

Eulogy for Daisy S McCann (1927-2022)¹

I want to begin by thanking everyone who came, in person or online, to offer condolences and come together in fellowship with us to remember Daisy. Thank you very much. The presence of so many family and friends warms the heart and lifts the spirit on what would otherwise be such a purely sad occasion. And I want to offer my gratitude to each of you who is contributing to the Scholarship fund established in my parents memory. Your gift will keep on giving to University of Toronto students following Daisy's example in trying to make a better life for themselves and their communities. For my family and I, Daisy's passing marks the ending of an era. Its an era, which though rooted in the past, has lessons to all of us for the future.

On March 8, 1927 in Hamburg Germany, Gisela Schoendorff was born into a prosperous family of assimilated German Jews. Even her grandmother kept a Christmas tree in her home each December. Her grandfather was Chairman of the Board of Rudolf Karstadt AG, which was, and is still as far as I know, the largest department store chain in Germany. It was undergoing a period of explosive expansion, and her father was an executive with the company whose job was to set up and open new stores. Although he had completed a year or two of medical school, he enlisted as an officer in the German cavalry when the First World War broke out. On the Eastern front, he was captured in his first skirmish by the Russian Army, and sent to a prisoner of war camp in Kransnojarsk. After managing to escape the camp, he walked ever westward following the TransSiberian railroad, exchanging medical advice for food and shelter in the villages he encountered along the way. By the time he arrived in Sweden on foot, the war was over and his hair had turned white. The Red Cross managed to reunite him with his parents in Germany, where he entered his father's business. It was while managing the Rudolf Karstadt store in Leipzig that Robert met his future wife, Käte Hamlet, who later became known as Mushie within her family. Over the next several years, they married and produced both Daisy (who was then known as 'Gisi') and her older sister Else. In 1929, the family moved to Berlin to open a new Rudolf Karstadt store. The largest in the world at the time, it was built over not just one but two of the U-bahn stations in Berlin's subway network.² The family also acquired a piece of land, on which her father and grandfather built homes separated by two pools and a hothouse, where her grandfather cultivated orchids and collected impressionist paintings. Her grandfather's home is now the official residence of the Israeli ambassador to Germany. I believe the new Israeli embassy stands on the site of her father's house.

Both her father and grandfather, now titled Kommerzienrat Hermann Schoendorff, played Skat in a weekly card game that included Hjalmar Schacht — a well-connected financier who went on to become minister of finance in Hitler's first government, before parting ways with the Nazis. He advised the Schoendorff's that they were marked men and recommended they leave the country should the Nazis take power.

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²The building was later converted to a supply depot by the Nazis, who blew it up before the end of the war rather than risk its contents falling into the hands of the approaching Russian forces.

After learning the outcome of the 1932 election, Robert and Hermann Schoendorff left Germany the following day, sending a telegram requesting that Daisy's mother dispose of the properties and meet them in Czechoslovakia. This process took several months, during which Daisy — still called Gisi — commenced kindergarten. When the family moved to Bruno (Czechoslovakia) where her father opened a five and dime store modelled on the American Kresge's, Daisy and her sister were placed in a boarding school in (Aegeri) Switzerland.

The family's next stop was Spain where in 1934 they opened SEPU (Sociedad Espanola de Precios Unicos) stores in Barcelona and Madrid on behalf of Swiss investors. The stores remained in business until (I visited Spain in) 2002. Daisy described life in Barcelona as picking up where Berlin had left off. They lived in a large and beautiful house with her parents, attended a Swiss school in German, and were saddled with a German-speaking governess. In spite of this, Daisy and Else learned Spanish, and life was good. Two or three years later, while the girls were vacationing in Belgium with their cousins from Amsterdam, the Spanish Civil War broke out. When several months brought it no closer to a resolution, the girls were returned from Amsterdam to the boarding school in Switzerland which they hated. Their parents required them to write weekly missives in Spanish, in a vain quest to preserve their Spanish fluency. Later in life my mother discovered these letters among her mother's effects: while she could recognize her own handwriting she could no longer understand what she had written. Although she continued to converse with her mother in German, after Mushie's death in 1990 Daisy's fluency in German lapsed as well. It was not until the last weeks of her life that she began to slip occasionally into German or once into Spanish. Although her final words to me were 'Thank you,' the penultimate thing which she said was 'Gracias.'

