

My Ninetieth Birthday

A Celebration on Three Continents



On December 6, 2025, I flew down to Costa Rica to help the Vuurmans celebrate Christmas. Marjan lives in the Cortijo, an upscale condominium in Escazu, San Jose. In a short time after dinner. I was relaxed on the sofa with Lanita by my side. She is Marjan's fluffy, miniature poodle. While I was enjoying a Dutch cookie with my nighty night tea, Marjan popped the question.



“What do you want to do for your birthday?.”



“Oh, that’s over a month away, no big deal.”

She was persistent

“Please, you will only be 90 once in your life, so we must celebrate.”

“Well, you know what I really want? ...to go back to ski at Matrei.”

Last year, our Austrian friends would not permit me to ski because I was 89 and I am still upset about that! They said.



“If you come back when you’re 90, we will let you ski.”

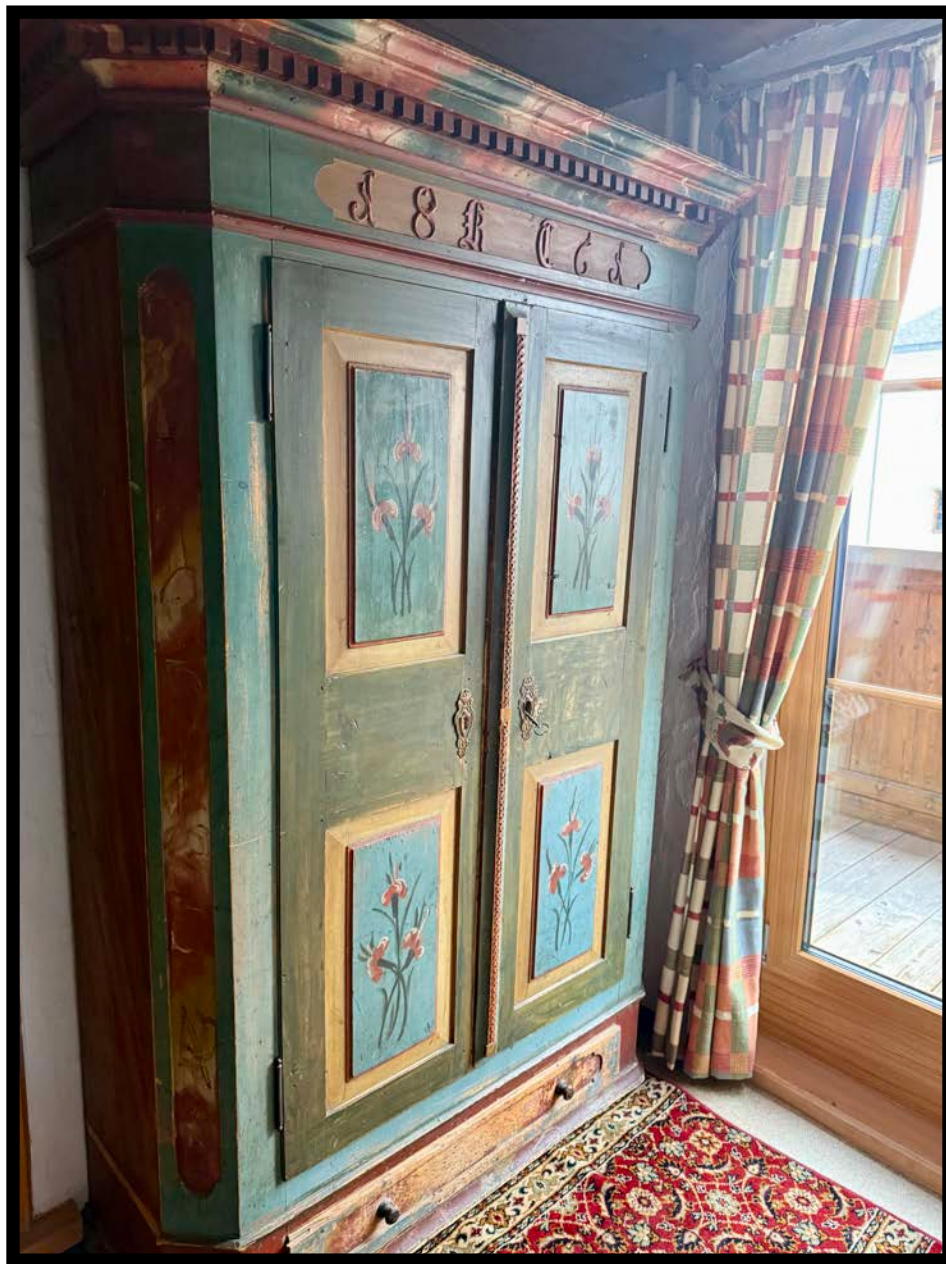
In a moment, the phone rang and it was my youngest son, Hugh, on the line from New Hampshire.

