

School Days:

From early years, I loved to learn and find out what made things work.

Since my father was a teacher, I was born into the right household. Also, most of the time a question opened a faucet or river of answers. The explanation came in the form of a declaration that it was a worthwhile question. Before I got the answer I learned first, from where the word derived, if it was Germanic Expression, French, or came out of the Latin, Greek, or was a common folkloric description of the thing or action,

My father being a Rheinlaender had a vocabulary of great richness, such as the famous professor Heinrich Luetzeler, who taught at the University of Cologne in the years after World War I about the essence of the Cologne humor, which embraces all human calamities and situations. Needless to say, my father used the same expression with gusto. I still have some of these expressions in my German vocabulary; I can only apply them in a friendly chat with my friend from Cologne. We get the greatest enjoyment out of it, when nobody can even comprehend what we are saying. These words are an absurd combination of corrupted French, corrupted Spanish corrupted expression out of our Catholic liturgy and the old Cologne dialect.

Since childhood I have developed a fine ear how people say things, which helped me size up people in various situations.

My grammar school years were chaotic, the war caused our move to the mountains and a village school for two years, but mostly with constant absences because of all the childhood diseases, I had during this time. I was not were much in a classroom

I read in bed whatever came in handy. My mother's nightstand had a whole stack of Velhagens & Westermanns Monatshefte. It had fashion pages, travel pages, short stories and beautiful illustrations.

When I was sick, the doctors did not like to make house visits as of today, but did come, when it came close enough to dying. My father took care of the illness. He took out of his big library cabinets a very thick book, which cures where based on water cures only. Sometimes when he was finished looking up what I had, he

would forget to put the book back. In this way, I learned the human anatomy, about skin disease, venereal disease, crippling disease and mental disease. All these symptoms were illustrated in a very exact method, therefore so ghastly that I slammed the book, and decided not to look into this horrible book again.

Later in the hunger year of 1947, I came down with pleurisy and TB. For months, I stayed in my ice-cold room under blankets, but with feet sticking out at the bed end. That was the only cure at the time, killing the bacteria by cold. Since I could not even sit up, I read, and read. The most favored books were the fables, and the classics, *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. The rhythmic verses, the poetic and eloquent descriptions are still in my brain. I had just survived the war and the bombings. How close the description of the Trojan War was to me? Poor Andromache, losing her glorious warrior husband, and the worry about her little boy and the upcoming destruction of her town.

The anguish of Priam frantically looking over the battlefield to find Hector, dead or alive. My father went through this agony when the City of Düsseldorf was bombed in 1943, he on duty as a captain in the technical rescue unit. And my brother, aged 16 stationed at the anti-aircraft unit outside of Düsseldorf, which was hit. Eventually they met coincidentally in the hospital men's bathroom at the other end of town.

But very little changes in history, Andromache feared the deportation and slavery to Greece to work with other women in the linen fields till they died of exhaustion.

I understood the situation, because in my town we had deported enslaved women from Russia and Poland working on the farms and in a factory next to the railroad station.

I started high school in October 1945 in Düsseldorf. It was a brave decision my parents made, because many other parents did not send their children as commute students to Düsseldorf. My father had another opinion, and as a teacher was convinced that I could only make a living later in life, by studying, and not just marrying a nice lawyer.

The rail system at this time was still in a chaotic condition, a 10 minute ride from my hometown to Düsseldorf, could take an hour, because most bridges were bombed, and the train had to be re-routed crisscross the area to wind itself into the Main Station. The trains ran only in the early morning hours, later in the early evening and around midnight. Missing the train was to stay home the entire day, get into trouble at school for absenteeism. I had to get up very early in the morning, my father and my brother too. I was so miserable at this early hour, the icy water to wash my face, get dressed and rush out of the house and literally running to the station while eating the small roll with only jam on it. I cried a lot, and was named the “eternal singer”

When we arrived at train station the train was already full of people riding on platforms crammed inside, that it two conductors to slam the doors behind them. Several times my brother would lift me onto the couplings between the wagon and standing behind me, holding me tight, and warning me not to look down to see the fleeing railroad ties. Sometimes his friends would lift me into the baggage netting above the seats, so that I would not be squeezed to death.

