

Chapter 4:

Marta Schehrer

Growing Up in Faurndau

1903 to 1923

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For over seven hundred years, in the land of the 13th century Swabian kings, the little southern German village of Faurndau has nestled beside the gentle river Fils. The village has survived the Black Death, numerous wars, and no small number of famines. Yet it retains an ageless charm that comforts residents and visitors alike. The village church, constructed in the 13th century, is a jewel of late medieval architecture, known far and wide for its simple elegance.

In that church, a few weeks after her birth in May, 1903, Marta Schehrer was christened. Several years later, she would be confirmed in the same setting. And a few years after that, she would return from America to become *Martha Besemer* taking in marriage the young man with whom she fell in love and with whom she would live for 56 years – but not in



Faurndau. Although Wilhelm Besemer was from another Swabian town only 15 kilometers from Faurndau, they actually met in America and would spend their lives as proud citizens of their new country. However, they never forgot or lost their love for the family or the homeland back in Swabia.

What do we know – or about what can we reasonably speculate – regarding Marta's life in Faurndau, before the momentous decision in 1923 to migrate to America?

Wedding Picture of Rosine Kolbus Schehrer and Jacob Schehrer, November 17, 1894

The Family of Jakob and Rosine Kolbus Schehrer.

Jakob Schehrer (1870 – 1947) and Rosine Kolbus (1871 – 1933) were married in a simple ceremony in the little 13th century Faurndau Church (pictured on the previous page) on November 17, 1894. He was 24 and she was 23.

Marriage in a couple's early 20s, unlike in contemporary Germany, was common at that time, as was fairly frequent procreation. In the case of Jakob and Rosine, the timing for marriage and beginning a family was not necessarily in any particular order. At their wedding, Rosine was 2 ½ months pregnant with a baby (Rosa) who would die three months beyond her birth in May of 1895. That was not to be the last such tragedy in Rosine and Jakob's family. She would bear 12 children between 1895 and 1917. The second child, born in 1896, was Bertha Rosa, known to all of us as *Tante Rosa*. She lived to be over 80. A year after her birth came the third child, Mathilde (*Tante Hildi*), who lived to be 66. The next four children – Karolina, Wilhelm, Emilie, and Richardt – were born annually and died between the ages of 5 weeks and 7 months. To the two surviving girls were added five more, – Marta (1903), Johanna (1906), Julia (1908), Emilie (1909), and Hedwig (1917). All but one lived to become grandmothers. Julia, who like Marta emigrated to America, died of heart disease at age 49, never meeting the 7 grandchildren who would come later.

Thanks to the efforts some years ago of our now departed dear cousin Walter Maser (Marta's nephew) we have a family tree (*Ahnentafel*) of Jakob and Rosine Kolbus Schehrer. The *Ahnentafel* has contributed greatly to our understanding of the family history. We can thus follow the outline of the family history back to the late 18th century. Walter discovered all of the records by visiting only three villages – Faurndau and two neighboring settlements. Until the 20th century, the family had remained within a 15 mile radius. The 20th century, of course, was to change that dramatically, with emigration to America and movement elsewhere throughout Germany.



Marta was born into a solid but poor family and community. [The house in which she and the other children were born is pictured here, as seen from the back yard.] Jakob came from generations of craftsmen. He himself was a carpenter.

Garden view of the Schehrer family home in Faurndau

His father was a master carpenter (meaning he could take on apprentices). One grandfather and one great-grandfather of Jakob were also carpenters (although it was only his father who attained master – *Schreinermeister*). Other ancestors of Marta’s father included a tailor, a shoemaker, a grave-digger, and a day-worker (*Tagelöhner*).

Pictures of Marta and her family from her childhood years are rare. Included in this chapter are nearly all we have from that period. One rare find was of Jakob’s maternal grandparents, Jakob Schehrer (the *Schreinermeister* – 1848 – 1908)) and Mathilde Ramenstein Schehrer (1849 – 1928).

Mathilde Ramensein Schehrer and Jakob Schehrer, about 1900

Marta’s mother, Rosine Kolbus Schehrer, was apparently a quiet, hard-working woman, probably worn out from child-bearing, tight circumstances, and hard work, departing the mortal coil at only 62. To help maintain the family income, Rosine worked at home sewing stockings for a local clothing factory. Cloth blanks would be provided by the factory. She would stitch them down the sole and up the back, using a treadle sewing machine. The older girls would often help out in this piecework enterprise.



