

Often a smell, a sound or a name will provoke an overpowering nostalgia in me; but if this brings back memories of my childhood, I will quickly try to wipe these from my mind.

Not that I was ever deprived of love, understanding or comfort. As an only child I had rather too much of everything. It was simply an accident of birth, the wrong time, or the wrong race, which made me desire not to remember too much or too often. Having grown up in Germany in the thirties, as a Jewess, does not make for happy memories.

I was made to feel an outcast at a very early age. I was three years old and spent my first day in the kindergarten. A great thrill and experience as I was allowed, for the first time, to mix with all sorts of children. I can still feel the spittle on my face as one of the angelic looking children plastered it there, shouting venomously: "Dirty Jew, you murdered our Jesus". The shock of that terrible accusation, the misery it caused me, lives with me still. After that my nightly prayers begged: "Please God, give me golden curls and blue eyes". My nose was permanently wrinkled from pushing it up with my finger, in the hope of acquiring a tiny, turned-up button for a nose. All Germany displayed posters picturing Jews, hated enemies of the Third Reich; all had huge, beaked noses. I felt sure that, unless I prevented it swiftly, mine would grow just like that.

As I grew older times got harder for the Jews. They lost their jobs; their businesses were closed down, or forcibly taken over by Gentiles. 'Aryanisation', the Nazis called it; a sort of national purification. Those who had always dealt honestly and thus had capital still in Germany, had it confiscated. Most of us became poor. The fear of arrest and transportation to concentration camps was daily with us. Suicide and madness were a commonplace. After years of soul-destroying, spirit-deadening persecution, it was decided that I had to cut my education short. It was better to learn a practical trade; I would have to emigrate and earn my living anywhere I could get an entry. It was the only way out. Although we did not realise it then, it was also a matter of life and death.

Life was very sad, but it was not always so. There are many happy memories of my childhood that I love to recall.

There were the yearly visits, during the summer holidays, to my mother's home, a tiny picturesque village in Hessen. My mother and I hardly spoke to each other during the eight hour journey as we travelled south. We could hardly await the moment when the slow country train would arrive at the tiny station. Swarms of healthy looking relatives awaited us. Huge embraces, tears of joy; then the smell, a mixture of hay, cows, horses, pigs, the tang of barley from the mill near the station and, of course, as in all childhood memories, the sun was always shining. It was their quaint local costumes, their beautiful soft dialect, that completed the magic for me.

The pony and trap were waiting outside the station and we all clambered on, overloading the trap. The poor horse strained at the harness with all its strength and went jogging along, clip clop up the steep, narrow, cobbled street towards my grandparents' lovely old farmhouse. Our luggage followed in the haywagon pulled by oxen. As we slowly made our way we were greeted by friendly calls of "Gruss Gott" by the inhabitants of all the old gabled houses which stood crookedly on either side of the narrow streets.

They all knew us by name, my family having lived in the village for several generations and being greatly respected. This was mainly on account of my grandfather, a village elder and a very wise and pious patriarch. He was a handsome old man, with a long grey beard, eyes that were kind, bright and dark in a manner that never lost its dignity. He terrified me, yet he was always gentle and patient. He and my grandmother greeted us with much affection and ceremony. My grandfather usually blessed us children on arrival and departure, by putting a hand on our head, while murmuring a prayer. This made me feel most uncomfortable, for I never felt I really deserved his blessing.

My grandmother was a mild little woman who peered out at everyone through kindly, myopic, pale-blue eyes. Her belly was permanently extended from having borne her beloved husband thirteen children. She never quite remembered to which of her daughters I belonged. Since, during the holidays, the house swarmed with grandchildren, it was very hard for her to sort us all out.

As she refused to wear glasses, on the grounds that they would damage her eyesight, everything and everybody was just a blur to her. She never said an unkind word, or raised her voice, nor did she ever interfere when her son-in-law, who shared their house, displayed his terrible temper in abusing his wife, her favorite daughter. I hated him; he never went past me without pulling my hair and hissing "gipsy-poodle". He had fiery red hair, and blazing green eyes, so that I took him for the devil.

The village was my fairyland. It was surrounded by gentle green hills and large thick forests. There I found myself in the company of gnomes and fairies, though they may only have been large toadstools and glow-worms. As soon as it got dark, all the little glow-worms performed their ballet, little blue lights suspended in the air. We spent many happy picnics in the mysterious forests, and filled buckets with luscious bilberries. They tasted lovely with milk and sugar, or made into pies.

