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# An Awakening

I am an American.

The words surge proudly from the depths of my soul because I know for a surety what they mean...

We were eight; father, mother, and six children, ages ten months to twelve, when we left the United States, anticipating the delights of Europe, with scarcely a pain at parting. A military family, we were well traveled and travel weary. We called Provo, Utah our home, and our roots were reaching down there after many nomadic years. But the allure of Old World pleasures enticed us overseas for our final tour.

My initial impression of Germany was of damp, bone chilling cold, slippery, narrow, cobble stone streets and sparkling shop windows full of multitudinous “I’d like to haves.” As we clopped through the town of Gelnhausen where we would live for the next three years, I visualized Nazi storm troopers marching through town, pounding at the door of some ill-fated person, and I felt fear. But it soon passed for the war was many years over and this Germany was vastly different. How our family enjoyed the Saturday morning sampling sprees through that picturesque town! We stopped at every meat shop (those wursts!), bakery (those tortes!) bratwurst stand (those sausages!), department store (those prices!), and cheese shop (yuk! those smells!!). After a few gourmandizing jaunts like that, I bowed out in deference\furriness to my stomach, and it was a year before I could walk into another bakery or look a bratwurst in the face (rear?).

Within two months we had made trips to Nurnberg’s Kriskindlemarkt, to France, and, during the New Year’s weekend to Switzerland, where we bear witness to seeing bumper-to-bumper ski traffic across most of the country’s girth. But my enthusiasm was not dampened for that glistening, blue and white, chalet-dotted country.

In the spring, I heroically drove to Paris with a fellow artist for my initiation into “adventure training.” I hardly slept the first night for fear of white slavers breaking into our hotel room. But the Louvre and Versailles and the French cuisine and successful attempts at communicating, using my high school French,

soothe my anxious nerves.

Greedy for more foreign fare, our whole family traveled to Holland via Belgium in one day during the tulip season. But, alas, our only reward was hyacinths, for it was a late spring. In the summer we highlighted the year with a camping caper to fairy-tale Bavaria, Venice, Rome, Pisa (you know, with the leaning tower), the Riviera, and all stops in between. Rome wasn't built in a day, they say, but we did see it in one! May I add, do not judge a man until you have put up his tent nine times in two weeks with six children.

I do not know with whom I was competing, but I had an insatiable appetite for experiencing every painting, fountain, museum, cathedral, antique shop, sculpture, castle, flea market, park, palace, garden, cafe, hotel, restaurant, train, subway, crystal factory, candle factory, alabaster factory, wood carving factory --- pant, pant --- in all of Europe, and by gosh, the whole world! My Bible was *Europe on \$5.00 a day*. I took every tour possible, accompanied by a child or two. I could even write a song --- Berlin, Fulda, Frankfurt, Strasbourg! Bern, Vienna, Amsterdam, Luxembourg! Brussels, Dover, Geneva, Heidelberg! One night my husband and I drove frenziedly across three countries to hop a ferry over the Channel to board a train up to London to hail a taxi to get to a hotel to spend all of a day and a half there. We dashed through the city, nervously sampling anything British which happened our way.

I'm sure I could have made every tourist attraction within a 700-mile radius of our home if I hadn't been indecorously retired by the pending arrival of my seventh child. Still, I managed trips to Spain, the French Alps, and much more of Germany, Switzerland, and France.

You may have gathered by now that I did not sit on an army post twiddling my thumbs while imperiously looking down on my foreign hosts. I really loved the whole idea of seeing new places and meeting new people. And I loved Europe. Our family were the proverbial puppy dogs who sought approval and friendship of any foreigner who would pat us on the heads and throw us a crumb of conversation, usually in our own language, I must regretfully add. I took every opportunity to observe these people, especially the Northern Europeans. They seemed very jolly in spite of their regimentation. Their rosy cheeks were a tribute to their love of walking outdoors in all kinds of weather. It appeared that every single person was born with a green thumb because I saw no house or apartment without windows full of plants; gardens were everywhere. Their industriousness was admirable. The grooming of the older people was spotless, although the

young people looked rather sloppy. Their landscapes resembled neatly patterned patchwork quilts, and each small piece of land was cherished and carefully cultivated. The mossy forests and crumbling castles reminded me of my childhood fairy-tale books. And over it all hung something indefinable, perhaps medieval, perhaps atmospheric, but somehow different --- different from anything I had ever known. Even the people ---- what is it? --- I struggled to put my finger on this elusive differential which distinguished the people from Americans.

At first, everything European was somehow better than the American counterpart. Oh, the culture of these people, we enthused. How superior to our own neon brashness! But I changed my outlook sooner than did my husband. A conversation between us may have sounded like this:

He: We could sure learn a lot from these people.

