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Experiences of a German Girl Growing Up During the Nazi Regime, the End of World War II, and Coming to "Amerika": An Oral History Narrative

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Abstract:

This oral history describes the memories of a young German girl growing up during the Nazi Era and the end of World War II in a village in the Bavarian Alps of southern Germany. The narrative is based on her lived experiences and stories shared by her father about the horrors of the Nazi regime. Her memories include shrieking bells and imminent bombing attacks, boy soldiers inducted in the *Wehrmacht*, the sabotage activities of her dissident father, and the despair of villagers when death notices came for sons and husbands killed at the front. She also describes the white-flag welcome her father and grandfather gave troops from General Patton's Third U.S. Army 10th Armored Division when they arrived at the edge of their village, and her experiences meeting White and Black soldiers who threw fruit and candy to the village children from their tanks. Concluding with her immigration to the United States at the age of 22 and her discovery of profound racism and discrimination against African Americans, this oral history gives teachers and teacher educators a rich, personal resource to use as an adjunct or alternative to textbook readings about a devastating time in Germany history.

When one's lived experiences of trauma or joy occur during a significant time in history, they yield rarely forgotten memories and deeply held, private knowledge that might never come to light without a storyteller. When first-hand accounts are shared publicly, however, they offer powerful insights into historic events. In the classroom, such oral histories can be a powerful force in the dynamics of knowledge creation. Oral histories move students from abstract textbook descriptions to concrete and compelling "lived" stories associated with an historical happening. In this way, they are often critical to a deeper understanding of the past.

This oral history narrative enables teachers and teacher educators to enrich historical facts with the voice of an individual who grew up during the turbulent times preceding the end of World War II. It may be used to enhance the study of topics such as Nazism, the Holocaust, or the impact

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of war on families, neighbors, and communities. Educators can divide students into pairs, assign to each pair one of the lived experiences in the account, and have them dramatize the event from the point of view of the child in the story. Or students might be asked to reflect on the oral history and write a letter to or poem about the child in the story. A concluding discussion might involve students' assessment of the value of oral history as a learning tool as compared to textbook readings.

My Birthplace

I was born in the beautiful village of Unterammergau on the Ammer River located in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps in southern Germany. The village name originates from its location: the place *(Gau)* below (*Unter*) the River Ammer. With only around 1,500 inhabitants, the mayor, priest, and teachers were prominent local figures who were deeply respected by the local populace, most of whom were farmers. Like most inhabitants in Germany's state of Bavaria, the villagers were deeply entrenched in the Catholic religion. During World War II, 41 men of Unterammergau perished, 21 went missing in action, and many more were wounded. Today, a marble memorial in front of the village's St. Nikolaus Catholic Church is engraved with the name, birth date, and location of death of every soldier who was killed. Most died in Russia, others in Poland and France. The names of soldiers missing in action are not inscribed.

My Schooling

In 1939, Germany became embroiled in World War II. By 1943, it had been five years since Jewish children had been banned from attending school. I was six years old and attending first grade in our public elementary school. As in many Catholic villages in Bavaria, religious studies were taught every day, and in Unterammergau this role fell to our local priest, Herr Pfarrer. When he entered the classroom, we automatically stood up and waited for his gesture indicating it was time to pray. Every morning we said the same prayer to the crucifix on the wall before we were permitted to sit down.

One morning at the start of the school year, when Herr Pfarrer arrived in class, he walked directly behind the teacher's desk, moved the chair against the wall, climbed on it, and took down our hand-carved crucifix. The crucifix was especially beautiful. It had been handmade by a well-known woodcarver living in nearby Oberammergau, world-renowned for its wood carving school and its elaborate, many centuries-old Passion Play. We students had to participate in fundraising toward the purchase of this cross, so I was surprised to see Herr Pfarrer remove it. At the same time, I was secretly relieved that Jesus was able to come down from the wall. As a first grader, I had felt sorry for him having to hang on a cross. From under his black frock, Herr Pfarrer pulled out a framed picture of Hitler, hung it on the same nail, turned to us, and said, "From now on you

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will not pray at the beginning of class. Instead, when I enter the classroom you will stand up, raise your arm, and say *Heil Hitler*! three times. And when you greet the people in the village—which of course you should do—you will no longer say *Grüß Gott* (Greetings to God in Bavarian), *Frau* (Mrs.) so-and-so. Instead, you will raise your right arm and shout *Heil Hitler, Frau* so-and-so! Do you understand?"

