

2. A Surprise Welcome

The unwillingness to speak German was the one thing threatening Hilda's idea, if the shopkeepers did not understand English. She decided to communicate in German even if it embarrassed her, since at least she could apologize and laugh at her mistakes, and maybe the people would be more obliging if she tried to speak their language. Serendipitously, encouragement came to her as she prepared to cross the road. Two children approached and asked what time it was. Without hesitation, she answered, "fast Mittag". They smiled, thanked her, and quickly disappeared to wherever they were expected. That hadn't been so difficult thought Hilda, as the exchange boosted her self-confidence. If children understood her, so might the shopkeepers.

She took one final gaze at the property from across the road, observing its steeply pitched, black roof, cream walls and neatly trimmed windows and balconies. It dominated the neighborhood, looking graceful and elegant, surrounded by other rather ordinary post-war structures. If buildings could speak what stories this one could tell. She remembered her mother talking about how, during National Socialism, tenants would ask members of the Protective Squad or SS guards (Schutzstaffel) to leave the premises, and shopkeepers would lock their doors to keep out the Hitler Youth. Her grandmother faced enormous risks if something went wrong since not only was she in charge of the building, but was responsible for the care of her youngest daughter. By all accounts, she spoiled her.

"Who do you think I am?" Hilda's mother would ask when entering her daughter's cluttered and disorganized bedroom in San Francisco.

“I’m not your dienstmaedchen,” she would declare, referring to the housemaid who kept her room neat and organized during her adolescent years in Berlin.

What was clear to Hilda, was her mother’s fondness for the home in Berlin, and how sad she had been to leave it. Her mother could never remember exactly when she left Germany, but knew it was before Hitler invaded Austria during March 1938. The outcome of leaving had been ten years of refugee status, the first four in Vienna, and then six years in Shanghai. This period of displacement only came to an end in July 1947, when she and her Austrian husband arrived in San Francisco on the SS General Gordon, having been granted refugee admission by the United States. In Vienna, she had met the son of the person who looked after her and her mother on arrival. The two fell in love, and as soon as she was twenty-one, she married him on November 10, 1939. He was in prison at the time, and had been interned since around the time of the Vienna Kristallnacht. On November 9th and 10th 1938, paramilitary organizations combined with thousands of civilians to form mobs that torched synagogues, vandalized Jewish businesses, looted and destroyed Jewish stores, and arrested several thousand Jews. A few months after her mother died in mid 1940 the newly-weds arranged to flee to Shanghai.

Hilda’s parents arrived penniless in the United States. Her mother found a job as a packer in a shoe polish factory and her husband was employed as a janitor by the Pacific-Union Club. He declared himself a journalist on Hilda’s birth certificate in 1950, the profession he practiced in Austria, rather than admit he cleaned toilets.

Hilda returned across the street to visit the shopkeepers she had previously not spoken with. She found it a slow and frustrating process as she explained in German her connection to the building and the ambition to look inside. The retailers listened carefully, would on occasion ask her to

repeat herself, but then state they could not help. Soon she was entering the last store. It was different from the others in that it sold products only made in Switzerland and was operated by two non-German men who spoke perfect English, German and French. They had no difficulty understanding Hilda as she returned to speaking her own language. Her story fascinated them and they were shocked that she had never been inside the building.

“Would you like to?” one of them asked. “We have a friend who lives on the second floor and will be home shortly. We can ask her to show you around. I’m sure she will.”

Hilda was surprised and pleased at this sudden turn of events. She smiled her acceptance and told the shopkeepers she would wait as long as necessary until the person finished work and returned. They called their friend who said she would be delighted to show the apartment, and would be home in about an hour.

As soon as she arrived, Hilda and John were introduced. She was a charming person, easy to talk to, in her mid-forties, an attractive brunette, well dressed, and worked at a nearby university. She spoke English perfectly, with a slight British accent and lived in the apartment with her young son who he wasn’t home on this particular day. The apartment had been owned by her since the mid-1990’s when it was purchased from a real estate company. Most residents, she said, bought their homes at that time, although the landowner kept ownership of the ground floor shops. She couldn’t remember the company’s name and had no idea the property was once owned by a Jewish family. No-one had ever told her.

The three of them entered the building through the side door and climbed the stone staircase to enter her immaculately decorated apartment. She was very proud of her home. She pointed to the

Art Deco displays on the room ceilings and the molding trim on the doors, telling her guests that these dated back to when the building was built. A tour of all rooms was given, ending at a small bathroom adjacent to the kitchen. This she said had been the bedroom of the apartment's dienstmaedchen. She invited Hilda and John to stay for a cup of tea and talked about her life as an art student and single woman. Hilda shared with her stories from her mother.

"Let me take you to the top floor attic," she volunteered, after the tea was drunk.

"It's part of the building only recently repaired, and you can still see the marks of the bullet holes made during the war."

