

Family Tree April 30, 2024

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### **Agnes Kerker**

Agnes Kerker was born in 1857 in St. Gallen, Switzerland. She was the 5<sup>th</sup> child of 8 born to John and Marie Kerker. John Kerker was an entertainer, entrepreneur, businessman, editor and teacher. Most of all, he was Catholic. He was a stern man, and once he set his mind to something, his confidence and determination was not to be refuted. This was the case when he made the decision to take his family of ten to America in 1866. Agnes had just turned nine, and her chief talent was rocking the boat whenever and wherever she found the opportunity. She was at that age where she'd repeatedly shown herself to be her father's daughter.

"Why do we have to leave?" Agnes, protested. "All of my friends are here," she pleaded. "I'm afraid of the ocean. I'll never ever see my friends again."

Agnes dearly loved St. Gallen. Each time she gazed at the alps from their home, their majestic grandeur enchanted her. She loved her daily life in Switzerland and imagined enjoying a long and predictable life in the only home she'd ever known. Agnes had already planned to get a college degree, teach, marry, and have her children in St. Gallen.

Papa's announcement had launched Agnes into a panic. "Papa, I'm frightened. Surely, we can be just as happy here!" Agnes didn't care about her father's talk of following his dream. At nine, she was already full of vinegar, stomping her feet, and testing how far she could push her father with her temper.

Papa Kerker would look at her and, and even when Agnes was in one of her darkest moods, he saw only delight in her animations. Her ivory skin turned bright red when she got herself into one of her many fights, determined to influence him with her side of the story. Papa loved this about Agnes. She was a beautiful young girl, with the same hazel eyes as he, his high cheekbones, lightly curled dark hair and an unmistakable sharp wit showing itself lately with increased frequency.

Agnes objected the most loudly against the long trip to an unimaginable foreign small town. "Minnesota? What a strange name! Who wants to live there? Minnesota could never be as beautiful as my St. Gallen."

Papa, ever-patient with Agnes, sat down next to her and put his arm around her. She leaned into the comfort of his embrace as he explained the name as told him by a friend who had already settled there. "My dear Agnes, Minnesota takes its name from the Dakota Indians living there. Their name was Wat-pa-minne-sotah. It translates as the river of the cloudy, sky-tinted water. The state was named in 1852 by their political authority, called Congress."

"I'd rather be near clear water. What's the matter with their water?" Agnes groused.

“I’m sure the water there is plentiful and beautiful. We’ll see when we get there how magnificent it is. There are more opportunities in this new town. I have contacts there, who are also from Switzerland. Did you know that the name Chaska is derived from a Dakota Indian word given as a name to male children? If the first-born child of a Dakota couple was male, he would be called Chaska; if the child was a female, she would be named Winona.”

Agnes, along with the rest of her siblings and parents boarded the Saxonía in June of 1866, departing from Hamburg, Germany. After a forty-three-day voyage, the Saxonía pulled into the New York City harbor. Each new immigrant was directed to Castle Garden where their first step was to undergo a physical examination.

When it came Agnes’s turn, the doctor smiled at her, seeming friendly enough as he ran his hands through her hair. Agnes was then instructed to turn her head side-to-side, followed by a diligent review of her hands and neck. With what she thought was the last step, the doctor listened to her chest using his stethoscope. Having heard no problems, she could hardly wait to be free of him. But to her disappointment, there was one more, and the worst, part of her examination awaiting her. She was told that the doctor must examine her eyelids. She’d briefly seen others go through this step, but she’d no idea about the pain involved. The doctors were required to examine every immigrant’s eye lids for a bacterial infection called trachoma. Agnes was frightened, noticing that the doctor’s hands were dirty as he grabbed her eyelid, turning it up to take a closer look. Agnes cried with fear and recoiled back, as if to escape. The doctor, in an effort to calm her, said, “You’re all done, dear one. You look healthy enough to me.”

Agnes worried often about whether the family’s voyage to America was a mistake. Papa, on the other hand, was a man of exemplary confidence. Once settled in Chaska, Minnesota, Agnes and her favorite sister, Rosa clung to one another for support, fun, games, studies and talk of boys. Agnes, in particular, was more interested in boys than Rosa. Rosa prayed mostly, and talked of her interest in joining the convent. Papa and her mother immediately set about accomplishing their goals. Papa secured a teaching position, and within a few years, they built their own hotel, calling it the Washington House; named after George Washington.

