<Photo 1 on separate page>

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2. *Der Rechte Weg*

When I think of my childhood I think of Topeka and the white clapboard two-story house with its three upstairs bedrooms and full front porch at 615 Lindenwood. It was in the living room by the stairs that I practiced the violin to my father's moody, vigilant piano accompaniment. And it was both in the blue bedroom that I shared with Barbara and, later, after my father's mother Antonie moved away a few blocks, in her room papered in pink with white lace stripes that I listened to my mother's stories of her own childhood in Berlin. Despite the shock my parents must each have felt as apartment dwellers from European capitals transplanted into a small Midwestern town, it was this simple very American house that gave me my own first sense of roots.

Lindenwood was shaded by expansive old mulberry trees on both sides, and in summer the sidewalks were stained purple with fallen berries. The street sloped upward from Sixth Street, where my father caught the bus each morning for the Menninger Sanitarium, and where Barbara and I sat kicking our feet against the cement retaining wall until his bus finally arrived in the early evening. Then we walked back happily,

one hanging on each arm, as we tried to tell him all the day's news we had been saving just for him.

Most of the homes on our block were small but well-kept, and the yards were neatly trimmed. Our house stood in the middle of the block on a raise of land above the sidewalk; my mother was often out planting exotic succulents in a rock garden she had created at the sides of the steps, an unusual approach for Kansas that was never as pretty as she hoped. On our left toward Sixth, a one-story white bungalow with a sloped red roof sat sideways to the street, as if to display the standoffishness of the Catholic family whose children went to parochial school and who only rarely played with us. On our right, beyond our side yard where some years Mother planted a vegetable garden, stood a two-story house that was a duplicate of ours, though the house had a neglected air that made it seem mysterious and larger and its often unmowed yard was vast: as often as I tried to peer through its lace curtains, I could glimpse little of the elusive couple who lived there with a frail white-haired mother.

But the blight of the block from a real estate point of view was a busy laundry across the shady street. Extending back from the corner of Sixth Street four or five lots, almost far enough to face our Catholic neighbors, it sent out hot moist vapors, and the sidewalk was usually covered with lint, as if sticky snow had just fallen. I could kick at the lint as I walked by, trace a path with my footprints, or scoop it up and feel its

tacky gray softness between my fingers. Yet my pensiveness as I passed the huge laundry window was also the result of my mother's concern that the black women at the vast ironing machines had taken work that white people wouldn't accept. In the summer, when the window was open to give the black women a breeze, I sat on its ledge and watched them shout back and forth, their pomaded hair in kerchiefs and their faces glistening with sweat. Sometimes they called out to me. "What?" I asked, excited but unsettled by the chance to talk to the women our neighbors ignored."You on vacation?"" This time I heard. "Oh yes, my school let out last week." "Wha'd she say?" I watched them mouthing explanations to each other; but even if I repeated myself, the noise formed a barrier as real as race, making it useless to carry on a conversation.

Directly across from us was the gray shingle house whose low front porch was covered with a faded green awning; like a half-sunken boat, it was the house where Mrs. Marsh lived. My mother tried to invent diversions to keep me home, but as with the sordid novels that some years later I would devour with intoxication even when I wished I could put them down, I couldn't stay away. Mrs. Marsh was an angular woman with a narrow, bony face and eyebrows tweezed to a feathery line. When she released the tiny pin-curls she usually hid under a silk scarf, they became a brown billow of waves, and she had the tense glamour of a movie star. She was the first on our block to have a television set, and she spent her days crocheting tablecloths and doilies while she sipped

Coca-Cola out of the bottle, something I had never seen before. She would offer me a Coke, a frowned-upon drink in my house, while we watched one soap opera after another in her dark living room, cut off from the rest of the world. Why she put up with me, a little girl of eight, nine or even ten, who was often unsure what the oblique melodramas were about, I don't know; but I felt that beneath our differences in age, we were soul mates in our isolation. At the same time, I was learning from her, as well as from television, what adulthood American-style could be like, something neither my father and mother, nor my parents' circle of refugee psychoanalysts, could teach me.

While my childhood memories unfold for me on Lindenwood in Topeka, inside that Midwest locale sits my mother's early home on Nassauischestrasse in the Wilmersdorf district of Berlin. As in a theater whose floodlight leaves other areas of the stage in shade, my mother's stories left dark gaps in my geography, but the nostalgic scenes she created formed a territory in my imagination which my Kansas home could never equal.

"Just think!" she would say, as she sat at my bedside before I went to sleep, or on those days when earaches kept me under the covers. Five

minutes earlier, her sharp gray eyes had roamed my room in search of a disorderly shelf or a sweater left lying about, but now her voice had the achy pleasure of longing, and her eyes softened as they came to rest on the luxurious second-floor apartment on Nassauischestrasse.

Facing her street was a winter garden filled with plants and large windows on three sides. Behind glass doors, so that the sun streamed in, was a *Musikzimmer* with a grand piano in one corner, while in the other corner, by the door to the *Herrenzimmer* where my grandfather smoked his cigar, squawked a parrot in a large cage. At the back of the house, along the corridor to the children's bedrooms, on contraptions suspended from the ceiling, hung the bicycles of the four Ascher boys, which could be lowered whenever they wanted to ride into the countryside. Gerhard used the bike most often, for he was cultivating the family's vegetables in a little kitchen garden in the Dahlem district several kilometers away.