“ If you ski in Austria next month. Ray and I will join you and Marjan.”

With this surprise and with many to follow, I was treated to a three week fairy tale. Immediately, we booked round trip tickets on United to Munich from our respective sofas. I booked from Philadelphia (PHL) to Munich (MUC) for January 20- February 8.



Marjan booked MUC for before January 20 to near the end of February. DONE ! Not quite...we wanted to stay at the Messnerhof in Virgen, Austria where we loved staying last year. The facility is a 400 year old farmhouse located in the center of the village. We



checked Booking.com for a reservation and there was none. The whole area was almost sold out. What was left had sky high prices.

“ John, no worry, I will call Anna in nearby Matrei. You are exhausted from your flight today from Philadelphia. Go to bed and get some sleep.”

In the morning, she had the “ Lunewisehglick Room ” booked for Hugh and Ray and “The Apartment “, Blick Ruine Rabenstein” for us.

This was the second surprise with many more to come.

Here is an account of the email conversations between Marjan and Hugh before I arrived. She was introducing him to her/our many



Hello Hugh, hoping to find you well.

Just a little update:

I made the reservation at the Cowstall Restaurant at The Stanglwirt Hotel for Jan 30 at 5pm and it has been confirmed!.

I managed to get the best place, we will be seated at a long table in front of the window so that the cows can see what we are having 😊😊

Dinner Dress code: not formal but definitely not too casual !

We will be a total of 15 people. All dear friends that John has met through out his visits with me to Germany and Austria and Costa Rica.

I will give you the names of these friends so that you both know a bit about them.

Irmi Bares 87: a very dear and long time friend since 1991 Germany. Last year and this year we lodged at her home, many an hour was spent at the breakfast table and enjoying her tea and having lovely conversation that I still don't know how John and she

understand each other in their English/ German/gesture conversation!! 😊

Ulli 66 (Irmi's Son) and his partner Konrad 60 both real Bavarian persons with a lovely sense of humor well English spoken know much about art every tile and fashion (Clothing). Mona (my ex husband's daughter, for me my "daughter") and husband Jan both 45 she architect and he a lawyer have 3 girls, also well spoken English. Both witty and outgoing. John met them twice in Germany and last time here at my home in CR, they pamper us she lets us use her car while we visit Germany just yesterday going.

Anna and Robert both 61 from Matrie Austria, I know them since 1991. John met them here in Costa Rica while they were vacationing with at that time their little 13 year old son Benny. Later he met them again in Austria where they pampered us and he met Benni again a young man then 21. and got to meet his girlfriend Silvi 22 and his brother Daniel 28. John was introduced into the Matrie lifestyle and fell in love with the surroundings, the customs, the people etc. In the mean time John was surprised by Benni and Silvi's visit to Leben Kay this past summer when he took marvelous drone films from the

28. John was introduced into the Matrie lifestyle and fell in love with the surroundings, the customs, the people etc. In the mean time John was surprised by Benni and Silvi's visit to Leben Kay this past summer when he took marvelous drone films from the farm.

It's going to be a great birthday, John has no idea if and what is going to happen for his birthday and even less that his dear European friends will join this celebration.

He is extremely excited that you both are coming which for him is the "high point" because he wants to show you around and share with you these moments.

So this is a little recap. Please in due time confirm me your flights so that I can plan our travel time from Matrie to the Airport in Munich to pick you up on time.

Thank you and I'm so looking forward to all.

Warm regards
Marjan 🌸🌹

friends in Munich, Germany and Matrei, Austria.

Her airport schedule in Munich on the 21st was on schedule.



We arrived at Irmi's condo in Lohengrin for another one of her signature breakfasts (Frühstucks). Black tea with different breads, some toasted; and "smerries" (cheeses, marmalades and deli meats).



It was so easy to pass a two hour conversation with this type of menu.



On to Austria for Matrei and Virgen on the flat roads of the Autobahn where you pass on the left lane and then quickly change to the right because someone is coming behind at 120 mph! Everything changes within the jagged peaks of the Alps in Austria. There is

the Felbertauern Tunnel before Matrei that costs 13 Euros each way which saves many kilometers and much time. The snow is good in Austria while Munich is bare. We stopped in Matrei to stock up on groceries at the Spar Supermarket. It's always fun to visit grocery stores while abroad to observe the differences from home.



The Messnerhof had changed from last year. The functioning watering trough had sprung a leak. It was made from a large, slightly curved larch log that lasted 15 years. The Messnerhof is located in the center square of the Virgen village. Their four hundred year old house also has 4 rooms and one apartment for rent. Additionally, they have a dairy cow- calf operation attached to their house. Yes, we were privileged to sleep over the cows! Anita Jestl (Grandmother) with Thomas and Danielle and their two children run the



operation. They graciously presented us with their welcoming birthday gift.



