

CHAPTER VIII

DETTELBACH - MATT'S ROOTS

by

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Dettelbach (Franken, Germany) with river Main

Periodic visits to the Dettelbach relatives showed me much of the place, culture, people and attitudes encompassed in the charm and mystery of the old world medieval city. Past and present.

Where time seems to have stood still. Where ‘Gemütlichkeit’ (leisurely pace) persists to the present. Where tourism has not as yet inundated the atmosphere. Although the water wheels are stilled now (with grains for bread and beer and grapes for Franken wine refined and distilled by modern methods) you nonetheless feel you are walking into another time as you pass through the ‘Brückertor’, gateway to the old walled city. The gateway, where only the brick arch remains, reminiscent of a time when anyone unlucky enough to be out of the city after ten had to spend the night outside the wall, since there was no way to get back in.

The ‘Türmer’ (gatekeeper), who customarily had living quarters over the archway of the “Brückertor”, worked under absolute orders from the Bürgermeister(City major) and he was wholly responsible for the keys. Woe unto him if they should ever fall into the hands of servants, menial laborers, or any undesignated persons.



There was a time to raise the gate. A time to lower it, and all were aware of the rules. The last of the Türmers, Michael Peau, died in 1920. And the last ‘Nachtwächter’ (night watchman), Paul Burkard, grandson of Valentine (eldest brother to great-grandfather Josef), died in 1931. With these two men's passing something of the romantic was lost, according to the town folk. Especially that of the night watch. He'd been something of an institution. For as he'd made his rounds, walking up and down the dark, hilly cobblestone streets, swinging his lantern he'd cried out his rhymed messages, in the Franken dialect through a bull horn immediately following the ‘Rathaus’ (majors hall) clock striking the hour. Translated this poetic, religious creations went something like this:

Hear yee people, and let it be said to you,
Our clock has struck nine.

Nine choirs of angels pray to God,
That he should protect us from sudden death.

At ten o'clock he'd call out the same first two lines adding:

Ten commandments God gave us,
Gave, for us to pay heed.

Then, at eleven, the strophe:

Eleven Apostles remained faithful.
Grant, that here none will defect.

At midnight Nachtwächter Burkard continued his admonishing with only his voice, footsteps and insect sounds disturbing the quiet with dark:

Twelve, that is the end of time.
Man, prepare for your eternity.

His four-line refrain was emitted at one o'clock:

There is only one God in this world,
He shall be the one who prepares our heavenly home.

At two the voice rang out again, ending with:

Two ways man has for himself.
Lord lead me the right way.

Finally at three, before the little town awakened from its short sleep:

Hear yee people, and let it be said to you,
Our clock has struck three.
Three, that is what the Trinity is,
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

With that the night watch retired to his home. The Rathaus clock continued to strike the time and the towns people began to stir for the day's work. Some of which involved going outside the city into the fields, vineyards and tending cattle. But, until such time as the keeper of the keys raised the gate no one could leave. His determination was absolute.



Absolute, except for an occasion when nature foiled him. The story goes that in May of 1551 a violent wind and rain storm had come up during the night, threshing and swelling the Dettelbach (stream). High winds smashed against the gate and wall it was attached to, breaking parts of the wall. After some hours of battering, the appended gate of the Brückertor broke loose. Great gushes of water rushed out. Likewise, some of the towns people. And so the folk from inside the city (and outside) came together for a time - until the wall was repaired and gate reattached.

Parts of that wall, built around the city in 1484 as protection against invaders, remain. Of the fifty-two look out towers, (round and silo-like) originally built and spaced at intervals in conjunction with the wall, many are still standing. Some have been converted into interesting little hide-a-ways. A cousin, Julia Burkard owns one which she uses as an escape haven and for entertaining special guests.

On one of my recent visits to Dettelbach she'd said to me, "Would you like to see my hide-a-way?" Would I! I'd been waiting for this!

"Oh yes for sure!" I'd responded enthusiastically, as she'd lead the way along a stone path, past her court yard (part of her home with a small attached tavern), and up a slight incline to her tower. We'd entered at ground level into the living room. Compactly furnished with antiques and serving pieces it spelled hospitality despite the musty smell of stone and age.

