

Daisaku Ikeda's Recollections of World Figures
Jutta Unkart-Seifert —
Undersecretary of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, the Arts and Sports

SHE is a person who lives life to the fullest. A singer and a government official. A doctor of philosophy and a warm, home-loving individual. When I think about the energetic life of Dr. Jutta Unkart-Seifert, undersecretary of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, the Arts and Sports, two things come to mind — her unaffected smile and one particular scene from her past.

A small girl arrives at a cemetery in Vienna, leading her blind father by the hand. He is a professional vocalist, but in order to earn extra money for his family, he has taken a job singing at funerals. His daughter, although very young, listens solemnly by the grave with the mourners until the service is over. She watches protectively over her father with warm, loving eyes. The shadows of the trees change shape with sun's movement. Occasionally, she raises her face to the sun and gazes into the sky's infinite depths.

"That was my most fundamental school in life," Dr. Unkart-Seifert recalls. "There I was, only 5 years old, standing before coffins. I naturally came to wonder about the meaning of death, and as a result the meaning of life.... I still ask myself many of those same questions about the purpose of life. Do we merely live to eat? Or to watch mindless TV programs? Or to speak ill of others? Or to fight wars? Surely this is not what life is all about. Those who do not avert their eyes from the question of death realize just how precious and irreplaceable life is. They cannot fail to devote every minute of their lives to developing and improving themselves."

When Jutta was young, her father was also her voice teacher. During World War II, a bomb had destroyed her parents' home except for the music room. Jutta's cradle was also placed in that room. Her father had many pupils and gave lessons from ten to twelve hours each day. From morning to night, young Jutta's cradle was rocked by the sweet hand of music.

Both her mother and father were visually handicapped. They faced dreadful discrimination. During the war, the threat that her parents might be sent to a Nazi concentration camp because of their disability hung over their heads. In addition, four of her relatives were killed in the war. Those were terrible times. Yet, somehow her parents always managed to remain cheerful. Perhaps they resolved to live that way for their daughter's sake.

"I had a truly wonderful childhood," recalls Dr. Unkart-Seifert. "Because I had to help take care of my parents and because of my music and voice lessons, I couldn't run around and play freely like other children, but I never once felt my lot to be hard or painful. Every day I lived in a beautiful world of song — in a palace of the spirit. Song is what nourished my heart. Today, I am deeply appreciative of my parents."

Dr. Unkart-Seifert has given concerts in Japan under the auspices of the Min-On Concert Association, and lyrics of "An die Musik" (To Music), one of the many songs in her repertoire, surely echo her own sentiments:

Thou lovely art, how often in dark hours,
when life's tumult wraps me round,
have you kindled my heart to loving warmth,
transported me to a better world.

In Dr. Unkart-Seifert's mind, the odyssey of music and the odyssey of human existence are the same; a search for "a better world," a search for the divine. She says: "Art is the expression of the divine within us. I always say that when I am performing it is not me singing but the divine spirit within me."

Art and religious feeling are like two sides of the same coin. Religion without art is cold and barren; and art that does not seek the eternal is lifeless and bereft of any power to move our hearts.

Later, Dr. Unkart-Seifert attended Vienna University, where she avidly studied German literature, classical linguistics, and anything and everything else that interested her. The dissertation for her Ph.D. was on the linguistic structure of the writings of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860).

Her father, she remembers, seemed a little saddened that she had grown estranged from music. Then, he died, and a strange phenomenon occurred. She suddenly felt the desire to sing again, and was unable to conceive of a life without music. Perhaps she felt that she didn't want to let her father's song end with his death. Now it was her turn to sing. After a ten-year hiatus from music, she had to start all over again from scratch. It was a difficult challenge

STARTING out as a government official, Dr. Unkart-Seifert also encountered many arduous struggles. She was told time and again that a woman's place was in the home. "It was a battle against lack of understanding," she says of those early days. "I had to work five times harder than anyone else. I would never have made it if I hadn't been in possession of good health and the energy to bounce back from the hardships I faced."

"Where there's a will, there's a way" — using this motto as her guide, she continued making painstaking efforts day after day. Today, she is undersecretary of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, the Arts and Sports and also director of the ministry's International Department.

For many years, even before the collapse of communism in the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, she was committed to conducting exchanges with them. Today, the artists of those countries enjoy much greater political freedom, but in terms of financial support they are worse off because of the fiscal pinch many of the newly democratic governments are experiencing.

Dr. Unkart-Seifert works tirelessly to create opportunities for promising young artists. She does not think in terms of personal advantage or gain; she does what has to be done when it needs to be done. This is her guiding principle in life.

"With each passing year, I come to feel more keenly how short life is and how I must leave something of value behind. I want to devote myself to those who need me. Today or tomorrow may be my last day; that is why I am seeking things that will last and endure."

Dr. Unkart-Seifert is not only a mother of culture full of love for humanity in her public role, but she is also the supportive and caring partner of her beloved husband, Dr. Ralf Unkart, a professor emeritus of Vienna Technical University. She has a message to share with other women: "Be confident and believe in yourself. The compassion of women who love humanity is stronger and deeper than the ocean."

Jutta Unkart-Seifert sings with warmth and feeling. Although she never speaks about her hardships, her life shines with a pristine brilliance that comes only after the cleansing rain of tears. Music is a message that passes from heart to heart, just as

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Beethoven wished. "From hearts may it go again to other hearts."

After a performance in Saitama, Japan, in 1993, Dr. Unkart-Seifert was presented with a bouquet of flowers. As an encore, she sang in Japanese the song "Mother," the lyrics for which I composed. The music passed from heart to heart — the singer's heart touching the hearts of the audience, until they became one. An elderly woman in the front row was weeping. After Dr. Unkart-Seifert finished her song, she stepped down from the stage and gave the bouquet to the elderly woman. When the concert was over, she sought the woman out and spoke to her. Those who have known great hardship and suffering themselves are sensitive to others' feelings; they treasure people's hearts.

Dr. Unkart-Seifert also sang Wagner's "Schmerzen" (Pains) in her concert. In the song, dusk gradually turns to dawn, and a new day is born:

If only death gave birth to life,
If only pain brought joy:
How I should thank nature
For giving me such pain!

AS long as we live, we will experience problems and sufferings. They are proof that we are alive. We encounter obstacles precisely because we are making progress. When we fearlessly forge ahead and overcome them, our life becomes brighter and richer and our horizons broaden. True happiness is, after all, the feeling that one's inner world has been enriched. The problems we face become our teachers, pointing out life's treasures to us.

"I have heard of the marvelous Buddhist expression, 'Winter always turns into spring,'" says Dr. Unkart-Seifert. "In Austria, too, we have similar phrases like, 'When morning comes the sun will rise' and 'The sun always shines after it rains.' My parents taught me to live in this bright, positive manner."

The little girl who once served as her parents' eyes now shines with the commitment to bring light to the lives of countless others. As if still clasping his father's big, warm hand in her own, Dr. Unkart-Seifert holds on firmly to his legacy, keeping alive the life, the song and the brightness that he gave her. □