The next day Thomas and his uncle took the John Deere to the forest to harvest a larch log to make a new trough. They used a chain saw and a special variety of tools to craft a new trough. He then







made the cross that adorns the barn but not the 150 year old crucified Savior image.

Our state of the art apartment had a porch off of the bedroom which afforded a view of the church and graveyard. This section of Austria has a wonderful tradition of caring for their departed loved

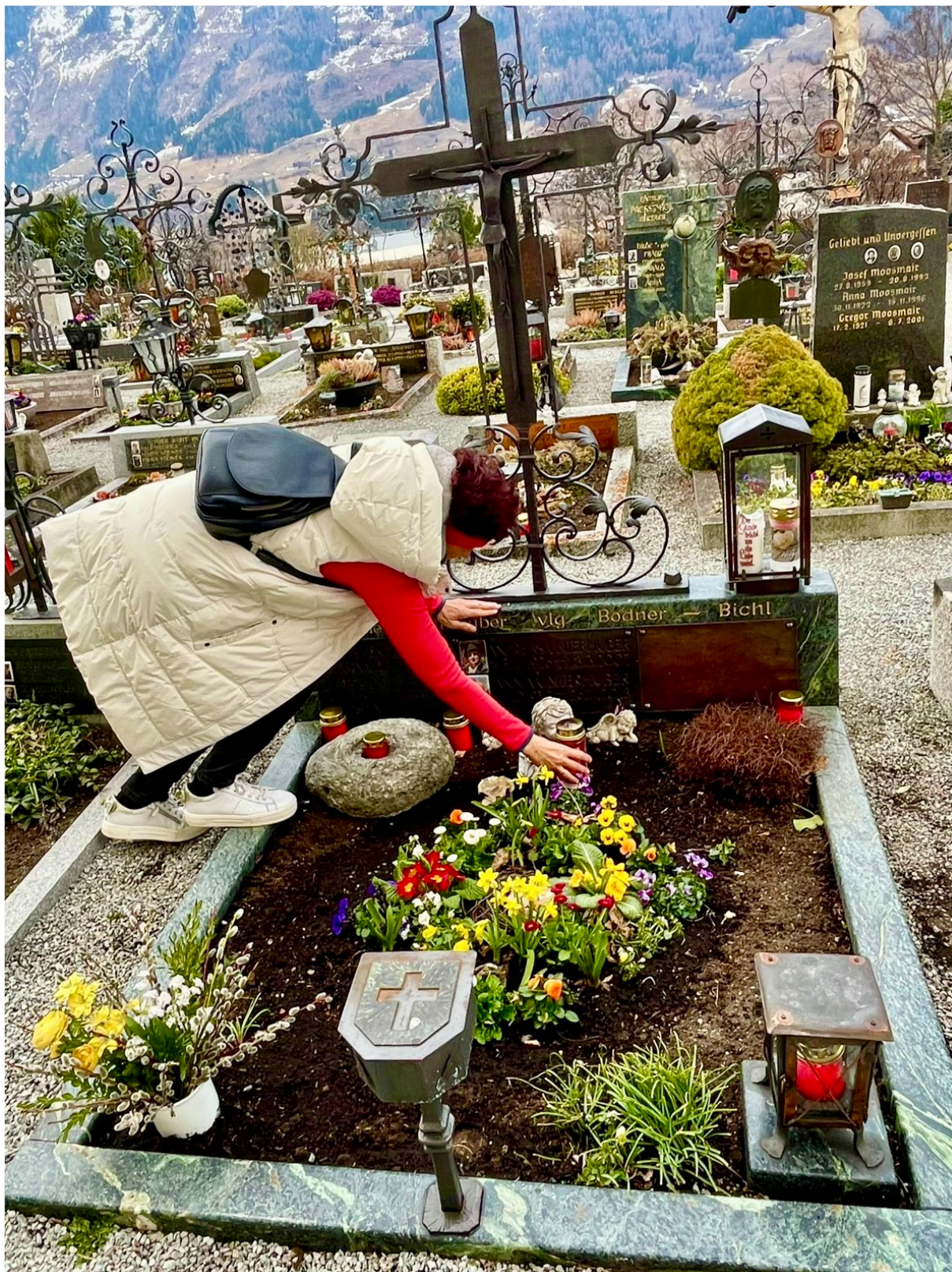


ones. One can purchase a one day, three or five day candle in the church or supermarket to decorate the grave. This practice is a





lifestyle of grave visits at least once a week. A time to pray and reminisce. The graveyard glows at night. For those who are cremated



there is a hole in the cemetery wall for an urn with a candle.



There was another porch off the kitchen-dinning area with a view of the square and main road. These porches were really wonderful on the mornings that were blessed with fresh snow.



