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WORLD WAR II: MOMENTS IN OUR FAMILY

by

YVONNE NICOLE RICHTER
Under the Direction of Josh Russell

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the history of one German family during World War II, using the inspiration and background knowledge gained from historic scholarship and literature to create narratives closely following actual experiences and memories to help understand the peculiarities of war narrative and war memory. The sources are interviews with relatives, existing literature on the subject matter, and the writer's imagination.

INDEX WORDS: World War II, Refugees, Vertreibung, Silesia, Germany, Paderborn, Silesia, Germany, Paderborn, Red Army, Children, Adolescents, Firebombing, Ratibor, Gestapo

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YVONNE NICOLE RICHTER

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for Graduation with Undergraduate Research Honors

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2006

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Prologue

One ceases to be lonely only in recollection;

Perhaps that is why people read history.

—John Andrew Rice

I am possessed by a passion for history and I love hearing the stories of my family. I cannot help investigating the wealth of experiences my ancestors have accumulated for me. The generations of our family are long, so I do not personally know many of even my direct ancestors, let alone their paths, their thoughts, their passions, and their pains. It appears that the more I find the more questions arise. It is not that my life makes more sense, or becomes easier by knowing what they went through. I am actually much more able to generate questions than answers. But each question I explore opens my view to new aspects of my own character, of the people, the dynamics, and the problems I observe all around me. I wonder about the capabilities of man to cope, to destroy, to build, to heal, to harden, to deliberately disregard his (or her0 gut feeling, coldly to obey orders, to rationalize, suffer, serve,… Man can do so much, and create beauty, but man is as capable of ugliness and destruction.

There is a strange bond that grows between us the more I learn about my grandmother, a woman who had the courage to start on the dangerous trek from Silesia to the west with five children (my mother was three at the time), only one of them old enough to shoulder some of her responsibilities; or when I hear of my grandfather who went to exchange his typewriter and a vase that was a valuable heirloom for scraps of food for his family, never receiving a good exchange because he lacked a mercenary knack in his soft, Samaritan nature. I never knew either of them, and yet, I was told I

inherited a bit of her courage when I dared to live abroad because opportunities seemed brighter here. My father says I have his father's lack of talent to bargain and make profit, but a big heart, just like him.

My peoples' experience with war is really a facet of a whole country's—of Germany's—history. It is of major interest to me because I live now in a time of war in so many places. I was raised to pray for peace. I shudder to hear of the hopelessness of refugees from Afghanistan. I wonder how young men I meet can fulfill the bloody work of war, then make small talk, be chatty and flirty on their leave. I speak with the head of my congregation, a marvelous man, to whom I look for advice, who has killed in the name of a flag he revered. In my sheltered world the mere thought induces nausea. And yet I know it was not murder—or was it? No one can say any longer that the war in foreign lands does not touch their lives. We know too much to be unconcerned. I am afraid that I am complicit with contemporary thievery and murder when my hatred of war does not elicit more than tears during news on NPR, just like my uncle speaks about his boyish feelings for Hitler, their Führer, with a tone of voice so quiet, burdened with the knowledge of the death of so many Jews, soldiers, and starved families.

I had once let someone talk me out of feeling responsible for all the grief Germans caused the world. I listened to all their arguments that I had been born nearly forty years after the Third Reich fell. Then, one day during a yearlong exchange year in Charlotte, NC, a beautiful girl with a head full of red curls, whom I knew to be funny and engaging, approached me in our high school locker room. She sized me up, her expression was confusing. "You're German?" she asked me. I smiled, nodded—usually that question precipitated many others and many friendships had started that way. She lowered her head, swallowed, her eyes darkened. "I'm Jewish," she said loudly, and, as if freed from a tremendous weight, swung her head around, a mass of curls whipping my face as she turned and walked off. The entire rest of the year she ignored me. She pretended not to hear me whenever I tried to talk to her. I cried that day and have many times after,

because something my ancestors did or allowed to happen stole a friend from me, made someone think of me as complicit, made someone feel a victim at my hand, though I had hoped to laugh with her. Was she arrogant or wrong to act that way? Who am I to judge? I do not know with what kind of stories she grew up. If my family stories make me choke and cry because a baby was lost to illness and women had to hide their femininity from the soldiers of the occupying forces—what must be in her heart whenever the word Holocaust comes up somewhere if she knows how many of aunts, uncles, and grandparents she never met because they went through and fell victim to the Nazi hell of hatred?

I am the daughter of two who were born during the war and raised on a make-do-with-whatever tactic for survival. I am the friend of a few who have fought for the U.S., the student of many who lived through combat, POW camps, came near starvation, and witnessed miraculous rescues. Because of that I find myself with an insatiable urge to ask, to explore the past, the memories and the stories to see if I can find any answers, or to see if I will find only new questions, more complexity. Complexity is welcome. Answers are welcome. New questions are undoubtedly necessary.

My research consisted of a lot of listening. I tried to apply my analytical skills learned throughout my schooling. I tried to draw conclusions through reasoning. Only, I found, that most of the stories do not make any sense to reason, do not give us clear answers. I tried to pin down generalities and crystallize wisdoms. But what haunted me were the stories. Images of little boys playing with empty gun shells between air raids, out on the streets filled with rubble. The remark that my uncle made, that my three-year old mother sitting on all their possessions on their hand-cart protected them like a small angel as they trekked back east. The power of these stories cannot survive their conversion into analysis. So I have tried to hear the stories just as they were told and make them my own. I tried to explore the experiences in my imagination. So I listened, and I read to fill the gaps. I read history, memoirs, and novels written under the impression of the war years. Then I collapsed history, stories from my ancestors, and stories from literature into a few

stories of my own. Frequently it was only a single statement from one of my interviews that sat heavily in my gut like a rock and would not go away. Emotions and images grew from theses statements. I was often unsure where to go next, even reluctant to go further. I sometimes resented what I found. But I tried to be honest with the material and with myself. I tried to be thoughtful.

Birth

Groß-Peterwitz, Ratibor, Silesia *January 1942*

The day Lore was born, Günther found a broken cart in the road out into the country. It was lonely out there and quite possibly no one had passed this way for a few days. This was their first firewood in a couple of weeks. Günther knew not to leave a splinter of wood by the wayside if it was moveable. He dragged this cart the whole way home, the axle broken. It was obviously homemade of all kinds of wood—thick pieces and little flimsy ones. He shouldered it despite the pack he had already carried to Wellendorf and back; it was quite heavy and carrying it made him warmer, so that was not all bad. But then the light snowfall began to seep through his gloves. His hands became numb after just a few minutes. Then he lugged the cart by one broken side plank. His coat was worn, the lining torn—it kept him warm for his shorter walks when he could keep a fast pace. But now with the cart on his back, he was slow and he could feel the cold wind creeping into all the holes.

Fig. 1: Günther at about age nine.

Günther had set out that morning to go visit family and maybe get some vegetables or even some meat. He did not like leaving at all. Mama was sweating and freezing alternately—the water had broken. Hanne was flustered, left to explain to the younger ones that they had no more bread and no milk. She was not quite ten yet. Willi was whimpering when Günther went out the door, and Friedel just sat quietly by the window, with big, round eyes looking out as if to fill his stomach with all the things he could see there. Günter prayed a little on the way to Aunt Liezi that the baby would not come before he'd come back and Mama

could at least eat a little something. He had some chicken bones and a cabbage. He and Hanne would figure out how to make a stew. He'd prayed to find something to fire the oven with, to have it warm for the baby's arrival. For all the many times that he thought even Willi's pure and trusting prayers were not touching any but mortal, helpless ears, this one had been heard. Mama thought the baby was going to be a boy. She would name him Peter. But when Papi came home last time, he was so sure they were having one more girl. What a chaos this child was coming into! Their cradle—all six of them had slept in it—had become Hanne's doll carriage after they had buried little Rupert. Mama would not hear of putting a baby in it again. And it was not like you could just go out and buy a cradle down the street. So he'd cleaned out a simple fruit crate that morning and stuffed some rags in a pillowcase Hanne had sewn to make a mattress. So the baby would lie in a fruit crate. "A little bit like baby Jesus in the manger," Friedel had whispered. Günther had added in his mind that it was going to see a lot of suffering like him, too. The baby would probably wish very soon it had stayed inside Mama's belly. But nothing was to be had there either if it had to share what Mama was eating.

Fig. 2: *Hitler Youth uniform.*
Photo: © http://www.dhm.de

He was almost home now. A little group of Hitler Youth boys came marching around the corner with their huge flag, carried, of course, by the littlest guy who nearly fell over the staff every few steps. They were singing in all kinds of registers as their boyish voices cracked with trying to grow up. It wasn't glorious, but it helped him to straighten himself and step us his pace a little. Günther thought a little mournfully about his own uniform with the black corduroy pants, the brown

shirt, and the neckerchief with the leather loop. He'd been wearing it far too little lately. He just never had time, being the only man in the house. Mama needed him now. And that could have almost made him a little bit proud. But when he saw Karlchen and Helle on the church steps, whittling sticks into little Pied-Piper-whistles, he sometimes took the long way around just so he would not have to excuse himself again that he could not come and play. They were going to go down to the lake the other day. Three boys came to pick him up, they'd play capture-the-flag, they said. You could even get a new badge if you were good!

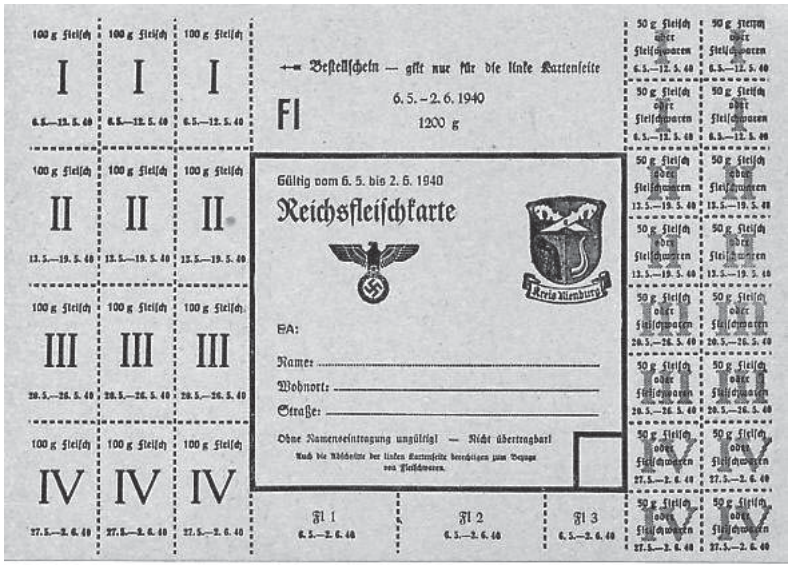

Fig. 3: *Food stamps.*
Photo © http://www.wir-wussten-nichts-davon.de

But by the time he came home from school Mama was usually exhausted, the little ones asking for food all the time. She'd give him some food stamps, a colorful bunch of them so he could get some of everything. But the little shop usually did not have "some of everything." Most days he would come home with nothing more than one egg per person, some milk and a chunk of bread barely enough to feed just the boys. The meat stamps were pretty superfluous most of the time.

