

# **My Upside-Down World**

## **From Germany to Australia**

**(via Italy and Austria)**



*by*

**Claire French-Wieser**

*Edited by*

**Scott McKenzie and Edith French**

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Printed and bound

by

**Digital Print Australia**

135 Gilles Street, Adelaide, SA 5000

[digitalprintaustralia.com](http://digitalprintaustralia.com)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS



FOREWORD.....	iv
Chapter 1 – A CONTROVERSIAL WEDDING.....	1
Chapter 2 – ONLY A GIRL! .....	7
Chapter 3 – CHILDHOOD.....	15
Chapter 4 – STARTING SCHOOL .....	23
Chapter 5 – AT HOME IN SELB.....	31
Chapter 6 – SCHOOL YEARS IN BOZEN.....	53
Chapter 7 – TARGETED BRAINWASHING .....	64
Chapter 8 – GIRLS’ HIGH SCHOOL.....	73
Chapter 9 – THE YEAR 1938.....	82
Chapter 10 – CONSCRIPTED LABOUR (REICHSARBEITSDIENST).....	88
Chapter 11 – A FARM IN THE MOUNTAINS.....	97
Chapter 12 – MILITARY HOSPITAL WOERGL .....	102
Chapter 13 – STORMCLOUDS.....	111
Chapter 14 – THE LAST YEAR OF THE WAR.....	118
Chapter 15 – MILITARY INTERPRETER.....	125
Chapter 16 – FRANCOPHILIA.....	133
Chapter 17 – HUNGER YEARS .....	142
Chapter 18 – JOURNEY TO AUSTRALIA.....	151
Chapter 19 – ARRIVAL.....	160
Chapter 20 – CULTURE SHOCK.....	167
Chapter 21 – GOODBYE TO MUTTI .....	174
Chapter 22 – HALLO TO MELBOURNE!.....	182
Chapter 23 – BOGONG.....	189
Chapter 24 – KIEWA VALLEY .....	203
Chapter 25 – BACK TO MELBOURNE .....	212
Chapter 26 – BABEL.....	218
Chapter 27 – JACK.....	225
Chapter 28 – THE ROAD TO NUPTIALS .....	231
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	237

# FOREWORD



Claire French-Wieser was my mother.

She was born in Germany, in the first quarter of the 20th century and has lived through one of the most tumultuous periods in our recent history.

My Mum was one of the most resilient and tenacious people I ever met.

Having a mother who was an émigré in outer suburban Melbourne, and an “enemy German” to boot, could be quite a mortifying experience for a youngster trying to make their way through primary school. Her accent, though not strong, marked her out as different (and by association – us!); we just wanted to blend in and be the same as everyone else. And at school fetes, her European style cakes were very different from the standard fare of sponges and lamingtons that everyone else’s mothers would bake for their kids to take. How embarrassing!

Despite the evident ups and downs of living in a strong Anglo-Saxon outer suburb, my mother forged her own path.

She found meaning teaching adults at the Council of Adult Education in Melbourne; initially teaching German, and subsequently, tips on travelling in Europe and Philosophy.

As the 1970’s took hold, the rise of the Women’s Liberation movement galvanised her interest in feminism. Soon she was teaching classes in how to break free from the shackles of being a “Housebound Housewife”. She became so well known for her views on the subject, that she was invited onto a well-known midday television show, where the audience was primarily stay at home Mums. She made herself thoroughly unpopular with the television crew by exhorting viewers to turn off the television and go out and “do something you are interested in!”

Even in the last years of her life, as a nonagenarian, she continued writing, engaging actively in social media and holding regular discussion groups on philosophy, spirituality and the works of Carl Gustav Jung.

Claire died suddenly at home, in April 2020 and is dearly missed by all who knew her.

This book provides a first-hand account of how life was for everyday folk during a time of peak chaos and the factors driving a family's desire to leave the land they loved in search for stability and plenty to eat.

My brothers and I are immensely proud of our mother and her achievements.

This is her story.

**Edith French**



## CHAPTER 1

# A CONTROVERSIAL WEDDING



How does a soul find its appropriate body? Few people waste time to think about it. As for me, I know exactly when and where it happened.

It was on the midsummer night of the year 1923 in the little border town of Steinach on the Brenner Pass, smack bang between North and South Europe. Time and place became typical for my whole future life, which was forever wavering between North and South, midsummer delights and dismal penury.

My father, Heinrich Maria Wieser, a young sculptor from Bozen (which the Italians call Bolzano), had wooed and won the hand of my mother, Georgina, the daughter of a publican at Selb in the Fichtelgebirge, the Spruce Mountains, one of the poorest areas of Bavaria. Her ambitious father, Hans Fluegel, natural son of Count Zedtwitz zu Liebenstein in Bohemia, had opposed this marriage most energetically, but to no avail. Georgina Fluegel (called “Gorchina” in the local idiom), had already been engaged to a rich land owner in the then Czech village of Liebenstein, and Hans Fluegel could foresee great financial advantages through this liaison, but this young South Tyrolean had ruined his plans.

