

## 2. A Surprise Welcome

The unwillingness to speak German was the one thing threatening Hilda's plan, if the shopkeepers didn't 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 wasn't so difficult*, thought Hilda, as the exchange boosted her self-confidence. If children understood her, so might the shopkeepers.

She took one final glance 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, and 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 the years of 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 she had sole responsibility for the care of Ellen. By all accounts, she spoiled Ellen.

"Who do you think I am?" Hilda's mother would ask years later 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 the next six in Shanghai. This period of displacement only came to an end during July 1947, when Ellen and her Austrian-born husband, Walter, arrived in San Francisco on the USS General Gordon, having been granted refugee admission by the United States.

In Vienna, Ellen had met the son of the person who looked after the family when they first arrived in Austria. The two fell in love, and once Ellen reached age twenty-one, she married him on November 10, 1939. He was in prison at the time, where he had been confined since around the time of the Vienna Kristallnacht. On November 9 and 10, 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 weeks after he was released, in late 1940, the newlyweds fled 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 father Walter 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 followed in Austria, rather than admit he cleaned toilets.

Back in Berlin, Hilda returned across the street to visit the shopkeepers she had not previously spoken with. As she repeatedly explained in German her connection to the building, and ambition to look inside, she encountered a slow and frustrating process. The retailers listened carefully, and on occasion would ask her to repeat herself, but then the reply would be the same, that 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 she will be home shortly. We can ask her to show you around. I’m sure she will.”

Hilda was astonished by 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 home. The shopkeepers called their friend who said she would be delighted to show Hilda and John the apartment, and would return in about an hour.

As soon as she arrived, Hilda and John were introduced. The lady was a charming person, easy to talk to, in her mid-forties, an attractive brunette, well-dressed, and a lecturer at a nearby university. She spoke perfect English, with a slight British accent, and lived in the apartment with her young son, who wasn’t home on this particular day. She explained that the apartment had been owned by her since the mid-1990s, when she purchased it from a real estate company. She loved the home and was proud to show it to visitors. Most residents, she said, bought their property back in the 1990s, although the landowner kept ownership of the shops. She couldn’t remember the company’s name and was surprised that 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 arrive at her immaculately decorated apartment. The host welcomed her guests inside. She pointed to the Art Deco displays on the ceilings and the molding trim on the doors, telling them that these dated back to when the building was erected. A tour of all rooms was

given, ending at the door of a small bathroom, adjacent to the kitchen. This, she said, had been the bedroom of the apartment's dienstmaedchen (servant). She invited Hilda and John to stay for a cup of tea and talked to them about her life as an art student and a single woman. Hilda shared with her stories from her mother.

After the tea was finished, "Let me take you to the top floor attic," the woman volunteered. "It's part of the building only recently repaired, and you can still see the marks of bullet holes made at the time of the war."

The host knew the building suffered additional damage during hostilities, but didn't know the extent. It was some time later, when Hilda was studying correspondence she received from Berlin, that she read how the two apartments above the one she had just visited, were destroyed by incendiary bombs during Spring 1944. 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 to 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. Still in place was an 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 awaited 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." He gave 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 owners’ 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’re staying in Berlin until Wednesday, you should have time for a visit.”

He continued, “And if you go, please return and tell us the outcome.” Then he added, “And we have another idea. You should see the Wir Waren Nachbarn exhibition (“We Were Neighbors”). It’s located in the Schoeneberg City Hall, not far from here, and holds records of every person living in this neighborhood who was killed during the Holocaust. The exhibition contains hundreds of biographies and photos, and maybe they can help with your research.”

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. The day had been exhausting and they were 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, and these might help gain access to the law courts. They 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 daily schedule by the time Hilda and John completed their itinerary of sightseeing, concluding with a walk in the Tiergarten Park. Consequently, there was a five-mile hike back to the hotel, but that didn’t seem to matter. 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 shopkeepers 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 would be presented to the District Court, if they decided to call on it and it wouldn't let them in.

The following morning was devoted to a visit to the remains of the Berlin Wall and a walk through Memorial Park. Somehow the fierceness of the Wall's former purpose was missing because of the presence of so many tourists and commercial activities, despite realistic exhibits of the death zone. The nearby Documentation Center gave a thorough education on the differences between the two Berlins, the Viewing Tower offered a panoramic view of the neighborhood, and the Visitor's Center sold pieces of the Wall as souvenirs. All in all, it was an invigorating walk, but with none of the excitement of the previous day.

Late in the afternoon, it was time for the Rick Steves tour orientation, and introductions to fellow travelers. The group was small, with a range of reasons for people being there. For some, it was curiosity, others an interest in history, and for the musician in the group, to attend a symphony in the Dresden Concert Hall. Hilda and John described their adventures of the previous day and explained Hilda's links to Berlin and Vienna. Afterwards, they sat down with the travel 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, bespectacled German called Carlos, who had led this particular tour many times before. He smiled and seemed eager to help, and he and Hilda discovered they had a number of things in common. Both had one parent born in Germany. Carlos's father had escaped from East Germany to West Berlin

during the 1950s, and had met his Costa Rican wife in Bonn. Carlos was proud to be German, and like Hilda, enjoyed the perspective of parents who were able to objectively critique their home country.

Reacting to the unexpected request from his two traveling companions to be let off part of the Berlin itinerary, and using his Rick Steves training, he diplomatically agreed their plan was sensible, but the visit to the District Court should take place on Tuesday rather than Monday. That way they would not miss the important tour of central Berlin he had arranged for 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 instruct them on how to use it. That way Hilda and John would be able to travel by train to the District Court, and he would provide directions to the Amtsgerichtplatz in Charlottenburg, after dinner on Monday evening.