Günther squared his shoulders one more time for the last few meters on Feldstraße, and sighed heavily when he put his hand on their brass doorknob. He nudged the door open with his shoulders with both hands on that broken plank of the cart. He leaned forward to drag it up the two uneven steps in front of the door. He had to push the door back with his icy-cold rear-end that did not even feel like it was part of him anymore. He heaved the cart up into the hallway when the back broke out of it and fell with a loud clatter back down the stairs. Hanne came running out to meet him. She picked up the pieces that had tumbled back down on the pavement.

"Günther! Firewood! Mama is shaking like the willow out front and Pauline is on her way already! We can make a fire now. Run, start it, I'll pick up the rest and get it out of the way!"

Pauline had been the midwife for their little town for a good twenty years now. She brought hundreds of children into the world. Because uncles fought in the war and aunts kept too busy with their own shower of children to come to baptisms, she had been godmother for probably half of the children she had delivered. Half of the inhabitants of Groß-Peterwitz up to age five and six called her Aunt Pauline by now! Now that the young doctor had been drafted as well, she sometimes stayed with the family of the newborn for a few days to help the mother cope with the want of everything babies need.

He grabbed the plank that had just torn off, ran into the living-room and dropped his backpack by the living-room door. He hurried to close the door, so they would not to let the cold come in from the open front door. He pulled the stove lid down and shoved what he could find of paper and sticks that they all brought in from playing outside into the oven. He was just lighting the first scrap of paper when he heard Pauline at the front door.

"Little Miss Hanne, how do you do?" Here she was—a dark, haggard woman with chiseled features, and a voice that Hanne once said sounded like the noise their coarse linen undies made when their Mom scrubbed them on the washboard on Saturdays.

“Oh Pauline, you must hurry! Mama is breathing so fast, and she screams when it gets too bad. The little ones are a little afraid, I think. I’m so glad you are here. And Günther found some wood to make a fire! How lucky!”

“Oh no, Hanne, nothing good these days happens by luck. The good Lord is still smiling over this family, I am glad to hear it. This child shall live to have children of her own. I am sure of it.” She said all this in a strangely low, dispassionate voice, but her hands crumpled her skirts as she said it and she hastened into the living room with excitement now, instead of anxiety, as if she could not wait to welcome this lucky child. Günther still was not quite sure how lucky it was to be born to them. After all Rupert only lived to be a week old, and his and Rudi’s little graves were the saddest in the village cemetery, though Hanne picked fresh flowers for them as often as she could.

A few minutes later, the room was already warming up. The wood was crackling in the oven. Mama’s breathing sounded like a heavy steam engine. And she groaned in between as if it was not another human being that was coming out of her, but rather her own liver or stomach.

Hanne had to lean her forehead on the back of the stove to heave the kettle out from behind the stovepipe. Willi sat close by on the floor racing an old toy cow with the whittled toy car Günther made him a few weeks ago. He chuckled when she came back out with her face all sooted. “Eeper, weeper, chimney sweeper!” he gibbered. Hanne hefted the kettle on the stove with a bang, swung around to grab a pitcher and in the same motion reached over to draw a big black streak across Willi’s cheek with her blackened hands. Günther laughed and realized how tense he had been. His whole face released suddenly. While Hanne scooped water into the pot from the bucket they filled up from the well in the back every morning, Willi giggled and blubbered and hugged Hanne’s knees. His giggles bounced through Günther’s mind like a little rubber ball.

Hanne grabbed a ragged blanket to heat up under the stove and stacked rocks around the kettle to put by Mama’s feet to keep her warm. Günther came over with a heap of rags to warm up that he had washed to wrap around the newborn.

“Aunt Liezi gave me chicken bones and a cabbage. She said to boil the bones for a half hour, take them out and put the cabbage in then.”

“Oh, wonderful!” Hanne clapped her hands, and grabbed a pot from the hooks on the wall.

When the water in the kettle started steaming, she poured some into a cup over some peppermint leaves she found just yesterday. Liezi taught them these things last summer when Mama was sick and they spent a couple of weeks with the cousins. She showed them all the herbs you could use for cooking; she taught Hanne how to make salad out of nettles, dandelions, and sorrel.

“I have some tea for Mama.” Hanne handed the steaming cup to Pauline. “And the blanket should be warm now.” She pulled it out and around Mama’s shoulders while Pauline lifted her up. Mama looked worn out.

“Don’t worry, Hanne.” She managed to smile a little between laborious breathing, “You will go through this one day, you’ll survive it, and you’ll know it’s worth it.”

“Should we get the little ones out of here?” Günther asked with a glance towards Pauline. She nodded, so he picked Willi up off the floor.

“Let’s go find some potatoes, Friedel.” Hanne motioned him to the door. “Are you two coming with me?” Willi tottered out behind her, Friedel hesitated, eyes fixed on Mama.

“Mama is alright, Friedel. Pauline won’t hurt her. Come on!”

Friedel stared for a few seconds, forehead wrinkled.

“Doesn’t she need our help?” he asked.

“Yes, she does,” Hanne said, tipping her forefinger on Friedel’s nose. “She needs us out of her way!”

Friedel frowned like one underestimated. But Mama smiled a little.

“Go, help Hanne, dear. Not much you can do here right now.” That struck the right cord with Friedel. He always wanted to be so responsible while Günther sometimes wished he could trade with him and be eight again.

So, they rummaged around in the basement for potatoes and pressed herbs for the soup. Friedel liked to get into the herbs. He diligently searched each sheet for the ones Hanne asked him for. Willi was dancing around her like a wid-up toy bear, with clumsy, heavy steps wobbling from one side to the other. She had taken a bowl with water downstairs and was just showing Willie how to water the cabbage when they heard Pauline from upstairs.

"Günther! I need you!"

He reluctantly turned to go back up. "Don't stay down here too long. It's too cold. It's warmer upstairs than here. I'll set out my backpack so you can get to the food."

"Alright, hurry!"

He was halfway up the stairs when he heard a feeble cry, like the bleating of Liezi's baby goats. He jumped a few steps, and pulled himself up by the grating at the top of the stairs. When he pushed the door open, Pauline held a little bundle in her arms.

"Grab those rags!" He unfolded them and she lay a small pink something in his arms that was covered in a cheese-like substance.

"You have a sister!"

Not a Peter after all. Günther looked down at the noisy little thing worriedly. Tiny fists stretched up in the air, eyes pressed to slits, she had to be using everything her lungs could give. "She is so … tiny! Please take her."

"I can't. I'm not done with your mom. Don't worry! You won't break her!"

Günther was not so sure about that. He held her like a very bulky piece of china.

"Wrap her up, boy, she's cold!"

Well, he finally supposed he had recently become so used to doing uncomfortable things, he might as well get over this one, too. He tried to pull the rags around the slick little body. The little arms and legs were wiggling and kicking so much, he could barely keep her covered for a few seconds. She was warm all over, and wrinkly like Willie when

he pulled him out after a long bath.

“Come over here, dear!” Mama’s voice was full of the now familiar tired and worried sound. But it was full of love, too, and there was some spark of excitement in it now.

When he lifted the baby up to his chest how Liezi had taught him, she opened her eyes. They were blue and very clear. She finally calmed down a little.

Right then Hanne peaked her head in the door.

“The baby is born!”

“It’s a little girl, there’s two of you now!” Pauline announced. Hanne had been declaring for months that she was going to have a sister, no matter what everybody else thought. He held the baby up so Hanne could see her. Then he laid the tiny bundle down on Mama’s chest as she motioned him to do. The baby rolled up, sticking her rear up in the air a little, bending at the knees, like a frog, her fists tightly by her chest.

“She’s very small,” Hanne remarked. Mama reached her hands towards both of them.

“You were that small and curled up on my chest once! And look how much you help me now. Just wait, you’ll be surprised how fast she will grow.”

Brief Return

Paderborn, Westphalia *December 1937*

He was just sitting in the kitchen when Mizzi came home with the groceries. He was at the table kneading a napkin, his elbows on the table bearing up his upper body. His skin, his clothes, his hair—all one shade of grey, the shade of worn rags. He did not lift his eyes or his head. He did not nod or open his arms to hug her. He did not speak, nor grunt, nor moan, nor weep.

Mizzi sank down in the doorway, with her fists around the handles of the grocery bags, kneeling on the wooden threshold. For quite some time she did not say anything, or move, or cry.

A key in the door, the door opened. Mutti rustled in the doorway. It's hard to say how long they had sat there, mutely staring. Mizzi wanted to jump up, hug Mutti, and be the bearer of good news. Instead, she stayed where she was. Ashamed that she was so whole, so young, so unharmed, so healthy.

Mutti was hanging up her things, taking off her shoes, whistling. She could do that, even after funerals. That had always puzzled Mizzi.

"Mizzi, have you lost something, dear?" Mutti touched Mizzi's shoulder lightly and clambered over her, but froze with one foot in midair. She heavily fell on Mizzi.

"God help us!"

She squatted and gently turned Mizzi's head in her hands to face her.

"Fill the tub with water. No matter how long it takes. Borrow soap from Reinhild."

Mizzi stared.

Mutti brushed Mizzi's hair behind her ear and brought her chin up. She spoke tenderly.

"Please. Get the rub ready."

Mizzi got up and stumbled over the grocery bags. Everything scattered and fell out. She hastened into the bathroom. There she sat on a little stool for a minute.

“Father is back. He is back. No word, nothing for three months. And now he is back, just like that.” She could not believe it.

She picked up the bucket slowly. Staring on the wood panels stretching down the hall before her, she went to the oven in the kitchen. She lit the fire, filled water into a kettle, and put it on the stove.

Mutti was gathering up groceries. They had not spoken a word.

Mizzi stepped to the window and traced frost-flowers. She heard Mutti open the bread box and make noise with the cutting board on the wooden table. She heard her open the pantry, clink jars. She was setting a plate on the table and sitting down, moving the chair back and forth for a while.

The kettle whistled. Mizzi emptied it into the bucket, filled it back up, and replaced it on the stove. She started with the bucket through the kitchen. Mutti was beside Father who held the sandwich in his hand untouched. She was holding his left hand, stroking his arm from top to bottom with her whole palm. Mizzi stopped by the table and looked at them. Father looked up for the first time. He searched her face for a moment and finally looked into her eyes. For just a second. Then he looked down, his bare shaven head shining in the light, but he smiled. Just a little bit.

Mizzi set down the bucket and reached for a cup from the top shelf. She dipped it into the bucket of steaming hot water and spooned some of the mint leaves she had pressed in spring into the cup. She carried it in both hands to the table. It was so hot, it was burning her hands. She grabbed a rag from the hook and wrapped it around the mug and set it down by Father’s plate. She hesitated and then touched his hollow cheek with two fingers, traced it down to his scruffy unshaven chin, lifting it barely with those two fingers. Their eyes met. She cupped her hand around his other cheek and smiled. His cheek was cold. Mizzi’s tear dropped on his plate and stayed intact like a transparent pearl.

She turned around and carried the bucket to the bathroom. He really needed a bath. And heat.

Mizzi went and collected holly with Dora later that night after having sent messages to their brothers and Gerda. They hung it from doorknobs and in bunches from doorframes with ribbons and old bits of tinsel.

Father went to bed after he had a bath. They grey and the hollowness stayed. He said he felt human again but hardly looked it. When Mutti helped him up from his chair, his knees buckled. His leg was absurdly twisted underneath him. They had no idea how he had made it home.

From the bedroom they heard occasional groans. Mizzi tried to sing carols, but each time she heard a groan she forgot where she'd left off and had to start a new one.

Dora stared at Mizzi.

