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# A WORLD ELSEWHERE

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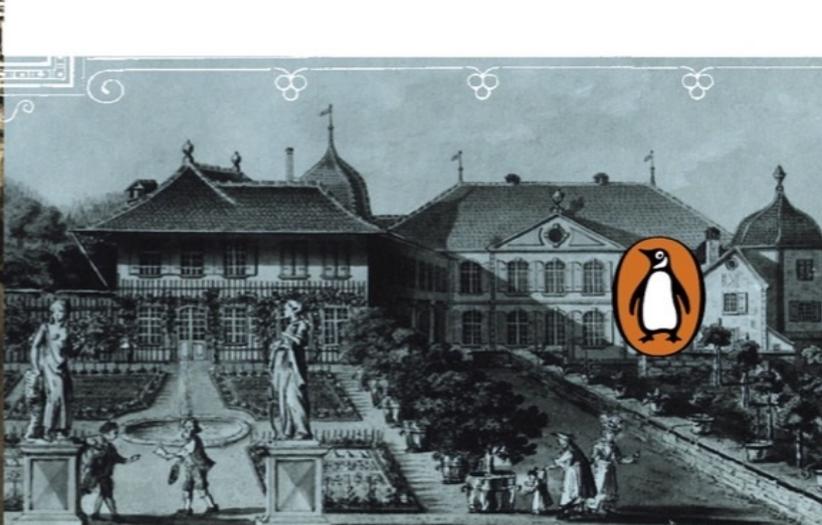
AN AMERICAN WOMAN  
IN WARTIME GERMANY

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SIGRID  
MACRAE

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“A LITERARY MASTERPIECE . . .  
[AND] A DAUGHTER’S ELOQUENT  
MONUMENT TO HER COURAGEOUS  
MOTHER.” —EDMUND WHITE



## Praise for *A World Elsewhere* by Sigrid MacRae

“Using her parents’ letters written during this devastating time, MacRae does a fine job of portraying the fear and uncertainty felt by her mother, living in a strange land and torn by loyalties.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“How [her parents] fell in love and lived, until separated by war and death, is the story told in *A World Elsewhere*, by Sigrid MacRae, their sixth child, and it is a remarkable and touching book.”

—*The New York Times*

“Fascinating . . . Drawing from a collection of letters and diary entries given to [MacRae] by her mother, [a] thought-provoking chronicle.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“MacRae is an elegant writer with a sharp eye for revealing details. . . . *A World Elsewhere* [is] a vivid tale of voyages through war-torn Europe.”

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

“*A World Elsewhere* is a literary masterpiece, fully realized, and a perfect work of art, a daughter’s eloquent monument to her courageous mother. It is also a reminder that war spares no one but wounds everyone it touches.”

—Edmund White, author of *Inside a Pearl*

“Only a person of superb literary gifts and exquisite sensibility could have done justice to this great story. The excitements and horrors of wartime are brought vividly to life, and the reader remains spellbound with each turn of the von Hoyningen-Huene family saga. The heroic mother, the romantic, idealistic father, the band of beautiful spunky children—I will never forget any of them.”

—Sigrid Nunez, author of *Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag*

“This subtle, beautifully crafted book tells a moving story of love, exile, and survival from the frozen Neva river to the Loire valley, from Hitler’s

Berlin to the shores of Maine. A vivid family memoir and an unforgettable portrait of a woman who braved all to bring her family to safety.”

—Caroline de Margerie, author of *American Lady*

“Sigrid MacRae manages to find a window into Germany during World War II we’ve never looked through before, an unputdownable true story of courage and love, beautifully realized on the page, and a reading experience that will break your heart in a good way.”

—Mary-Rose MacColl, author of *In Falling Snow*

“In this compulsively readable telling of an American mother’s escape with six children from wartime Germany, Sigrid MacRae brings to life the struggle faced by refugees everywhere, as well as acts of kindness that redeem the atrocities of war. I rooted for Aimée’s ingenuity and courage all the way home!”

—April Smith, author of *A Star for Mrs. Blake*

“[*A World Elsewhere*] leaves one with a profound sense of the importance of home—of the danger of being too nostalgic about home, of the horror of having your home taken away, and of the battle to belong and start afresh, creating a home out of the most unlikely circumstances.”

