

A World of Waltzes

from Mende

Ilmar and Elinor von Mende were born in a world of dreams far away, before the Russian Revolution, before World War I, in what was then Czarist Russia. Czar Nicholas II still sat on the throne of the twin-headed peacock, all of Europe's royalty consisted of cousins marrying each other to solidify their myriad alliances, all the while watering down their gene pool to a puddle of bland drool: the Czar and his sons were hemophiliacs, they could bleed to death from a pin prick, and only a mad monk, Rasputin, seemed to have a cure.

Rasputin, an incredibly horny, vicious and crazy monk, held sway in one of the highest courts in Europe, infested with petty and corrupt noblemen who still held millions of peasants in conditions of serfdom, peasants ostensibly freed only as recently as 1867 by Czar Alexander II but still bound to the manor: they still could not travel or marry without the blessing of the manor lord.

But it was still in many ways the most beautiful of times. The automobile had not taken over the landscape and the culture. People of means still had enormous amounts of time to spend on each other, in conversation in coffee houses and drawing room salons, at balls where champagne and waltzes flowed around billowing skirts and dashing, handsome young officers in plumes and waxed mustachios. There were chandeliers ablaze with thousands of candles, evenings at the opera with gossips taking indiscrete glances to see who was sitting with whom this season, and rides in carriages and open sleighs. It would take an entire day to prepare and eat meals cooked and served by a passel of servants, and for the sporting kind there were the hounds and the horses, the shooting of birds and game.

On summer afternoons baskets of bread, cheese, fruit and wine would be carried off to a stream or a mountain top, and a lad would woo his secret love with a carefully memorized poem, or he would slip her a heatedly written letter, scribbled with a quill or a big fat pencil on a large wooden secretary the night before, and she would quickly hide it with a blush lest her chaperon should notice it. Which, of course, she would.

Now there was a world!

That it was also full of the cancer that would destroy it goes without saying: the anarchists, the communists, the Holy Russia mad priests, the envies and hatreds of starving and disease-ridden masses. God would soon come along and wipe the table clean, pools of blood everywhere. But this was my mother-in-law's world, a perfect place with the ball about to begin, her dancing card already full of promised dances to waiting men with straight backs and noble chins. "Why, the Czarovich, the son of the Czar himself, had danced with me!"

This world of waltzes, lilting gentilities, hushed whispers of desperate romantic longings in hard-wood corridors of large houses with fireplaces a-crackle in each room -- this was the stage setting forever in Lore Strauss' girlhood.

And she was a beauty. To look at her in her old age and then at a photo of her in her flowering, you get angry with the Dance Master of Life: Why is beauty so brief? Are we not supposed to

live so long? What's the deal?

She got a short run on happiness. At least so it seemed with her mind, her soul, and the motherhood that came during one of the least physically passionate marriages ever put on record, at least from what I saw of it and what the von Mende children have told me about it, from Hita, whom I was later to marry, her twin brother Aki, her older sister Elfi, her older brother Hans. (When I first heard all these names, I expected to meet them all in a gingerbread house in the Black Forest).

The source of her long discontent, indeed, her marriage to Ilmar von Mende had, in my mind, its origin in that waltz world romanticism of the Old Europe she never could be free of. It was that girlish romanticism, never put in the attic, that drew her to Ilmar.

Let me explain. The "von" in Hita's family name is a mark of nobility. In German, it means "of" or "from", and that's all nobility in Europe used to mean: you were from this place or that place (in French, it's the same thing with "de": a Count de Charlesville was a rich and powerful guy from Charlesville). Except a nobleman was not only from a particular town or county, he owned it. And not just the land and all the buildings, but the people too. A nobleman in Russia was known by the number of souls he owned!

Well, it turns out that Ilmar von Mende, a lanky, shy but handsome officer in the Latvian Army (by 1919 this part of Russia had become the Republic of Latvia) was introduced to the stunning beauty Elinor, a woman who was beginning to worry her family: she was beginning to lose the blush of youth, would she ever marry? The Strauss family was part of the shop-keeping, money-conscious bourgeoisie, extremely conscious, as all Europeans then were and still are, of their station in life. Could it be that a von Mende is courting the difficult Elinor? A man of nobility?

