

3. The Land Register

Hilda slept soundly Sunday night, excited that the organized tour was beginning, and she would visit the District Court on Tuesday morning. Carlos had asked her to share the Court experience with the rest of the group during the Prague communal dinner in four nights time.

With her jet-lag beaten, she spent Monday in the company of her colleagues, sightseeing in the heart of Berlin. Thoughts of her mother returned just before lunch, during a visit to the concrete stelae of the Holocaust Memorial, nestled next to the Tiergarten and Brandenburg Gate, and close to the site where Hitler committed suicide. Her mother had lost her home to National Socialism, but at least she had survived the Holocaust. As Hilda sat among the cold, grey, concrete slabs, she felt a sense of achievement for her parents who had defied the horrors of anti-Semitism and established a new life for themselves in America. She recalled her mother's praise for the courage and resilience of her own mother during the harsh years in Berlin under Nazi rule.

Monday evening, Hilda checked her tote bag to make sure it included her passport and birth certificate. She also checked to be certain she had her mother's identification records in case they were needed to gain entry to the District Court. She intended to visit the Land Register where she hoped to inspect the ownership deeds for her family home. The limit of what she knew about the property was her grandparents lived there after they married in 1910, and it was confiscated during 1936.

The couple was told to leave the hotel around nine in the morning and use the U-Bahn to travel the Pankow to Ruhleben line. The train could be boarded at nearby Sansfelderplatz station, and they should get off at Sophie-Charlotte-Platz. Once there, it was only a short walk to the Charlottenburg District Court.

Early Tuesday, dressed in their smartest clothes, Hilda and John left the hotel to make use of the travel instructions given to them by the tour guide. Everything went smoothly and soon they were at their destination. A pair of imposing wooden doors greeted them and then, pushing hard, they found one of the entryways open to reveal a security gate obstructing further access. To the left was a security cage occupied by a solitary guard, protected behind a thick glass window. The female guard came to the see-through barrier and gruffly asked Hilda who she was, why she was there, did she have an appointment, and who was it she wanted to see? This was all in German and Hilda asked the questions to be repeated, more slowly the second time.

Neither Hilda nor John had any idea who they needed to speak with, and Hilda's reply was made more difficult because the guard understood no English. In poorly spoken German, Hilda explained she was trying to trace family ownership of a nearby block of apartments and had been told the Court held land registry records. She'd recently arrived in Germany and did not have time to make an appointment, as she was leaving Berlin for Dresden the following morning.

The guard reacted skeptically, displaying signs suggesting she was suspicious of Hilda's motives. She asked Hilda for her passport and her mother's birth certificate. As these were handed over, Hilda asked the guard to take the letter that had been prepared in case Hilda and John were not allowed into the building. This seemed to unsettle the interrogator, who realized there was something she would have to do if entry was denied. Her attitude softened and she agreed to let them in. The security gate was released, Hilda was given a piece of paper on which a room number was scribbled, and the couple was instructed to go upstairs. The room number turned out to be the location of the General Inquiries office.

A few minutes later Hilda and John were in General Inquiries. A man and woman sat behind a desk monitoring the flow of visitors, but there were none present when the two arrived.

Hilda once again used her limited German to explain the reason for the visit, and once more, reactions were discouraging. A barrage of questions was asked that seemed intended to persuade them to go away. The woman receptionist asked to see Hilda's mother's birth certificate and evidence that she was no longer alive. The documents were provided.

Hilda was not a threatening person. She was somewhat petite and had a super-welcoming face that smiled whenever she talked. On this occasion, she nervously tugged at her light brown hair. The people behind the desk reluctantly decided to check their records. Whatever it was they were looking for, they found it. It changed their attitude and they became more cooperative, and the woman wrote down what appeared to be a property registry number, and passed the note to Hilda. Directions were given to visit the Land Register, or Grundbuch as they called it, and the couple was told this department could help them.

The building corridors were long, and the rooms were not clearly numbered, but eventually Hilda and John found the designated office and offered the piece of paper to a man at the desk. He seemed surprised that they had made it so far without an appointment. He took the piece of paper, and as soon as he confirmed the land plot number on the Registry of Deeds, he told his visitors to go next door.

This new room was larger and busier than anything Hilda and John had so far experienced. There was a large reception desk at one end, staffed by several individuals who seemed to be answering questions and passing packages to people who came and went. Along one side of the room was a shelf with a row of desktop computers, several of which were being used. It appeared many people were searching for property records. There were also several rows of chairs in the center of the room, most unoccupied, that were presumably for visitors to sit and wait until they were called to the front desk.

Hilda and John were unsure of what to do next. They sat and looked around. It appeared that clients were either accessing files online, or receiving physical copies at the reception desk. There was a young lady helping who seemed particularly friendly and Hilda took a liking towards her. She became the target of attention. Hilda approached her with a big smile and asked if she spoke English. She didn't. Once more, using her limited German, Hilda explained who she was and why she was there. The woman reacted sympathetically and took away the piece of paper, asking her visitor to return to the chair. A few minutes later she beckoned Hilda back to the counter.

She spoke in German. "I will assist you. We have records and I can access them as soon as I have time. If you leave your address, I'll send copies to your American home, but I need two weeks for research, and the mailing will probably take a similar length of time."

Hilda's persistence once more had been effective. She was delighted by the woman's offer, which seemed genuine. She thanked the assistant and gave her the prepared letter since it included her home address.

People willing to help were always appreciated by Hilda, and on the way out she asked the security guard if there was a florist's shop nearby. She was directed to a store across the street where she bought a bouquet of flowers and a vase to present as a thank-you gift to the helpful woman. On the return, the attendant waived Hilda and John into the building, asking that they deliver the flowers personally. The recipient's reaction indicated she rarely received recognition from her clients.

After a quick lunch, the couple decided to take one final look at the apartment building and let the shopkeepers know what happened at the District Court. They used public transport and quickly found the property. The store owners were pleased to receive an update and

congratulated Hilda and John on the results of their visit. They asked to be kept up-to-date by email, and repeated their recommendation that the Wir Waren Nachbarn Exhibition should be visited. It was within walking distance and time was available, so the couple decided to visit.

About forty minutes later, Hilda and John found themselves in a large display hall. It was an awe-inspiring exhibit, but somber and sad. The person in charge listened to Hilda explain her family's history, and went off to research her files. A few minutes later she returned to say that there were no records of Hilda's family, and the property address fell outside the geographic area served by the Exhibition. It was the first disappointment of the tour, but the willingness of the person to help was a welcome consolation.

That evening, the tour guide spoke to the couple to find out what happened during the day. He was pleased the visit was so successful. For Hilda, it was now a matter of wait and see. She trusted the lady at the Land Register and believed she would honor her promise. It was time to resume the tour and prepare for the bus journey to Dresden the following morning.