

What a pleasure, to spend the morning with Helen Adler at her quiet retreat in old Delmar. Filled with books, music and art, her home contains the memorabilia of the Adler family the way her mind contains the richness of her 88 years.

I first met Helen Adler at the *Humanities Institute for Lifelong Learning (HILL)* which she founded with her late husband, Fred Adler. She is also past director of *Books in the Morning*, former SUNY adjunct professor, retired AP English teacher at Bethlehem Central High School, mother of three daughters, and a charming conversationalist.

Inspiring, intelligent and engaging, talking with Helen is like having a beacon beckoning you toward the best part of yourself. "This may be my obituary," she said at the beginning of our interview. Then she laughed and told me how ridiculous obituaries were. "I mean, an obituary pretends to know the most intimate details of a person's life, their innermost feelings and motivations.... We don't even know that about ourselves...How can we know that about someone else?"

The only daughter of poor Hungarian immigrants who kept a grocery store in Rankin, Pennsylvania, Helen spent her early childhood absorbing the atmosphere of a 1920s steel town on the Monongahela River. "It was perfect, I lived there until I was seven years old. The steel mills were dramatically beautiful, especially to a child, all that fire and sparks reflected in the river and pouring down on the river. On Sunday afternoons there were stern-wheelers with their calliopes going and our dining room window was open. It was wonderful. In the evening we could see the drama of the open hearth furnaces."

The town was filled with poor immigrants from eastern Europe. Her family lived above their grocery store. Helen waited on customers from the time she was 10 years old. Her memory is filled with the images of poor steelworker's wives coming into the store to buy groceries. "They would have just enough money so that the men would have 10 cents worth of meat to put into their lunch boxes on their way to the factory. Immigrants who had been swept off the streets of Europe with promises about how they were going to get rich in America. They had been removed from the green fields to work in those horrible smoky factories."

"I did all the boy things, sat out on the milk crates in front of the store, roasted potatoes up on the hill, fought with the boys physically, and my mother was just horrified. She was a lady and she wanted me to be in white gloves and white stockings and play bridge with the girls on Sundays". I asked Helen when she began reading. "There wasn't a book in the house, my parents did not read English, so when I was about five I stole a copy of *Peter Rabbit and Farmer McGregor's Garden* from The Rankin Christian Center, which was the only place in town that had any books." (An auspicious beginning for someone who has made a life of enjoying great books.) "Later when we moved to Braddock, Pennsylvania, there was a library and I began to borrow everything I could get my hands on. Every week I would pick up 10 books and return 10 books and . I surprise myself when I think back. I had read all of the Shakespeare plays by the time I was 13. I read Dante, Virginia Wolf and Henry James. I would sequester myself in my room; books were my retreat."

"Being the child of immigrants I got a very special kind of education, my parents would receive these letters from Europe and they would weep and tell me stories of our relatives. We would sit with my mother in the evenings. We got lessons in Hungarian Geography. The stories were endless. My mother spoke six European languages."

I asked Helen where she got her taste for writing and teaching literature. “My father was the most compassionate, humble, and sensitive man. As a little boy in Hungary, he used to get up early in the morning just to talk to his mother while she milked the cows on the family farm. I was so moved by the idea of his wanting to use language to convey to her how much he loved her and what the world was like for a very small boy. And how I was, in a way, the completion of his love, so that language was very important to me.”

When Helen was ten years old her brother brought a young friend home, an extremely bright and sensitive boy who played piano. This boy became a fixture in their home. He was the son of some grocers in the next town. Some years passed and Helen’s father said to her, “You know, I think Fred is coming to see you, and not your brother.” The young boy was Fred Adler.

