July 28/29

Our trip begins. Exploring Bavaria and Franconia, culminating with the Ring cycle at Bayreuth. Much to my surprise the trip out was uneventful. Even NJ transit was on time. Our Amtrak friends did not paralyze the northeast corridor as they have been doing for the past few days. The flight was on a Boeing 777. Quite an impressive airplane. I was pleased that the Lithium batteries did not do anything unusual.

The flight was what is euphemistically called a red eye. It was not my eyes that were red. I imagine there are people who can sleep on an airplane (for example contortionist, the height challenged).

Seven hours later we arrived in Frankfurt, made our way to the long distance train (after traveling a very long distance by foot through the airport). Had a generous 10 minutes to catch the train to Nuremberg, followed by a taxi to our b&b. As I said the trip was rather boring.

We did make it to the old city of Nuremberg after a bit of a nap. First impressions: not too bad. 80% of the Altstadt (the old city) had been destroyed by allied bombing. The city fathers rebuilt the town as close as possible to the original plan (the city dates from the 13th century). This includes the castle and old churches. They were able to use the old stones in the reconstructions. Rather impressive. It does indeed feel as if we were walking through the original streets.

Quite by serendipity we came across one of the strangest fountains we had ever seen. It was created by Jurgen Weber and represents scenes based on a poem by Hans Sachs (the poet cobbler of Meistersinger fame). The poem, “Bitter-Sweet Married Life” apparently represents marriage from the first stages (aptly represented by rather lustful scenes), with figures representing faith, hope, charity, courage, temperance and patience. The sculpture is not good enough to make one feel any of these virtues. Weber did succeed in effectively depicting the end of a dreadful marriage. There is a very old woman with droopy breasts strangling the neck bones of the skeleton of her husband. Needless to say the marriage did not end well. I have not read the poem, but I would guess, if the poem is anything like the story represented by the sculptures in the fountain, that Hans did not like women. I am not sure if the poem was a metaphor for all marriage, or just Hans Sachs'. I will continue to think of Mr. Sachs as Wagner presents him in the opera.

July 30

Our first full day in Nuremberg. We can appreciate the city now that we are not exhausted. We took the underground to town from our b&b. It is wonderful to ride a clean, efficient, well-designed subway. It is true that New York's is over 100 years old, but the age difference seems greater.

We got to appreciate the wall that surrounds the city. There is a double ring of walls that must have been the boarder of a moat. The city fathers did a great job of rebuilding the wall, including the wooden barracks capping the edge. We hope to find access to walk the top. Our first stop was the Lorenz-Kirche (St. Lawrence Church). A magnificent building begun in 1250. Rose and I had just visited the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. The Lorenz-Kirche was as impressive, of course on a smaller scale. The proportions of the interior and altars seemed perfect. The golden ratio seemed to permeate the architecture. There was a beautiful Annunciation by Velt Stoss that was a medallion life size sculpture that hung from the ceiling by a rope in the center of the chapel. The portal is decorated with statuary and a 9-meter wide rose window dating from the 14th century. Lovely medieval alters, memorial plaques and stained glass. Much of it in need of cleaning. Seems strange if
indeed the church was leveled during the war. Why not clean things up before putting it back together. Perhaps it looks more authentic if grungy.

The surprising discovery about this church was the pre-Reformation liturgy of the Mass in Nuremberg. There was a digital audio display of some 23 chants taken from the “Geese Book”, named after an illumination in the musical text that showed a charming choir of geese directed by a wolf. The music was beautiful! The illuminated manuscript (which is also beautiful) is in the collection of the Morgan Library. Hopefully it will some day be on display. In spite of a serious language barrier I was able to buy a CD of the chants, performed with the St. Lorenz pipe organ (one of the largest in Germany).

We next went to the Albrecht Durer House. Unfortunately Emperor Maximilian of Bavaria loved Durer's work. He moved all of Durer's paintings from Nuremberg to Munich in the 16th century. (Nuremberg was allowed to have a Durer show in 1928). The Nuremberg painters got busy and made copies that are now on display. Needless to say even copies of Durer's work, especially his portraits are magnificent (not to say I could tell a copy from an original). There was a copy of a self-portrait of Durer as Christ (modesty was not one of his problems). It caught the eye of Napoleon who appropriated it for the Louvre. Unbeknown to him it was a copy (so Napoleon could not tell an original from a copy either). The French were fooled until 1805 when they figured it out and took the original. My favorite is a portrait of Durer's teacher, Walgemit. The original is at the National Museum, part of tomorrow's agenda.

There was a display of natural dyes that Durer used. Indigo was interesting. It starts life as a plant, which, after soaking in urine turns purple when exposed to light. There is interesting literature on everyday items we take for granted but whose discovery is not obvious. For example how did people discover that you could actually eat an olive? I have no problem imagining how man (not woman) discovered indigo.

When Durer traveled he carried his dyes in the shells of mussels, gluing the bivalves together. Pretty neat!

There was a woman (in 15th century dress) demonstrating the printing process. She was making a ink reproduction of Durer's famous print of Rhinoceros (Durer never actually saw a Rhinoceros – which may explain its fanciful appearance). She invited us to make a copy. I made one using the same method Durer used. It is a very good copy, easily confused with an original.

She also displayed a method of illumination that was used by cobblers when working at night. A candle shown through a globe filled with water. The globe acted as a lens that concentrated the candle light on the workbench. Clever cobblers.

We then walked about the old wall (hoping to get to the top, but no success). Then on to the Bardentreffen Nuremberg, a music festival celebrating its 40th anniversary. Lots of music venues, with plenty of spectators, beer, sausages, and good cheer. It is amazing how some sausage looks so gross when raw, but looks delicious when cooked. We did not plan on being part of the festival, just good luck. Shared a table with some locals who spoke good English. Lots of fun.

I got some information about the music festival. It started in 1976, the 400th death day of Hans Sachs. To celebrate, motivated by the plot of Der Meistersinger, the city fathers decided there should be a music competition with amateur singers and songwriters. Today it is said to be the greatest free music festival in the world – with 200,000 visitors. I guess the Edinburgh festival is more than just a music
July 31.