"Why won't Father talk to me?"

"Let him sleep, Dora. Tomorrow he will talk a little more and a little more the day after that."

"What has happened to him, Mitzchen?"

Mizzi sank to the floor by the balcony door and stared out into a flurry of snow through the thin curtains, a weird effect of lights reflecting in the crystals behind a web of flowers and curlicues.

"I don't know, Dora." Mizzi whispered and tightened her hand. The holly pricked her hands, but she did not release. She stared at the snow.

"You are bleeding, silly. What are you doing?"

Dora pried Mizzi's hand open and picked out crumbs of holly leaves.

Three months ago. They are sitting at the kitchen table for supper. They are discussing their trip out to the country for Mizzi's eighteenth birthday the next day. It would be one of their family biking trips, the kind where they'd whistle and sing on the

way, picnic and get away from everything, get away from what they did not have, from being afraid. A knock at the door. What an odd time for visitors! Father casts a serious glance at Mutti. Mutti takes a deep breath. Men shout outside the door. Father goes to answer the door, squares his shoulders, lifts his chin.

Dora thrusts her hand over the table to grab Mizzi's and knocks over the teapot. Mizzi jumps up and grabs towels to clean up the mess.

When she looks up, there are Gestapo men in the kitchen. Nazi insignia in their home. Father and Mutti had made it no secret in front of the children how they thought of Hitler. Father's newspaper had let him use their press to print some educational fliers after the Nazis had made them give Fränz away into an institution far away. They had not seen their brother in a really long time now. And he had always been so excited to show them new things he had learned even though he sometimes hardly remembered them. Father had gone to some neighborhood meetings with those fliers and discussed some of the new policies with others.

Fig. 4: *Gestapo insignia.*
Photo © fas.org

A heavy-set officer barks out short questions and commands. The other two stand around like living "Beware" signs.

Mutti motions for Mizzi to take Dora from the room.

"They will stay. Our youth will see order and justice executed in our Reich!"

Dora clenches her jaw. Mizzi can see her boiling inside.

The barking officer orders his men to search the apartment. Mutti starts to follow them.

"You will stay. You have nothing to hide, I assume. If that is so, they will find nothing."

Mutti takes up the towels Mizzi has dropped on the floor and begins to clean off the tea that has spread in a generous puddle all over the table and is beginning to dribble on the floor. Mizzi can see her work something out in her mind as she scrubs.

Drawers opening and shutting in the adjacent room, things fall on the floor, rustling and clanking of doors. Father stands in the door frame with a studied calm in his face, hands in his pocket, fixating on a spot on the hardwoods. Mizzi wishes she could catch his eye and know if there is cause to fear. Could any of those fliers still be in the house? Kröger, the retired professor downstairs, had advised father to keep his concerns very low and not to keep any such printed matter around the house. Some subsequent events had confirmed that it was better to be careful.

When the Nazi men return they hand the framed picture of Hitler to their superior.

"In the bottom drawer in the living room. No portrait on the walls anywhere."

"Do you revere our Führer?" The big uniformed man barks at Father.

"We revere God," Father says quietly.

"Do you support the government and the fatherland?"

"So far as my conscience allows."

"What is that supposed to mean? Do you morally object to the Führer or his government?"

"I mean what I said. I support authority insofar as policies do not conflict with my faith and my standards of morality. I have voiced no judgment of the current administration."

Mizzi's fear swells proportionately with her pride for her father. If more men dared to say these things, would not Hitler have to see that nobody wanted families torn apart, be they Jewish, Arian, or whatever else? But what would become of Father if Kröger's cautions were right?

The officer nods to his men. They frame Father, each taking him by one arm.

"That will be enough. Thank you, Mrs. Richter. You and your daughters can

return to your meal. Your husband will accompany us to answer some questions for us." He smiles a very oily smile.

"Where are you taking him?" Mutti stands up tall with her hands to her hips. She speaks sharply, but with control.

"We are here as keepers of the peace. You should trust us. Your concern will be to hang up the picture of our worthy Führer in a prominent place. Follow my friendly advice and your family will be quite safe."

He walks on straight with his chest broad as if she were not there, right in front him. She stands firm. Mizzi cringes.

He stops, glowers, and roughly shoves her aside. She staggers into the doorframe with a thud.

The officers quickly follow their superior with a tight grip on Father.

"You can't take him! He's my Father, you can't take him!" Dora suddenly runs out on the staircase after them. Mutti rubs her arm. She straightens herself with a bizarre mixture of rebellion and despair in her face.

"You seem to have an inadequate education of manners and justice and order, Miss. You better see to this young lady's proper instruction, Mrs. Richter."

Mother returns the officer's stern look without a sign of submission or fear.

The door across the way opens. Reinhild peeks out, sees the scene, and gasps.

"Dora, dear. Come here, we will have a talk." She quickly draws Dora into her apartment. "Excuse her youth, Sir. She just loves her Father and does not want him to go."

The officers and Father disappear into the backyard.

Mizzi has laid her arm about Mutti firmly and guides her back into the apartment. Reinhild and Dora slip across the hall and follow inside. Reinhild closes the door without a sound. She steps over to Mutti who stands by the door as if frozen. She grabs Dora and Mizzi by their shoulders and pulls them close. They huddle together for a few moments, their trembling bodies pressed up against each other, burying their faces in each others' necks.

"Mutti, where are those fliers?" I finally manage to bring out.

"In the attic. I will make a fire in the oven. Bring them down along with some of those newspapers."

Mutti is back to taking charge.

"Now?" Mizzi wishes they could barricade all doors and windows for a few days.

"They won't come back today. But they might soon!"

They burnt a lot of paper that night. They whole apartment was filled with the smell of melted ink and the kitchen was sooty afterwards. But it gave them something to do the next day, Mizzi's birthday—scrub and try not to think. Dora kept asking, "What will they do with Father?" and Mutti and Mizzi kept biting their lips and shaking their heads as if their fears were less likely to become reality if left unspoken.

Mizzi rose quickly to wash her hands in the bathroom. In the hall she nearly bumped into Mutti and Father on the way to the bathroom. Father fell. He coughed and gagged. His sleeve was bloody when he lowered his hand from his mouth. Mutti helped him in the bath and brought him back to bed. She sat at his side, stroking his arms, his back, his neck, his face. He stared up at the ceiling, stole short glances at Mutti every once in a while. He was shaking, but never made a sound of pain when he was awake.

Dr. Mersch, the retired surgeon who had practiced at the Catholic hospital with Grandfather came in the afternoon and stayed with Father a long time. His leg was broken and had not healed right. There was some sign of nerve damage. Several of his ribs were broken as well, probably piercing some organs. He must have been bleeding inside. It would have been impossible to bring him to a hospital without causing a rupture somewhere. Performing a surgery with the improvised means would be very dangerous. Mutti determined they had to try. She and a nurse Dr. Mersch had worked with in the hospital assisted.

It was supposed to have gone well. The anesthetic had overpowered the terror inside Father and made him sleep. He called for Mizzi when he woke. She brought him broth and some bread and fed him carefully so he would not have to move very much. He held Mizzi's hand when he had finished his meal and really looked at her for the first time. He still did not speak.

"Dr. Mersch said you will feel much better soon."

Fig. 5: *Interior of the Gestapo prison in Köln. My grandfather was incarcerated in Bochum.* Photo © ushmm.org

He smiled very faintly. "My body is fixed and patched now." He closed his eyes.

"But I, I am not whole."

Mizzi let out a sob involuntarily. "What did they do to you?"

"I was lower than an animal for the last few months, Mitz. When they beat you enough, you start bending to fit the mold. When they hate you enough, you become despicable."

He frowned suddenly and blushed.

"Please fetch your mother for me, Mitz."

She could smell he had dirtied himself. In front of his daughter. He turned his eyes to the wall, his jaw hard.

He told Mutti of bright lights flooding his cell every minute of the day. He had hardly slept more than a few minutes every night. Whenever he had gone to sleep wardens would walk by and rattle the door. He did not talk about the beatings, but it was obvious they had happened. He wanted his room dark now. Every loud noise made him flinch and moan in pain from the sudden movement.

Sepp came home the morning of Christmas Eve. He and Mother whispered in

the hallway while Dora and Mizzi made a Christmas cake and some stew with what they could find. Mizzi had garnered a few eggs and even a little bit of sugar at the store. She was happy to be working with her hands and to make something nice for Father and for Sepp. Dora was unnecessarily loud, banging pots and pans. She cut her finger deeply when she sliced the potato and had to hold it up over her head for the bleeding to stop. Then she dropped a raw egg. Mizzi carefully scooped it up in her hands just above the floor so they could still use it.

"Dora, please calm yourself. Give Father time!"

She hissed at Mizzi. "Are you saying that's Father?" Her hiss went to a shrill sort of whisper, "They killed Father. That's a ghost in Mutti's bedroom!"

Mizzi turned Dora towards herself by the shoulders. She fidgeted. Mizzi tightened her grip and demanded that Dora look at her.

"Dora, I am mad just as you are. Father is not as he was. Maybe he never will be again."

Dora went limp and sobbed, pressing her face into Mizzi's sweater so no one could hear.

"But listen! If he ever will be himself again, it will be because we give him all the love that we have. And the only way Mutti is not going to lose her mind is if we do the same for her. And you and I, we need the same thing from each other—and Gerda, and the boys when they are here. The Nazis win if you let this make you hard and bitter."

In the evening they gathered by Father's bed and sang some carols. They read the Christmas story and Father spoke about the Christmas when his little brother was a week old and Father had said out loud in church that they had the real Jesus at home. Father wanted to pray with them. They all held hands and he prayed a blessing on them that we would be strong enough to stick together.

When Hans arrived in the morning, Father was worse. He had not taken any food and had slipped back into a fitful sleep. He did not wake up till evening. Hans, working as resident in a hospital at the time, found Father's upper body very tense and tender everywhere. He was hot to the touch. Hans suspected an infection and they tried to give Father a lot of fluids to flush it out. Dora was tireless, heating water for tea, cooling rags in the snow on the balcony for compresses on his forehead and legs.

At night, when Mother and Sepp had gone to sleep on the floor by Father's bed, Mizzi found Dora sitting on the bed, wiping Father's forehead and whispering to him.

Father was delirious by midnight, tossed and turned, moaned and cried. He hallucinated and screamed until dawn. They were all by his side.

He grew very still in the morning. He slept for four days, the whole time slipping away, and he never woke again. His heart had hurt too much. It could not attend to his body anymore. It had seen too much, feared too much, and endured too much.

Soap

Großpeterwitz, Ratibor, Silesia *May 1942*

"Menzel, please read problem number six for us."

"A town has twenty imbeciles, sixteen blind persons, thirteen deaf persons, and twenty-three cripples. The town is planning to build an insane asylum. The building of the asylum will cost about six million Reichsmark and the sustenance of each inmate about fift-five Reichsmark per month, the employment of nurses and wardens altogether about 5,000 per month. Calculate the cost for the building of the asylum and its upkeep for the first year. For an average monthly rent of about sixty Reichsmark, how many healthy families could have shelter during that time on that sum?"

Figure © http://judenverfolgung.no-sa.de

Fig. 6: Above the figure on the left is written: "An imbecile costs the state 5.50 RM daily!" On the right: "For 5.50 RM a healthy family can live for a day?"
Figure © judenverfolgung.no-sa.de

"What are they building that for anyway?" Paul shouted into the class. "We don't need to pay our money to keep those people! They aren't doing anything useful for our country anyway!"

