

Chapter 1



My Parents' Meeting and Background

The principal root is as important for a person's life as it is for a plant's. It is the life force that passes from parents to child.

On a visit to Germany with my mother in 1965, I learned how my mother and father met. The story came from an old woman whose name escapes me now, but I shall call her Elena. My mother, Aunt Eva, and I went on an excursion through the Bavarian Hills and stopped at the village where this woman lived. We knocked at the door of her first floor apartment, situated in an old stone building with a throughway that led to an interior courtyard where chickens roamed. We peered through the windows and saw a teapot on the table and some family pictures on a bureau. Neighbors said she lived there but had gone for a walk in the nearby woods.

We drove to the edge of town, and in a meadow, some distance from the forest, we saw a good-sized matronly old woman wearing a printed dress, a straw hat, and walking with a swaggering gait and using a cane; a bouquet of wildflowers was in her hand. We walked down the path, waving at her. She soon recognized Eva and my mother and approached us with great enthusiasm. After greeting my mother and Eva, her effusiveness spilled over to me; she embraced me warmly, saying, "Ein kleiner stuck von China" ("A small piece from China"). I was touched with delight. Now in my twenties and still not knowing of my father's whereabouts, I was glad to meet someone who knew my father and was instrumental in my parents' meeting.

My parents met at the beginning of World War II in 1940, in the city of Munich, Germany. My father, Wang Fu Shih, was a doctoral electrical engineer student at Munich's Institute of Technology, and he had been in Germany for about eight years. He could speak German with a perfect Bavarian accent. I was told he was given a free mug of beer in a Bavarian Inn because he could speak the dialect so well. One evening, he and his friends were having dinner at a Chinese restaurant and talking animatedly. At the next table were my mother, Aunt Eva, and Elena. The young men caught Elena's attention and she began to talk with them in Chinese. She was

of Russian descent but had lived in China for over twenty years, where her family ran a movie theater in the Chinese city of Tiensin. Before long, the two groups were intertwined in conversation and sharing stories. Elena had a chance to practice her Chinese and my father a chance to work his charm. Before the night was over, my father had invited the three of them to an authentic Chinese dinner at his apartment, which they accepted without hesitation.

In the ensuing weeks, my father became enamored with my mother, a beautiful blue-eyed, blond woman, with the look of an actress, and a genuine soul, who loved Nature and adventure. They went on many mountain hikes and rides on my father's motorcycle. I have some pictures of those outings. In the few references to my dad that my mother made during my years growing up, she would say that he could jump one meter on one leg. Soon, my mother, who worked as a secretary in the city, began typing my father's doctoral dissertation. I have a picture of my handsome young dad given to my mother with an inscription in his handwriting, "In memory of our work together and hoping for a Summa Cum Laude." Another picture of my dad in a tuxedo and bow tie also has writing on the back, which translated from the German, said, "Conceited and immature, this fellow knows only Agi." (Agi in German is the endearing nickname for Agnes.) The romance began, and soon my father learned a little more about my mother's background.

My mother, Agnes Viktoria Anna Schuetzinger, was born in Tirschenreuth, Bavaria on April 20, 1916. According to my Aunt Fe—the family historian who always tried to keep us in touch and informed—my mother's parents, Joseph Schuetzinger and Karoline Schuetzinger, nee Penzkofer, were married in the full style of that time in 1907. After their wedding, her parents moved to Moosburg near Munich where they operated a printing, bookbinding, and stationery shop, and her father published a newspaper, the *Moosburger Tageszeitung*. They kept this establishment from 1907-1912. My mother's oldest sister Caroline, her twin brothers Joseph and Ernst, and her sister Eva were born in Moosburg.

In 1912, her father bought the *Tirschenreuther Volksbote*, another newspaper, and the whole family moved to Tirschenreuth, a lovely little city north of Regensburg and east of Nuremberg, close to the Czechoslovakian border. There her sister Maria, my mother, and her sister Hildegard were born. The family stayed at this place from 1912-1919. In the meantime, Grandpapa Schuetzinger, who ran the *Donau Post*, a newspaper he founded, and a printing shop at Wurth a.d. Donau (on the Danube), died in 1918. Pushed by his mother, Great-Grandmama Schuetzinger, my grandfather Joseph Schuetzinger took over the business of Great-Grandpapa in Wurth near Regensburg.