I'm convinced it was that little preposition "von" which propelled my future mother-in-law into matrimony. When the Russians finally caught up with the fleeing, ramshackle Germany Army on the Eastern Front of late 1944, proud Elinor had been a refugee walking on foot across Poland in a vain effort to stay ahead of raping Mongolian Red Army conscripts, with only rotten potatoes and a concealed loaf of molding black bread to feed the twins in a baby carriage. Her little Elfi had been written off by a doctor as someone who was going to die of dysentery.

Despite all this, she still had the pluck to say this to a mean, rude Communist German woman whom the Russians had somehow dug up from somewhere to rule their part of the newly-defeated Germany: "My name is Elinor von Mende". To this the commissar said "Oh, no, comrade, there you are wrong. From now on you are Mende, not von Mende, we are through with 'von's' here." To which my future mother-in-law said: "My name is Elinor von Mende." Each woman took the measure of the other; glares were exchanged. Elinor's sole power lay in her will and her dignity. Elinor won. A von Mende is used to winning.

The commissar wanted to jail her then and there, better yet shoot her for this persistent aristocratic bearing. But what to do then with these sickly and dying children? She let her pass, but for it Elinor had to sleep the night in the forest, fearing such strange things as wild animals that had escaped from the Berlin zoo after the zoo had been blown to bits in an air raid. The phantasmagoria of war: not only to walk across all of Poland on foot to escape the Red Army

and its rapists, but to hide from rogue elephants and lions in the Brandenburg forest, where once -- how long ago could it have been -- Prussian gentry in white gloves ate dainty sandwiches and mused over the meaning of life.

Well, so there she was, the power, the ruler in Hita's family. With only a handful of worldly possessions she and Ilmar took the kids to America to start over. In her baggage was an obsession with class, bearing, dignity, and yes, memories from a world blown forever to smithereens yet carefully tended in a garden of her mind. Her favorite movie was *Gone With The Wind*. In the hick Lutheran Minnesota town of Owatonna (where the local church had poneyed up the money to sponsor the family's journey to the New World) she would dream of the flowery days of her youth as she sewed her fingers bloody in a cheerless sweatshop. The work was not as hard as the shame of the kind of work she did. Her legs swoll up, she went near crazy, the children would hear her scream in the night and howl at a husband who didn't have it in him to fight back, he would get in the car and drive away until the storm was over. He was not much of a winner, but he wouldn't fight, so he wasn't strictly speaking a loser, either.

She could preside like a queen at an occasion. She loved her children with a passion. There was nothing better than presenting Mami with good news. She knew like no one I ever have met before or since how to spread sunshine over a good piece of news. She would purse her lips, fold her arms in contentment, lift herself tall in her chair, and ask and ask for more detail about the wonderful thing that happened to you, and now to her. I think it is that gift she had which her children now miss more than anything, now that she is dead.

She had the best posture I ever saw on anybody, a regal bearing, even in her last years, when she could only breathe through tubes in her nostrils as she slowly gave herself up to emphysema.

Even her death was part of that waltz-world poetry. She died within days of Ilmar's death. After his funeral she toasted everyone with a Manhattan, my father-in-law's favorite drink, which he was a master at making, and announced that she, too, was now ready to join him, and she said good-bye. I discounted it as yet another bit of Mami melodrama, upstaging her husband in death as she did in life. But sure enough, she went to bed and died later the next day. A classy exit.

Ilmar, a man with whom I can never imagine her ever having sex even once in her life, was a beautiful man in his soul, a wildly sentimental man who also stood erect and did, at all times, the socially correct thing. He was a "gentleman" without being a show-off about it, he would open doors, take coats, kiss hands, bow, all that stuff, and do it with a natural, in-bred elegance. His hands were delicate and always manicured if nicotine-stained. He and Lore (that's what he called her, two syllables, like Laura, but "Lore eh", not "Lore ah") smoked a lot.

He made the best fried eggs; he'd first burn the butter, then slip them in, and the yolks would have the perfect consistency. He'd serve them up with bread and pastries he'd get at the Lincoln Del, a nearby Jewish delicatessen.