Teacher Scharfenberg growled and said in a strained, tired tone of voice, "Did I ask your opinion, Wrublick?"

Before, Paul always used to get in trouble for hollering, but lately the teachers hadn't minded him so much. Some even laughed with him about the dumb comments he made. Günther was always a little embarrassed that they had the same last name. The teachers always assumed they

must be related and therefore alike, except for Scharfenberg: he lived right next door. Günther had helped him repair their rain gutters the previous summer. Scharfenberg knew him, and that he wasn't a bit like Paul.

Scharfenberg would walk into the middle of the room each morning, facing the picture of the *Führer*, raise his arm straight up in the air like a schoolboy with something to say, and silently salute some spot next to it on the wall. When the director came in, they would all jump to their feet and shoot up their arms, like a factory hall full of machines spitting out broomsticks, and firmly ring out their "Heil Hitler!" But it was always Paul you could hear over all the other boys. He somehow drowned out Scharfenberg whose arm never quite made it to the perfect angle.

"Przoszynski, would you come up to the board and do the calculation for us, please. Explain your steps as you go."

Gerda Przoszynski rose from the back bench, two feet of braids on each side, bicycle-wheel-sized glasses, freckles, and all. She was always nervous. Günther could have sworn he had never seen her with any other expression on her face than one of utter horror. She knocked three or four pencil-cases from various desks as she went by, tripped over Werner's feet, which were so far away from the rest of the boy that he had a hard time keeping track of them, and finally she stumbled into the black-board bent at an angle of nearly ninety degrees at the waist. Mama said Günther ought to be nice to her because her dad had not come home after the Nazis had come to get him in the middle of the night. Nobody knew where Werner Przoszynski was or if he was even alive.

Gerda found a piece of chalk, tip-toed to reach at least half-way up the board, and began:

"Six million Reichsmark plus fifty-five Reichsmark times twelve plus 5,000 Reichsmark times twelve…" Her figures looked a lot like a parade of tiny white fleas marching rather diagonally and in somewhat unmilitaristic disarray across the board. She started a new row.

"I have to multiply out the monthly expenses first." She seemed to be talking to the flea army muffled through her left sleeve that she had stuffed almost entirely into her mouth as usual. She now made neat little bundles of her calculations that would undoubtedly have been perfect to copy down into his exercise book, only he could not read writing the size of fleas at twenty feet distance.

"Now I have to divide this result by sixty Reichsmark …" came through the muffler.

Scharfenberg did not comment—he knew she would inevitably end up near fainting if he would criticize her presentation. Gerda finished and managed to write the resulting "101011 RM" larger and bolder, though scrawny and somewhat tipsy, so that the zeros became round bellies for the ones, not quite so much like fleas anymore.

"Good, you may be seated." He smiled at her, asked no one to formulate an answer to the question, and proceeded right on to the next problem.

Fig. 7: *Above the drawing is written: "Here you carry, too! A genetically defective person costs about 50,000 RM before reaching age 60."* Figure © sonderpaedagoge.de

"Reichert, would you read the next problem right below for us."

"A new factory has been built in the town of Bergdorf. Workers' barracks are needed. The Jewish population of the town will be working here. They number 670 adults and 430 children. Building a barrack unit for twenty-five persons costs 1500 Reichsmark in materials. Materials for extra buildings will also be needed: 1800 Reichsmark each for sanitary facilities, a mess hall, and an infirmary and an additional 900 Reichsmark for a schoolroom. The upkeep per unit will cost eighty-five Reichsmark each month

and food for its inhabitants will cost 2400 Reichsmark per month. Employment of supervisors, teachers, and nurses will cost 9000 Reichsmark per month. After one year of the existence of this factory community, how high will the expenses be that it will have incurred? Assume that a healthy adult, of which the community has 375, can produce goods of the value of about 312 Reichsmark per month, children between 8 and fourteen, of which the community has 160, can bring in about 234 Reichsmark per month, an elderly adult still able to work, of which the community has 155, can produce goods for 195 Reichsmark per month. Calculate how high the loss is as long as those persons who cannot work will be sustained like the workers."

Scharfenberg saw one arm flung up into the air before the boy was done reading the exercise.

"Yes, Bender, what is your puzzlement?"

"Will they bring those who cannot work into special camps like the one they have built in Plaszow? What do they do there?"

Scharfenberg was straightening himself. His face disappeared behind a large hairy hand, as he scratched his eyebrow that really had to be itching badly. He seemed to be grinding some poor dust bunny into the ground with his feet.

"They make soap out of the Jews," Paul declared.

"Paul!" Teacher Scharfenberg's voice sounded strange and shrill and as if he was in pain. He had screwed his forehead into remarkable furrows; his eyebrows loomed like one large bar over flashing eyes, but for a moment only. He softened as quickly as he had flared up and quietly asked Günther to come forward and calculate the problem at the board.

Günther was a little frightened by the teacher's sudden vehemence. As he rose from his desk and walked to the front of the class, he wondered for just a second about Paul's comment. But then having to do the math in front of the whole class won his attention. He pulled himself up straight, searched for the piece of chalk and tried to figure

out the first step. He was really good at math; he never brought home anything less than a 1 and his Dad had taken to calling him his “little scientist” because of the random rules of nature he had been picking up here and there. But today his brain just would not do math. There was something about these exercises that made him think much more about “why” than about “how much.” They had used to solve math problems about seamstresses needing fabric for so many suits and dresses or how long a weekend trip would take a family if they’d travel by train. They had never used to worry about whether those people were healthy or Jewish or big or small or anything of that kind. People used to be just people in their math book.

“Günther!”

The boy started and colored hotly. How long had he been standing up there dreaming right in front of everybody?

“Leave out the second part for right now, we’re getting close to the end of the lesson.” Scharfenberg’s large hairy hand planted itself firmly, but gently on his shoulder and his voice sounded confidential.

Günther hurried now, added up the costs for building and just as he underlined his final result, the bell rang. He had a hard time getting back to his desk to put up his things because all the other kids were ready to leave. Scharfenberg had remarked a bunch of times before that making Math the last class of the day really was not fair to teacher or pupils. And especially on a Friday like today! Who was thinking about math problems when everybody was going to the lake tomorrow on a trip with their Hitler Youth groups? All the kids in town were going and some really important guy was going to come to inspect them, with special greetings from the Führer, as they always delivered. They would say that the Führer had great expectations for the

Fig. 8: *School in Groß-Peterwitz that Günther and his siblings attended.*

future generation, but that they would have to work hard and all that. They all felt pretty important after that for a while, until some chap a couple years older than them would start commandeering them to some work project again.

Hanne, his sister, was waiting out in the courtyard for him with Friedel. Sometimes they walked home together. Günther liked to go with the other boys his age, but he'd been slow today. They were already ahead. Today the others would have been making plans for the camp this weekend anyway, and he would not be able to go. The baby was ill and Mama needed him to be home and help with the younger ones.

"Günther," first-grader Friedel poked him in his side to get his attention, his voice screwing itself down and back up till it cracked. "Do Jews have flat feet? Does Jakob?" Jakob Kirschbaum was the son of the jeweler down the street. Their shop had been closed for a really long time now. Günther had heard his parents wonder a few times what they lived on now.

Günther muttered. "Oh goodness, Friedel, I have never looked at his feet!" What did it matter what kind of feet somebody had? And what did somebody's health have to do with the rent they paid? Why did they worry about that stuff? What had Paul's comment been all about? It sounded really dumb, but what if he was right? What part of a Jew would you make into soap? Surely it would just be finger nails or hair or something? Would that soap smell good? Would it make you clean?

Hanne waved a food stamp before his face, saying something.

"What!?" he wished he had been even slower so that Hanne and Friedel had been ahead already as well.

"Mama said to stop by Weber's and ask for some broth. She gave me a stamp."

She was the oldest girl, just barely a year younger than him. Mama said she was really useful with the little ones.

"Okay, it's right there, go ahead. Friedel and I can wait here!" She crossed the street and went into the little grocer's shop at the corner. Friedel started after her.

"Wait here, Friedel! Frau Weber will just say Mama sent us begging if we all go in."

"Herr Koslowski said today that all Jews have flat feet. What if I get flat feet from standing on them too long? Does that make me a Jew?"

"Friedel!" Günther was about to lose his patience. He looked at Friedel and saw the genuine expression of wonder on his face. He really expected an answer. And after all it wasn't his fault they had been talking about that stuff in school.

"You are only a Jew if you're born one, Friedel. And we aren't." Friedel looked satisfied with that answer, but Günther realized he himself was not. "But they aren't really all that different, I don't think," he added.

Hanne returned with a tiny jar of some thick yellowish liquid that didn't look very eatable. They finally made it home, broth and all, and Mama was really ready for him to take Willi off her hands when they walked in. She'd sent him down to pick out some coals and now he was covered in soot. He'd obviously tried to hug the baby afterwards. She had black swatches all over her, too. Mama was trying to rub them off without irritating her skin too much. Lore had been breaking out everywhere for a few days. No vitamins, Mama said. Babies can't handle that.

Fig. 9: *Hanne and Willi around 1940 (2 years before Lore's birth).*

"Little mole!" Günther tried to grab a part of his little brother that wasn't quite as dirty and finally just put his hand around the back of Willi's neck, directing him out the door to the big tub in the yard. It had been warm enough for them to take their baths outside for a couple of weeks now and it was great. He didn't have to carry water very far—the pipes leading into the house were still broken from the frost—and later he could just dump it out into the gutter.

"I don't even want to touch you, little pig!"

Willi giggled into his shirt as Günther was trying to pull it over his head. For some reason being called names was still endlessly amusing to him. He never even protested—and obviously he usually earned his titles.

Hanne helped out by bringing buckets full of water from the well by the vegetable garden.

“I’ll find some more clothes that need washing now that we already have the water here,” she said and pointed at the little pile of Willi’s soot-covered clothes.

Günther grabbed the naked child around the middle and plunged him into the water, knowing that he would giggle and sputter and chortle. They wrestled for a few minutes and Günther remembered that he’d do well to take his shirt off for this, right when a big splash of water soaked him to the bone. He made a little pile of his clothes right by Willi’s. He could just get in with him since he was now about as coal-black everywhere as the little boy. Willi’s little fists were pounding on him relentlessly among gurgles and unintelligible shouts.

Günther grabbed the chunk of curd soap from the ground and clambered over the edge of the big tub. He rubbed Willi down with the soap, then himself, always interrupted by attacks from the little guy. Günther finally called him to order so he could really clean him off a little. Willi settled down a little.

“Close your eyes and mouth really tight!” Günther lathered the child’s face and hair. For a second he caught a glimpse of a face reflected in a big bubble. Was this piece of soap made of Jews? It looked like one was looking up at him from inside the bubble now. He splashed wildly as he rinsed Willi’s hair, not only for play or to stay warm in the cold water.

Willi wailed. He’d glimpsed and gotten soap in his eyes. They burnt and made his eyes water with big tears. Did the soap make Willi cry because that Jew had cried because he did not want to be soap at all? Günther flung the piece of soap away from him and

submerged himself in the water, for now he felt a burning in his eyes that had nothing at all to do with soap.

