FOREVER BARBIE

Excerpt from Forever Barbie by M.G. Lord
Chapter 2: A Toy is Born

It is hard to imagine Mattel Toys headquartered anywhere but in southern California. A short drive from Disneyland, minutes from the beach, it is in a place where people come to make their fortunes, or so the mythology goes, where beautiful women are "discovered" in drugstores, and a man can turn a mouse into an empire. Barbie could not have been conceived in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, where Hasbro is located, or Cincinnati, Ohio, where Kenner makes its home. Barbie needed the sun to incubate her or, at the very least, to lighten her hair. This is not to say that Hawthorne, where Mattel had its offices until 1991, is anything but a dump—a gritty industrial district that cries out for trees. But it is a dump with a glamour-queen precedent: In 1926, Marilyn Monroe was born there.

Of course it's inaccurate to say Barbie was "born" anywhere. The dolls were originally cast in Japan, making, I suppose, Barbie's birthplace Tokyo. But Barbie's "parents," Ruth and Elliot Handler, are very much southern Californians —of the fortune-making variety—who fled their native Denver, Colorado, in 1937.

California was a different place back then: neither stippled with television antennas nor linked with concrete cloverleaf. The McDonald brothers wouldn't raise their Golden Arches for another fifteen years. Thanks to the Depression, the Golden State had lost some of its glister. Okies and Arkies poured in from the ravaged Dust Bowl; and for many, the land of sunshine and promise was just as gray and bleak as the place they had left.

Not so for the Handlers. Just twenty-one when they uprooted, they were optimists; and because they believed in the future they were willing to take risks. The youngest of ten children, Ruth was a stenographer at Paramount Pictures; Elliot, the second of four brothers, was a light-fixture designer and art student; and their first gamble was to chuck their jobs and start their own business, peddling the Plexiglas furniture that Elliot had been building part-time in their garage. The wager paid off: In the first years of World War II, they expanded into a former Chinese laundry and hired about a hundred workers. They made jewelry, candleholders, even a clear-plastic Art Deco airplane with a clock in it. Wartime shortages derailed that venture, but the Handlers remained on track. In 1945, they started "Mattel Creations" with their onetime foreman, Harold Matson, whose name was fused with Elliot's to form Mattel. Matson, however, did not love gambling with his life savings; he sold out in 1946, making him the sort of asterisk to toy history that short-term Beatle Pete Best was to the history of popular music.

Elliot not only believed in the future, he believed in futuristic materials— Plexiglas, Lucite, plastic. He set up Mattel to manufacture plastic picture frames, which, because of wartime rationing, ironically ended up being made of wood. When the war ended, however, it was the Ukedoodle, a plastic

ukulele, that secured Mattel's niche in the toy world. A popular jack-in-the-box followed, and by 1955, the company was worth $500,000.

Although Barbie wouldn't be introduced for another four years, Mattel, in 1955, paved the way for the sort of advertising that would make her possible. It was a big year for child culture: Disneyland had opened in July and Walt Disney, who seemed to have a golden touch with the under- twelve set, was preparing to launch a TV series, The Mickey Mouse Club. No toy company had ever sponsored a series before, and ABC, Disney's network, wanted to give Mattel the chance. There was just one catch: ABC demanded a year- long contract that would cost Mattel its entire net worth.

Ralph Carson, cofounder of Carson/Roberts, Mattel's advertising agency, thought the Handlers would be hesitant. He brought Vincent Francis, ABC's airtime salesman, to Elliot's office to make the pitch. What he failed to consider, however, was the Handlers' willingness to gamble.

The presentation "took fifteen or twenty minutes," Ruth recalls, and she and Elliot were "ready to jump out of our skins with excitement." But before they said yes, they consulted their comptroller, Yasuo Yoshida.

"Yas," Ruth recalls having said, "what would happen if we didn't bring much out of this? Would we go broke? And Yas's answer was: 'Not broke— but badly bent.' "
"Okay," Elliot remembers telling him, "we'll try the bent."

In Mattel's commercial, a little boy stalked an elephant with a toy called the Burp Gun; when the child fired, the film of the animal ran backward, causing it to appear to retreat. Kids loved the ad, and by Christmas the gun had sold out.
The Handlers' move, however, did more than create record sales for a single product in a single year. Before advertisers could pitch directly to kids, selling toys had been a mom- and-pop business with a seasonal focus on Christmas. But once kids could actually see toys on television, selling them became not only big business but one that took place year-round.