Fluegel had done everything to nip this romance in the bud. He had beaten his daughter with the dog whip. With his dogs and shotgun, he had tried to chase the young Austrian from his house. He had threatened to cut her off her inheritance, but nothing could change Gorchina’s love and determination.

Of course, with Gorchina he had always had problems. Ah, those girls! Things were bearable whilst they were washing and scrubbing floors but as soon as they had set their eyes on some fellow there was no holding them back! It was lucky that this Tyrolean tearaway had promised to marry her, in the full knowledge that this commitment came despite the lack of a dowry, as he said. This suitor worked as a sculptor ceramicist in the nearby porcelain factory of Philipp Rosenthal

Pty. Ltd. (an artist to top it all!) and even pretended to own a house at Bozen, his hometown (wherever that was!).

At Bozen, where his uncle was the Dean of the Cathedral, a clergy as good as a bishop, he would marry his bride. Hans Fluegel decided to cut his daughter out of her inheritance.

Gorchina had been educated strictly within the Lutheran religion. Like Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust* she had asked her fiancé about his religious beliefs and like Faust he had answered her in the vapid, roundabout way Doctor Faustus had answered Gretchen's naive question: "Name is but sound and smoke. If you can't feel it you shall never understand it..." And so on.

And just like Gretchen, Gorchina had accepted his answer. She had not the faintest idea about Church history, nor how the Lutherans were despised in the Holy Land of Tyrol. There the Jesuits of the College of Trent had done their best to condemn the Lutherans. But Heinrich did not tell her that, mainly because he did not care about it. What he did care about was his bride's cooking. Not that she knew how to cook but her mother, Jette Fluegel (*nee* Vates), was famous for being the best cook of wild game fare in the region. Hans Fluegel owned hunting rights in the nearby forests, and the traditional hunting feasts he held at his restaurant were renowned. Nobody could produce better potato dumplings with sauerkraut and roast game than Jette Fluegel. But my father did not care about potato dumplings. For him they were a culinary barbarity which he called "tortured potatoes". They could not be compared with Tyrolean ham dumplings and other delicacies his mother produced, and before Gorchina would become Frau Wieser she would have to learn the finer points of the regional cuisine.

The Tyrolean sculptor was of a practical turn of mind. As a young apprentice he had learned from his older colleagues that love was transitory, but that a man had to eat. Gorchina would have to learn how to cook properly from his mother and from his aunt, who had been a former clergymen's cook and could satisfy the highest expectations.

He told his bride to get herself a certificate of good behaviour

from the town mayor, as well as a passport and a train ticket to Bozen. The station master had to write the ticket by hand and to work out the price laboriously. Gorchina owned a special permit to cross the border into nearby Czechoslovakia, but the seven hundred kilometres from Selb to Bozen seemed a journey to the end of the world. Yet love conquers all. Heinrich Wieser accompanied his bride to the station and found her seat in the little steam train. He kissed her goodbye and promised faithfully to join her in three months for the wedding.

Poor Gorchina! In those days, the journey from Selb to Bozen took thirty-six hours and was fraught with many dangers. Her fiancé had given her strict instructions: no falling asleep and no conversations with strangers. The trouble was that she had neglected to bring along some provisions and a thermos flask of tea. She had very little money and hardly any chance to buy food or drink.

As the train stopped at Munich an itinerant seller offered food and drinks, but as her fiancé had told her to save her money, she did not dare to buy even a bottle of lemonade. Everything was so terribly expensive. At the Brenner Pass she was so thirsty that she decided to buy herself a drink. But the young food seller took Italian lire and she had only German marks.

It was nearly dark when the train arrived at Bozen. Nobody had come to meet her. She had to ask for directions to the Wieser house. Heinrich had forgotten to tell her that shortly after the end of The Great War his family home had suffered from an air raid (which the Italians had staged even after the truce was declared) and his parent's house had been badly damaged. Gorchina was shocked; the Wieser house looked like a robbers' den. Weary, hungry and thirsty, she knocked at the door. An old lady opened it, but could not understand who she was nor what she wanted. At last an aunt came down the stairs and understood the situation. "It's Heindl's bride and she is thirsty," she shouted into the ear of the deaf woman.

"Oh, that's the Lutheran!" At last the future mother-in-law understood.

A bed was found for Gorchina on the first floor of the little house. Years later Mother told me that they put her into the room of a young tenant for

whom they had to find alternative accommodation, which meant some loss in the old lady's meagre income. As it happened the bed sheets were not changed, and she could count on them the red flea marks.

