

Father's Sister, my *Tante Anna*

At a time when life was falling apart I joined a women's barbershop quartet that called itself Sweet Adelines. One of the songs we performed was "Sentimental Journey," a bluesy number in which the speaker is looking forward to returning home. Of course, we really can't ever truly go home again; still, we try. After twenty years in this country, within the span of five years I made a couple of return trips to Germany. The first was marred by tragedy, of which more later, the second was to renew relations with my cousin and her mother, my father's sister.

In 1998 my aunt was eighty-eight and lived in the house of Edith, the younger of her two daughters. *Tante Anna* had absolved a lifetime of work in the family bakery, first as helpmate to her spouse; after his death, in service to the son who inherited the business. In May '98 I arrived in the native village of Edith and her parents to spend three weeks with the family which, besides my aunt and her daughter, consisted of my cousin's husband and two foster children, their own two children having grown and gone.

One morning *Tante* wanted to visit the village cemetery, about half a mile away, and Edith asked that I accompany her mother. We linked arms as we walked. The year before she had suffered a mental and physical breakdown that her son was unprepared to accommodate; hence, *Tante* had grudgingly removed herself from his house to take up residence with her daughter.

My aunt's family story, recounted as her first, or at any rate dominant, memory, revolved

around her mother's sickness and dying. In 1917, Anna was the youngest of five children and the only girl. At her mother's illness, as she turned seven, it fell to her to cook and keep house. My father, the next-to-oldest, was not yet twelve. The terror of war tore through the land, begun as a family feud among the ruling houses of Europe that mushroomed out of control. Touted in the early days as swift, retaliatory, and with an early end, the conflict brought devastating consequences to the recently-united Imperial Germany, as it eventually did to all Europe and revolutionary Russia. The conflagration would become known as World War One. Farming families like Anna's and my dad's bore the brunt of it, in Germany and all over the continent.

Anna's and my dad's parents were the grandparents I never knew. I'm told they had lived much like the other farmers in Neibsheim; still, they considered themselves special. "We owned a horse when everyone else used oxen in the field," said my aunt. But the horse was confiscated for the war effort and the children's dad ordered into battle.

"Kaiser Wilhelm said he wouldn't draft the heads of families who depended on farming, yet our dad was one of the first from our village to be called to the front. Our mother died because of that war," she told me.

Rosina, their mother, began to work the fields with no help other than her young sons. According to family story, Rosina developed tuberculosis while planting potato-eyes in the cold rain of a German November. Her husband petitioned to be relieved of military duty, which was granted in early 1918, too late for Rosina, who died in the spring of that year.

"All through my youth I was by her graveside whenever I could," said my aunt. "One day a village woman said, if I wanted to speak to my mother, I should visit the grave on Sundays at noon. 'At that hour,' the woman said, 'the heavens open and your mother can hear you'."

"Yes, *Tante*."

“From then on I went to my mother’s grave every Sunday. Every Sunday at noon, without fail.” My aunt had tears in her eyes when she said this.

I had heard the story before and thought it indescribably sad.

We found a park bench and sat down in the garden of Neibsheim’s St. Mauretius Church. I thought of the trauma of loss that must have shaped my father into the man I had known as unforthcoming and taciturn, seemingly devoid of emotion and unwilling to disclose himself. I had attributed his emotional stuntedness to soldiering in World War Two and privations as prisoner of war in Soviet Russia. How much of his suffering originated much earlier, in a childhood that lacked food and warmth? When Vati, our dad, spoke of his early years, which he rarely did, he always said how hungry he was.

As she picked me up at the airport, my cousin cautioned to take her mother’s utterances with a grain of salt. “Sometimes she doesn’t know what she’s saying. She gets confused.” Just now, resting on the park bench and reminiscing about the past, *Tante* did not seem the least confused. Plus, when I first embraced her and asked if she remembered who I was, she replied, “Of course I know! You are the oldest child of my brother Anton.” Then she recited the names of my brothers. “I know they are dead, all three,” she added.