Robert and Mushie remained in Barcelona while the war dragged on. While not very enamoured of the communists, Robert also said "I didn't leave Hitler's Germany to live under Franco in Spain." After reviewing their options Robert decided to emigrate to Canada, which he had visited and liked on a business trip in the year Daisy was born. Selling the Renoir's he had inherited from his recently deceased father yielded enough funds to obtain permission to emigrate to Canada in a period when "None was too many." Early in 1939 they sailed from Liverpool on one of CPR's drunken duchesses (the Duchess of Richmond), Robert at the prow facing the new world with his girls, and Mushie weeping at the stern as the old world receded from view. On the boat they decided to adopt new names for their new life. Robert changed the family name to Sheldon, and Gisi changed her name to Daisy.

Although both parents spoke French and neither spoke English, they continued on to Toronto after landing in Montreal because Robert was savvy enough to anticipate the emergence of English as the language of the future. The family resettled in Toronto, buying a house less than three miles from here and a short walk from where I now live. Robert used the last of his fortune to establish a small printing press. He also loaned some money to friends and to relatives. One of these was a farmer who paid the family back over time through a weekly delivery of three dozen eggs. Daisy became an expert at cooking with eggs. Some of you probably experienced

her soufflés and omelets. Daisy excelled at Oakwood Collegiate, where she and Else attended high school. The war in Europe and eventually the Pacific ended. But then tragedy hit the Sheldon family. Born with Gaucher's disease, Else, who had always been sickly, died in (17) August 1945. Five months later, after a brief but terrible illness, her father was also dead. Still in her last year of high school, Daisy was devastated. For the first time in their lives, Daisy and her mother had to provide for themselves. Daisy found work in a friend's chocolate shop. By the end of the first month she was so sick of chocolate she wouldn't eat it again for years. Her mother sold the printing press to the printer and found a position proof-reading at the University of Toronto Press, where she eventually worked her way up to Chief Proof Reader. Not bad for an immigrant who learned English at the age of forty.

In the fall of 1946, Daisy commenced studies at the University of Toronto. Although studying science, she often skipped classes to attend Northrop Frye's lectures on literature instead. That summer she took a job filing income tax returns for Revenue Canada. By the second day Daisy was so bored that she left after lunch with a friend working on a Lake Ontario pleasure cruiser that was hiring. Daisy took a job as a waitress and eventually hostess on the Canada Steamship Lines' SS Kingston. (While waitresses earned better tips than the hostesses, they had to bunk together; the perk of being a hostess was that you got a cabin to yourself.) It was a good thing she did. As her high-school acquaintance once described: "There were two crops of men when your mother and I were in University. There were the boys we had gone to high school with, and there were the men who had won the war. It was very romantic. I married one. Your mother married one..." During the war, Joe McCann had been an RCAF fighter pilot stationed in England. He was now a porter and eventually purser on the boat. The latter was a position of distinction: it entitled him to a cut of every illicit bottle of alcohol that the porters smuggled onto the boat at the passengers' requests. They were berthed alongside the Noronic on the night it burned. When Joe returned from taking Daisy home that night, most sailors were still out drinking, so Joe and a couple of his colleagues had to take the Kingston out into the harbour by themselves to protect it from the fire. Daisy and Joe met that summer, dated through University, and married upon Daisy's graduation. Joe had graduated from optometry a year earlier. Having a practical bent, he explained to me that "When I came back from the war and the government was offering funding for veterans to get a post-secondary education, I was no longer a young man, so I looked around for a program that wouldn't take too long to complete but would provide an adequate income when it was done. Optometry was a 3 year program, whereas Medical School took 4 years, so I chose optometry." When he graduated, Joe spent a year in Northern Ontario before taking a two year internship in Windsor. Daisy married him the summer she graduated and joined him in Windsor. She spent the year teaching gym and English at Riverside High School, before finding a job with Wyeth Pharmaceuticals. Tasked with flavoring their newly developed variant on penicillin, she got it to taste like a strawberry milkshake, but was forced to start over when her bosses feared it would lead patients to overdose on the drug. Their plans to return to Toronto soon evaporated. They bought land and built a house