We started at the state museum. We approached the entrance passing through a stylized triumphal arch followed by The Way of Human Rights, twenty seven 12 foot high pillars inscribed with articles of the General Declaration of Human Rights in a number of languages, including Hebrew. The museum is in a very modern building that was very hard to navigate, perhaps because an Israeli artist designed it. It was almost impossible to follow the maps from one gallery to another. The path would suddenly stop with no hint how to get to the adjoining room. Or one would take us to a staircase, but only going up—we wanted to go down. With the help of the staff we were taken to a staircase that went down (but not up). The maps gave no hint as to the vertical direction of a staircase. We were not the only ones having trouble. With much difficulty we did make it to the modern art gallery. We were the only people there. In fact the guard seems startled. Perhaps we were the first people to have figured out the maze in some time. In any case there were some interesting items. I happen to like Bauhaus art, which was represented here by some beautiful, functional pottery. There was also a Frankfurt Kitchen from 1928. It was one of the first attempts at fitting a working kitchen into a small space. It may be the precursor of the kitchen in my studio apartment.

Interesting and disturbing was a room devoted to Nazi propaganda “art”. For example a painting of sinister looking Jewish bankers forcing two old farmers to sign away their farm. The artists rightly belong in the dustbin of history.

There were other galleries with some very lovely items. The most impressive was the original Durer painting of his master (the original is far superior to the copy we saw the previous day at the Durer museum). And the worlds oldest pocket watch (dating from 1530). A watchmaker named Henlein built it. A masterpiece of miniaturization. A mirror gave a view of the maze of gears and springs. It was a bit large for the average pocket, but represented a breakthrough in miniaturization. Back in the 16th century an upper class gentlemen could be at the cutting edge of technology by owning the watch. Something like having the newest iPhone. The fact that the watch never worked may have been a problem. There was an impressive “evening clock” (that did work) with minimal moving parts. It was a series of concentric rings comprising a large disk. On the inner rings you indicated the location (presumably longitude and latitude) and the date. You then looked at the North Star through a central hole. After you had fixed the north star (which is the tail of the big dipper) you move the outer rings so that two knobs pointed at the two stars making up the far edge of the dipper. An interior pointer now gave the correct time. Amazing! (If it really worked).

There was a separate building devoted to toys. I have never seen grander dollhouses. Multistory buildings, about 5 or 6 feet high. Filled with detailed, miniature household items. Including an attached two-horse garage. I also like the old rocking horse, complete with leather saddle.

The grand church of St. Sebald is the oldest church in the city, dating from 1215 (I think that is the date they started construction). An impressive space, but not as appealing as St. Lawrence. The Church was destroyed when the city was bombed. To me the most impressive experience was the series of photos of the church from the 1945 rubble to its reconstruction in 1957. Each poster was accompanied by a stanza of a poem for peace.

We read about a tour of the medieval rock-cut cellars containing the water supply conduits. The booklet we got the information from wrote that there was an English tour at 11:30. We tried to buy a
ticket but were told that there are no English tours and in fact the only tour is at 3:15. We showed the ticket agent the booklet. She went on about how old the book is, how outdated the information is and how she never knew of tours at the times listed in the book. We tried to explain that we got the guide yesterday at the museum across the street. In any case we decided to risk taking the German tour. As it turned it is was the right thing to do. It was phenomenal. There are steep steps that lead down into a defense passageway of the Imperial Castle. You can see the casements with embrasures for shooting weapons. There was still water flowing below the walkway. About 20,000 residents of Nuremberg took shelter here during the allied air raids.

One of the fortunate side effects of taking a German language tour is the people you meet who try to explain what is going on. We met a lovely couple from the Netherlands.

The music festival is in full force today. Walking through the streets was a cacophony of different styles of music. You transition from rock, to folk, to improvised drumming etc. Quite exciting. In fact the couple from the Netherlands were in Nuremberg for the festival. It is a big deal! While we were drinking some beer a musician was setting up for the evening's gig. It turned out he is from Missouri and was stationed in Germany while in the military. Met a woman and stayed, starting a music group. For what it is worth his name is Tim Brown – advertising himself as a playing American Rock Country Oldies. He had quite a repertoire of 60's and 70's songs. I have to say I grew up with great music. He definitely knew how to work the crowd, especially the women.

August 1

Our friend Rainer put us in contact with his friends, Eva and Bernhard. They graciously will be showing us about Bavaria and Franconia after we leave Nuremberg. Eva came by to spend the day with us.

Our first destination was the Memorial to the Nuremberg trials. The reason the trials were held in Nuremberg date back to the trials held after WWI. The allies allowed to Germans to administer the trials of people thought to be war criminals after that war (I don't think the term war criminal existed at that time). All the German defendants were set free. After WWII, the allies decided they must hold the trials. Nuremberg was chosen for the trials because it was the only large court that had not been destroyed. Courtroom 600 was enlarged for the trials and is still in use today for major crimes. We did not visit the courtroom, but we could view it from above through glass panels. It was identical to the photos in the exhibit.

And what an exhibit! The text of the London charter establishing the rules of law to be used, documents used as exhibits, the films, the witness' statements. The outcome. Amazing.

An extremely edited list of some of the information. It was a major accomplishment to establish rules that the allies could all agree to. The American, European and Russian legal systems were all different. For example it is in America that the Judges are not involved in the investigation. Their role (in the US) is to make sure the proceedings are fair and follow the rules. The London charter adopted this. The charter also established that “following orders” was not a defense (I did not know this). The Russians (and some members of the US government) wanted to execute them all and get it over with. The idea that the allies had to act on a higher level than the defendants, who would be given a fair trial with defense lawyers who could cross-examine witnesses and evidence, was a major breakthrough. And the evidence – some of which was at the exhibit – was astonishing. Of course there was the footage taken at the camps (difficult to watch). The seized documents were chilling. Hitler
and his staff at a meeting shortly after annexing Czechoslovakia: “We now have to go after Poland. There are 83 million Aryan people. We need the space for our people. We will have to eliminate all the local population to make room. It will not be as easy to occupy Poland, we will have to fight. If the western countries declare war we will have to enter Poland and France at the same time”.