I was privy for the Hugh surprise. In 2005, Hugh led two blind



men up a mountain in the Dolomite mountains in Italy, about 60 miles from Matrei. The climbers were Eric, an American, and Andy Holtzer, Austrian. Both were blind from birth. It was a tv production here and later in Lake Tahoe in the US. Robert and Anna Unterhuber Egger, friends of Marjan for 36 years live in Matrei and knew about this filming incident. They knew that Andy lived in Lienz which is only ten miles from Matrei. They acquired Andy's address and phone number. This was our surprise. Robert and Anna took us over to explore Lienz to find Andy. Andy was not home but we learned that his sister lives next door and is also blind. The trip was salvaged by having lunch on the mountain near Lienz. Later Marjan was able to connect with Andy by phone. The conversation began in German but soon reverted to English. She arranged a time to visit the following



night when it was snowing heavily. Andy and his partner Gaby were hand shoveling their driveway to welcome us. This was shortly after we discovered we had only one working headlight. Adventures! No problem, They easily agreed to meet us with Hugh on Saturday night at the restaurant in Matrei.

On the morning of the 29th of January, we picked up Hugh and Ray at the Munich airport. It's a 3.5 hour trip each



way. They were exhausted from their “red eye” flight so they slept most of the way to Virgin. We had a nice breakfast with them in our apartment for the next three days. On the morning of the 30th, we



showed them around Matrei before we visited Robert and Anna. The first surprise began with a mountain goat pin for my Bavarian hat from Daniel and Benni, their sons. Robert and Anna's gift was a lift ticket for the gondola tomorrow. Silvi and

Benni gave a framed photo of us last year. Silvi used wood from the 450 year old Unterhuber farmhouse where Uncle



on the mountainside near Matrei.

Peter lives with his family



Our lunch consisted of a huge soft pretzel cut horizontally to accommodate lunch meats, cheeses, lettuce and tomato. When sliced in 6 inch pieces it could feed a bunch of people!



The toast for the birthday occasion was a schnapps (Zirben) made from the cone of a rare, local pine tree. The tree features extra long needles. A remedy for colds and aching limbs; also for après-ski gatherings. Anna and Robert call it Medicine which warms the whole way to the stomach.



Dessert was Anna's Black Forest chocolate cake decorated by an eatable confection of Marjan and me prepared by Anna, Daniel's girlfriend. This Black Forest cake is surprisingly light with a generous supply of cherries throughout! Oh, how blessed I am.

We had to leave early because we needed to travel two hours to



honor an evening restaurant reservation. As we came out of Kitzbuhel, I implored Marjan to call the Stangelwirt to see if they might have a cancelation.

“ No way would there be a cancelation, they’ve been fully booked since August. I do have their permission to show Hugh and Ray the cows in the restaurant ”.

Her Pinocchio nose was gaining in length.

Well, inside there sat 15 friends at the premium table in front of the cows. They came from Matrei and Munich to sing “Happy Birthday” to me. What a beautiful shock! The Stanglwirt restaurant and hotel which dates back to the 1600’s. The horizontal spouting are made of carved wood. The hotel is famous for providing the in house Lippizaner horses for clients who like to ride. Tonight was Marjan’s birthday gift to me. Here are some photos to help document the occasion.











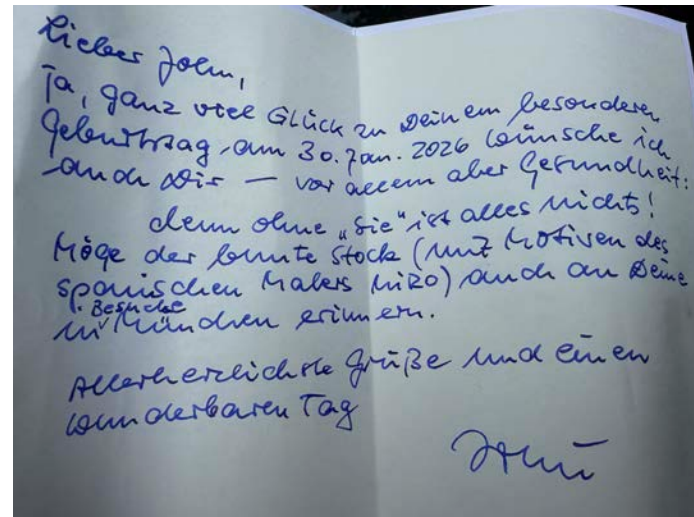
The weather cooperated for clear travel conditions to get to and from this celebration.

Exotic presents from the Munich folks included:

A gamsbart is the hair from chamois, a goat in the Austrian Alps, to grace my Bavarian hat (rabbit). A dapper gift from Uli and Konrad. The evolution of my hand made, Breiter hat. It was purchased at



Hutmacher Zapf in Munich in 2024 for 425 Euros. The additions of the chamois pin and gamsbart came this week from dear friends.



A colorful cane from Irmi
made by Joan Miró, a
renown artist from
Barcelona. It collapses

easily to transport when not in use.