On the next day Gorchina met her future brothers-in-law, Karl and Sepp. When the war had started, they had belonged to the Austrian crack unit of the *Kaiserjaeger Regiment* and they had only recently returned from Russian captivity. Like all former POWs in Russia, they were infected with tuberculosis. Both lads fell immediately in love with their brother's young bride. They changed her name from the harsh "Gorchina" to "Gina", and the sweet sounding "Ginele". Sepp, the older of the brothers, asked her to marry him. "Ginele," he said, "Don't marry Heindl. He is a never-do-well. Marry me instead. I have not long to live and then you will inherit the house and the business." Karl, his younger brother said nothing. But he too knew that his days were numbered.

During the next days she also met Heindl's two sisters. Resi was a young widow who tried hard to be friends with her future new sister-in-law. Clara had had the good fortune to marry the city building inspector and was very conscious of her status and dignity. She had written to Heindl to think of his immortal soul and dissolve his engagement with the Lutheran girl. This was also necessary with respect to their old mother and with regards to the status of the family, who had been living on Church commissions for decades. Heindl had been tactless enough to show Gorchina his sister's letter, which caused a lifelong rift between the two women.

This was now Gorchina's new family: the deaf mother Maria Wieser (nee Danay), who bore eleven children; her unmarried half-sister Aunt Theres nee Viehweider, the future brothers-in-law, Karl and Sepp, and the two sisters-in-law Resi, widow Braitto, (who unforgivably had married an Italian from Trent) and Clara, wife of the building inspector Othmar Leitner, who hailed from Bieberwier in Ausserfern, an Alemannic enclave in Tyrol. Othmar spoke a different dialect and looked down on the homespun Tyrolians in the family.

With the exceptions of old Aunt Theres' and sister Resi, Gorchina had

not been welcomed in her new family. The difference of religion was not the only handicap. The Wieser family was still deeply steeped in the old Austrian formalities which required that the old lady had to be addressed with *Sie*, the German polite form of address, even by her children. She was the *Frau Mutter*, the matriarch, a formality which Gorchina could never get used to.

Three months later, when Heinrich Wieser arrived at Bozen, it was deemed indecorous for him to sleep under the same roof as his bride. He had to move to his sister, Clara's, who lived with her husband in an apartment in the Eisackstrasse. Mr. and Mrs. Leitner were somewhat inconvenienced by this: "So much trouble for that Lutheran girl!" But at last the wedding got under way.

The ceremony was fixed for the 24th of September 1923 to be held in the Cathedral of Bozen, behind the main altar and of course without Nuptial Mass. At such "mixed marriages" the Dean of the Cathedral would not officiate but left the ritual to a young priest.

Yet there was one more handicap to overcome: the so called *Brautexamen* or "bridal test", a pre-nuptial instruction for the young couple. As at other such occasions, the groom excused himself and left his bride to the mercy of an old canon to conduct "the test". Years later my mother always mentioned this experience with deep revulsion.

There was no wedding reception nor any further celebrations. What was there to celebrate at such a shameful occasion? The young bridegroom did not even dare to introduce his bride to the extended family at Meran and at Andrian. After the obligatory visit to the photographer, the young couple took the train to Germany. There was no honeymoon at Venice (as his sisters had enjoyed), but they decided to interrupt their journey at the Brenner Pass and spend the night at Steinach, at the Hotel *Zum Steinbock* (to the Ibex), and that was the place of my conception. It became symbolic for my whole future life. Like a portal between two different worlds, the Brenner Pass, which had united North and South Europe for millennia, had opened for me and in later life I crossed it again and again.

## CHAPTER 2

# ONLY A GIRL!

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The young couple was very happy. I think this was the only time in his life that my father was really content, as he had no talent for happiness. Without ever having read Schopenhauer, his ideology agreed with that of the most pessimistic of all philosophers. The summer of 1923 may have been his happiest time. He had found a beautiful wife and could set up his own home.

Even before his wedding, Heinrich Wieser had the good fortune to secure accommodation in one of the new houses which the firm Philipp Rosenthal had built before the war for their white collar workers. It consisted of two rooms and a kitchen on the second floor of the house at Ascher Strasse 9. It was the last house in a long row of houses and open to the cold Bohemian wind. The six flats had neither a bathroom nor a water closet, but only an old fashioned toilet with a septic tank which was emptied regularly by night cart. The laundry was situated in a little building in the courtyard. It contained an enormous cauldron to be heated by wood fire, where the washing was boiled for hours and worked over with a special instrument called a laundry stomper. It was then rinsed in clear water and spread out on a meadow for bleaching when the weather was good. During the winter months it was hung out to dry in the attic, where it was usually frozen stiff at once. However, it got dry after a few days. The coal, firewood and a few bags of potatoes were stored in the cellar and had to be hauled up to the second floor.

The janitor, *Herr Zeitner*, watched carefully that everybody followed the house rules, checking that all tenants kept their turn in cleaning stairs and windows. Yet as far as necessary repairs were concerned, he usually turned a blind eye.

