

Loving
LATVIA

I may have left my country when I was a little girl, but my heart has always been with the people of Latvia.

BY PAM KNEPPER



Zaiga Phillips was 9 years old when she and her family left Latvia in 1944. Fleeing Soviet occupation during World War II, more than 40 years would pass before she would set foot in her home country again.

“When I left Latvia it all happened so quickly. I was told to take a few belongings. So I packed some clothes and hid a chicken my relative had given to me in the pocket of my coat. I did not know whether I would return, so I wanted to take the chicken to remember my relative,” says Zaiga. “The chicken survived the crossing of the Baltic Sea, but did not live long after that.”

Zaiga, along with her mother Alma, father Aldolfs, brother Janis and grandmother Maija, left their hometown of Ape, Latvia, via a tortuous route. They traveled mostly by night amongst bombings and shootings. They hid in the hay on horse-drawn wagons, rode in train cars with animals and finally crossed the sea. “I remember getting in a boat and arriving in Danzig, Germany. We then kept traveling and settled in the German town of Pocking, Bavaria. We eventually ended up in

a displaced persons’ camp in Munich,” describes Zaiga. “At first our family lived in a room that housed 30 people, but luckily we soon moved to a small room for only our family.”

Run by the International Refugee Organization, Zaiga says the camp was quite interesting with varied nationalities present.

“Since my family was Latvian, we lived in a part of the camp designated for people from my country,” explains Zaiga. “We had schools, a hospital, Boy and Girl Scouts, music lessons and ballet—everything a little girl could ask for. Plus, my father served as the camp’s group leader for the Latvian people and was able to work in his trained field as a professor in the School of Veterinary Medicine in Munich.”

While living in the camp, the family worked on finding a sponsor.

“We lived in a displaced per-

sons’ camp because we didn’t have any place to call home. So it was up to us to choose another country where we wanted to live and then find a sponsor within that country who would agree to provide shelter and help assimilate us to living there,” says Zaiga.

Many countries in Europe, Australia, South America and the United States were opening their doors to displaced people.

“Luckily, our family had good friends already living in the United States and they worked with Lutheran World Relief to help us find our sponsor, Dr. Todd,” says Zaiga. “He was a veterinarian living in Lakewood, Washington. The Lutheran



FROM LEFT

ZAIGA AND HER BROTHER JANIS HOLDING THEIR PET DUCKS IN LATVIA.

ADOLFS AND ALMA ALKSNIS PRESENT THEIR DAUGHTER ZAIGA WITH FLOWERS TO CELEBRATE HER CONFIRMATION DAY.

ZAIGA IN HER GIRL SCOUTS UNIFORM WHILE LIVING IN A DISPLACED PERSON’S CAMP IN GERMANY.

DR. ZAIGA PHILLIPS LOVES BEING A PEDIATRICIAN AND HELPING CHILDREN LIVE HEALTHY LIVES.

World Federation paid for our travel to the United States. The costs were repaid while working for Dr. Todd, who provided our living quarters.”

Zaiga and her family began their voyage to America in 1949 first by taking a boat from Bremerhaven, Germany, to New York. Zaiga was 14 years old. After traveling for a week on the rough waters of the Atlantic Ocean, the family arrived in New York City. From there they changed boats, went to New Orleans and then began their final trek to Lakewood.

Once the family arrived in Lakewood, Zaiga’s father went to work for Dr. Todd as his assistant. While her father was working, Zaiga began her freshman year at Clover Park High School.

“It was very important to my father that he pay back all the money to the Lutheran World Federation that they spent on bringing us to America,” says Zaiga. “So we scrimped, saved and paid them back in only a year’s time.”

In 1950, the family bought a house in the small community of Mossyrock, Washington, and Zaiga’s father opened his own veterinary office. “My father enjoyed working

with Dr. Todd, but was very happy to have his own office,” says Zaiga. “He allowed me to assist him with surgeries and in the day-to-day care of the animals. These experiences made me appreciate medicine.”

Two years later, Zaiga graduated from Mossyrock High School and that fall began her undergraduate studies at the University of Washington. Three years later she was accepted into the University of Washington School of Medicine.