—*The History Vault*

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## A WORLD ELSEWHERE

Sigrid MacRae is the coauthor of *Alliance of Enemies*, about the undercover collaboration between the American OSS and the German Resistance to end World War II. She holds a graduate degree in art history from Columbia. She lives in New York City.

Sigrid MacRae

A WORLD  
ELSEWHERE

*An American Woman  
in  
Wartime Germany*



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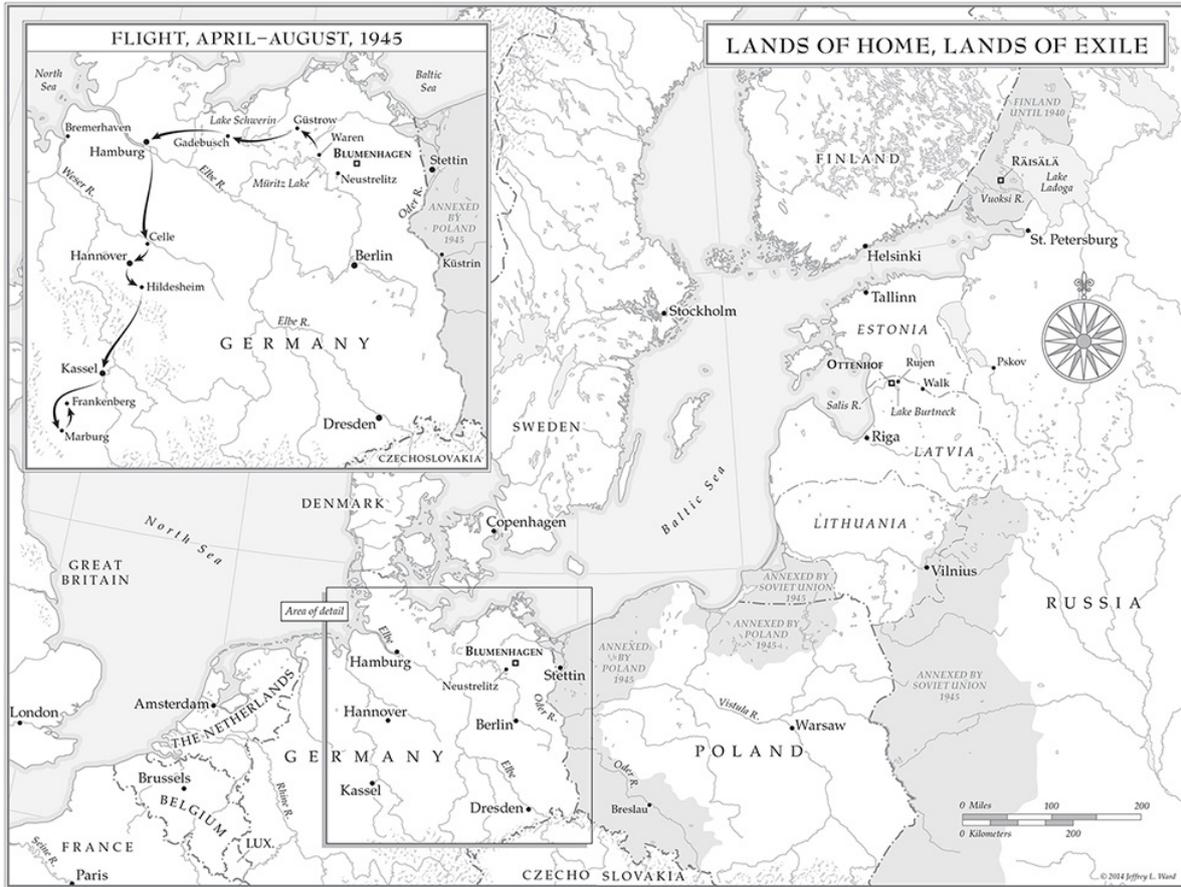
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*To those who went before,  
especially my mother, and to  
those who will come after.*



## Prologue

The box was beautiful. My mother had bought it in Morocco many years ago, and as a child, I admired it in secret, stroking the tiny pieces of mother-of-pearl inlay on the surface, its patterns conjuring faraway places. Its ivory keyhole held a key with a striped ribbon attached. Turning the key always produced a soft *pling-plong*, but never opened the box. After many decades, my eighty-five-year-old mother was tired of Maine winters and was moving to Arizona. Parceling out her possessions and the memories they held to her five surviving children, she now held the box out to me, saying simply, “Your father’s letters.”