For a very long time it struck me as extremely odd that his best buddy was a Jew named Eisenberg, and that he loved Jewish food and Bernie, the owner of yet another local Jewish delicatessen, and yet for all that he was what most Jews would consider an anti-Semite. He

always reminded me of who the real powers in America and the world were, the Jews had everything tied up, it was the Rothschilds of the world who brought on the world wars, and so on. And yet even his mannerisms were Jewish. He could shrug, hands out, in oy-vay's that would make a Georgie Jessel cry.

Odd, too, were his seeming defense of what Hitler did and how wrong the Americans were in the retelling of the events leading up to and including World War II. We talked together often, late into the night, long after Hita and everybody else had gone to bed. I had once been an ardent student of World War II, and we could talk details of battles, of the political intrigues and nonsenses that occurred in the Germany of the 1920's and 1930's.

It took me years to figure out he was neither a Nazi nor, for that matter, a German. But he had served, he had taken oaths of service, as a German soldier, and it simply didn't matter if the ultimate boss was Adolf Hitler. "In Treuen Fest" -- the Baltic credo: "In Loyalties Firm."

Within the Wehrmacht there was little room for a junior officer to maneuver. He had his fluency in Russian, however, and so he became an interpreter on the dreaded East front, where Germany in fact lost the war. Thousands of Germans died in the West after the Normandy invasion of mid-1944. Millions of Germans died in the vast reaches of Russia, from 1941 to the bitter end in 1945.

Papi saw it all, and told only a little of what he saw.

The war on the Eastern front turned German husbands, sons and fathers, a race that once boasted of poets and composers as its sole export, into a ragged mob of starving, freezing animals fending off an even more ragged mob of stinking, savage soldiers defending their homeland, their families. In the carnage and blood and mud, Ilmar one day drew a line between the core of him and the masters of war: he refused an order to execute a prisoner. He was an interpreter, not a henchman. In the usual course of events he should have been shot along with the prisoner, but the pace of war and bad communications made any discipline of Ilmar impossible, the war's fury outpaced even Nazi efficiency.

In a war that killed millions, he killed nobody. He risked his life not to take another life which was certain to be lost. He was the best of war heroes for that.

When the war started grinding to a halt, he and a buddy headed West in search of the Americans. Everybody knew the Americans would be vastly kinder than the rabid Russians. They threw away their uniforms and hid in a barn until an American jeep came by. He was placed in a large soccer stadium in Belgium, and as a prisoner of war he nearly starved to death.

When he got out of prison camp in 1947 he had one blanket and a case of diarrhea. The British, who had taken over from the Americans in their zone of occupation, released him rather than have the embarrassment of his dying in their presence from malnutrition.

He and a buddy went somewhere and got a big bowl of hot, steaming potatoes. When he told that story you could see those potatoes again in his eyes. How they must have tasted!

So there it is, Hita between her third and fourth years before she ever sees her father for the

first time.

I imagine this: during the war, the many nights of flight in strange homes and churches and camps and caves, Mami telling the children long stories about Papi, the father not there, just to keep him alive in their minds. She never knew where he was or whether he was even alive, until one day, after the war, she receives a letter from a close friend in Berlin, a woman everybody called Aunt Eia. Eia was rambling along in the letter, and as if in an afterthought, she writes "...oh, yes, and by the way, Ilmar was here briefly and was able to leave a sausage..." And then on she wrote about something else. Mami, of course, is ecstatic, telegrams fly back and forth, and magically, the family is reunited, unscathed (unless you count the night when the children come out of a bomb shelter to discover that a bomb had fallen on Grandma; she had run back into the house for a trifle and was blown to bits).

Papi got a job at an American PX. He could get cigarettes and candy for the kids from the generous G.I.'s, and eventually he was close to the pipeline that shipped down-and-out Germans to America. One day a family that was scheduled to leave for Minnesota opted out at the last minute. With only a day or two to get ready (what's to pack?) they left Germany for a strange, flat prairie of corn and cornball people.

He never really did all that well, but he provided. He just couldn't get into the back-slapping, how-the-hell-are-ya way of doing business in America, he was modest and didn't climb the corporate ladder. He did some god-awful job in an insurance company, and he turned gray in his hair, his face, his teeth. He became a gray man.

Still, he'd enjoy a good joke. His laugh was sometimes boyish, he'd open his mouth wide even if it had food in it, and then he'd be quick to control it. He'd cover his mouth with his hand.

He'd dance well, too, but always stiff, always just so.

