from the life that they had to live.

Mother had received only three years of schooling. She was third daughter in a family that would have twelve children; six would live and six would die. She learned to read and write but that was enough for a girl who was needed to take care of all those babies.

My father did not have one day of formal schooling. He was the second son. His brother received an education and eventually would inherit the small farm. My father could work for his older brother but chose to get passage to America instead. I never learned his story of how he came to America. He never talked about his family in Lithuania. He said that America was his home and that his proudest day was the day he became an American citizen. Mother told everyone her story. It showed her determination, wiliness, and resourcefulness. She was never too shy to let her “virtues” shine.

Mother’s oldest sister had come to America and had worked as a maid. She earned too little to sponsor her sister’s passage but she found a rich Lithuanian man who wanted a hard working wife from the old country so this man paid for Mother’s passage, thinking they would be married. Mother knew if she stayed in Lithuania her fate would be to end up in an arranged marriage like that of her own mother.

Her mother had been married off to a widower who was twenty years older than her. He wanted children who could inherit his land. As he fathered child after child, his initial wealth ebbed away and when he died all that he left his wife was the roof over her head. Mother was determined that she would not live out a similar experience.

With the money from the gentleman in Chicago, Mother booked passage on a steamship that would take her from Lithuania to America via Ellis Island and then by train to Chicago to be reunited with her sister. She rejoiced at this reunion but she dreaded another meeting, the meeting with her sponsor. The only thing that she was sure of was that she did not escape the bondage of marriage in the old country to end up bound and married in America.

The day for the meeting came. The gentleman arrived wearing a three-piece suit, a starched white shirt, and a bowtie. He removed his bowler hat when he entered the apartment but he kept his cigar tightly gripped in the corner of his mouth. Mother took one look at him and thought, this is not the man for me. He looked my mother over and liked what he saw—a strong, good-looking woman who would serve his purposes. When he said, “Well, when are we getting married?” her response was, “Never!”

Then the shouting started.

“But I paid for your passage, you owe me.”

Mother said that she would work and repay the debt.

He said, “I’ll have you deported.”

Her response was that she had entered the country legally and was going to stay. She worked two jobs to repay the debt. By day, she plucked chickens in a butcher shop. Of course,

she had to kill them first. She worked nights in a bank scrubbing floors on her hands and knees. This was in a large bank in downtown Chicago, one with huge marble floors. She managed to repay the money and she was a free woman.

She chose not to marry for ten years until she met my father. He fulfilled her criteria for marriage. First, he was tidy and good-looking. She said that she would not marry an ugly man because then she would have ugly children. Second, he needed to have money. When Father showed her his bank savings book, she said yes to his proposal and they were married. I was born eight years later.

When I turned five, my parents registered me for kindergarten at the local public school. My mother walked me to school the first day and left me at the door. I went in and sat down on the little chair by the table.

The teacher had her hands full because so many children were crying and one little boy kept running between the doors in the room shouting, "I'm going home." Not much happened that first day beyond the teacher calling attendance. When the bell rang, my mother was waiting for me at the door.

"So, Elyte, what did you learn today?"

"Mamyte, I learned to listen."

That was a lesson that would carry me through to my high school days. My report card had all A's but the comments said, "Quiet and shy. Needs to speak more." I didn't speak up because I was afraid that I would say the wrong word. I spoke only Lithuanian at home and English was my second language. What if I answered in the wrong language in school? The children would laugh at me, so the best recourse was silence and so I was labeled as shy.

Halfway through kindergarten, Mother started to wean me from the long walk home. She would meet me half way past the busy intersection. On cold winter days we would go to a neighborhood restaurant where she would order soup. She never asked what the soup of the day was. Soup was the only English word that she was confident enough to say in a restaurant and she knew that two bowls would cost forty cents so it was soup today, and soup the next day. She left a 10-cent tip for the waitress because that was the American way.

When I reached first grade, Mother said that I could walk to school by myself. I was a big girl now. So I wouldn't get confused and turn at the wrong intersection, I devised my own little road map. I would count the taverns as I walked the four blocks-- one, two, three, four, five, six, seven taverns then turn right and cross the intersection and walk the three blocks until I saw the school. There was only one bakery, one gas station, one grocery store and a few dime stores, but you could count at least two taverns on the blocks in the old neighborhood so taverns became my road marks to education

My parents were at my eighth grade graduation as I proudly received my diploma from Marquette Elementary School. My parents had not attended any of my school events during those nine years. Mother always said, "We don't speak English so good. This school is for you." Mother was there to see me get my high school diploma from Maria High School. Father had died when I was a sophomore. When I got my first college degree, Mother was there with my stepfather. She had remarried when I was a sophomore in college and I moved into the dorms.

In college I had majored in English. I graduated and became a high school teacher. Mother said that that was a good profession for a girl, "When you have a family, you can be home with them during summers." The three choices for women of my day were teacher, nurse, and secretary.

When I got my Masters degree, there was no ceremony to attend. I had moved to California because of my husband's job and the degree that I had completed in Chicago was mailed to me. I wasn't even home to receive it from the postman. I was at the local supermarket selling Girl Scout cookies with my daughter's troop. Ten years later, I got my Doctorate.

I worked hard to fulfill my parents' dreams –“You will go to college”. What they didn't say out loud was, “ Because we never could and we don't want this dream to die with us.” So the silent message that I kept hearing was: live our dream. After second grade, I didn't need to count taverns to find my way to the schoolhouse but I did use the lesson that I learned that first day in kindergarten, the lesson to listen, listen to the dream.