

SPRINGTIME IN GERMANY-Minden & Berlin: The Edible Tea in Minden, Freedom in Berlin

In late December, I received a coy question in the subject field of an e-mail message from the Netmails in Minden: *April 1 in Minden?* Well, it was an invitation to come to Minden to celebrate the Edible Book Tea with a group of senior citizens, who would bake up a storm and make the trip really worthwhile. What followed was the fact that they were raising money for a plane ticket for me, asking about dates, times, and what else I wanted to do in Germany for the rest of the week. It seemed all like a dream—until we finally talked, got faxes back and forth, as well as e-mails—and the ticket really arrived before I left for Rutgers/Camden to install “Women of the Book: Jewish Artists, Jewish Themes”.

The installation at Rutgers went so smoothly, thanks to Nancy Maguire, the chief curator and jill-of-all-trades genius that although it was 6 long days, it was worth it. The opening went well, the 2 hour and 45 minute tour through the show on a very wet night proved to hold my audience, and by Wednesday the 30th, I was ready to get to Newark and get on Lufthansa to Frankfurt and Hannover.

Newark Airport via the AirTrain is a dream—it feels as though you were in a futuristic airport, arriving by a train that runs in the sky to your destination which is glass-enclosed. After taking so many buses to the airport, this truly was a novelty. I checked in and waited, as usual, for Newark is an easy transit portal, not like Los Angeles. (We go through security in Los Angeles via fear and trembling, because it has taken so long in line to arrive at just the TSA security check!) Anyway, I sat down and noticed a group of Chassidic Jews gathering in the next alcove to pray the afternoon prayer, I guessed. Bowing back and forth like dancers choreographed in black moving back and forth, while German citizens were taking pictures of their Lufthansa airplane on their way back home. What a strange and wonderful beginning to a week packed full of activities, adventures and friendships.

Next to me on the plane was Ralph, a 79-year-old widower, tall and stately, a world traveler who worked for Goodrich, Mobil, American Express in West Africa, Bahrain, the United Kingdom. A former Navy Lieutenant Commander, he was going to visit with old colleagues throughout Europe. Our conversations were

interesting and kept the trip quite short. Arriving at 6 a.m. in Frankfurt on 31 March to a silent but smoky airport (they have smoking stations from station to station in the Frankfurt Airport, where three standing-room-only circular tables are available for smokers—little do they realize that their smoke penetrates the air and secondary smoke is tough to take, believe me! The one wonderful thing about Frankfurt is that they whiz you in, welcoming you to Europe without any difficulty. Then you can pick up a cup of coffee, or pick up any paper that your heart desires free of charge to read in the a.m. such as the International Herald Tribune or Financial News or the Wall Street Journal. Just amazing to get free newspapers and sit down and wait with something to do at 6 a.m.

MINDEN

Upon arriving in Hannover, my friend Peter Kuestermann (aka Netmail) was waiting for me with sunshine—glorious warm sunshine. We went to the man-made lake in Hannover and had lunch and he immediately began to take photos with his digital camera. We returned to the railroad station to take the train to Minden, the home of Melitta coffee, a town created by Charlemagne in 800 A.D. Upon arrival, I was whisked off to the five-star hotel where I would be staying for the rest of my Minden stay. I showered and changed and off we went to meet all the people responsible for my being in Germany, besides of course Peter and Angela, my hosts, who certainly know how to work the crowd and the town. I met the travel agent who made it possible for me to have the Lufthansa ticket which would allow me to leave from Berlin back to Newark and eventually Rutgers. I met the doctor (who must have been 6’7” tall who had an exhibit of the covers of Umbrella on his waiting room wall; then I met the photo shop owner who turns historic photos into digital printouts—and he gave me two wonderful photos of this beautiful half-timbered town. Later in the day a coffee in front of the hotel with a look at the beautiful square with wonderful medieval buildings which were part of the heritage of this quiet but busy 80,000-population mecca. We went down to the Church, which is the headquarters of the Buz Art

Center in the Johannis Church, to see the preparations for the "Essbare Bucher" or Edible Book Tea which was to take place on 1 April. Many books had come in, and the elaborate marzipan frostings and ingenious designs led me to believe that this would be a remarkable event. We also stopped at a rubberstamp shop, which also has classes and workshops, and it is so successful that the owner, a young woman, is opening another shop in another part of town.