Agnes had not yet found her purpose in Chaska. By the age of twenty, Agnes looked the spitting image of her mother, minus her mother’s enthusiasm. As opposed to her mother’s joy for business ventures, Agnes had no such inclination. Marie was queen in the kitchen and was unsurpassed in her Sunday bounteous meals, but Agnes preferred quiet, simple meals with only her immediate family. Her older sister, Christina had established herself as her mother’s right hand, and her mother had found her indispensable, while Agnes did not feel herself to be nearly so valuable.

Agnes had grown to five feet eight inches and had a figure envied by most of her peers. With the thick dark hair matching that of her father’s, Agnes possessed the engaging signature Kerker smile even more so than the rest of her siblings.

Unfortunately, another beau of Agnes’s had recently ended his relationship with her. As a result, Agnes’s smile had disappeared and her posture had become slumped. Many family members noted Agnes’s depressed mood when one of her relationships ended, but all were confident that Agnes’s smile would make its return appearance, and her doldrums would be behind her.

“Agnes, I’m going shopping. Care to join me?”

“I’m not in the mood.” Agnes snapped.

“This is the second time this week that you’ve refused to go shopping with me. What’s the matter?”

“Gregory broke up with me two days ago.”

“I thought the two of you were close. He’s always said how much he enjoyed being with our whole family.”

“He asked to walk me home the other day. He wanted to talk privately with me. I’d hoped he might propose right on the spot. Instead, he told me he didn’t want to see me anymore. I think Margaret Lee has caught his eye. When I saw them flirting with each other last week, I became angry with Gregory, and we had a big fight.”

“Oh Agnes, I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“No, Rosa. I’ll be stuck here in Chaska and I’ll be an old maid.”

“Agnes, you must cheer up. Gregory was not the right man for you, that’s all.”

“Rosa, I miss Switzerland. I’m going to tell Papa that I want to return home. My real home. Ever since we’ve moved here, I’ve never felt that I fit in. I’m not happy here.”

“If you return to Europe, we’ll never see each other again. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“It’s just that I feel so lonely. My happiest memories are in St. Gallen.”

“Agnes, you’ve performed in father’s plays here. Remember last year when you received a standing ovation? You laughed throughout the whole day. St. Gallen is no longer our home. This is our home. Your decision to move would be an impulsive one, and one you’d soon regret.”

“I suppose you’re right, Rosa. You’ve often been the voice of reason for me whenever I’m upset. Just the same, I have no idea what I’m going to do.”

Rosa heard numerous grievances from Agnes over the years, but today Rosa worried that Agnes was more depressed than usual. She decided it was time to share her concerns about Agnes with her mother. Mother Marie listened intently, and suggested to Rosa and her other sisters that they plan a picnic to honor Agnes’s twenty-first birthday. The idea was embraced excitedly by the entire family. Upon hearing their grand offer, Agnes was uninterested. In the Kerker family, however, the show must go on. Their father had become Chaska’s entertainer and this was the family motto.

On the day of her birthday, Agnes made only a brief appearance, thanked her family for everything, then exited toward home after providing a forced smile and promising she’d return momentarily. One half-hour passed, without any sign of Agnes.

A worried Rosa noted the time lapse and began to inquire others if they'd seen Agnes. "Let's continue to look for her. I'll ask a few friends to go south of town to look for her. If we can't locate her soon, I think we should get help from as many people as we can."

Thirty more minutes passed, and for Rosa, it had already felt like days. Every step, every turn, every 'No, I haven't seen her,' felt as though all of their efforts were moving in slow motion.

Rosa saw her mother and ran quickly to her inquiring, "Where's Papa?"

"He's rounded up a dozen friends and they've scattered in all directions. I'm sure we'll find her. How could she think to disappear telling no one where she was going? Your father has also notified the sheriff. He and his men are helping as well."

"Mother, what if we don't find her tonight?"

After hours of panic and calling out her name, Agnes was still nowhere to be found.

Eventually, Papa, Anna, and several others gathered at the Kerker home. Papa, pacing frantically, was the first to direct the conversation to Agnes's depression. "Dr. MacDonald has reminded me of the frequency of suicide in Chaska. I hope our Agnes will not be numbered among them."

On June 12th, Dr. MacDonald received a telegram from Shakopee, in neighboring Scott County. The tragic news of a young woman's body was found by Cressey's Ferry. She was the victim of a drowning. On suspicion that it was the body of Agnes Kerker, he immediately informed John and asked him to accompany him to Shakopee.