Ironically, in December 1955, Time magazine ran a photo of Louis Marx, founder of Louis Marx & Company, Inc., on its cover. He was king of the old-time toy industry—an industry that Mattel and Carson/Roberts were well on their way to making obsolete. Marx sneered at advertising. Although his company had had sales of $50 million in 1955, it spent a meager $312 on publicity. Mattel, by contrast, which had sales of $6 million, spent $500,000; it also pioneered marketing techniques that would send Marx and his ilk the way of the dinosaurs.

IN 1993, RUTH AND ELLIOT SHARED SOME REMINISCENCES with me in their Century City penthouse. With its gray marble floor, white pile carpet, grand piano, and vast semicircular wet bar, the dwelling is a far cry from the furnished one-room apartment they shared when they were married in 1938. Their daughter, Barbara, after whom the doll was named, was born in 1941; their son Ken, who also gave his name to a doll, in 1944, during Elliot's year-long hitch in the U.S. Army.

Together since they were sixteen, they have weathered things that might have daunted a lesser couple: Ruth's radical mastectomy in 1970; her indictment in 1978 by a federal grand jury for mail fraud, conspiracy, and making false statements to the Securities and Exchange Commission; and, after having pleaded no contest to the charges, her conviction, leading to a forty-one-month suspended sentence, a $57,000 suspended fine and 2,500 hours of community service, which she has completed. In 1975, they survived expulsion from the company they built. Theirs is the sort of romance

that seems to happen only in the movies—or used to happen, before the fashion for verisimilitude precluded not only "happily ever after" but "ever after." They have not grown to resemble each other, as many couples do. Ruth is compact and gregarious. She marches into a room with a combination of authority and bounce, rather like Napoleon in pump-up, air-sole Nikes. And indeed, on the two occasions I met her, once at home and once at Beverly Hills' Hillcrest Country Club, she was wearing sneakers and a stylish warm-up suit. Her hair is short and steely. She can be irresistibly charming; she's cultivated the ability to listen as if you were the most fascinating conversationalist in the world. But if your talk takes a turn she doesn't like, she can wither you with a glance.

"When she walks, the earth shakes," said her son Ken, a philanthropist, entrepreneur, and father of three who lives in New York's West Village. "She's a little woman, seventy-six years old, and the earth shakes."

Elliot is tall, lanky, and laconic. He lets his wife do most of the talking, occasionally interrupting with a sardonic aside. He dresses as casually as Ruth, wearing short-sleeve polo shirts on the two occasions I met him. Very little, I suspect, gets by him: he strikes me as a keen observer.

Elliot's paintings hang on nearly every wall of the apartment. One composition depicts an orchid on a mirrored table; in the foreground, blue and white jewels spill opulently from a case. Another shows voluptuous red and green apples in front of a city scape. Yet another has as its principal element a giant pigeon. Often, these forms are displayed against a flat cerulean sky with clouds—a sky that recalls Magritte's and that, as the objects are painted many times larger than life and in intense Day-Glo colors, heightens their surreality.

There was a time, a little less than ten years ago, when the room was a museum, housing the Handlers' multimillion- dollar collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings. A wintry Norwegian landscape by Claude Monet contrasted with brighter, sunnier spots by Camille Pissarro, Fernand Leger, and Andre Derain. Pierre-Auguste Renoir's Baigneuse and Picasso's Baigneuse au Bord de la Mer shared wallspace with Amedeo Modigliani's Tete de Jeune Fille. But considering whose success made the collection possible, perhaps the most intriguing canvas was Moise Kisling's La Jeune Femme Blonde: a standing female nude, slightly stouter than Barbie, with her hair pulled back in a Barbie-esque ponytail.

In 1985, however, at the height of the art market, the Handlers put their paintings on the block at Sotheby's in New York. "One day I said, 'This place is no good for an art collection'—too much glass, too much window, too much daylight," Elliot explained with a smile. "We had to keep the drapes closed. So I said, 4Aw, to hell with it, I'm painting now.' "
If one were to believe in astrology, as many Californians do, one would suspect something strange and powerful was going on in the heavens over Hawthorne in 1955. Not only had Mattel caused an earthquake in the toy business, but the company hired Jack Ryan, a wildly eccentric, Yale-educated electrical engineer whose sexual indiscretions, extravagant parties, and sometimes autocratic management style would shake the company from within.

For Elliot Handler, hiring Jack was a great triumph. Elliot had initially met him when he pitched Mattel an idea for a toy transistor radio. Children's toys were not, however, Ryan's forte; a member of the Raytheon team designing the Sparrow and Hawk missiles, he made playthings for the Pentagon. But Elliot sensed that Jack had what Elliot needed: Jack knew about torques and transistors; he understood electricity and the behavior of molecules; he had the space- age savvy to make Elliot's high-tech

fantasies real. Elliot courted Ryan for several years, sweetening his offer until Ryan had a remarkable contract: one that permitted him a royalty on every patent his design group originated; one that swiftly transformed him into a multimillionaire.

