

Face-to-face after 38 years

Veena Gomes-Patwardhan

“You can’t stay in your corner of the forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes.” That was A.A. Milne writing in one of his Winnie-the-Pooh books in the late 1920s. Well, after almost four decades of exchanging hundreds of letters and scores of greeting cards via airmail and then with the dawn of the internet era switching to email, I decided to follow Milne’s advice and flew across continents from my end of the globe to meet my German pen-pal Renate for the first time, and a few years later, my American pen-pal Connie.

We three had started by writing gushing, sweetly naïve missives to each other as 12-year old schoolgirls after I had come across Renate’s and Connie’s addresses in the pen-pal pages of Sunshine magazine, a popular monthly for school children in the 60s. In Renate’s case, this was at a time when you had to add West Germany at the end of her address, it being around 25 years before the Berlin Wall was brought down. Along the way, we made vague but sincere promises to meet one day. Then when our children finished school we realized the clock was ticking, and resolved to meet before we became grandmothers at least. Renate and I managed to pull this off, but by the time I met Connie, she already had four grandkids.

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With Renate outside a Black Forest farm house.

I met Renate in 2002 when Fall colours were at their peak in the western world. That year, I had decided to make a stopover of four days in Germany along with my mother en route to the US to visit my sisters. By then, no longer the skinny schoolgirls we were when we started off, we had... er... got a little rounder, let's say. Also, when we actually came face-to-face I was so glad that neither of us was like those heavily made up women desperately trying to look young.

A couple of weeks earlier, I downloaded a few German phrases like *Guten Morgen*, *Guten tag*, *Gute Nacht*, *Wie Geht's*, *Bitte*, and *Danke* from the internet.

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Hitler! thanks to Robert Wise's classic "The Sound of Music". I brushed up on my German every day without fail and continued practicing the phrases even on the Swiss Air flight to Zurich much to the amusement of the helpful air hostess who stopped a few times while passing down the aisle to help me get the pronunciations right.

When we entered the arrivals section at Zurich, standing right in the front row of the little group of people waiting to receive their guests, I saw a beaming Renate holding up a lace-edged cutout of a heart with the words "Welcome Veena and Caroline" with her handsome husband Kurt by her side. The strange part was when we joyfully hugged each other it didn't feel like we were meeting for the first time. I felt I was meeting someone I had known almost all my life, which in fact was true. The letters and photographs down the years had made sure of that. And this is something I learnt from my foreigner friends: you can get to know what a person is like from the letters they write.

A two-hour drive northwards from Zurich past stunning Swiss landscapes brought us to Endingen where Renate lived. This charming wine town in southwest Germany nestles in the Rhine valley and is encircled by the thickly wooded Kaiserstuhl Mountains with the famed Black Forest stretching across its eastern side from northeast to southeast.

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Edingen Market Square.

The next morning, after a hearty breakfast with Renate and her family, we set off for a train ride on the “Rebenbummler”, considered to be one of the most beautiful museum railway lines in Germany. Since we were in wine country, it seemed just right to commence our sightseeing with this magnificent ride through the vineyards of the Kaiserstuhl which rose in steps along the sides of the mountains. We learnt that it was the lava flowing out of the now extinct Kaiserstuhl volcano that gave the surrounding regions their rich volcanic soil and some of the best vineyards in Germany.

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Cobble-stoned Freiburg Street.

In the evening we strolled through the pretty cobbled streets around Endingen's market place lined by shops and cafes and historic buildings with window boxes bursting with colourful flowers adorning their facades. The day ended with a visit to a local pub which, packed to the rafters with patrons, was bristling with energy and *joie de vivre*.

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Town Square, Freiburg.

On a drive through the Black Forest the next day, the lush panoramas floating past us literally took my breath away. The winding route was flanked by rolling hills and dense forests of evergreens interspersed with vivid splashes of autumn colours. We drove through picturesque towns and verdant valleys dotted with wooden farm houses with steeply sloping roofs and masses of flowers leaning out of every window, till we got to Lake Titisee. Though there was no time for boating, we checked out the souvenir shops crammed with an array of wooden cuckoo clocks and other artefacts. Before leaving we settled down at one of the bustling cafes there and tucked into, what else but, luscious slices of Black Forest cake.

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starting our tour on foot by visiting the town's most distinctive landmark, the towering Münster, a thirteenth century cathedral. An interesting discovery was an Indian restaurant named Jaipur where Renate took me for lunch, a place with a sort of east-meets-west kind of décor and which Renate's college-going daughter often frequented. We ordered a platter of fragrant saffron pilaf with a mutton curry. It was so delicious that both of us wiped our plates clean. But the bigger surprise element was learning that Raja, Renate's regular German-speaking waiter at this Indian restaurant, was a Pakistani!

Meeting my American pen-pal Connie for the first time in 2009 was an equally memorable experience. After flying into Minneapolis, I had taken a bus to the port city of Duluth, the nearest stop to her town, Virginia. Since her husband Ray, a heart patient, didn't drive long distances, and she herself, like me, couldn't drive, Connie had promised to get someone or the other to drive her to Duluth to pick me up. The 'someone or the other' turned out to be her sprightly octogenarian parents who, having been witness to how our long distance friendship had grown over the years, were as eager to meet me as Connie. Like a true-blue Goan I relished the sea-food lunch we had at the Red Lobster, after which Connie's Dad Wayne took a small detour so I could get a good look at the gigantic Lake Superior before hitting the pine tree lined road leading to Virginia.



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The friendship with both pen-pals has endured despite the separation of thousands of miles. It's been a gratifying ride so far and the journey still continues.



Bailey Lake, outside Connie's senior community apartments.

A Mumbai-based Goan freelance writer and science journalist, Veena is also the Assistant Editor of Let's Travel, a fortnightly newspaper. Her work has been published in national, international, and online publications, and in anthologies like Inside Out and Chicken Soup for the Indian Soul – Brothers and Sisters. She blogs about the senior years and Goan mandos at www.veenapatwardhan.com

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