This cold building was shared by the families of six employees: a private secretary, two accountants, a specialist for the giant ceramic

kilns, the engine driver of the factory owned goods trains, and my father, the young sculptor from South Tyrol. All these men had survived the war and were happy to have found work in the little industrial town near the Czech border, as well as a place to live for their families.

The young Frau Wieser was fortunate to live close to her parents, as the restaurant *Zum Nordbahnhof* with its Shell petrol bowser was just a few houses further up at the beginning of Ascher Strasse, the street that led directly to the Czechoslovakian border. Yet in those years there was little call for petrol and Grandfather was the only car owner for miles around. The two story corner house is still standing today between the two porcelain factories of Rosenthal and Hutschenreuther, with the tenant flats of the factory workers close by.

If there was anything that my father disliked in this neighbourhood it was the large number of children, as there were at least two in each family, and Herr Heinrich, the kiln supervisor who actually belonged to the blue collar workers, had five! My father did not like children. Having decided to be the last of his family he was hoping that the family name should die out with him. He was convinced that life was not worth the effort and neither was progeny. But he had not taken into account my mother's wishes. Gina, as he called her, had a motherly soul and wanted many children. Therefore, he was not pleased when she happily told him that she was pregnant. Pregnancy would soon ruin her dainty figure and being a sculptor, he thought of women only in terms of physical beauty. On the other hand, the news caused great joy in the Fluegel's household, and there were many preparations for the new arrival. Typical of her time, my mother was uninformed about the realities of pregnancy and childbirth. These things were never discussed in front of young girls. Only on one thing did both her mother and her grandmother agree: "When a girl was born one should drown her immediately in a nearby lake. That would save her much pain and suffering." Of course, she looked forward to her baby, but now she was filled with fear. In those times childbearing was still surrounded by much ignorance and superstition. There were no maternity hospitals and many women died in childbirth.

Her first birth pangs started in the night from the 30th of April to

the 1st of May, 1924 in the ominous *Walpurgisnacht*, which in that region is still celebrated with pagan bonfires called *Besenbrennen* (brooms burning), where the witches' brooms are supposed to be burnt. As often happened in those early years, Heinrich Wieser had been out with friends and Gina was alone at home. She did not know what to do and prayed fervently that her child may not be born in such an ill-favoured night. Yet two more weeks passed until on the 14th of May I finally saw the light of day.

It had been a difficult birth, because I was much too big for my dainty mother. She suffered terrible pains until Frau Hoefer, the old town midwife, put me into her arms with the words: "A nappy washer for all your future children, Frau Wieser." In the Fluegel family there was great disappointment. They had enough girls and wished for a boy. My mother too had hoped for a boy to gain her father's approval. She was hoping her son would become a sports champion and study Law. It would be well to have a lawyer in the family. Later, during the war, when the sons of her friends got killed one by one, she thanked God that I was "only a girl".

Yet my father was not disappointed. He was happy that his brave young wife was still alive and that his daughter was "a pretty little girl", healthy in body and limb. He was a model father. When it became clear that my mother could not nurse me, he rode every day after work by bike to Hohenberg an der Eger to get goat's milk for me, as goat's milk was deemed healthier for babies than cow's milk. When I was older my mother told me about a mysterious old custom. Somehow my grandmother had procured the dried head of a cross adder and hung it round my neck. I wore this adder head throughout my first year, until my mother finally buried it together with the umbilical cord. Was this a symbol of protection by the Old Goddess? Soon after I got an ugly eczema which covered my whole face and head. I can still darkly remember it. Was I no longer protected by the adder's head or was it because I was now on cow's milk? It only disappeared after my mother put a few drops of lemon juice into my baby food. But I got a touch of the rickets and suffered from bad teeth and splitting fingernails for

the rest of my life. It seems that mother's milk is irreplaceable.

My father, who had lost his homeland after the First World War, told me that in 1809 Bavaria had occupied the Tyrol. But now the Italians were in charge and that was even worse! (He kept telling me about the tragedy of South Tyrol again and again, so that I would never forget it.) In my first year, he took me to Bozen to proudly introduce me to his friends and relatives. Even though I had been born in this hell hole of Selb, I was to grow up as a true South Tyrolean. One of my first childhood impressions was the mountain range of the Wilde Kaiser, as it can be admired from the train at Kufstein, and later the classical panorama of the Dolomite Rosengarten as it can be seen from Bozen. Since then I have never lost my love for the mountains and living in the plains always made me feel unhappy.

During our yearly journeys to South Tyrol I learnt early on about the prestige of the Wieser family. Father's mother, the widow Maria Wieser, was the undisputed matriarch, a dainty little woman and mother of eleven children. Although her sons and daughters had to address her with the German polite form of *Sie*, I, as her only grandchild, was allowed to call her "Grandmother" and to address her with the familiar *Du*. By that time her two older sons had already died of their war illnesses. But her stepsister, Aunt Theres, was still alive, and my father's two sisters Clara and Resi, who had no children of their own, spoiled me more than was good for me.