I had always suspected that the box held them. Exotic and mysterious, it was the perfect receptacle for the treasured relics of a husband long dead and a father I had never known. It contained a chapter of my mother’s life that she had closed long since, one I was reluctant to reopen. The moment was freighted with feeling; her expression suggested things that I was afraid I could respond to only with tears. Neither of us felt comfortable in such emotional territory, and we cut it short. I stowed the box tenderly in the car along with the other pieces of her life she had designated for me: a miscellany of books, pictures, rugs, silver. As the car pulled away, she stood, small and contained, the enormous firs by the garage dwarfing her as she waved good-bye. Behind her, morning sunlight skittered across the bay.

At home the box sat—still beautiful, but still steadfastly, stubbornly locked—keeping its secrets. Though my mother had given it to me, I felt that breaking this family reliquary open by force was wrong. Besides, I was reluctant to discover what the box held. Inside was the person who had changed the shape of my mother’s life, whom my older brothers and sisters loved and remembered, a real person to everyone in the family except me, the youngest. For years his mythical presence had loomed large, but as an absence—an immense absence. Time had gradually healed my mother’s wounds, but I was wary of causing pain by asking about him. In fact, I realized that I bore some resentment toward the man I had held responsible for many miseries.

My mother had moved on, but for me he remained unfinished business. Opening the box—resurrecting him—would mean finding not only the man who became my father, but also the man responsible for the “Nazi!” a first-grade classmate had yelled at me as a six-year-old, newly arrived in the States from Germany. I didn’t know then what that was, but whatever it was, I knew it wasn’t good. The taunt stayed with me. It was thrown at me in many other guises, and eventually I blamed my father.

I always felt different growing up. My family was an anomaly in rural Maine—a clan of outsiders. There was my unfamiliar, unpronounceable last name: von Hoyningen-Huene. Even just von Huene was bad enough; I longed to be Linda or

Susan, Smith, Jones, or Brown. There was the language, and there was the taint of being German. And in spite of my mother's tireless efforts to always provide a beautiful place to come home to, my sense of dislocation never budged. There was nowhere that felt unmistakably like "home."

My father's parents, Baltic Germans exiled from Saint Petersburg to Germany after the Bolshevik Revolution, had suffered exile bitterly, feeling displaced, lost, and alien—an awareness that also left an indelible mark on my father's life. His younger sister once told me that the only place she ever felt homesick for was Saint Petersburg, a city she had last seen as a twelve-year-old, more than seventy-five years before. Such feelings and memories were endemic; they came with the territory, demanding the lion's share of space in the exile's little bundle of belongings. Maybe for us, as for so many, they ran in the family.

My persistent hunt for home began long before my mother gave me the Moroccan box, and much of it circled around my father. He had always been a presence, if iconic, and I was hardly ignorant about him. His portrait hung in our living room along with one of my parents as a young couple in Paris in 1929, by a celebrated photographer cousin, George Hoyningen-Huene. Assorted forebears kept them company on the walls. I knew about his past; stories about him were family lore. There were letters, diaries, and poems from his turbulent early years. I had read his letters from France as an officer in Hitler's army, where an occasional passage sounding alarmingly like Nazi propaganda had made me squirm, yet his awareness of history, his wide learning, his sympathy for people, and his enviable optimism shone from every page. His brief diary from the Russian front had also made me question what his being in Hitler's army really meant. Still, for me, he remained buried in the uneasy murk of history.

I had read about the backdrop to his life in his father's elegiac memoir. Spinning a magical lost world, it detailed life in tsarist Russia—a civilization that disappeared like Brigadoon beneath the Bolshevik mists. Typed by my father's younger sister, with annotations and a genealogy, it had been privately printed and distributed to all far-flung family households. Along with memoirs by other ancestors, aunts and uncles, and many letters, it was part of a jumble of suggestive ephemera: portraits; poems; a small double-headed imperial Russian eagle in diamonds, once part of a tsarist medal presented to some forebear. Individually, these items all spoke, offering pieces of a puzzle, spurring my imagination, but providing little narrative. Together, they acted as a mute chorus, nudging me to become their amanuensis. It occurred to me that putting the pieces together might help me find where home lay.