Jan, Mona and the three girls made sure that we all start the day with
a proper Bavarian Frühstück ...love those white sausages!.



Marjan gave me the card that came mighty close to moving the mountains. The love given to me today will be with me the rest of my



life...so many thanks.

Virgen 30 Jan. 2026

Dearest John,

This is my birthday gift
to you, wishing you a very
happy Birthday surrounded
by your family and mine
equal "Ours" at this
wonderful place you so
dearly wished the "Cowstead"
at Stanglwirt.

May you have a great and
memorable ending of the
day to look back on.

With much love,

Yours

Margan



Enough parties, it is Saturday; now is the time to work. We rented all the ski equipment at the base of the gondola in Matrei. Boots, skis, poles and helmets for only fifty Euros /day. Hugh handed a pipe with a small arm attached to the caretaker and said.

“Please fit this with your smallest boot”.

The boot came and the system was secured by one socket head screw.

The sun was bright, no wind with a multi mile visibility...what a perfect day for skiing. Our guides were Benni and Silvi who ranked high in the recent downhill race in Matrei. Anna provided more security while Robert hiked up the mountain to join us for lunch. This is the day we looked forward to for a year. Our best group photo:



A few more for documentation



The highest mountain in Austria, The Grossglockner , (12,461' above

sea level) is visible from the top of the Kals am Grossglockner cable



car. Today, it was possible to see 50- 3000 meter peaks from this 360



degree mirador. Today, we had no falls or breaks for which we are so grateful.





Our dinner at the Alte Mühle Restaurant in Matrei is where Hugh had his surprise to meet Andy Holtzen after 26 years. He didn't recognize him at first because Andy had long blond hair then. They both ordered hamburgers. Andy ate his quickly. Abby, his partner, ordered a large meal. She didn't eat much of it before she handed it over to Andy. He attacked it immediately.

“ I really like to eat! ”

He used his knife and fork to gather the small peas and carrots by tapping the plate while talking without out looking, of course. In 15 minutes the plate was clean. He told us that it is easier for him to climb than it is to hike.

“Wherever my hand is, my foot will be there in a short time,”

This fellow has climbed Everest after the third try, Aconcagua, McKinley and Kilimanjaro. This gentleman is one tough human being.



On Sunday, We took Hugh and Ray back to the Munich airport having warm thoughts of friends old and new.



We needed another surprise party at the farm of the Unterhuber family. They live on the mountain on the opposite side of the Matrei gondola. Anna's brother Peter, with his wife Monja and three children live here in a 250 year old farm complex. Andy, their oldest son, showed us his pet duck outside the duck house in a snow storm. The party was in the kitchen by the ceramic stove. In the summer, their cows gaze near the top of the mountain where they are able to look down on the clouds. Peter builds ski lifts internationally. One near Sochi, Russia and this year one in the Ukraine. " Oh yes, there is a war at the one end and ski resorts at the Western end."

This is not what we are shown on tv in America.



My birthday gift didn't last very long. It was a box of delicious



Austrian chocolates.

Robert announced that tomorrow he wants to give us another surprise.
"Bring your passports".



So along with Anna, we headed towards Lienz and kept going. Soon we entered Italy...he showed us where the new tennis phenom, Jannik Sinner, grew up near the small village of Sexton in the Dolomite Mountains. After only 55 miles from Mauterhorn we came to Cortina, Italy which was one of the 4 venues for the Winter Olympics. We came 3 days before the games opened and a permit was required to enter the town which was super crowded already. The security was tight which proved successful for the two week event.



Coming out of the city to the Dolomites, Robert showed us the Three Peaks of Lavadero. The wall that Hugh led the two blind climbers to the summit in 2005.

Returning to Austria, we visited The Loacker Store. They are unique biscuit makers of many versions. The store was busy which proves that the product is appealing.

Marjan sought forgiveness for her pinocchio nose so she ask Amma and me to attend church in the evening. Anna advised that



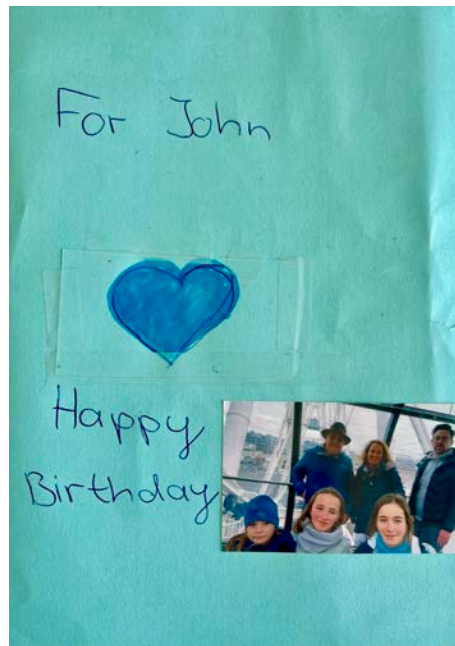


we sit on the front pews because they had heated cushions because the church was not heated. The music from the harp kept us warm. We knew that the saints were pleased because the graveyard was glowing as we exited the church.

