

My Trip to Europe, Part 2

By Andre Jordheim

Maybe the fact of having read of these things and having some prior knowledge worked the other way and made the experience that much more intense. All I know is I never want to go to another concentration camp again. I've seen it twice now. That's enough, thank you. It's the most tangibly evil thing I've ever encountered in my life.

Anyway, on to happier things. We headed for Poland and stayed, on the way, at a B & B north of Berlin and had a couple beers at the little Gasthaus down the street and ate one of the most wonderful meals I've ever eaten in my life. I'm not a person who cares much about what I eat, whether it's "good" or not, but every once in a while a meal comes along that is so good that it even gets MY attention. This was one of those meals. I'd rate it up there in the top five of my whole life. Just a little Kuhsheiss Dorf out in the country, too. (That's colloquial meaning "cowshit town," like we might call "bumfuck" or something.)

Well, then it was on to Poland. At the border was a five-mile backup of semis alongside the road. Germany doesn't allow semis on the road on weekends. We arrived at the border on Sunday. Sunday night at 10:00 is when they open 'er up. As well as the five-mile backup, there were three lots on that side that held around 200 trucks, judging from what I know of truckstops over here.

We arrived in Poland in the afternoon and had some coffee with the people we would be spending most of our time with, and then checked into our hotel down the street. Marek speaks good English. He taught over here at NDSU for a while. That's how Mom and Dad got to know him. I learned a few words and phrases of Polish. Just stuff like "please" and "thank you," and "good morning." "good night," "good evening," and "excuse me, I don't speak Polish." It was very good that Marek spoke English though. Not many people in Poland speak very much English, and how far can you get by saying "Hi there. I don't speak Polish"? Sort of ends the conversation in a hurry. (It's "Przepraszam. Nie mowie po Polsku." by the way. I'm not going to try to explain how it's pronounced in print.)

Anyway, the next morning we went to the suburb of Gdansk called "Neufahrwasser," or "Nowy Port" in Polish (we'd call it Newport), that had been my Mom's home town from birth in 1931 till the war was over and the Russians took over in '45, when she was 14. She was there on Sept 1, '39, not far from the Westerplatte when a ship named the Schleswig-Holstein launched the bombs that kicked off WW number two. Right at her apartment building. (Among other targets of course).

She told me all my life though that the worst was when the Russians came. My Grandma had it figured that she and my Mom and my aunt (just kids)

were going to kill themselves in the gas stove at home when the Russians were on the way, but the German defenses were collapsing too quickly. Gdansk is not really that far from Berlin. It was the last days of the war. It happened too fast. There wasn't time for the suicide. The Russians kicked all the Germans out of their homes. Just came in and said get the hell out, and made it physically, tangibly apparent that they meant it.

Oh, I don't know. There's a hell of a story in my Mom's childhood. If I don't get off the subject I might end up finally writing my first book. The story tells itself. If I chose the precise words in which to tell it, it would be a page-turner.

In Neufahrwasser we met up with one of Mom's little girlie friends back sixty, seventy years ago and walked the old neighborhood. Me and Dad sort of hung back a couple paces from those two and let them be 10 again, soaking in the comments they made along the way, being they spoke in German. I think Mom and Ulla enjoyed themselves

I'm lucky I was along because Mom said she doesn't ever want to go back. She remembers it when it was a typical "German" neighborhood with flower boxes in every window and manicured lawns and streets and sidewalks actually swept with a broom, like we saw in the small towns of the former West Germany. One thing you have to say about Germans, they like their flowers and lawns. And everything spotlessly clean.

Now Neufahrwasser is a run-down slum. All of the buildings are dirty and peeling and falling apart. Mom's old childhood friend has three locks on her outside door and another heavy steel door with two locks behind that. We were told several times not to be there at night. Seeing that neighborhood was sort of a graphic demonstration of the results of communism for 45 years. It wasn't dangerous during that time, of course. Only decaying. That's one thing about totalitarian systems. It became dangerous and crime-ridden since the fall of communism. Again I was glad Mom got under the fence and made it to the West in '46.

I think the only reason Mom went this time was to show me and tell of how it used to be before '39, 'cause she's been back several times since the first time in '73. It was very much worth it to see things that I had heard of all my life. I could imagine the pictures Mom painted for me. Sometimes a word is worth more than a thousandth of a picture.

You know? It's a real hard sensation to describe, but one of the things I felt was a sort of mental sigh. Being there, with Mom, sort of completed something for me. I can't describe what. I'm sure glad I got the chance to do this, before it's too late. I think all of us have things on our "to do" list that we put in the someday category. This was one of mine. Like I said, I'm sure glad this one happened.

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