

## MY PARENTS

By Valdimar Björnsson

*When one discusses my mother's patriotism, then it is surely time to mention my father.*

As the editor of a weekly paper for some time, it was often my responsibility to compose eulogies. Fortunately, I have never had to write about close relatives of mine until now - about my deceased mother and my living father.

My mother was 71 years old when she died on the 19th of August, 1949. My father will be 83 this year, born 17th of August, 1872.

Ingibjörg Agústína was my mother's name, the daughter of Jón Jónsson, farmer at Hóll in Hörðudalur in Dalasýsla and his wife Halldóra Baldvinsdóttir. Jón Sveinbjörnsson, my great-grandfather, was descended from Skagafjörður, while Halldóra, my grandmother, was from Middalur in Dalasýsla. The twin brothers, my grandfather Jón and Teitur, took charge of Hóll as a two family farm, when their father died. Jón moved to America with a fairly large group in 1883. My mother was then not yet five years old.

First the family went to Winnipeg, and there my grandfather built a log cabin on the bank of the Red River, just where the Canadian National Railway station stands today. He first worked, as did many other immigrants during those years, on laying a railway. There were no fewer than 11 men in the work gang named Jón, all of them Jónsson - the foreman knew them only by their numbers. Grandfather then decided to adopt the name Hörðal, from the Hörðudalur valley; the spelling was latter changed to Hurdal in English. The family, Jón and Halldóra and their children - Jón, Helga, Ingibjörg Agústína, my mother, Hjörtur and Sigríður, twins, Þorgerður and Asa, who were born in Winnipeg - lived to a large degree on fish, caught in the Red River, during the first summer.

My grandfather believed that he could better support a large family as a farmer and moved within a short time to the Pingvellir colony in Saskatchewan province, 350 miles north-west of Winnipeg, near the village Churchbridge. There my grandfather became a widower in 1890. There my mother lost her mother, when she herself was only 12 years old. From that day on, mother worked to support herself. She never became a long-term student. She worked in homes in the settlement and continued to do so in Winnipeg, when my grandfather moved there again with his seven children, shortly after grandmother died.

Mother could attend school to a limited degree in Winnipeg. She was confirmed in the Lutheran congregation of the late Rev. Jón Bjarnason, where the preparatory classes for confirmation were mainly conducted by Björn B. Jónsson, who was a theology candidate at the time. Rev. Björn married my parents a few years later; by then he was a minister in Minneota in Minnesota in the United States. He was a nephew of Kristján, the mountain poet.

Mother was in her 23rd year when she left Winnipeg for good in 1901. First, she went to Minneapolis and stayed til summer with a friend, who had moved there from Winnipeg with her husband, Hjörtur Larússon, musician. Then mother arrived in the village Minneota, over 160 miles south-west of Minneapolis, because she had been offered a job in the "Big Store" as the market run by Olafur Arngrímsson (Anderson) from Búastadir in Vopnafjörður was called. She worked in that store until she married Gunnar Björnsson, my father, on 29th of

March 1903.

Mother became responsible for a family, so to speak, from her wedding day. Kristín Benjamínsdóttir, my grandmother, was there. There was also an old man, Þorbergur Guðbrandsson, a sort of beneficiary of my father. And an immediate addition to the group was a young man, newly arrived from Reykjavík, Sveinn Oddsson, a printer, whom father had hired to work on the publishing of an Icelandic monthly publication, *Vinland*, which was printed in father's printshop. Some newly wed women today might have felt that starting a home in this way was more than enough, but mother's quiet temperament never wavered.

Every man feels that his mother's good qualities are indescribable and beyond appreciation. This is surely buried in each man's nature, and I have never heard fainter praise for any one than when it is said that he was particularly fond of his mother. It is difficult to describe without prejudice the character of one's own mother. It has always seemed to me that one of the strongest forces in my mother's life was the quite temperament which I mentioned before - balance, patience, unassuming modesty. She was hard working, energetic, and especially proficient. And she also had a happy disposition - lively and vivacious in discussions.

It could truly be said of my parents and their six children who reached adulthood, what President Eisenhower said about his family, when he looked back on his childhood: 'Of course we were poor, but we did not know it then'. There was never much money. I always admire my mother, when I compare her condition with what is now customary. There was no running water in the house. We fetched water in a bucket from a well at Snorri Högnason's, a neighbor not far away. Washing and bath water was rain water from the roof, pumped from the well under the kitchen floor. The first three children were boys - and clothes were passed down the row, from Hjálmar to Valdimar to Björn. One grew into the other's clothes, as has been the case in many places - and mother sewed everything. A girl was born next, was named Halldóra for her grandmother on her mother's side, and then she died, a few months old, from pneumonia - which causes no deaths in this age of wonder drugs. Then two girls were born, Helga and Stefanía, and the last baby, Jón, in 1919, when mother was past forty.