Grandfather Jakob would outlive her by 14 years. From the standpoint of family history, she is a bit of an enigma. We know very little about her. We have no family pictures. Walter Maser’s family tree does go back on her side as well to the late 1700s. All of the men were farmers, or, more accurately, *peasants* (*Bauer*).

It is highly unlikely that any of the Kolbus family ever owned the land on which they worked, laboring in a semi-feudal status for local landlords, as often as not members of the lesser aristocracy. The peasants would live within the village – in the case of all Rosine’s grandparents and great-grandparents, the village of Schlierbach, about three kilometers west of Faurndau, on the Stuttgart road. They would drive their horse and cow, and perhaps a few beef cattle out of the village barns each morning in order for the livestock to graze and the peasants to work the various plots surrounding the village.

The Schehrers, like most other European families until the mid-20th century, were unfamiliar with upward mobility. Persistence, not progress, was the best they could expect out of life, from generation to generation. They were modest craftsmen and homemakers. The necessities of life were not taken for granted, and privation was all too common. Much of the furniture in the modest Faurndau house was made by Jakob with his own hands before and after his marriage to Rosine Kolbus. Solace, if not comfort, was drawn from the extended family circle. With little economic or geographic mobility, relatives lived and died near one another. The extended family provided a sort of social, psychological, and economic security. Uncles, aunts, grand-uncles, grand-aunts, and grandparents loom large in family lore. One abandoned such a close-knit setting with great reluctance and trepidation. Circumstances improved, if at all, imperceptibly from generation to generation.

To the extent that dreams of alternative lives had any grounds other than forlorn hope, it was the dream of going to America.

Marta's Childhood

Marta Schehrer was a quiet child. Her sisters described her as the most pious of the seven. We may assume that the community of the village church in Faurndau, just a few blocks from the family home, played an important part in Marta's childhood. The earliest picture we have is of her confirmation, probably around 1916, when she would have been thirteen (center, bottom row: A blow-up of Marta, from the group picture is also included here).¹

Marta Schehrer's confirmation class about 1916



¹ All members of the family should be grateful to Cousin Helga Gentner Neumeyer, daughter of Marta's younger sister Johanna, for sending these early pictures. Helga has been a willing and appreciated partner in assembling material on the Schehrer family. *Vielen herzlichen Dank, liebe Cousine.*

What little she later told her American family and the limited pictorial record suggests that she was not an unhappy child, even though more shy and spiritually oriented than her six sisters. One of the rare pictures (below) shows her, at about age 16, in an apparently carefree, if somewhat restrained and hesitant mood.

Marta completed six or seven years of formal education in the village primary school. In their early teens, those children unlikely to advance to the *Gymnasium* (a rare occurrence for anyone from a working class family, and especially rare for girls) were commonly provided some sort of vocational training. After that, they entered the workforce. True to the norm, at age 14 Marta took an office job in the same company where her elder sister Rosa worked.



Marta Schehrer, about 16 years of age

Marta rode a bicycle a few kilometers to work. Her entire wages were brought home to augment the meager resources of the family – an especially important contribution after her father was drafted into the Kaiser’s army. In later years, she would remember her years in the factory office as a pleasant time. She was apparently well-received by her co-workers, and some good friendships were formed there.

A festive office birthday celebration provides us with one of the rare pictures of Marta from that time. On the back of the original picture is written: *Geburtstag von Herrn Tuebel* (“birthday of Mr. Tuebel”). One may assume that Herr Tuebel is the boss. He is seated between two smiling young women. In this picture, the one to our left being Marta, who seems to be looking approvingly at him, although her glance is not quite as fetching as is that of the young woman to the right in the same row. Marta is holding a mandolin, and



various other festive items may be seen in the picture. It is as though a great joke has just been played. The fun seems to be genuine – not feigned for the boss.

We know that at some time in her late teens, Marta had a boyfriend. Who he was or what became of him is a mystery, for she was to leave for America before it became serious. The picture below, perhaps, may be of her with that boyfriend.