And he'd love to listen to schmaltzy piano music on the record player, awful saccharine German piano music, and that old Riga world would come along watering up in his eyes, he'd hold his cigarette elegantly, daintily at the ends of his finger tips, and you'd see the purple signet ring on his finger, the one with the family crest on it.

Hans wears that ring now. He was really glad when I could get another one like it made for his son, Todd, when I last visited the only town in the world where they still make that kind of ring, in Idar-Oberstein in Germany.

To their children Ilmar was Papi, Elinor was Mami. I knew Hita three years before we got married. In German there are two kinds of "you", the polite form "Sie" and the familiar form, "Du", used with friends, family, God and dogs. For three years they would say only "Sie" to me, even though they had to accept the fact that in America people start first-naming it up right away. So I was "Larry", yes, but still "Sie", and they were to be called "Herr von Mende" and "Frau von Mende."

But they liked me, I think right away. I spoke a flawless German, which I must say is still, for a world that likes grades and quizzes and so on, my best achievement, both because it is hard to fool foreigners about origin (Germans think I'm German), and also because at age 14 I taught myself the language, and with that tool in hand I got to go to Switzerland as an exchange

student at age 17, and all that changed my whole life, as did the fact that my future in-laws thought I was terrific because I could speak German, and it mattered to Hita very much what her parents thought. In our very first excited telephone conversation after our very first sit-down at coffee together, outside of the French class where I met her, one of Hita's first sentences was: "You'll like talking with my Dad, he likes to philosophize and knows a lot, too." I especially warmed to that last part, "too." I had been showing off in the French class, trying to impress her with how smart I was, and it had worked.

But Mami (I got to call her that after the wedding, my first few "Mami's" and "Papi's" being as awkward as a fart in church), Mami never forgave me for not making a big deal announcement about Hita's and my engagement to be married. I had simply asked Hita to marry me and she said yes, and I figured that was what you do to get engaged, and that was it. So when I, in a silly but at-the-time serious confrontation between Hita and me on the one side and Papi and Mami on the other, sat down at the von Mende dining room table to have it out, I blurted out somewhere in there that "Hita is, after all, my fianc,e." Then, like the ceiling had just caved in, Mami shouts "Oh, well, she is, is she, I don't recall that we were ever told that, or that it was in any way announced!" And there it was, the real reason for all the posturing and commotion: Larry-boy had not spun out a waltz and a toast at the foot of the long stairway, with proper blessings and permissions and a party and so on. I had fucked up. So, alas, there was nothing to be done for it. Hita would be a Johnson, the "von" gone.

Mami, you can look down from Heaven now and be glad. She has resumed the name you gave her, the one she has always kept on her paintings: Hita von Mende. It truly looks better than the one she took from me, the three words with a little dip in the middle, with the small "v".

The funny thing about it, that "von". When I was again an exchange student, in 1964-1965 at the height of the Cold War, and in the very center of it in West Berlin at the Free University (A CIA-funded transplant of a Berkeley campus, not far from where the lions and elephants had escaped in 1945 to terrify my future wife's mother) -- when I was there I met an old dowager of a woman, a former countess or baroness of Mami and Papi's old world of Riga. Riga was a goofy place in that, in 1909, the year Papi was born, it was the Czar's Russia but also Latvia, with its capital, Riga, a mixture of Russians, Latvians, Poles, Jews -- and Baltic Germans. In the 11th or 12th century, a Christian order, the Teutonic Knights, were sent into the wilderness of what are now the Baltic countries of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, to civilize the heathen living there (I think they worshipped rocks or fish, something like that), and so the Germans established themselves.

The Germans were morally superior and pushy even then. If you didn't go for the brotherly love of The Prince of Peace, Our Lord Jesus Christ as served up by the Teutonic Knights, by Jove they'd kill you. No fooling around.

And these Germans were busy doing more than just converting pagans. They found it easy to procreate in large numbers, build cities and start a robust trade in the Baltic cities, linking harbors like Riga with other bustling German towns like Lübeck and Hamburg and Bremen. Riga also became renown for its University and its Protestant theologians. Serious Germanic stuff in a stew of Slavic lethargy.