Beaming with pride at my exclamations of wonder and awe! Julia took a bottle of Franken wine from a cabinet at one end of the circular room, filled our glasses, and after a few sips said, "please come on upstairs".

With that I followed her up the highly polished wooden spiral staircase to the top level, the bedroom. A double bed with its green and gold spread, brown toned tapestry on the varnished hard wood floor, and dressing table with matching chair invited Peace and comfort.

I walked to the window. The window, formerly used by the lookout, set in foot-thick walls. As I gazed at the panorama of red-tiled roofs, trees and flowers, it was hard to internalize the why all of this. Turning to Julia, I said, "Tell me, please. Why did they really build these Türme (towers)?"



" Oh yes why...for protection I guess? From these towers they could see all around---in every direction. And shoot any raiders that tried to cross that ditch that's all around the wall and these towers In early days that was much, much deeper and filled with water."

" Oh," I interjected, " you mean where those shrubs and flowers grow in that ditch-like depression, that was once a moat? It came before the wall and the towers then...so later they had three-way protection. Obviously pleased at enlightening me, Julia went on," Yes you are right. They tell me this town was raided and sacked by the Huns as early as 450 after Christ.

Indicating that I now fully understood, and with near-empty wine glasses in hand, we then went gingerly down the spiral stair-case. Seated ourselves at the living room coffee table, where Julia again filled our glasses, and we visited as we sipped.

" Would you like to see the bathroom?" she asked. Looking around for where it could possibly be I asked, " Where is it?"

"Here" she answered , raising a large trap door concealed by a throw rug, exposing a ladder leading to a below-ground-level room. Looking into the opening, then at my empty wine glass, I quickly responded with " No thanks!"

As we'd walked back to her house I asked, " Julia, how did you come by this Tower?"

"I bought it from the city several years ago. But you know they have a law that says you can make the changes, like you saw, but you mustn't change the character of the outside of the Tower."

" Aha...so that's why it looks like any other well kept towers"

As I became further acquainted with Dettelbach, with cousins Frieda and Maria Burkard ushering me around, I learned the huge wine press that still stands in an enclosure, was once part of the market place near the city's center. Here farmers had brought their grapes from the vineyards outside the wall for Franken wine.

A short distance away, Maria had pointed out the town jail with its small iron -barred windows, with the old Pranger (pillory) attached and facing the street.



Dettelbach am Main - Pranger

Pointing at the Pranger, I asked, "Whats that for?" Maria and Frieda took turns explaining that civil authorities had it erected in 1674. It was a place for ridicule and punishment. They'd put the victim, accused of a crime as big as murder or as small as stealing a loaf of bread, on a little stone platform near ground level, his or her head held against the wall with an iron band that locked under the chin. Then passersby were encouraged to jeer, and spit on the hapless victim. This, a prelude to their incarceration in the jail. Shades of Les Miserables, I thought, as we moved along.

" Of course we don't do that anymore," Frieda added quickly, noting my expression " that was a long time ago.

Qf that "long time ago" there were, however, customs they still did hold firmly. While, understandably because of location, grain-fields and general farming are outside of the community, the people still make their homes within the city and go out to work, as it were. Bonneted and aproned hausfraus still scrub the narrow cobblestone streets separating half-timbering and late gothic homes and buildings early Saturday evening preparatory to Sunday - the day of rest and worship. A day when pilgrim would come from far and near to pray and do penance at the 'Wallfahrskirche'.



The Baroque pilgrimage church, known throughout Bavaria as a place of homage and supplication, is, without a doubt, the most beautiful and colorful edifice in Dettelbach. The rose-colored-marble high alter begs comparison. Located at the outskirts of town, where vineyards commonly stood, the church is set on the spot where a late Gothic Pieta on a marker served as a source of reverence and prayer for vineyard workers at the end of the middle ages.

From a book . cousin Armin had given me on my first visit here I'd gleaned something of the history of the Wallfahrtskirche. Early/ and late.

In 1505, according to legend, Nikolaus Lemmerer had been healed instantaneously at the spot where the Pieta stood. Consequently, as word of the miraculous healing spread, the town council erected a small wooden-structured prayer room in close proximity to the statue. In time the local priest reported innumerable instances of healings and answered prayers, prompting the town council to build a small stone chapel, replacing the crude wooden building.