Though she was valedictorian of her high school, Helen almost missed going to college. “In the summer of my senior year my mother almost died; she had gotten blood poisoning and it looked like she was not going to make it. My father was away all day on his huckster truck selling produce. So I had to take over the store all summer. I had to be in the store at six in the morning and close it at seven at night. By the end of the summer my mother had made a recovery and was back in the store. And when my father saw what I had done for the family he had to reward me in some way and what he said to me was, ‘You have my permission to go to college,’ and I could have kissed his feet because that meant that I didn’t have to remain in the store and that he recognized what I had done for the family. My parents never praised me; it was not in the times, but they were very proud of me.”

University was the fulfillment of a dream. Helen was so passionate about learning that she took a triple major: Literature, History and Education. Since her family had no money she had to work three jobs during her time at Carnegie Mellon. In her senior year she won the prestigious Parry Award, got 25 dollars, and promptly spent it all on books. In September after her senior year she married her childhood sweetheart, Fred Adler, who was by then an established pianist and conductor of the NYA Symphony Orchestra.

With the Second World War approaching and Fred’s budding career as an orchestra conductor in jeopardy because of wartime funding cuts, Helen went to Carnegie Mellon Library School and got her degree in Library Science.

After the war, with her husband back from Japan, and a family on the way, Fred Adler went to work at the Westinghouse Corporation in Pittsburgh and rose to become manager. He was in charge of a section of 300 employees. The Adlers were living comfortably. But this was the 1950s and the height of the McCarthy era. All the Westinghouse managers were asked to sign oaths saying that they had never known any communists. If they signed, and had ever associated with a communist, they were subject to prosecution, if they did not sign they lost their jobs. Fred chose not to sign. “How can I say I’ve never met a communist? I’ve known hundreds of people over the years. How do I know if they were communists or not?” But very few people shared Fred’s courage and logic. Friends melted away till there were none left. It was a time of fear. All their former friends were afraid of losing their jobs.

Fired and blacklisted, the Adlers struggled to make ends meet, Helen substitute teaching and working part time in libraries. Fred going through a series of sales jobs, businesses, a bankruptcy when he was cheated by a business partner, then Fred and Helen assuming all the debts of this failed business, just to do the right thing, when the business partner fled town. The Adlers moved to Delmar in 1957 at the behest of Helen’s brother to begin a new life. It took Helen and Fred 10 years to reestablish themselves financially. “And our oldest daughter had to go to college in the midst of all that. I literally took down the draperies and made her the clothes

she took to college. I made all their clothes.” Helen did the cooking, sewing and housework and Fred traveled across upstate New York selling drilling equipment. Between Helen’s employment as a teacher and Fred’s hard work, the Adlers survived.

Through all the hardship, Helen never forgot her youth, her love of books and learning and in 1983 after their last daughter had finished college she retired as one of the most popular teachers in the history of Bethlehem Central High School.

Ordinary people might have spent their retirement years golfing in Florida. But Helen had some ideas. First, she started *Books in the Morning*, a great books program that met monthly and became one of the outstanding cultural events in the Capital District. Due to Helen’s keen interest in literature and her ability to draw people into her way of discussing it, the program took off and ran for 21 years, enrolling hundreds of eager readers over that time period.

The second idea the Adlers had was meant to fill up a void. “What,” Helen wondered, “would happen if we started a humanities program here in Delmar and brought in teachers from the local universities?” But how to proceed? It was a simple idea actually: Find the most engaging professors in local universities by visiting their classes as auditors. If they were compelling enough, invite them to give college level courses in Delmar. The idea grew into a reality and became the enormously successful *Humanities Institute for Lifelong Learning (HILL)*. In 14 years over 5000 students and 100 professors have participated. *HILL* now has a nine-member board and seems likely to continue its work well into the 21st Century.

For now, Helen sorts through her old journals, reads, goes out with friends, arranges Fred’s papers (he passed away in 2003) and keeps in good order 2 houses full of memories. I didn’t know her in 1938 when she was a triple major at Carnegie Mellon but I would say that her energy probably hasn’t diminished a bit since then.

Terry Rooney