It was tough to leave these gorgeous Alpine scenes to return to “flat” Munich. In the morning we were treated to the fourth birthday



party at the Bavarian restaurant, The Augustiner Braü München which opened in 1328. Our hosts were Mona Atta and Jan Mueller with their two daughters Lena and Sara. The youngest daughter Mira was unable to attend. I was presented with a beautiful card from Lena written in English which will be a keepsake.



The white sausages skinned and then sliced horizontally with sweet



mustard is probably why the restaurant has flourished hundreds of years. The large soft pretzel with soft cheese and herbs is addicting as well. The smallest acceptable egg order is three.

There were 12 positive compliments about my hat on Sunday during my flight from Munich to Philadelphia.

On February 15, Elizabeth, my daughter, hosted my fifth birthday from the family at her home on Wheatland Ave. Another special with good food and love.





Sky, my only great grand child, liked her new sled from Matrei almost as much as the adults.



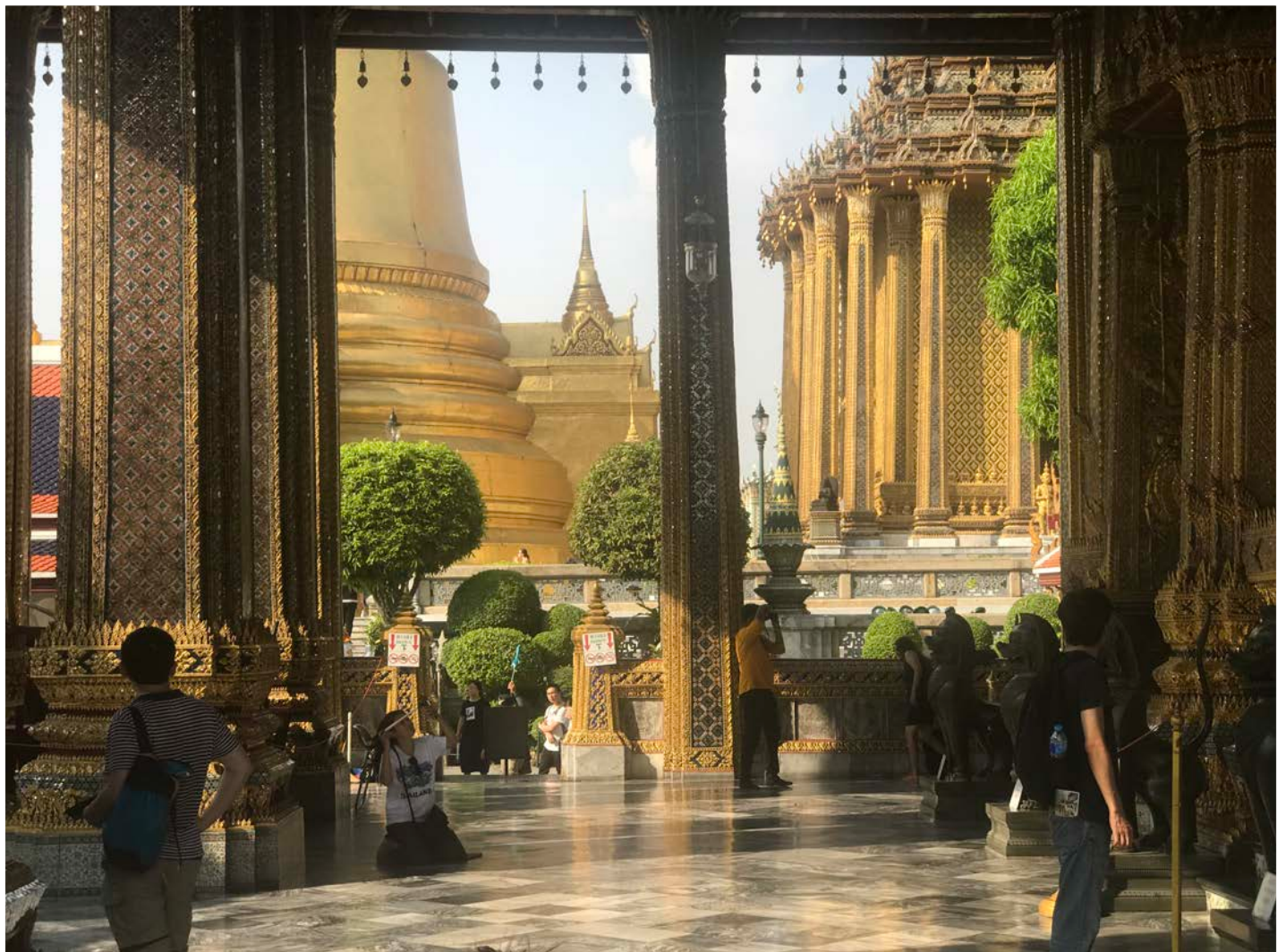
An interesting book on farm animals and a birthday card were outstanding presents. The card contained a ticket for the Saturday broadcast of La Traviata at the Metropolitan Opera in New York of June 6. Almost all of my family will be filling a box seat. The group photo lacks Tony who had to leave early. This was the first



take which turned out well.