Like a sponge, I absorbed the beauty and the cultural riches of the country. Much as I loved the serene beauty of the Spruce Mountains (my Mother's stomping ground) they could not be compared with South Tyrol (where my Father was born).

I am sorry to say that I became the object of a tug of war between North and South which gave me an early feeling of being something special. As my parents had grown up with different cultural backgrounds, they decided to drop their native dialects and to speak only "high German" or what is called *Buehnendeutsch*, classical German. I learnt to understand Tyrolean and also the local idiom of the Sechsaemterland, the region between Saxony and Upper Franconia,

but I could not speak them. By the same token I was not allowed to call my parents “*Papa*” and “*Mama*” as was the norm in the middle class. “That is much too French!” said my mother. “Yes, and *Welsch* (Italian) too,” my father added. As soon as possible I had to learn to call my parents “*Vati*” and “*Mutti*”, two expressions which had come into use after World War I. My father also disliked too much hugging and kissing as to him that was a typical Italian characteristic. I was allowed to play with the children of our working class neighbours, but I was early taught about the class differences. “We don’t belong to this kind of people,” *Mutti* used to say. And *Vati* added: “They are proletarians, *Herdenmenschen*, people of the common crowd, quite different from us.” Thus, I early learnt the meaning of the word proletarian together with a nasty snobbishness. Grandfather too lived constantly in the knowledge of his blue-blooded descent as the natural son of Count Zedtwitz of the Liebenstein lineage. His favourite expression was *Ja, unsereiner*, (people like us) and he quite forgot that his mother had not been a Countess.

My parents did not object if I visited “those people” in their homes and sometimes stayed for lunch with them. I was the grandchild of Hans Fluegel and they treated me like a little princess.

As one of the first burghers of Selb, Grandfather owned a motor car, a dark blue Opel sedan, and despite my constant car sickness he loved taking me for drives all around Upper Franconia and Saxony. My parents did not approve. They preferred taking me on their bus trips to Czechoslovakia, to Asch, Eger and Franzensbad. In those places they could still enjoy Austrian style hospitality and cheap shopping, as the Czech crown was only worth thirteen German pence.

As my parents loved nature, we went for long hikes into the woods along the border, collected mushrooms, blackberries and cranberries and usually visited one of the cosy pubs in the woods. On one of those outings we had a terrible experience. My father was arrested by a Czech border guard. His crime had been to inadvertently take photos on Czech territory. The guard took us to the Czech Customs Office where my father was severely reprimanded and his box camera confiscated.

In those years Europe was full of border markings. Everywhere in the woods one could find big grey stone blocks which carried the inscription *Bohmisch-Bayerische Landesgrenze* (Bohemian-Bavarian Border) with a crown underneath it. These were the first words I learnt to read. Despite this unpleasant experience those hikes in the woods counted as some of my happiest childhood memories.

Although I often felt closer to my father, I understood early what an exceptional woman my mother was. She was the most noble, gentle and warm-hearted woman I have ever met, and I thank God that I had such a wonderful mother. On old photos she looks like a doll. Her figure was small and dainty and her pretty face was surrounded by auburn ringlets. Yet her most beautiful feature were her big blue eyes, which always smiled and radiated love and good will.

According to the registrar's archives Georgina Katharina Fluegel had been born a few months too early. Therefore there was no wedding photo of her parents because the unfortunate bride was not allowed to wear a white wedding dress nor a bridal veil. Hans Fluegel, who was young and ambitious, had married her reluctantly, as he had hoped for a richer marriage. *Fraulein* Jette was the daughter of a tailor at Marktleuthen. She had been brought up to become a good housewife, but was much too homespun for her ambitious husband.

Shortly before the First World War, when Rosenthal and Hutschenreuther had built their factories in the north of Selb, my Grandfather had bought the Hotel Zum Nordbahnhof at the corner of Ascher *Strasse* and Schoenwalder *Strasse*. He had taken up a hefty mortgage from the brewery Rauh & Ploss, and this pub in the middle of the workmen's quarters turned out to be a brilliant enterprise. His wife and his daughters managed it without pay, and he was free to follow other plans.

One of my earliest childhood memories was Grandfather leaving on his motorbike to work at Hutschenreuther's factory. Mother has told me that he worked as a *Dreher*, (a porcelain turner working on a potter's wheel) in order to learn about the secrets of china production. On reflection, he probably needed the money to pay his debts. Amongst

other enterprises he had opened the first cinema at Selb, the picture theatre Olympia, showing each night the most sensational silent movies. It once happened that Jette Fluegel's mother, old Frau Susanne Vates took her two granddaughters Gorchina and Frieda to a show. At first she was very impressed by the film, but at the start of the passionate love scenes with their hot kisses she was shocked. She covered the children's eyes with both hands and said: "*Leut', des is a ja Schweinerei. Des sollt' verboten sein.*" (People, this is obscene. This should be prohibited). Clearly, she did not think much of her son-in-law's cultural enterprise.