I: Oh yeah. We could learn how to push people off the sidewalks.

He: Look at their towns, their countrysides, their forests! Where do you see any trash? I'd rather buy something German because it won't fall apart the first year.

I: All they care about is our money. And after all we have done for them.

He: They've got real culture --- operas, concerts, classical music.

I: I'll admit the music is beautiful, but it's two hundred years old! What music do their young people like? Where is the center of art today? Who do they copy in their dress? What dances do they do? It's all from America Our music, our art, our dances, our blue jeans. Even their kids dress up like cowboys and Indians.

He: What about their restaurants?

I: OK. Their restaurants *are* better. But....

There I was, defending my country and wondering why. For I had to admit some feelings of shame for my countrymen. We lived on the Army Kaserne, which I can best describe as a combination of *Peyton Place* and *West Side Story*. We were surrounded by some of the worst of America. Drug users and drunkards --- "heads and juicers" --- fought over which was the quickest escape from reality. We fell asleep to the music of crashing beer bottles sailing through barracks windows to

windows to the street below; to men being dragged into the dispensary screaming from the horrors of a “bad trip” while the blare of acid rock threatened to burst our ear drums. On weekends the rock groups playing at the Officer’s Club competed with the brawls in the barracks for the highest decibel count. I often mused that hell must have the same sounds. It was suicidal to walk alone after dark. And we learned to avoid the woods on our Kaserne after my son and his friends found a murdered soldier’s body there. Racial tension threatened to break into rioting and sometimes did. There was adultery, gossip galore, thievery, rape, murder, mugging, and obscenities all in our little corner of the world. I deplored our wanton wastefulness, our fascination with violence, our beer cans and garbage strewn about like flower petals, our garish lights and music, our loud noise, and our sloppy appearance in public. Parts of our culture turned me off.

Many fellow Americans were quick to point out all our wrongs, heading the list with racial problems. But they forgot that we were agonizing to remove the impurities from our melting pot to produce a stronger alloy of harmony. We had come so far, so fast, against so much. Then the news media begun untangling the web of Watergate before the eyes of the world. We watched our dollar fall in value as other nations lost faith in us. My inner voice cried out for my beautiful country. What was happening to her while I watched helplessly from across the sea? I had a vision of America shimmering in the midst of blue-green waters far out of my reach.

Often in the middle of a group of people, I would find myself trying to figure out what it could possibly be that made Americans so easy to identify. Why, in spite of all their faults, did I love them so passionately? Why was I so proud of them? They laughed and joked with ease, were so self assured, so open. Maybe the difference was that American sense of humor, born of freedom. Maybe it was our ability to open up to strangers, taking for granted that everyone must like us. Or, what about the infinite charity to those less fortunate? I knew for a fact that our wive’s club gave parties for the German orphans and old folks at Christmas. Perhaps it was our casualness, our willingness to accept the individual on his own merit. I knew these traits attracted many Europeans to the point of their wanting to be Americans, too. All these characteristics, and many others made us what we were. It had to do with the spirit. And I could color the American spirit, it would be more than red, white, and blue. I would choose many warm colors for the friendliness and charity, laughter and fun. I would choose blues and greens for courage, honor, and justice; and white for our Puritan heritage which keeps the scales tipped in favor of morality. I would have to smudge it up some with blacks and grays and clashing colors to show our imperfections. But finally, I would set a

a bright lamp within to signify our glorious freedom, which springs from a divine source. As long as that light shines, our spirit will be a beacon to the world. More than our overabundant riches, more than our vast fertile loveliest of lands, more than our skyscrapers and our biggest and best of everything, it was our beautiful spirit that I loved so.

Once in a while I attended the rat-infested, soda-pop-sticky, drafty, old building which we used as a movie theater to see one of the halfway decent movies which passed our way. I was less than thrilled to sit there with the hooting, cat calling GI's and teenagers, but it was that or nothing, so I stuck it out. Always, before the show began, they ran a short film of scenes from the States while the Star Spangled Banner played. And never once --- not one single time! --- could I watch old glory flying in the breeze without feeling chills of pride and unsuppressed tears of gratitude. There in that beat-up theater, amidst all that was wrong with my country, I thanked our Father in Heaven for seeing to it that I was born an American.

They are violent and gentle, wasteful and full of charity, vain and friendly, lazy and industrious, stupid and wise. They are ugly and they are breathtakingly beautiful. They are the worst; and they are the best.  
They are Americans.  
And I am an American.

This article was published in the 1976 PROVO PATRIOTIC READER - a book of selected patriotic articles chosen from all those submitted, by residents of Provo, to the Provo and Utah County Bicentennial Commission as the people celebrated the 200th Anniversary of the United States of America. Copies of the book are of significant historical value.

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