Sunday afternoons, the seven children were dressed in identical sailor suits: Manfred, Gerhard, Heinz and Julius with little sailor caps, and Margot, Gerda, and Irmschen or Little Irma, the baby, all with large ribbons in their hair. After they had been lined up for inspection, their proud father led them and the *Kindermädchen* past the linden trees of Nassauischestrasse and across Uhlandstrasse, to Kempinski's, Berlin's best *Konditorei* and restaurant. There, at the largest table, everyone including the nursemaid was allowed to choose a slice of cake, along with

coffee or hot chocolate topped with whipped cream.

<Photo 2>

Mother's favorite was a *Baumkuchen,* or tree cake. Made on a rotisserie, when you sliced it, there were tree rings, and it tasted so delicious! “Was it like pound cake?” I asked, staring at the backyard trees beyond my Lindenwood bedroom window, but I was also seeing a striated piece of cake set out on a white tablecloth in the wonderful Berlin restaurant. “No, not quite.” My mind's eye switched to the packaged cakes on the rack at the corner grocery store across Sixth Street. “What about a jelly roll?” No, nothing available in Kansas could give me even an inkling of the design or taste of this marvelous cake.

One afternoon Mother tried to make a *Baumkuchen* using a recipe from my Grandmother Antonie's Viennese cookbook. Pulling the pan from the oven as each layer dried, she carefully ladled another thin spoonful of moist dough on top. As the oven's warm sugary odor began to smell familiar to Mother, her excitement mounted. But when the cake finally had three or four inches of thin layers, it was dry and hard on the bottom; even the tree rings hadn't come out right. Without a special rotisserie, the miracle couldn't be transported. (Years later, when we were finally in Berlin together, Mother would buy me a cellophane-wrapped *Baumkuchen* at the KDW, the big department store on the Kurfürstendamm. But, if I was an erstwhile Proust, savoring the gentle flavor of this plain cake as I ruminated on the nostalgia she had passed

on to me when I was a little girl, Mother refused to be sentimental: perhaps her taste buds had been ruined by so many years of sweet American desserts, but to her the cake was dry and bland, not worth the money.)

Yes, food had been rationed in the years after the First World War, but what she recalled was Papa bringing home a single banana to slice off a small section for each child, or giving them each a taste of his soft-boiled egg at breakfast. And if their ration cards were used up at the end of the week---well, then he gathered the entire family and the *Kindermädchen* to go to dinner at Kempinski's.

I could tell that Grandpa Heinrich had doted on his family, and perhaps especially on his youngest daughter, Irmschen, my mother. Also that my mother's fun-loving Papa had been utterly different from my own moody father, though Mother cloaked them both in rapture, without apparent distinction. Whereas my father found can openers bewildering, and his expression grew distracted if a faucet sprang a leak or a light bulb needed changing, my Berlin grandfather had been an engineer who adored contraptions. During the First World War, he had shown his patriotism and ingenuity by manufacturing steel crampons in his factory in the district of Moabit that enabled military horses to travel on winter ice. After the war, revamping the factory, he became the first German manufacturer of an electric vacuum sweeper, *Vivos,* which he promoted as *der rechte Weg* (the Right Way), intending to convince Berlin

housewives to give up their brooms and mops. He must have been successful, for the family prospered throughout the economically turbulent 1920s until the Nazi years. But for my mother, Heinrich Ascher's grasp of *der rechte Weg* extended beyond electric sweepers or even a good knack for business, for her Papa had understood that in all endeavors the right way was that of gentle pranks, good-humored jokes, and generosity.

<Photo 3>

Perhaps his children had tasted their bit of egg at the edge of his teaspoon, and he was now straightening his *Krawatte* or putting on his hat before the large mirror, catching their adoring eyes in the glass "What will you do at the factory today?" Irmschen and Gerda wanted to know. The little girls were wearing their starched dresses, and large bows held their straight hair away from their excited faces. While the *Kindermädchen* wagged a cautioning finger at their interrupting his concentration, Papa turned and threw them a gallant kiss. "*Ach*," he explained. "Exactly the same as you. I'll play with my dolls."

My mother during our Topeka years is a robust athletic woman, and her clear forehead from which thick brown waves are combed back

suggests determination and good cheer. Free of the glasses she will wear later, her grayish eyes can be pensive or restless, or excited by a prank she is about to play, and her long straight nose and resolute chin give her a classic profile. Uninterested in the fashions of her new country, she confidently sews our dresses to meet the standards of quality and taste she remembers from Berlin, and she calls the patent leather shoes the other children wear to parties “vulgar” or “cheap.” Sometimes her insistent light-heartedness irritates me, as does her boundless enthusiasm for projects by which she hopes to ameliorate a neighbor's loneliness, or solve human callousness and cruelty. "Until everyone is safe from prejudice, we aren't safe," she says in her heavy accent, her eyes suddenly burning as she prepares to leave for a meeting of the local NAACP. But when she is smocking the front of a dress or mending our socks, or even about to tell a story, her eyes are cast downward and there is a pleasant peace in her strong face. Though she measures only two inches over five feet, and complains of being short, to me she seems large, even statuesque, built of some pliant yet terribly durable material.