There was the river, the Fulda, which wound its way through the village, and by its banks the inhabitants washed their laundry. The geese and ducks were led there for their daily paddle, and the children to bathe in its rather murky waters. Into its swiftly flowing waters we drove the horses, riding on their backs whilst they swam, a great thrill. During the week we children had complete freedom. We climbed the many trees and ate their fruits to our hearts' content. We each had a favorite cow or goat, which we were permitted to milk. My daily joy was to collect the still warm eggs, a pleasure which I accompanied by making loud cacklings, an accurate imitation of a laying hen, which was the cause of great amusement to the household. I loved cleaning out the sheds and stables; I adored all the animals and enjoyed grooming them. To this day, much to the disgust of my family, the smell of farm dung fills me with ecstasy.

There was the village goatman, who surely stepped out of a Grimm fairytale. He was small, gnarled, hairy and hunchbacked, a real-life ugly gnome. He was dressed in rags, and since he spent most of his days with the goats, one could smell him coming, even before he blew his horn to summon his friends, the goats. They ran towards him from every house at the sound of his horn, fighting to get near his goat-smelling rags.

They loved him: he gave them freedom, a day of carefree grazing in the hills. He knew them all by name and murmured kindly to them - I don't think he ever spoke to a human being. In the evening he would return, trundling down the road, the goats close behind. They all knew their own houses and sadly entered their sheds. There we were waiting with our own pails to relieve them of their milk. My aunt swore that goatsmilk was the only cure for my pale complexion and puny figure.

Friday was always a very busy day, full of preparation for the coming of the Sabbath, which was celebrated at Sundown. Many loaves were baked, vegetables picked and prepared, and wonderful smells of cooking filled the house. By Sundown we had all assembled in the old dining room, with the beamed ceiling and shiny, uneven floorboards. All clean and dressed in our best clothes, we were ready to greet the Sabbath, the opening of which was marked by all sorts of strange rites, among which was the handing round of a tiny, silver filigree tower, which we all had to smell. It contained strange spices, perhaps the same that the three kings brought to the infant Jesus. Around us were tall candles, in beautiful silver candlesticks.

I never dared ask any questions, for fear of admitting my ignorance. My mother had especially schooled me: never was I to give away the fact that my father was a renegade.

All this time prayers were chanted, and we finished off with a glass of grandma's home-made raisin wine. Having sung a hymn, broken the bread, dipped the latter in salt and taken a bite of it, we could at last begin to enjoy the lovely dinner that followed.

On the Sabbath we slept late, meaning, in that household, until 8 a.m. The men of the house had risen earlier, and were already chanting their morning prayers, wearing all sorts of queer things around their neck and head. Narrow leather belts with boxes - or so they looked to me - were wound round their arms. It was all part of the magic to me, and remained a mystery.

I never really liked the holy Sabbath, not because we went to the tiny Synagogue twice that day, or because we had to wear our best clothes, but because I was always terrified in case I sinned.

It was a sin even to switch on the light. A gentile woman came in every Sabbath to carry, fetch, wash up and do any switching that was necessary.

These idle Sabbaths provoked many forbidden games and chats amongst the children. As the sophisticated city cousin, who came from far-off, wicked Hamburg, I was expected to give all the answers. Proudly but wrongly, I played the role of Know-All. On such a dull, holy Sabbath, I was invited to unravel the mysteries of sex. I knew far less than my country cousins, who had seen animals mating and had helped many calves into the world. Still, I could hardly admit defeat.

I remember finding it all very hard to explain. All I knew, I had found out quite by accident in finding some lurid drawings on the desk of one of my Hamburg cousins. But how was I to enlighten my country cousins with these interesting drawings if we weren't allowed to draw? Writing or drawing is also a sin on the Holy Sabbath. So paper and pencil were taboo. Still, there was the large steamy window, right in front of us, a perfect drawing-board; after all using one's finger could not be as sinful as using a pencil.

Thus one of my pious aunts found us. She gaped at my huge disgusting drawing which covered the whole of the window. Before I knew what was happening, I was dragged by my weeping mother into the august presence of the Patriarch. My grandfather, who never shouted or raised his hand, just looked at me sternly and talked. I can't recall what he said, for I never heard a word. I was trembling with fear and shame, and the blood rushing to my ears made awful buzzing noises in my head. It would have been bad enough on any day of the week, but to behave in such a way on the Sabbath I was banished for two days to a small room in the attic.

As this room was next to the store-room, which contained, among other delicious things, beautiful home-stuffed, home-cured sausages, suspended from the ceiling, I was not unhappy for long. I always did have a passion for sausages. When I refused most of the food which my sad-looking mother brought up for me, it was interpreted as a sign of true repentance. We did not return to my mother's home the following year.