

An excerpt from 'Emma's Story'

Language Lessons: a summer in Paris

When I was a girl, all educated young ladies knew how to speak French. I had studied French for years at school and could read and write it quite well but my father wanted me to learn to speak with a proper accent.

“Emma,” he said, “It's important for you to learn many languages and to speak them with a good accent. The best way to do that is to go to the source.”

To my immense excitement, he arranged for me to spend the summer of 1934 in Paris. My mother was against me going and cried the day I left, but I didn't care. I was excited to get away from home, imagining all the freedom I'd have with no mother to police me. Little did I know the chaperones that accompanied us would be run a far more totalitarian regime than my mother ever did.

I travelled overnight by train, with a group of young people my age. I loved Paris from the very first moment. All the students lived together in a pension in the *Quartier Latin*, that Left Bank neighbourhood full of students attending the Sorbonne.

Many mornings, we would walk down the beautiful ancient streets to the Louvre or go to visit one of the churches. We peered at the forbidden sights of the Place Pigalle. We ate delicious food at the kinds of restaurants frequented by *les Parisiens* and it was here that I fell in love with artichokes.

I felt somehow more important, as though my life had really begun. Sometimes I missed my boyfriend, who waited resentfully in

Prague, but mostly I was too bowled over by the wonders of Parisian life to think about home.

We younger students had a curfew of 7pm; only the older students were allowed to stroll around until 9pm. I chaffed against these strict rules: there were enticing, forbidden things out there and I was fifteen. I wanted to see and experience them all. I ached to break the rules, but...I was a good girl.

Luckily for me, my roommate, Vera Friedman, had enough daring for both of us. She was a lively girl whose sweet face masked a brain full of wicked ideas.

One afternoon, as we entered our room, she leaned toward me. "Brace yourself, *ma chère*. We're going to break curfew tonight!"

"Break curfew?" I asked. "But where will we go? It will be dark outside."

"So what? There's lots of light at the casino and that's where we're going."

“Are you crazy!” I exclaimed. “We can't go to the casino. We don't look anywhere near 21.”

Vera just smiled and pulled out her make-up case. Later, when the chaperones were in their rooms, we climbed over the balcony of our second floor rooms, wearing so much make-up I'm sure we looked like we were off to a costume party. When we arrived at the casino, the doorman asked us our age.

“*On a vingt-et-un ans,*” Vera coolly replied. My face burned under all my paint.

The doorman gave us a little smirk. I was certain he could hear my heart pounding against my ribs. Then, with a shrug he opened the door.

Once inside the smoky, crowded casino, my mouth fell open. I couldn't believe I was here. What would my friends at school think when I told them? What would my mother say? We wandered around taking in the sights.

Vera pointed out a very good-looking blonde guy. I looked his way, but was distracted by his beautiful girlfriend who wore a slinky bottle-green dress. Her long fingers, with their matching long green nails, held a cigarette in a long ivory holder. Both she and her lover smoked constantly, elegantly. I decided to start smoking as soon as I could.

“Look at him,” Vera continued. “He’s lost all his money. Everything gone...I suppose he’ll shoot himself now.”

We should have taken that as a warning, I suppose, for when we left the casino a few hours later, all the money we’d brought to France was gone too, left behind on the roulette table. We’d lost 40 francs, which was quite a lot at that time.

“What will we do?” I cried, as we hurried back to the pension.

“Don’t worry. Just write your father and tell him I’m teaching you to knit. Everyone knits here. Tell him you need money to buy wool and knitting needles. He’ll send you more pocket money.”

And she was right. A few days later, more money arrived, though I never did learn to knit.

Later on in our trip to France, we spent almost two months at a resort on the Atlantic coast named Les Sables d'Olonne at Vendée. It was a beautiful place and we swam in the ocean every chance we got. It was here that Vera led me on my second dangerous adventure.

We spotted a fishing boat far out at sea.

"Let's swim out and see what they've caught," Vera suggested.

I wasn't sure...the boat looked awfully far away. But Vera's enthusiasm was contagious and soon we were swimming and swimming farther out into the cool Atlantic. After quite a long time has passed, Vera said, quite casually, "Don't look down right now."

"Why?" I demanded, thinking that the boat still seemed awfully far away.

"Hmm...well, I think there's a shark right beneath us."

"Tu es folle! There are no sharks in France."

But when we reached the boat at last, we found the fishermen looking at us with grave concern.

"What are you doing? Don't you know there sharks in this water?"

They hauled us aboard and kindly gave us a ride back to shore.

Vera's father raised race horses and she was an excellent rider. Since I admired everything she did, I too wanted to learn to ride.

"The best way to learn is to ride with no saddle or bridle," Vera assured me, as we led the horses on to the long, white beach. Before I knew what was happening, I was on the back of a horse, my long legs clamped hard against its side, my hands clenched tight in its long mane. The ground seemed quite far away.

Vera leapt up on her horse. "Just kick him in the side," she called as her horse thundered down the beach, sand flying out behind her.