Applesauce and Loveletters

Paderborn, Westphalia *April 1945*

Dora clutched the handlebars of her bike as if she were riding a troublesome pony, tense and cramped, squinting into the glistening sun. There was none of the cheery mood, the two-part harmony whistling and teasing that a bike ride on a beautiful spring day like this usually engendered. It was unusually warm for late March, but with a sweet and gentle breeze. There were wildflowers dotting the fields all around them: red poppies and magnificent blue cornflowers, like Easter eggs a week early. Little bunches of buttercups lined the scattered groves of trees. Mizzi felt like getting off her bike and pick some, but she knew they should probably hurry to get back and find Mutti. She felt the brightness of the sun and the beauty of the landscape, as if mocking her, with all that fear inside. The sound of sirens still reverberated in her bones. A sense of terrible haste never left her anymore. At twenty-six and single, the age to roam and explore and be free, she had forgotten to laugh, to relax, to trust life would hold miracles for her.

They pedaled like mad, though not sure why they were in such a hurry. Nothing one did or did not do made any difference these days. Seeking shelter in time did not mean you would live through the air raid, resigning and staying in the house did not mean your house would get hit. Being with your loved ones did not keep them safe, being apart from them meant no additional harm. A tense muscle twitched between ear and jaw. Mizzi rolled her head to stretch her neck. When would this ever stop?

But then she checked herself: The beautiful day was not a ridicule; it was a gift from God. He sends signs that amidst the monstrosities of men He has not forsaken those who can still give thanks for the beauty of flowers and gratefully receive the warm sunrays of a lush spring day. Mizzi quickly whispered a thank you and it miraculously

made her smile. Just for an instant, but she smiled and felt not quite so alone. It dawned on her that maybe she would have more strength again if she got off her bike and picked some flowers, trusting they could give them to Mutti once they would arrive at their house, enjoy this beauty and not worry just for a few minutes.

“Dora, look at the flowers. Aren’t they pretty?” Mizzi yelled, hoping to infect her younger sister.

Her answer sounded reproachful. “What in the world are you thinking?!”

Mizzi saw Dora kicking her pedals a little harder than necessary and tightening her grip on the handlebars.

Mizzi pedaled harder to catch up with her sister.

“Let’s pick some flowers for Mutti, Dora. What do you think? They are so beautiful!” Mizzi jumped off and dropped her bike in the grass. She turned and ran into the meadow a few paces.

“Mizzi! What has gotten into you? We don’ even know if Mutti is alive! We need to go!” Dora had followed Mizzi. Mizzi stopped and waited for her. When Dora caught up with her, Mizzi touched her sister’s arm, and brushed her hair back to look at her.

“Dora, it’s a gift from God. Allow for a moment of gratitude. You are twenty-two and you never laugh anymore. You don’t even smile! Don’t get bitter! The Lord can only bless a softened heart.”

Her jaws were rigid in that square clench she had always made so as not to cry, even when they were little. She had been a defiant child who would much rather have screamed and pounded on something with her little fists than cried. Mizzi knew the little quiver in Dora’s lower jaw indicated her defenses had broken. She fiercely wiped off a tear with her sleeve.

“What am I being grateful for?” she hissed. She went on savagely, “Papa is dead, Seppel is dead, they’ve killed Fränz, we haven’t heard from Hans and Heinz in ages.

And now Mama is missing. What is there to thank Him for?" She turned her head to face Mizzi, a bitter hardness in her eyes.

"Us!" Mizzi whispered and handed her a small wild, charming bouquet of reds, blues, and yellows. "We have each other, we are alive, Gerda and the children,… He knows better and aren't they much safer with Him than here in this mess?"

Dora had torn her eyes from Mizzi's searching look, staring at the road. Suddenly her eyes widened. A new horror seemed to reflect in them. She opened her mouth, then just pointed ahead of her. Blackened figures stumbled slowly toward them, clutching unshapely bundles and unidentifiable items. Curls of smoke twirled from beyond the grove of trees up ahead.

This was the Neuhäuser Street; they were just a couple of kilometers away from Paderborn. Fire! Fire in Paderborn! Homeless people filing out of their part of town. Mizzi and Dora ran back to their bikes, but stood there immobilized, mutely watching. Mizzi suddenly felt bizarre about her clean dress and the smile she had smiled a minute ago. She timidly approached the hunched figure of a woman tightly gripping something that looked like a child's coat. She felt cowed by the loss written into her shoulders pulled forward, the blackened lines of her face. She stared through Mizzi. Mizzi could not ask. An old man, nothing in his hands, in only a thinned shirt and a tattered pair of rough woolen pants came right behind the woman. He fixed his eyes on Mizzi, stopped, and hesitated for a moment. His voice was firm.

"Don't go in yet. It's too hot for you young women. They don't need you fainting in there. Too much cleaning up to do." He must have seen Dora's defiant pose. In his blackened face, teeth showed, his eyes gleamed for a moment. Had he smiled? He continued in a quieter voice. "Not much left on Neuhäuser. 'S that where you're going?"

Mizzi nodded, then let her head sink back, eyes closed, taking a deep breath. For no real reason she offered the man her hand. He shook it.

Mizzi mounted her bike again, wiped her now grimy hand on her dress with determination, as if to declare solidarity with these sooted people. She steered to the very edge of the street so as to make way for the stream of refugees heading towards Schloss Neuhaus, a neighboring town that was yet unharmed and still seemed peaceful.

Fig. 10: Photos: © medienzentrum-siegen.de

They passed so many. Filing past them an endless procession of loss embodied. At first, Mizzi dared not even to look up, to face anyone. She should have known many. She was afraid to detect people grieving for someone she had known and maybe loved. When they came into the first city avenues, the smoke grew thick. These streets, beautiful in the spring when the poplars and the ancient oaks shaded the pavement with dense lush-green crowns, now seemed to lead into the destruction of Gomorra. The trees, their beautiful old trees, were creaking, bending, and caving in under the inferno. Flames still reached high through the smoke. The air was hot and heavy with dust and ashes.

Mizzi got off her bike. Dora caught up. They pushed their bikes respectively on opposite sides of themselves and clutched each other's hands like children, but just for a moment. Burning branches fell all around them. They tried as well as they could, not letting go of the bikes, to jump out of the way of debris crashing through the canopy of blazing wood overhead. Mizzi turned her head, stared down what had been her favorite street to walk down for a lazy Sunday stroll into the fields, to pick flowers and play silly games on bare feet. Her breast ached, her lungs rattled already. Heinrich Heine's aching for his fatherland came to mind—she had just read his poems with Mother during long nights by candlelight in their windowless dining room. One could not have light in the others because of the blackout rules.

Oh, once I had a lovely fatherland.
  The oaks grew tall
Up to the sky, the gentle violets swayed.
  I dreamt it all.

I felt a German kiss, heard German words
  (Hard to recall
How good they rang)—the words Ich liebe Dich!
  I dreamt it all.[1]

It did seem a dream now to have ever walked with a light heart, a bunch of poppies in her hand, a wreath of buttercups and daisies in her hair on this same road, to have lightly sung, holding hands with a boy she had fancied, carefree and with no thought of other times. Had he gone to war? Mizzi did not know if he was here in this inferno, grieving, homeless, if he was even still alive or if poppies were growing through him in the fields of some strange place now. The unbearable heat broke her revelry.

Now they had to be careful to walk in the middle of the street. Flames were still shooting out of the houses and the trees were shedding their burning limbs. Here and there a small mass of something caught fire in the middle of the street. Dora tried to climb over it, go around for the first while, but the heat all around was so overpowering

[1] This is a translation by Hal Draper, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine* 363. The original German poem reads as follows:

Ich hatte einst ein schönes Vaterland.
  Der Eichenbaum
Wuchs dort so hoch, die Veilchen nickten sanft.
  Es war ein Traum.

Das küßte mich auf deutsch, und sprach auf deutsch
  (Man glaubt es kaum,
Wie gut es klang) das Wort: »ich liebe dich!«
  Es war ein Traum.

Fig. 11: *Marienplatz, Paderborn's central market place before and after the destruction of the firebombing in 1945.* Photos: © Stadtarchiv Paderborn.

that they could not even feel the small burns on legs and arms. The asphalt was softening under their feet and they had to walk fast so they would not get stuck. Because they had been walking miles and miles daily just for the simplest errands, their shoe soles were paper-thin. But they hardly noticed how the pavement scalded their feet.

Their eyes could not quite get used to the smoke and ashes in the air, but after a while Mizzi saw more than just grey and flames and movements among bizarre outlines of burnt objects. Maybe it would have been better to go blind right there. A woman came toward her gripping an arm, shirt burnt into the flesh, just an arm. Mizzi's innards revolved and it seemed that all blood went down to her feet. She fell upon Dora.

"Mizzi," she shook her sister. "You can't faint now. No!" She slapped Mizzi's check severely.

Mizzi clasped Dora's hand. "Oh Lord, oh, Lord!"

A girl, maybe nine years old, with long braids, her face grimy, carried a baby close to her chest. Her eyes were attentive and wide awake, but fixed on something Mizzi could not see, something sure and firm. Mizzi felt the girl's gaze fortified her, though she did not know what she saw. Like our Lord's Mother, she bore her grief with faith.

Hail Mary, full of grace. Mizzi stepped over part of a doorframe.

Two men carried charred bundles, bodies, very small bodies with pieces missing, as if petrified in grotesque contortions.

The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

They left the Neuhäuser behind with all its trees. The heat abated slightly. The air here was clay-brown, due to the beautiful half-timbered houses, as someone explained later. The clay between mortar and timber burnt with a sweet odor and it colored the air thickly.

Fig. 12: *Remains of fire victims in buckets by the side of the road.*
Photo: © www.tod-im-bombenkrieg.de

"Nettie!" Tall, beautiful Henrietta Mielke, Mizzi's companion from elementary school, who had always gotten them into trouble with her giggling, dragged a small wagon behind her, a sack with something unshapely on it. Her face was pale despite the heat and the ashes. She pinched her lips together, a spasm convulsing her features. She clawed Mizzi's arm as she passed.

Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Mizzi wanted to speak, to ask, but all that came out was a gurgle. The sack was soiled and bloody. Mizzi stared, but then tore herself away violently to run after Dora.

We reached our street. Rubble, flames, some unrecognizable silhouettes against the unearthly red glow and brown-black smoke. The baker Braunrot dragged a blackened oven spatula from the debris that had been his shop and dropped it beside a small array of faintly recognizable objects he had salvaged. How many times had he retrieved steaming hot rolls from his big oven for them that they had taken home for a very early breakfast when the boys were home, when Father was still alive. Reni Liebermann sat in her housedress on the pavement where her door had been rocking back and forth, humming,

unseeing, crazy. Her surviving son was in the wreckage behind her, carefully taking up pieces as if hoping the next stone removed would reveal their possessions unharmed. Just a couple of weeks ago she had received a letter reporting her other son as having died courageously facing “the enemy.” Mizzi knew she should have seen their house by now. It had three stories, the tallest on this street, but there was nothing left higher than the bunker that Hans had used to climb on. It was so low, he didn’t even need the tree beside it to get on top.

Dora ran ahead. Mizzi arrived there soon enough. Smoke was rising out of the walls of their home. Not a stone left on top of each other in the whole front part of the house. But part of the back wall reached about twenty feet into the air, a chunk of the second floor still hanging on; a chair perched on the very edge, some rags fluttering about it. Dora just hoisted her skirts and marched right into the ruin, tugging at objects sticking out here and there. Funny how that made Mizzi think of how Dora had used to march into the high grass in their garden to search for Easter eggs when they were children, with braids in a cute pastel plaid dress. It seemed to me like a weird vision. Easter was only a week away, but Good Friday seemed to be the only appropriate holiday to have for a while. Would they resurrect? Would they come forth out of this grave for the living?