Ryan "had a funny little body, very compact, and a kind of bird puffy chest—like he had just puffed himself up," recalled novelist Gwen Davis, who had met him through his fourth wife, Zsa Zsa Gabor. His hair appeared "painted on, like Reagan's, and he had a very peculiar tan that looked as if it might have been makeup." At his parties, he wore clothing that was very non-Brooks Brothers—khaki jackets with golden epaulets, imaginary uniforms, fantasy costumes for his fantasy life.

The setting for this strange life was the castle he built in Bel Air, on the site of the five-acre, eighteen-bathroom, seven-kitchen estate that had belonged to silent-screen star Warner Baxter. In Jack's mind, "residence" was a synonym for "theme park." He gave dinner parties in a tree house with a glittering crystal chandelier and occasionally forced his guests to down victuals without utensils in a tapestry-ridden, vaguely medieval curiosity that he called the Tom Jones Room. "He ruined a perfectly good English Tudor house by putting turrets on the end of it," chided Norma Greene, the retired liaison between Ryan's design group and Mattel's patent department.

But the castle was not all lighthearted fun and games. It also had a dungeon— Zsa Zsa described it as a "torture chamber"—painted an ominous black and adorned with black fox fur. Over the years the castle housed, often simultaneously, his first wife Barbara, his two daughters, his brother Jim, multiple mistresses, one or two fellow engineers, and a group Zsa Zsa called "Ryan's Boys," twelve UCLA students who did work around the place in exchange for room and board.
Zsa Zsa never moved in with Jack; but even with her own house as a refuge, she could only endure seven months of marriage. "Jack's sex life would have made the average Penthouse reader blanch with shock," she observed in her autobiography, One Lifetime Is Not Enough.

Meanwhile, in Hamburg, Germany, around the world from Mattel, 1955 was a key year for another designer who had a major influence on Barbie. Reinhard Beuthien, a cartoonist, had created the comic character Lilli for the Bild Zeitung; on August 12 of that year, Lilli acquired a third dimension. The Bavaria-based firm of Greiner & Hauser GmbH issued her as an eleven-and-a-half-inch, platinum-ponytailed, Nefertiti- eyed, fleshtone-plastic doll.
Lilli's cartoon antics fit right in with the Bild Zeitung's sordid, sensational stories. A golddigger, exhibitionist, and floozy, she had the body of a Vargas Girl, the brains of Pia Zadora, and the morals of Xaviera Hollander. Beuthien's jokes usually hinged on Lilli taking money from men and involved situations in which she wore very few clothes. Male wealth was of far greater interest to Lilli than male looks; she flung herself repeatedly at balding, jowly fat cats.

In one typical cartoon, Lilli appears in a female friend's apartment concealing her naked body with a newspaper. The caption: "We had a fight and he took back all the presents he gave me." In another, a policeman warns that her two-piece bathing suit is illegal on the boardwalk. "Oh," she replies, "and in your opinion which part should I take off?" In yet another, she shouts her phone number to a female friend on the street, hoping the rich-looking man nearby will overhear.

Her debut cartoon, which ran on July 24, 1952, set the tone for the others. It shows her with a gypsy fortune-teller begging, "Can't you give me the name and address of this tall, handsome, rich man?"

Even people inured to the peculiarities of Barbie's

body might cringe at the sight of the doll based on Lilli. Unlike Barbie, Lilli doesn't have an arched foot with itty-bitty toes. She doesn't even have a foot. The end of her leg is cast in the shape of a stiletto-heeled pump and painted a glossy black. Never mind that her leg is a fetishistic caricature; never mind that she is hobbled, easily pushed into a horizontal position; that she might want to play tennis sometime or walk on the beach. Poor Lilli can never take the monstrous slipper off.

Sculpted by doll designer Max Weissbrodt, Lilli was never intended for children: She was a pornographic caricature, a gag gift for men, or even more curious, for men to give to their girlfriends in lieu of, say, flowers. "Die hochsten Herm haben Lilli gem" —"Gentlemen prefer Lilli," says a brochure promoting her wardrobe, over a picture of the doll in a short skirt that has blown up above her waist. It adds: "Whether more or less naked, Lilli is always discreet." ("Ob mehr oder minder nackt Lilli bewahrt immer Tackt.")