One kick and away we went, faster and faster. Vera was far ahead now but she didn't look back once to see how I was doing. As her horse disappeared into the forest at the edge of the beach, I heard her cry, "Don't forget to keep your body down. These branches could tear your head right off."

Seconds later, the forest rushed up to greet us, me clinging so tightly to the horse's neck I'm surprised the poor beast didn't suffocate.

When I returned to Prague later that year, I asked my father to enrol me in a riding school, a proper one with saddles and bridles.

1939: London with Father

One day, in February 1939, my father said, "I have to go on a business trip to London. Your midterm holidays start soon. Would you like to come with me for a few days?"

I jumped up in excitement, hugging and kissing my father. "Of course, Dad! What a question! When should I pack? When are we going? I still have my passport from my trip to Paris two years ago."

My father smiled softly at me. My birthday was coming on March 4 and this was my gift: a trip alone with my beloved father. I could not have been happier. We were to go to Prague by train—sleeping cars, dining cars! I could not contain all the excitement – followed by the ferry to Dover then by train again to London. What a magnificent trip! What an experience!

We all travel so much today, but if I compare that trip in 1939 to traveling now, I much prefer the way it was in 1939. It was all so chic. I had a new yellow pigskin *necessaire*, purchased specially for the trip and wore my best clothes, topped with a Russian squirrel coat. My father was fashionably dressed and handsome as usual and I felt proud to be seen with him as we entered the dining car. There white gloved waiters served all the courses on china and glassware as elegant as that found in the finest restaurants.

We travelled across France, to Le Havre, then took the ferry to Dover. Later, another train to London.

I was astonished by my first sight of big, bustling London. It was so much larger than Prague and the streets teemed with life. Our

hotel was the luxurious Regent Palace on Piccadilly Circus. I had my own room. It had a huge bathroom with an enormous bathtub, but the bathroom was so very cold that I couldn't enjoy any long hot baths. I thought it was so strange that, to heat the room or to get hot water, I had to drop coins in a meter. My father had a suite next door, with a living room, all just as cold as mine.

Being a Sherlock Holmes fan, I had hoped for lots of rain and mysterious, romantic fog, but in fact we had over ten days of sunshine. Too bad! In the morning we took our breakfast in a large dining room. It had a very, very high glass ceiling. My father ordered tea for both of us and the service was quite ceremonious. First the waitress poured cream or milk then very strong tea in beautiful cups. We then had toast, eggs and smoked kippers. I kept looking and eating and looking and eating, amazed by the number of people seated in the dining room and the rushing of the waitresses.

After breakfast I went with my father to the business district where I could see wide streets lined with fur wholesale stores. We visited with some people my father knew from years before in

Prague. When his business was done, we took a cab to Buckingham Palace. For the first time I saw soldiers wearing those huge gorgeous bearskin hats.

We had lunch in one of those specialty tearooms which apparently do not exist anymore. I thought it strange that all the women rolled their fur coats under their seats. Of course, we drank more tea—in those days, English coffee was not worth drinking! My father and I shared a cucumber sandwich on white bread and ate some other food I found quite unappealing. That evening we went to the Palladium Theatre. I enjoyed seeing all the men in tuxedos though I wondered how they could go out with no fur coats in that chilly weather. I can't remember which play we saw—my English at that time was not as good as my father's—but it was a wonderful evening.

The next day we did a lot of walking, taking in the sights. My father had a surprise for me, one that shocked and upset me.

“Let's go to Oxford tomorrow,” he suggested.

“What for?” Oxford sounded like lessons and I had no desire to think about studying. School bored me.

“I want you to stay in London and finish high school,” he said. “Then next year, you can attend Oxford University. You can board there. I will pay for your education.”

My eyes filled with tears. “No! I don’t want to stay here. It’s cold. I’ll miss you and mama.”

“But Emma,” he exclaimed, “You can always come to Prague for a visit. It’s not forever, you know.”

“But my English is poor,” I argued. “How would I be able to pass my courses?”

“You passing exams...that’s my last worry.”

So I reminded him of something he didn’t want to think about. “Tatko, I’m going to marry Kurt.”

“Yes, but that’s a few years off.”

“No, Tatko. We want to get married as soon as I’m done my exams.”

At the time, I didn't understand that our world was about to change. I realize now that my father could see what was coming and wanted me to be safe. He was right, but I rejected his offer. I did not want to be in London, alone and freezing at some boarding school; I wanted to be in Prague with my family and friends. And of course, there was Kurt.

Soon the day of our departure from London arrived. Once more, my father tried to convince me to stay.

"No," I said, giving him a smile and a kiss on the cheek. "I love you, Tatko and I'm coming home with you."

Some of his London business friends were surprised at our decision to leave and tried to convince us both to stay. Just a short time before, my father had been called up for a month of military training and had come back worried about the weakness of our army. He realized we didn't have the right weapons or enough men to fight. But, even then, he never realized Hitler would want to use Czechoslovakia as a base for his army. In any case, he could not stay in England with my mother waiting for him at home.