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Meeting the Relatives

My mother filled in some of the gaps in my earliest memories. What are now just a few shards of memory in my mind belong to the larger story of my family. My father was trying to support a pregnant wife and child in Iran, on a contract fixed to a project. When that project was completed, there was no certainty that other work would follow. What is missing from the retrospective accounts of their early years in Iran, and the enthusiasm both my parents felt for the country, is the insecurity of my father's paid work. It was subject to vulnerable contracts in a country attempting to modernise itself in a climate of world Depression.

When Rudolf's Tehran project was approaching completion in late 1937, he sent Elfriede and me home. At the same time, he was making preparations to go to Sao Paulo in Brazil to work on harbour construction.

Mother and I were to take a boat across the Caspian Sea, then continue our journey by rail to Breslau. She was then expecting her second child, and was to live with her mother in Breslau until the baby was born the following June. Father expected to be settled in Brazil by then and was to call us to join him when mother and baby were strong enough to travel such a long distance.

The day that we left Iran, she told me the Caspian Sea was extremely rough. I do not recall that I was upset at having to leave my father, and had thrown a tantrum in protest. Nor do I remember trying to jump the ship's railing to return to him.

During the subsequent storm at sea, my mother received burns to her arm when she was thrown against a ship's oven. The long journey by rail was taken in an atmosphere that seemed somewhat ominous. At railway

stations in Poland, soldiers with bayonets pierced bundles of cloth in search, it was said, of fugitives from Russia. The Russian Revolution had left a huge legacy of fear. But in the sleeping compartment next to ours, a Russian general travelled with his daughter, his maid and his samovar. He sent the maid to invite me to play with his child, and offered cups of tea to the elegant German woman.

I do not remember any of these details. Previously I have clung stubbornly to my own memories, not wanting to lay claim to what others have told me. But there is a kind of imperceptible osmosis at work, and one hungers to know *what really happened*. Our imaginations grow to embrace the stories of others and absorb them as our own. Perhaps I have done that more than I know.

I do know that my mother's family in Breslau welcomed us with open arms. Every morning Omi, my great-grandmother, Bertha Friebe, brought warm milk to me in my cot. I am now surprised by how much I welcomed this milk.

We had none in Iran and later in life I disliked milk on its own intensely, especially the skin on top as the heated liquid cools.

Photographs from that time show that the German Christmas was a wondrous experience, with a decorated spruce, silver 'angel's hair' and real candles dripping wax into the little metal dishes that were clipped to the fragrant branches. My little eyes are shown as wide with astonishment. Mother's brother made me a wooden doll's pram and I was given my own 'child', a doll named Käthe.

There was a visit to Berlin and more relatives. The glass-sided department store escalators proved irresistible. A visit to the famous *Berliner Tiergarten* (park and zoo) ought to have topped the popularity stakes, but I have no recollection of that either.

Then Rudolf sent one of his urgent telegrams: 'Come back, wife. We are staying in Iran.' It must have been February 1938, about three weeks before Hitler moved his army into Vienna to bring his native land back into Greater Germany.

On our way back to Iran, our way back 'home' to Pappi, we visited my father's people in Vienna. They received us in their inner-city apartment near the Danube Canal with generous-hearted hospitality. They kept to

themselves their view that they found my mother too opinionated and assertive. I was only to hear that view decades later. In her turn, Mother never felt entirely at ease with them after their first dismissal of her. But her dour father-in-law fell in love with me, his first grandchild. He surprised his family when he became all Viennese charm, dancing with me with abandon. I warmed even more to my aunt's singing. At the end of Bach's loving tribute, *Willst Du Dein Herz mir Schenken* (If you want to give me your heart), I walked over to her, curtsied as I had been taught to do, and kissed her hand, with the plea: 'Please Tante Annie, sing me that lovely song again.'

At this point my own recollections and my mother's stories leave a gap. My father's fine photographs have us in a townhouse in Tehran. It is Easter, because I am carrying a large chocolate egg wrapped in shiny paper. There is a small walled garden and a little pool in which my mother's naked, swollen body is relaxing. Later that day she sits with her arm lovingly around my neck, her stomach bulging under her tailored dress. We are sitting on a verandah behind a garden of roses. We are both laughing. Later, my smiling father and mother stand in loving embrace.

Then, on the day that my brother is born, I was packed off to stay with Herr Baumgärtel and his Iranian wife. They were kind to me but I had never been separated from my mother. My third birthday would be in four days. But mother would be away!

It was very hot, late in June. On the first night away from my mother, I had my first-ever, memorable nightmare. It was a simple childish story about my family becoming hostages to the Turkish pilot of a flying house. He disappeared, and we managed to jump out of a first-floor window and hop into cars, crossing many bridges that kept on collapsing behind us, repetitively, a theme without end.

I wake up. Herr Baumgärtel and his wife are bending over me, having heard my screams of fear. But I do not want them. I want my mother.

I tell the incident here because it begins a constant theme in my life. In the simple Arabian Nights-type dream, we do not come to any real harm. In other dreams, and in real life, I may be frightened out of my wits, but optimism always ends up outstripping fear and loss. In dreams in later life I am occasionally threatened by a massive avalanche of water

towering above me like a tidal wave. I am on a simple raft, threatened with drowning. But my raft rises, like a lift going up many floors, to the top of the wave. It then slides down gently to calm waters beyond.

I remain a creature of hope. The sense of security imparted by my loving parents keeps at bay the terrors that fly through the night. I never became a victim of annihilation. Of course, one may argue that such simple faith demands less intellectual energy. Scepticism and doubt require real courage and, in later life, I came to admire people who challenge received knowledge for the sake of correct information.

But in June 1938, my life was simple. I did not warm immediately to my new brother, Peter Michael. He was red and wrinkled and ugly at first. But, day by day, he grew ever more handsome until he grew into my ever-better playfellow, my only constant child companion. As he grew and walked and talked, it was he who rescued my neglected dolls, he who wanted to dress like me, and play my games. Mother was a sufficiently free spirit to allow him to wear dresses, to grow his hair long and tie ribbons in it, until this urge disappeared. He remained a nurturing person but did not become ostensibly effeminate. I was a bossy older child, but I probably loved him even more than he loved me. His loyal friendship I was to take for granted.

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