

A Visit to Saaz

Going to Saaz, my mother's home town, was always a very exciting and happy time. My grandmother and grandfather, whom I called Emi and Opi (my version of the German Oma and Opa), were the focus of my love and attention, and I of theirs. We always drove from Prague, our home, in our convertible. I jumped up and down in my excitement. As we rounded the corner to their house, we came to a brick-paved square, which sloped down to - where?

On our right was Peter's house. He was my best friend in Saaz, and we always hugged and kissed each other every time I arrived. On our left was our destination. First the corner of the house, then the brick wall surrounding the yard with a big tree hanging over it. As we turned left and parked the car, I could see the whole house, then a little passage way between the house and the Temple.

Both would later be destroyed in fires set by the Nazis. The last time we made this visit must have been in 1938, when I was seven. The Nazis burned down the house and the synagogue in early 1939 after they invaded the Sudetenland, the German speaking part of Czechoslovakia. But I remember the visits, the greetings, the fun, love and food as if they were before me today.

My grandparents lived on the lower storey of the house and the Rabbi lived upstairs. Opi was the Cantor, who sang and chanted during the services. From the women sat in the balcony, he always seemed to look so serious in his white robe and blue and white Talles (shawl). I loved his melodious baritone voice.

As I jumped out of the car (no seat belts then) and rushed toward the door, Emi and Opi hurried out to greet us, beaming all over their faces. Emi was usually in a print dress with a white collar, she was a couple of inches taller than her husband. Opi had a lovely round beard that tickled when he kissed me. Emi went down on one knee and stretched her arms out to me. I nearly knocked her over in my enthusiasm to be embraced, hugged and kissed as long as she would

hold me. Opi meanwhile greeted mommy and daddy, until he too, had a turn pick me up and twirl me around accompanied by more hugs and kisses.

Behind them, the glorious aroma of baking and cooking wafted out of the door. Emi had been at it all morning. We could hardly wait to start the evening meal. If it was Friday, Emi would have baked challa, the Sabbath braided eggbread, and perhaps her wonderful, juicy, crunchy strudel. The pungent smell of poultry roasting, of soup and all the other foods could be discerned at the door.

The front door led right into the kitchen. It was a long and narrow room with a tall window opposite the door, letting the sunshine flood the area with brightness, golden warmth and home. To the right of the door the old wood or coal burning stove was well stoked to produce the delightful mingling of burning material and food cooking, which gave our noses full satisfaction.

The table in the middle of the room, was huge (to me), old and wooden. It had four sturdy legs, and a hardwood top, which no amount of cutting and pounding could destroy. It had had many years of hard labour under Emi's hands.

What was on that table? That depended on what time we arrived. No matter, I started jumping up and down to see what was there, and my fingers reached to break off, dip into, or slide off whatever I could reach. It was always special, always just right, always both expected and unexpected -- just right. My fingers came off deliciously sticky as they slid into my mouth.

And Emi would look on and burst with that special joy grandmothers have, when their (in this case only) grandchild is finally with them. Now I know that feeling too.

We all crowded in, all talking and asking questions at the same time. The latest news had to be exchanged immediately, especially about my latest escapades and learning. Much as I loved my parents, I couldn't wait until they would leave again, so that I could rule the Saazer roost to my heart's content, glorying in the love of my beloved grandparents.

There was another pair of people in Saaz, whom I loved dearly and who spoiled me completely. My auntie Herta (mommy's sister) and Uncle Ernst who

were either already at Emi and Opi's house, or arrived shortly after us. Sometimes I spent part of my visit at their house, where I could also do no wrong. Auntie Herta usually called me "Vogel" - little bird, and for my Uncle I was the bundle of joy, which he could toss around to his, and my, hearts' content.

Since the initial excitement was over, and supper was not ready, I went to visit Peterle (little Peter). There was very little traffic in the square between his house and ours, so I ran excitedly across, and banged on the big front door. I could not yet reach the bell. Since Peterle had seen our car and was waiting for me, the door opened quickly and we rushed into each other's arms.

Tante Trude, his mother and Auntie Herta's best friend, also had to have her turn with me, and then gave us both some lemonade and cookies and sent us out to play. Whatever we did, it was just about where we had left off the last time I was in Saaz.

It was easy to slip into our well-practiced games and special understanding. Usually we played in our backyard where we watched the chickens, ducks and geese Opi raised in a wire pen. We also played in the sandbox under the tree and on the sturdy swing that hung from a high branch. We were finally beginning to learn to climb that tree, and were very proud of our accomplishment, and much to the adults' anxiety.

(I often wonder whether our friendship would have lasted. I imagine so, if.... Last time Aunt Herta talked to me about them, she said they had had a very hard time during the war because they would not join the Nazi party. Later when the Communists took over, they expelled all German-speaking people with only the clothes on their backs. I understand that Peter still lives in Vienna. Maybe next time I go to Europe, I'll try to look him up, if he is still alive.)

Later we were called in for dinner. Often Peterle and Tante Trude were invited to join us for the Sabbath meal. I really liked that, as we could talk and giggle while the adults weren't paying attention to us.



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