More pilgrims came, among them a list of notables that read like a royal litany:

- William II of Bavaria, in 1591;
- Maria of Austria (mother of Kaiser Ferdinand II) who'd brought a valuable ring as an offering;
- Empress Ann (wife of Kaiser Matthias) who brought a silver lamp offering;
- Ferdinand III, emperor of Hungary and Bohemia made a pilgrimage in 1634.

And many years later, in 1892,

- Prince Ludwig of Bavaria (who became Kaiser Ludwig III), was numbered among the royal personages to visit the shrine.

These prominent pilgrims elevated the reputation of the Wallfahrtskirche, making the name of Dettelbach known throughout the entire empire. Early visits of royalty added impetus to the founding of the pilgrimage church as such in 1626.

Various aspects of the building were defined and added through the years, with three distinct architectural styles interwoven – a Renaissance facade and entrance, early Baroque high alter and inner furnishings, and a late Gothic pulpit. Armin had pointed out these features on my first visit to Dettelbach. Beaming with pride as we'd stood in front of the pulpit, he'd proceeded to tell me Michael Kern carved it out of limestone and alabaster in 1626.



" Who do the figures represent?" I'd asked, entranced by the beauty of the masterpiece, the delicate carving, shiny alabaster, and vivid colors.

" Oh, that's the rooted-spreading tree of Jesse---you know, Jesus' Stammbaum (genealogy). That one," and he'd pointed to one of the figures, " is David." He then proceeded to explain who the other statues represented.

" Armin, please, why do they call it the tree of Jesse?"

" My dear" he'd said fondly, " because Jesse was the father of David. "Do you understand?"

" Yes I do - thanks" I'd responded, marveling at the sheer beauty of it all. Yet, the main attraction of the church apparently doesn't lie in its magnificent architecture and sculpturing, but in its reputation as a place of grace, supplication and indulgences.

Sometimes the numbers of hopeful pilgrims who came from considerable distances presented genuine problems for the town. For instance, in 1613, on the feast of the Virgin's birth, Bishop Julius of Würzburg allowed 4000 pilgrims to enter the area without giving sufficient consideration to their accommodation, physical spiritual. Obvious ensuing problems promoted building more guesthouses for eating and sleeping requirements.

Doubtless the problems provided strong influences on the citizenry to build the nearby monastery in 1620, as a religious school, as well as accommodation for the pilgrims such as housing, confession, communion and other customary religious rites.

In the course of time a brewery, winery, dairy and bakery were added in the huge courtyard for the needs of the priests and as an area distribution center for the poor.

Understandably, the great influx of pilgrims and organized pilgrimages had a tremendous effect on the economic life of the people.

The prolonged and elaborate building program became something of an economic drain. Some folk, however, offset this phenomena to a degree, by renting out rooms in their homes, setting up stands and selling food and wares.

The crunch become especially great after 1717, when the Bishop issued an edict that a plenary indulgence will be granted to all pilgrims provided a minimum of 50,000 visited the shrine. As a consequence of processions from all sections of Northern Bavaria came, steadily increasing until 1870, when a peak of 80,000 was reached.

In later years, for some unknown reason, the numbers steadily declined until in 1960 only 15,000 visited the shrine.

A kind of veteran-pilgrimage revival had taken place in 1955 (twenty years after their 1035 participation when they'd come plead their cause to thank the Virgin Mary for their survival. and to pray for peace. At that time 5000 veterans had participated. Again. five years later. five thousand veterans made the pilgrimage and it was agreed there would be a veteran pilgrimage every five years.

" Do the veterans still make the pilgrimage every five Years? I asked Maria one Sunday morning in 1976, when we'd heard a band playing, and the sound of marching feet on the cobblestone street in front of the house.

" No, there are too few of them now. That's just a little group, doing it on " Later that day we'd revisited the cemetery that adjoins the Wallfahrtskirche. Where Armin sleeps in a flower-decked family plat. Where one grave is on top of the other, with the first going down thirty feet... Armin, victim of that schrapnel in his head

" Maria, tell me, how active is the monastery? How is it today? " I asked as we walked past the huge building in the courtyard.

"Not much, only five or six priests live there. And three families."

"Oh, how different from the old days."