outside Windsor, adjacent to the Beach Grove Golf and Country Club, where my friends and I would eventually spend our youthful summers lounging by the pool, learning to swim, and ordering french fries on our parents' accounts. The house was based on a plan bought at Hudson's department store in Detroit, modified by Daisy and with construction overseen by Joe. Mushie described the result as 'not bad, for a cottage.' Bored at Wyeth, Daisy had entered graduate school at Detroit's Wayne State University, where she completed her MSc (1956) and PhD (1958) in biochemistry. From this point on, Daisy's career evolved entirely in the United States where she held a series of positions of increasing responsibility in the laboratory sciences.

In 1968, she gave birth to your truly. An addition to the house was built to allow Mushie to join the growing family (though she retained her independence, an apartment, and a lover, in Toronto, where she spent most weekends until her death in 1990). Two years later Daisy became Director of Research at Wayne County General Hospital, a position that carried with it an Assistant Professorship at Ann Arbor's University of Michigan. This meant a daily cross-border commute of an hour each way (52 kms) unless she was teaching, in which case it was 1h45 (88 kms). In 1977, Rosalyn Yalow shared the Nobel Prize in medicine for the laboratory diagnostic technique of radioimmunoassay that had been pioneered when Daisy was a graduate student in the 1950s. Regional medical societies devoted to practitioners of this art were beginning to form. Daisy was a leading member of the Midwest Radioimmunoassay Society, which then became a chapter in a national organization of the same name. By 1982 the organization had changed its name to the Clinical Ligand Assay Society and hired Daisy as its Executive Director. In this part-time capacity, Daisy would lead the organization for more than a quarter of a century. Its main activities were fostering networks through local and national scientific meetings devoted to research and education, promoting the subject with awards, and eventually publishing a scientific journal — the Ligand Quarterly. Remuneration from this position did not pay the rent, however.

In the hospital privatization craze of the early 1980s, Wayne County General Hospital was privatized and taken over by a consortium of physicians known as University Medical Affiliates. It did not take long for them to realize that research was not turning short term profits, so in 1986 the division headed by Daisy was disbanded. Hanging out her shingle as an independent research biochemist, Daisy incorporated under the name McCann Associates, rented space in Wayne MI and filled it with her mothballed laboratory equipment that she had purchased from the hospital for a song. Her scientific efforts focused on identifying subtle metabolic differences between cancerous and healthy tissues, with a view to diagnostic and therapeutic applications. Although she continued to teach biochemistry to medical and dental students at the University of Michigan, as a semi-affiliated researcher, she found it hard to attract funding from the National Institutes of Health. Her grant proposals were typically approved, but with a priority too low to actually be funded, especially at the second, more lucrative phase. During her downsizing, she had placed almost all the researchers working under her supervision into positions in industry. She was so successful at this that she decided she could act as a headhunter for medical lab

technologists, medical technologists, and phlebotomists. Thus her second company, Add-a-Tech, Inc. was born. This actually did pay the rent for twenty years. At its height the recruiting business was successful enough to support a second office in Cincinnati and a third in Indianapolis.

In many ways, I grew up in Camelot. As an only child I was doted on by my parents. Towels were warmed in the dryer for my daily bath, which was followed by a nightly hunt through the kitchen for a decorative cardboard sphere containing a bedtime treat left for me by ‘The Gremlin’. I also received presents from my grandmother upon her return from Toronto each week. Although most of these presents were small, the most remarkable of them — certainly from my father’s point of view if not from mine at the time — was the halfsize violin which she bought for me when I was 7 years old. Both of my grandfathers had played the violin, or at least the fiddle, so I was expected to carry on this family tradition. There followed years of private music lessons with constant encouragement from Daisy, summer music camps, and playing in orchestras into my twenties. The only problem with Camelot is that it doesn’t last forever. In 1997 my father Joe was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, with its accompanying rigidity and dementia, which progressed over a seven year period to his death. Those were probably the hardest years of my mother’s life. Following Mushie’s maxim, she celebrated the holidays as they came, took to popping caffeine tablets so she wouldn’t doze off at the wheel during her long commute, and with support from many, achieved her dream of keeping Joe in the home that they had built until the week he died.