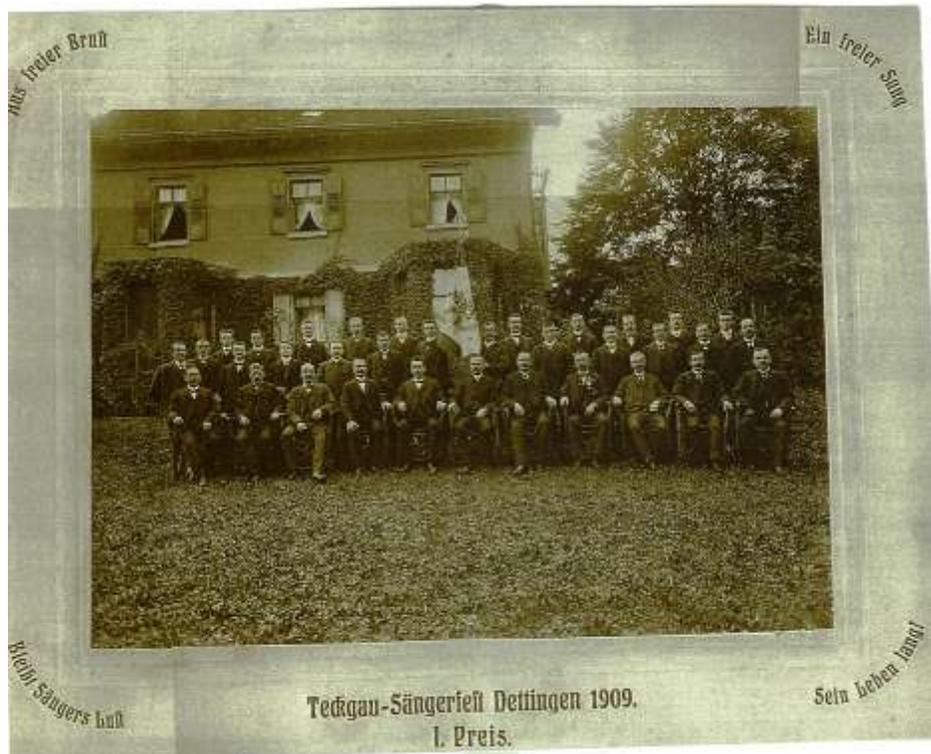
Marta Schehrer and friend, about 1920

So life was not all work and no play. The same holds true for Grandfather Schehrer. Below he is seen with his *Männerchor* (“men’s chorus”). On the margins of this lovely picture is written (somewhat loosely translated):



“From the free heart -
A Free song.
Singers stay happy
Their whole life long.”

“Teck Valley Singing Competition - Dettingen, 1909
1st Prize”



Opa Schehrer here occupies a place of honor, standard-bearer, as seen in the blow-up at the right (he is the one with the magnificent mustache):

If one is to judge by her later correspondence from America, Marta seemed closest to Rosa, 8 years elder, and to Johanna, who was three years younger than Marta. Conversations with the sisters left the impression of a fairly tight group of seven young women, with Rosa fulfilling a role somewhat like a co-mother. She was destined to stay home, single, her entire life. Many factors combined to encourage that life. First, as was to be the case twice during the first half of the 20th century, many of the eligible young men were killed in war. World War I broke out when Rosa was just 18. Her potential as a bride had been limited earlier by another tragic event: She had lost her right arm near the shoulder in an industrial accident when she was only 16. For the rest of her days, she wore a useless, cosmetic prosthesis usually carried in a sling with a white glove over the plaster hand.



In spite of some times for a bit of fun, the war years (1914 – 1918) were made extraordinarily hard for the family due to the father's being conscripted – in his mid-30's, leaving at home his wife and six daughters. Family lore contains no references to his military service, except that some time in January or February of 1916 he returned home on furlough long enough for Rosine to become pregnant with Tante Hedel. This 1915 picture is the only record we have of Jakob's military service.



The only known picture of the entire family was taken shortly before Marta's emigration in 1922. They are, left to right: Julia, Mathilde (*Hildi*), Mother Rosine (seated), Rosa, Hedwig (*Hedel* – with the magnificent bow, seated beside her father), Father Jakob, Marta, Emilie (*Emy*), and Johanna (*Hanna*).



Of the domestic life of the seven girls and their parents, we know very little. Rosa as the eldest exercised the most responsibility for the others. She would remain the matriarch to the end of her days.