"Yes, different, but still the same, only less and fewer" she said as we walked quietly down the same path the pilgrims take, past the way of the cross, into town and up the slight hill to her home. To her warm, welcoming home. Each preoccupied with memories of Armin and another time.

Yet, despite the overall declining numbers of pilgrims, individuals, families, friends and organized groups still make pilgrimages an important part of their religious life. Scarcely a weekend passes that there aren't some who have walked great distances to come to the church and pray. And during pilgrimage week, which would include August 15, (the feast of The Assumption) the numbers are vastly increased.

On one of my earlier visits I had the opportunity of observing first hand something of the impact this religious custom had on the lives of the people. Instead of going directly to Dettelbach to visit my relatives, my husband Jerry and I had decided to stay in Würzburg at the Hotel Excelsior, where Sharon and I had stayed a few years before. Würzburg, where we'd discovered the bridge with the good saint. Burkard's statue, the church and street named after him, and now I wanted to share these.

" You were right, he was a big wheel in these parts," Jerry observed. " Hmmm, and now you believe it. Some days I'm going to find out if we were relatives too," I said half seriously.

The next day we had driven to Dettelbach in our rented Volkswagen, following the west bank of the Main River which flows through the Steigerwald. As we drove along Jerry said, " Just look at all those grapes growing on the sides of those hills! And some are layered like on steppes! And all of those fruit trees! Amazing.

I could only join in his wonder. Marvel at the sheer indescribable beauty of the winding river, the hillsides of shell limestone covered vineyards and fruit trees, interspersed with fields of barley that would ultimately be fermented into one of Bavaria's favorite beverages - beer.

When we arrived in Dettelbach we discovered we indeed had been wise in obtaining housing in Würzburg for all the guesthouses and rooms in private homes were filled with pilgrims.

After welcoming us wholeheartedly and serving rich Bavarian torte cousin Frieda, (who'd been expecting us) said she was providing housing for four young sisters; Pilgrims, who aged sixteen, fourteen, twelve and ten had walked twenty-eight kilometers that day to pray at the Wallfahrtskirche. They were now in an adjoining room soaking their blistered feet in basins of warm water and preparing for bed.

" Why did those girls walk so far to come here to pray?" I asked in my limited German.

Answering in her impeccable German, (she'd been a teacher)

Frieda said, "Yes this is sad, so sad - their mother has terminal cancer, and the only hope they and their father have left is that maybe a miracle will happen and she'll be cured."

Because they hoped the Virgin would take notice of their penance and accept their votive offering as each one puts a few

Pfennig in the box, and lights a candle they walked here. They'll light one for their father too."

" What more will they be doing tomorrow, is there any kind of planned activity? " I wanted to know.

" If there is a procession, with a priest leading a group in the Rosary as they walk along the way of the cross, they'll probably join it. For sure, they'll pray hard on their knees before the alter for several hours. They'll have lots of faith, and hope strongly the heavenly mother will use her influence with her son, der Christus, to cure their mother of that terrible sickness.

" I see, " I said empathically, as Frieda rose to get the girls more warm water from the sink" her tall slender frame moving with ease- Blond, blue eyed, typically German, with an almost aristocrat bearing, Frieda was the very essence of the cultured Berlin woman.

During her brief absence which she had prefaced with, " Excuse me, please", my thoughts turned to part of a letter written by pioneer Anton Burkard (brother to Josef) to his brother-in-law Kilian Meier at the Steigmühle, just outside Dettelbach.

The written words with their German translation, came back to me like so many images on a movie screen:

November 11, 1853.

... I have a request to make of you. My wife has been sick all of the time since she has been expecting. So, would you please do me a favor and make a votive offering in the Wallfahrtskirche. My wife suffered unspeakable pain during the births of our children. At the birth of our first child I had three physicians in attendance, and it lasted five days before she was able to give birth. The physicians could not find anything wrong with her. Then I discussed this with my brother. At the time he was of the opinion that it would be well for me to write to you that I might have higher hopes. I will send you the money right away to cover the cost.

That evening, after socializing and drinking white wine with Frieda and Maria's family who'd joined us, amid assurances we would return next day, I couldn't help but think of Matt as Jerry and I drove back to Würzburg. And how he would have identified with the Wallfahrtskirche pilgrims.

