

Back to the Roots

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, January 2016

My first pang of nostalgia hit in Toronto as I was leaning against a wall waiting to board the flight to Frankfurt as I heard a young boy behind me address his father as "Papa", a familiar term of endearment. I just returned from a struggle in the restroom where I had successfully conquered putting on my compression support hose, when I realized that in my haste, I had left behind all eight enlarged photocopies of the village plan of Leipzig, circa 1940, in my friend's car, curbside at the terminal.

Once the plane had reached cruising altitude, the stewardesses began plying their wares up and down the aisle, offering, much to my surprise, cigarettes amongst their amenities. Scanning the movie offers on the touch screen in front of me, I settled on "Eat, Love, Pray" starring Julia Roberts, but it failed to hold my interest for very long. My meal soon arrived as I spontaneously prayed out loud "Vater segne diese Speise". I decided to watch "Woman in Gold" even though I had seen it a mere four months before. It revolved around WW 2 art restitution in Austria, focusing specifically on a beloved national masterpiece by the artist Klimdt. The film retraced the journey of the heir apparent, residing in California, played by Helen Mirren. Her attempts appeared futile at times as she navigated the legal system in Austria trying to prove her familial claim to the painting, which had by the year 1998 become a beloved national treasure hanging in a gallery in Vienna. She was successful, but not without much travail. To my left, I observed a young man fervently chanting his evening prayers, repeatedly nodding his head up and down while simultaneously raising both arms, all the while keeping both eyes tightly closed. His two young daughters seated beside me were enjoying an animated Disney movie; all the while we were within clear earshot of the chatter of the flight crew working behind us. The amicable male steward frequently called out to his cabin partner "Svenja". I furrowed my brow and recalled that this was also the name of the lioness in the Disney movie "Lion King". Helen Mirren meanwhile was pleading her case when I heard her blurt out "I was forced to abandon the places and people I loved"! Her lawyer meanwhile began to leaf through the beloved German children's classic "Stroh Peter". I wondered to myself whatever had become of our copy.

After an uneventful flight, I settled in at the home of my cousin where we tied up some loose ends before leaving on our flight to Odessa several days later. In local village shops, she introduced me to several German-Russian sales clerks, one of whom, Nadia, wrinkled her nose and expressed surprise that we were actually going to Ukraine. "Yes, in Russia we were the Germans, and in Germany we are the Russians. I was bullied in school", she relayed to us. "My mother forbade us to speak German".

The day before our departure for Odessa, we made a quick trip to the local cemetery and stood at the family plot as my cousin Martina announced "Ja, Papa, Morgen fliegen wir nach der alten Heimat". The second pang of nostalgia hit hard. Catching a connecting flight in Vienna, I caught sight of a dazzling display of gold-coloured souvenirs for sale and was shocked to see that it was a collection of "Woman in Gold" memorabilia.

Boarding for Ukraine, I was surrounded by passengers conversing effortlessly in their native Russian tongue. Many of the words were familiar although I had not heard them in several years. The nostalgia continued.

The aerial view of Austria was manifestly picturesque, with clusters of peaked red roofs, dense lush forests, shimmering lakes and meandering rivers. My mind wandered as I reminisced and visualized the atrocities of years gone by, mass murder for one. "Yes, I once saw the Russians order a group of men to run naked into the freezing waters of a lake until they drowned", a local family friend had once told me as we were discussing my grandfather's arrest in the village of Kleefeld, Ukraine in 1942. As I surveyed the green woodlands below, I could not help but wonder about the horrors that had been committed oh so many years ago. Mass murders. Terrified children clinging to the arms of their mothers. "Those Russian soldiers, they were so brutal. No respect for women or children", my mother often told me. "We were so afraid of them. They thought they could just take whatever girl they wanted and have their way. One of the girls resisted their advances and ran and hid in a large bale of hay. They became furious. We watched them take a pitchfork and repeatedly stab it into the straw trying to find her. Poor girl. She was so beautiful. She met her demise right in front of our very eyes".

The straight rows and perfect angles of the fields below me eventually gave way to acreages which did not appear to be quite as immaculate or tended. The villages no longer appeared to be quite as picturesque and roads seemed to be few and far between, with minimal traffic. I surmised we had now arrived in Ukraine.