And: “We need the food and space of Russia for our Aryan Race. We will take over food production. This will starve the Russian population. At least 2.5 million will die. This is not a problem”.

And: A map signed by Hitler and Stalin showing how Poland will be divided. The documentation makes clear that the Russians were complicit with the Nazi war machine. I am amazed that the Russians allowed this map into evidence. The Russians wanted to execute them all – but the allies at the London conference overrode the Russian objections. Perhaps they did not want some of the documents entered as evidence. They also wanted revenge. After all they were promised part of Poland and got invaded instead. It is true that Russia lost more people than any other country, but it is also true that the war might (emphasis on might) not have started if Russia did not plan on enjoying the spoils of German aggression. There was a harrowing photo of a smiling Ribbentrop and Stalin shaking hands. We know what they had just agreed to.

There were follow up Nuremberg trials. For example the trials of the doctors who performed horrible experiments on the concentration camp inmates. The documentation and film records were nauseating. The trials were significant in developing the concept of modern international criminal law. The Nuremberg Principles, which ensued from the tribunal, form the basis for the International Criminal Court in the Hague. The exhibit did not water down Germany's guilt. One moving panel was a map of the world listing the genocidal wars since 1945. The markers (with number of dead) covered most of the globe. The Nuremberg Trials Memorial is moving and profound. A must see.

After such an experience we had to have lunch and beer. So we took the underground back to Nuremberg and went to one of Eva's favorite restaurants. Had more delicious sausage, sauerkraut and Pretzels. By the way the Pretzels are much better than those of NY or Philadelphia. After all the Pretzel came from Germany. Similar to the attempted migration of the bagel from NY to LA.

On our way to the underground (to return to our b&b) Eva showed us a church (actually a rebuilt cloister), St Clair church. The chapel is very simple, unadorned concrete walls with some beautiful wooden panels. The surprise was the adjacent “Lady chapel”. It was a dark room with a wall of sculpted, slabs of clear and green translucent glass, back lit by natural light. It was quite lovely. The church is not in any of our books or pamphlets. We would not have discovered this gem it were it not for Eva.

We then drove to the Documentation center Nazi party rally grounds. Here is where Hitler gave his speeches documented in “The Triumph of the Will”. One might ask why Hitler made Nuremberg the city of Nazi Rallies and of the Nazi racial laws. It seems the Nuremberg Imperial Castle was one of the most important fortified palaces of the Holy Roman Empire. A home of one of the first Kaisers. Hitler saw himself as an heir to the first rulers of Germany. I can understand the symbolic value of bombing Nuremberg.

Bayreuth was also bombed. The festival hall was not leveled. Bayreuth is also famous for one of the best beers in Germany. The allied commanders were not Wagner fans. They thought the festival hall was the brewery. Of course that means the actual brewery was probably destroyed. This is very disturbing.
We went to Eva's apartment in Erlangen. A pleasant little town that is the home to Siemens manufacturing. She has a lovely apartment and Rose took home a rose from the “jungle” on the balcony.

August 2

Mostly a day to recover. Rose had a massage from our b&b hostess and took a bike ride. Eva drove me to the Hop museum in Wolnzach, the center of world Hop production. I believe the hops they grow here are similar to the Saaz hops grown in Pilsen Czechoslovakia, the finest hops in the world that I used when I brewed beer. A nice tour of the history and process of growing hops and turning hops into beer. This is a very important place!

August 3

Today we leave Nuremberg. Had a lovely time. Nuremberg was definitely worth the visit. I have to mention how the town understands the needs of its visitors. Among our memorabilia pamphlets is the town map of the toilet facilities in Nuremberg old town. Not just lists of toilets, but information about free verses pay toilets. Part of the Nuremberg Principles should be mandatory toilet information for the cities of signatory countries.

Eva gave us a grand tour of Franconia. We started with St. Georgskirche in Kraftshof. It was built in 1315. Quite a nice church, with an interesting wall. In the 14th century it was churches where people sought refuge from attackers.

There was a beautiful Linden tree (Lindenbaum) that had been split by lightning. The tree was saved by supports that kept the limbs from collapsing. It grows out like a banyan tree covering quite a large area. It stands across from the St. Georgss Kirche in the village of Effeltrich. Had an interesting lunch of Leberknodelsuppe – liver dumpling soup.

Next on the tour was Uttenreuth, with a beautiful view of Franconia Switzerland. As we learned Switzerland simply means a geological region. Franconia Switzerland means the plateau of Franconia bounded by some short hills. Lovely panorama.

Then on to the church of Effeltrich, started in the 8th century by the King of Bamberg who built his house here. However it was the cemetery that was of greatest interest. Elaborate plantings and beautiful flowers. It is clear that this cemetery is intended for the top 1%. Not only did they live better than us, but they had a better afterlife. The cliché is that you can't take it with you, but these people tried.

We did stop at one other church at Gossweinstein. Apparently this is an important church on the pilgrimage trail. We felt it was over the top. Lots of gold, cold, white walls. Lots of Cherubs. The door did have an elaborate locking mechanism, not much more that I can say about this place.

We then drove through some lovely countryside till we came to the town of Pottenstein. Now this place is spectacular. Deep ravines and high cliffs (some with houses precariously sitting on the edge). It is at the intersection of four valleys. The best way to convey its natural beauty would be to compare it to some similar town that might be more familiar. But I can't think of any. I think the geology is interesting. Franconia used to be at the bottom of a large lake. Deposits of sedimentary rock were laid
down (which of course is why most of the rock is sandstone). Sediments have a gradation of hardness. Over the millennium the softer deposits were eroded away (hence the valley we stood in) but the harder sediments were left (hence the beautiful rock towers).

We then went to visit Bernhard in Lindenhartd.