The move brought my grandmother closer to her family, as Grandpapa Penzkofer, who had run an inn and brewery in Falkenstein, on the Bavarian hills, had bought a large house with an expansive garden and orchard on one of the hills in Wurth. This was a choice location, romantically situated near the old eleventh century castle in Wurth, in which the Emperor Barbarossa had once stayed overnight. The famous German artist Albert Dürer painted the same castle.

However, my grandfather's move did not bring much prosperity to the family

since the business fell into bad times after World War I, and most of the money was consumed by the big inflation of 1923. By then, the family had grown to nine children with the birth of my mother's sister Felizitas (Fe) and her youngest brother Erich. In 1924, her father fell ill with throat cancer, most likely caused from exposure to the printing inks used at that time, which were stored in large drums and present everywhere in the shop.

On January 24, 1925, Papa, as he was called by the children, died. My mother was eight years old, but she always had some fond memories of her dad. She remembers going with him by train to the big city, Regensburg. In the city, held by his secure hand, she was taken to the best establishment and treated to the best chocolate in town. It certainly was a special occasion to have been singled out from a brood of nine brothers and sisters and treated to the nectar of the gods. No wonder my mother loved good chocolate and always celebrated special occasions by giving us bars of European chocolate!

Here is an unfolding of my mother's family in more detail.

The first child, Caroline, died as an infant after tumbling out of a carriage precariously parked on a hill. The second child was also given the name Caroline after her mother, Karoline Penzkofer, and moved to Wurth to be raised by her paternal grandparents, after the birth of the twins Joseph (Seppy) and Ernst. At age five, Caroline was returned to the family home in Wurth, which was above the publishing house. She never quite felt at home there and did not get along with her mother or her siblings. She tells of how the boys broke her exquisite china doll given to her by her beloved Schuetzinger grandparents, who pampered her with affection and fine clothing.

Nevertheless, she adored her Papa, so she was devastated when he passed away in her early teens. Bright and studious, she was sent to study with the English nuns. Later, she transferred to the boarding school of the Dominican Sisters in Niederviehbach, where all the other sisters joined her, including her youngest sister Felizitas (Fe), who was only four at the time.

Aunt Fe told me that Caroline, who by then had entered the convent, did not want her in the school, often avoiding her. Aunt Fe felt hurt and rejected—a feeling that lingered all her life. Caroline, who died at the age of ninety-three, spent her last years in the Wurth castle in the city of Wurth, where she had lived with her grandparents and parents. Today, part of the castle has been transformed into a home for the elderly. My husband Tony and I visited her in 1994 and again in 1997 when she was placed in the Wurth Castle. To test her mind, I asked her, "Where are you, Linchen?" (A long time ago, she had asked me not to address her as aunt but preferred I use her favorite nickname.)

She answered me from across the table at the nursing home's dining room, "I am at my grandparents' house, and I receive many visitors from all over the world." I did not have the heart to tell her otherwise. Even though she had been a philosophy professor at Mercy College in Detroit, and been retired in Germany for over twenty years, she was touched with dementia that made some twists and turns in her mind. She recognized us and often held lively discussions about the course of history and

men's hunger for power, from the Roman exploits to the Nazi regime. She would say, "But all will end in the heart of God. And before Truth, all are silent." I asked her whether she would like us to bring her additional clothes from her apartment in Pfaffenberg. She said, "No. When one is on a journey, one does not take very much. It becomes a burden." One day we offered her some maltzbeer, which she did not refuse, exclaiming, "How can a granddaughter of a Bavarian brewer not take a sip of beer? But not too much so I won't get tipsy! Ha!..Ha!" She was happy in the castle and felt the staff took good care of her, and she could order whatever she wanted, just like in a hotel.

It is well to say here that while their father Joseph Schuetzinger was alive, the family held a respectable position in the town of Wurth. Grandfather Schuetzinger even had a special table at the fine restaurant Butz where the family dined often on Sundays, and which still exists today. After my grandfather's death, grandmother was unable to manage the publishing business, which was bought out. A small fund was established for maintenance of the family and the children's education. Those were depression years, not only for the family, but also for the whole of Germany. The children were all sent to boarding school in different Bavarian cities and uprooted from their beloved Wurth on the Danube.

