

My Improbable Journey

by Vera Gottlieb

Rome, 1950.

I was twenty-two and had been traveling through Europe for six weeks with Carol, my college roommate. We had another month remaining before returning to the United States.

I attributed my aching neck that morning to our very energetic first day in Rome that had included the Sistine Chapel. I got out of bed and suddenly fell to the floor. Picking myself up, I again fell down. Something was very wrong. I called the American Embassy and asked them to send me an American doctor. A physician arrived and proclaimed I had spinal meningitis. The medication he prescribed would, he assured me, have me well on the road to recovery in twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours later, I was

paralyzed from the waist down.

This time I asked the Embassy to please send me an Italian Neurologist and they sent an impressive Dr. Ruggieri. He spoke no English and I spoke no Italian, but we managed with fractured French. After examining me, he said he was quite sure I had polio. He would have to take me to his Clinic for the definitive spinal tap.

I remember a lot about my experience at the clinic, which turned out to be a mental institution, in post-war Rome. I was placed in isolation. Tests were completed and confirmed the polio diagnosis. I was confined to bed for a month. Once they gave me two canes, stood me up and asked if I could walk. That went nowhere except back to bed! I could only slightly move my legs (with great distortion of my body). The doctor said they had no experience in Italy with polio in adults because only children got polio or had developed an immunity. Two of the more notable memories are that breakfast was a hard boiled egg, served in an aluminum tin and that toilet paper was simple newsprint.

In the meantime, my parents were expecting to hear about our travels to southern Italy and Sicily, so I had to come up with some excuse. Carol had disappeared, but fortunately a kind bellhop from the hotel where we had been staying supplied me with postcards. I sent one every few days telling my parents I was having such a good time in Rome and had decided to go no further. I was not in the habit of lying to my parents, but I felt I was sparing them.

A month passed, and the day was arriving when I was due in Le Havre, France, to board the ship that would take me home. I had completely ignored the fact that at no time had the subject of money arisen. I was astounded when Dr. Ruggieri told me that he had arranged for a sleeper car in a train that would take me to Le Havre. He rejected my offer to pay him with what little money I had left, but did agree to accept a donation to the clinic. He then gave me two envelopes. One was to be shown at the international border and contained a phony diagnosis. (A polio diagnosis would not have permitted me to continue even though I was no longer contagious). The second envelope contained my complete history and was to be given to my New York doctor.

When our ship docked in New York, the shock to my parents seeing me brought down in a wheelchair made me wonder if I had done the wise thing in not preparing them. A close medical friend of my parents contacted Dr. Frederick Marek, whom he considered to be one of the finest and most experienced polio physicians in New York. The next day, Dr. Marek arrived at our apartment. After examining me, he said it was unlikely I would ever walk again – a prognosis I didn't accept. He said that the previous hospital (in Italy) trying to force me to walk with such distortion was truly harmful and ordered a physical therapist who came five days a week. My physical therapist made no attempts to get me to walk for

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many months as she worked on me. It took almost a year, but I went from a wheelchair to crutches to two canes and finally, I could walk on my own.



My years in the coop program at Antioch college and the many difficulties I'd faced on various jobs, had prepared me for challenges - and this was just another one.

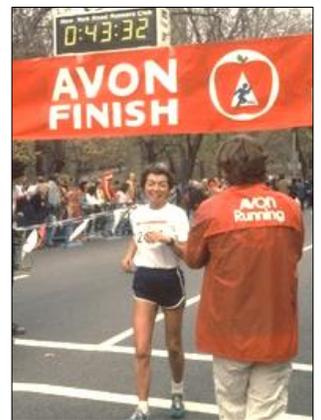
The years that followed were full. I married, raised two children, volunteered at the coop nursery I had co-founded many years earlier, continued my graduate studies and managed my husband Joe's engineering consulting business. There had been a one month hospital stay for a herniated disc, followed by several months in a brace. My life was busy but I felt something was missing. Finally at the age of 47,

I decided I might have the answer.

We lived near a small park. I tried walking around it very rapidly. The next day my legs felt so weak I had to remain in bed. I waited three weeks and then started a much slower program, progressing from walking to jogging and finally to running six days a week. I joined the New York Road Runners Club and entered competitive 10k races. In between races I preferred training alone or with my husband Joe. I ran 5 or 6 miles a day in the rain and snow, and I ran whether the temperature was 5 degrees or 95 degrees. I ran the mini marathon. Anyone who has run long distances will probably admit that distance running is addictive. It is! I continued running well into my late 60's. But then something changed.



My left leg which had never fully recovered from polio, would suddenly buckle. I was planning to run another 10k race in Central Park and had always completed every race I took part in. This time I had doubts. Joe and I found a spot at the four mile mark where he would wait for me, instead of at the finish line as usual. Long before I reached four miles, I realized I couldn't finish. Joe knew something had happened when I failed to appear. I had walked the last two miles slowly and after finding Joe and resting, we walked the final two miles together.



Then began the months of testing for everything: multiple sclerosis, brain tumors, spinal tumors, Lou Gehrig's disease and more. Finally, the cause was understood. But, there was less agreement as to what to do about what came to be known as post-polio syndrome.

I went to the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Washington D.C. for a 2-day evaluation at their famous Post-Polio Clinic. They told me that for five months I was to sit for most of the day. I hadn't cried when I got polio, nor when I realized I needed to slow down, nor with the post-polio diagnosis. Now, I burst into tears and said "no." I couldn't do it.

We finally reached an agreement: no more running, not even jogging. Walking was permitted for short distances only. Initially I complied. Five months later, when I returned to the Rehabilitation Hospital, I had increased my walking to four miles a day. This time they were firmer and I gave in. At almost seventy, I was ready to comply.

The experts differ on whether the more than twenty years of running had accelerated my post-polio syndrome or perhaps, had kept it in abeyance. The consensus is that moderation is better. Over the years, many people have asked me if I would have done things differently had I known that the excessive running might have contributed to my current post-polio syndrome. My answer has always been "No!" I have never regretted it for a moment. I have the memories of those many years of joyous running, and an outlook on life that has helped get me through ninety-one years.