The Germans in the Baltics came to develop their own accent and colorful variations in their use of the German language. It's strange to say so, but I always think of the Baltic accent as

having the same slurred, lazy melody of our Deep South English. Plantations and mint juleps along the Duna, Riga's river to the sea. Gone With The Wind as the Russian serf comes back to Ol' Massa, and Scarlet von Hara digs in, today's another day, sweat and dirt on the forehead.

During World War II, when the Baltic Germans were all kicked out of the Baltic States, they felt they had lost everything, even when resettled in Germany. And they had lost everything. The Baltic Germans seek each other out when they come to a strange place, until recently there were Baltic German newspapers and Baltic German balls and a Baltic German Verein (association) in many cities around the world where you could go to find other displaced souls. They were unique people: they all spoke fluent Russian, Latvian (or Lithuanian or Estonian), they ate Russian food and drank vodka stored in the freezer part of the refrigerator, and they observed the great wonders of the Russian Easter. They never saw themselves as Germans but as Baltic Germans. In Treuen Fest -- a breed apart.

So, anyway, there I am, a wide-eyed American in Berlin at this Countess or Baroness So-and-So's tiny apartment in Cold War Berlin, Brezhnev had just seized power and Khrushchev had been deposed. To scare off the Americans from trying anything hasty at this shaky period of transition, Russian MiGs flew low and threateningly over West Berlin, leaving sonic booms and the scream of jet engines overhead. I could see the pilots' faces in their cockpit canopies. American tanks rolled down the Potsdamer Chaussee, the big street outside my dorm. President Johnson reaffirmed the American commitment to defend freedom at the Berlin Wall, even if it meant world war.

It was exciting and I loved it and I loved being pals with Kuno, the son of an old friend of the von Mende family. He took me to Baltic German functions and taught me how to be a better stiff and polite person. He would greet me at the door with a hair net on, all the more to make his sleek hair stay plastered down to his head. I loved shit like that then, being this cool European guy. I held my Pall Mall cigarettes at the tips of my index and middle fingers, just like Papi, and practiced looking bored and world-weary.

So it was Kuno who took me to the Countess or Baroness So-and-So. She had an enormous presence in the midst of a squalid apartment building's one-room flat. In one corner was a huge samovar, far too much of a space hog for this frail woman's apartment. And she had on this wildly luxuriant shawl, and jewelry all over her. She had on display all the wealth still left her from a former life, the richness of which must have been unimaginable. She had, as she was only too glad to tell you, lost whole estates to the Bolsheviks (they were never "the communists"; a Baltic German could wrap more venom around the syllables in Bol-she-veek-en).

And she had known the "Mende's", as she called them, as, it seems, every Baltic German of that generation living in Riga knew every other Baltic German living in Riga. And so I said, "You mean the von Mende's, don't you?"

And she said sniffily: "Oh, well, I guess you could say that, but they were, you know, only *Verdienstadel*" ("nobility of service"). You see, Hita's great-great grandfather was a doctor, and during a particularly bad epidemic of something like smallpox or typhus he had exposed himself to infection himself in order to tend to the many sick and dying when other doctors took cover, waiting for the mini-plague to pass by. For this the Czar gave him an *atta-boy* with essentially the equivalent of a knighthood. That meant he could come to the Czar's parties and

be seen in the salons of the nobility, if he wanted to, but there wasn't the stuff of real aristocracy: rubles, land, and yes, souls. So the first von Mende was probably too damn busy as a doctor to make much of the deal. And so the wizened dowager simply refused to recognize the "von" in my fiancée's name.

Give me the *Verdienstadel* any time. Nobody was ever whipped for not bowing low enough, no one labored for bread and had to give it up to a Mende. To you Heinrich von Mende, I say: "Way to go!"

That "von", disdained by communist and countess alike, was slapped on what is otherwise an ordinary name in German: Mende. And yet to me, for one woman's life, my future ex-wife's mother, it was the center of what defined her, and through her, her children. If nothing else, it stamps all of them with a mark as distinct as the signet ring that passes only down the male line: a mark of distinction, but also of separateness. Pride, and the price of pride: a cold zone in the soul, untouchable and untouching.

In a kind of *Back to the Future* replay, I wonder what would have happened if the good doctor Heinrich had hidden out in the wine cellar until the mini-plague blew over. He would have left a world of just plain Mendes off the hook, to be freer, perhaps, but also, perhaps, less distinctive.

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