

The Stork

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

Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008), the famed late Russian historian and novelist once stated "the German is like a willow. No matter which way you bend him, he will always take root again."

Yesterday—this past May 3, my dear departed mother's birthday—I awoke to streams of sunlight peeking into an otherwise curtain-darkened bedroom. Spring was arriving fashionably late this year it seemed, but the trees were starting to burst into bloom and I had been more than pleased to discover a few daffodils, purple mini hyacinths and assorted tulips nosing their way through the emerging weeds of my perennial bed. I was thankful the bulbs had not been suffocated by the huge bags of fertilizer my husband had haphazardly thrown into their midst several months ago. I methodically measured and doctored up my daily bowl of steel cut oats and checked my inbox before dashing out the door later at nine AM. I made a mental note of another email which had arrived from an acquaintance regarding the burial of my late uncle Harri's ashes. It stated, "I contacted our undertaker. If you are sure to visit Belgium in the coming year, he would save the urn for you until you come." Now in a pensive move, I sat at the dining room table, irrevocably lost in thought as redundant babble of American election coverage blaring from the television in the next room began to fade. The wall clock chimed as I gulped my coffee and I could hear the church bells in Leipzig, Bessarabia, ringing joyfully as my mother's birth was announced to the villagers. I wondered who the midwife had been and how the birth had transpired, with only minimal medical resources available. I chuckled as I recalled conversations of my younger years during which my mom tried to awkwardly explain the facts of life to me. These heart-to-hearts were invariably brief, and usually consisted of four simple words. "The stork brings babies," although on one occasion, as a family friend was about to give birth, I recall my mother mumbling something about a plane from Africa arriving with a newborn and landing on the roof of our local hospital. Yes, I will admit, in those days children were indeed more gullible.

After downing my cholesterol lowering oatmeal, I sped across town for my standing weekly appointment to babysit for a longtime family friend. The little one was down for her morning nap when I arrived, and when she awoke I again broke into my usual patter of German conversation with her, a ritual which both of her highly educated parents enthusiastically endorsed several months ago when I first proposed it. As I fed her a bottle I found myself humming as my mother also used to do with the grandkids. Getting ready to go for a walk, I admonished my young charge, "geh und hole mal deine Schuhe." (go and get your shoes). I will admit I was astonished to see her toddle towards me, bringing me not one, but both of her shoes! As we sauntered around the block a few times I continued to point out items of interest in German, as she babbled away incoherently, the word of the day being Vogel (bird). A schoolmate of her father, having grown up with my nieces, recently sent me a very kind note making reference to fond memories of hours spent at my parent's home, as my mom sang German songs to the kids and prepared stacks of paper thin pancakes. A delicacy which I, too, have often aspired to create, but which has not yet come to fruition.

Later in the day I telephoned my 91-year-old aunt, my mother's sister, the lone surviving sibling. She was overcome with emotion as we reminisced, and as I suddenly had a flashback about the ominous willow tree she

used to have in her back yard. The one which flourished for decades until an unfortunate and unwelcomed expensive septic tank problem developed. The issue lay with thick meandering roots of that invincible willow which had become entangled in the sewer system as they forged an unchartered underground pathway all the way to the paved street in front of the house.

Before dusk yesterday I clipped some of the spring flowers from my neglected perennial bed and drove to the local cemetery, where I again gave thanks for our life in Canada and the sacrifices my parents had made. Birds chirped and doves cooed in the distance and for the first time I noted the numerous willow trees scattered about. I walked from my parents' tombstone to the grave of my grandmother, located a few meters to the north. Uncle Harri had been her lone son-in-law and the bond they had shared was extraordinary. As I drove home, I became briefly distracted as I spotted a chicken running along the shoulder of the road beside my van. Our annual family tradition of cleaning chickens immediately came to mind as I pictured my mom sprinting around the farmer's yard to catch her unsuspecting prey.

I made a quick stop at the grocery store to pick up locally grown hydroponic tomatoes for a birthday lunch I was hosting today, and I reflected on the many summers my mother and I had spent in local tomato fields. Where I eventually became quite a proficient picker, regularly filling up to a hundred hampers a day if the harvest was good. When I made my debut in the tomato fields, at about the age of 8, I sported white knee socks and white runners, my mom often laughingly recalled, and she had a heck of a time getting the stains out of my clothes in her old wringer washer. On one of my regular jaunts to the farmer's house to ask his wife what time it was, she graciously brought out some freshly baked "Platz" which my brother and I enjoyed as we took yet another break relaxing in their shaded yard.

I arrived home at dusk as my daughter was preparing to go in to work for the first ever midnight shift of her nursing career. She checked her watch as she dashed out the door in her colourful cartoon themed scrubs, large coffee in hand. I could hear my mother as she commented on my countless night shifts of the past, "Well, it is easier working in the night is it not? After all, the people are all asleep!" In response I usually just smiled and rolled my eyes. The "hus-pee-tal," as she referred to it. I was relieved that nurses had long ago discarded the uncomfortable white polyester dresses and hose, along with the heavy leather, polished, lace-up, white, clinic shoes. "Hey, we paved the way for you guys," I often reminded junior staff on the units.

This afternoon, after a resoundingly successful lunch, the birthday girl, a German Russian with Polish roots, stacked up the dirty dishes as I gathered my mother's white embroidered vintage linens from the table and threw them into my new washer. I again thought of the wild clusters of untended weeping willows under which we had sought shade this past summer as we wandered about in the settlement of Leipzig, Bessarabia in the 40-degree Celsius heat. The dusty dirt road consisted of pot holes and puddles and was covered with litter and animal excrement as we ambled along, trying to capture and immortalize the sights before us with our cameras.

As we departed the village, I felt a sense of contentment, having been able to successfully photograph my mother's childhood home, the same one the midwife was called to so many years ago in 1919. And my new friend Henri was content as well, presumably having been the only one of our group to have gotten a picture of a massive stork nest, perched high about the poverty riddled street, on the rooftop of one of the dilapidated dwellings.