Mizzi stood, as with lead in her arms and legs, and finally just sank down on a stump of wall. She sat there for a while and thought of nothing, saw nothing, heard nothing. She did not even feel the smoke burning in her eyes or the heat of the stones. She was just another piece of rubble.

A small scream jerked my head around. Dora’s blonde head disappeared entirely in a hole between the debris just as Mizzi caught sight of her. Mizzi was on her feet and through the mess quickly and discovered a stairwell Dora had freed. It went down to the basement. There would not be anybody down there, nobody trapped. The house had been too old to be modified according to the basement fortification rules Hitler had imposed on all house owners in 1939. Who knows how the landlord had passed by the inspections

all these years? But then, not all houses had basements, either. They had just gone to the neighbor's basements during the air raids. They now had to dig through some more loose rubble, but it was amazingly easy to reach the basement. The ceilings had held up without the prescribed fortifications! The pressure and vacuum of the explosion and fire had destroyed a lot down here. Everything was scattered and heaped on the floor as if burglars had wreaked havoc. Dora tried to clear a space.

"We could stay here for a few days maybe, until we know where Mother is and until we have made sure we can't find any of our stuff here anymore."

Mizzi wondered how she could be so clear-headed. This had really been her home. Mother and Mizzi had just moved here from their old house just around the corner when Seppel had left for the front and the last man in the house had been sucked into the war. So when he was on leave, he had come home to this house. Strange how much light each visit of any of the boys had had brought into this place. Seppel was Mama's youngest boy and oh, how the separation had aged her. Injured five times, each time a notice that scared them breathless until they read that he would be fine, coming home on leave soon. The sixth notice in November of 1943 had born no such comfort—in Znamenke he had been shot to death by a Russian soldier, probably no older than their Sepp. He had probably wanted to go home and see his mother and sisters, too.

Dora emerged from a pile of stuff in the far corner with a shriek, triumphantly holding up one jar of Mother's glorious applesauce preserves. Father had planted very prolific apple trees all around their old house when they were little. Even through the first years of the war Mother had been able to make so many jars of applesauce that even when the food stamps afforded nothing but bread, they could have a few vitamins from that. The trees were probably nothing more than ashes now, as all reminders of Father, Fränz, and Seppel were lost and destroyed—sacrificed to the great cause, to the greatness of the German people. A hysteric giggle or sob rose up in Mizzi.

“Yeah, look at us, we’re really quite a sight! Really just the same as those who had dropped the bombs on us,” she thought.

They were all destroying each other and themselves. Whoever turns against another human being in hatred, with intentions to murder really turns against himself. If men could do this to other men who had wives and babies and little vegetable gardens in the back just like themselves, maybe they were ripe for destruction.

Dora handed a box of letters to Mizzi, quite unharmed. Mizzi pulled out one, nearly blind with tears. Mother’s student address written in Father’s hand. She sank to the floor and sobbed.

Birthday

Großpeterwitz, Ratibor, Silesia *January 1945*

"Maier left town last night, with his whole family and his fancy furniture on the truck," Mrs. Braunstein said in a fake cheerful tone. "Aren't you glad he was able to make it before the Russians got here?"

She addressed Mehringer, block leader for our street.

"Why should he not want his children in safety?" the graying man with the permanently pinched eyebrows mumbled. Mehringer was in charge of getting us all into the bunker during air raids. He was still all attention and suspicion, even though half the people were not even worried about insulting the Führer anymore. I guess he had probably spied for so long now that he couldn't help it anymore.

"Günther, didn't your mom go to the authorities just yesterday to get you children out of here and didn't she get told she was a cursed coward to even think of such a thing? Didn't they tell her such cowardice was a stab in the back for her country when it needed her?"

I didn't like how Mrs. Braunstein dragged me into this now.

"She didn't get permission." That was all I was ready to admit in front of a Nazi. Who knew what could still get one into trouble? And the last thing Papa needed when he'd come back was a bunch of angry Nazi functionaries on his back.

Old Mrs. Vormann had stepped through the door just as I said that, bringing a sweep of the brutal cold in with her. She had moved in with Mrs. Braunstein last year after her son Reinhard had died in Stalingrad. She whimpered on my behalf.

"Those horrible beasts will rape her beautiful Johanna and you boys will get carried off to labor camps in Siberia. And Lore? What will happen to the baby? Oh dear, dear…. I know how they are. My Reiner wrote me all about them."

Mrs. Braunstein carefully surveyed my reaction to this prospect while her prophetic friend cried into a flowery handkerchief. She stared vacantly for a moment, then she added as if without any voice at all, "Tomorrow it will have been a year since they have killed my Reiner."

Fig. 13: *Nazi propaganda poster warning of the brutality of the Bolshevik soldier, using a rumor of Polish soldiers having been brutally executed by the Red Army in the forest of Katyn.*
Photo © calvin.edu

Mama had told me never to believe Mrs. Vormann's horror stories. She said her grief had eaten up her last bit of sense. And she had fairly tight nerves even before her husband and three sons had died in the war, one after another. But why had Mama packed our possessions every minute of the last few days? Why had I been taking valuables to secret nooks in various relative's houses for safekeeping? Why had Mama forbidden Hanne to go out in her pretty dress last night and told her to wear pants? And Hanne was not even thirteen, tall, but very thin, with shaggy-colored braids just as thin as her. Would the Russian soldiers really take any interest in such a scrawny child?

Günther gathered up the scanty provisions he had been able to acquire for his food stamps and stuffed them in the enormous pockets of his father's parka that reached down past his knees. He draped his scarf around his neck and head, folded up the collar, and buttoned everything he could, and mentally braced himself to step back out into the cold. "…you boys will get carried off to labor camps in Siberia," rang through his mind until

the icy wind grabbed his worn and torn pant legs and crept up all through his body. He wanted to jog home but his feet were already stiff and clumsy. His shoes weren't exactly protecting them with all the holes in them. But he sped up a little, making quick little steps because that would warm him up most quickly.

He nearly fell over Lore who was sitting right in front of the door with her hand-sewn rag doll when he stepped into the house.

"What are you doing in the cold?" He swept her up with his left while he carefully closed the door against the cold with his right.

"Look, Günther, I've made a bird!" Willi ran out to greet him with something looking a lot like a crooked paper airplane made from some public announcement in his hand.

"Did Friedel show you how to make airplanes?" Günther gently turned Willi around to go back into the heated kitchen, set down the wiggly toddler in his arms and closed the door behind him. His feet were painfully thawing out.

"Not an airplane!" Willi protested. "It's a bird! I just don't have any colors to make it have pretty feathers!" Willi pouted slightly.

"Of course it's a bird. And you even told me so. See, I still have icicles on my eyelashes. Can't see too well!" The ice that had formed on his nose and facial hair was really melting all over his face and his skin was tingling as it came back to life. He couldn't recall that having happened before, but of course, he had a lot more facial hair now. He was fifteen now.

He dropped on a chair by the kitchen table, emptying his pockets of a small loaf of coarse bread, some cubes to make broth out of and five small potatoes.

"That's all you got, hm?" Mama had a deep furrow etched into her brow. Günther could still remember that it hadn't been there before Papa had gone to war, except when she was mad at him.

Günther nodded quietly. Mama turned around and carefully put away the food into the high cabinet above the sink so the little ones couldn't get to it. They had to ration carefully.

"Mama, Maier and his family have left town. Last night."

He saw her hand close fitfully around the knob on the cabinet door.

"Mrs. Braunstein was telling Mehringer in the store."

Mama chuckled with a malicious undertone.

"Must have given her pleasure to report him a coward, huh?"

Hanne had thankfully engaged Friedel and Willi with a homemade marble track on the other side of the room and they were making such a racket that only Lore, who was practicing her imaginary wings perched at the very edge of his knees, could hear their conversation. And her world was still full of dreams that quite crowded out the bleak reality. She had determined to be a bird early that morning and she'd been fluttering all around the house ever since. Not much else but lunch had secured her attention. She had even shamefully neglected her doll. Hanne had sewn it for her with old towels and her favorite old dress that would not hold together for her anymore.

Mama softened as she looked at her baby. She reached over and weaved her fingers through Lore's fine hair.

"Wenn ich ein Vöglein wär' und auch zwei Flügel hätt', flög' ich zu dir…," she sang in a whisper. I didn't have a hard time to guess who she'd fly to if she had two wings. But where was Father?

"You think too much," Mama's hand held my chin in her hand and directed my eyes at hers as she had done when I was little and would try so hard not to cry and she'd say tears I'd hold back would make it hurt more.

"You're too young to brood like this all the time." She saw everything, right into my heart. How did she do that?

But since she knew what I was thinking anyway, I spoke up: “How can we know where Father is?”

“We can’t.” She looked straight at me and I knew that in this moment she had decided to finally accept that all this had made me an adult and that her bottling up her worries was wearing out both of us. “There is no way for us to know. And I know what you are thinking: How can we leave then? How will he find us? I don’t know Günther, I just don’t know. I pray he will find us. I pray and I hope. But we have to get out! This is not a place for you kids anymore.”

I cast an anxious glance at my siblings playing just a few feet away from us. I could see Hanne’s brain was working fiercely to keep up a pretense of entertainment for the little ones and catch every word we said at the same time.

“Günther, they will ask the same question soon. And what will I answer them? All I can teach you children, all I can give you is my faith, my hope, my prayers. I cannot even feed you enough, or protect you from all this ugliness. It is out of my power.” She spoke with quiet force. Hanne had given up her pretense and Friedel had caught on quickly. Both were looking at us earnestly, and to my surprise, without fear.

“Don’t worry, Günther. We will all pray really hard!” Hanne reassured me, stepping over to the kitchen table. I swallowed. If nothing else, this war had made this little girl a perfect mother and a brave, strong young woman.

My older cousins Christian and Hans-Willi came over after lunch. Hans was home on leave. He had gone to war at sixteen, a little over two years ago. Christian was supposed to go right around now, but Aunt Liezi had been ill and he had somehow gotten out of it until now.

Mama had welcomed her nephews like she would have heavenly messengers bearing an announcement that the end of the war was immediately at hand. She made them fake coffee of which we had very little left and shared some of the “cookies” Hanne

had baked the day before. They were really not much more than flour, water and sticky syrup Mama had received from a neighbor. We talked about how they were doing in Wellendorf.

Then Mama, with Lore on her hip, reached in a cabinet and pulled out a letter I had not seen. She presented it to all of us, to me as to the cousins.

“This came today. It’s a reprimand for having asked permission to leave town. ‘Cowardice’ and ‘a stab in the back of our country that needs us now’ —that’s what they call it. But they know nothing of mothers!” She pointed at the envelope. “Look at the stamp!”

“Our Führer will banish Bolshevism,” Hans read with a sneer and handed the envelope on to Christian and me. Lore leaned toward the table, grabbing for it, waving her hand.

