

Casper Star Tribune, November 12, 2016: “Thoughts from the Old Country”

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There’s nothing like a visitor from the old country to make you reflect on your past and think back to your origins, particularly if that visitor is a cousin who was named after you. I looked back on family, clan, country, on the awful war- and postwar years with their cultural and social constraints, their religious bigotry. How I swore I would make life better for myself than what my parents had! I’d make up for the poverty and family strife that ruined my childhood.

Yet when the time came I was terrified to leave behind everything and everyone I knew—although, come to think of it, I practiced leaving when I first ran away from home. My cousin’s childhood was no bed of roses, either, even though back then it seemed to me that her family was immeasurably better off than mine.

“What was it like for you to bear my name?” I asked after jet lag was behind her. “You never got to celebrate your special day.”

In her all-Catholic village of Neibsheim, no one celebrated birthdays; instead, you are feted on Name Day, the birthday of the saint for whom you were named. There was no Saint Edith in those days, though there is now. The Name Day celebration features a Gugelhupf baked in a fluted tube pan.. Gifts are few. Edith’s mother had married the baker of Neibsheim. My dad, like his brother-in-law, was a master baker endowed by the guild with the privilege to apprentice young people. He wandered into the eastern parts of Germany and married Protestant in Leipzig, a city that, together with Weimar, constituted the region’s cultural and political center.

“A Name Day hardly mattered for any of us.” Edith frowned. “We children worked every day, including Sundays after church.”

“Same in my family. Karl and I thought we were slaves at home, Karl in the bakery, I in the store. We never got a penny of pocket money.”

“I looked up to you after your family moved near us and I go to know. Until then you were just an abstraction.”

“You looked up to me? But I was Protestant!”

“The Catholic faith troubled me even as a child. Maybe it did my mother as well, though she never let on. Naming me after you may have been her way of expressing solidarity with her brother. Betrayal of Catholic values? I don’t think it mattered to her.”

“Everyone in Neibsheim hated my mother for leading him away from the True Faith. At school the kids bullied Karl and me. Their teachers goaded them on. The eighteen months we lived in Neibsheim were awful. I was so glad when we moved to Bruchsal!”

“My classmates called me Cow Eyes.” Her eyes are unusually large. Because they are not deep-set, they give her face an air of quiet sadness.

“At school my son was tormented also,” she added. Rolf had inherited his mother’s features, but he eventually found a way out. He and his wife migrated to Switzerland, where they teach the children of a subalpine village. Every summer their village expands to accommodate tourists and hikers.

“I wanted to become a teacher,” Edith went on. “I wanted to go to *Realgymnasium* as you did. My parents wouldn’t allow it, not even after my teacher came to plead my case.”

“Yes, I got a bit of higher education, but not for long. My dad took me out of school to ‘apprentice’ me. Help in the kitchen and the store, look after my baby brothers. I thought of killing myself. I ran away from home before I was fifteen.”

“You did? I never knew.”

“Stole money from the till and got a train ticket to Mainz. Before boarding the train I had my braids cut off—at the train-depot beauty parlor.”

I hated those braids. Mother grabbed them whenever she got angry, which was often. She’d jerk me around, then send me crashing into the wall or a piece of furniture. Invariably she made me apologize afterwards for having provoked her.

“Why Mainz?”

“I knew of an American base nearby. Our teacher pointed it out on a train excursion.”

“And then?”

“I pretended I was seventeen and signed on as domestic with an American family.”

Those two weeks, when I managed to make myself understood in another language, boosted my morale and my linguistic skills. It’s what helped me decide on immigration later on. Leaving for college was not an option, yet I was certain, to remain would mean death or dying.

“You had to return home, of course.”

“Of course I did. But the braids were gone.”

The decision to immigrate was, however, driven by stark and unmitigated terror, since I feared I would not survive the journey. The ship would break apart; the airplane would crash. Would I make it to the land of my dreams?