I could not wait to run home from school to tell my father about our exciting new *Heil Hitler* greeting. I will never forget how he grabbed me by my arms in no uncertain terms and shouted that I was never to salute Hitler in the classroom nor in the street, stating, "Don't let me catch you not listening to me!" The next day, I did not raise my right arm three times to say *Heil Hitler* in our classroom. My teacher, Fräulein Grainer (she and Herr Pfarrer were our only teachers), asked to see me after class, and she tried to persuade me to use the Hitler greeting. When I informed her that my father *forbade* me to do so, she shook her head, raised her eyebrows, stared into my eyes, and said, "From now on you must stay one hour longer after school every day to clean blackboards, floors, and windows as punishment for not saluting Hitler's portrait." As Fräulein Grainer lived in the basement of our schoolhouse, it was easy for her to check on my duties. Once, she threatened that I would have to stay even longer if I was not more thorough in my work. I made sure that did not happen.

After this event, my peers ignored me, Herr Pfarrer disliked my family, and the villagers shunned us. When my peers at school planned group activities, I was not invited. They looked over their shoulder at me with disapproving eyes. Along with my family, I was ostracized, and my life became much more difficult. I had nobody to talk to; I felt lonely and abandoned.

As a six-year old, I wondered why my father felt that the *Hitler Gruß* was such a terrible thing. After all, everybody else used it in school and in the village. But I sensed he knew more about the world and had a good reason for his directive, and I dared not question him about it. He was very strict, and I wanted to obey him.

Imminent Bombing Attacks

To this day, I can still hear the screeching sounds of the rusty hand siren used by the old city clerk to announce imminent bombing attacks that began around 1943, in the last years of the war. The small church bell would also be rung by anyone who could manage to get to the tower first. The big church bell had long ago been taken down to be melted for war material, as the Nazi government mandated at the start of the war.

The cruel sound of the siren alerted us schoolchildren to run home from school to take cover in our cellars. If we could not make it home in time to escape the low flying bombers soaring over us, we threw ourselves into the ditch along the street and held our ears. The shrieking fighter

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planes would fly so low that I could sometimes see the pilots' faces. They were Allied bombers on their way to repeated, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempts to bomb an underground *Messerschmittwerk* (factory) inside the base of the Laber Mountain in the next village of Oberammergau. The main factory was located in Munich, the capital of Bavaria, but the Nazis had moved essential manufacturing to protect it from bombing attacks. The Oberammergau villagers were enraged but nonetheless required to house the hundreds of technicians who came to work in the *Messerschmittwerke*. Being so nearby, we feared we would be bombed to death, and a blanket of despair hung over our village.

Refugees

I vividly remember the hundreds of refugees who sought shelter in our village after the war ended in 1945. They came from as far as the Sudetenland (now reconstituted as Czechoslovakia) and from as close as Munich, only 90 kilometers away. The former group included Germans who had lived in the Sudetenland regions of Bőhmen, Schlesien, and Mähren for centuries. The latter group was composed mainly of city-dwellers—many of whom had vacationed in our village in peacetime—trying to escape Allied bombings. Now, homeless and hungry, they were begging for a place to stay.

Of the 3.4 million Sudeten Germans forced to flee their homeland at the end of the war, 1.2 million were sent to Bavaria. Of these, 600 arrived in our village of Unterammergau. The local authorities mandated that every homeowner provide housing for one refugee family. Suddenly, our classroom became crowded with newly arrived refugee children who spoke in a strange dialect and looked afraid, as did we. We eventually overcame our fear on the playground, as many excelled in sports which impressed us. My classmates and I soon realized that they were children just like us.

My Parents

I have many profound recollections of my mother and father during the Nazi era and the end of World War II. When my younger brother was born at home in 1944, I asked my mother why Dr. Kohlmeier did not come to deliver him, as he had with my sister and me. My father heard my question and yelled at Mama in the vernacular, "Tell her the truth, why he did not come to deliver her brother! Dr. Kohlmeier is a Jew who was arrested, and who is likely in the Dachau concentration camp with his family and other Jews… where they are being murdered in cold blood." I can still hear my Mama moaning when I begged my father to tell me more. He ranted for what seemed like hours as he told me, his seven-year-old first-born child, of the horrors taking place in concentration camps. I had a thousand questions to ask him every time he returned home on a weekend from Munich. He then would take me aside and explain about the Nazi's

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brutality against the Jews, the Romas, the forced laborers, the prisoners-of-war, the resistance fighters, the mentally ill. Today, I wonder fearfully if my mentally challenged daughter Andrée would have been euthanized under Nazi rule.