August 4

Today we took a 15 km hike through the Franconia. Bucolic new growth pine forest and panoramas of lovely fields. Particularly attractive are the glens of 5ft ferns. What made this hike unique were the blazes that marked the trail. In the US a trail will be marked with colored or numbered blaze markers. Sometimes you might see a tree blaze, but the Franconian trail was marked by blazes with glasses of beer. Sure enough after a few hours of hiking we came upon a beer garden. Of course it made its own beer (which was delicious). We stopped for a snack of pretzels and Quark, milk curd with chives and scallions. Actually quite good, and I might add did not contain any sausage.

The complete trail stopped at 5 beer gardens. Something like the mountain clubs in the US. But instead of huts there are pubs.

Later that day we went for dinner with Bernhard and some of his friends. This was my opportunity to try Grillhaxe. A large hams hock that is a specialty of the region. It was enormous. The best description I can give is to reference grade B-movie bacchanal scenes. Imagine a room full of dancing girls with fat, sweaty toga clad Roman, laughing out of context with food dribbling from their lips. Nubian slaves are bringing platters of huge chunks of meat to serve to the hoard. One of these platters was brought to my table obstructing my view of the lower half of the garden. About a third of it was bone, gristle, skin and fat. The remaining meat (and some of the chard skin) was succulent and absolutely delicious. I believe Rainer told us that it is prepared by boiling then grilling. Whatever the process, it is a wonder of Franconia.

By the way the reviews of the first Bayreuth Der Ring des Nibelungen came in (we have tickets for the Ring II cycle). “A grand triumph, very successful”. Of course the staging was booed – this is the tradition, but the conductor (Kirill Petrenko) and the singers were glorious. Petrenko was just appointed to be the conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic. No slouch! Can't wait for the opening nature motif of Das Rheingold.

August 5

Today Bernhard drove us to Bamberg. Our trip through Franconia with Eva concentrated on the churches. Today we enjoyed castles and the natural beauty of the region.

Our first castle was Ravenstein Castle, viewed off in the distance beyond a lovely valley. Passed a magnificent 800-year-old Linden tree near Heiligerstadt. It is impressive to think that this tree sprouted when the Holy Roman Empire began, but some of the buildings we saw were older! In particular the castle at Waishenfeld was started in 1122. We enjoyed an aerial view of the town. The small Franconian towns are similar. The local stone is naturally colored red and yellow. The houses are simple, with plenty of flowers flowing from window baskets. Plenty of churches (in proportion to the size of the town) often with onion domes.
I had written that Franconia has the largest concentration of breweries in the world. I can now be precise. Franconia has 4 breweries per 1,500 people (800 distinct types of beer), a Guinness record. Did I mention that our b&b is also a brewery (their beer: Kurzdorfer)? I wonder if Guinness finds this record of more interest then most. After all Guinness is a brewery. I have to tell the story I heard about the origin of the Guinness book or records. Pub fights in England over bragging rights were quite common. In order to bring order to their bars, Guinness started publishing their book imagining that the bar locals would look up the answers rather than resolve the conflict with fisticuffs.

We then went off to the Stauffenberg castle, approached by an avenue of stately trees. The family that owns the castle has a true hero among recent ancestors. Stauffenberg was the officer who tried to kill Hitler by placing a bomb beneath a table during one of his staff meetings. It did kill 6 or 7, but not Hitler. Had he succeeded it is estimated that there would have been 20 million fewer deaths. Because Stauffenberg was an officer, he was simply shot. The other conspirators were hung by piano wire in the center of Berlin.

The next stop is Bamberg (via a road that passed Levi Strauss' birthplace – however we did not see a monument to Jeans).

Bamberg is a beautiful city! I did not see one McDonald's or Starbucks. The old town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The town is bisected by rivers and canals, built on 7 hills (I think we walked up all of them). Of course it was over run by tourists and the prices were twice what we had seen elsewhere, but to paraphrase Pogo, “I have seen the tourists and it is us”. The original town hall is on an island in the river Regnitz, connected to the town by lovely bridges providing wonderful views of the half timbered houses lining the rivers. The town is sometimes called the Venice of Bavaria. Easy to see why. The story about the island is interesting. There were rival church parishes (there are still about 20, outnumbering the breweries which number only 10). The churches imposed taxes to move from one side of the river to the other. However the little island was not in any jurisdiction. So to avoid the tax they built bridges to and from the island.

Bamberg is actually an important town. The Bamberg Dom (church) was founded in 1004. The priest of this church is now a cardinal, one of only 7 in Germany. It would not be inappropriate to describe Bamberg as romantic.

We went to Spezialkeller to try the beer that defines Bamberg. It is called smokebeer. Somehow they created a brew that taste like bacon. We were told it is an acquired taste. Rose quickly acquired the taste. I was in the process of acquiring the taste when the glass emptied. We feasted on another traditional dish, Schauferle, the shoulder of the pig. Actually Rose ordered it, I stole from her plate. I enjoyed it, but the hock is better than the shoulder.

August 6

A day to take a vacation from our vacation.

There is a lovely church in Lindenhardt (where Bernhard lives), St. Micheal's Kirche with an altarpiece by Grunewald (he painted the amazing Isenheim Altarpiece which I saw in the Alsace city of Colmar). This altar is much simpler. The story is that this church burnt down. Another church gave them a relief that has Mary as the centerpiece. The Grunewald was painted on the back. One problem is that having Mary as the main person of glorification is a catholc tradition, Christ would be at the center of
an altar in an Evangelical church, which is the denomination of St Micheal's. A bit of a conflict that seems to still be an issue.

Tonight I join Bernhard in cooking dinner.

August 7

Today Bernhard and Birgitta took us on another tour of Franconia. We began with a drive to a tower. By climbing to the top we were now at the highest point in Franconia (614 m). The panoramic view was beautiful. Geometric patterns of farmland, forest and with some effort, a view of our b&b. Then on to Tuseberfeld, a “rock village”. Not that the villagers had wild parties, but because of the abundant fossils. Some time ago, someone found a 6-meter aquatic dinosaur fossil. Next the town of Pottenstein which is famous for its January epiphany festival where 800 fires are lit on the snow covered rooftops.