• • •

My mother died about ten years after she gave me the box of letters, and not long after, turning the key opened it. Inexplicable, I thought, magical, until my husband confessed that he had tinkered with the lock.

After all these years, my father revealed himself quickly. Always dating his letters, numbering pages, he sometimes noted the day of the week, even the time of day. He had been a trained historian after all, yet this was not mere record-keeping; he was also truly sharing his days. His was an ordered mind and a giving nature. The voice of my

mother's young lover, so long silent, emerged from his letters like a genie out of a bottle. From the pages of one letter slipped silken, nearly transparent poppy petals of the palest salmon pink—the tender gesture of a long-ago love.

So this was the person who had lurked inside the box all those years: no bland Hartford, Connecticut, swain, no dull future captain of an insurance empire. Small wonder my mother was *bouleversée* when they met in France; more than seven decades later, he was charming me. His habit of enclosing flowers in letters was one she later adopted, but here, though she would have foreseen my eventual intrusion, I still felt I was prying. A flurry of envelopes, addressed to Hartford in June, July, and August of 1928, was meticulously dated in my mother's hand; this batch was clearly important. My mother was ushering me into their young love.

I began to read. As I came to grips with his loose, generous hand, the father I had never known came spectacularly, breathtakingly alive. Finding sleep after such an introduction was nearly impossible. In the dark, I grappled with this vivid interloper I had known only as a kind of household god. His letters destroyed that status completely, shifting the emotional landscape I had established over a lifetime as the child of a single parent. This was the other side of the parental equation. It changed everything, demanding a revision of my views of my mother and a rearrangement of the family constellation.

One letter stood out. Postmarked London, February 11, 1928, it was addressed to my mother in Paris. Their young romance is blossoming quickly. If she will meet him,

. . . your great wish will be fulfilled: You shall put on your best clothes . . . and we shall go and do something grand and brilliant. Do you insist on my wearing full dress? Won't this be an historic night: Miss Mayflower flirting with the "Hun."

Apart from shattering his remoteness completely, the letter put its finger squarely on my own puzzling provenance. Clearly the man who had left me his name and his profile was no cliché Hun at all, no bellicose militarist with monocle and bristling moustache, not even absolutely German—as his Russian diary attested. Young, lively, fully aware of the label history had affixed to him, and with an acute sense of humor, he was demolishing all my preconceived notions. The Miss Mayflower he was referring to in impeccable English, though of Mayflower stock, was obviously not my worn, hard-pressed, ever-practical mother, but a carefree spirit, wanting, as she had written him, "to put on my best clothes and go on a bat with you," adding, "It must be most romantic to have a young and ravishing female creature, head-over-heels in love and following you all over Europe."

. . .

The pieces on my mother's side of the puzzle were varied too, if less exotic. An American cousin spent many hours interviewing my mother, meticulously transcribing the result; another put together a comprehensive genealogy. Late in her long life when she woke early, my mother often spent those mornings writing recollections on a pad

propped against her knees in bed. After she left Maine for Arizona, I tried to make sense of her scrappy, loose-leaf pages, but with a continent between us, distance, my own reticence, and life intervened, leaving me with regrets that I know many share. I asked questions—never enough questions, and never the right ones. The confessional mode was terra incognita in our family, and my mother had a talent for closing doors on what was over. I was reluctant to pry those doors open, no matter the cost.

Apart from those to an American friend, Mary, few of my mother's letters survived. But these—written between 1928 and 1947—are a record of extraordinary times. Had I not found them cached in a rusty file cabinet as I helped clean out Mary's apartment after her death, this window onto my mother's evolution from breathless fiancée to expatriate wife and mother, observing Germany's 1930s and '40s, would never have opened for me. The carefree, playful young thing I encountered in the early missives was unrecognizable as the mother I knew. Her letters added to the clamor of voices driving this book forward, pushing the story further, if not anywhere near its end. Without them, there might never have been a book, just fragments without a narrative, no story at all.