"John, let's hope that the body is not Agnes."

"Doc, I think you've asked me along because you think the body is my Agnes's."

"The body is that of a young woman, about age twenty. She was wearing a long navy-blue dress. She has long, dark brown hair. I'm afraid that, yes, she fits the description of your Agnes."

Within minutes, John Kerker identified the lifeless body of her beloved Agnes. "I shall notify my family immediately. My wife and I will arrange Agnes's funeral at Guardian Angels Catholic Church."

"I'm afraid there's more, John. I believe Agnes committed suicide. We can hold an inquest, but I'm sure my conclusion will be confirmed. Pastor Grante will not give Agnes a Mass because suicide is considered a mortal sin."

John would hear none of this dismissive treatment toward his dear Agnes nor toward his family. He set forth a plan to see that her death would be ruled an accident. He would insist on being present at the inquest.

Despite his persistent efforts, he was refused access to the inquest. One week later, Agnes's death was ruled a suicide, and the notice was posted in the Weekly Valley Herald.

After being refused a Catholic Mass by Paster Grante, Papa Kerker drove to St. Paul to make his plea to Bishop Grace. "Please come in, Mr. Kerker. Father Grante has informed me as to the reason for your visit. Please accept my most sincere condolences."

"Thank you, Bishop Grace. Last week my daughter Agnes drowned. We have no idea what actually occurred at the river bank. Our family was celebrating her 21st birthday, and suddenly we all realized that we had not seen her since shortly after her party began. Agnes's body was eventually found at the riverbank in Shakopee near the ferry. The group impaneled for the inquest determined suicide, but they had absolutely no proof. She'd never expressed a desire to die to my wife or I, nor any of her siblings."

"Mr. Kerker, again, I'm sorry for Agnes's death. But as long as the inquest panel ruled her death a suicide, Father Grante and I must adhere to their official ruling." Bishop Grace leaned over and picked up the Catechism, turning to the exact page on the beliefs of the Catholic Church. "We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us and, thus, our lives our not ours to dispose of."

A look of despair and horror swept across John Kerker's now reddened face. Then, in an outburst, he abruptly grabbed the catechism from the bishop's hands and threw it across the room.

"Bishop Grace, you're an unreasonable man. You've not given one consideration to the life of my daughter. You've not considered my viewpoint. And, most importantly, you are wrong! May your soul be in hell for the pain and harm you've brought to my family. I'll have nothing further to do with the Catholic church!" John exited, slamming the door behind them.

Agnes's funeral was an abbreviated one and nothing like the Mass that Marie and John Kerker hoped would occur. Instead, only the immediate family and a few friends gathered by Agnes's burial plot located at Mount Pleasant cemetery. John Kerker had enlisted the help of a friend and Lutheran minister to say appropriate prayers and bless her casket before they lowered it into the ground. Unfortunately, her legacy would be her decision to take her own life. Fact or fiction, this was how she would always be remembered. This saddened Rosa, who could only remember Agnes as a generous, loving, and tender spirit.

The family later gathered at the Kerker home. Rosa's grief felt like a rock stuck in her throat, and it was paralyzing her. Rosa scanned their parlor, studying each of her family members, concluding that there would be a hole in all of their hearts for years to come, including her own. But in Papa's case, the family could actually see the hole in his heart. His eyes were sunken, his head hung low, as he gripped the hands of his two eldest sons. Rosa had taken for granted her father's confident and straight posture every time he entered a room. Now he was bent over, Agnes's suicide having aged him in a way that she never thought possible, and the Catholic Church having provided no blueprint to help her family cope with the stigma of suicide.

John Kerker kept to his word to turn his back to the Catholic church. His wife, Marie, continued to attend Mass on a daily basis. Rosa, still harboring a desire to explore life in the convent, made what would become a pivotal decision. She'd decided to make a deal with God. "God, if Papa accepts the church back into his heart, I promise I will join the convent."

On May 26, 1883 John Kerker died of consumption. Kneeling at his bedside, Rosa heard her father's last words: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph." A shocked Rosa stood. This was the proof and a sign that her father had indeed accepted his faith once again.

John Kerker was buried at the town's public cemetery, next to his daughter Agnes. It was now time for Rosa to deliver on her end of the bargain. But was the convent her true calling? She had to listen to her own voice. Her own journey, without Agnes, had now begun.