

Matron

by Sheila Luecht

On December 8, 1980, John Lennon died. I was heading back to Salzburg to see someone I had left behind in 1976. I was still trying to see how this man was supposed to fit into my life, even though it had seemed completely impossible when I left. Back then there was no email, no cell phones, so on a wing and a prayer, I called from the states to a friend of his to let him have a clue I would be arriving. It was a surprise, something that just happened in a strange set of circumstances.

He knew I would be coming and was happy to see me. In an odd way, I knew the moment I saw him that things were not going to be what I had gambled on or wanted. He knew it too. Still we made the best of our reunion, as the friends that we were, and I stayed at his place. He was renting from an older woman in a kind of two flat. I was happy to land there. Happy to visit with him and his friends and remember when I had left the area at almost the same time, those few years earlier. It was nice to erase the sad chaos of those past moments.

His land lady was somehow thrilled that the Herr Doktor Professor had a visitor from the US and invited us for tea. She caught us coming in and without thinking anything, and at her persistence, I had absently accepted. My friend did not seem to want to be with her, and tried to insist that I go along myself. I was intrigued by his reluctance, but decided that I would not want to do that. For some reason, cancelling proved to be extremely difficult. In the interest of just being a good soldier I thought we should just go and stay briefly; and he should accompany me as that was what she really wanted. I was then very much a kind of people pleaser, especially to those who were elderly. I was brought up with manners and decorum, so to me this was the solution.

I fussed around with a light dress, which turned out to be stupid because of the damp cold, but put a sweater and boots on and together we made our way up the stairs to her apartment. She was a tall, matronly woman, an imposing kind of figure. Her hair was dark grey and her face full and lined. Something about her exuded authority.

She was all over the professor with her excitement and enthusiasm. She had it in her mind that we were a couple and we attempted to clear that up right away, both of us, spontaneously, but instinctively. Thereafter she focused herself on him. He was a historian, had just published a major work and been decorated by his government, so to me this was almost a natural kind of thing. People value those who are highly educated there, they represent power and elitism to a degree, even now, so many years later, but my friend was a pretty different kind of guy. He was also in a rock band with friends and looked like a rocker. He was a talented musician and just not exactly who you might think of as someone who was a Max Kade scholar at that time.

The war had really not ended that long ago. People still remembered it and many who were intimately a part of it still lived. There were those who participated and those too young to have done so.

When I smelled the burnt strudel, I was a little surprised. Most women, elderly grandmother types do not ever burn strudel in the oven. She hustled around with the tea and the table was nicely set. All the while she was apologizing about the condition of the strudel, declared it herself to be edible and threw a vast amount of powdered sugar on the top of it.

Suddenly in the darkened afternoon light I began to feel eclipsed by what was happening, it seemed dark inside. It did not seem warm and inviting. I felt it was a play that I was a part of and this is the scene where something terrible gets revealed.

I kept waiting for it, and it never came. Not in the physical moment that is, not with any sound, no big thunderbolt of revelation. It was an overwhelming feeling of fear and despair. I was not feeling it as myself, but as another person in her presence. I could hardly participate in the small talk, I would barely eat the food, I took continued solace in the tea, drinking it over and over until it was gone, but still lifting the cup and disguising my fear with the cup.

My friend put his deep German intonation in place with his speech and spoke to her in her own language and soon we were departing. It was all courtesy and smiles at the door, but it was over and I was relieved. I could not wait to get out of there, I escaped, ripped off my dress and changed. I was distraught and unsettled.

This was no ordinary Oma, perhaps not even an Oma at all. No she was not. She was a camp guard at Mauthausen, she was young and ignorant at the time, but very cruel and I had seen her there. I had known in the room, with the burnt strudel and when I had fled down the stairs, it was the second time I had fled from her. The same woman, only years earlier, in another lifetime.

At the time, I made no mention of it to my friend. I feel he sensed something all along in his dealings with her, perhaps even knew there was something sinister. Somethings do not die with age, they are still a part of personality, there is no escaping the evil that one does, perhaps the circumstances make a person do something, but only if you are evil and wicked, you can never quite erase what you have done.

No one can forgive you because you do not see yourself as needing forgiveness and that is what you carry with you. So in a generation I was there, returned. Unknown to me at the time, but now in retrospect, I understood so much better. Everything that happened on all my visits there, when I lived there, who I encountered, what I

did, who I knew was bad for me, was all part of something else. Something in the past that was not completely gone was sifting through time to my present.

Through all these years my friend and I have lived full lives this time, we periodically exchange news and greetings, discuss politics and our children and spouses. Who explains this kind of closeness through so many years and so much distance?

The reality of all of this is that when we were young, my friend and I said we would both fight fascism in the trenches. If we had to fight it again, we would be side by side. When I think of it now, I realize that we were once together in a previous life and we did bond over our beliefs and we did fight in the trenches; and also the matron.