One day I realized that she wore no wedding ring, as other mothers did. "Why not, Mother?" I hated it when she was different from American mothers. She looked down at her sturdy well-shaped fingers, surprised either that they were bare or that married women were supposed to wear rings. Smiling, she began her story about the dime-store ring she and my father had quickly bought in England, after the judge had refused to

marry even penniless refugees without a gold band. When their cheap imitation turned blue on her finger, she had tossed it out. Anyway, didn't having children make it clear she was married? "I guess whoever is confused can ask," she shrugged, uninterested in the romantic complications I was discovering on Mrs. Marsh's television screen across the street.

Though the *Deutschland* of Mother's youth has itself been transformed by the long shadows of the Third Reich, and her Berlin was divided by high concrete walls for four long decades, I find myself speculating on the energetic, middle-class German woman she might have become without Hitler — Jewish by genetic and cultural heritage, mildly observant, at home in a Germany still filled with Jews. She would have been a proper responsible citizen, urbane, with an edge of adventurousness. Although she was too young to understand the violent social struggles that shook Berlin during the 1920s, her older siblings passed on their excitement at the artistic and cultural freedom of the Weimar years: the theater of Brecht, the functional design of the Bauhaus. Like many German teenagers (including Nazis), she grew up a nature-lover, a hiker, and a gymnast; after school, she swam and practiced running, long jumps, javelin, and discus- throwing at the *Sportsklub* in the Berliner Stadium. (I would see that Stadium for the first time as a young adult in Leni Riefenstahl's film, *Olympiade.* Among the scenes left out of this celebration of the 1936 Olympics were the

many *Juden unerwünscht* (Jews not wanted) signs that had sprung up along the streets of Berlin and were temporarily taken down for the international visitors.) Like many Germans and German Jews, though not the Nazis, she also looked forward to the victory of reason over irrationality and superstition---an optimism she held to the end of her life. This is why I find it hard to isolate how leaving everything behind and starting again in a new country changed her.

Here, in America, she saw herself as forward-looking and sensible. She was as scornful of anything she called old-fashioned as she was of émigrés who held onto the traditions of their former countries. “You have to look forward, you can’t look back,” was her mantra, recited with equanimity or determination or, more rarely, wistfulness. Unlike my father, whose attention was caught by the dark undertows and minor keys, Mother liked flat surfaces and the bold cheer of primary colors. Even my father's profession of psychoanalysis turned upbeat and uncomplicated in her rendition. "Spill it out!" she advised, as if talking about mental anguish, like pouring out milk that had gone bad, simply disposes of the anguish. Memories, for her, could be held onto or given away as simply as the clothing that she made us sort through each season to make sure we kept only what could be hemmed or let out to fit. Though her English was faulty, she called German "Hitler's language" and increasingly avoided speaking it. (Years later, when she visited me in New York, I thought to please her by taking her to the German Jewish

community in Washington Heights, but she was revolted to discover that in America Jews still walked the streets speaking German to each other, "as if they never left home.")

Where in the living rooms of other families on Lindenwood one sank into soft upholstered chairs and couches, Mother covered rattan and wood garden furniture with hand-made canvas cushions in brown and green, the colors she attributed to nature. Instead of dark shiny wood cabinets filled with dishes, figurines and personal keepsakes, we had bookcases built of pine planks held up by glass bricks. Our light and sparsely furnished living room was decorated with several modern paintings, the most conspicuous of which was an enormous cubist-style portrait of an elongated and sorrowful black man with large oval eyes and blue and mahogany skin. If my father identified with the man's lonely grief, for my mother the painting affirmed for anyone who came into our house her alliance with those who suffered from bigotry, including in her adopted land.

Still, our household was graced with several mementos of old Europe. There was the sterling silverware, part of the large, ornate, monogrammed *fleischig* set my mother's parents had somehow hidden from the Nazis when they came to collect silver for the Third Reich. The set was now divided among the three sisters: Margot had eight place settings in Chicago, Gerda was storing her pieces in her home in London, and we had our setting for eight. Mother would tell me to be careful of

the knives, whose handles came loose if left soaking in hot dishwater; but we used the heavy silverware everyday, even when we ate outside in the backyard. There were also the leather-bound volumes of Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, and Heine; a complete twelve-volume set of Freud; and an old German Bible with an Old and New Testament, which my father had for mysterious reasons carried out of Vienna and now took with us from move to move, explaining only that it was also literature. And there were the small carpets my Grandmother Antonie had brought out of Vienna. Though I loved their density of pattern in rich melancholy shades, and the aura they gave of an Old World intricacy, Mother viewed them with the general impatience she felt toward her Viennese mother-in-law; they interfered with her vacuuming, and she eagerly let my grandmother take them with her when she finally moved out.