We ate dinner in the Senior Citizens home, Nussbaum-Haus, where we finally met up with Angela Pahler (the other half of the Netmails), an old friend from when Peter and Angela circled the world delivering mail art to artists throughout the globe and made the Guinness Book of Records, too. We then took a walk to the Old Mill, which is still operating where buckwheat flour is ground in a water-driven stone mill and there is a café, and those buckwheat pancakes were so delicious, remarkably fresh and light that I knew this would be quite a wonderful time.

APRIL FIRST

The morning was glistening, breakfast was abundant as German breakfast always art and it was the best muesli I have ever eaten. Then we walked around the mill to see the green everywhere (spring was beginning to bud) and saw the dragon boats from Macao which are used for races on the river in July). We saw Minden with its half-timbered houses, the details of architecture, Joki places (a famous mail artist who passed away), including his factory where he made art, to an interview at Nussbaum-Haus with Sonia Rudolf of the *Mindener Tageblatt*, who asked many pertinent questions about the Edible Tea, why books?, etc. for the newspaper. We went down to the Senior Center where 42 books had been made of marzipan, pumpernickel and cheese, chocolate and so much more. "Swan Lake" was made of green Jello for the water, cream puffs in the shape of swans with whipped cream in the body of the swans. We also were being videotaped by WDR in Minden for TV that evening, a current events program from Minden, at 7:30. Everyone was coming in with books, looking and asking questions, oohing and aahing. My friends Klaus and Hanni Groh had arrived from Edeweicht with their contribution (a take-off on something Goethe had written about books, but this time Klaus put in something about "edible books"). There was a presentation to me of a big red umbrella which had been used to celebrate the 1200th anniversary of Minden in 2000—they had found this last umbrella to give me—and the 81-year-young woman from the city

who presented the umbrella to me gave a talk about the history of the book as well as the Umbrella Museum in Italy (near Lago Maggiore) which she had visited with her daughter with which she was so impressed. Photos were taken and then coffee was served to go along with eating the books—some of which were hardly touched because of their beauty—and then we retired for an hour of readings from books of prose and poetry about food by the writers of all ages in the community.

Then we went to the great hall, which was decorated with upside down umbrellas hanging from the ceiling, as well as a projection of our edible books having been photographed by Herbert Schmidt on his digital camera and then put online to be linked with the [books2eat](#) website. All 42 books had been shot and transposed to the computer and we were sending them to Beatrice Coron, our webmaster, to be first in line for the Edible Tea events all over the world. I was interviewed in front of this awe-inspiring audience about the event, my history and my impressions of Minden. Then Helmut Anefeld, who was teaching computers to the seniors, and I communicated with New York, probably too early for Beatrice to have the message immediately, to tell her we were sending her the photos of the event.

At the hotel, an ingenious event had been announced, i.e. that I would be "signing umbrellas" for anyone who would bring me umbrellas that evening. And so Angela came with a quiver full of umbrellas which were designated for my signature. She had selected the proper pens which were permanent and non-smudging and I began to "sign umbrellas" for the first time in my life. The hotel manager also presented me with three or four different colored umbrellas to represent the different political parties that meet in the hotel for events, which I signed as well. Angela had also made a rubberstamp in the shape of an umbrella which said that "This Umbrella was signed by Judith A. Hoffberg in Minden, Germany on 1 April 2005. Just amazing! Meanwhile, all of this was being documented by Peter. In addition, the program on TV came on and we all stopped to see our 3 minutes (Warhol wanted us to have 15) on the news broadcast, with voice over me in German. Then we sat down to an amazing banquet at the hotel with all people responsible for the event as well as friends and family. And a good time was had by all!