After a few years there was a new arrival in the Fluegel family, Marie, a difficult child who at the age of three still demanded to be breastfed. As to the father, he did not believe that Marie was his child. How could a man like himself produce three girls in a row, when his mother bore twenty sons? It was clear to him that his wife must have betrayed him with some other fellow. Poor Jette! How would she, as a businesswoman, hotel manageress and mother of two, have found the time for romances? But Hans Fluegel stuck to his accusations, because they allowed him his own escapades. As the son of a Count he thought himself a man of the world and could afford a number of expensive mistresses. In German Men's Clubs they have a saying: "A decent woman dies at forty." And Jette Fluegel was a decent woman. On a Sunday afternoon while having coffee with her daughters and playing with her grandchild (that was me) she suddenly felt unwell. She laid down on the sofa and was dead within minutes. Heart failure!

The daughters Gorchina and Frieda were devastated. Hans Fluegel too considered himself a mourning widower. It was December and the soil of the cemetery was frozen hard. No matter. Hans Fluegel engaged a team of grave diggers who had to dig a family vault within a few days. At the funeral he held a larmoyant eulogy at which he declared to have lost "his best mate".

A year after my grandmother's death, Grandfather married again. Elise Kronester was his daughter Frieda's school friend. She was a pretty young woman and because of her youth I never called her

Grandmother but always *Tante* Lies (Aunty Lisa). She was the daughter of a factory owner in the region and had enjoyed an excellent education. She had a driver's licence, which was a rarity in those years even for men. She played tennis, she trained dogs and knew how to handle a hunting rifle. I accompanied her on her daily walk with Grandfather's retrievers Senta and Flora and she was always very nice to me.

## CHAPTER 3

# CHILDHOOD



My native town, Selb, derives its name from Latin *silva*, meaning forest, and it refers to the endless woodlands of Bohemia, to which it originally belonged. Legend has it that the Empress Maria Theresia, while hunting there with her entourage, had been caught in a storm. She had found refuge there in a hunting box belonging to the Forster family. The Forsters' coat of arms, which consists of two pairs of antlers with a blue, red and white quartered shield, is still the town's crest to this day. Regrettably, the proud stags of the region have long since disappeared.

Another local but unverified legend handed down tells how Maria Theresia's son, the Emperor Joseph II, had lost the six shires of the Sechsaemterland (the Six Shires' Country) at the gambling table to the Marquis of Ansbach-Bayreuth. The Emperor had never found it necessary to reacquire them for his Kingdom of Bohemia and they remained with the little principality until 1815. They were then incorporated into the newly founded Kingdom of Bavaria, as a thank you gift from France for Bavaria's alliance with Napoleon.

The people of this region were desperately poor, practising charcoal burning and cottage industries such as weaving and lace making. They grew oats, barley, and later, thanks to Sir Francis Drake's new discovery, they survived on potatoes like the Irish.

In his travelling book about Franconia, Prince Franz von Sayn-Wittgenstein describes the beauty of the *Fichtelgebirge*, the Spruce Mountains, with their rolling hills and endless woods. My father could not see this beauty. No matter how often my mother pointed it out to him, for him this region was always the "Bavarian Siberia", the place of his lifelong exile from South Tyrol.

After the Great War Selb had about 14,000 inhabitants, who were divided into two classes: the wealthier ones were the landowning farming burghers who were Lutherans. They were largely settled in

the south of the township between the Town Hall and the little brook called Selb Bach, where the local women still did their laundry in running water. Then there were the factory workers who lived to the north, in the tenant flats around the porcelain factories of Hutschenreuther and Philip Rosenthal. These people had originally come from across the Czech border and were either good Catholics or fanatical Communists. Their working day lasted from 7.00am to 7.00pm with two hours break for lunch at noon. They were hard working artisans and the factory owners knew their worth. They provided them with amenities which at that time were still unheard of in the industrialised world. The women were offered nurseries for their preschool children. There was also a crèche attached to the factory, where mothers could nurse their babies every three hours. Families were given small gardening plots where they could grow their own vegetables. There was a Health Service where workers were checked regularly for lung diseases and if they suffered from tuberculosis or dust on the lungs, they were sent to a factory owned clinic at Berchtesgaden in the Bavarian Alps to recuperate. Apart from a state-of-the-art crematorium, Selb had probably the best school for ceramicists in Germany, as well as the lower grades of a *Realschule* or technical school. Yet there was no provision for a girls' school nor any preparation for the University entrance examination.