We then hiked to caves and castles. The first caves were actually rooms that did not extend a great distance to into the ground. One was named the tailor's cave because of a formation that looked like the eye of a needle. We then hiked to Ravenstein castle (which we saw at a distance a few days ago). We estimate it was at least a 20% incline for about 10 minutes. Something like a stress test (which I passed). At the top was the castle and of course a beer garden, which served a delicious, unfiltered beer. I lack the skill to properly describe the hike. Others have done it better. I'm thinking, for example, of John Muir. In fact some of the hike reminded me of my walks along the Muir trail. Of course the high Sierra trails lack castles and beer gardens.

The rock walls are famous for rock climbers practicing for climbs of more difficult ascents, such as El Capitan. The soft sandstone makes them extremely treacherous. About three climbers a year die while trying to climb these walls. The survivors of course can commiserate at the beer garden along the trail.

We then walked to a cave that was accessible only by guided tour. Unfortunately the next tour was in a half hour, which would have screwed up our plans. I asked the woman if it was possible to at least get a view further into the cave. She eventually agreed – perhaps Rose helped by asking if she was the model on one of the postcards. In any case she took us through some passageways to a grand room with magnificent stalactites and stalagmites. There were formations that looked like cloth hanging on the walls. There was a 6-foot high stalagmite that was the target of a regular drip from a beautifully twisted stalactite. It took 10,000 years for the stalagmite to grow to its present height.

The temperature today is the highest ever-recorded in Germany, 40.3C. Germany has not discovered air conditioning. OK, but what about a fan? We asked the owner of the b&b who replied (in German of course) “Open a window”. There are so many responses to this, but decided not to say anything. Bernhard said the husband and wife who own the place have never been pleasant. The temperature will drop a few degrees (to the high 90's) and the Wagner's festival hall is not air-conditioned. I may be the only one not wearing a jacket, but I might be envied by all.
August 8

Today we drove to Bayreuth! Took a walk to the festival house. We had a beer at the garden next to the festival theater. There were tuxes and elegant dresses. I guess the phrase is that people were dressed to the 9's. I may be dressed to the 5's tomorrow. I may get a few more points by sitting next to Rose.

August 9

Today Das Rheingold.

We started the festival by having an early dinner at the restaurant we enjoyed beer at yesterday. This place predates Wagner and was a restaurant he often enjoyed. I would say we had one of the best meals since arriving in Germany. I had a delicious grilled trout (they called it sea bass, but it was a trout). Rose had a salmon. We split a bottle of Franconian Rose. Not outstanding, but refreshing (it is still in the 90's).

Then on to the Festspielehaus. It was designed by Wagner with music, not appearance as his priority. I thought the exterior attractive. The locals don’t think so. They call the building Wagner's barn. The concert hall is wonderful. A very small balcony, about 6 rows deep. Most of the interior is what we would call orchestra seating. The floor sloped at about 20-30 degrees. No central aisle. So when the theater is full all you see is a sea of people (sorry about that) from the rear of the hall to the stage.
Notice I do not say to the orchestra. Wagner did not want the musicians to distract the audience from his dramas. The orchestra is in a covered pit, obscured from view. So when Das Rheingold starts it seems the music is coming from the bowels of the earth. Perhaps it is better described as coming from the bowels of the Rhein. The walls were spare with regularly spaced columns. The ceiling was simple, no chandeliers. We were warned about the seats. They are folding wooden seats similar to the ones I used in school, but no armrest. It was awesome to be sitting in the theater built to present the opera we were about to hear. The audience is called to their seats not by chimes (as in most houses) but by a brass fanfare 15 minutes before the start. I like this idea.
The staging was, shall I say interesting. The Wagner family controls the theater and makes a point of modern productions. The Wagnerians in the audience are very conservative and make a point of booing the productions. We had a mixed reaction. The story usually begins with the Rheinmaidens swimming about. The Rheinmaidens are not really nice characters. They are arrogant, insensitive and insulting. Something like a click of cute high school girls who ostracize less attractive girls and make a point of insulting geek boys. In the story the geek boy they play with is Alberich, who of course is a bit of a jerk. In this production the Rheinmaidens (and the gods as well) are presented as white trash living at a seedy hotel in Texas. There was even a confederate flag (that interestingly, eventually came down and was replaced by another flag which I could not identify). Somehow this idea worked. We thought the director understood the Rheinmaidens. They abuse Alberich, but seriously misjudge him and pay the price as does the audience who has to wait 20 hours (with intermission) for a resolution. If the staging was an elaboration of this idea it would have been fine. But the director thought his staging was more important than Wagner's music. There were lots of distractions; most egregious were projected videos of action being recorded by cameramen waking about the stage. For example while Wotan and Loge are singing there is a video of a frantic Freia trying to get help before the giants come by to claim her. Lots of frantic calls to someone (perhaps 911 – but I could tell). Very distracting. There is a hotel room, which is over used. There are scenes where there is a lot of action, usually presented using the full stage. These scenes in this production took place in the confines of the motel room. I found it too confusing. I am bothered that a motel pool represents the Rhein. Not very dignified. Rose initially liked the production; I was not overjoyed and may join in the booing at the end of Gotterdammerung.

In any case one can ignore the distractions and concentrate on the music. And what music! Wagner built this house for these operas. The acoustics were perfect. The orchestra and singers were matched better than I had ever heard. After all it is a small house. From the back of the theater you can look into the eyes of the performers (a bit of an exaggeration but we are close to the performers). The orchestra was phenomenal (the best musicians in Europe consider it an honor to play for the festival). The conducting was incredible. There were no dull moments – the music just flowed from beginning to end. We had heard great things about Petrenko and were not disappointed. The singers were all outstanding. I will single out Alberich and Erda.

I always had trouble with the concept of a curse. Can anyone, by simply singing very menacingly in a minor key effect the future. Was the idea that you or I could utter some nonsense and hurt someone? After all Alberich was just an unpleasant fellow without any real power after the ring was taken from him. But after Alberich, as performed by Albert Dohmen, cursed the ring you felt Wotan should be afraid, very afraid. So Fafner killing Fasolt may be the curse after all and not the stupid greed of humankind and giantkind.