The sixth party was given by my Amish friends and neighbors. It was hosted by “Junior” Benjamin and Marion Yoder and their sons Mahlon and Nathan Aaron and Elizabeth Glick along with Ike, Lillian and Joseph King made for lively conversation with many handmade gifts. It was understandable that no photos were taken but the wonderful evening will be remembered for a long time. Marian’s lasagne was so yummy lite that I ate too much.

The number 7 birthday party was given by “Susie“, Suchitre Tanpansuriya, a longtime Thai friend. She operated a high class tailor shop for many years in Pattaya. I still cherish my cool, black and yellow house coat that she made 25 years ago. Susie and Martha were



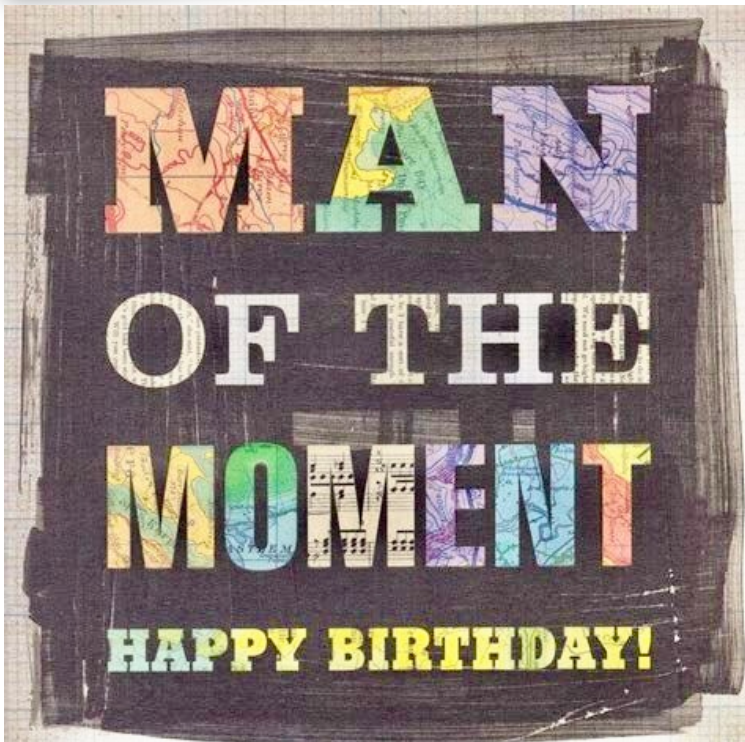


good friends. The visits to her shop always included conversation and coffee. She later married Jelle Feenstra, a Dutchman . They spend their summers