The factories were overshadowed by the high smokestacks for the huge kilns. They belched forth clouds of black smoke which often made the air unbreathable. Despite this the people of Selb were pleased when the kilns were smoking, because that meant employment and food for their families. The factory workers, or *Porzliners* as they were called, were very different from the norm. They looked down upon the local burghers and were proud of their product, porcelain, "the white gold". The workers' communist ideas also struck fear into the burghers; once they had kidnapped the Catholic parish priest and forced him to carry the red flag in front of their May procession.

It was a period of downturn for German industry. The economy deteriorated rapidly during the 1920s. Factories became uneconomically

viable and were forced to close down and many of those proud specialists lost their jobs. It was a sorry sight to see so many factories empty and with cold kilns and broken windows.

Our neighbour, Herr Schmidt, who suffered from tuberculosis, was in constant radio contact with his communist comrades in Czechoslovakia. The workers were planning a revolution and the citizens were afraid. Once, while playing as usual on the big slag heap of the Hutschenreuther factory I discovered a cache of ammunition. Despite my youth I knew what I had found, because it looked exactly like the bullets which Grandfather used in his hunting rifle. I told him about my discovery, and he informed the police. At the police station they showed him a blacklist with the names of the people who were to be liquidated at the start of the revolution. Grandfather's name, Hans Fluegel, had pride of place on it.

I was perhaps four years of age when I accompanied my mother to the cemetery, where she tended Grandmother's grave. While I was playing with the watering cans she started to chat with a neighbour. A certain word kept recurring in their conversation that frightened me. This word was *Buergerkrieg*, meaning Civil War. I had heard it repeated many times. Little though I was, it conjured up in me images of street fights, burning houses and random executions. My mother was frightened, and I became frightened too, gripped by a vague fear which remained with me for many years.

My mother was envied by other women, because her husband was their idol. Good looking and endowed with Austrian charm my father was quite pleased with this adulation. It never occurred to him that his young wife may resent it. Furthermore, Gina was very dependent on other people's good will and the slightest criticism upset her deeply. Once one of her friends remarked: "It was easy for you to keep house with your father's money. It remains to be seen how you will be able to manage with an employee's meagre salary." From that day on she resolved to live frugally, to forgo every little joy, and to save as much as possible. She was dreaming of a house for her family and she would earn money selling baby clothes. Yet my father

would not allow it. "My wife is not a shop keeper," he said, ignoring her dearest wish and her business potential.

During those early years of my childhood I have memories of making my parents happy. Perhaps I would also have made Grandfather happy, if only I had been a boy. I was not even as pretty a child as his daughters had been. Little girls were expected to be pretty and always smiling. Fortunately, my father did not share this view. His view on life was in keeping with his melancholy demeanour. He saw me as a crying baby rather than a little angel. Another disappointment for my mother was his refusal to celebrate family birthdays: "What is there to celebrate if one enters this sad world?" he said. Throughout her marriage my mother tried to bring a little sunshine into his life. It was in vain.

On the wall of our lounge room there was a photo which showed me as a baby, watched over by my mother, her sister Aunt Frieda and my maternal grandmother, Jette Fluegel nee Vates. Jette still looked so young that everybody took her for one of her daughters. Whenever I looked at the picture the three women appeared to me like good fairies. Fifty years later I visited Aunt Frieda's daughter Erica in Brisbane and slept in the room which had been Aunt Frieda's. During my first night there I had a strange dream. I was walking in a misty country lane when I met three elderly ladies in grey garments coming towards me. The women seemed very pleased to see me and said: "Never fear, darling. We shall always look after you." When I awoke I was filled with a sense of boundless energy and a feeling that there was nothing I could not do, a strength which stayed with me for several days and a strong sense that I would continue to enjoy a lucky, well protected life.

All of my childhood photos show me with a very serious mien. Indeed, there was little to smile about. The sombre atmosphere of the 1920s, the general feeling of hopelessness and impending disaster in post war Germany was all pervading and may have filled me subconsciously with dark forebodings. I knew nothing about the lost war, the Treaty of Versailles, which some historians consider contained some harsh conditions, and the deteriorating economy.

Yet I did feel the despondency, the hopelessness and the desperate poverty all around. In our region, Upper Franconia, most people were very poor. A never ending stream of beggars came to our door and my mother gave at least a few pennies to each of them. When she ran out of money, she would always give them a bowl of soup and a slice of bread. Old clothes and shoes she gave to Sister Babette, a Lutheran deaconess, to be taken to needy families.