Of course, this was the week the Pope was very sick—and dying, in fact. So I was sharing headlines with the Pope in the town of Minden. A flea market on Saturday gave me a chance to find a few things for the Umbrella Museum, especially thanks to Angela, who

found one delightful handpainted object, and I found four small Thai handpainted umbrellas. The flea market took place in the plaza in front of the church, and there Peter had street markers set up for all his visiting mail artist friends. The editor of a slick magazine in Minden came to take a photo of my signing my marker saying that I lived 9,528 km. far from Minden. While waiting for the photo, I sat down next to a Cavellini sticker, dear to the hearts of all mail artists, and Peter took a photo. We then went by car with Elsa Deutschendorf, Angela, Peter and I to the mountains around Minden where we took a walk among the spring wild flowers to the foundation of a 1000 A.D. Saxon church which had been discovered by archaeologists, who uncovered not only the foundations but also 3 graves of a mother and two children, and then the city took precautions to protect it by putting a glass covering over the whole site. It was astounding and historic and a great Saturday afternoon, where we went to the local hotel where we had *apfeltarte* and tea, and hoped to see hang-gliding, but there was not enough wind.. What a wonderful afternoon.

That evening, I walked down to the church to attend improvisational theater, and Peter translated for me during the pieces. Then we walked by the Cathedral, where they were preparing the altar—and we kind of knew the Pope must have died but I rushed back to my hotel room to find out that indeed he had passed away that evening. The next morning, the Cathedral was full but not for the Pope, but instead for confirmation by all these little boys and girls in all their finery, with the parents videotaping the mass. The bells rang for a half-hour—morning and afternoon. The four days in Minden gave me four days of the Pope on CNN World—the three days in Berlin gave me three days of the Pope on BBC World. There was no other news—and so the world went.

That afternoon we went to a rebuilt windmill that was fully operational, which ground grain, to a historical tour of the mill by a young man. Then we went to the Westphalian Industrial Museum and Gernheim Glass Works where they was an exhibition of Child Labor, as well as a glass blowing demonstration. A pizza party ended Sunday evening's events with Renata Kruse, the head of the Senior Citizen activities who believed that the Edible Book Tea would be wonderful for the Seniors and show the other centers in Germany that something innovative could produce remarkable results—and in so doing, I understand that in six months the children will be involved in doing an edible book tea in Minden. I

returned to the hotel to pack—saddened by the fact that I would have to leave Minden.

BERLIN

Off to the train station with Peter after breakfast and Christa and Renate came to wave goodbye. I loved the facility in the train station where you can put your suitcase on the ramp at the bottom of the stairs and it goes all the way up to the top to meet you when you climb the stairs—or vice-versa. Trains run on time, wheeled baskets are available to carry your luggage, and the rolling ramp carries your luggage up or down! I ran downstairs and bought an International Herald Tribune in Frankfurt and arrived comfortably in Berlin in a different kind of train station than 1988. It was new, bright and clean and I walked out onto a shimmering city which was bathing in very warm sunshine. It was in the 70s at least—and spring had burgeoned into a warm summery day. I stayed at a studio, where my friends Klaus and Hanni Groh came to pick me up and we went to walk under the Brandenburg Gate and to explore (for me) a free city of Berlin. Albert Einstein's words were staring at everyone above most large buildings (and there are many large buildings on Unter der Linden), as well as university buildings too. Many universities have been building all around the Brandenburg Gate. What a thrill to walk toward the Brandenburg Gate without having the Volkspolizei running after us (as they did in 1988) and rabbits coming up from their holes and a gloom all around. Instead we saw the remnants of the wall set into the road around the Gate and we walked freely under the gate to many buildings (embassies) such as the Russian Embassy which is gated, closed and cleaned up. We headed toward Berlin Guggenheim where there was a show of Jackson Pollock's Works on Paper. Then we headed for a café for a bite and listening to astoundingly wonderful Russian musicians (a violinist that was superb, an accordionist and a guitarist) who played as a trio. We looked at all the cathedrals, the ugly DDR building which is an eyesore on the horizon, and then had a late lunch outside near the river. As we walked back, we realized there are too many office buildings and not enough lowcost housing.

Across from the U.S. Embassy being built by the architects who have their office on my street in Santa Monica was the almost done Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, designed by Peter Eisenman. Alas, I could not enter to feel the possibilities of the memorial, but from architectural critics, I understand that one must walk through the 2,711 concrete pillars to feel the scope of the

Holocaust's horrors. Alas, it seemed like an endless rippling, unavoidable abstraction of horror. Then off to dinner with Emmett Williams and his wife, Ann Noel. Emmett was celebrating his "real" 80th birthday that day and we had dinner together. What a treat, since Emmett is one of the most distinguished Fluxus artists and although I could not stay for the "official party" on the 8th of April, we had a fine time.

