

Helga's
Biography
As Told by
The GrandFather Clock

by Bettina von Schweinitz

Introduction

On 9 March 1937, Helga (née Pörtner) von Schweinitz was born to Rudolf Pörtner marry Ella Gößling in Herford Germany. In their house at Fürstenaustraße 10, there was a large Grandfather clock that was originally purchased by Johanne Gößling, the mother of Ella.

This is a historical biography of Helga and her families lives as told through the Grandfather clock.



Grandfather clock with Johanne Gößling

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The Adventures of Grandfather Clock

This was submitted to the writing club on 20 October 2022.

This is a summation of the adventures of the Grandfather clock that will be further expanded in the following chapters.

I began my adventurous journeys in Bielefeld, Germany (The City That Does Not Exist) and eventually found myself in Pflugerville, Texas USA (the town “Between a Rock and a Weird Place”).

I was original built in Bielefeld Germany by a clock maker and a carpenter. Probably in the late 1890’s. Who this craftsman was, has been lost to history. After I was made, I stood in a show room among many of my kind. Our hands were set for different times, so that the show room was always filled with the chime music of one or more clocks ringing in the hour. I would loudly ring my chimes every time my hour would arrive. I found that every hour the number of chimes I rang would increase until I reached 12 and then the next hour the chimes would begin again at 1.

I was purchased by Johanne Gößling and moved to Herford, a town 30 kilometers away. This being the 1890’s that journey was made by horse and wagon. I was placed upright in the wagon and strapped in place. I stood there proudly and look around at the idyllic pastoral countryside, swaying slightly from side-to-side, listening to the clop-clop sound of the horse, and the gentle urging voice of the driver.

Upon arriving at Fürstenaustraße 10, Herford, two strapping young men came out of the house to help carry me in. I was placed in the living room on the ground floor in the corner. From this corner I could see the whole living room and outside through the large picture window into the back yard. So different than the cramped show room I was used to. But I was immediately made welcome. One of the young men, Rudolf Pörtner, set my hands to the correct time, pulled up my weights, set my pendulum swinging, and gently washed the travel dust from my face glass. Johanne Gößling was there and lovingly stroked my walnut sides as she showed me to her husband Gustav Gößling. Quickly more adults and children showed up, and the room was full of people admiring me. The time was just right, the hour had come, I loudly chimed. The children were excited and the adults where in awe of my deep voice. I had found my family.

Time went by as I stood in this corner watching over this family. I saw Rudolf Pörtner marry Ella Gößling, one of the daughters of Johanne and Gustav. The new

couple moved into the upstairs floor, but would often visit the ground level living room. More children grew up and were married. New children were born and played on the floor in front of me. During the day there would be company, I could listen to wonderful conversations, and of course contribute on the hour with the chimes. Before bedtime, Gustav would check on me to make sure I had the correct time, was wound correctly, and then put me in my night setting. I could show the time, but my chimes were muted for the night. I did not mind, my tick-tock would lull the children to sleep, and all night I could look out the picture window and watch the back yard. There were fruit trees waving their limbs, domestic animals moving around, stars shining in the sky, and of course the moonlight glowing. I discovered that once during the sunlight I would chime all 12 times, and again once during the moonlight I would chime all 12 times. Life was good.

First there were heavy curtains put over the windows, so I could no longer look at the moonlight. Then the ground shook and there were unbelievable noises. Louder than my chimes. What was going on? The family was tense and concerned. The conversation turned to subjects involving war, airplanes, bombs, air raid shelters, and family safety. Crates showed up and both Johanne and Ella were packing away China and other precious items. Then Rudolf and Gustav approached me. They put me in night mode (no chimes), unhooked my weights and pendulum, and stuffed my insides. I had been turned off. What was going on?

I was loaded into the back of a van and unceremoniously put onto my back. All around me and on top of me, they put the crates and other items. We were stuffed in the van like sardines. I felt the van move for quite some time. It was a smooth trip but dark. I could not tell how long because I had been turned off. How do you tell time with no weights and no pendulum?

Finally, the van stopped. We were unloaded and put into a corner of a barn. I felt blessed because they stood me upright again. But my weights and pendulum were left inside of me with the stuffing. I was still turned off. But being upright let me stand watch over all the other precious items that were stored around me. Through the slits in the barn walls, I could see the sunlight and then moonlight. I remembered what I had learned about the sunlight and moonlight cycle. In each cycle I used to do my 12 chimes one time. So now I counted these cycles. I could only count to twelve, so I had to keep restarting back at one. I restarted so many times, I even lost count of how many times I restarted. Now, I could only watch time go by; I was no longer able to tell time.