“And then Günther came home telling me that Meier has left, packed his bags and out! Does he not believe in the Führer anymore?” Mama hardly ever spoke like this. She was furious, but other feelings were still stronger. She let Lore bounce on the table, holding on to her hands, still smiling and giggling with her. Without changing her expression, she said, “I have to get these kids out, boys. There is a box of things I don’t want to take. And I haven’t had time to give it to anyone else. It’s too big to just carry home from here for you boys. There are bricks downstairs and some dried up mortar from when you fixed up that wall last year. Draw in an extra wall right before the end of the hallway and enclose it in there. Can you stay that long? I’ll feed you dinner.

Hans-Willi and Christian looked at each other and nodded.

“When will you leave? Do we have time to let Mutti and Lucy know?”

“If I can, tomorrow night. I would be very grateful if you would tell Lucy. I hope she can come with us.” Lore was tired of bouncing and made efforts to crawl up on Mama’s shoulder to curl up there. I took her so Mama could talk. Lore’s thumb went in her mouth and her eyelids drooped as soon as I had her nestled in my arms.

Christian stared at her. “She’s turning three on Sunday. She’ll be homeless instead of having a party.”

Mama stared at her hands for a minute. “I know,” she whispered. “But I don’t want her to have a Russian party either.”

“I know, Aunt Margarete. I just don’t think we can go yet. Lioba is still really weak. And we’ll miss you.” Their youngest sister Lioba was 12, Friedel’s age. She had been very ill the last few weeks, probably because she’d grown so much and eaten so little.

We raised a wall at the end of the hallway and put Father’s stamp collection there and some of Mama’s jewelry, her only expensive dress that she had only worn to a couple of weddings because there really hadn’t been anything else to celebrate. I silently prayed she could go out with Father in this dress again, here from our home, with all of the little ones safely in their beds. We worked silently. Christian and Hans-Willi seemed as much caught in their thoughts as I was and we had to be fast and finish early enough for the two of them to eat some dinner and make it at least to Lucy’s house that night. That was a good eight miles away in the pitch-black dark.

Mama and I had talked about fleeing to the West before. We would pack everything we could carry and hopefully catch a train. I would have to listen to people carefully tomorrow to hear when there would be a train. But it was bitter cold outside. All of our clothes were worn thin. Lore didn’t even have a real coat because there was no reason for her to go outside in this weather. Maybe Hanne and Mama could sew her one out of those army blankets Father had left. It could be sort of a birthday gift. We were going to go to Aussig if we could, to Uncle Emmo and Aunt Elly. But what if the train just would not go there?

I spent a good deal of the next day trying to find out news—news about the progress of the Red Army towards Ratibor, about trains leaving Peterwitz, about soldiers

at the Western front, which is where we supposed Father to be. I visited the stores that were still open to see if I couldn't get something more for our remaining food stamps, I idled near in the tavern that had nothing to offer anymore but a few tables to play cards and in the church yard where the gossip-champions of the town reliably assembled day by day. All I could find out, though, was that a freight train would be coming through the Peterwitzer train station around evening. Apparently a lot of people were not giving heed to the warnings to "traitors and cowards who desert the cause." There was talk about packing and "visiting" family in the West everywhere. It seemed that Peterwitz was going to be a ghost town soon.

In the early afternoon, Mama had just made us a small lunch, when Christian came back. He had news from Lucy that she would be there in a few hours with her sister, Agnes, and her two kids. Josel was a little younger than Willi, so not much help. Erika was only eleven, but she had been learning a lot from Hanne lately. Maybe the two of them would manage to keep the little boys entertained so Mama would have her hands free for Lore. Christian also pulled a chicken out of his bag, a whole chicken that was already cold only because it was far below freezing outside. Mama pushed it back in his backpack when she saw it and said to give it to his mother for Lioba.

Christian grinned. "She got one, too."

Mama looked at him questioningly like she always would if Hanne and I were too enthusiastic, but very quiet on certain subjects.

Christian's expression became serious, as if to say that Mama better not pull out a standard lecture for such an unusual situation. "We were out in the middle of the night, Aunt Margarete. Lioba needs to get some fat on her ribs before we can follow you guys and you can't make the trip without some serious food, either."

He stepped over to the counter, got out a knife and went outside to pluck and prepare the bird while Mama and Hanne were busily stitching away at a coat for Lore. Friedel was undoing seams in some of our clothes under Mama's close supervision so

that we would be able to put on several layers on top of each other. I went through the house gathering usable luggage. I found backpacks Mama had made for Father and me out of coarse blankets. The smaller one would fit Friedel now. I would take the large one, as I seemed to have been carrying lots of things adult-sized lately. I had to fit in Father's mold somehow even if it required stretching uncomfortably, literally spreading myself too thin.

Lucy arrived flustered and upset, bearing the news that the train was waiting at the station already. Our luggage was pretty much assembled, so I grabbed Willi and Josel and put as many items of clothing on them as I could possibly fit. Hanne and Erika giggled about the strange shape they were each taking in the next room over. Finally Friedel, the three women, and I left the little ones immobilized in their round fluffiness with the girls and set off to bundle up as well. Christian made a sort of harness out of belts into which I would be able to strap Lore on top of my backpack if we had to go faster than her little legs could carry her.

Then we stood in the front hall looking absurdly like a bunch of fat bears in coats with backpacks staring at each other fearfully. We did not dare to look around us at our home and think we might not return. Mama and the girls left kiss hands on the front door knob for Father before Christian pulled the door shut behind us. We were not the only procession like this in the town. A real exodus had broken out. The train station was packed. Willi fell on his behind twice, having his balance challenged by the extra bulk of his clothing, the backpack, and people bumping into him from all sides.

Christian managed to cram all of us and our meager belongings unto a wagon of SS gear. Hanne immediately grasped the best of the situation, plunged little Lore into a pile of blankets, and tucked here in tight. Her tiny eyelids barely fluttered twice before they shut tightly over very red cheeks.

Mama hugged Christian a long time in a cramped looking grip, her face hard with

trying not to cry now. When she let go he said, “We will come soon. Even if I have to carry Lioba the whole way.” Mama looked like she would rather have him stay than take that upon him.

Fig. 14: Photo © DPA

“You have Günther. He is your man. And a good one.” He looked worried while he said it, but he looked up at me and nodded. I needed to hear it more than Mama did.

The train finally left. Hanne and Erika clasped hands as they cheered back to Christian on the platform. The doors only went halfway up and a sharp wind blew in. We piled the SS blankets and coats around, underneath and on top of us. The girls piled themselves in between the women and it seemed they all became on heap. The little guys went to sleep fast, with their blankets up to their noses so that their warm breath kept their faces from freezing.

Friedel sat next to me, serious and quiet, a whole lot of unspoken questions written all over his face. I punched him playfully, wrestled him down with a blanket to keep us both warm. But he did not even laugh. He pulled the blanket over our heads a little ways, looked at me profoundly and whispered, “We are homeless now, aren’t we?”

“We can come back, Friedel. And we’ll be with Uncle Emmo and Aunt Elly in a couple of days.”

He examined my face. “Do you really think we’ll come back?”

I clenched a fist under the blanket, tried to ignore the tightness in my throat and the rock in my guts. He was not a child anymore either. Already.

We sucked on frozen chicken in the middle of the night and when it dawned we stopped somewhere. Soldiers brought fake coffee to each train car, weak, but it was

hot and felt glorious in my stomach. The girls came back crying from relieving their bladders. They were so cold, shaking uncontrollably until I had tucked them firmly into many layers of the big army coats around us. Lore whimpered when she came back in from her potty break with Mama, but I took her under my covers and breathed on her face and neck until she fell asleep again.

Suddenly soldiers shouted outside. A message was passed from wagon to wagon. People began to scramble out of the train. I strained to hear and make out what was going on. A man jumped down from a car down a little ways and motioned to me, while he was giving a hand to two little boys clambering out behind him.

"This train cannot continue beyond the Oder River. We have to run to that other one over there across the tracks."

We had to shake the boys awake and get the girls out of their blankets. Agnes and Lucy were stuffing things into the backpacks. Mama put an army coat on Friedel inside out and a blanket on top before she loaded him up again. Lore sat in midst of all this: "… ich ein Völlein wär," she sang off key, making her doll dance around her.

"Mama, it's Lore's birthday. It's today!" Willi suddenly cried out.

Mama looked dumbfounded for just a second. She grabbed the little bundle off the floor, spun her around and started her special birthday song that says, "How great you were born. We would have missed you very much!" We all chimed in for a minute until soldiers appeared in the door, shouting angrily.

"Didn't you hear? Stop this racket! You have to get off! Run or you'll miss the other train."

I helped Mama and Lucy down and handed down children and luggage. I jumped down with Lore last. But Mama needed me to take a heavy bag Christian had carried before and Hanne took Lore by the hand. We hurried terribly and at every track we had to cross, Hanne simply lifted Lore over by the one hand she had a hold off. First she giggled. Josel fell and could not get back up alone because he was too round. The train

was filling up down the track and the engine was puffing already. Agnes pulled her son back to his feet by his coat lapels. Hanne yanked Lore over another track and another. Willi was about to collapse under his backpack and Erika had sprained her ankle. We scrambled on the last train as it started moving, I tossed the little boys running alongside, jumped. The train sped up. A man in the car tried to close the door, jerked it when I realized something small and colorful stuck in between and lunged forward to grab it. But the door opened and Lore's rag doll flew off behind the car. It got caught in a wheel. A flash of color whirled above the black of the stony ground. A tiny strip of the flowery fabric from Hanne's dress fluttered from the hub for a second like a tiny flag. I closed the door. In the dark corner of the wagon, Mama sat with Lore and Hanne in her arms, their backpacks still strapped to them, singing "Happy birthday!"

Epilogue

O Leben Leben, wunderliche Zeit
von Widerspruch zu Widerspruche reichend
im Gange oft so schlecht so schwer
so schleichend
und dann auf einmal, mit unsäglich weit
enspannten Flügeln, einem Engel
gleichend:
o unerklärlichste, o Lebenszeit.

Von allen großgewagten Existenzen
kann eine glühender und kühner sein?
Wir stehn und stemmen uns an unsre
Grenzen
und reißen ein Unkenntliches herein,
. . . . . .

Rainer Maria Rilke

Time-of-a-lifetime Life, that can extend
from contradiction into contradiction!
Now hard and slow beyond all malediction,
now suddenly outspreading to ascend
wide angel-wings beyond all benediction:
O life-time, life-time, hard to comprehend!

Which of the daringly-devised creations
can beat us in our fiery enterprise?
We stand and strain against our limitations
and wrest things in we cannot recognise.
. . . . . .

Trans. J. B. Leishman

After many interviews and conversations, and after much reading and research, I feel I have gained a glimpse into a world. I have tried to put myself into the shoes of my uncle, Günther, and my grandfather's sister, Mizzi, and the exploration has been fruitful. But the overriding sense that I come away with, is that, even to the survivors, the images are still as if from a separate life that does not quite connect with their reality today. Mizzi would sometimes shudder with recollection of what she had seen and in that moment her

experiences seemed to linger physically. As if to eradicate the possibility of repetition by sheer willpower, she repeats, “I hope that no one will ever have to go through anything like that again!” and “I would not wish such a time on anybody.” While one can come away from many challenges and hardships with a sense of victory, both Günther and Mizzi convey to me that a majority of the horror they have seen continues to defy any search for meaning, but that their lives have nevertheless been built from the ruins, the fires, the ashes, death, and destruction, and that the ruins are part of who they are. They continue to come to terms with these events. It may hardly be a conscious process unless a young relative comes along asking questions like I did. Both seemed surprised that I wanted to hear their stories. Both seemed to realize with some shock that they truly had lived history and that their witness was the only way for me and my generation to comprehend our nation’s past.

