

On the Verge Writing Contest 2021, Second-Place Non-Fiction Winner
By Sarah Holman

Sudoku and Speedos

Opa taught me how to play sudoku. One winter, at a relative's home in Whistler, he sat staring at the newspaper with a pen in his hand. After I asked, he showed me how to play, and a few games later, I impressed him.

“Good with numbers. Going to be an accountant one day, just like your Opa,” he said, so proud of me. Little did he know I would become an arts student, and that numbers weren't exactly my forte, but he has always been an optimist.

He loves the world. He has seen more of it than anyone I have ever met. “One-hundred-twenty-eight,” he would declare, like he was holding up a trophy. One-hundred-twenty-eight countries. The number would climb each year, and at Christmas I would wait for his latest story—his latest adventure.

“So, I was climbing up this mountain in Finland,” he said, pronouncing the Finnish mountain in his German accent. My Oma rolled her eyes—she thought he was too old to be climbing foreign mountains. “I felt very light-headed. All of a sudden, I was on the ground and they were carrying me down in a stretcher.”

He would bring home treasures, or what he thought were treasures.

“It's delicious,” he told my brother-in-law, who was still new to the family. He'd brought home what's called a century egg; an egg that had been preserved for one hundred years.

“A Chinese delicacy,” Opa said—it was black and smelled like rubber. The newest member of the family didn't want to disappoint our grandfather, so he took a bite. He may have gagged a few times, but he swallowed it.

“Delicious!” Opa repeated an absurd amount of times. I never saw him eat one.

He loves everything about the world. Although, he has every reason not to.

Axel Zitscher grew up in Berlin. He was born on July 3rd, 1939, at the start of it all. He lived it—the day his brother was thrown from his mother’s arm after a bomb hit their home, the day he heard that his anti-Nazi activist father had “fallen from a cliff and died.” And most importantly, the day World War II ended.

Despite experiencing this world, he loves every part of it. He preaches travel to his children and grandchildren, claiming there is nothing more valuable than a trip around the world. Even Berlin, once filled with tragedy, he loves to go back to. He brought his children there, and baptized them in the same church he grew up in as a young boy. He showed them everything, but not much was said—the stories came later.

Opa has a good eye—he knows when he has spotted something special. In 1957, he frequented a coffee shop, one that had a particularly pretty German woman behind the counter.

“He came to get coffee every day,” my Oma said. “We had our first date there.”

After meeting Gisela, my lovely grandmother, his “schatze” (meaning darling in German), they hopped on a boat and sailed across the Atlantic. He wanted to break the cycle—his children would not grow up like he had.

He had trained for a few years in the hospitality industry before leaving Europe, but when they reached Sudbury, Ontario, he had to start from scratch. Not only with work, but with language, culture and everyday life.

Five years and four daughters later, a job opportunity came up in British Columbia. Desperately wanting to escape the brutal winters, Opa closed his eyes and traced the west coast with his finger. He landed on Tsawwassen, a small town on the coast of Vancouver.

In 1973, they purchased a house, 5087 Erin Way, for \$17,000.

After a few years working, Opa decided to go back to school in 1980 for business. He graduated a few years later and created Axel Zitcher Financial Services. Zitscher without the “s” because apparently, “These Canadians can’t pronounce it right.” He became a very successful accountant—at 81 years of age, his business is still thriving, and he still works every tax season.

“I thought this was going to be your last one,” I have said to him a number of times. My Oma had told us he would stop working this year, and the year before that.

“I love what I do,” he would say, so simply, as if it were not work at all.

After hearing all his absurd and entertaining travel stories, I remember asking him where his favourite place in the world was. Surely, it would be some foreign country that I hadn’t heard of.

“What do you mean?” he looked at me as though it was a silly question. “Tsawwassen is pretty nice.”

Opa is a strong man, but he is not immune to everything. This past year, after being diagnosed with bladder cancer, he accepted his fate. For a while, we didn’t think he would get treatment. He’s a firm believer in the “natural route” of life.

We were all relieved this time, when he didn’t allow the natural route to take him. I think he loves us too much to give up that easy.

So, he went through it all. He explained to me how odd it is to lose control of your own body. Then, when he started to get better, he explained how amazing it was that he could pee on his own terms again.

“It is interesting to watch your body deteriorate,” he said at the dinner table one night.

“You are born, and you grow into a human. You learn how to talk, how to walk, how to live. And then you get old, and you forget how to do all those things,” he said, while sipping on his classic scotch and soda.

“Doesn’t that scare you?” I asked.

“It’s the circle of life,” he said.

His old age and deteriorating body haven’t stopped him. Opa has always loved to swim; he goes to the pool every morning and does a few lengths, to stay in shape. He refuses to wear anything but a Speedo.

“He says the regular trunks ‘hold him back,’” my Oma said to me at our family cabin this summer. I tried not to draw my eyes to my grandfather standing there in a Speedo, with his big belly overhanging the tight swimwear.

A few years earlier, at the age of 75, he attempted water-skiing for the first time at that same cabin, in that same Speedo.

“I want to try that,” he said to my uncle Dave, pointing at one of his grandchildren in the water.

“You want to water-ski?” uncle Dave asked him, trying not to laugh.

Next thing we knew, Opa was in the water, strapped into the skis and looking a little regretful.

“I’m ready,” he yelled, clinging onto the tow rope.

Opa may have guzzled a few litres of lake water and fell at least a dozen times before he stood up, but he did it. He had a big smile on his face, too—I think he likes proving us wrong. Although, I remember him walking with a limp the next day, sore from the strenuous watersport.

Not only can he waterski, he is one hell of a dancer. Every holiday, all the drunk relatives break out in dance at the end of the night. The music blares, drinks spill, and we celebrate, the Zitscher way. Amongst the drunken aunts and uncles, there is Opa, taking my Oma's hand. No matter the song, she will accept his offer for a dance, and they will waltz, even to ACDC, my uncle Dave's favourite.

Everyone notices when the pair start dancing. Things seem to slow down; we all watch as they move around in perfect synchronicity, as if they have practiced the night before. But they have just danced their way through life. They know every step, every beat. They may have stepped on each other's toes once or twice, but they have never stopped dancing.

Opa danced with me at my prom, and while I'm not well versed in the proper way to waltz, I followed his lead. That's one thing that didn't impress him; my dancing skills.

"Just follow me," he said, and I tried my best.

He guided us; he continues to guide us. Not only on the dance floor, but in life. To this day, he is hardworking, loyal and as white-haired as can be. He is one of those people that you will remember; not because of the lessons he taught you, but the way he taught them.

"My beautiful Sarah," he said to me, and putting his hand to my cheek. "Now next number, what would go there?"

I gazed down at the newspaper in my hand, ready to fill in another spot in our beloved Sudoku game.

"Seven?" I would ask him. He nodded as I jotted down the number.

"So smart, you are," he said with a smile.