Erda (Nadine Weissmann) was just as effective. I prefer to have her rise from the earth (which I believe is how Wagner wrote it). In this production she walks into the hotel room, takes her fur off and starts singing. It was one of those cluttered, distracting scenes I mentioned, but when she started singing I did not care. She was very convincing. There was no way Wotan would keep the ring after hearing Erda. I had a thought at this moment. The hall had frequently been contaminated by Hitler. If only he had listened to Erda or Alberich instead of Wotan we would all have been better off. Any way he ignored the message of the operas. Wotan's desire for power naturally led to his destruction.

In contrast to the Met, the audience did not applaud until the last note faded away. Then they went crazy. The ovation lasted 15-20 minutes. I like the European custom of stamping feet while applauding, no standing ovations. As Rose pointed out this only works in an old house with wooden
floors.

Wagner realized his operas go on for a while. He insisted that there be 60-minute intermissions so patrons could enjoy dinner or dessert. We made reservations for four of the intermissions. I have to say the menus miss an opportunity to offer food that has some connection with the opera. My suggestion for Das Rheingold is based on Freia being the keeper of the golden apples that keep the gods young. The Festival restaurant should have offered an apple tart after Das Rheingold. Perhaps calling it Freiatart (the double meaning has escaped me).

I have to admit I find it amazing that we were able to score tickets for the Ring at Bayreuth. The waiting list is 5-10 years (the person behind us waited 6 years). We waited 5-6 months. I had convinced myself that I was a victim of a scam by a crazed anti-Wagnerian who hacked a Trojan onto my computer. After all the tickets looked like boarding passes. I expected they would be exposed as counterfeit when they were scanned. We got passed this obstruction and found ourselves in pretty good seats.

I just read this in the international NY times:

“...After weeks of very long days spent on the Greek debt crisis, an exhausted looking Chancellor Merkel is off to her usual recreational program starting with some Wagner at the festival at Bayreuth...”

So Merkel gets a ticket without waiting.

It was incredible to hear Das Rheingold in the theater Wagner designed. It will be exciting to watch the fall of the gods and mankind in this hall.

August 10

Today Die Walkure.

Not being able to see the orchestra is a great idea (well done Wagner!). The opening music of the Die Walkure in a totally dark auditorium is very effective (this is storm music based on the Woton staff music of Das Rheingold). The sets were a surprise. Not the red neck hotel of Das Rheingold, but a setting that could easily have been Hunding's dwelling. Reminded me a bit of the Otto Schenk staging. The room did lack the rustic tree growing in the middle of the living room (with a fashionable sword stuck in the trunk). Looked like we might be able to enjoy an evening without the distraction of the videos (I was wrong).

The orchestra and voices continue to amaze. When Hunding (Kwanghhul Youn) started to sing you could feel the floor vibrate. I have never felt the love between Siegmund (Johan Botha – who we have heard at the Met) and Sieglinde (Anja Kampe) better expressed (a lot of my comments on the amazing performers will seem repetitious – I can't help it).

The videos eventually did start up, even more distracting than last night. Some old Soviet propaganda films were projected. The phrenetic action on screen was totally different from the pacing of the action and music. Had to work hard to ignore the video. Then an oil derrick appeared on stage. Rose read that oil replaced the gold in the director's vision of Die Walkure. I have no problem with the Der Ring
The message of the Ring is so universal it has served as a medium for social comment in scores of ways (no pun intended). But the cardinal sin a director can make is to have his message distract from the glories of the music. Frank Castorf is guilty of this sin.

In any case, with effort I was able to let the music take over. The scene between Woton (Wolfgang Koch) and Fricka (Claudia Mahnke) was amazing. You really felt Woton's frustration as he realized Fricka was correct and his plans for getting the Ring violate his oath. Of course this was so effectively communicated because the singers were outstanding actors. I always felt the English subtitles at the Met are a distraction (to which I am drawn and cannot ignore). At Bayreuth there is no English, and the scenes between Woton, Fricka and Brunhilda do go on forever. But the drama is in the music. I had no trouble understanding what was going on (of course it helps to know the story). I was much more moved by Bayreuth in a language I do not understand than at the Met.

Then the next act – the Ride of the Walkure- WOW! Have to admit I did think of Apocalypse now, napalm and victory, but only for a moment.

Then the scene between Woton and Brunhilda (Catherine Foster). The above comments apply. I had no trouble understanding the anguish Woton felt having to punish Brunhilda whom he clearly loved.

The fire music was done beautifully, but the fire itself was disappointing. Give me the old Otto Schenk blaze.

As I mentioned Wagner wanted the audience to enjoy dinner and dessert during extended intermissions. We did the dinner break. Rose had Marinated Summer Vegetables, and Braised Knuckle of Lamb from the Jura Mountains (I am not making this up). I had Thickened Shrimp Soup and Lobster and Veal. We enjoyed a bottle of 2013 Mosel Blauschiefer Riesling. What a wonderful way take a break from the gods. I have to say the intermission dinner at Bayreuth put the Met to shame.

There is an obvious entree that should have been offered for Die Walkure. A barbeque served at your table over an open fire.

August 11

Today Bernhardt generously drove to Bayreuth to give us a tour of his home town (he was raised here). We started with a guided tour of the old town with visits to the new Palace and court Garden built by Wilhelmine. The garden was quite beautiful. Not much more I can say about the tour. A bit disappointing.

We then took a bus to the Eremitage, a pleasure garden for Wilhelmine. The main courtyard was surrounded by the standard grand Greek buildings, but with walls covered with rocks and what looked like broken glass. It was as if the walls were covered with glue, and then dipped is a huge pot of one-inch cubic stones. Of course the stones were not randomly arranged. Some lovely pools with strange sculptures of fish. I can easily imaging the rich have decadent liaisons here.

We then went to the Wagner Museum and his house, “Haus Wahnfried'.