Hildi (Mathilde – 1897-1963) at age twenty married Jakob Maser and raised two children. Jakob died a natural death in 1958. Hilde followed him five years later. Their son Walter would serve as family organizer until his death in 1998. Ruth, his sister, is today a loving grandmother, with open arms for any and all who visit the family.

Johanna (1906 – 1994) married Karl Genthner in 1939, with whom she bore two children. Alas she was widowed at an early age when Karl was killed at Stalingrad in 1942. She and the children (Helga and Dieter) would live in the family home with Rosa for the rest of their time together. Helga to this day expresses gratitude for her *two mothers*.

Julia (1908 – 1957), the fifth of the seven surviving daughters, would follow her sister Marta to America, where she would marry a Bavarian immigrant, Sebastian Frederick Kufer, with whom she would have three children before she was taken from this life at the early age of 49. She worked hard all her life, but maintained a hearty sense of humor. Unfortunately, she was never able to share that with the seven grandchildren that were to come after her untimely death.

Emilie (*Tante Emy* – 1909 - 1994), while living through awful personal tragedies, maintained from her childhood a hearty sense of humor and a generosity of spirit toward the entire family. She was the practical joker who could enliven any setting. Her husband, Ernst Schneider, would survive World War II, only to take his own life a few years later. Their only child – Kurt – died in a construction accident at age 26. In spite of her humor and a seeming joy in life, some members of the family believe that Tante Emy never quite connected with reality after Kurt's death.

The youngest, Hedwig (*Tante Hedel* - 1917 - 2000), was a surprise. Born eight years after the next to last (Emy), Tante Hedel was a magnificent figure in the family. As a child, she was rather spoiled by her siblings. However, it seems merely to have developed in her a strong sense of family responsibility. She and her husband Ernst Mueller had three lovely daughters -- Monika, Ursula, and Doris.

Alas, by now all seven sisters are gone. The youngest, Hedwig, died in 2000 at age 83. Marta would survive all of her sisters, living until nearly 99 years old. All seven survived well into the post-World War II years – the war and its aftermath being a topic for a future essay. For those who stayed behind, the *Wirtschaftswunder* (“economic miracle”) of the post-war years brought to their later years a prosperity undreamed of during their childhoods. Two of the sisters, however, fulfilled the other dream – the dream of going to America.

Going to America

If life had been difficult before World War I, it was often unbearable afterward. Germany would fall (or be pushed, depending on how one reads history) into a deep economic depression that would last in some form until it was “rescued” by Hitler and his cohorts a decade and a half after the allied victory in the *war to end all wars*. Privation elsewhere, as for example in Belgium, was widely addressed by more economically secure countries. The United States sent over 3% of its Gross National Income for aid to Europe. Herbert Hoover, a California engineer, made his mark on the world stage by leading the European relief program in the 1920s. Germany was largely excluded from such assistance. Further, in retribution for its aggression against the allies, severe financial reparations were extracted from the already crippled economy.

To pay its bills, the new German government printed money. The result was hyperinflation. By the end of 1923 the German price level was 1,260,000,000,000 times what it had been at the start of World War I.²

*In the immediate aftermath of World War I, central Europe and Russia were near starvation. One of the principal weapons with which the western allies had fought the war had been a naval blockade enforced by the British fleet: deprive the cities of central Europe of the food that they had imported, and deprive the farms of central Europe of as many of the raw materials to boost agricultural productivity as possible. And during the war the German army made sure that Germany's chemical factories used nitrogen to produce explosives, not fertilizer.*³

These general conditions were felt painfully by people at all levels of society, and not the least by those such as Jakob Schehrer who made their living as independent craftsmen, dependent on the purchasing decisions of relatively well-off customers. In post-World War I Germany there simply was not enough demand by relatively well-off customers to meet the supply.

Germans had emigrated to America by the millions in the half century before Marta Schehrer's birth. Nearly everyone had some more or less distant relative in America. Few of those relatives were at all wealthy by American standards, but, in the eyes of post-War Germans, they must have appeared to be rich beyond measure. In Marta's case, the relevant relative was her Grandmother Schehrer's sister, Christine Margarete Rammenstein Haselbeck Sieg, known to the American family as *Tante Sieg* ("seek").

