

My First Home

Ivan A. Backer

Until I was ten years old my family and I – mother, father, brother Frank and a maid who cooked and cleaned – lived in a spacious five room apartment in Prague on a fairly busy thoroughfare. The fourth floor could be reached either by a slow elevator or by running up the stairs. I got great satisfaction in taking the stairs and beating my parents who took the elevator. I was breathless when I entered our unit but glad to be home. As I entered the foyer I faced a long, wide carpeted hall. Opposite the door a window looked out on a small courtyard lined with white bricks where there were always many pigeons and the noise of their cooing was both penetrating and soothing. Slightly to the left was a narrow pantry that led to the kitchen from which the aroma was always inviting. Where it always smelled good. The smell of the soup which was served almost daily was pungent and whet my appetite. After arriving home after school, it was my first stop for a glass of milk so cold that I could feel it trickle down all the way to my stomach.

I usually turned left in the hallway, going through my mother's bedroom to the room that I shared with Frank. Beside the two beds, one of which was folded up every morning, there was a round table covered with oil cloth in the center where we four family members ate lunch every day. In those days everyone came home at noon from the office and from school. The hot soup, often with dumplings, was a staple, as was the flavorful, thick, dark bread that is so characteristically Czech. After lunch father stretched out on the sofa in the same room for a 20-minute nap, punctuated by loud snores.

All my toys were in a large wardrobe in my room and I loved to play with my erector set with my friend, George, from whom I was practically inseparable. We built huge buildings, the higher and more complicated the better. In another part of the room was our gramophone on which I first heard the song of the Toreador from the opera, Carmen, and I played it often, singing along lustily. My brother who is eight years older was seldom home until late evening so I had the room to myself. The view outside was in the back of the building and frequently I surveyed the apartments opposite and the small gardens which separated the buildings. There were a few trees to break up the urban landscape and each building had its little plot of land. Some were cultivated while others simply afforded a place where people could meet, sit and talk.

The one bathroom we all shared was next to my room, but luckily the toilet had a separate cubicle off the hallway. My brother would often occupy it for a long time to the annoyance of the next person who wanted to use it. That was also true of the bathroom where my father enjoyed luxuriating in a hot bath tub and taking a long time, especially it seemed when my mother was waiting to come in.

I did not go to the other wing of the apartment often. There was the library with a table for light suppers and snacks and the all-important radio around which we tensely listened to Hitler's threatening and frightening speeches. Next came the formal living room that was seldom used except for my hated practice sessions on the stately grand piano placed there. One passed through to the formal dining room, again used sparingly, but it contained the sofa-bed on which my father slept. The smallest room was occupied by our live-in maid. Her room scarcely had enough space for her bed and a dresser with a meager window looking out over the small uninviting courtyard. I wondered how anyone could live there, but for me it was strictly off limits and I don't think that I was in it more than once or twice. So many cherished memories of my tranquil childhood are embedded in that apartment I called home for almost ten years.