

WTE Column of Nov. 19, 2014. Editor's headline: "Playing music together . . ."

As an eighteen-year-old in Bruchsal, Germany, I worked in my parents' mom-and-pop bakery and grocery store, rendered chaotic by Mother's illness, two baby brothers, and a sixteen-year-old with whom I was locked in strife. To keep at bay my unhappiness I joined a group of mandolinists and guitarists, sidearm of the civic organization "Naturfreunde," Friends of Nature, who met weekly on an evening. Decades later I discovered a similar group in Cheyenne, Wyoming, the Cheyenne Guitar Society.

In Bruchsal a twenty-year-old, Harald, was leading our group of daytime working stiffs. Harald played with a disco band on weekends, maybe some of the others did as well. The year prior they had agreed to admit young women into their circle, perhaps because mandolinists were in short supply, since most of the boys played guitar. Though not far from proficient, I played both instruments, so I was accepted as one of two female mandolinists. We played and sang from sheet music arranged for several voices, with the leader correcting our most blatant slip-ups. A snapshot of our group playing at some community event is posted on my website on the Music Gallery page, long with pics from The Guitar Society, courtesy of Don Williams.

The Cheyenne guitarists meet monthly, often in a communal room of the local library, under the leadership of its congenial president, Keith Blaney. Some are retired, some hold down jobs, some perform at civic functions like fairs. At meetings, seated in semi-circle, they play as individuals. Some sing and play oldies or Westerns, others play jazz, others perform as classical guitarists, still others sing barroom songs. Some offer up their own compositions. Always at the halfway point the leader hands out a popular song augmented with its progression of chords, which is belted out by those of us ready to do so.

Bruchsal was in West Germany while Leipzig, city of my birth and my parents' wedding, lay in the east and chafed under Communist rule. That was long before Gorbachev and glasnost and German reunification. A few months prior another east-block country, Hungary, had revolted against Communist overlords and was mercilessly crushed. Rock-throwing youth got run over by artillery tanks. Thousands fled across borders with but the clothes on their backs. In Bruchsal the government housed the unfortunates in dilapidated barracks that must have dated from WWI.

"Let's bring some Advent songs to the Hungarian refugees," Harald said during one autumnal practice session. Advent season initiates big celebrations in Germany, with pine boughs, wreaths, and candles: carry-overs from pre-Christian rituals of the woods-and-bog dwelling Timbers and Teutons.

The next Sunday, when our store was closed and I could get away, my coevals and I set up in the courtyard of the barracks. A light rain drizzled down, which meant we couldn't use our sheet music and had to perform from memory, but we picked well-known songs. Soon the inhabitants ventured forth in babushkas, shawls, hats and coats. How much they understood is anybody's guess; Hungarian is altogether different from (and much more complex) than any European language. Still they seemed glad for the diversion, even if it happened in the rain.

"My mother is not well," I said to my fellow musicians afterwards. "Would some of you come and play a few songs for her?"

"How about for a couple bottles of beer," said Harald.

"Deal." Our store, like all German grocery shops, carried wine and beer.

The boys who had arrived by bicycle pedaled home, but three or four piled into Harald's Beetle. I led the way in my dad's VW. They positioned themselves on the stairwell and tuned up while I woke my mother. We sang, we played, they took home a few beers. Mother died a week or two later, on Christmas Eve.

Today I still hold sadness at bay with music-making. Each of my three brothers suffered an abbreviated existence, though two of them separately settled in the US as I'd done. Today I am the only one who remembers our bleak family story.

Recently I persuaded a Guitar Society member to critique my playing in private session. Practicing solo can lead to bad habits that go unnoticed, hence uncorrected, and it diminishes the urge to try more advanced pieces. When you play for the occasional visitor only, it's easy to keep repeating what you know instead of challenging yourself and tackle the next level. I find that attending Guitar Society meetings helps concentrate on pieces previously deemed too arduous. To learn new things may carry a semblance of meaning, but mostly it advances us, one step, then another, on that lonesome road we all travel.