The host knew the building suffered additional damage during hostilities but didn't know the details. It was sometime later when Hilda was studying correspondence she had been given that she read how the two apartments above the one just visited, were destroyed by incendiary bombs during Spring 1944, and how the windows of the entire building were blown out by bomb blasts amid the last days of the Battle for Berlin. Additionally, the roof was badly damaged twice, the second time, catching fire towards the end of the War. However, compared with many other buildings in the vicinity, the property escaped the fighting relatively undamaged..

The climax of the visit was when the host took her guests downstairs to the main reception area. It still had in place its ornate, polished, wooden banister, curling upwards to the highest floor, that Hilda's mother had often talked about. Witnessing it stimulated Hilda's memories. She stroked the wood, saying nothing, but the look on her face and her tear-filled eyes said it all.

With the visit over, the three returned to the store where more surprises waited for Hilda and John.

As soon as the woman left, the youngest-looking of the two men, announced with vigorous enthusiasm.

“You need to go here,” giving Hilda a map and a scribbled address that he said was the headquarters of the local District Court, a place he called the Amtsgericht.

“These people maintain land registry records for buildings around here. History on every property is kept, including owner’s names, sales dates, and registration documents. You should visit them. Maybe they can tell you when your family owned the building. It’s open only a few hours each day, but if you are staying in Berlin until Wednesday, you should have time for a visit.”

He continued, “and if you go, please let us know the outcome.”

“And we have another idea,” he added.

“You should see the Wir Waren Nachbarn (“We Were Neighbors”) exhibition. It’s located in the Schoneberg City Hall, not far from here, and holds records of every person living in this neighborhood who was killed during the Holocaust. It possesses hundreds of biographies and photos, and maybe it can help with your family.”

With the information on several scraps of paper, it was time for Hilda and John to say goodbye, and start their journey back to the hotel. It had turned out to be an exhausting day and they were feeling hungry. Before resuming the journey, it was time to eat a late lunch at a delightful Italian trattoria less than a hundred yards away across the street. They talked about whether they would have time to visit the District Court. Hilda confirmed she had brought her mother’s birth

certificate and other documents with her on vacation and that these might help gain access to the law courts. They eventually decided to delay a decision until after they talked to the tour guide the following Sunday afternoon.

The Hop-On Hop-Off buses had finished their day's schedule by the time Hilda and John completed their itinerary of sightseeing, concluding with a walk in the Tiergarten Park. Consequently, they were faced with a five mile hike back to the hotel, but it didn't seem to matter. It had been an exciting day. Hilda had achieved far more than she expected, and walking through central Berlin on a Saturday evening was a way to soak in the sights and sounds of the city, and reflect on a very successful day. John mapped the way as Hilda chatted about the kindness of the shopkeeper boys and the tour of the building. After losing their way several times, they finally made it back to the hotel late in the evening. There was no time for dinner. Instead, they retired to the bedroom where they jointly composed a letter that they would present to the District Court if they decided on a visit, and it wouldn't let them in.

The following morning was devoted to a visit of the Berlin Wall and a walk through the Memorial Park. Somehow the fierceness of its former purpose was absent with so many tourists and commercial enterprises, despite displays of the death zone, watch tower, and stretches of Wall. The close-by Documentation Center gave a thorough education of the two Berlins, the Viewing Tower provided a great perspective of the neighborhood, and the Visitor's Center offered pieces of the Wall as souvenirs. All in all, it was an invigorating walk, but with none of the excitement of the previous day.

During the afternoon, it was time for the tour orientation and introductions to fellow travelers. It was a small group with a whole range of reasons for being there. For some it was curiosity, for

others an interest in history and for the musician in the group it was to attend a symphony in the Dresden Concert Hall. Hilda and John described their adventure of the previous day, and Hilda's links to Berlin and Vienna. Afterwards, they sat down with the guide for a personal discussion. They were surprised by his interest and encouragement as he listened to their story. He was a slim, thirty-something year-old, bespectacled German called Carlos, who had led this particular tour many times before. He smiled a lot and seemed eager to help. He and Hilda had things in common. Both had one German parent. Carlos's father escaped from East Germany to West Berlin during the 1950's, and met his Costa Rican wife in Bonn. He was proud to be German but like Hilda, enjoyed the perspective of a foreigner in the family who could critique his home country.

Considering the request and behaving like the academic that he was, he announced their plan was sensible but that the visit to the District Court should be on Tuesday rather than Monday. That way they would not miss the important tour of central Berlin on Monday morning. He added, during Sunday evening and before the start of the Monday morning itinerary, he would introduce the group to the Berlin public transport system and teach each of them how to use it. That way Hilda and John would know how to use the train to reach the District Court. He would give them instructions on how to travel to the Amtsgerichtplatz in Charlottenburg, after dinner during Monday evening.