The exhibit of his music was fascinating. Music was displayed (and played) as a beam of light traveled across the page with information annotating the score. Two outstanding examples: The end of
Gotterdammerung was displayed. As the music played the score, various motives were highlighted on the page. So you heard the Rhein music in the strings, with the Walkure music in the brass. The gold music appeared in the base line, while the Valhalla music started in another section of the orchestra and so on. The musical motives of the finale retold the entire story of the opera.

Then there was the page of the opening of Das Rheingold. Wagner described this music as the creation of the world. As I followed the score I can see (and hear) how the instruments are slowly introduced a little bit at a time, just as the world was created but now in sound. Being able to follow the score would add enjoyment to the experience. You left this part of the exhibit in greater awe of what Wagner had achieved.

Then on the to other side of the Wagner experience. Hitler was a regular visitor to the Siegfried house on the Wagner estate. Winifred Wagner was his dear friend. Even after the war and all the horrors were made public she would not denounce her friend. The history of this place is very disturbing.

I mentioned that the productions at Bayreuth were very modern, often taking on social issues. Often boosed by the audience. The reason (as presented at the Wagner museum) is that the productions were restricted to satisfy the Reich's taste during the war. The family wanted to dissociate themselves from the old and go in new directions, fully expecting a reaction. In fact they claim that a lot of the avant-garde productions around the world can be traced back to Bayreuth. Perhaps. But the social issues I have seen tackled are somewhat easy (often with some nudity thrown in). It would be interesting if Bayreuth dealt with its Nazi past by staging the Ring with Alberich played as a Jew and Woton as Hitler.

Wagner died in Venice. The museum had the couch he died on, a bit bizarre. His grave, in the garden behind his house is unmarked. Wagner wanted it this way. He said that people would know who is buried here. This is true, especially since every bit of literature from the information office tells you where Wagner is buried. His dog's grave was nearby. I believe Wagner liked dogs better than Jews.

The town cemetery had the graves of Franz Liszt and the poet Jean-Paul. I have to admit I never heard of Jean-Paul. In his day he was considered as great as Goethe and Schiller. Bernhard said he is taught in German schools.

August 12

Today Siegfried. But first lunch at the Italian restaurant near the festival house (where we had a dinner before Rheingold). Delicious pasta (my meal) and marinated beef (Rose's) served with sparkling wine.

Act 1 of Siegfried was wonderful. The singing continues to be phenomenal. The staging was strange again. Mime and Siegfried's place is a cave below a Mt. Rushmore type mountain, but Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao replace the usual crowd.

The playbill tries to explain the set. Wagner was a bit of a revolutionary, not just in music but politically as well. In fact he spent 12 years in Switzerland in exile from Germany after the failed Dresden uprising. Marx and Engels wrote about Wagner (not always favorably). The playbill claims that there were important political similarities between Marx and Wagner. Both were strongly influenced by the Communist ideas of the early socialist. Wagner was a friend of Bakunin. Wagner and Marx wrote about the Jews. Wagner in “Jewishness in Music”, Marx, “On the Jewish Question”. All perhaps true, but am still not sure about the relevance of Mt. Rushmore.
Siegfried assembles an AK-47 in addition to Nothung (the sword). But somehow it works. The stage was used well and the action was riveting.

Between acts we went to a spa that Aron recommended. Seems that all in the know who visit Bayreuth know about this place and use it to relax and cool down between acts. It is a wading pool of ice-cold water. I rolled up my pants, some of the folks in tuxes took their pants off (there is fancy underwear under some of the fancy tuxes). It was great. Rose passed by a naked fellow relaxing on a lunge chair. These Germans know how to dress and undress for the opera. The spa is not on any tourist information. In fact we had trouble finding it on line. It was only inside information that led us to this place. It is also the reason it was not mobbed.

Act 2 was the weakest so far. Due entirely to the staging, which was absurd. Fafner is not a dragon, but just Fafner. He was spending his gold on prostitutes. He should only be guarding the gold. The point of the opera is that Fafner did a lot to get the gold, including killing his brother, but does not enjoy it. He devotes his life to guarding the gold. Perhaps this was Wagner's thought about the rich (he was in debt most of his life). In any case this staging made Fafner an ordinary rich pig. Siegfried kills him with the AK-47, not the sword. We sat through the first act of Walkure so Siegfried can get the sword. Seems like we wasted our time. The forest bird was beautifully sung. But then Siegfried has sex with her. This is really crap. Siegfried has never seen a woman (Brunhilda will be the first woman he sees, poor fellow). He is a virgin. Sex with the forest bird is foul (sorry – I could not help this). The production was soundly booed – but the singers were given a 10-minute ovation.
We had dessert at the Festival restaurant before act 3. Rose had a warm apricot cake. I had delicious chocolate ice cream.

Act 3 also suffered from the staging. Woton (now the Wanderer) is presented as a staggering drunk. It is true that he is broken, destroyed by his plans going awry. The scene when Erda tells Woton there is nothing she can tell him that will help the gods was very effective. These are great singers. At this point she should leave – but in the production she gives Woton fellatio. It is true that many of the characters in the opera so far are the result of sex between Woton and Erda, but this scene was unnecessary and stupid. A sign of how far Woton had fallen? In the productions I saw at the Met he still had some dignity. There was still room for him to fall. The Met production made it more meaningful when Siegfried breaks Woton's staff (the source of his power). Another flaw in the Bayreuth production; Much of the action in the scene between Woton and Siegfried took place stage right, out of view with muffled voices.

This scene suggests the dinner that should have been served for the Siegfried intermission. A kabob served on a broken skewer.

Act 3 had some amazing singing with offensive staging. Brunhilda's awakening was awesomely beautiful. Gave Rose and myself the chills. The love duet between Brunhilda and Siegfried was fantastic, but for some reason the director decided that there should be alligators roaming around. What was this all about? The booing was very loud. The fellow behind us (who had a good baritone boo) nearly lost his voice. But then again when the singers and conductor came out for their bow the crowd went wild.

My friend in Frankfurt is very knowledgeable about opera. In fact he knows some of the singers. He said we're very lucky. We may be hearing one of the most outstanding casts in recent years. The singers and the conductor will not be performing next year.