The weather changed the next day and I wended my way by train to the Jewish Museum, after walking around "East Berlin" with monuments to Checkpoint Charlie and those Germans who died in trying to escape to the West, and the Checkpoint Charlie Museum now full of students who make field trips here and to the Jewish Museum. On the train, I saw a black child speaking perfect German. The diversity of the population is manifest everywhere. Berlin is international.

The Jewish Museum is a Beaux Arts building (the original one) next to the Liebeskind building, which would have been wonderful empty and devoid of people, but it was full of many classes and groups of people from Rome, other parts of Europe and tourists. I cannot tell you what I felt in the empty rooms—just what the architect wanted me to feel—a chill, an awe, a fear. It was shattering. But downstairs the multimedia center attracted me so much and I sat and read and saw all the lives of those who were willing to share with the world—the archive is vast, including Leo Baeck archives and so much more. Multimedia is pleasant to research, since there are cubicles all through the oblique halls of downstairs. I learned a lot about Coco Schumann, a jazz guitarist who survived Auschwitz with his Ghetto Five, a quintet which played at Auschwitz. His story has been made into two films and I could see vignettes of both films. I saw all the exhibits and it amplified a great deal of information that is in exhibition I have curated, Women of the Book. And the postcards in the bookshop were wonderful, including some with umbrellas. The weather was changing as I emerged from the museum after seeing a stunning exhibit of Jewish buildings by Jewish architects upstairs including Frank Gehry. I went over to Torstrasse and saw a great many small galleries with cutting edge art. Some were opened only two days a week, others were open for business from Tuesday - Saturday. Then I went over to see Barbara Wiens and her bookshop where artist books have been sold for many years. She now has a mezzanine and gallery room which allows her to put on small exhibitions. Had fun with a friend that night in an area where Christopher Isherwood, Rudolph

Steiner and many more creative people have lived and are still living.

The next day I went with a California friend who has been living in Berlin for 20 years. We saw contemporary architecture and then went on Bus 100, which is a normal everyday bus but has a wonderful route to take you all around the city for a modest bus fare and you can see the layout of Berlin in all its beauty. At Alexanderplatz, we got off and were in the Jewish section. We visited the Synagogue and walked up to the Dome and walked inside the dome, giving us an incredible view of the city. In the neighborhood were lots of crafts people, cutting edge shops and a feeling of Greenwich village. The Cultural Center is now rebuilt as it was in 1933 and with blue and white tile lining its facade there was an art cinema, boutiques, a bookshop and people living above these commercial shops. We had a wonderful evening and the next day it rained, as I left for the airport. This was not a "cultural" visit, but one to feel Berlin, to see friends and to realize the difference in a city that is buzzing with energy and activity—especially since 1988 when I saw it last.

I returned to a New York City, whose subway system leaves much to be desired after the perfection of Berlin. But I did attend a wonderful Bookfest, organized by Ed Hutchins, in a wonderful venue with a gorgeous New York City sunset—so I cannot complain. I met many of my old artist-friends who still make wonderful books and enjoyed a great buffet as well. I recommend Bookfest highly, not only for the venue of the library of the Borough of Manhattan Community College, which I hope will continue, but for the wonderful experience of meeting the very artists who make the bookworks and who can sell them to you. How many gift ideas were solved by coming to Bookfest! And the most touching of all experiences was to meet my friend, Ambar Past, again who had launched "Incantations" which took 150 Mayan women from Taller Lenateros 30 years to create. She was so excited to show us the video, which I bought, of the making of the bookwork, and to share this weirdly beautiful volume with us. That was indeed a treat!

Springtime in Germany—hurrah—what a great week—and a wonderful way to see how the Edible Book Tea can travel well in any clime, to any location, and with "artists" of any age. Thank you, Peter and Angela, for making April 1st an unforgettable experience, as well as Renate, Jutta, Elsa, Marco, Helmut, Christa, Sonja, Carsten, Werner, Karin, Thomas and Conrad.