

1. Going Away

Hilda Stein sat relaxed and cross-legged on the sofa in the front room of her Marin County, Pacheco Valley condominium, and stared at the tightly-closed, carry-on suitcase, which days earlier, in May 2016, arrived empty via Federal Express. Now it was stuffed with clothes, 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 a friend who would accompany her and check in his luggage to simplify the process of passing through airport security. This was the first tour with the Rick Steves organization and she was not certain what to expect since the itinerary emphasized walking and mixing with the local community. It would be her second time in Berlin, the first having happened in the early 1990's when she traveled with her mother to scrutinize her mother's childhood home. Her Austrian-born father was absent; unfortunately he passed away of natural causes several years earlier. Now in her sixties, Hilda preferred vacationing in faraway places.

In earlier times, she spent most of her life in Northern California, close to where she was born in San Francisco. Her mother passed on during late 2006 after a long illness, making it much easier for Hilda to travel, and releasing her from eldercare responsibilities. She gave up a career in banking and relied on owning and renting residential property as an alternative source of income. She was an only child, though raised two sons and a daughter of her own. They had grown-up and lived in Sacramento, New York, and Shanghai. Although Jewish, Hilda's parents always encouraged her not to flaunt her Jewishness. She was divorced and met her friend John during 2010, in a Starbuck's coffee shop. They had grown close together, yet managed to permit each other the freedom to do their own thing and remain independent. He was a few years' older than she, had lost his wife to cancer, retired 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 seen with her mother during that first stay in the city. It was where her mother was brought up, was owned by her grandparents, and was the source of income for the family prior to the Second World War. From memory, Hilda recalled an imposing building, with its five floors sub-divided into about twenty apartments and several shops on the ground level. It was located in a prestigious neighborhood of West Berlin.

Standing outside the building many years earlier, she had been told about the privileged upbringing her mother enjoyed, the servants who looked after the family, and how her mother and sister played in the inner courtyard and spent hours sliding down the wooden banisters of the building's interior staircase. Hilda was determined to discover the site as homage to her parents. Additionally, she hoped to learn about Berlin during the time of her mother's upbringing and how Jewish life had been so violently disrupted by Hitler's national socialism. Most everything the family possessed was lost during the Hitler years and Hilda could not recall any photos of her maternal grandmother. Her mother and grandmother were very similar, she had been told, both physically and in temperament. She never met the female head of the family who died in Vienna

during 1940. Her grandmother's husband died ten years earlier when Hilda's mother was just eleven.

The plan was to use the two days before the organized tour to find the property, and to travel by the Berlin Hop-On, Hop-Off City Tour bus. A friend of the family in London provided the address and Hilda hoped to recognize the property by the florist's shop on the ground floor which, according to the friend, existed since before the War. Hilda did not think about what she would do once she found the building. It was fair to say she acted impetuously rather than planned, but sometimes her impulsiveness resulted in surprising success.

She and her friend purchased two-day excursion tickets after deciding that the U-Bahn and tram public transport systems were difficult to use. While she understood German, she did not speak it. It had been the language used at home during her early years, but once she attended school, English became the language she spoke. 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 an Aryan German.

It was a warm, dry Friday afternoon as Hilda and friend arrived at the Berlin Tegel Airport. She was unhappy the airline insisted in Copenhagen that she check in her hand luggage. It arrived on the same conveyor belt as her companion's full-size suitcase. There was also worry about the petty theft that existed in Berlin. She was warned by friends. 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 cost.

The talkative Turkish taxi driver used the opportunity to practice his English and explain the recent transformation of Berlin into a thriving international city. The two passengers were dropped off outside their hotel in former East Berlin and checked in for five nights. The hotel was small but comfortable and made Hilda and her friend 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. The streets were alive and vibrant with people commuting, shopping, eating, drinking and socializing. The grey, depressing architecture of East Berlin was almost unnoticeable behind brightly lit shop fronts, restaurants, and beer gardens. Hilda experienced her first Currywurst that evening, a sliced sausage coated with a preparation of curry powder, ketchup and onions, and presented alongside French fries.

The next morning she returned to the streets of Berlin mapping her way by foot to the Hop-On bus stop in Alexanderplatz. Her friend had booked the Classic Tour which would take them within a mile of Guntzelstrasse. This was the name of the family property. The bus travelled slowly, stopping frequently to allow passengers time to look at sites such as Museum Island, the River Spree, the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, the Victory Column, and the Charlottenburg Palace. Soon the bus passed through the upscale shopping district of the Kurfurstendamm, and it was time to dismount and search for the apartment building. It was a long walk along the residential boulevard but eventually Hilda arrived at the street she was looking for. Turning right, a few minutes later her mother's former home appeared in front of her.

She gasped with open mouth as if in wonder. It was much larger and more imposing than she remembered and appeared in very good condition. She knew it was the right structure because of the flower shop on the ground floor. The florist welcomed Hilda, patiently listened to her family

story, and then invited her to view the building's interior courtyard. Access was only gained through shops and from each apartment. Hilda hoped to enter the building but was told this was impossible because most apartments were now privately-owned. She inspected the lists of occupant names alongside the front door bells but resisted the urge to press any buzzer. If she stood there long enough, maybe someone would leave or enter. But it was a quiet Saturday. It was irritating to be so close to where her mother grew up but unable to experience the sights and sounds of her upbringing.

Instead, Hilda walked to the jewelry shop at the corner of the streets to purchase something to remember her mother, and once more asked about entry to the building. The reply was the same. She was disappointed. It was early afternoon on a dry, warm day, and it seemed there was no way to make further progress. Hilda walked across the road and stood gazing back at the balcony on the second floor where she knew her mother had spent many summer evenings. What should she do now? It wasn't time to give up. Hilda could be surprisingly aggressive and persistent when necessary, and combined with her amiable temperament, this could be very effective in persuading others to help her achieve her goals. She would test the strategy while her friend observed.