Like Barbie, Lilli has an outfit for every occasion, but they aren't the sort of occasions in which nice girls find themselves. In a dress with a low-cut back, Lilli can be "the star of every bar"; in a tarty lace one, she can rendezvous for a five o'clock tea—either in a cafe* or (wink) in private. Lilli isn't just a symbol of sex, she is a symbol of illicit sex. "You should take Lilli with you everywhere," the brochure advises men. As a "mascot for your car," Lilli promises a "swift ride" ("beschwingte Fahrt"). The nature of this "swift ride" is suggested by Lilli's photo. In a tight sweater and microscopic shorts, she sits on a swing, her outstretched legs slightly splayed—a pornographic recasting of Fragonard's erotic The Swing. The brochure mentions that "children swoon" over Lilli; but the very notion of "swooning"—the way one "swoons" over a rock star—has a weird carnal ifinuendo, implicitly sexualizing kids.

Just what did German men do with the doll? "I saw it once in a guy's car where he had it up on the dashboard," said Cy Schneider, the former Carson/Roberts copywriter who wrote Barbie's first TV commercials. "I saw a couple of guys joking about it in a bar. They were lifting up her skirts and pulling down her pants and stuff."

Lilli is more, however, than a male wet dream; she is a Teutonic fantasy. And her Germanness is a critical part of her identity. Lilli reminds me of Maria Braun in The Marriage of Maria Braun, Rainer Werner Fass-binder's allegorical 1979 film about the relationship between the two parts of then-divided Germany. Not only does Hanna Schygulla, the relentlessly Aryan actress who portrays Maria, closely resemble Lilli; for much of the movie she wears the same hairstyle—a flaxen ponytail with poodle bangs. One gets the sense that Lilli, like Maria, has endured great privation during the war, and that even if it means using men, she will not starve again. Although Fassbinder is not around to clear up the mystery, one has to believe he was familiar with the Lilli cartoon character—so similar to Lilli's are Maria's clothes, makeup, and behavior.

In Fassbinder's movie, the parallel between Maria and the Federal Republic is clearly defined: Maria kills a black American G.I.; her German husband takes the fall, and she remains loyal to him while he is in jail—a situation analogous to the prisonlike condition of East Germany before 1989. Her loyalty, however, does not preclude exchanging sexual favors for cigarettes, silk stockings, and ultimately, corporate perks. Lilli first appeared in 1952, when the so-called German economic miracle was under way, though far from fully realized. And while Lilli doesn't bear the metaphorical burden of a marriage to the East, it's hard not to view her pursuit of wealth as similar to that of West Germany. She is the vanquished Aryan, golddigging her way back to prosperity.

Ruth Handler first encountered the Lilli doll when she was shopping in Switzerland on a family vacation. “We were walking down the street in Lucerne and there was a doll—an adult doll with a woman’s body—sitting on a rope swing,” Ruth told me, though she has in other interviews placed this epiphany in Zurich and Vienna. Her daughter Barbara, in her mid-teens and well past the age for dolls, wanted Lilli as “a decorative item” for her room. Ruth bought three—two for Barbara, one for herself. ”I didn’t then know who Lilli was or even that its name was Lilli,” Ruth said. “I only saw an adult-shape body that I had been trying to describe for years, and our guys said couldn’t be done.” “Our guys” were the male designers at Mattel. Since Barbara was a child, Ruth had tried to get them to develop a doll with a woman’s body. She got the idea watching Barbara play with paper dolls who were “never the playmate or baby type,” but rather “the teenage, high-school, college, or adult-career type.”

“Through their play,” Ruth said, Barbara and her friends “were imagining their lives as adults. They were using the dolls to reflect the adult world around them. They would sit and carry on conversations, making the dolls real people. I used to watch that over and over and think: If only we could take this play pattern and three-dimensionalize it, we would have something very special.”

Special was not how the male designers saw it. It was costly. In America, they told Ruth, it would be impossible to make what she wanted —a woman doll with painted nails “ Othing” that had “zippers and darts and hemlines”— for an affordable price.

“Frankly,” Ruth recalled, “I thought they were all horrified by the thought they were of wanting to make a doll with breasts.”

But just because the dolls couldn’t be made in America didn’t mean they couldn’t be made. In July 1957, Jack Ryan took off for Tokyo to find a manufacturer for some electronic gadgets he had designed. “Just as I was leaving,” he said, “Ruth stuck this doll into my attache* case and said: ‘See if you can get this copied.’ “ The doll, of course, was Lilli.

