

OUR TRIP (Part 2)

Fran observed some time ago that one of the differences between us is that she is happy with whatever sights she sees on a trip, and I am disappointed with whatever I miss. And on this trip, did I miss sights! But don't get me wrong. It was a great trip and we saw lots of cities and lots of water and lots of locks and lots of churches and lots of old houses and lots of castles high up on the hills alongside the rivers.

To begin at the beginning: We flew Lufthansa. The flights were booked by the cruise line. (The return flight was on Swiss. Not Swiss Air; just Swiss.) The announcements were in German and English. I thought I might be able to understand German since it is so much like Yiddish. I didn't. Our cruise ship also flew the German flag. A digression: We decided to take this cruise because it fit in with our timetable. It was after Yom Kippur, and the weather would be warm. Also, it was the longest cruise available. Also, it included Budapest, Vienna and Amsterdam, three cities I looked forward to revisiting. Fran loved the idea that we didn't have to unpack and repack, that we could go at our own pace, and that we could sit and watch the sights go by.

What I realized only after we made our reservations was that more than half the trip was in Germany. Goyishe kup! About a week before we left, I decided to learn what I could about the history of Jews in pre-Hitler Germany. Turns out that it is a long history, in some cases, going back to Roman days. I checked Wikipedia which said, "Jewish settlers founded the Ashkenazi Jewish community in the Early (5th to 10th centuries CE) Middle Ages." Which is why Yiddish, which is derived from German, became the Ashkenazi Jews' "Lingua Franca." But did they have it bad! They were slaughtered during the crusades and accused of well poisoning during the Black Death of 1346-53. They moved east, and it wasn't any better.

Back to the trip. Budapest was wonderful. We had a bus tour with a guide which took us all over the city, seeing picturesque old houses. I had been in Budapest for three days as part of a nine-day trip I took (which included Prague and Vienna) in 1997, after David and I visited Romania and Kishinev. It was exciting seeing and remembering the Chain Bridge, Castle Hill, Matthias Church, Fishermen's Bastion. But I missed walking around Heroes' Square and the parks and museums.

In the evening we headed north on the Danube and the next day, we were in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, "in the foothills of the Carpathian mountains." Another church and more old houses with cobblestone streets, which are hard to walk on. A lovely museum featuring the art of Slovakia. Our guide proudly announced that there are five Slovakian ice hockey players in the NHL. And KIAs are made in SlovaKIA. He also described life under Communism, and the split from the Czechs. In the evening, a beer tasting and concert.

Next stop, Vienna, and another church: St. Stephen's. We had a walking tour which we managed to keep up with, and when we were on our own, Fran had a coffee and a Sachertorte, and I found the Jewish museum. In the evening, we went to a concert at the

Weiner Konzerthaus, "Salute to Vienna" which featured a small orchestra, singers and dancers. I am afraid it was packaged for tourists. Lots of Johann Strauss and Franz Lehar.

Still in Austria, we arrived in Durnstein which I never heard of, and toured the Wachau wine region, which I never heard of. But the town was remarkable, with 16th century houses and more cobblestone streets, which were not getting easier to walk on. It is famous for being the place where King Richard the Lionheart was imprisoned, which I never heard of. In the afternoon we sailed to Melk and the 11th century Benedictine Abby. A church with lots of gold, and a library with lots of old books.

Passau is on the Austrian-German border. More old houses and cobblestone streets, and still another church named after St. Stephen. This one with an organ with 17,774 pipes. It is strategically located where the Danube, the Inn and the Ilz rivers converge. I never heard of them either. Passau is a charming city, and it has a castle on a hill that you can reach by walking or taking a shuttle bus. I took the shuttle bus. We were fortunate when our boat docked near the action. Less walking. By the way, where Fran and I were the slowest walkers, several people commented how impressed they were that we undertook this trip.

Deutschland: I have avoided visiting Germany ever since I started travelling, and here I am: Regensburg, Nuremberg, Bamberg, Wurzburg, and Miltenberg (which I called Milton Berle.) True, they were worth seeing, each city having its own special attraction. One had a 13th century Town Hall (in German, Rathaus) and another had a 13th century cathedral. The German construction workers were busy in the 13th century. Another had a 12th century bridge. Regensburg had the remains of a Roman fort built in 179 CE. Most of the cities were destroyed by Allied bombing raids, and were rebuilt to look like they once did. Nuremberg had a remarkable Documentation Center, a modern museum explaining in detail the rise of Hitler and Nazism. We also saw where the Nuremberg Rallies were held, and the Palace of Justice where the Nuremberg Trials took place. Wurzburg was a winner with the Bishop's Residenz which has the largest ceiling fresco ever painted (by Tiepolo). In several of the towns, we noticed Jewish stars outside certain shops. The guide explained that they were not "stars of David" but they indicated that beer is sold there. Maybe, a long time ago, Jews were the beer sellers. After a few days, the cities began to blur, and I felt I cannot absorb it all. I kept a journal, but am having trouble reading my writing. I did take lots of photos. I never found out why some cities end in burg and others in berg. We had very little opportunity to shop. (Sorry, kids.)

As I mentioned, the weather was fantastic, and being on the sundeck as we moved from the Danube (which was not blue) to the Main (pronounced mine) to the Rhine (pronounced rine), gave us wonderful vistas. We passed a bunch of old castles, and barges, and vineyards growing on the side of hills. I have no idea how anyone can tend those vineyards on such steep slopes. We also went through 60 or 70 locks. The rivers would not have been navigable without the locks. And without the locks there would have been no Avalon or Viking or Grand Circle River Cruises. The ship enters the lock. A gate closes behind it. The chamber is either filled or emptied. Then the ship continues up or downstream. I will send pictures.

Moving up the Rhine, We came to Rudesheim which is famous for Siegfried's Mechanical Musical Instrument Museum, and Rudesheim Coffee which is mostly brandy with whipped cream in a funny cup. Here, we managed to get a few souvenirs. And leaving Rudesheim heading for Cologne, we found ourselves going from one side of the ship to the other, to see and photograph the castles up on the cliffs.

The penultimate stop: Cologne. Bombed to hell. But the Cathedral was spared. Our guide said that most of the Jews of Cologne left for Holland and France before the Jews that remained were rounded up and sent to concentration camps. However, Hitler eventually got them in Holland and France. The new Jewish community consists of East European Jews.

Finally, Amsterdam and a great canal cruise--loved the houses and the houseboats along the canals--a quick look at Rembrandt's house and the Portuguese Synagogue in the morning, and in the afternoon, a visit to the Rijksmuseum. What a collection of Rembrandts and his contemporaries! It was exhilarating but exhausting. By the evening, I had had it. We packed, and in the morning said goodbye to all those people we had met, whether we remembered their names or not, were taken to the airport (shipfol) and were more than ready to return home. We learned a lot of history which I am having trouble retaining. A great deal of fighting and killing and conquering. Emperors, Kings, Princes and Bishops. Castles and Abbys and Cathedrals. Red wines and white wines. Light beers and dark beers. And as Tom Lehrer noted, "Everybody hates the Jews."

Next come the pictures.