

Travel Notes

Inside a 15th Century House in Zürich

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Whenever I went to the old quarters of Zurich, I always wondered how it would be like to live in a place where the houses are at least four- to six-centuries old. In my aimless wanderings around every nook and cranny of this "little big city," I was simply content with the notion that I was walking along the ancient narrow cobblestone streets, surrounded by shingle-roofed houses that formed an important part in the history of Zurich. I couldn't ask for anything more than that, indeed.

Then one day, on 21 May 2005 to be exact, I was given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of going inside a house built in 1425 in the middle of Zurich's oldest district!

With me at that time was Werner, the father of my friend Thomas who had invited me for a two-month vacation in Switzerland. Thomas and his friend Aek had gone to Salzburg for the week-end, and I was staying with the elderly Müller couple, Werner, 84, and his wife, Esther, 69, in their home in Zurich. That Saturday morning, Werner was eagerly showing me the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) and the Universität Zurich, two universities where he spent a greater part of his college education. After a good tour around the two campuses, which was a walk down memory lane for Werner, we then ambled down another quarter of the city where he eagerly explained to me some important establishments particularly related to the university district.

He led me down into one section of the city that he said was one of the Zurich's oldest quarters. While we were trying to find our way around a narrow uphill lane after crossing a square with a water fountain dominated by a sandstone statue of a wild horse, we bumped into an old resident of the city. He was walking his Labrador retriever along a narrow lane adjacent to the former residence of Zurich's lord mayors. I didn't realize until then that Werner possessed such an adventurer's heart, for he approached this old man with the pretext of asking for some directions.

The two old men talked amiably. I did not know what they were saying in German but I sensed that Werner charmed him so well because for whatever it was, this old man was very obliging enough in showing us around. I simply followed both of them as we made our descent into the sloping cobblestone street of Trittligasse. To my surprise, this old man opened the door of his apartment building at No. 19 and let us in.

Inside, Werner pointed out to me the year in which the house was built and first settled in, as printed in a frame that hung on the wall: 1425. Also on the wall of the small foyer hung a huge ancient map fronting an oil painting of a charming lady. We went inside an elevator so small and tight it looked like one of your grandmother's vintage closets. The elevator climbed up to the 5th floor and there we found ourselves in a low-ceilinged flat with a small window affording a fairly good view of the city of Zurich.

The old gentleman's flat is on the top floor with an open balcony, which I suspect is a new addition to the house. It was in that room that it finally dawned on me that I was actually inside a 15th century house, with most of the interiors still intact. The elderly gentleman led us to a few flight of carpeted steps going up the attic or penthouse converted into a salon, with a small balcony filled with plants, overlooking much of the good vista of Zurich.

I couldn't really believe my luck! Who would have thought that I would ever set foot in a house such as that? And who would have imagined that the man we bumped into would turn out to be a kindly old doctor who took extra training in Chinese medicine in Asia, willingly letting two strangers go up his apartment?

There are certain portions in the apartment which had been added within the last two to three centuries, but the old structure is preserved



Figure 1.
Entrance to No. 19
Trittligasse in one of
Zurich's oldest districts.

and intact. It looks small and narrow, with many small rooms and glass windows fastened with ironwork. The hallway is especially narrow and it connects to a circular wooden but carpeted staircase leading to the attic. There is one special room there where the old wooden flooring is perfectly preserved, as well as the painted design on the ceiling and the small square windows. We were told that that's what remains of the original quarter of the house. I guess it is no longer used as a sleeping quarter. There is an antique spinning wheel and some bric-a-brac that more or less rendered the room to be about six hundred years old.

In other parts of the house, I saw a variety of decorations that hung on the wall, such as pieces of metal engraved with family insignias, miniature animals, swords, and some curios which one often finds in an antique shop.

As for the rest of the apartment, paintings and pictographics hung alongside porcelain, some objets d'art, and what not. The attic-cum-salon looks fairly modern by 15th century standard. There's a grand piano filled with photographs and knick-knacks, a coffee table crowded with fine china and doilies, silver napkin holders, and candlesticks. Adjacent to it is a fireplace and a stack of books lined along the walls in one corner. You could read a fairly good selection of books which bespeak of a learned owner: Hans Küng, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Will Durant count among his favorite collections. There is also a 13-volume book on the history of art and architecture, selected works of William Shakespeare, and a host of books on theology and church history.