Then one day, a few strange men came into the barn. They picked me up and carried me out of the barn to a van. Again, I was unceremoniously put onto my back. And they packed all the crates around me. We were stuffed in the van like sardines. This time when the van moved, it was not a smooth trip, it would bounce violently up and down. I was worried that the China would break. The van stopped and the door where opened. All the crates were taken out. Finally, the men came for me. I was lifted out and stood upright. We were in front of Fürstenaustraße 10, Herford. I had come home.

I was carried into the house and placed back into the living room corner. Then Rudolf and Gustav approached me. They removed the stuffing, turned off my night mode (I could chime again), set me to the correct time, hooked up my weights and set my pendulum swinging. Johanne and Ella, removed all the barn dirt by waxing my walnut sides until they shined, and washing my face glass until it was clear. I was a Grandfather Clock again; I could tell time and ring my chimes loudly. Life was good.

1936 Rolf Pörtner

Submitted to the writing club on 28 February 2025

I am a Grandfather Clock that was original built in Bielefeld Germany, probably in the late 1890's. By 1936, I lived at Fürstenaustraße 10, Herford, Germany. I was standing in a corner of the living room on the ground floor in the corner. From this corner I could see the whole living room and outside through the large picture window into the back yard. From the very corner of my face, I could see slightly into the kitchen, enough to see people when they sat at the breakfast table. Time went by as I stood in this corner watching over this family. I saw Rudolf Pörtner marry Ella Gößling on 27 September 1927, and the arrival of their two children: their son Rolf on 28 June 1928 and their daughter Margret on 10 September 1930. During the day the children would play in front of me, company would sit around while discussing heavy subject, and of course I would contribute with my tick-tock and hourly chimes.

Rolf was a happy and inquisitive child. Full of energy and cheekiness. He tried very hard to be well behaved, he was never mean or hurtful, but he could not help himself. I saw him several times tease his younger sister enough to make her cry, then he would comfort her, and they would continue to play nicely together. Sometimes, when I could tell that Margret was about the cry, I would tick-tock louder to warn Rolf to stop teasing. Other times, when nobody was in the living

room, Rolf would stand on a chair and move my hands forward in time. Then Rolf would rush into the kitchen and tell the cook, Frau Köchin, that it was lunch time and he was hungry – where was his lunch! Frau Köchin, would take one look at my face (with the wrong time), and exclaim “Oh my, where has the time gone – come, I will make you a quick lunch.” Rolf was a growing boy and was always hungry.

Rolf would never set my hands back to the correct time. He was too busy with his next adventure. This would create a problem when Rudolf (Vatti or father) came home for his lunch. Vatti liked to take a quick nap after his noon meal. When he looked up at my face, he would exclaim “Oh my, where has the time gone – I have such a short time for my nap!” I wanted so badly to tell him that I was not showing the correct time, I would tick-tock louder to keep his attention. Luckily Rolf would usually walk into the living room at this time and state “Maybe the clock has the wrong time?” Vatti would draw out his pocket watch and say “Rolf, you are right, the clock is not correct. Would you like to help me correct the time?” Vatti would then lift up Rolf and let Rolf correct my hands. I enjoyed watching this loving Father and son moment.

Rolf’s birthday was on the 26th of June. Ella (Mutter or mother) liked to plan birthday parties very early. For Rolf’s that would begin in early June. So, on the 7th day of June 1936, Mutter, Frau Köchin, Tante (Aunt) Hilde, and Tante Hanna gathered in the living room. Rolf was going to be 8 years old. The ideas they had were so interesting that I almost missed seeing through the window Rolf come home and go into the backyard. The house had an extensive walled-in backyard that included the vegetable garden, fruit tree, fruit bushes, and various animals. This backyard was a wonderful place for children to play and have adventures. I watched as Rolf went up to the Gooseberry bushes and began to pick them. I thought, how nice of Rolf, picking sweet Gooseberries for the dinner’s dessert. Then I remembered, it was not the right time of year to eat Gooseberries, they were not yet ripe. Then again, it would not matter, Frau Köchin could make Gooseberry Jam instead. I watched as Rolf kept picking, and picking, then I realized, he does not have a container, he is eating what he is picking. Okay, he should be full soon, and then he will stop eating, he cannot continue forever. But Rolf just kept on picking and eating – this is not good; this will not end well. I tick-tocked louder. Frau Köchin mentioned that I seemed extra loud today, but no-one looked out the window. When it came time for me to ring the hour, I rang my chimes as loud as I could. Startled, Mutter looked me right in the face, but did not look out the window. Oh dear, I did not want to look out the window anymore, what else could I do but wait.