Mother looked after this conglomeration of children with constant energy, gentle care, peerless patience, true mother's love and spirit of sacrifice. Grandmother died in 1920, almost eighteen years after my parents were married. Five years later my parents moved to St. Paul, the capital of Minnesota, when father was appointed to the State tax committee. The three younger children moved with them, but we three older brothers remained in Minnesota. We continued in the printing shop, took turns publishing the paper - and one or two of us were always there, while the third attended the University of Minnesota. Thus we all completed our university education, even if there was a gap between our preparatory education and the final stage in Minneapolis.

Mother's living conditions improved in the large cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis for the rest of her life. She missed her friends from her younger years in Minnesota and spent all summers there during the first years after moving to the big city. But she was sociable wherever she was, and kept faith with her church and religious life, equally in the Twin Cities as in the home village. She was a Christian in her deepest nature. Grandmother taught us to say grace: 'Heavenly Father, bless us and these Your gifts, which we accept, from Your mild love, for Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.' But mother had us continue to recite this grace. Mother urged us to attend church, no less after we were grown up than when we were children.

There was no Icelandic social association in Minneapolis, other than the women's Hekla Club. Mother undertook normal duties as an officer of the club, and there her nationalistic feelings found an outlet. She was exceptionally patriotic as an Icelander, this mother of ours. Her work in an association of English speakers, the International Institute in St. Paul, was the strongest proof of this. The participation of the Icelanders in Minnesota in the displays and work of the Festival of Nations - an exhibition by the national minorities, 30 in all - would never have come to pass if not for the leadership displayed by my mother.

She was always unnecessarily sensitive to the fact that she had never had the opportunity of receiving an education. Sometimes there were signs of a feeling of inferiority in this regard. But this was needless. No other would have done better than she, on the few occasions when she ventured onto a speakers platform - where father was so much at home - and started to tell "foreigners" about Iceland and Icelandic culture. In particular, her nationalist feelings grew stronger during her last years, although they always had been strong. It gave her the greatest pleasure to recall memories from two visits to Iceland. She and her husband attended the 1000 year celebration of the Icelandic Alþing in 1930, and again visited Iceland as guests of the Icelandic National Association and the Government of Iceland in 1940.

When one discusses mother's patriotism, then it is surely time to mention my father. He is an Icelander and has been one from top to toe since he was born at Mással, a cotter's farm next to Sledbrjótur in the Jökulsár district in Norður Múlasýsla, on the 17th of August 1872, where his mother, Kristín Benjamímsdóttir, descended from families in Þingeyjarsýsla, was a maid. His father, Björn Björnsson from Hallbjarnarstaðir in Skriðdalur, son of Asmundur Hallgrímsson from Sandfell, was at the time a farmhand at Hvanná in Jökuldalur.

Father can scarcely remember Iceland from his infancy, as he was a few months short of four years old, when he left with his mother during the summer of 1876. But a more Icelandic man, deep down under, I will probably never meet. Since my parents were raised almost entirely in America, it strikes me as being strange in their case, and that of many others, how truly Icelandic they became. Father has always spoken Icelandic as if he never left home - the accent, choice of words, concepts, sentence structure, spirit, all totally Icelandic. And this has remained, despite the fact that he really had to support himself and his family by the use of English as the editor of a paper published in that language. Never was his knowledge of Icelandic a hindrance to him, quite the opposite. His Icelandic has, in my opinion, increased his power over and understanding of English - and his editorials in that language were considered by far the best in any weekly paper in Minnesota for many years.

Grandmother knew a large number of poems, and father received that rich inheritance. As far as that goes, the spiritual inheritance was the only one that grandmother left behind. This can never be measured in monetary terms, but it is a valuable treasure none the less.

Grandmother's courage and sacrifices fill one with admiration, when thinking about father. She comes barehanded with this little boy from home - he was her only possession. She supports him, makes a home for him in a sod hut, works for a while for a Norwegian farm family to the north of the village of Minneota, and there father learned the Norwegian Valdres dialect, which he has never forgotten. Father started early to do what he could to ease his mother's burden. He is with her as a shepherd and errand runner as a small boy amongst Icelandic farmers in the settlement to the west of town for a time.