A few days later she described how, after my youngest brother killed himself, my dad came to see her. My father cried bitter tears, my aunt said, recounting how he had to identify the remains of Reiner. When I heard this in 1998, Vati was ten years into the grave. A few months after Reiner’s suicide I had traveled from California to see Vati and his new wife. He took me to the grave of my mother and Reiner but remained silent, unaware that I felt bereft and confused. Perhaps he thought I had come to comfort him.

At the Neibsheim cemetery my aunt showed me a mural inscribed with the names of the

village men who had fallen in various wars. She pointed out graves of classmates. The norm was for several family members to be buried in the same grave, the headstone bearing empty spaces for names yet to follow. Not a weed was to be found among the profusion of flowers. Without exception, the graves looked like exquisite miniature gardens.

“There’s a watering can by the pump,” she said. “Would you fill it for me so I may water my husband’s grave?”

“Of course, *Tante*. I’d be glad to do the watering for you.”

Graves are a precious commodity in densely-populated Germany, for the graves of the departed are demolished after twenty-five years when grave stones or crosses are returned to the families or else discarded. Bones go into a mass grave. People get around the 25-year halt by burying later descendants on top of previously-deceased ones.

“I am ready to join them,” my aunt said of the cemetery sleepers. “I’ve lived long enough. It’s time to go, and I am glad of it.”

What could I say? My father said the same, that final time I saw him. With so much sorrow during our lifetimes, we are relieved to lay our burdens down.

“*Tante Anna* talked of her mother’s death,” I mentioned to my cousin while her mother took a nap. “She got all choked up on our walk to the cemetery.”

“Mother tells that story again and again,” Edith answered. “Her grandkids have heard it. My step-cousins have, one by one.”

“She’s still emotional about it.”

“She never got over it. For as long as I can remember she has looked forward to her own death, to be reunited with her mother.”

I said something about my cousins spending their growing-up years with a mother never

fully present, preoccupied as she was with her own mother's too-early demise.

"We got used to it," said Edith. "She did the best she could."

Thinking of my own mother's lack, I wasn't sure "the best she could" is good enough for children who grow up without love.

"I put my nose to the grindstone, as she taught us to do," said Edith. "Mother was a compulsive worker. It's hard work that saved her, she said. I blame my father for that. Whenever she fell ill, he said she was letting him down. 'You're either alive or you're dead,' he told her when she was bedridden with seeping sores on her legs. When he was small, he'd watched his own mother die. Later in life, he couldn't cope with any kind of sickness in a woman."

"Your father and mother both kept aloof when you were growing up."

"Everyone knows Mother preferred Hermann, her only son, her youngest. You wouldn't believe the commotion in the village when the boy was born! Sure, he came after two girls; still, you'd have thought the pretender to a throne had arrived. Someone hung a banner from our window, IT'S A BOY! A procession of people filed past as if in homage to a religious icon."

When I first met my aunt she was a young mother of three, dark-eyed and dark-complexioned like my father, her brownish-black hair thick and unruly and therefore kept short—unlike the silky, blue-black braids of my mother's, pinned into a bun at the nape of her neck. Now, at eighty-eight, *Tante Anna* was tiny. In youth she had named her second daughter after me, quite a feat in a village where birthdays are ignored; instead, the Name Day, the birthday of the saint after whom the child is named, constitutes the child's feast day. When my cousin was born, there was no Saint Edith in the Vatican annals, though there is now. Hence, my cousin never had a birthday celebration nor a Name Day one. "It wouldn't have made a difference," she said. "We were always working, even Sunday afternoons." She and her sister constituted the handmaidens,

the servants the family couldn't afford,

"Here's something I've been meaning to tell you," I said. "My mother told me once, the name Edith signifies 'She who fights for what is hers'."

"Wonder if it applies to me?" asked my namesake. "No," she answered her own question, "I've always been the good girl, always adhered to tradition. I can't imagine leaving Neibsheim. Leaving my mother."

The following day, as *Tante Anna* and I lounged in the shade of grape arbor while Edith tended her vegetable garden, my aunt said something odd. "You know that woman over there? She pretends to be my daughter but she really isn't. She's Babette, my stepsister, out to get her hands on my land. I have to be careful. I listen and watch."

