

Mrs. B.

by

Barbara Azore

This spring (1998) when the Alberta obstetricians threatened to stop delivering babies if they did not get an increase in pay, my first reaction was, “Good. It’s about time.”

According to the World Health Organization, while 70% of babies born in Western Europe are delivered by midwives and 96% of babies born in North America are delivered by doctors, the infant mortality rate in Western Europe is lower than that in North America. Given the choice between an obstetrician and my little English midwife, I would choose my midwife every time.

Her name was Mrs. Bongoukian - Mrs. B. to the non-linguistic Anglos - and to describe her as a “little English midwife” is not entirely accurate. She was little, standing 1.5 metres in her stocking feet, she was a midwife, but she was English only by naturalization.

By birth she was part Greek and part Turkish and had lived the first half of her life in Turkey. Small in stature but strong as an ox, she exuded energy. Her hair, a mass of thick, tight waves, sprang from beneath her midwife’s cap like a black cloud.

We met only a couple of times before my first son was born. He decided that eight months gestation was long enough and came into the world before his father and I were ready for him. In response to my husband’s early morning call, Mrs. B. arrived with the home maternity kit - plastic sheet for the bed and supplies of laughing gas and oxygen. She told me to stay in bed in the hope of stopping the labour until another day and told my husband he could go to work as soon as my mother arrived to keep me company. She would ask my family doctor to call and return later to check on me.

The doctor came and said the baby would not be born for another twenty four hours. I told Mrs. B. this when she returned at noon and she said I might as well get up. She would pop back at tea time.

She returned at 3 o'clock. I was upstairs in the toilet when the doorbell rang and I heard my mother open the door. I recognized Mrs. B.'s voice and heard my mother say something. Then came the sound of running feet pounding up the stairs. The bathroom door burst open and Mrs. B. flew in. She dragged me out of the bathroom and into the bedroom, muttering as she did so, "I thought things might speed up."

1

Once I was installed in my bed and Mrs. B. had the bedroom as she wanted it - rugs pushed under the bed and the floor covered in newspapers - she explained, "I had to fish a newborn out of a toilet once and I have no intention of doing it again."

She dispatched my mother to a phone box to phone my husband and he arrived in time to see our son come into the world. He weighed in at 2275.5 grams, covered in vernix caseosa because he was premature, and sporting a mop of black hair.

Before leaving Mrs. Bongoukian laid him sleeping in a drawer propped across two chairs beside my bed. "He needs to rest now," she said. "I'll be back in the morning before he gets hungry."

She was and she came back every morning and evening for the next week. She showed me the right way to breastfeed and how to hold a tiny, soapy baby in the bath without drowning him. She also showed me how to sit down while I bathed, changed and dressed him. I have silently given thanks to her many times since as I have watched mothers standing at their change tables and bending over bath tubs.

Mrs. B. came to check on our progress once a day for a second week and because my son was officially a “preemie” she continued to visit once a week for another month. After that I would sometimes see an apparently driverless car tootling along the street and realize it was Mrs. Bongoukian doing her rounds.

We did not meet again until I became pregnant for a second time. Now that I was a full time homemaker Mrs. B visited me more often than she had during my first pregnancy. She came to the house once a month for the first four months, twice a month for the next two and every week for the last month.

My second son was born on Saturday, December 30. Mrs. B. arrived at 8:00 am to check that everything was in order. She had some other routine visits to make so she left again, promising to “return soon.”

She came back at noon and said that as she had nothing else to do she might as well stay with me. My husband was busy looking after our toddler so I was all alone at this point. If things went as they had the first time she wouldn’t have long to wait. Alas, this baby was as reluctant to arrive as his older brother had been anxious to do so. He was not born until 10.00 pm! All that time Mrs. B. sat by my bed, chatting to me between contractions.

She told me that she had been married and given birth to her first baby when she was only 14 years old. It was, she confided, “a terrifying experience.” This baby, her son, was now at “Oxford University on a scholarship,” she said with obvious pride.

When she was six months pregnant with her second child she received the news that her husband had been killed. The shock sent her into premature labour. She gave birth to a living baby boy but at that time and in that place the doctors could not keep him alive.

She didn’t say how she and her son reached England. I can only assume that she came as a refugee after the Second World War. Life must have been a struggle for some time while she obtained her midwifery license in an alien culture and with a small child to raise. My admiration for her soared.

Between checking on the baby and monitoring the contractions she commented on the cultural differences in birthing. “Mediterranean women,” she said, “scream and shout and throw themselves about.” It had taken all her strength and the husband’ “to keep one woman’s knees far enough apart to allow the baby to be born.” She laughed, “English women are much more restrained.”

As the hours passed she talked about her work. She was worried about one of her mothers-to-be who was pregnant for the third time. The two previous pregnancies had ended in stillbirths. “I don’t think I’ll be able to stand it if she loses this baby,” she sighed. “The older I get, the softer I become.”

She admitted that she got quite miserable when all her mothers were in waiting and she had no babies to care for.

On Boxing Day she had been called out to a boarding house where a young girl had given birth the day before. Apparently no one in the house had known the girl was pregnant. She had delivered the baby herself on Christmas morning, left it lying on the bed in her unheated room and gone downstairs for Christmas dinner. When, next morning, the landlady found out what had happened she notified the authorities who sent Mrs. B. to the house.

When Mrs. B. arrived and saw the baby boy, blue from head to toe and still connected to the placenta by a frozen umbilical cord, she feared that he was dead. When she examined him she was amazed and delighted to find that he was alive. By bathing him in increasingly warm baths, she eventually restored his body temperature to normal. Mrs. B. did not mention it but I think that she probably saved not only the baby’s life but the girl, from criminal charges.

That night when my second son was born Mrs. B. left us about midnight. In the early hours she was called out again to deliver a baby in a gypsy caravan in the camp at the top of our street. While she was there it began to snow and when she left the camp at daybreak the gypsies had to push her car out to the road. She managed to drive home where she bathed and changed her clothes. Then she walked back to my home for her morning visit. Later that day my doctor arrived complaining that he had had to walk from the top of the road where his car was stuck in snow.

I don't know how much Mrs. Bongoukian earned but I suspect it would compare unfavourably with the income of an obstetrician and I'm sure it was less than she was worth. She didn't just deliver babies. She was an adviser, a source of strength, a friend. Would an obstetrician have sat on the end of my bed so that I could rest my leg on his or her shoulder or sat with me for 10 hours just to keep me company? Would a physician have thought to tell me to put the baby in different clothes for day and night so that he would learn to differentiate between the two and not sleep all day and stay awake all night? I think not. Mrs. Bongoukian was worth more than her weight in gold. For her, delivering babies was a labour of love.



Mrs. B. by [Barbara Azore](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 2.5 Canada License](#)

Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at

<http://awmp.athabascau.ca/contact/>