The narratives of my family and the narratives of history and literature all confirm that memory does not call horror and fear simply by these names, nor does it cleanly separate it from joy and good fortune. Hans Graf von Lehndorff, in his account written in journal form during the war, narrates the experience of an air raid he spent in a ditch without protection. In the midst of the noise, the frenzy, two steaming dead horses only a few feet away from him, fire and explosions all around, his mind slips away: “Durch meinen Sinn zucken Blitze aus glückseligen Kindertagen, die mich oft an dieser Stelle vorbeigeführt haben, wenn wir von Trakehnen aus zum Turnier nach Insterburg fuhren.—Nun geht das Gericht über die Welt” (12; “Flashes of memory from blissful childhood days rush through my senses, memories of journeys from Trakehnen to the Insterburg tournament that would take us past this place.—And now the Judgment is passing over the world,” my translation). The retrospective of a life, or of a nation’s history, presented itself to me throughout this research as a mosaic in which the dark lines and pieces are crucial to the pattern. They emphasize and sharpen the brighter pieces and add definition to what would otherwise be a blur of color. Günther and Mizzi both speak

of their memories with an expression of reverence for what they went through. It seems that they are themselves in awe that they survived terror of that magnitude, that not only their bodies came forth unharmed, but that their spirits proved resilient enough to laugh after all that fear, to love despite being surrounded by hatred, to cry tears of joy after having run out of tears for tragedy. They both were still amazed how man can get used to horrible circumstances and adjust; then in turn get used to peace and prosperity again and, though one had once hungered, take that for granted after a while. Von Lehndorff hauntingly touches upon facets that sound in Günther's and Mizzi's story, but are buried under the struggle with painful memories and an effort to recall "how it really was." Von Lehndorff points out how unreal the war was, even as one went through it, as if one were a character in a movie set. Even as he wrote it down, a sense of disbelief accompanied his shock and sorrow. He touches on many ways of psychological self-defense necessary to remain sane in the midst of war, such as refusing to empathize, refusing to consider the dead around him as individuals, refusing to slow down and ponder, to do, to work, to act at all times. He writes also of sentiments of shock and shame as he watches the Russian soldiers abusing their power, absolutely out of control. "Das hat nichts mit Rußland zu tun, nichts mit einem bestimmten Volk oder einer Rasse—das ist der Mensch ohne Gott, die Fratze des Menschen. Sonst könnte mich dies alles nicht so peinlich berühren—wie eigene Schuld" (70; "This is not limited to Russia, has nothing to do with a particular nation or race. This is man without God, man's grimace. Otherwise all this could not fill me with so much shame, like personal guilt," my translation). Tears well up in Günther's eyes as he speaks of his own boyhood faith in Hitler. His faith crumbled slowly as he learned of more and more of the atrocities of the regime until, one day, he saw the pictures of the freed concentration camps, piles of bodies and human remains. He still hurts about having once cheered for this man, that he had been blind like most. He feels guilty, though he was just a child. Mizzi's story differs in that instance, as her family had known the horror of the regime early. The guilt and shame that resonate in her story have

to do with being a survivor while her father and two brothers lost their lives. She was able to rebuild her world, literally working among the “Trümmerfrauen” who rebuilt the cities with their children while surviving soldiers and released prisoners of war were still trekking home from distant ends of the world.

To be more sensitive to what war meant to women, I read *Der Krieg hat kein weibliches Gesicht* by Svetlana Alexeyevitch. Even though Alexeyevitch’s material draws mostly from the accounts of women soldiers, I found the kind of approach I wanted to take towards this project most clearly articulated in her writing. She speaks of uncovering the intimacy of the experience of war, of penetrating through to the truths and the eternal aspects of human life and human nature by examining the memories of people who go through such an extreme experience as war because the surface breaks and abysses appear before one as under hardly any other circumstances. Thus, the aspects that became clearest to me lay hidden in small moments each of them narrated in stories of everyday life. One such story that haunted me and gave me a firmer sense of what war must have meant for my grandmother was this: When Rupert died—the second youngest of my mother’s siblings—only a week old, Günther’s father, my grandfather walked to the hospital about thirty miles away and because he had no casket to put the tiny body in, he carried him back in a laundry soap box so that the family could bury him together. These occurrences were part of life and my family is not very extraordinary in having these stories.

As much as the lines between horror and joy are delicate, so are the lines between victims and perpetrators. A character in Klaus Kordon’s *Der erste Frühling* stands at the window for days after having returned from a concentration camp, observing life. He hears a boy play music in the backyard and contemplates how men can be capable of such beautiful and such horrible things. Was a sixteen-year old forced to carry a gun a killer? Yes, in some ways. Most of the time he probably felt more in the role of the hunted rather than the hunter. I wonder how many who committed atrocities under the Nazi regime did so with a sense of fear or frenzy rather than of power. I wonder how many who abused their

power with some pleasure also feared for their families and felt sympathy and horror at times. I wonder how many who willingly recited discriminatory propaganda did so with an actual sense of hatred. I wonder what I would be capable of if put into such a situation. There are some clear-cut lines of war criminals and victims. There is no doubt about the absolute horror of the Holocaust. But why do Günther and Mizzi feel shame to this day? Why do I whenever the topic of the Third Reich arises? The terror endures.

Günther is seventy-seven years old today, a retired professor of chemistry who discovered a yet unnamed mineral at some point in his career. He has three grown

Fig. 15: *Wrublicks in 1937; Mother Margarete and Father Karl in back, front left to right: Günther, Friedel, Hanne, and Rudi. This is one of very few pictures that include Rudi, who died in a freak accident at a flight show in 1939, barely three months before Rupert's birth and death.*

Fig. 16: *Wrublicks in 1939; left to right: Günther, Hanne, Mother Margarete, Friedel, and Rudi. Here one can already tell that young Günther has become a serious boy under the circumstances. This may also be one of the last photographs of Rudi.*

Fig. 17: *Wrublicks in 1943; Father Karl must have been home on leave. This seems to be a family outing in the country (Groß-Peterwitz was very rural). From left to right: Hanne, Father Karl, Lore, Mother Margarete, Friedel, and Willi. Perhaps Günther was the photographer.*

Fig. 18: *Werdings, formerly Wrublicks (name was changed in 1942) at the wedding of Willi's oldest son in July 2005. Friedel, Lore, and Günther at the bottom left, Friedel's youngest son, Rupert right behind him. The groom is Stefan, Willi's son; to his right, his younger sister, Anne, her husband, Pierre right in front of her, and to her right, Willi, her father.*

Fig. 19: *Günther with his grandson, Jacob, December 2004.*

children in their late thirties to early forties and six grand-children. He lives in Bochum in the midst of the most industrial area of Germany. He has traveled back to Silesia a few times to see the places of his childhood and found the same tree that he climbed on as a boy still in the front yard of their old house, the house where my mother was born, the house from which they fled. That first flight ("Birthday") went relatively smoothly. The family arrived in Aussig within about twelve days on little food and in bitter cold conditions, but all arrived safely despite air raids raging above them. In Aussig, they found out they were not the only ones who were seeking shelter with Uncle Emmo's family. Space was tight and nerves were stretched thin. In May the war was finally over. Trusting that tensions would ease, the family packed their belongings again. Günther found a small handcart near the market square in Aussig. One wheel was missing, so he found another one that was much smaller. The cart hobbled and bounced as they walked back to Silesia, a distance of what would be nearly three hundred miles with today's infrastructure. My Mom would sit on their luggage like a pauper princess on a small throne. After a long march they found their town occupied by the Russians, the occupying force rightly feared above the other Allies. My grandfather, who had been an NSDAP party member by virtue

Fig. 20: *Left to right: Friedel, Willi, Anne (Willi's daughter), Ruth (Willi's wife), July 2005.*

of his teaching profession, arrived home from a prison camp in Italy only a few weeks later. They left home once more that same night, afraid of what the Russians might do with him, a "card-carrying Nazi." One could assume that the critical attitude he had maintained throughout the war would not help him now. They found a train that went to Westphalia, undertook the journey west once more and settled there. That is where I grew up and where all of my Mom's childhood memories were shaped.

Friedel, Hanne, and Willi became teachers. Friedel and Willi each have two children (who are all now well into their thirties). They built picturesque houses in small towns and raised their families with a thorough faith in God and a very deep awareness how blessed they were to escape. Hanne died a few weeks before my birth of a still unclear illness. All three brothers live in Westphalia today, as does their youngest sister, Lore, my mother. This is the place my mother claims as home. While her brothers still call themselves Silesians, my mother does so only in jest. She does not remember Groß-Peterwitz or the journeys west. Willi's memory of the stories told here is blurry, but the stories are still a part of him.

Mizzi is eighty-seven years old now. Her memory is now failing her, only a year after I conducted the interviews with her. We have developed a special relationship and I fear to see her grow old. She has given me a tie with my grandfather whom I have never known, which is almost like giving me a piece of myself. The story of her family had been almost entirely unknown to me because my grandfather passed away so long ago and his two sons were just infants during the

Fig. 21: *Mizzi and I in December 2004.*

war. My father only remembers late post-war years, the last years of reconstruction, but none of the real misery and fear. The loss on this side of my family was tremendous as well: My great-grandfather died in 1937 of the consequences of three months of Gestapo imprisonment. Fränz, the third-oldest son, appears only briefly in my narrative. As a child he had incurred severe brain injury from falling down a staircase. He had developed epilepsy after that and the Nazis had made the family to give him away to an institution. Mizzi remembers visiting him often until he was transferred to an institution too far away to make the visit frequently. One day a message arrived that he had passed away after a brief, but severe kidney infection. It did not take very thorough investigations to find out that all the institution's inhabitants had been taken to a concentration camp to be gassed. Sepp was killed at the eastern front in 1943. Three pointless, enraging deaths in six years. Yet, Mizzi amazes me with her outlook on life, her cheerful, positive attitude, and her love for life.

Out of the people from her generation that I have interviewed, her answers were the most honest. She always thought about my questions for a moment, started somewhere and then interrupted herself. "No, to really tell the truth, I have to start somewhere else." She never tried to analyze while we talked. Her stories were like diary entries in a way, even with exclamations and bits of prayers that welled back up in her heart as we talked. She speaks much of gratitude and recalls acts of charity more than cruelty now. She says that she never experienced anyone denying their neighbor a share of their little bit of food, but always found people to be helpful, although her father was denounced by someone from their neighborhood. As Klaus Kordon's characters point out several times, people were dispossessed repeatedly to the point where anything they found or acquired in anyway was not considered a possession, more as something to borrow and put to good use before it would be lost again. Mizzi tells similarly of many generous gifts her family received even from people who hardly had any more than they did.

Mizzi's "Mutti," born 1880, passed away in 1957. Hans, my grandfather finished his medical degree after lengthy detours brought about by Nazi bureaucracy. He came home from the war unharmed and was able to play a substantial role in the raising of his two sons until his early passing in 1966 of a fit of apoplexy. Heinz also died early in 1973 of a heart attack. In their fifties, Dora, who lives in Paderborn with her husband to this day, and Mizzi were the only two remaining of a family of seven children. I am sad to have almost entirely missed a connection to that part of my family, but am grateful to know Mizzi and want to preserve her stories as a legacy.

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[1] This is an unpublished family history document authored by my grandmother's cousin and his wife.

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