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Published by Anonymous on Sep. 02, 1988

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Umashankarananda Left Germany for India at 23

In 1954, a young German girl wrote in her diary, "I want to know the Hindu God." Six years later, she was living in a cave in the Himalayan foothills. For the next 21 years she made this solitary cavern in a mountainside her official home.

The girl was born Rose Schmidt in an idyllic village sequestered among the lowland hills and forests overlooking the River Rhein in Germany in 1936. Her teen years were a mix of formal schooling in art and personal study of Western religious mysticism, in particular the writings of the Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart. Then she discovered and enrolled in a two-year correspondence course issued from Swami Sivananda's Rishikesh Ashram in northern India. Disciple had found guru.

When Rose turned 23, another door opened. She received an invitation to come and stay at the Rishikesh Ashram. Her mother had passed away, and her father was busy in his professional work as an automobile designer. She had a little money saved, and quickly bought a ticket to India. Before leaving, she picked a beautiful array of "May flowers" from the German countryside for Swami Sivananda. Plane, trains, car and sandals brought her finally to the feet of Swamiji. "He was a huge, big statue of a man, and behind him, just like moon rays coming out of him," she remembers in her slightly awkward English.

Her visit soon became permanent residence, as Germany, family and friends slowly faded amidst the fascinating life with Swami Sivananda and his coterie of God-hungry souls. "Everything was gone from my material life. I lost everything," she shyly told New Life during in a recent first-time interview. But spiritually and culturally, she found everything she really wanted. She continued to paint, undertook formal study in veena and flute, learned Indian cooking, practiced devotional singing and slowly established command of two new languages - English and Hindi. Study, study, study was her life with Swamiji until he passed away in 1964.

Initiation into sannyas came very early, in 1960, after only a year at the ashram, but not before a memorably trying episode. Swamiji made an attempt to get her married to another devotee, a gallant Sikh military officer. "I was angry with Swamiji," she smarts. She flatly refused the proposal, thereby passing Swamiji's test. He gave her diksha soon afterwards with the name Umashankarananda.

She lived in "Ganesha Guha" (Ganesha's cave) - a 9' by 12' opening carved into a steep slope, a healthy hike from the ashram. Officially registering the cave in her name with the Forestry Department, she also installed a double-lock on the bent iron door, to keep animals out at night. Her stay in the cave, though spanning a full 21 years, has not been unbroken. She never imposed any restrictions on leaving. For five years, she attended advanced music lessons at the prestigious Karnatik Music College of Madras, mastering both the veena and the flute, and recently spent two years in Germany to undergo kidney stone surgery.

"I was alone on top of the mountain," she vividly shared during her visit to Germany. Now back in India, she continues her simple life. For most of the year she clothes herself in simple renunciate robes, but in the dead hot summers, she wears only a loin cloth and chest cloth and smears her body with holy ash. Her day begins when the first light breaks the jet-black night sky. Inside the tiny cave, she moves off her iron/wood cot and sits before her earthen altar. Incense is lit from hearth embers and soon Sanskrit chanting sonorously echoes inside this dirt-walled micro-temple chamber as she bathes her stone Siva lingam. The rest of her day will vary - play the veena or flute, sing, meditate, talk with a rare visitor, tend her few plants and fruit trees, do repairs, forage wood or edibles, take walks or care for a few animals she has adopted.

"Leopards, snakes" and other animals, "roam at night. You can hear their cries," Umashankarananda relates. Food staples are provided her by a philanthropist, and were transported by a male servant she retained full-time for many years. Today, a Nepalese mountaineering guide helps her, and returns to his home at night at a nearby village.

Now 51, when asked to comment on her ascetic lifestyle, she shared, "I did a good thing. If I had stayed in Europe, I would never have had good progress in my inner, soul life. I like to be near the nature, fresh air, the forest, animals and all the Gods...Happiness is everybody's right. I've achieved it. I help others achieve it, cosmic happiness."