August 14

Today – Gotterdammerung

We started by pre-cooling at the wading pool followed by some wurst and beer.

We were told about a fascinating exhibit in the garden below the festival house. It was a series of about 20 or 30 metal information planks describing the fate of the Jewish performers at Bayreuth. Cosima Wagner was even more virulently anti-Semitic than Richard. Once Richard died and she took over the festival, she made sure no Jews, or people with Jewish spouses ever got a job at Bayreuth, or elsewhere. Her reign of terror started after Richard's death. While he managed the festival he allowed Jews to perform. The Met in NY benefited by the talent that had to leave Germany. After Hitler took over, and was a welcome guest at Bayreuth, the outcomes took a grimmer tone. Many Jewish performers were murdered in concentration camps.

I had read that Wagner's anti-Semitism began after his attempt to break into the Paris opera scene. He thought Meyerbeer, the leading opera composer in Paris at the time, dashed his dreams. Meyerbeer was Jewish. In fact this was all in Wagner's head. Meyerbeer supported Wagner.
The first act of Gotterdammerung seemed static. Of course the singing was great, but the staging did not have much energy. It would have been helpful if Hagen lived at a house depicted by a different set. It may be the case that this act would have benefited with English subtitles. A lot is going on!

For dinner, between acts one and two Rose got Little rolls of Organic Saddle of Veal and Fried Tuna for starter and Beef Tenderloin from the Highlands of the Franconian forest and cured in a salt chamber. I ordered Small Pastas filled with Chanterelles for starter and Brook Trout from the Trout farm Thoosmuhle in Ebermannstadt. (The beef and Trout seem to have come from better families than Rose and I).

For dessert between acts 2 and 3 we both got Vanilla ice cream and berries with whipped cream, garnished with old balsamic vinegar and long pepper.

I cannot come up with an entrée that connects with Gotterdammerung. Brunhilda does ride her horse into Siegfried’s funeral pyre, but this does not suggest an appetizing dish.

Acts two and three were phenomenal. Great tunes. As usual the staging was a problem. The Rheinmaidens were not in the Rhein. In fact there was no water to be seen anywhere. They were the tramps from Rheingold now trying to seduce Siegfried to get the ring. The swearing on the spear scene was well done (we know Hagen's plan, he was very sinister - the house went crazy when he took his curtain call. The house went crazy quite often). Siegfried's funeral march was musically very exciting – what a concert piece- but there was no march! Siegfried lay prostrate on the ground throughout the entire march. What is this director thinking? The final scene of the opera was magnificent, if you closed your eyes. The gold was replaced by oil oozing onto the stage. The NY Stock Exchange replaced Valhalla. However the stock exchange did not collapse or burn down. We heard one audience member tell another that this production would best be enjoyed by a blind person.

The ovation was, as usual, ecstatic. The members of the orchestra came out for a bow. Of course they were dressed in shorts and tee shirts, an advantage of not being visible.

Thus ends one of our most exciting opera experiences. Rose called it “epic”, an apt description.

August 15

We took the train to Frankfurt. No problem even though we had to change trains 3 times.

We met Don Porche, a friend of mine from our Berkeley days. He was the news director at KPFA. His daughter, Ilona stayed with us in Lawrenceville when she was 13 (she is now 41).

Don gave us a tour of Frankfurt, the home of Goethe. Mostly a banking center, not too exciting, but some interesting architecture. There was a glass building that had large tubes running through it. Looked like a black hole running through the structure.

The topology of the building could be a torus, or a Klein bottle. We could not tell, but definitely a memorable building.

We then went (with Ilona) to hear an outdoor performance of Donizetti’s Don Pasquale. It was quite enjoyable, lots of fun. Quite a contrast to the operas of the past week.
August 16

Today we went with Don to visit Mainz. Our friend, Charlie told us about the St. Stephan church with Chagall windows. The windows are spectacularly beautiful. The dominant color of the windows is blue. From the brochure

“...they appeal to our very life spirit, implying as they do, optimism, hope and the joy of being alive”. Since a picture is worth a thousand words (especially my words) it is best that you take a look at:

https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=images+for+st.+stephan+mainz+chagall&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8

We then trudged through the rain (our first in 20 days) to the Gutenberg Museum (he was born here and invented movable type at this site). Rose worked with prints and is very interested in paper and printmaking. I had no clue how to make paper. It is not an entirely trivial process. The demonstration of a model of Gutenberg's press was great. The process is still time consuming, but movable type did speed things up a lot. He tried to copy the style of the scribes, but the process produces sharper letters, and right justifies margin, something that was surprisingly difficult for the manuscript writers to achieve. Then we went into a vault where there are 3 (of the remaining 42) Gutenberg bibles. Awesome! There were two bibles opened up to the same page, but looked entirely different. The reason is that Gutenberg did not illuminate the books. He just provided the text, but he left space where the purchaser could have an artist add pictures, usually at the beginning of a paragraph, similar to the hand written illuminated manuscripts.

Another interesting fact. No one knows what Gutenberg looked like. The usual representation of a bearded old man is most likely not correct. At the time Gutenberg lived beards were not in style.

August 17

Home to New Jersey. A great vacation comes to a close. Eva and Bernhard are generous, interesting people. They made our exploration of Franconia memorable. Nothing like locals to show you about.

And of course there was the Ring cycle. Even thought I like the traditional productions better (glad we got to see the final Otto Schenk production) I did get to enjoy the Eurotrash approach. After all this is now the tradition. We have never gone to an opera where every voice was as glorious as the voices we heard at Wagner's theater. The week's immersion was not only my best opera experiences, but also one of my most enjoyable experiences, period. We met a Wagner fan from Taiwan (a very international crowd). He complained that he has trouble sleeping because he can't get the evenings music out of his head. This was indeed a problem. No wonder Bayreuth is the Mecca for Wagner. We were very lucky to be able to make the pilgrimage.

I will end this rant with homage to another great performance of Wagner: the Loony Tunes Wagner cartoons

THAT'S ALL FOLKS.