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in the post-war era of World War II, while many people of various nations were caught up in reconstructing their lives, Sylvia Ellis was learning to ice skate in a time of rationing and rebuilding, of picking up the shattered pieces of lives and homes. She chose to listen to the music and see the lighter side of youth.

Born in Melbourne, Australia, she decided to leave the country. Ellis attended school in a small town that provided a sheltered existence. Growing up as an only child and losing her father at a young age, she had an extremely close relationship with her mother.

Late in her teenage years, after watching friend, figure skates. Ellis decided – with her mother’s permission – to take up the sport. Her friends tried out the activity after a few years, but Ellis carried on – and in 1947, that perseverance provided an invaluable opportunity.

Acknowledging that she received a lucky break, she and a group of friends were afforded the opportunity to go to England to perform in a new show that had just received financial backing.

The England show opened and closed immediately, leaving the four girls to find another show in which to perform. Good fortune found them to another opportunity in Paris. They were hired to perform in the Paris show and stayed there for several years touring around Belgium and Germany.

Ellis was familiar with the area, as she had spent a substantial period of time in France while she was skating.

The group reorganized once more, requiring Ellis and her husband to fly into Berlin to perform, as they could not go by road or train at that time. Ellis was quick to admit there was nothing like being in the theater and watching people’s faces when they are having a good time.

“It was a feeling akin to none other. Seeing the smile we put on people’s faces made the traveling and lifestyle worthwhile. It is difficult enough to put a smile on someone’s face. It was just satisfying to be able to do that during such a tumultuous time.”

Probably the most asked question is, “How did you make the ice in those venues,” which ranged from football stadiums and exhibition halls to buildings in Spain and a more than 2,000-year-old Roman arena in France.

“Generators and pipes and ice-making machinery traveled with us – two sets of everything while we worked in a town using one set, the second set was in the next town being set up.”

After a 14-year skating career, Ellis decided it was time to go home. She left the group and went back to Australia to pick up the pieces and start life over by working as a secretary in an oil company until 1970.

An advertisement for a secretarial job in Papua New Guinea caught her eye, and she applied for the job and moved. The position was in a remote area that was primarily tropical jungle. The company for which she was newly employed was building a copper mine on the island of Bougainville.

“Never gave thought to the danger involved in my excursions. I was philosophical about it. If you had to sit and wait for a tree to be removed from the only road open that crossed the mountain back to civilization, then you sit and wait.”

The company for which she was employed had to build a town, port facilities and residence for its employees.

“Worked six days a week. On Sunday, the group would go down the mountain, providing the road was open and clear to the beach at the port.”

A true testament to the longevity of her friendships, Ellis is still in touch with a few people who were there with her on the mountain. A girlfriend she made there just recently came to visit and stay with her in San Antonio.

It is during her time in Papua that she met and married her husband, John. Since everyone was so isolated and amenities were sparse, she wore shorts and she wore a casual pant suit to the wedding.

When her engineering contract in Papua ended in 1972, she was assigned to a job in the South of France. Ellis was familiar with the location, as she had spent a substantial period of time in France while she was skating.

The company reorganized once more, requiring Ellis and her husband to move back to her homeland of Australia. Subsequently, they were sent to Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela for his work.

“Not all the locations were glamorous like the South of France. Some were quite difficult with nowhere to go for recreation and an extreme language barrier. Somehow we made the best of it and carried on.”

The marriage was a second for Ellis’ husband, and as he already had three daughters, they never had children together. Her stepdaughters played a large role in her final move to Texas, where they settled her into the Independence Hill Retirement Resort Community after her husband of 15 years and 90-year-old mother passed away. They wanted her close.

“This opened up a whole new chapter in life. Making new friends, doing new activities such as exercise classes, joining the Wine Club, attending the great celebrations on high days and holidays – so many things to do. Independence Hill has a great vibe. It becomes a question of, ‘What shall we do today?’ With so much on offer, it can be a hard decision.”

Sitting on a buffet next to the table where we sat were numerous framed photos. They were mostly of children and grandchildren, but one small shot caught my eye. It was of a young and beautiful Ellis from years ago in a skating performance.

When asked what thoughts and emotions were conjured from looking at the photo, she said, “It reminds me mainly of the people I encountered, the loves with whom I interacted. A show would run a year or more, so when I see those pictures, I know exactly where I was and with whom I was working.”

The particular picture on the buffet that caught my eye was of Ellis in costume for an Italian number set a couple hundred years ago during a wine harvest.

There were four showgirls, and the rest of the girls were the people who would be carrying buckets, picking grapes …

Ellis vividly described that the performance had a festival-type feeling to it. Thoughtful pauses when asked about the people she knew.

A theme of relationships persisted as we continued our talk while pouring over her cherished photographs. One such friendship in which she is actively engaged has had more than 80-year span.

There were many thoughtful pauses as she stopped to quietly remember the people from over the course of her life. Gently tracing the outline of the pictures, she softly said, “Goodness me. They are all just so long ago.”

As the time with Ellis came to a close, I was left with the nostalgia of the time passed, the passion and zest for life ever present in her eyes, as memories silently played like an old movie in her mind.

“I was never ambitious for anything in particular. I SKATED HARD and worked hard because I liked doing it.”

With an ice skating career and marriage that took her everywhere from Paris to Papua New Guinea, Sylvia Ellis fondly recalls an era gone, but not forgotten.

By JELLY HAMILTON

Photography: ROBIN JERSTAD