With Daisy focused on Joe’s care, Add-a-Tech suffered. The industry was consolidating, margins grew thin, the competition fierce. In 2010 I met my wife, Carolyn. By then, Daisy’s business was losing money, and aged 83, Daisy had broken her femur in an icy fall while hawking my grandfather’s violin to a family in Grand Rapids. The final deal to sell Add-a-Tech to an industry behemoth called On Assignment (now ASGN Inc.) was negotiated from Daisy’s hospital bed in Grand Rapids. The agreement called for Daisy to continue working as a consultant to On Assignment for three more years. During those years I married Carolyn and Ian was born. By the time Dylan arrived in 2014, Daisy was semiretired. She was moonlighting for another medical recruiter in Detroit. When Carolyn and I invited her to move to Toronto to help raise our kids, she said she was touched by our offer but wouldn’t consider it seriously for another 3-4 years. Six months later she called to tell me she was consulting with a real estate agent about positioning herself to sell the house. I told her consulting was a good idea but not to sign anything. At that point my brother-in-law Kent Tisher was living in my basement. As a foreign medical school graduate, he was waiting for his Canadian license to come through so he could practice his profession in Canada. The next day, Daisy was under contract and had scheduled viewings. I was busy hosting visitors to a math conference I had organized that week and told her I didn’t have time to think about it. “You don’t need to think about it” she replied. When I called her on Friday night at dinner time, she asked to call me back because the real estate agent was coming over. When I called her impatiently a few hours later I could hear them on their way out saying “Congratulations, Mrs.

McCann, congratulations!” She had sold her house to Keith Crowder — a former hockey player with the Boston Bruins. She had realized the Canadian dream.

The closing date had been deferred to 1 June 2015. We needed to renovate our home to make space for her. Kent moved into his own place on the first of January, which left us barely enough time to complete the necessary renovations. Daisy arrived with her poodle Jimmy Q at the beginning of June. Aiden was born a year later. For the next four years, Daisy cooked three nights a week for us and did the dishes 7 nights a week. Finally in her 90s, she began to slow down. However, she continued to enjoy life to the fullest extent that her health permitted, exercising at the community center, walking daily, taking in concerts, and joining us on family vacations, most recently to Banff following a 95th birthday weekend that some of you attended less than three months ago.

As she inspired in life, so she continued to inspire in her decline. She was fiercely independent, did not want help, and did not want to be a burden. Shortly before her death, when she had not eaten for many days, her medical advisors asked me to explain to her that her options were either to go into a hospital to see if they could figure out what was wrong, or to die at home. She responded emphatically: “I am not going into the hospital; there is nothing wrong with me.” With the support of my wife Carolyn, who had opened her heart and home to her, and our three wonderful boys Ian, Dylan and Aiden, Daisy realized her dream of dying on her own terms, in the comfort of her home, surrounded by her family. May we all be blessed with such grace and such luck. And may choirs of angels sing her to her rest.

More information about the 20 May '22 passing of Daisy McCann can be found at www.math.toronto.edu/mccann/Daisy

including links for accessing the video recording of her 28 May 2022 celebration of life. Your memories and photos can also be uploaded to the site linked there.

Condolences can also be sent by phone, snail- or e-mail to Robert McCann, 334 Walmer Road, Toronto Ontario Canada M5R 2Y4 Canada 1-647-641-4858 (cell) or [robertjmccann AT gmail.com](mailto:robertjmccann@gmail.com)

In lieu of flowers, the family would be grateful for donations to the University of Toronto to support a scholarship named in memory of Daisy S and John Joseph McCann. Cheques, made payable to the University of Toronto, can be mailed to Donations Management, 21 King’s College Circle, Toronto, ON Canada M5S 3J3. Please note ‘McCann Memorial Fund’ on the memo line of your cheque. Phone donations can be made by calling 1-800-463-6048 and providing credit card details; online donations at the link above. For US tax receipts, US based donors may prefer making their donations through the Associates of the University of Toronto, Inc., at 1-800-699-1736 or www.math.toronto.edu/mccann/Daisy/US-Donor.pdf