



Leaving New York for Germany on the *T.S. Bremen*, August 1970

The Fulbright Triptych: A Love Story

Renée Dinnerstein

August, 1970 . . . Simon and I standing on the deck of the *Bremen*, oompah band booming maudlin German music in the background, our families anxiously waving from the shore . . . we were off, on Simon's Fulbright fellowship, to the land of Dürer, of Bach, and of a terrible holocaust that practically annihilated the Jewish population. Excitements, expectation, confusion, guilt . . . all of these emotions were playing havoc within us.

For Simon, a twenty-seven-year-old Jewish artist who grew up in the post-World War II years, spending a year in Germany was more than the sum of its parts. We both found it almost impossible to have a conversation with a mature German without thinking, "Where were you? What did you do? What would you have done to me and my family?" But living in a small town, making new friends (our not-yet born daughter Simone Andrea was named after the two children of our new friends Gerlinde and Herbert Wenderoth) forced us to confront many of the complexities of human existence. Our own country was dropping napalm on villages in Vietnam, as was often brought to our attention by young Germans who we met at the art school and in the village.

That year, I saw in person the art that I had only previously seen in books. Simon and I were overdosing on art and it was wonderful! Van Eyck in Frankfurt. Dürer in Nuremberg. Grünewald in Kolmar. Simon even got special permission, with the help of the Fulbright Commission, to enter into the then-East German city of Gotha to view one of the only original existing Dürer copperplates. I got to go along on that complicated but exhilarating trip.

Simon often spoke with me about his desire to put all of these experiences and thoughts together in a major statement in some way that was personal and not pedantic. Although he had a grant in graphics and had not, since art school, done any significant painting, as crazy and perhaps unrealistic as it seemed to me at the time, a monumental triptych was what he envisioned. In April, he ordered the wood and, without any preliminary studies, began work on the central panel.

The painting took three years to complete. In August, the unfinished panels were transported by ship to Brooklyn, New York, and, with the financial support of the Staempfli Gallery, Simon continued to work on this project until its completion in 1974. *The Fulbright Triptych* was the centerpiece of his first one-man exhibition at Staempfli Gallery in 1975.

This past August, my now grown-up daughter, her husband Jeremy, my seven-year-old grandson Adrian, Simon, and I made a seven-hour pilgrimage to Penn State University (our rental car stopped working along the way, slowing down our progress) to visit with this painting that has been so much a part of our family history. As I stood before it, I noticed something that I had not thought of before. At the top of the left panel, Simon included some photos that we took on one of our first dates, in 1964. We rode on the Staten Island Ferry and when we arrived at the terminal we found a machine where one could take inexpensive little pictures. Then my eyes skimmed all the way over to the right panel. At the very top, Simon included the same kind of photos, only this time they were of Simon, myself, and two-year-old Simone. There it was! A story of our life from when we met until the completion of the painting. I imagine that each person will see something very particular or personal in this painting. One could concentrate on the history of art, on the juxtaposition of the printer's studio with the painted image, with the scene of a young American family in a foreign land, but for me this painting is the ever-lasting, monumental story of our love and of our voyage together through life.



c. 1974