• • •

Who were these people? What had brought such an unlikely pair together? And where did their eventual alliance leave me? Accidents of history had joined them, and the entangled mysteries of love, sex, and money. How they had shaped me was yet to be determined, but where should the story of two lives whose strands ran separately far longer than they had been knitted together begin? And how should other lives—those of the parents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, and grandparents—be woven into the fabric? Tangents, vagaries, shifts, and turns are uncomfortable in the tyranny of chronology, yet history is tyranny too, and the convulsive history of the century that shaped my parents' lives refused to obey any other imperative.

“One lives so many different lives,” my mother used to say. “Life is a verb. Everyone has a story.”

This book is theirs.

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## Mademoiselle Sophie's Hat

The world was more or less whole in 1927, still healing from World War I, but on the mend. Aimée Ellis and an old school friend, an actress named Hope Cary, began their trip in Sicily, and then planned to follow spring up the Italian boot. Easter week found them among Palermo's dim churches and golden mosaics. All Sicily was in bloom. At Agrigento they traipsed through flowering meadows to picnic in the great temple's shadow. They lolled on deserted beaches looking out toward Africa. On Aimée's nickel they spent a few days at a splendid old grande dame of a hotel bellied up against the amphitheater in Taormina, the windows of their baroque room looking out on Mount Etna, smoldering in the distance. They sashayed around Capri, sauntered through Rome, then on to Florence and the hill towns of Assisi and Orvieto. The world seemed miraculously beautiful.

All along the way, Hope kept saying that she'd met a Russian in Providence, Rhode Island, who was studying at the Sorbonne now. Aimée must meet him when they got to Paris. She imagined Hope's Russian in his late thirties, compact, dark, and intense. Instead he was twenty-three, tall, and handsome as a young god.

Baron Heinrich Alexis Nikolai von Hoyningen-Huene was in fact only somewhat Russian. His family was Baltic German aristocracy, a particular caste whose lives had always gravitated toward the tsarist court, and who divided their time between Saint Petersburg and their estates in the Baltic countries. In flawless English, he explained that Germans, many of them like his family, descendants of the crusading Teutonic knights, had been settled in the Baltics since the thirteenth century. After Peter the Great crushed Swedish supremacy in the region, he encouraged more Germans to immigrate, promising them an independent administration with German language and laws. The Baltic nobility profited enormously and played a significant part in the imperial Russian civil and military services ever after. At one point, Heinrich's family was one of the largest landowners in the Baltics.

In the Russian capital, Saint Petersburg, Baltic Germans established German churches, schools, and cultural institutions. The fight against Napoleon—many of Heinrich's ancestors had fought for Russia—only reinforced their influence. But when Tsar Alexander III ascended the throne in 1881, his fervent Russian patriotism and anti-German stance rattled their privilege and independence. Despite reforms, the revolutionary unrest of 1905 only foreshadowed 1917, when the Bolsheviks seized power and many Baltic Germans went into exile.

The riddle of how Heinrich came to meet Hope in Providence, Rhode Island, was explained by an entertaining story about Mlle. Sophie, a longtime governess in Heinrich's father's family. In the semidarkness of a train compartment en route to Vienna, a young American gentleman accidentally sat on Mlle. Sophie's hat. Her lighthearted reaction to his gaffe charmed the embarrassed Mr. Alfred Lorand-Lustig, and for the rest of their journey the two young people talked animatedly. In Vienna, Alfred introduced Sophie to his mother and sister; several weeks later, she and Alfred were engaged. Having stayed in touch with the Hoyningen-Huenes, she was aware that revolution had left the family refugees, without home, lands, or money. In 1924, as Mrs. Lorand-Lustig, she wrote to suggest that Heinrich's extraordinary language abilities could earn him American dollars as representative to the new foreign operations of the Nicholson File Company in Providence, where her well-to-do husband held an important position.