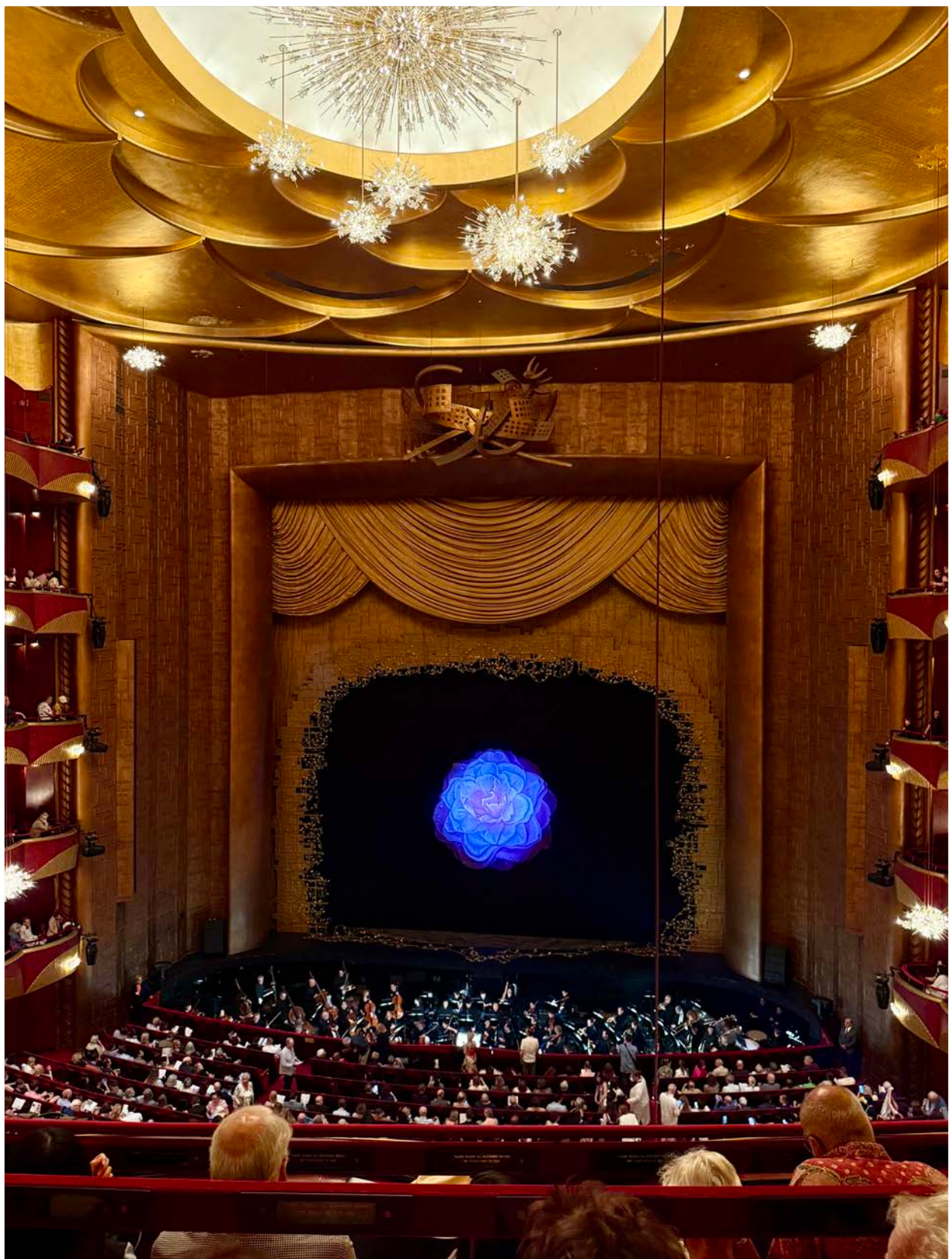
in the Netherlands and winters in Pattaya. Our waitress, was also a good cook on fried , mixed vegetables with shrimp in oyster sauce with a side of jasmine rice.

My gift was a ceramic, Delft shoe.



My birthday continued on June 6 when my family treated me to the Saturday matinee of Verdi's *La Traviata* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Hugh and his family were unable to attend due to illness. A lucky fan benefited from this and was proud to pose with his free ticket. The show was the last of the season and was





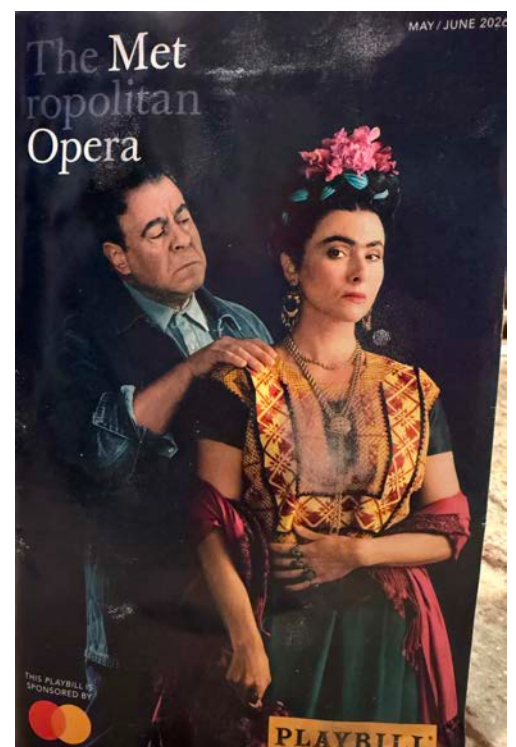
broadcast on world radio. It was downright sensational down to the tiny details. The camilla on the curtain was the omen of things to

come. The stage director had the singers constantly moving; the





deathbed was stage front for the entire production. The Italian Violetta sang the high e from the foot of the bed with outstretched arms to end the “Siempre Libre.” All the singers performed meaningfully with plenty of soft singing. For color, the elder Germont was from Mongolia. It was a comfort to see that Grand Opera is in good shape in 2026... a fabulous show without big name





performers. We enjoyed a meal together at the Shalel Restaurant in the brownstone basement on West 69th Street.

After living 89 years without a birthday party, my ninetieth year more than filled the gap. Seven parties on three continents! So many thanks to all those folks who made this possible. Special thanks to Anna and Elizabeth, who helped organize and host. Extreme kudos to Marjan who worked tirelessly to pull all odds the together. Lastly, I need to thank the priest in Matrei who restored Marjan's nose back to original size.

Text by John Bucher Herr

*Photos by Anita Messner, Anna Unterhuber Egger,
Marjan Vuurman, John Bucher Herr*