I remembered the Chapel of the Holy Virgin (commonly known as The Chapel) at Robinsonville, Wisconsin, five miles from our farm in New Franken.

Customarily, on August 15 my brothers, cousins, friends and I walked to the Chapel along the narrow country roads lined with trees, brush, rail and wire fences. Sometimes individually, sometimes in pairs or groups. We combined religious fervor with holiday spirit, depending on our immediate needs and concerns for the afterlife.

Hucksters, food and drink booths, games of chance, socializing, renewing acquaintances—all awaited us on the Chapel grounds. Sometimes, a short distance away, there was dancing at Deterville's hall and tavern—capping the day's activities.

Matt no longer walked to the Chapel after he'd been injured in that sawing accident where he'd gotten too close to the wide belt of the motor that had caught him up, upthrowing him some twenty feet, leaving a broken left arm, cracked ribs and thirteen compound fractures.

He would go by horse and buggy. In later years with his Model T. Ford. He would go and pray, and maybe, just maybe, that leg with the open, running sores, would really heal.

The reins fell loosely as old Dan, the big red work horse, plodded slowly along while Matt drew thoughtfully on his old corncob pipe. Maybe this time there **WOULD** be a miraculous healing for him. Maybe, just maybe, this time...

After he'd left the Chapel he would go to one of the saloons Detervilles or Fricks in the Belgium settlement of nearby Walhain, for a little diversion and companionship, then on home before we kids got to worrying about him. If he'd had too much 'diversion' old Dan always brought him home.

Matt had long told us about the miraculous appearance of the Virgin on August 15, 1858, and the story behind the building of the Chapel--paradoxically a counter art to the Wallfahrtskirche.

Though he knew little (if anything) about that pilgrimage church, he'd urged us to visit the Chapel, earn indulgences for ourselves, and add our appeal to his.

The story goes, (as Matt liked to tell it) three young Belgium girls, Adele Brice, her sister Isabelle and a friend were on their way to mass in Bay Settlement, about eight miles from their home, when all of a sudden, as they walked along the wilderness trail, Adele saw a blinding light between two trees. She screamed and turned pale as a ghost, then fell on her knees and started to pray as the light turned gradually into a beautiful lady, dressed in white with a yellow sash around her waist. The beautiful lady had deep dark eyes and a radiant, kindly smile.

Each time Matt told the story she grew to look more and more like his beloved Lizzie, our deceased mother, confusing brother Clarence and me. In our child minds we weren't quite certain whether he'd been talking about that beautiful lady or our mother.

"Tell us more, what was she like?" we'd said one time.

"Who? what was who like?" he'd responded, apparently surprised at the question.

"You know, our mother."

Realizing he was confusing himself and us as well he'd said, "Oh yes,- I didn't mean her," and went on with the story, as he knew it. 'He must have memorized the presumed words of the lady of the vision for he could quote them verbatim with little variation.

"I am the queen of heaven who prays for the conversion of sinners. Do you the same. Work for the souls of the settlers who are failing in their religious duties and who are letting their children go uneducated."

The implication in his voice that this was true even to date sent little shivers of horror up and down our spines as we looked at him and each other, while voicing low, "Ohooo's."

In later years, from the History of the Belgium Settlement, I learned more about the founding of the Chapel. It seems the two girls with Adele, even though they joined her on their knees in prayer, didn't see or hear anything of the apparition. Consequently they couldn't verify her story.

Nonetheless, Adele insisted the apparition and dialogue word real as she went about preaching, teaching, and persuading throughout the settlement. People were positively amazed at this formerly ignorant, shy, country girl's convictions and powers.

At first the Bishop pooh-poohed the vision as a myth and something of an imposition, even to the extent of excluding Adele from the graces of the church. But she wasn't to be ignored. Word of the vision, her preaching and teaching spread so widely people gathered from all around to worship at the small enclosure the pioneer folk had erected on the spot of the apparition.

Within five years so many people had come to the spot, and there was so much clamor that the church authorities finally gave their blessing. Adele then had free rein to build a larger chapel, a school house, and moderately priced religious boarding school.

It was to this school Matt sent Clarence (for twelve dollars a month) while I went to live with his sister Maggie. After two-and-a-half years we both returned to Matt's House.

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