Papa

Why was my father located in Munich and not fighting at the front? Papa had been assigned to the *Messerschmittwerke* in Munich after being injured early in the war. He was expected to apply his engineering skills to the smooth operation of large machinery that assembled airplane parts into fighter planes. There, Papa found a room to rent in the home of the overseer of the notorious Stadelheim Prison, a facility where the Nazis confined and tortured German dissidents working against the Reich who had been uncovered by the secret police. One nightmarish day, Papa's host was ordered to supervise the decapitation of the Scholl siblings, a young brother and sister studying at the University of Munich who had printed and distributed anti-Nazi leaflets. When Papa came home that night to his rented room, he found the overseer and his wife dead from suicide.

Papa had to live through many nightmares while working in Munich during the war, but there was one horrific event he repeatedly dreamt about: the day he and other factory workers were ordered to gather in a wheel barrow the body parts of children strewn in the shattered streets of a nearby orphanage bombed during an Allied attack.

Mama

Mama was the fourth child in a farmer's family of nine children. At birth, the toes of her feet were webbed to each other, a disability that required many trips to a specialist in Munich and placed an enormous burden on her family. Mama's parents gave her to be raised by her much older grandparents, who had the time and means to afford the operations she needed. After many surgeries she could walk, but she had to wear specially designed orthopedic shoes. The neurological damage from the surgeries left her legs strangely underdeveloped from the knees down; even as a child, I wondered why she did not wear long dresses to cover them up.

Mama's smiles were rare, and only later in life did I understand why. Growing up with her grandparents and having to assist them with their daily needs precluded her from playing with her siblings or neighborhood children. She was told that life in her parents' home, with eight siblings and little food, would be much worse. There was little joy in her young life. Her grandmother, as the only midwife in the Ammer Valley, was often picked up by a farmer's horse and buggy in the middle of the night to assist in the birth of a child. Her grandfather was the royal mailman to King Ludwig II (1845-1886), the last king of Bavaria. The frequent absences from home of her grandmother and grandfather made her life even harder.

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Among all my relatives, my mother's grandfather, or my great-grandfather Vetter, as I called him, was my favorite person. He was obsessed with education. When my teacher recommended after the fifth grade of elementary school that I attend the *Oberschule* (prep school for the university*)* in Murnau—some 13 miles from my village and requiring a roundtrip train ride each day—he paid for my tuition until he died. Each day I had to report to him what I learned from each of my teachers. He made me proud of excelling in school.

Boy Soldiers

Another profound memory surrounds my mother's decision to hide three boy soldiers who came into our house for refuge during the final days of the war. They were part of the retreating German Army, many of whom were trying to escape into the nearby mountains. My mother agreed to hide them in the cellar, where we stored potatoes, apples, and glass jars of marmalade. Its small rectangular door was in the corner of the kitchen floor and covered with a carpet. My father yelled at my mother that she would be shot when the SS (the *Schutzstaffel,* Hitler's security, surveillance, and terror organization) found the boys there. At that time, the SS regularly searched the houses in our village for deserters and resistance fighters. Mama refused to change her mind and, thank God, the boys were never discovered. After several days in the cellar, they thanked Mama, stuffed her food provisions into their backpacks, snuck out of the back of our house, and fled for the mountains. We never learned what happened to them.

Another profound memory surrounds the boy soldiers who were conscripted by the Nazis near the end of the war. By then, over a million boys aged 10 to 18 were members of the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth) brigades and had undergone physical training and indoctrination into the Nazi ideology. With the German Army suffering great casualties at the eastern and western fronts, boys as young as 14 were sent to serve as frontline troops. In one Panzer Tank Division, over 65 percent of the soldiers were aged 16 to 18, as they were sent to face the Allies on D-Day. Brutally disciplined, these young boy soldiers acquired a formidable reputation for their violence in battle.

The boys from my village were not spared. I can still see them walking through town, their uniforms too big and scared to death. I can still hear the wailing of their mothers, siblings, and grandparents as they said goodbye. One of these child soldiers, drafted into the Germany Army in 1943, was my uncle Gustl, my father's youngest brother. My grandfather had forbidden him from joining the *Hitlerjugend,* just as my father had forbidden me to join the *Bund der Deutschen Mädchen*, the female division of the *Hitlerjugend*.

