

The Flight Home

It was August, 1950, and we had just taken off from Shannon, Ireland, destination Gander, Newfoundland, then New York, and on to Houston, Texas. I was thirteen years old, going back with my parents to where I was born, but going to a country I did not know.

Only yesterday had we left the tiny north German village of Triangel that had been our home all during the war. Triangel is German for triangle, and there was indeed a small triangular park, with a small monument, at the place where three local roads met, or went their separate ways, depending how one looks at it.

I remember the high flying American bombers, with their condensation trails, as they were flying over on the way to bombing Berlin, or wherever they were going. I remember sleeping in the coal cellar, long empty, towards the end of the war, the American troops coming, then the British, the fright of winding up in the Russian, not the American Zone as Germany was divided. I remember the ration cards and hardly having anything, not even textbooks or writing paper. But it was not until many years later that I came to realize just how fortunate we had all been for my parents having picked this most out-of-the-way place when they went back to Germany from Houston in 1938 to retire. World War II of course broke out in 1939 and changed everything, and we were suddenly on the German side, as Germans.

It was just yesterday that we had gotten on the short local train, passed by the house and garden that had kept us safe and apart from all of Hitler's mayhem, looked at it pass into the distance. It was perhaps eighty miles to the Port City of Hamburg on the Elbe River where it joins the North Sea. I remember winding up at a fancy hotel along the water where we spent the night. It was the first time ever that I had stayed overnight anywhere else than in our home.

The next day it was on to the airport, although I do not know how we got there or who took us. Cities are strange places if one lived a simpler, slower life. Hamburg, as I would only learn later, had been swept by a terrible firestorm caused by Allied incendiary bombings. The same had been the fate of all the large German cities such as Dresden, Leipzig, Berlin, and so on.

It was the first airplane I had ever seen up close. I had always been fascinated by airplanes. Perhaps it was the aircraft engines, each on their stand, that had appeared in the woods adjoining our house, just before the end of the war. They must have been hidden there to protect them from Allied bombings. They were bristling with colorful wires and other fascinating things on them. Again, perhaps that was where my interest in aviation started. Perhaps it was that wooden toy, with the wooden propeller, that had been given to me by one of the many refugees that had come to live in our house as eastern Germany was collapsing just ahead of the advancing Russian troops. But, as I have learned later, there does not always have to be a reason, or reason at that. Anyway, I would later in life take flying lessons, come to own a V-tail Beechcraft Bonanza, get an instrument rating, and in general participate in the freedom and benefits of fully being an American.

I do not remember having any luggage with us. As I would only many years later find out from my parents, the slot to come to America had suddenly come up, and they had just two weeks to get everything together. They must have gotten a few things packed, for some stuff showed up via boat a month or so after we had been settled in Houston into a small suburban house. As I would learn later, this was the post-war boom, with all-white suburbs, two parent families with stay-at-home moms, with a single small American car in each driveway.

I do not remember much fuss about getting on the airplane, none of all that security stuff we now take for granted. A ladder was pushed up to the airplane, and we carefully went up the steep ramp, holding on to the handrail for all it was worth. I somehow managed to get a seat next to the small window, just to the rear of the wing. One propeller after another would come to life, only to die in a puff of blue smoke or a big bang. Finally all the engines were going and the thing slowly started going down the runway rumbling and shaking. I knew there had to be a place where that runway stopped. This was the first time that I realized that my life, as well as that of everyone aboard, rested absolutely and totally in someone I did not even know, who did not know me or anybody else. So far I had only been required to trust someone I knew, namely my parents, and they had never let me down. But strangers, that was something new.

It did not sink in to me at the time that we, just like most Germans, had trusted a ship of state to men that had not been worthy. I would only recognize later that all of Germany had been taken for a ride by men doing evil in the name of good.

Looking out from the left window I could see the coastline disappear. All I could see through the small window on the right was ocean. Then the coastline disappeared on the left to the constant roar of the engines.

We were low enough to make out the ships and the waves on what must have been the North Sea. This was before the days of the high flying jets where one gets in from the airport through an expandable walkway, quickly climbs into the stratosphere, and then is squeezed out through another similar tube into the lineup of coke machines and hole-in-the-walls that make up our modern airports, all without ever having seen anything, hoping that one is in fact wherever one hoped one was going to in the first place.

Then we approached land again. I had not looked at a map. In fact, looking back, I do not remember ever looking at a map in school. I can think of good reasons why one would not want to show world maps. They would show just how tiny Germany was compared to the rest of the world, and where things were collapsing.

But this had to be England. I did not know much about England except that we had wound up in the British zone, with the Brits having taken over our house, and all of us kicked out to fend for ourselves. We had moved in with some of the neighbors for a few months, while my mother did housekeeping for the Americans in what had been our own house. Everybody was on their own. There was no authority to take care of us. There was no government other than the barrel of a gun, held by young American GI's, who had just

ordered us out. Thank God, everybody remained as sane as they did under the circumstances. There certainly was no looting. Everybody knew that everybody else did not have anything to steal.

The plane went lower and lower, crossing houses and hedges. There had be a runway ahead, at least so I hoped. Then the runway at Shannon, Ireland, appeared. Back on good old solid land, at least for now.