

In My Own Words ...

Next Time...

(Lunch at the Guggenheim)



Like bees to a hive, Germans are attracted to Frank Lloyd Wright's famous conch shell structure known as the Guggenheim Museum. So much so, that besides English, German is the most predominant language spoken there. I suppose, this little-known fact has something to do with their Bauhaus tradition, that international modern design school which grew out of Germany in the early twentieth century.

Another little-known fact about the Guggenheim is: it gets crowded on Mondays because that is the day the Met is closed. And the third, and possibly the least known fact about this institution, is that if you have to go to the bathroom there, you always have to stand on a long line because in stark contrast to the Museum's futuristic design, it only offers one bathroom and, to make matters worse, it can only be used by one person at a time. But, besides these three little known facts, which do not appear in any guidebooks, the Guggenheim Museum has a small, and excellent, cafe.



One Monday, while standing at the salad bar, I heard a masculine German voice say: "Er ist jüdisch." I had not heard that word come out of a German throat for fifty years. I turned to look at the speaker, who was a young man pointing at Solomon Guggenheim's photograph on the wall.

"No! He is not 'jüdisch,'" I strongly objected inside myself. He is Jewish. Mr. Guggenheim is Jewish. He is not 'jüdisch.' "But look at him," a more reasonable self suggested, "How old do you think this German is? Twenty-five maybe? He wasn't even born then! Besides, what other word could he have used? If he speaks German, that's the word for ..."

"No! Don't say it. I cannot bear to hear that German word. It is annihilating. Mr. Guggenheim is not 'jüdisch.'"



Another Monday. Another lunch.

The Museum Cafe is crowded and I am carrying my tray searching for a seat. A blonde young man, seated at a table by himself, motions for me to sit down. He explains in halting English that he is waiting for a friend, but there would be room for me too. He gives me a friendly smile and then continues to read his brochure. I thank him and begin to eat. Not so soon, his friend arrives—I think I know what has detained him—with two Japanese rice bowls from which both men begin to eat with chopsticks.

Well, I say to myself, that's unusual. Two Germans confidently eating rice and grilled vegetables with chopsticks. Fifty years ago, when I grew up in Germany, nobody had even seen chopsticks, which accounts for the fact that I still use a fork.

"Was ist das Englische Wort für Serviette?" (What is the English word for napkin) I now hear the young man ask his friend, who simply points to the rear wall indicating that "over there" he could find napkins and anything else he might need without necessitating an English lesson.

When the young man returns with his napkin and is seated again between his friend and me, I overhear him speak about having been charged \$3.00 for the bottle of water which was on his tray. Because he spoke about it

at length, I assumed that he had only wanted a glass of water but his deficiency in English cost him \$3.00. A feeling of empathy welled up. I understood only too well how it is when one is compromised into having to buy an expensive bottle of mineral water when all one wanted was a glass of water from the tap. Besides, my civic pride wanted to show that not everything costs something in New York. One could have a drink of water in a public building for free. Surely there was at least a drinking fountain somewhere. And I began to look around the room for a bus boy. When I saw him, I motioned him to come to the table and proceeded to tell him, *sotto voce*, that the young man seated next to me does not speak much English. Could he have gotten a drink of water in the Museum without having to pay for it?

"Si, si," said the ^{PUEBLO VACANT} bus boy. "Tell him that next time he should look for me. And I will go into the kitchen and get him water."

Next time? I knew the likelihood of that was slim. But now I turned to the young man beside me and told him in my best German that I was sorry he had had to pay \$3.00 for water, indicating that there were other ways of getting it. The young man was overjoyed to find that I, the stranger seated next to him, spoke his language. Like an air bubble that had been bobbing in all directions in a carpenter's level, he now found center and came to rest. No more questions about paper napkins or anything else. He could talk in his language and I felt his eagerness to do so.

"But what about the water?" I asked.

"Oh, the water," he said. He did not mind paying the \$3.00 because he liked the shape of the bottle and the color of the glass.

(Ah ha! What did I say about the Germans being hooked on design?) And then he added, "Actually, I should only have paid \$2.50. The cashier had overcharged me."

And now his questions began. Did I live here? Yes I did. Which led to: Did I like it here. Oh yes, I loved living here. Which led to his telling me that he wished he could live here too, but he had heard that apartments were very expensive. Is that true? Yes, that is true. (In retrospect I feel that implied in his question was the unspoken hope that maybe if I knew how to get water from the museum kitchen, I might also know of ways to find reasonable apartments.) And now his next question was inevitable: "How long have you lived here?" An inner alarm went off. If I told him since 1938, he would know I was 'jüdisch.'

"A long time," I finally said.

He let it go, which enabled us to continue. He told me that he could not understand why in this fascinating city there would be people sleeping on the street and especially women. He emphasized that particularly women should not be so demeaned which led to the expression of his belief that women are really stronger than men and should and hopefully will eventually make a big difference in the world. Well, you can imagine that I did not disagree with him on that. And then he said: "On Sunday, I saw a parade. It was a Jewish parade." And what had impressed and pleased him particularly was that there were all kinds of people watching it. "Not only Jews," he said, "but everyone."

And then he noticed that I had begun to cry. He was alarmed. What had he said that brought this on? He had not meant to say anything hurtful. He was so sorry and frantically poked his friend to give him a napkin which he shyly offered me for my tears, while he stood ready to dab them himself if I were to let him.

"Ich bin O.K.," I said, trying to smile. "Ich bin O.K."

And again we were able to resume our conversation until it became time for me to leave. I gathered my belongings and as I pushed my chair away, he said: "Es war so schön zu sprechen." (It was so good to talk).

"It was the water," I replied.

"Ja," he agreed, "es war das Wasser."

With love

Hannelore Hahn

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