In Providence, Heinrich became "Henry" and lived on charm. Scrimping to save money, he shared a room at the YMCA with a large box of Quaker Oats. Mixed with hot water in his toothbrush glass, it kept his stomach from complaining too much if he had no dinner invitation. But he was lucky. Providence was more than happy to have a charming, handsome baron at its dinner parties, and invited him often. At one such party he met Hope Cary—"Beautiful Hope" everyone called her—in town with Walter Hampden's New York theater company. By the time Henry's stint in Providence came to an end, he had sent money home to the family and saved enough to pursue studies in history, international law, and economics. So here he was, studying in Paris.

Aimée was intrigued. He was utterly impoverished, but that was never an issue. His attitude—"We have no money, but it's a beautiful day, and we won't let that stand in our way"—was like nothing she had ever encountered. She was taken with the buoyant charm that endeared him to everyone he met. His title may have played a part in her interest too, but she knew that there was no shortage of aristocratic dullards, and he was not one of them. Irrepressible, with a storehouse of knowledge, and always up for adventure, he was fascinated by others, and by her. And to think that she had met this extraordinary man only because of a string of coincidences cascading from Mlle. Sophie's squashed hat—amazing.

When he asked her about herself and her family, she felt she had nothing to say. No exotic background, no family to speak of, really. Heinrich said that if she was going to be so reluctant to tell him about herself, they would have to establish a rule: Revelations about self and family from one of them deserved the same from the other. It was only fair. But in her memory, her childhood stretched as a lonely monochromatic landscape. She said nothing.

• • •

Hope had exhausted her resources and was due in New York for rehearsals. When Aimée decided to stay on alone in France, Heinrich suggested she join the group enrolled in a summer program for serious students wanting to polish their French at the château at Lestion, a village near Beaugency. Though all the rooms at the little château were taken, he found her a room with an old couple in the village.

Père and Mère Fenique's house was at the end of the village's single street.

According to legend, Heinrich said, Joan of Arc had spent the night before the battle of Beaugency, in 1429, in this house. To Aimée, it looked as if it had not changed much since. Joan may not have slept in the same bed, but she must have slept in the same room, for there were only two. The house was built on a south-facing slope, with an entrance to the upper floor on the street side, for the donkey and his fodder, but no windows. Windows on the street were taxed. To the south, the living quarters' windows and doors looked out across meadows sloping down to the Loire River. As he helped get her settled, Heinrich told her that almost a thousand years before Joan, local tribes under the Romans had repulsed the Hun on these very meadows.

A little brook spilling to the river served for bathing. In the mornings, Mère Fenique brought breakfast to a bench outside in the sun—milk still warm from the cow, and fresh, slightly ashy bread, baked in the shallow, open fireplace in the Feniques' room, which mirrored hers. On Wednesdays, stripped down above the waist to marvelously intricate stays, Mère Fenique boiled her washing in an enormous cauldron over an open fire. She had not been to the next village—about two miles away—in years. In lieu of newspapers, a small uniformed man came down the village's one street, his drum roll calling the villagers from their fields or out their doors to hear his reports.

Père Fenique, a veteran of the Franco-Prussian War, was ailing. Only rarely did Aimée hear his sabots clumping in the other room. He was too old to take part in the *vendange*—the grape harvest—already in full swing. (His image survives in a tiny photograph found in the Moroccan box. He sits near voluminous bed curtains, knees apart, cane firmly in hand, under an impressive thatch of white hair.)

Did they have a doctor for Père? Aimée asked Mère.

“Oh no,” Mère replied. If the donkey got sick, of course they would get a doctor. The old man wasn't going to last anyway, but the donkey—that was different, she said simply, enunciating a pragmatic, peasant philosophy.

After French classes, Heinrich and Aimée explored Lestion's little church and bicycled along roads barely traveled except for farm wagons bringing in the harvest. Following one wagon laden with sacks of grain, Heinrich told her it was built on a Roman model. When it stopped at a windmill, they left their bicycles and went inside. Wind roared in the sails; the entire structure creaked and groaned. It was like stepping aboard a sixteenth-century galleon in a storm. The grinding stones, the massive beams and joists—every single surface—was white with the dust of powdered grain. Heinrich shared his knowledge enthusiastically, opening dimensions in history, in architecture, in almost everything they saw, ushering Aimée into a rich, new world. She was suddenly, overwhelmingly in love.