The twin boys, Joseph and Ernst, and the youngest child, Erich, were sent to schools run by Catholic Monks. Of my uncles, I heard little, except that they all died on the front in World War II—one in Monte Casino, Italy, another in France, and the youngest in Russia at the age of twenty-one in 1944. Aunt Caroline published a collection of Erich's letters from Russia and called it *The Grüss Gott Camarade* because he so signed his letters, which means, "God's Greeting, Comrade." *Grüss Gott* was and still is a daily greeting among Bavarians. Before going to war, Seppy and Ernst had fathered my cousins, Utte, Marile, and Rudi.

Eva, the second oldest of my mother's family, never married. She was a virtuoso on the piano and became a baby products representative before retiring early. My mother and she had a special bond, perhaps because of their love of music and adventure. As for my mother's other sisters, Maria and Hilde, I know little of their childhood. Maria married an architect, but she did not have any children. She worked in antiques and was a motherly, enterprising lady. When I met her in Nuremberg in 1965, she was very welcoming, self-assured, and attentive to our needs, and often bestowed small gifts upon us. I remember her saying, "Always cream your skin so it will be smooth and silky in your old age." To the end of her days, she continued to visit spas every year.

Hilde was a rebel, whom I heard called the black sheep of the family, with some suspect political affiliations. In 1965, when I first went to Germany with my mother, we stayed at Eva's apartment. Hilde would often visit and accompany us on our excursions through the Bavarian countryside. However, Eva and Hilde did not get along; once, while in the process of crossing a bridge, Eva insisted that Hilde get out of her Volkswagen—she was just too heavy a load, and the two had a heated argument. My mother and I chuckled at the hilarious scene and chose to get out of the car with Hilde. We watched Eva go over the bridge alone. Even though it

was a “Folkswagon,” it could not carry so many hefty folks on winding roads and precarious bridges.

Hilde had three children: Rainer, Helmut, and Hildegard. They were left under my grandmother’s care in Wurth during the war and the early post-war years, as were Fe’s children, Roland, Ilse, and Erich, so the mothers could pursue whatever work was available in Munich. Hilde’s husband was killed in the war, leaving the young family to fend for itself. When Fe was expecting her youngest child, Erich, in 1945, she was destitute, roaming the streets for any morsel of bread. Aunt Caroline had heard of Fe’s imminent delivery and begged officials at various hospitals to accept her, but none would take her. Caroline even confronted a high commander in the Nazi party, but her defiance only earned her a demotion, and her religious order asked her to leave because it feared for her life. Caroline did help Fe deliver a healthy baby in her cramped apartment in Munich.

The war’s devastation and the people’s suffering in Bavaria and Germany as a whole are unfathomable to me. I know Aunt Caroline did leave the order of the Dominican nuns and sought shelter with a baroness friend; the two sheltered several Jewish families. Caroline immigrated to the United States in 1950 and worked her way up to becoming a psychology and philosophy professor. Aunt Fe married an American electrical engineer, a specialist in radar, whom she met in Munich. The two lived in Europe during the 1950s with Fe’s three children. Eventually, her children immigrated to Canada to join their father, a painter, who had moved there earlier. Aunt Fe and Poncho moved permanently to the States in 1965 and settled in Mobile, Alabama. It was then that I met her for the first time while she was passing through Detroit. I also met all my German cousins over the years.

As for my mother, I know she had fond memories of her childhood in Wurth on the Danube, a typical Bavarian village. It had a main street with various essential shops, including her father’s Donau Post publishing company. The business and the house above still stand today. One of the largest buildings on the street, it often was referred to by townspeople as the “Schuetzinger House.”

Mother remembers the special holidays when a piglet was roasted and brought to the table with an apple in its mouth. Then the family had servants and everything was scrubbed spic-and-span, including the children. Linens were ironed in a big press and sauerkraut was made in large vats that the children were allowed to stomp in with great glee—of course, after having their feet sanitized to the maximum.

