

1. Going Away

Hilda Stein sat relaxed and cross-legged on the sofa in the front room of her Novato, Marin County, California, single-family townhouse, and stared with satisfaction at the tightly-closed, carry-on suitcase, which days earlier, in May 2016, arrived empty via Federal Express. Now it was stuffed with clothes, European travel books, and personal belongings, for a two week trip to Berlin, Prague and Vienna. The exception was her toiletries. These she was giving to her friend John who would accompany her and check in his luggage to simplify the process of passing through airport security. This was her first tour with the Rick Steves organization and she was not certain what to expect since the itinerary emphasized walking and mingling with the local community. It would be the second time in Berlin, the first having taken place in the early 1990's when she traveled with her mother to be shown her mother's childhood home. Hilda's Austrian-born father did not accompany them; unfortunately he passed away of natural causes several years earlier. Now in her sixties, Hilda preferred vacationing in faraway places.

Previously, most journeys were to various parts of Northern California, close to where she grew up in San Francisco. Her mother was laid to rest during late 2006 after a long illness, making it easier for Hilda to explore, and freeing her from eldercare responsibilities. She resigned from a career in banking and now relied on leasing residential real estate as the primary source of income. She was an only child, though she herself raised two sons and a daughter. They were grown-up, living in Sacramento, New Jersey, and Oakland. Although Jewish, Hilda's parents always encouraged their daughter not to flaunt her Jewishness. She was happy her friend John was accompanying her. They met during 2010 in a local Starbuck's coffee shop, and had grown close together. Yet each gave the other the freedom to do their own thing, and remain

independent. He was a few years' older, had lost his wife to cancer, retired as a Human Resources executive shortly after they met, and lived nearby.

It had taken two days to decide what to pack. If only she had counted, she probably would hold the world record for the number of times a suitcase could be packed and unpacked during a forty-eight hour period. Her main concern was the weather. It was late May, and in Northern California, the climate was already sunny and hot. In Europe, she would experience rain and temperatures well below those she was used to. Departure for Berlin was scheduled the following afternoon, flying Scandinavian Airlines through Copenhagen to Berlin.

She was excited by the itinerary for this second visit. One of its purposes was to find the five-story apartment building she had been shown by her mother during her first stay. It was where her mother was brought up, was owned by her grandparents, and had been the livelihood for the family prior to the Second World War. From memory, Hilda recalled it as an imposing building, with five floors, sub-divided into about twenty apartments, and several shops on the ground level. It was situated in the prestigious neighborhood of Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf in West Berlin.

Standing outside the building many years earlier, she had heard about the privileged upbringing of her mother, the servants who looked after the family, and how her mother and sister played around the premises and spent hours sliding down the wooden banisters of the building's interior staircase. Hilda was determined to discover the place as a tribute to her parents. Additionally, she hoped to obtain information about Berlin during the time of her mother's upbringing and how Jewish life had been so forcefully altered by Hitler's National Socialism. Most everything the family possessed disappeared during the Nazi years.

The intention was to use the two days before the organized tour began to find the property, and to take the Berlin Hop-On, Hop-Off Tour to get there. A friend of the family in London gave Hilda the address and she hoped to recognize the building by the florist's shop on the ground floor. She had not thought about what she would do once the building was found. It was fair to say Hilda preferred to act without thinking, and deal with difficulties as they arose, but sometimes her impetuosity resulted in pleasing outcomes.

She and John each purchased a two-day excursion ticket, after deciding that the U-Bahn and tram transport systems were too difficult to navigate. While she understood German, she did not speak it. It had been the language at home, but once she attended school, English became the speech of choice. She wanted to discover how many years the property had been the family residence and what happened during the mid-1930's when it was acquired by someone else.

It was a warm, dry, Friday afternoon as Hilda and friend arrived at the Berlin Tegel Airport. She was annoyed that the airline insisted in Copenhagen on her checking in her luggage. It arrived on the same conveyor belt as her companion's full-size suitcase. She also worried about petty theft in Berlin that friends had warned her about. There was the story of the disappearing suitcase at the airport baggage claim and the snatched purse on the bus to the hotel. For once, she decided a taxi was worth the extra euros. The talkative Turkish taxi driver took the opportunity to practice his English and explain the recent transformation of Berlin into a thriving international city. He dropped his two passengers outside their hotel in the former East Berlin, and they checked in for five nights. The hotel was small but comfortable, and made Hilda and John feel welcome.

Walking the avenues of East Berlin that evening, she found she understood the Germans who spoke to her, and soon developed a sense of belonging. Her friend John spoke French so was of

no help, although he appeared Germanic, and often Hilda would ask the question and the person would look at John and answer in German.

The streets were alive and vibrant with people sightseeing, shopping, eating, drinking and socializing. The grey, depressing architecture of East Berlin was nearly unnoticeable behind the brightly lit shop fronts, restaurants, and beer gardens. Hilda ate her first Currywurst, a sliced sausage coated with a preparation of curry powder, ketchup, and onions, and presented alongside French fries. She liked it for the experience, but didn't ask for a second serving.

The next morning Hilda and John returned to the streets of Berlin, mapping their way by foot to the Hop-On bus stop in Alexanderplatz. They had chosen the Classic Tour which would take them within a mile of her mother's property. From the bus stop, they would need to walk but the hotel had kindly provided them with a street map of West Berlin. The bus travelled slowly, stopping frequently to permit passengers to take photos of sites such as Museum Island, the River Spree, the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, the Victory Column, and the Charlottenburg Palace. The leisurely progress annoyed Hilda and John who had no intentions of taking photographs until their organized tour began. It was as the bus passed through the upscale shopping district of the Kurfurstendamm that they realized it was time to disembark and walk the remainder of the way to the apartment building. It was a long distance down a residential boulevard but eventually they found the side-street they were looking for. After a brief discussion about directions, they turned right, and a few minutes later, Hilda was in front of her mother's former home.

She gasped with astonishment. It was much larger and more magnificent than she remembered, and neat and attractive in appearance. It was the right address because the florist's shop was on

the ground floor. The florist greeted Hilda, patiently listened to the family story, and then took her to the back of the store and showed her the building's interior courtyard. Hilda remembered the area from her visit with her mother. She asked if she could go inside the building but was told it was private and strangers were not allowed. She could have argued but sensed her host was rigidly disciplined and would stubbornly refuse assistance.

Returning to the street, she and John inspected the occupants' list of names alongside the front door bells. There was an urge to press any of them but the compulsion was resisted. Maybe if they stood there long enough, someone would leave or enter the building. Unfortunately, it was a quiet Saturday and no resident appeared. To Hilda, it was irritating and disappointing that she was standing outside the place in which her mother grew up, but not able to go inside.

She walked over to the jewelry shop on the street corner and once again asked about entering the building. The reply was the same. Other shops could be visited but it was likely the answer would be the same. It was early afternoon and the day continued to be warm and dry. Hilda crossed the road and turned to stare at the second floor balcony where she knew her mother spent many summer evenings. She imagined waiving at her across the street. What could she do now? It wasn't time to give up. She was pushy and persistent when necessary but she needed to find someone willing to help her. The idea was to combine her characteristic of determination with the appearance of humility and innocence, and see what happened in the other shops. John decided to trail behind as she prepared to implement her scheme.