The fellow passengers were a volatile mix of soldiers returning from some front, desperate women traveling from town to town to find missing relatives, and the food scavengers, who would travel from north to south to obtain some potatoes or whatever food. Needless to say, the atmosphere during these rides was horrible, everybody tried to explain his situation to the other one, complain, cry, and curse. The worst was the stench, since people had terrible digestion and the toilets did not function.

Once arrived in Düsseldorf I had to be held tight by my brother's or friends hand and walk out of the station. This station could only be described as the anteroom of hell. People had a wild look, crazy from their experiences, or determined to take advantage in any form of a weaker person. I made it a habit of waiting out extra time before catching the train home to sit in the Red Cross Station. Needless to say, that place had the concentration of all the misery assembled at the station.

I still wonder how much my parents worried about me, but it taught me to have my wits together and avoid terrible encounters.

The miserable conditions were the same in the streetcars and buses in town. People lost all good manners, they argued with strangers who had nothing to do with their misery, most had bad digestion and they had no problem letting go of it.

One day I stepped out of the streetcar, and my skirt fell to the floor, the three buttons that held it together were ripped off.

The most gruesome and scary part of my walk to the school was the street that was totally bombed out on both sides, the facades sometimes still there, blasted out windows, and here and there a portico resting on the marble shoulders of mythological hero.

But there was life in the ruins: the prostitutes and the rats. They did their business down in the basement, the street grill open into the lighted cellar room, and one could see what was going on. When the women noticed us, they came chasing after us throwing rocks after us, we did not dare to go into the ruins, because we knew the rats were there and one could still smell the dead bodies.

Once arrived at the school, a partially bombed out building that had once been an exclusive convent school. The school yard was square and completely walled in, rather small, plane trees, a small door leading to the convent.

In my years at the school, I only had two of the sisters as teacher; most of the female teachers were middle-aged or older women with their doctorates, educated before the First World War.

Our curriculum was classic, after all it was a lyceum. The routine of the schooldays was if nothing had ever happened since World War One. Good decorum, etiquette, care of dress, hair, fingernails were strictly enforced. Before entering a classroom, we were scrutinized and often ridiculed for a minor shortcoming. When passing a teacher we curtsied, just a short bob and acknowledging her. When an entire classroom of students walked together down the winding, broad stairs, and a single teacher walked by the other direction, the entire mass of students bobbed up and down in their own rhythms, which made the entire staircase look like a wave in motion.

It is still beyond me, how these teachers, having survived the war themselves had no understanding for the hardship almost every girl had to live through, several orphaned girls living with relatives, bad dwellings, unspeakable memories of the flight from the Russian invaders in East Prussia. We girls never talked about private things, sensing that it would expose their past anguish. We were very friendly and kind with each other. We had no afterschool activities except some parishes organized supervised groups.

Our curriculum was classic, languages, mathematics, history and science. At each opportunity, the sports classes were exchanged for a math test or another important repeat. And we still had a beautiful gym with hardwood floors and stained windows, a stage and leather vaulting horses, so we could have had at least the scheduled sports. But the swimming lessons in a soggy, drizzly Düsseldorf were never missed, so that we girls had our wet bathing suits in our book bags, with wet hair walked one kilometer from public swimming pool to our school.

The music lessons were the best. Our teacher was a dedicated musician and made us understand and love music. We had to learn to read music, sing and study chore books.

Once a month we had scholar cantorum, where the parents were invited. It was very festive and beautiful.

I was given a school violin to study playing the violin. It was a disaster. My father hired a violin teacher, who only started me for five minutes and left for the other room; I left after one hour of practicing what he asked me to do, without ever seeing him again. The other problem was that the strings broke constantly, and there was only one repair man, who left the violin unrepaired for weeks. Therefore, I never learned to play the violin, only remember some terms. At the end of the year, I gave the violin back.

We also had to learn to play the piano, but hardly anyone had a piano. As ersatz, we had to make a keyboard out of cardboard with all the keys drawn in black and white. At home, we practiced the melody on the paperboard without hearing any sound.

My keyboard eventually became unusable, because the leftover soup, that was given out during the break time, and by the way was donated by the Quakers of America, had spilled out of the container and ruined the books, the white linen napkin which we used to eat the soup at our school desks, and the keyboard.

But I had one treat: I read. At this time, my greatest love was the Iliad and the Odyssey by Homer. I lived in Troy and Ithaca.

My college year was good, we were called: Frauelein and did not have to curstey anymore.