Now I understood my cousin's airport warning. That evening after *Tante* retired, Edith explained that her mother had embarrassed her at the town council with complaints she was trying to deprive her of a field Anna had inherited long ago. *Tante* also gossiped to the villagers, accusing her daughter. Sometimes she would steal away, not saying a word to anyone, and wander the streets. A week earlier she had collapsed in front of a neighbor's house.

Next time I accompanied my aunt to the cemetery I asked as we walked, "*Tante Anna*, how many children do you have?"

"Why, I have three."

"Tell me about them."

"There's Hermann, my son the baker. He runs that successful business near the square, with his wife and three children. Hermann also keeps chains stores in other villages. Inge, my firstborn, lives in a village a few kilometers away. She has a husband and a daughter. Then there's Edith, the daughter with whom you're visiting."

So, this time she was clear on it! Was she aware that sometimes she got people mixed up? That she rose up in anger against her daughter over long-ago childhood wrongs? What unresolved conflicts led her to equate her daughter with a rival dead these many years? I wanted to probe further but lacked the courage.

A year after the demise of Rosina, her husband Franz, the father of the children of whom my father was one of the boys and Anna the youngest, married a widow who came with a daughter Anna's age. In time, Franz fathered three more children, all girls. One daughter in adulthood hanged herself in an insane asylum, leaving behind four children. None of the Neibsheim cousins maintains any contact with them, as if, by ignoring the children, they expunged the mother's deed from the family history. Another daughter immigrated to the States. In Florida, where they had moved from Ohio after her husband's retirement, I found her diminished in mental and physical health, her husband livid with rage. As a nine-year-old newly arrived in Neibsheim, I had admired Hilde's black hair and flashing dark eyes, in awe of her decision to marry a German American. Today one aging stepsister, in touch with Anna in a friendly way, lives out her life in the farmhouse that once belonged to Anna's parents. Anna's and Klara's adult children visit among themselves. But early on there was also Babette, a sickly girl when she joined her new family. It seems the mother doted on Babette while mistreating her stepchildren and rejecting the daughters that followed. My father once mentioned a chaotic row between his father and the stepmother. Franz became so despondent, the children feared he was leaving the house to kill himself. Two boys ran after their dad, begging him not to do anything rash. My dad was one of the two terrified youngsters.

"We were always hungry when we got up from the table," Vati said. "Even when there was soup left in the bowl, we were denied second helpings." By contrast, he said, his mother

Rosina once bought meat at the butcher's on an ordinary weekday, causing consternation among the village women: "Meat is reserved for the Sunday!" According to my father, his mother defended the "frivolous" purchase, saying her husband worked hard and deserved to eat well.

The farmhouse was too small, the children in it too numerous. One by one their father sent his sons into apprenticeships as they reached fourteen. Anton, my father, was given to a baker; the brother next in age, to a butcher. "At least you'll have things to eat there," their father told them, seemingly unmindful of the privations that would be forced on the boys. In truth, apprentices were indentured servants at best, slaves at worst, to the masters. Often they were accorded the barest minimum of food, shelter, and clothing. Sometimes the only way the boys could quiet their growling stomachs was by stealing something to eat—and stealing was severely punished. Yet what could my grandfather do other than send his children away? Young Anna became a domestic servant. Eventually she traveled to Leipzig where her brother my father worked in a bread factory. If Anna hoped for better job opportunities in the big city to the east, they were dashed with the onset of yet another war. Her brother, fearing he'd be drafted decided to marry and Anna returned to the village of her birth. She married the village baker who had inherited the mom-and-pop business from his parents.

None of Anna's brothers, with the exception of my father, lived long enough to marry. One boy got no older than fifteen. Another died because, I'm told, his brain chilled while he worked in the butcher's ice storage. The third lost his life in a World War Two bombing raid, when a house collapsed on him. He called out for hours, my aunt said, with rescuers frantically digging, unable to free him. "I have cemented a shell around my heart," she told me, "to bear the troubles that have come my way."