My mother’s adventurous spirit and fierce independence were put to the test when she was sent to the public kindergarten on the edge of town. She did not like the crowded room, or the confinement. So, during recess, she walked all the way home on a dangerous road to the surprise of her mother, who took her in her arms and did not send her back. She did, however, spend her early elementary school years in this public school in Wurth by the Danube.

My mother especially liked the surrounding countryside. On holidays, she swam in the Danube with its swift currents, and one time, she almost drowned but for the quick hand of a classmate. She also liked the Bavarian Forest. Once, she told me, her mother and father had a huge argument at night, probably about in-laws.

Grandmother gathered all her children at midnight and took them for a walk in a pitch-black forest. The last one always ran to the front of the pack to be close to mother because they were petrified.

Whenever possible, my mother liked to play in her maternal grandmother's house, with its huge orchards and gardens very near the medieval castle, which in her time was abandoned. During the lean war times, grandmother could always provide the family with a batch of fresh vegetables or a bushel of fruits. Sometimes, the children played hide-and-seek in the castle grounds, skirting with danger. As a matter of habit, my mother liked to gather fruits and flowers during her many walks, whether given or stolen, a habit she might have acquired in childhood. She said to me, "We make a wonderful pair because with you I can steal horses."

The regiment was severe at Niederviehbach, the girls' boarding school run by the Dominican Sisters where most of my mother's school years were spent. Rain or shine, the children took walks around town after lunch. They rose early and washed their faces with frigid water given to them in basins. My mother was a happy child there, not so much rebellious as mischievous. In order to break the monotony, mother joined the troublemakers in some serious pranks. Once they substituted the holy water, which the nuns used to bless themselves on the way into chapel, with writing ink. The girls could hardly contain their laughter as they saw the nuns file by with blotches on their faces. I wonder what punishment they received for this prank.

Mother excelled in gymnastics and the German language. She could tumble and do pirouettes with ease. Needless to say, mother was a tomboy with great love for the outdoors. She also loved to sing. Mother learned to play the guitar and could entertain friends with folk songs. She made many friends during this time, some of whom she kept for a lifetime.

When my mother graduated from high school, she joined a Christian youth group that included many idealistic thinkers and promising musicians. Hilde Wust, my mother's best friend, had a lovely voice, and for a time, she sang ballads on the radio and even cut a few records. Hilde's brother, George Wust, played for Munich's Philharmonic Orchestra and remained my mother's faithful pen pal for life. Once my mother told me he had asked her to marry him, but it was not to be. She had a few other suitors as well, and went on some fun outings, including, on occasion, skiing trips to the Alps, which were nearby. I have a few pictures of my mother and her friends singing, playing the guitar, flute, or violin along the Bavarian countryside.

On her twenty-first birthday, my mother and Hilde went on a European tour, traveling as far north as Norway and Denmark, and as far south as the Vatican. The two slung over their shoulders a few pots and pans, a blanket, and a change of clothes, as well as a guitar. They headed for the high road, staying in youth hostels and convents. They often hitchhiked. Once, while in Italy, a man who picked them up got fresh with them. They promptly took care of him by bopping him on the side of the head with their guitar. Whether the guitar survived, I do not know, but I know they remembered their trip with fondness. I met the Wust family in Munich, and I have a set of antique dishes they sent my mother.

It appears that my mother led an almost idyllic life, but it was not to last. While

in Munich in her late teens and early twenties, she had to make a living and support herself. At first, she lived with Tante Anni, a single teacher, but they had a falling out, so my mother had to find her own apartment. She had completed secretarial school and needed to find a permanent job. She told me there were times when she walked the streets for days without eating anything in search of a job. She finally landed a job with the German government.

In 1939, Hitler invaded Poland and the Second World War began. All women of age were employed at the service of the Third Reich. My mother worked in Munich for a while until she was transferred to Le Haag, Holland. There, I heard, if she knew of any Jewish families who were going to be targeted, she quietly sent out warning in whatever way she could. Once, when I was an adult, I asked her whether Jews in Germany had been disliked and experienced prejudice before the war. She answered, "Yes." She said no more because it weighed heavily on her heart.

It was during this time that she met my father, Wang Fu Shih. My father wrote my mother numerous letters, begging her to return to Munich from Le Haag, and promising abiding love. His persistence paid off, for my mother returned. Little did they know the two of them would soon be making the journey of a lifetime.