One experience still vividly remains with me. On arriving home after one of our hikes in the woods, a travelling salesman was waiting for us at the door. He had waited there for hours in the hope to sell a Hoover vacuum cleaner. My parents would have loved to buy one, but in that month my father had just sent some money home to his mother and he was short of cash. The poor salesman was broken hearted and bitterly disappointed. I can still see him turning sadly, and as he left, he sighed: "*Ach, es is a Traurigkeit!*" (Ugh, it is such a sadness!) Everything was a *Traurigkeit* in those years, and the word *traurig* (I pronounced it "*daulich*") became prominent in my early vocabulary. I told my mother that I was *daulich* when I wanted to be hugged by her. But she did not hug me very often, fearing to spoil me. Her main concern was my father, his depression and nostalgia for South Tyrol. She inspired him to engage in all kinds of artistic activities, including painting on silk in the Chinese style and modelling animal figurines, always in the hope that he might find another sponsor in a better environment. But sponsors were hard to find in those years. My father subscribed to the best known art magazines and bought art books of every genre. Besides my mother and me, he also made portraits of distinguished citizens in porcelain. Once he created a flying eagle which he offered as a porcelain logo to the Junker Works, a large aircraft and aircraft engine manufacturer. But the PR man of the famous factory found the preliminary plaster cast "too naturalistic" and declined to buy it. In disgust my father smashed it to pieces and I was heartbroken. Together with a friend, he built a little radio and patiently explained to me how it worked. I did not understand a word of it, but never tired of listening to his deep warm voice with his

Tyrolean accent. His friend was the son of a German soldier in formerly German South West Africa and had an African mother. He joined the Nazi Party in the hope that it would bring about the restitution of the former German colonies in Africa, but in this fervent hope he ignored Hitler's racist ideology. Classified as a *Negermischling* (a nigger half cast) he was one of his first victims to disappear in a Dachau Concentration Camp.

These were some of my first childhood impressions and they stayed with me for the rest of my life.

My mother tried to shield me as much as possible from some of the bleakness of the outside world, and she also knew how to create a warm nest for me, a place where I could grow up happily. Once a year, during the short weeks of my father's leave, we travelled to his homeland, to the South Tyrol, the land south of the Alps, which seemed like paradise compared to Selb.

It was at the old Austrian merchant city of Bozen, that I learnt that life could also be happy, rich and beautiful. Yet even in that Garden of Eden dark clouds were gathering.

For my father, the fact that South Tyrol was now occupied by Italy was an absolute disaster. As soon as I was capable of understanding he repeatedly told me about the tragedy of his homeland, to make sure that I would never forget it. From my very early childhood he took me to Bozen during his leave and showed me proudly to all his relatives and friends. My very first impressions of the alpine world were the walls of the Wild Kaiser massive, clearly visible from the train at the border between Germany and Austria. Subsequent impressions of the unforgettable panorama of the Rosengarten massive in the Dolomites, which dominated the eastern view of Bozen like a huge castle, accompanied my whole childhood. Like my father, I never lost my love for the mountains and even in Australia I remained faithful to them.

In his travel book about Franconia, Prince Franz von Sayn-Wittgenstein describes the romantic beauty of Upper Franconia, the land of my birth, at great length. My father could not see it. No matter

how much my mother loved the beauty of the woodland hills, for him they were the “Bavarian Siberia”, the region of his lifelong exile from South Tyrol.

My early journeys to South Tyrol proved educational in every respect. For a start I had to learn about the prestige of the Wieser family at Bozen. My grandmother, the widow Maria Wieser nee Danay, a small, dainty old lady, was the undisputed matriarch of the family. She had to be addressed with the German polite form of *Sie* and only I, her only grandchild, was allowed to address her with the familiar *Du*. She was the Frau Mutter, who bore eleven children, and had lost eight of them through either sickness, or during the war (or afterwards due to injuries sustained) and to a catastrophic flood. My father and his two sisters Clara and Resi were her only surviving children, and as these aunts were both childless, they spoiled me more than was good for me.

Bozen had always been a rich merchant city, situated at the confluence of three rivers and surrounded by rich orchards and vineyards. With its mild climate and scenic beauty South Tyrol was a tourist attraction, the land of *Rosen, Reben und Ruinen*, that is “of roses, vineyards and ruined castles”. From earliest childhood I had absorbed its beauty. Compared with the wilderness of the Franconian spruce forests, the Fichtelgebirge, the two regions could not be more different. My poor mother, who loved her homeland just as much as my father loved South Tyrol, suffered under my preference. So it happened that I became the centre of a tug of war between both my parents, a competition which influenced my childhood and teen years, had it not been for certain political events which were to change our whole later life.

My mother was aware of Vati’s nostalgia for South Tyrol. She inspired him with other artistic activities in the hope that perhaps he would find another ally and mentor besides Philipp Rosenthal. But mentors were in scarce supply in those years. Vati created portraits of wealthy citizens. He painted on silk in the Chinese manner which he loved. He bought expensive art books and tried to produce animal statuettes in china. He also subscribed to art magazines and studied

advertisements for work or commissions.

When I was five years old Mutti thought that the time had come to enlist me for school. I had heard terrible stories from grownups about their school time. The large building of the Luitpoldschule scared me. There was to be no avoiding it - *Mutti* had firmly decided that I should start school at Easter 1929.