

2 Back then

Back then! I stepped into the world. Surrounded by my family. My sister Leni. My mother and my father. My grandma Juli-Oma and my grandpa Juri-Ota. Two horses, a cow and a calf. And a sow with twelve piglets. Chickens and pigeons, ducks and geese. Two swallow's nests under the eaves and lots of sparrows in the yard. A cat, a dog and a goat. And rabbits. And guinea fowls. Because they were so beautiful. The sheep were with the shepherd on the fields. And countless mice in the woodshed and sometimes rats in the pig stall. And all the way back in the yard, where the garden began, there was a stork's nest with two storks on a big, crooked willow tree. They came there regularly. In spring. When it was getting warmer. As long as I can remember. From Africa. They said.

We lived in a corner house. At Dreibrunnen-Gasse and Lothringer-Gasse. In Sacklas. Săcălaz. House number 177. It was built in 1908. My grandpa Juri-Ota bought it in 1926. He had come to the village with a grey horse five years earlier. The grey horse was dragging a carriage. In the carriage, there was a bed with my grandmother Julianna Dassinger from Darova. He had met her in Lenauheim. Or Tschadat, as my grandpa Juri-Ota used to call it. They had both worked there at Doctor Willi's. In the hard postwar years. World War I had just ended.

You could only get to Lothringer-Gasse through the rear exit. I used it when I had to run off quickly. Through the „Hinkelsloch“. The exit for the chickens. „Staub“ was my nickname. „Staubs Juri's“, to be precise. Later I got my own nickname. „Willi-Walli“. Made sense, somehow. The main entrance was at „Dreibrunnen-Gasse“. That was my street. Behind it was the Kanalschanz. A water ditch. Then came the fields. That was my hood.

I was born in Litzeborjergass, or Luxemburger-Gasse, not far from the railway station. In my maternal grandparent's house. That's where I spent the first six months of my life. I don't remember any of that, of course. But I was told so. Later I often visited them. The most beautiful thing about the house was the tiled stove. You could walk all around it. And you could put tiles in it. I can still feel them on my feet today. Like a hottie. Besides that it was rather boring.

My grandpa Ruff-Ota was very strict. Fortunately, he wasn't home most of the time. Too many people needed a tiled stove. He built them. I wasn't a lot of use to my aunt Tante-Hilde, my mother's younger sister. Only when I had to bring messages to her boyfriend Peter. My grandma Ruff-Oma always filled my pockets with apples before I left. „Those are not for the „Refuschatten“, not for the refugees“, she told me. By the time I arrived at home, I had none left.

The way to Dreibrunnen-Gasse was very long. So I always visited my relatives on the way. And Keglersch Wes Kathi. I always counted her among our relatives. I could never grasp the thing with our kin, anyway. I had the feeling that the whole village was related to each other. We were surrounded by relatives. You could go there. Often through the gardens. You just visited their house. Just like Linkse-Pat. He entered, walked around and left. Without much talk. That's how I did it as well. At Kuppi's place. I went inside. Climbed the mulberry tree

and left again. Kuppi Michael was too tall for me. Mohrsch-God would give me sweets from the city. From Kandia. The sweets shop. She had a market stall in the city. She dealt with milk and cream! Then I was gone. I checked if everyone was at home at Linkse-God and Linkse Peter's place, my other godfather. Then I left through the gardens.

The summers were hot and the winters cold. The harvest was in autumn, the world came to life in spring. The city was only a few miles away. Temeswar. Timișoara. To get there, you had to bite through the chains. That's what they told the kids when they wanted to go to the city. In the city you could get Polar, Pariser and Citro. Icecreams, sausages and soft drinks.

But I didn't want to bite through chains. I wanted a pocket knife. A flick knife. Fuhrsch Peter had one. He lived on Hauptgasse, the mainstreet and was three years older than me. His father showed me the seeds in the attic. Seeds for flick knives. You had to sow them on the field and harvest in autumn. It didn't work for me. At that point I retired from farming.

Around that time the last horses and cows vanished from the house. My grandfather was slowly retiring. My father came in on the tractor. But usually, he was riding his bicycle. He was suntanned. Only on Sundays he was on foot. To play cards. They rarerly played. The cards were only their reason discussion starter. For long, endless debates. He always had a good hand.

But that was already a lot later.

Glossary

Leni – Pless Magdalena, maiden name Wilhelm, my sister, four years older than me, born in 1950

My mother – Wilhelm Barbara, maiden name, born in 1928

My father – Wilhelm Georg, nickname: Staub Juri, born in 1926

Juli-Oma – Wilhelm Julianna, maiden name Dassinger, my paternal grandmother, born in 1899

Juri-Ota – Wilhelm Georg, my paternal grandfather, born in 1900

Ota – grandfather

Hambar – elevated wooden shed to dry corn cobs

Dreibrunnen-Gasse – street in Sackelhausen at the edge of the village where I lived

Lothringer-Gasse – street in Sackelhausen at the corner with Dreibrunnen-Gasse

Sacklas/Săcălaz – my native village; Sacklas (Banat Swabian dialect), Săcălaz (Romanian), Sackelhausen (German), Szakálháza (Hungarian); former German village in the Romanian region of Banat, located 6 miles from Temeswar/Timișoara

Temeswar/Timișoara – town in the western part of Romania, capital of the Banat region, 6 miles from Sacklas/Săcălaz

Banat – situated mainly in the western part of Romania, where Romanian, Hungarian, German people and a few more nationalities live since centuries together; parts of Banat are nowadays as well in the eastern region of Hungary and Serbia

Darova – former German village in the Romanian region of Banat, located 40 miles east from Temeswar/Timișoara

Luxemburger-Gasse – street in Sackelhausen near the railway station, where my maternal grandparents lived

Lenauheim – former German village in the Romanian region of Banat, until 1926 called Tschadat (German), Csatád (Hungarian)

Doktor Willi – familiar customer from Lenauheim

Kanalschanz – goit, water ditch, near Dreibrunnen-Gasse

Staub – nickname of my family, the Wilhelm family

Litzeborjergass – Luxemburger-Gasse

Willi Walli – my nickname, derived from my name Wilhelm Walter, born in 1954

Ruff-Ota – Ruff Jakob, maternal grandfather, born in 1904

Tante-Hilde – aunt Hilde; Glatt Hilde, maiden name Ruff, my mother's sister, born in 1941

Peter – Glatt Peter, later husband of my aunt Hilde, born in 1941

Ruff-Oma – Ruff Anna-Maria, maiden name Berenz, my maternal grandmother, born in 1907

Refuschatten – refugees from other parts of Romania

Keglersch Wess Kathi – Wiener Katharina, maiden name Kegler, sister of Wilhelm Margaretha, wife of my uncle Wilhelm Jakob, born in 1920

Wess – title of an older woman

Linkse-Pat – Reinbold Michael, a relative, born in 1887

Pat – initially godfather

Kuppis – Koppi and Mohr family

Mohrsch-God – Koppi Barbara, maiden name Mohr, relative, born in 1917

God – initially godmother

Linkse-God – Messmer Katharina, maiden name Reinbold, relative, born in 1917

Linkse Peter – Messmer Peter, my godfather, born in 1939

Polar – Romanian type of ice cream

Pariser – Austrian type of sausages

Citro – Romanian type of lemon softdrink

Fuhrsch Peter – Tautzenberger Peter, a neighbor, born in 1951

Haupt-Gasse – mainstreet in Sackelhausen