Tante Sieg had emigrated at some point in the latter years of the 19th century, probably around 1880 in her mid 20s. The circumstances of her emigration are not remembered by anyone in the family. She was a cleaning lady of frugal means in South Bend, Indiana. Ellis Island records from several years after her first arrival show her entering the country twice more -- once in 1922 and once in July 1923. Accompanying her on the 1923 trip was her 20 year old grand niece, Marta Schehrer.

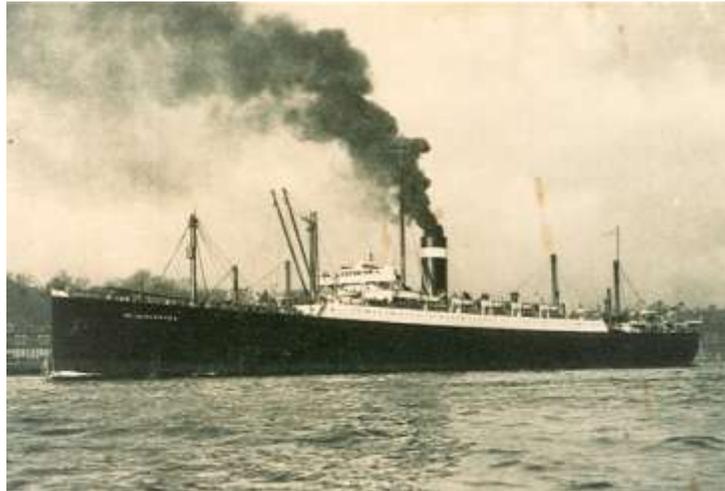
² In the summer of 1990, I was strolling through a large flea market in downtown Berlin. One dealer was selling old currency. One of the notes I saw (but was too irrationally cheap to buy) was a 100 mark bill. It was printed on only one side -- the other left blank. But stamped across the printed side was "10,000,000 Marks". The date of issue was July 13, 1923 -- the very day that Marta Schehrer arrived in South Bend, Indiana [RIH].

³ J. Bradford DeLong, *Slouching Towards Utopia?: The Economic History of the Twentieth Century-XI. Restoring the Pre-World War I Economy-*
http://econ161.berkeley.edu/TCEH/Slouch_Restoring11.html

Family lore tells us how Tante Sieg made the offer to assist one of the Schehrer girls to go to America. She told them that they were the only set of relatives who had not written to her asking for money. She offered to sponsor one daughter, with the clear understanding that the costs of passage would be repaid as soon as possible by the newly landed American immigrant. Why Marta? Rosa was handicapped. Hildi was already married to Jakob Maser. The other four girls were too young, Johanna the next in line was only 17 at that time. To meet Tante Sieg's terms, the candidate would clearly have to be of employable age in America. Further, Tante Sieg already had a job lined up for the girl to accompany her – housemaid and nanny for the family of a wealthy South Bend industrialist.

Leaving her family was a wrenching step. Marta assumed the chances were that she would never again see her parents or her loving sisters. She was the shyest of them all. She was the one probably least self-confident of her ability to manage strange circumstances. Tante Sieg, while in some senses a saving angel, was hardly the type to provide comfort and solace to a frightened and homesick young woman. But leave they did.

After a day-long train ride to Hamburg in the North, they sailed in late June on the Hamburg-America line's SS Minnekahoa, arriving at Ellis Island on July 10, 1923.



SS Minnekahda⁴

⁴ Built by Harland & Wolff Limited, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 1918. 17,221 gross tons; 646 (bp) feet long; 66 feet wide. Steam triple expansion engines, triple screw. Service speed 15 knots. 2,150 passengers. One funnel and one mast, rebuilt 1920.

Built for Atlantic Transport Line, British flag, in 1914 and named **Minnekahda**. London-New York service. construction halted owed to WWI. Rebuilt as passenger ship in 1920. Scrapped in Scotland in 1936. [www.ellisland.org - search on *Marta Schehrer*]

As Marta told it the passage was a total lark. They traveled the cheapest class, but Marta made friends with a group of other girls embarking on the same exciting adventure. One young woman whom she met was Frieda Erdman, on her way to America from Gotha, Germany. Although Frieda was nine years older, she and Marta would become the dearest of lifelong friends. It was cemented by Frieda's marrying into Marta's family. Also on board the Minnekahoa was Marta's second cousin, 38 year old Herman Haselbeck, Tante Sieg's son by a first marriage. Herman was in the process of divorcing his first wife and was thus traveling alone, aside from his mother and cousin Marta. He wooed Frieda Erdman and married her a year after their arrival in South Bend. Frieda worked for the same family as Marta. Marta and her fiancé Wilhelm Besemer were later to be godparents to Frieda and Herman's daughter Virginia. We may assume that Marta's anxiety about her new surroundings was mitigated somewhat by her close friendship with Frieda.⁵