So, I waited. The birthday planners were still planning when Rolf walked into the living room. He went straight to Mutter and complained about a bellyache. Rolf was almost doubled over in pain. When Mutter asked why he thinks his belly hurts, much to my relief, he was very truthful and said that he had eaten lots of Gooseberries. Frau Köchin got up and said she would make Rolf some ginger tea, which should help. Mutter asked one of the Tante Hilde to go across the street and get Doctor Kupfernagel, their family doctor. The Tante Hanna left to find Vatti at his job and ask him to come home. Dr Kupfernagel came immediately, declared it as 'just a tummy ache' and for Rolf to stop complaining so much. What did Rolf expect after eating so many berries. Dr Kupfernagle diagnosed that the high fiber in the Gooseberries was causing the bellyache, and recommended that Rolf drink lots of very diluted ginger tea (lots of water) and take a few tablespoons of rapeseed oil (European name for Canola oil). This treatment should help the mass of fiber slide through the intestines. If the pain got worse or if the belly started to bloat, to take Rolf to the hospital. [Just a note here. In 1936, the medical world was still depending on homeopathic remedies. The sulfur drugs were just coming out. Penicillin had been discovered but was still not approved for use. In the USA that happened in 1945]

Rolf was laid on the couch with blankets over him. He had begun to shiver and moan. Vatti came home. Vatti and Mutter went into the kitchen, leaving Frau Köchin with Rolf. I could see them with their heads together and their hands wringing, while they whispered. Vatti came into the living room, and explained that the homeopathic treatment was not working and that Rolf's stomach seemed to be extended with bloat now. They were going to take Rolf to the hospital, and could Frau Köchin stay until Margret came home from school and then take Margret to the Spanier's next door. Their daughter Marion was a friend of Margret's. Mutter came in with her purse, Vatti picked up Rolf and they left. Frau Köchin sat on the couch and cried. I tried to tick-tock quietly.

We waited and waited. Margret came home. But she did not want to go next door. So, they both sat on the couch in their sadness. We waited and waited. Night came. Nobody set me to my night mode, so when I struck my chimes for the hours, I tried to do it quietly. Frau Köchin made a porridge for Margret but Margret only picked at it. Frau Köchin carried Margret to her own room and laid her down to sleep. Frau Köchin came back into the Living Room, opened my door, reached in, and moved my lever to Night Mode. Frau Köchin laid on the couch using the same blanket that used to cover Rolf. We all waited quietly.

At sun up, Vatti and Mutter came back – minus Rolf. Rolf had died early on 8 June 1936 of complications because the gooseberries had blocked his intestines.

Rolf: Autobiography entry written by Helga

My oldest brother, Rolf, was born on 26 June 1928. I would overhear Aunts and relatives talk about Rolf, saying that he was a happy and inquisitive child. But, that he was simple and not very bright. The house at Fürstenaustraße 10 had a extensive walled-in backyard that included gardens, fruit tree, fruit bushes, and various animals. This backyard was a wonderful place for children to play and have adventures. Just before his eighth birthday in 1936, Rolf went into the backyard and ate gooseberries. They were not yet ripe and he gorged himself. He developed a tummy ache. At the first visit, Doctor Kupfernagel declared it as 'just a tummy ache' and for Rolf to stop complaining so much. What did Rolf expect after eating so many berries. When 'just a tummy ache' did not go away Rolf was taken to the hospital. It was too late. He later died on 8 June 1936 of complications because the gooseberries had blocked his intestines. All through my life, relatives loved to talk about Rolf. When a significant event would occur, relatives would comment "Wenn Rolf das wüßte!" which translates to the English saying "If only Rolf knew about this, he would enjoy it!"

Pregnancy 1936-37 version 250706

On 8 June 1936, Rolf died at age 7, just a few days before his 8th birthday. He was the only son of Rudolf and Ella Pörtner. They still had a younger daughter Margret age 6. But a daughter can never take the place of a son. The household was in a state of morning, but life had to continue. I am a Grandfather Clock that was original built in Bielefeld Germany, probably in the late 1890's. In 1936, I live at Fürstenaustraße 10, Herford, Germany. I was standing in a corner of the living room on the ground floor in the corner. And from this corner, on the 7th and 8th of June, I witnessed the tragic events around Rolf death due to complications from over eating unripe Gooseberries.