Jack was accompanied on the trip by Frank Nakamura, a recent graduate of Los Angeles’ Art Center School whom Mattel had hired as a product designer in April. A United States citizen, Nakamura was also fluent in Japanese; during the war, he taught the language in a school run by the U.S. Military Intelligence Service at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. When the war ended, he was sent to Japan to debrief Japanese soldiers on their battle experiences and report their stories to General MacArthur.

Frank “knew his way around Japan very well,” Jack said. “And in Japan, it’s more important to know your way around and to be able to make connections than it is here. Here you walk into any office and you’re doing business right away on face value. It’s not so in Japan.”

The trip did not begin auspiciously. Ryan, Frank recalled, became edgy when the plane took off. He had an odd phobia for an aerospace engineer: He was afraid to fly. Nor did things go smoothly on the ground. Frank contacted numerous manufacturers, none of whom was equipped to make vinyl dolls. After three weeks, Ryan returned to California. Part of the problem was Lilli herself; she didn’t exactly capture the hearts of the Japanese. “The Lilli doll looked kind of mean—sharp eyebrow and eyeshadow and so forth,” Nakamura said. “And Japanese people didn’t like it at all.” But Frank pressed on, and by the time Elliot joined him early August, Kokusai Boeki m Kaisha (KBK), a Tokyo-based novelty maker, was ready to cut a deal.

KBK was not one big widget factory; it was a dis-

tributor for widgets that had been made by contractors and subcontractors all over Japan, from Hokkaido in the extreme north to Fukuoka in the extreme south. “The network was like a spiderweb,” Nakamura said, “stretching two to three hundred miles in each direction.”

KBK persuaded a dollmaker named Yamasaki to knock off Lilli, but that was only the beginning of the challenge. Lilli’s body was as hard as her look, made of rigid plastic that had been “injection-molded”—squeezed into its mold like toothpaste from a tube. Mattel, however, wanted to make Barbie out of soft vinyl, and vinyl, when injection-molded, didn’t always ooze into the tiny crevices of a mold. To ensure that Barbie had fingers and toes, her arms and legs would have to be “rotation-molded”—turned slowly in their molds while the vinyl hardened.

Yamasaki had never rotation-molded anything in his life. So in November, Mattel sent Seymour Adler, a Brooklyn-born engineer with a background in tool design, to teach him how. Adler arrived with the latest plastic-industry journals detailing the new process. Only one obstacle remained: Adler himself had never rotation-molded before either.
Back in California, Ryan was doing his best to make the doll look less like “a German streetwalker.” He had befriended Bud Westmore, the makeup czar at Universal Pictures, who gave Lilli a makeover. The first thing Westmore eliminated was what he called her “bee-stung lips,” the Maria Braunesque pout into which her tough little mouth had been formed. Next were her heavy eyelashes and what Ryan termed the “weird widow’s peak” on her forehead. A sculptor was brought in to refashion Lilli’s face, but, Adler told me, nobody at Mattel liked the results, so the head was cast, with slight modifications, from Lilli’s.

Ryan also modified the joints that attached the arms and legs to the torso. Then he sent cast alloy masters of the freshly sculpted body parts for the Japanese to electroplate and make into molds. Before a mold could be used to produce the doll, Ryan had to approve six sample castings from it. Sometimes the castings had startling embellishments. “Each time I would get a half dozen back, they would have nipples on the breasts,” Ryan explained. “So I took my little fine Swiss file, which the Swiss use for working on watches, and very daintily filed the nipples off and returned them.”
After several rounds of emery-boarding, KBK got the message. “The Japanese are very obedient,” Ryan said. “They’ll always do what you tell them.”

KBK NOT ONLY MADE BARBIE, IT ALSO MADE HER CLOTHES. It didn’t, however, design them. For Barbie’s first wardrobe, the Handlers turned to Charlotte Johnson, a fortyish veteran of Seventh Avenue who had been working in the garment industry since she was seventeen. They found her at Los Angeles’ Chouinard Institute, where she was teaching an evening course in fashion design. Many say Charlotte created Barbie in her own image. “The shocker was that the doll looked like her,” Ken Handler said of his first meeting with the designer in the early sixties. “It had the same-shaped head and was wearing the same hair.”

As often as the adjective “short” has been used to describe Jack Ryan, who stood about five feet seven, the terms “tall,” “statuesque,” and “imposing” have been applied by colleagues to Charlotte, who stands about five feet ten in heels. Her reputation for tenacity evolved during the year she spent in Tokyo, in Frank Lloyd Wright’s aptly named Imperial Hotel, making Barbie’s wardrobe. Six days a week, Charlotte met with a Japanese designer and two seamstresses, developing designs that minimized the sewing process. “She was very, very fussy about the fit of the costume,” Nakamura said.