Immigrants and those who write about them often dwell on the unpleasanties met by new-comers to Ellis Island. For Marta, it was a continuation of the adventure. The clearance process took at least one full day, and often two. Dormitory accommodations were provided.⁶ Marta and some of her shipboard friends were able to bunk near one another. She recalled singing songs and telling funny stories the entire time.

Three days after landing in New York, Marta would arrive by train in South Bend – Friday the 13th of July, 1923. Four years later, she would be married to a handsome young man she would meet in Americanism class. He had arrived in 1922, having grown up in Kirkheim unter Teck, just 15 kilometers west of Faurndau. In between and, no doubt, in the later years, there was much lonesomeness and homesickness. Early on, Marta – now *Martha* – would deal with her loneliness by writing. One poem, long filed away among Tante Rosa's keepsakes, captures her mood at the time, and serves well as a conclusion for this essay on Marta's years in Germany. [Next Page]

⁵ Frieda Erdman Haselbeck died in 1977, having been widowed by Herman's death in 1959.

⁶ These may still be seen now at the wonderfully restored Ellis Island Museum. Also, along *Immigrants' Wall*, outside the Museum, one will find plaques honoring the arrival on America's shores of Wilhelm Friedrich Besemer and Marta Schehrer Besemer.

Aus trüber Stunde!

Fern von der Heimat weit von dir fort,
Da weile ich jetzt an einem fremden Ort.
Fremd unter Menschen die nicht mich verstehn,
Eisam und, verlassen muss' meine Wege, ich gehn.

Ich hatte ein Seelchen, das so gut mich verstand
Mit dem mich soviel Gemeinschaft verband.
Doch auch diese musst lassen ich weit zurück,
Ach wo blüht auf der erde mir einmal das Glück?

Wie oft liebe Schesterlein gingen wir zwei allein
Spazieren im Sommersonnenschein,
Und wanderten über Tal und Höhe
Und konnten uns immer so gut verstehn?

Wenn auch die Menschen oft warren gar schlecht
Wir glauben uns deshalb gerade erst recht.
Wir brauchten uns nur ins Auge ze schau'n
Da lag ja drin' die Liebe und das Vertraun'.

Wie oft hast Du mir das Deinem Leben erzählt
Und dabei immer die rechten Worte gewählt,
Die tiefbmi in's Innere das Herzens drangen
Bis dass dort die guten Saiten erklangen.

Nun hab ich nichts mehr als Dein Bild
Aus dem Du mich anschaust mit seinem Blick so mild
Und wenn mir jetzt manchmal das Auge trüb
So hab' ich nur die Bitte behalte mich lieb.

*Dies Ihrer Beliebten Schwester Rosel von Irer kleinen
Märtl
South-Bend, den 23. August 1923*

Of Melancholy Hours!

Away from home and far from you,
I pass the hours in a strange place.
Stranger among people who do not understand me.
Lonesome and lost, I must go my way.

But there is a dear soul who understands me well
With whom I am so tightly bound.
Yet I even had to leave that one far behind,
Ah! Where on this earth will happiness bloom for me
once more?

How many times these loving sisters – we two alone --
Strolled in the summer sun,
And wandered over hill and vale
And always understood each other well.

When people were often unkind,
We still believed what was right.
We had only to look each other in the eyes
And find therein love and trust.

How many times have you told me of your life
And chose just the right words
That forced their way deep into my heart
Until there they rang like lovely chords.

Now I have nothing but your picture
From which you look upon me so kindly
And when I now look sadly on those eyes
I pray only that you keep me in your love.

*For my beloved sister Rosa from her little Martha
South Bend, 23 August 1923*

[Written to Rosa Schehrer in Faumdau, Würtemberg, Germany
by Marta Schehrer, one month after she emigrated to America.
Translated by Richard I. Hofferbert, Marta's son-in-law,
November 17, 2004]