He first attends "school" in the Eastern Settlement, upstairs in the house of Björn at Stórhóll - Björn Gíslason, Knight of the Order of Dannebrog, from Haugstaðir in Vopnafjörður. He attends grade school at Marshall, thirteen miles east of Minneota, one winter - grandmother moves there with him, gets a room on the second floor above a store, works to support herself and the little boy, who has by now reached confirmation age. He attends some school in Minneota as well - completes the equivalent of high school, or barely that.

In Minneota, then a village with a couple of hundred people, almost every head of household owned a cow during those years. Father was employed as a cow herder during the summers, on grazing land just to the north of the village. He worked as a carpenter for some years, working for the late Loftur Jónsson from Lundarbrekka in Bárðardalur and for Kristján Schram from Reykjavík. Then he worked behind the counter in a store, attended a commercial school down south in Quincy, Illinois, for a winter, studied law for two years in the offices of a Minneota lawyer, Kristján Magnússon, son of Magnús Gíslason, from the Bárðar valley. In the year 1895 his career as a newspaper man commenced as the joint editor of the Minneota Mascot, a weekly, which was founded in 1891. He left that position after two years, but then he bought the paper alone in 1901 and owned it for more than 40 years. There he made his sons into printers and editors.

My father was a loving father from the very beginning. This can probably be said about most fathers, but this was really a noticeable characteristic in his case. He never made a trip without remembering his children at home - and as he early became involved in state politics the trips were many. If he was away for only a few days, he sent postcards and letters to the children. And he was always generous with presents, even more than he could well afford. He took delight in giving to others - and has bestowed freely from what has acquired, spiritually and of the chattles of this world.

My father was a member of the Minnesota Legislature in St. Paul for two terms, attending the 1913 and 1915 congresses as the member for Lyon County in the south-west part of the state. He was the Chairman of the Republican Party of Minnesota in 1914, in addition to being one of the major supporters for many years of the party in his home district. He was appointed to the State Tax Commission in 1925 and held that position for ten years; He was appointed to the State Board of Tax Appeals, when that board was created in 1939, was reappointed by the Governors of Minnesota in 1945 and 1951, but resigned on April 1, 1955, after nearly 30 years in public office, in his 83rd year.

I will not discuss my father's leadership abilities, as revealed both in his home district and on the wider field. Editors always become involved in such things, not least in small towns; he was a member of the School Board for many years, he was the President of the Association of Editors of Minnesota in his time, the Chairman of the Church Committee of the Lutheran congregation in Minnesota for many years and often attended the church congresses, he travelled throughout the Icelandic settlements in Canada and the United States delivering speeches, was a speaker at the Icelandic Day celebrations and the Icelandic Association, and so on.

My father had a good command of words, both in conversations and in the innumerable articles he has written as an editor for decades. His mother had a humorous way with words, and her remarks did not miss their target. Father received this all-Icelandic sense of humor in his cradle. He has used it brilliantly both in conversations and on the speaking platform - humor that is pointed and yet polished, quick to respond, and powerful as a speaker not least because a ray of innocent playfulness shone in the midst of serious logic. He was a

fine figure of a man when he was at his best, deep-voiced with exceptional control on the nuances of his voice. He could readily pass from humor to sarcasm, from quiet narration to thundering accusations. He was an outstanding speaker both in Icelandic and English. Although he has practically not tried his hand at making verses, a deep-rooted poetical streak has been one of his traits. He loves poetry - and knows a vast amount of Icelandic poetry, verses, literary gems, and even old Icelandic *rimur*. He is equally well at home in English literature, and the poetic gratification which he gets from beautiful language is obvious in his speeches and writings.

Regardless of the state of father's finances, he has always seemed to be able to buy books. He has shown good taste in his choice of literature, as witnessed by his collection of Icelandic, English and Norwegian books. He often read aloud to us children, the Icelandic sagas and much else. If anyone became tired of being read to, he would tell us stories himself, with great skill. He was by and large a self-educated man, but had read so widely, even in his youth, that he was always the equal of those, who could point to university degrees and titles.

My parents saw to it that all six of their children received university educations, and for that they deserve thanks. But the inheritance they left for their children, not heavy on the balance scale of money and possessions, will always be unmeasurable as spiritual values. This is the true "Icelandic Inheritance", granted to the descendants of that nation, which Matthías Jochumsson once described as "the saga, poet, hero nation".

This precious inheritance has been given by my parents to their six children, an inheritance which contains all the best qualities of the Icelandic emigrants to the western world: a desire to learn, this unquenchable longing for education, whether within a school or outside, love of literature and poetry, loyalty to just forms of government and the willingness to sacrifice for them. But the root of all this is the respect implanted in us for the Icelandic language and its primacy in the transfer and maintenance of the Icelandic cultural inheritance.