The idyllic countryside around Lestion offered endless opportunities for sketching: a young girl knitting as she tended sheep, a dolmen looming behind her; a late summer sun casting a glow over the *pigeonnier* of a big farm. Leaning over to admire her sketch, Heinrich asked, “Where did you learn to draw so beautifully?”

She blushed. He had touched on what she thought of as her one accomplishment. A treasured gift of colored pencils from her uncle Bill had encouraged her as a child, and she had studied and taken George Bridgman's life classes at the Art Students League in New York. He had never had such formal training, he said, only lessons from his adored grandmama Marie, always sympathetic to the frustrations of bringing three

dimensions into two.

Those few words about himself opened a floodgate. Heinrich began to talk about his family, painting lively word-portraits of his parents and four siblings, of Saint Petersburg's long dark winters, where night came early and dawn dragged its feet. Even in the bitterest cold, the governess took the children out to make the circuit of *le carrée*, one of Saint Petersburg's vast squares. At the Tavrishesky Gardens, rink attendants in thick padded coats helped get skates on and off, while the Chevalier Guards played waltzes, mazurkas, and marches that accompanied skaters across the ice and drifted through the trees at the lake's edge. Heinrich and his siblings knew that their parents had courted there. On the small nearby stream called the "Tour du Monde," which branched off to afford young Ernst and Mima a few moments of unchaperoned privacy, their mother had delighted Papa with her "yes" to his burning question.

Before the First World War, much of Saint Petersburg gave the impression of a wealthy city. Pink and cream and pistachio-green palaces perched along the canals like oversize petits fours, their pale, delicious colors reflected in the Neva River's green water. The Nevsky Prospekt's shops offered English soaps, fine leathers, Italian ices, champagnes. At Yeliseev, a temple of gastronomy, *style moderne* lamps of glass flowers drooped over an epicurean array. Though the contrast between rich and poor was huge, some prosperity trickled even to the city's beggars; the Orthodox belief that beggars, habitually congregated on church steps, were messengers from God reinforced traditional Russian generosity.

At the core of Heinrich's young life lay an enormous extended family, a multitude of cousins—close and distant—aunts, uncles, grandmothers. Long winter nights meant quiet evenings in cheerful intimacy at home, Papa reading aloud from his favorite Russian writers. Soft lamplight spilled over them like a blanket, reflecting in a mirror or on polished wood, but leaving most of the room wonderfully, mysteriously dark. If aunts and uncles joined the gatherings, a musical soirée might be quite ambitious, with Uncle Emil playing flute, Uncle Rudolph cello, and Tante Marie at the grand piano. The little ones lay on the bearskin rug beneath, letting the resonances roll over their heads. Snow tumbling out of the blackness outside swirled in the light of the streetlamp like a personal snow globe, the stuff of private reveries.

The weeks of Advent before Christmas were filled with preparation, festivities, and great excitement. At the entrance to Gostiny Dvor, the city's biggest department store, stood a stuffed bear, immense and upright, and inside were enough treasures to delight the most jaded child. Even the youngest children accompanied their father to the Christmas market to choose the big Christmas tree, and for several days, ornaments and nuts were gilded for hanging on Christmas Eve. There were visits to his mother's father, Grandpapa Nikolai Sievers, in the house a great-grandfather had bought around 1800, said to have been the house of Peter the Great's doctor. Heinrich's mother, Marie—"Mima"—had been born there, and they visited often.

Grandpapa Nikolai was an enthusiastic naturalist and huntsman who still enjoyed multigenerational mushrooming expeditions with his children, grandchildren, and ever-present manservant, Dimenty Zacharievitch. Deep in the woods, the cool air redolent of moss, soft earth, and resin, with baskets filled with mushrooms, they would find a spot among towering firs for a picnic. Everyone except Grandpapa sat on the

spongy forest floor; for him, Dimenty Zacharievitch brought a folding stool to keep his aged joints off the damp ground. A cloth was spread, and bottles, pâtés, and chickens were brought out of hampers while Grandpapa recalled mushroom hunts of long ago.