At the time he was drafted, Gustl was a talented woodcarver and had just been accepted to the famous woodcarving school in the next village of Oberammergau. To this day, I can hear my grandmother's primeval screaming when, in November 1944, she received a death notice saying

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that Gustl had been killed in Hochsavoyen, near Iacques, France. Her screaming gave me nightmares for years. Whereas my stoic grandfather withdrew into his workshop, my grandmother continued to yell about the Nazi killers who had murdered her son and other boys to win a useless war. I remember her saying, "Is it not enough that my oldest son (my father) was injured in the war, my second son Luisl is fighting in Russia, and my youngest son Gustl has been killed?" We later learned that Gustl was buried in a French cemetery for German soldiers at Andilly, France. I am still saddened today about my grandmother not being able to visit his grave.

Luisl, the second brother of my father, was more fortunate than Gustl—he survived the war. Luisl was my favorite uncle; he had often taken me skiing and mountain climbing when I was a little girl. After fighting in the five-month-long Battle of Stalingrad, where almost two million Axis and Allied soldiers died, he finally returned home in 1945. Emaciated and wild-looking, his mother did not recognize him at first and would not let him into the house. Much later, as an adult, I tried many times to interview Uncle Luisl about his wartime experiences, but he always painfully refused.

As the war raged on, Mama continued knitting socks, as many women did, for the soldiers on the front lines. Mandated by the Nazi regime, the activity, I believe, allowed her to maintain her sanity. Mama was not given to easy emotion; her much older grandparents had taught her not to cry. But despite her deeply stoic approach to life, I watched how she broke down sobbing when she learned of the death of her oldest brother Nikolaus, a scout in the *Wehrmacht* (German army), who died in a prisoner-of-war camp in Staβdopol, Siberia. At the war's end, her second brother Toni, who also had fought at the eastern front, came home after being released from a Russian prisoner-of-war camp. Soon after, he died of his wounds.

Nightly Footsteps

By the time I was seven, my farming village in upper Bavaria had experienced many years of tragedy. One sad event I experienced was listening to the clattering footsteps of a young woman walking past our bedroom window on her way to the train station. She intended to pick up her fiancé, who she was told would arrive on the 10:45 night train. Night after night she walked by our bedroom window, until a year or so later, when the clattering ceased after she received notice that her fiancé had fallen in the Battle of Stalingrad at the age of 24. She would never marry. To more fully understand the tremendous suffering of German families in these years of war, the reader should know that her fiancé's two other brothers also were killed in Russia.

My childhood memories are filled with stark images of a village population scarred by war, desperately yearning for peace. Too many death notices from the eastern and western fronts had reduced the male population in the country and in our little village where, by the end of the war,

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41 husbands, sons, uncles, cousins, and neighbors had been killed, 21 were missing-in-action, and many more were wounded. Lieutenant Hubert Menninger was the first soldier from the village to lose his life on June 29, 1941. The villagers remembered him proudly waving goodbye in his brand-new Air-Force uniform. He fell in Russia at the age of 25.

The Nazis in our Village

Some members of our village served as Nazi appointees. They wore perfect-looking uniforms and Nazi insignias on their jackets, and shouted commanding *Heil Hitler* greetings. They marched around the village with great authority and evoked deep anxiety in the townspeople, who wondered with fearful anticipation what they might do next.

The Nazis had grown increasingly suspicious of my father. Every time he was home from Munich, there was a big sigh of relief in my house when they did not knock at our door. They had the authority to order those suspected of disloyalty to be taken out of their house in the middle of the night without notice. Our apprehension was multiplied by my father's constant warning to us: "Trust no one, including your own mother, the *Spitzel* (spies) are everywhere." I think my father feared that my mother might inadvertently mention his frequent outbursts to her sister, outbursts about "the mad and murdering Nazis who trample *über Leichen* (dead people) in their brutality." During the mandated evening blackout periods, he frequently jumped up from our peaceful family dinner table and pulled back the window curtains to see if a *Spitzel* was eavesdropping.

Of all the fears I experienced as a young girl during the Nazi era, the greatest fear was that my father would be shot. Often in the night, I would awaken to the sound of shots fired in the distance and run to my mother, who would assure me that Papa was alright working at the *Messerschmittwerke* in Munich. But she was not really privy to his activities. We heard that in the nearby coal-mining town of Penzberg, the SS had shot 17 men and women in cold blood after they attempted to remove the appointed Nazi leader of the village. He had commanded the local miners to destroy nearby bridges and industrial sites to prevent the approaching Allies from reaching southern Bavaria, and they had resisted.