“My father didn’t want me to study veterinarian medicine, but he thought becoming a doctor to help humans was a great idea,” says Zaiga.

During her residency year at Children’s Hospital in Seattle, Zaiga made the decision to specialize in pediatrics. “I love children,” says Zaiga. “It is very satisfying for me to help them when they are not feeling well or have more serious medical issues to deal with.”

After graduating from medical school, Zaiga got married and moved with her husband first to Colorado and then to Texas, so he could pursue additional medical training in psychiatry. During this time, the couple added son Bert and

daughters Lisa and Sintija to their family. In 1969, the family moved back to Washington State and settled in Bellevue.

Three years later, the couple divorced and Zaiga went to work for the Bellevue School District as a school physician to support her family. Five years later, she joined Pediatric Associates in Bellevue.

“It was quite a big deal when I started at Pediatric Associates because I was the first woman to join the group,” says Zaiga. “They must have liked me because 28 years later I am still there. Being a pediatrician is great fun for me because I get to play with children all day.”

Aside from playing, Zaiga also loves the constant challenges found in medicine. “I am always learning something new and I love taking new knowledge and passing it along to my patients and their families,” says Zaiga.

Over the years Zaiga has noticed both good and bad changes in the field of pediatrics.

“I love that fathers are much more involved in their children’s lives these days. When they come to my office they are fully aware of



their children's medical histories and what needs to be done," says Zaiga. "Thirty years ago that wasn't the case. Fathers didn't have a clue. They always had to call their wife to find out the information they needed."

Another improvement has been the discovery of so many vaccinations. Diseases that used to kill children or make them very ill are now managed with immunizations. Zaiga also agrees that the ability to diagnose different medical problems in children has improved dramatically over the years.

One area that manifests crippling affects on children today is obesity. "I see it every day in my office and it is so sad because it can be avoided," says Zaiga. "Children are spending too much time in front of the computer or watching TV and not getting the physical exercise they need. Plus, they are eating poorly. You add all those things up and it is the recipe for a child with long-term medical problems and disabilities."

Always driven to improve her medical knowledge, in 1982 Zaiga went with a group of American physicians to China to see how the Chinese practice medicine. "I found

the area of acupuncture to be particularly interesting," says Zaiga. "Thanks to advances in medicine, as well as incorporating modern medicine, so many positive results have been made in the lives of people both in China and throughout the world."

But despite all her success as a doctor, one thing that Zaiga had been unable to do was return to her home country. Over the years, her mother had kept in contact with several family members and would often send them packages. But no one in the family had seen each other since 1944! This all changed in 1987 when Zaiga felt the communist hold of Latvia had weakened and she decided it was time to go for a visit. So she, along with her father and two daughters made the long voyage back.

First, they flew to Helsinki,

Finland, and then took a ferry to Estonia. Once in Estonia they took a bus to the city of Riga, Latvia. "When we arrived in Riga on a drab rainy day there were several family members waiting for us with large bou-

I love children. It is very satisfying for me to help them when they are not feeling well or have more serious medical issues to deal with.

quets of flowers. It was quite emotional for all of us because so much time had gone by since we had last seen one another," says Zaiga. "My father's sister Marta, who had glaucoma and hadn't seen her brother in 50 years, came to the gathering. Because she could no longer see clearly, she touched his head and noticed he didn't have much hair left. She told him he had turned into an old man while he had been away in America. My father just laughed and hugged his sister, grateful to see her again."



FROM LEFT

DR. PHILLIPS VISITING CHINA IN 1982 TO WITNESS HOW THE CHINESE PRACTICE MEDICINE.

ZAIGA WITH DAUGHTERS LISA AND SINTIJA, SON BERT AND GRANDSON JAKOB.

THE UP-AND-COMING DR. PHILLIPS AS A PRE-MED STUDENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON IN 1954.

ZAIGA'S FATHER ALOLFS ALKSNIS WITH HIS SISTER MARTA IN LATVIA IN 1987. THE TWO SIBLINGS HAD NOT SEEN EACH OTHER IN 50 YEARS.