In one corner where you could see the Zurichsee and some important landmarks of the city, there's a small table surrounded by chairs. I suspect this is where the old doctor and his wife receive their guests for a glass of champagne which is a customary welcome exercise amongst Swiss hosts.

From the balcony, I could see the two towers of Grossmunster as well as the clock tower of Fraumünster loom amidst a clustering row of shingled roofs, somewhat reddish-brown in color now and redolent of centuries that have gone by.

While our host, who turned out to be Dr. J. Hulwyder, and Werner were chatting spiritedly in the small table and having generous servings of champagne, I managed to have a chance to look around the flat. I gawked at the objects I found on the tables and walls and took some photos of the view from the balcony, with the doctor's Labrador retriever following me around, yakking at my heels.

I browsed over a few volumes of the art books and passed my time flipping through the pages which explained the different characteristics of Byzantine, Romanesque, Baroque and Rococo, Renaissance and 19th century art. Shortly after Dr. Hulwyder's wife arrived, who also proved to be a kindly old lady, Werner and I bade goodbye to our host and left No. 19 Triftligasse.

When I reflect on that experience, I still get exhilarated to have been given the chance of seeing, up close, the private world of people who have inhabited these old establishments and who have carried with them the tradition and burden of history as they live about their fairly ordinary lives.



Figure 2. Dr. J. Hulwyder (left) opening a bottle of champagne for Werner Müller (middle) and this writer (right).

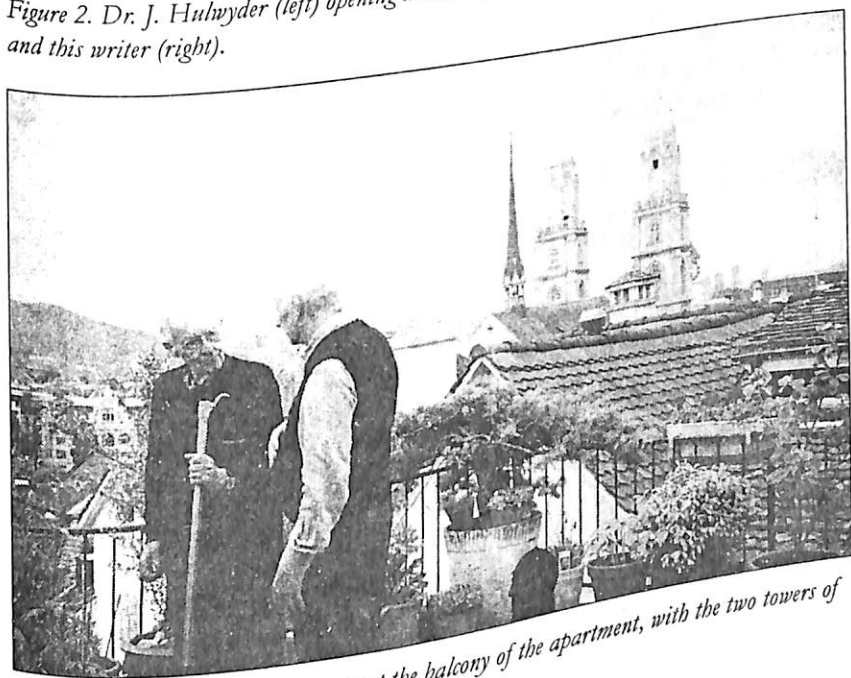


Figure 3. The two elderly gentlemen at the balcony of the apartment, with the two towers of Grossmünster seen in the background.

Maybe I am just a romantic at heart, but the three wonderful hours in the flat of Dr. J. Hulwyder filled me with gratitude and appreciation. According to Werner, not too many Swiss are like Dr. Hulwyder. They are often reserved and closed when it comes to entertaining strangers who simply want to "look around." How much more to an octogenarian accompanied by an Asian often mistaken for either a Thai or an Indonesian, but never a Filipino!

The old and kindly doctor was, in a way, behaving rather uncharacteristic of a typical Swiss. I certainly don't know what warmed him up to Werner, but for whatever it was, I know that I will never forget the experience of being welcomed in No. 19 Trittligasse. When we left the comfort of the flat and headed down the remaining steps of Trittligasse, Werner told me that Dr. Hulwyder belongs to one of the old families of Zurich, a family of doctors for a couple of generations. Dr. Hulwyder is already 91 years old, but looks much younger than his chronological age.

It was a good day, which ended up rather memorably—in a strange way. Were it not for Werner, I would not have had the chance in the world to experience what I had just experienced.