My cousin was devastated when her mother died in 2000. We spent hours on the phone

discussing Eastern philosophy, Buddhism, the writings of Eckhart Tolle. Even though I was down and out in Tennessee she came to visit, bearing a finely-bound history of Neibsheim that proved antidote to my doldrums. Compiled by a couple of village residents with a flair for writing, the volume comprises four hundred densely scripted pages, with photos and drawings ancient and new, as well as replicas of documents dating to 707. The book is an astounding testament, considering Neibsheim's 1200 inhabitants. It speaks of crushing tithes, extracted by church and nobility alike; of peasants' dependence on a liege lord, bishop or duke, whose permission was needed for anything from marriage to travel into a neighboring town; indeed, a liege lord owned the right to sell his human subjects "like cattle." The practice was abandoned only in 1832, when peasants could buy their freedom by paying huge severance fees. Already in 1525, on the Reformation's winds of change, peasants all over rose in revolt and revenge. The Reformation proved a two-edged sword, however, originating as it did in the fevered mind of Martin Luther, a virulent anti-Semite. The village remained Catholic despite its document of religious and church-endorsed feudal cruelty.

During the religious wars Neibsheim was decimated by famine and disease. One writer claims that four-fifth of the town's 700 inhabitants perished; others say the toll was worse: the entire settlement burned down and only three to ten inhabitants survived. Eventually, immigrants from Switzerland and Tyrol arrived, having abandoned their huts and monasteries in the forbidding Alps to take up farming, which explains the dark-complexioned Neibsheimers, so unlike neighboring Rhinelanders. Even with the arrival of the blackheaded people it took forty years before the settlement showed thirty families living there, their houses once again set immediately next to one another, with no front yard or dividing spaces between the small houses.

The most devastating of the religious conflicts, the thirty-years-war, left the village in

ruins, but even before that calamity, the community turned on itself in bursts of religious mania. In 1618 a number of women stood accused of witchcraft, of straying from the true faith and thereby causing the hailstorms and insect infestations that decimated the crops the year. The hapless victims were tortured until the inexorable pain extracted confessions, then they were burned at the stake or hanged. One woman who persisted in protesting her innocence despite the torments inflicted on her, whose husband of eighteen years stood by her with his own testimony, was nonetheless put to death by strangulation, her meager possessions confiscated, her children left destitute. In neighboring principalities, even newborn children were tossed into a “witch’s fire,” having been delivered by a midwife accused of witchcraft. These events, meticulously documented, were perpetrated “all in the name of justice and religion,” the writer says.

Bloody history notwithstanding, the inhabitants of Neibsheim celebrated 1970 as the year that marked 1200 years of their community’s existence. They danced the polka, ate onion cakes and bratwurst, downed steins of beer or their home-made fermented apple cider called *Most*, sang the Neibsheim song. That year the village consisted of less than a thousand, having lost close to one-third of its inhabitants to immigration to the U. S., Spain, even Hungary. I lived in California then, with a new family of my own.

Today only a handful of families farm the consolidated fields surrounding the village. Most inhabitants commute by train to jobs in the city. Neibsheim has ceased to be the all-Catholic enclave where I spent a miserable eighteen months of my childhood, isolated and ostracized in school. Now the community has opened itself to Protestant strangers. The newcomers hold their own worship service on Sunday evenings in St. Maurelius Church.

My granddaughter is the age of Anna as she watched her mother succumb to illness in the absence of her father. My oldest grandson is the age my father then was; his brother is a version

of Vati's younger brother. Another California grandchild, the son of my youngest, is two. None of the boys looks anything like the lad my father once was, nor does my granddaughter resemble Anna in any way. My sons took after their father, with sandy hair and light eyes, although the youngest grandchildren have inherited their mother's dark eyes and dark hair. Each of my sons married Catholic. They frown when I speak of religion as error grounded in myth. They ask I refrain from volunteering my opinions to their children. I might bake a *Gugelhupf*, the traditional yeast cake that is baked in a fluted pan for a child's Name Day, the baking reminding me of the sins of the past that have visited our family as schizophrenia and Alzheimer's and suicide. Then again, I bake in remembrance of my aunt. Though small of stature and ever in mourning, *Tante Anna* came with energy to spare. In later years, leg problems caused her to use a cane when she walked, but even then she continued to ride her bike. As a young woman with luscious dark hair and dark eyes she prepared hearty meals for her newly-arrived brother and his impoverished gang from the East. Yes, she inflicted grave limitations on my cousins Edith, Herman, and Inge; still, I loved and admired my aunt. Her spirit will ever be with me.