

1. Going Away

Hilda Stein sat relaxed and cross-legged on the sofa in the front room of her single family townhouse, in Novato, Marin County, California. She stared with satisfaction at the tightly closed, carry-on suitcase, which days earlier, during May 2016, had arrived empty via Federal Express. Now it was stuffed with clothes, European travel books, and personal belongings, ready 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. The plan was for John to check in his luggage to simplify the process of passing through airport security.

This was Hilda's 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 her second time in Berlin. The first took place during the early 1990s when she traveled with her mother to see her mother's childhood home. Hilda's Austrian-born father did not accompany them; unfortunately he had 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 had raised two sons and a daughter. They were grown up, living in Sacramento and Oakland, California, and New Jersey. Although Jewish, Hilda's parents always encouraged their daughter not to flaunt her Jewishness. She was happy her friend John would accompany her on the travels. They met during 2010 in a local

Starbucks coffee shop, and had grown close. Yet each gave freedom to the other to be self-supporting and remain independent. He was a few years older, and had lost his wife to cancer. He lived nearby, and retired from being a Human Resources executive shortly after they met.

It had taken two days to decide what to pack. If she'd kept count, 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. The flight to Berlin was scheduled for 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, and had been owned by her grandparents. The building represented the livelihood of the family prior to the Second World War. From memory, Hilda recalled it as an imposing building, with its floors subdivided into about twenty apartments and several shops located on the ground level. It was situated in the prestigious neighborhood of Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf in West Berlin.

Standing outside the building many years before, she'd heard about the privileged upbringing of her mother, the servants who looked after the family, and how her mother Ellen, as the youngest child, would spend hours playing with friends in the courtyard. She also talked about sliding down the wooden banister of the building's interior staircase.

Hilda's maternal grandmother was the eldest of six children, and had received a favored upbringing from her father who owned a successful publishing company. Her education was completed at Finishing School in Bonn during the end of the first decade of the twentieth

century. This prepared her for Jewish society and marriage to a suitable husband. In turn, she expected her own daughters to develop into refined ladies and marry well.

The youngest daughter was a disappointment as a child, preferring life as a rebel, and enjoying fun with friends, rather than playing with dolls and being concerned with her physical appearance. She spent much of her spare time with the only child belonging to one of her mother's younger sisters. The family lived nearby, and the two girls frequently played together in each other's homes. As the more senior of the two by one year, Ellen believed it was her right to take toys she did not have from her cousin, smuggling them home in her underwear. Consequently, both mothers regularly searched her clothing at the end of each playtime. They agreed a strategy of buying the same playthings for the two daughters, but even this process sometimes failed. There was the occasion when a bicycle was stolen, causing Ellen to ride off on her cousin's bike. Nonetheless, they remained the best of friends during their adult years despite living thousands of miles apart. The independence and self-determination displayed by Ellen during her childhood proved invaluable in helping her cope and outlast German National Socialism.

Hilda was determined to find the home where her mother lived as a child and teenager. Additionally, she wanted to discover details about Berlin during the time of her mother's upbringing, and understand how Jewish life was so forcefully altered by Hitler. Most everything the family possessed was lost during the Nazi years.

Hilda's intention was to use the two days before the organized tour to find the property, and take the Berlin Hop-On, Hop-Off Tour bus to get there. A friend of the family in London gave her the family address. She hoped to recognize the building by the florist's shop on the ground floor that she'd heard about. She hadn't thought about what she'd do once she found the

building. It was fair to say Hilda preferred to act without thinking, and deal with the consequences as they arose. But sometimes her impetuosity resulted in pleasant outcomes.

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

It was a warm, dry, Friday afternoon, as Hilda and John arrived at the Berlin Tegel Airport. She was annoyed that the airline insisted on her checking her luggage in Copenhagen. The bag arrived on the same conveyor belt as her companion's full-size suitcase. She also worried about petty theft that friends had warned her of in Berlin. She'd heard a story concerning a disappearing suitcase at the airport baggage claim and a snatched purse on the bus to the hotel. For once, she decided a taxi was worth the extra euros. The talkative Turkish cab 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, Hilda found she understood the Germans who spoke to her, and soon developed a sense of belonging. 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 a portion of 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 on foot to the Hop-On, Hop-Off 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 Berlin. The bus traveled slowly, stopping frequently to permit passengers take photos of sites such as Museum Island, the boats on the River Spree, the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, the Victory Column, and the Charlottenburg Palace. This leisurely progress annoyed Hilda and John, who had no intention of taking photographs until their organized tour began. As the bus passed through the upscale shopping district of the Kurfurstendamm, they knew it was time to disembark and walk the remainder of the way to the apartment building. This was a lengthy distance down a residential boulevard, but eventually they found the side street they were looking for. After a brief discussion over direction, 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, neat and attractive in appearance. She was sure this was the right address because the florist's shop was on the ground floor. The florist greeted Hilda, listened patiently 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 to allow her to gain access.

Returning to the street, she and John inspected the resident occupant list alongside the front door bells. They had the urge to press any of them but resisted the compulsion. 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 where her mother grew up, but she was 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 not change. It was early afternoon and the day continued 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 waving at her from across the street. What could she do now? It wasn't time to give up. Hilda was pushy and persistent, and had been taught by her mother to confront challenges and not walk away from difficult situations. Here, however, she needed to find someone willing to help. She would visit every shop. Her idea was to use humility and her innocent looks to persuade someone to assist. John decided to trail behind her, and watch as she prepared to implement the scheme.