Rudolf still went to his job as Stadtobersekretär (City Head Secretary of Herford). Ella went to her job as accountant in the local bank. Time just kept marching on. Friends and family still dropped by for Coffee and Cake and a good conversation. I enjoyed listening to the conversations. Especially when the cleaning Lady came, Frau Putz. Before she would start cleaning, she would sit down with everybody in

the house, drink a cup of coffee, and regale everybody with the latest jokes and gossip. She was a wonderful story teller, and her timing was perfect. Soon she would have everybody laughing and asking for more.

Then Frau Putz would finally begin to clean the house. I especially liked it when she would use her feather duster to clean my carved outer wooden casing. Her light feather touch would tickle my timbers. Then she would clean the soot from my glass face. The house had electricity for light, but no central heating system. Heat was provided by the fireplace which produced a lot of soot and dust in the air. While she was cleaning me, I felt the years melt away, and when she was done, I felt so young again, bright and shiny.

Frau Putz comical story telling was a welcomed relief from the sad and depressing news. The economy was in shambles, inflation was ramped, the effects of the Treaty of Versailles was oppressive, and in July 1936 Germany was joining the Spanish Civil War. Germany was siding with the Nationalist faction, led by General Francisco Franco. Not only was Germany sending troops, Germany was also sending the Luftwaffe. I could not believe that Germany was entering another war so soon after The Great War, which only ended in November 1918, less than 20years ago. Is this enough time to forget the devastating effects of a war? Both Ella and Rudolf grew up during the Great War, and both have fathers that were soldiers that were drafted into the conflict.

Another relief from the devastating news, was the Summer Olympics in Berlin, which began on 1 August 1936. Tante Hilde (sister of Ella) lived upstairs and her husband Onkel Hermann would come downstairs and join Rudolf in putting the Reemtsma Olympic cards they had collected into their special album. These cards came inside cigarette packs and depicted the athletes. They were very similar the Baseball cards that were being collected in the United States of America. Rudolf and Hermann would sit before the fireplace, puffing on their cigarettes, while reading the statistics on each card. The winning times for the Track and Field, especially by Jesse Owens. Or whether the famous figure skating legend Sonja Henie did a double or triple leap. I could not get enough of their conversation. Numbers, and lots of numbers, just my language, especially when the numbers concerned time.

Tante Hilde and Tante Hanna would often come to visit with Ella. In September of 1936, they were visiting when a Roma (Gypsie) came to the front door. I could hear Ella having a quiet conversation with the Roma at the door, then they both came into the room. Ella invited her to join the group and have coffee and cake.

The GrandFather Clock's story

The Roma explained that they had come for the fall harvest and were staying in their usual place just north of town, on the other side of the railroad tracks. The Roma then offered to tell everyone's fortune using Astrology and Tarot cards. Why not, Führer Hitler believed in Astrology and often referred to Tarot cards before making major decision. She asked Ella for her birthday for the Astrology and then laid out her Tarot cards. The first two cards were the Empress and the High Priestess. The Roma explained that these two cards indicated that Ella was pregnant or soon would become pregnant. There was silence. Then Ella exhaled quietly, "how could you know, I just today made an appointment with Dr Kupfernagel (their family doctor) because I have skipped a couple of months?" Ella implored Tante Hilde and Tante Hanna not to tell Rudolf yet, to let her tell her husband after the visit with the doctor.

Dr Kupfernagel confirmed that Ella was indeed pregnant. As time went by, Ella began to show the pregnancy. Friends and family commented that the shape of the belly indicated that they were going to have a boy. Ella's pregnancy belly was low and pear shaped. The final indicator was that Ella was constantly craving pickles and Bratwurst with lots of mustard. Definitely signs that the baby was a boy.

In early winter, Ella and Rudolf sat in front of the roaring fireplace and had a discussion about bring up a new baby. When Rolf and Margret were born in 1928 and 1930, Ella stayed home to care for the babies. They decided that Ella should again stay home, so in the new year she will give notice at the bank. They remembered that times were financial hard when Ella was not working. So, Rudolf was going to try and get a promotion. The position of Stadtinspektor (City Official, Inspector) was going to open soon. The current Stadtinspektor was retiring. Rudolf would be in charge of Education, Arts, and Cultural. The new position did come with risks. Because Stadtinspektor was a civil service with rank, Rudolf may have to become a NSDAP member [National Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei = Nazi] and take the Führereid (Hitler's Oath). They decided the extra pay was worth the risks, and only time would tell if this was a good decision.

Ella gave her notice at the bank and on 30 January 1937 Rudolf became the Stadtinspektor. On 9 March 1937 their daughter was born. They named her Helga Johanne Hildegard Pörtner. Helga was an adorable baby; plump, healthy and huggable, always showing a cheerful, if sometimes mischievous face,

But she was a girl!

The End

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The End

The GrandFather Clock's story