In 1913, the Romanov dynasty celebrated its three-hundred-year jubilee with a parade even more fabulous than usual. Shining carriages, coachmen in grand liveries, and troops in brilliant dress uniform passed in front of the Winter Palace; sun glinted on thousands of gold buttons; horse flanks gleamed. The glorious show went on for hours. Grandpapa Emil (Papa's father) was dressed for a ball. The children went to the floor below in the apartment building to see him, resplendent in his uniform, a scarlet coat with gold embroidery, white pants with a scarlet stripe. Clustered around his magnificence, the children reached to touch this or that medal pinned to the broad blue ribbon draped across his chest. It was thrilling—all of it.

Carriages and sleighs crowded the streets alongside streetcars, some still horse-drawn. If the Neva River was frozen, much of the traffic, including the horse-drawn streetcar, the *konka*, could cross the meter-thick ice. When the ice began to break, the cannons of the Peter and Paul Fortress boomed to announce the event; floes from Lake Ladoga sent mountainous chunks of ice crashing against bridge pilings. The nearby Liteiny Bridge might hold them for a time, but the children and their father loved to watch the swollen Neva's current rip the thudding, crunching ice away. The excitement was tremendous: Winter was losing its grip.

*Maslenitsa*—butter week—or Carnival, was another sign that winter was giving way, promising spring and Easter, the highest feast day of the Russian calendar. In this madcap week of entertainments and balls, itinerant entertainers and masked and costumed people crowded streets that were often still under deep snow. At the colorful *Verba*, the Easter market, the children weighed how best to spend their extra bit of pocket money. After the Lenten fast, the city's church bells rang almost incessantly. It was time for feasting again on the painted eggs, on *pashka*—the traditional Russian Easter dessert—with its paper flowers, and *kulich*—the accompanying yeast cake—laid out on white cloths to be sprinkled with holy water.

Spring made the children restless. The apartment was large and pleasant, there were many fine things to do in the city, but they were always shepherded by a nurse or governess. They yearned for the long days of summer at Ottenhof, the family estate in Latvia, without city constraints, where time was all theirs, where they were free. Then came the great day of the pilgrimage. First the *droschke* to the Baltika Station, then wheels clacking across the miles, through the night. With a railroad car to themselves, the children tried to sleep in the wide reclining seats, but the excitement was great, and lights flickering in glass lanterns cast moving shadows and inspired restless dreams.

Morning sun gleamed on the samovar at the station at Walk, the *zakuska* table laid out with delicious tidbits as they waited for the little train to Rujen, where the coachman would be waiting in the calèche. A second carriage would bring the luggage. The last twenty kilometers were achingly familiar: Emerging from the forest on the height, the children were nearly drunk at the first glimpse of the lake shining below. On either side of the river, meadows swept away to a distant church. Already they could see the allée of larches, then the turn at the so-called heathen oak—so huge it surely predated Christianity.

At the wide bridge over the Salis, the horses slowed. Their solemn tread prolonged

the excitement as the river moved in swift counterpoint below, glittering in the sunlight. The ride along the park fence and through the park's great trees to reach the vine-covered house would be exactly as always: the scent of white lilacs, roses, and mock orange; a hundred different birdsongs; the silver willow by the pond; the chuckling millstream. Then lunch on the big veranda with a view across the rose beds, past Grandpapa Nikolai's oak, to the rich meadows along the river and the lake's satin sheen.

Long hours of daylight meant almost limitless pleasures. The roomy "picnic" carriage took them to Salisburg, clattering across the cobbles to buy the baker's special *Kringel*. Then along sandy paths to the Sievers burial ground, where Heinrich's mother, Mima—the children called her Mimama—put roses from Ottenhof on the family graves. Past the Vietinghoffs', rolling into the vast park, with picnic baskets unloaded at the little round temple, coachman and horses resting in shade, the horses' tails switching at flies. Sailing expeditions to the mouth of the Ruje River, where still, salmon-rich waters mirrored red sandstone cliffs and white water lilies nodded on stems reaching into the deep. Elk roamed the forests where gentians bloomed.

The days were nearly endless; the white nights meant little darkness, but the evening still had its special sounds. The call "*Maya, Maya*" brought the russet cattle to their stalls, bellowing. Crickets enlivened the dusk with their immense chorus, and along the so-called Philosopher's Walk the nightingale sang his own melancholy song. It had all seemed immutable. Then it was gone.