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Headline: A mysterious benefactor I never met molds my life

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SUMMARY: Generous spirit | A chance meeting between a Polish girl's father and an American traveler changes her future

The story begins in a train somewhere on the border of Poland and East Germany in the late '70s, when both nations are still communist. A man is caught riding without a ticket. A gruff conductor threatens to throw him off the train at the nearest station.

Another man, not related to the first, pays his passage. This man -- my father, a Pole -- knows that he will probably never get his money back. In a seat across from him, a short-haired, modestly dressed woman silently observes the scene.

She is an American, riding through Europe alone, and her name is Michele Dekle. Baffled with my father's act, she starts a conversation and by the end of the train ride, the two exchange addresses. It's the first and last time my father will see her.

Throughout the years, they exchange letters. She sends gifts for my parents and toys for my brother and me, mostly complex building pieces, so much so that we think her the owner of an educational toy company. The toys come at a time when Polish kids can only dream of Legos. Michele Dekle is a mystery to us -- a stranger who lives in a mystical country who for some reason has decided to become our friend.

We don't even know what she does for a living.

Two years before the Germans dismantle their Berlin Wall stone by stone, my parents finally get passports for the entire family and decide to emigrate from Poland. We go "on vacation" to Paris in our beat-up, rusted Fiat and never come back.

A year and a half later, just as we are approved for French permanent residence, my parents decide to move again, to the United States, in search of better employment. Sponsored by an aunt who lives in Connecticut, we land on the East Coast. My father and Michele Dekle continue to exchange letters.

That first year, she proposes to help us move to San Francisco, her favorite city. My father, terrified by another move, declines. In a subsequent letter, she also tells him that she's terminally ill, and so is her partner, but discloses few details. Everything about her, including her illness, is now puzzling to us, an unknown.

She dies three years later, at age 46. We know, because we receive a letter from her friend and trustee, Kathy Richert-Boe, informing us that my brother and I are two out of four recipients of a sizable sum of money left for us in a will by Michele.

It comes at a time when my father, the only wage earner, makes \$12 an hour as a counselor for the mentally ill, when my parents are paying off rent and a large loan on the plane tickets Catholic Charities purchased to bring us to America.

"Michele brought so much into our family life, even though she was a person very distant to us," my father will confess years later.

The money from this stranger, who had somehow become a part of our family, helped pay for my room and board at Boston University, and for plane tickets to visit grandparents in Poland; it supplemented the family income in those first years of immigrant struggle.

Whatever was left, we invested in a mutual fund. This year, I bought a used car thanks to Michele's generosity and moved to Portland to work as a reporter at The Oregonian.

I was about to find out that by far the best thing about Michele wasn't her money. My father called one morning and said: Kathy Richert-Boe lives in Portland. Find her; she must know something about Michele Dekle. I called the number he gave me and spoke with Kathy's husband Paul, a former newspaperman. A month later, I met the couple for dinner. They wouldn't stop talking.

There are hundreds of stories about Michele. Like the one about her riding the length of Africa on the back of an open truck. Or the one about how, when she was in Australia, she saw a posting that advertised sailing on a boat to Tahiti and set out on the trip with a man who, it later turned out, knew nothing about navigation, and the two were stranded in the middle of the ocean. Or the one about her second tour around the world, this time starting aboard the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

She traveled in bouts, alone, always stayed in youth hostels, and brought back postcards because she didn't own a camera. Fiercely independent and intensely private to the point of paranoia, she rarely told anyone where she was going. At the same time, she had friends all around the world.

Born in a small, conservative town in Florida, she was a physician by profession and has also endowed a scholarship at her alma mater, the University of Washington medical school. Generous to others, she was extremely frugal herself, her friends told me. "She worked like a doctor, but lived like a graduate student." She got a commission in the Coast Guard as a physician, and spent most of the money she earned on travel.

She married a wealthy and equally eccentric speech audiologist from the Virgin Islands, whom she met through a classified ad. The two rarely

lived together because she took a dislike to the islands after a particularly nasty hurricane. But the marriage reduced her loneliness. In the early '90s she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

A few years later, her husband found out he had brain cancer, and she took care of him until he died in Los Angeles. By a ghastly coincidence, her breast cancer spread and she discovered that she, too, had brain cancer.

The woman who next planned to go to Antarctica as a researcher died in Portland in the company of her friends, the couple I met. Kathy Richert-Boe still keeps her ashes in an urn in the closet at home. Kathy told me she'd like to do something with the ashes, such as taking that trip to Antarctica and scattering them in the sea.

For now, along with a hat from Tyrol pinned with badges from around the world, which Michele Dekle used to wear on walks in downtown Portland, the ashes are a reminder of a generous, free-spirited woman who wasn't afraid of following her own path.

Michele Dekle's liberal, big-hearted gift helped me get an education and much more. It allowed me to get physically and intellectually to where I am today. She is an adoptive parent of sorts, or perhaps the older sister I never had.

And if I have hitchhiked through Europe and North Africa, traveled to India, Romania and Turkey, and feel the constant urge to pack my bags, it may be her inheritance somehow trickling down.

Thanks, Michele. I wish we could have met.

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ILLUSTRATION: Photo -- GOSIA WOZNIACKA