During the months before the war ended in April 1945, the German Army and Waffen SS retreated to southern Bavaria to regroup. They began to prepare for the last stand against the approaching Allies, who had landed on the Normandie coast and were sweeping with lighting speed through Germany, overrunning the *Wehrmacht.* Tens of thousands of German soldiers had surrendered en masse, but there were many true believers among the Nazi forces. Faced with the Allied demand for unconditional surrender, fanatical SS officers gave a dreadful choice to retreating soldiers, most of whose commitment to the Third Reich was forced on them and

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anxiously awaited the end of the war: The soldiers could continue fighting or be shot or hanged on the spot.

Germany's looming defeat meant that more and more retreating soldiers and Waffen SS officers arrived in our village. At the same time, many German underground resistance groups, who were aware of the imminent arrival of General Patton's Third Army Armored Division, grew bolder. Around the corner from my village, the *Auerhahn* resistance group burnt down the *Hundigungshütte,* the largest wooden cabin on a nearby mountain in the Graswangtal Valley. The cabin was intended as a place where the Waffen SS could store food and ammunition that would help them escape to Austria, approximately 10 kilometers away. The *Auerhahn* also sought to eliminate the *Kreisleiter Schiede* (district leader), a ruthless Nazi official who, along with his staff, governed our entire county of Garmisch Partenkirchen. The attempt failed due to the unexpected speed with which the advancing U.S. Army arrived.

My Fear for My Father

By this time I was almost eight, and I was sure my father would be shot, for many reasons. One was his refusal, from the start of Hitler's takeover, to wear the Nazi pin. I witnessed him tear the Nazi insignia off my mother's blouse and tell her to never wear it again. Plus, despite his compulsory military service, Papa was highly critical of the "murderous Nazi regime," as he called it. He spoke openly about it to encourage other villagers to recognize its dangers, but to no avail. On the contrary, they began to look at him and our family with suspicion. The frequency and suddenness of his unexplained disappearances and reappearances, both to and from Munich, suggested that he may be involved in activities that were unacceptable to the Nazis in our village. He did not tell me about them. What he did tell me about was the horror of the concentration camps and their victims. Since Papa really had no one to talk to, I became the person he most spoke to of his overwhelming rage. Moreover, his early admonitions forbidding me to say *Heil Hitler* in school or in the street or join the *Bund der Deutschen Mädchen* exacerbated the local Nazis' suspicions. From the beginning of the war until its end, the Nazi leadership kept a suspicious eye on our family.

The Role of Our Village Church

How well I remember the many church services held in our village, a reflection of the deeply entrenched Catholicism in southern Bavaria. On Sundays, the high mass was held at 10 am and the Vespers at 2 pm, and my mother required me to attend both. In addition, throughout the war a *Kriegerandacht* (service for soldiers) was held every evening of the week to pray for the safe return of the soldiers fighting at the front. We had to say an entire rosary during these services—for me, a very tedious church ritual.

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The most traumatic church services were those held after a death notice came for a soldier from our village. Between 1941 and 1945, 41 young men had fallen. The city clerk, with his rusty bell, would bicycle through the village announcing that a special mass would take place at a certain day and time. These services usually had more village attendees than any other, a pitiful assembly of old men, distraught women, and children like me. The priest, standing close to the parishioners, would announce the name of the fallen villager and the place where he died. A photograph of the uniformed soldier would be placed on a memorial—a cross made of birch trunks—and a helmet would sit on top, surrounded by flowers. Bereaved families would sit in the front row of the church dressed in black, the women sobbing and wailing. Hymns would be sung by a small female choir, alternating with parishioners' prayers in the vernacular and the priest's prayers in Latin.

When we attended the evening *Kriegerandacht* on April 28, 1945, it was the night before the American troops arrived in Unterammergau. Deafening artillery fire came from behind the Schergen Mountain and echoed in the church. I thought it must be Hitler fanatics, SS officers, and old and young soldiers shooting at the approaching American tanks, and the American soldiers returning fire. Filled with terror, we all ran out of the church to the relative safety of our cellars.

Peaceful Surrender of the Village

The artillery fire we heard in church on the night before was the prelude to a momentous next day. On April 29, 1945, the prospect of liberation from the Nazi Reich spread quickly through the village when we learned that General George S. Patton's Third U.S. Army 10th Armored Division had halted at the entrance to our village and, as was custom among liberating American troops, waited for the local mayor to come and officially surrender the village. At this auspicious moment, Frau Reindl, whose house and gas station were located at the village entrance, ran panicked across the surrounding fields, escaping from a lone Nazi who had fortified himself in her gas station with the intention of resisting the Americans. A U.S. reconnaissance plane circling over the village shot her; she died two days later. Four 18-year-old German soldiers were hiding behind the gas station and also were killed as they attempted to flee. They were buried in our cemetery and years later exhumed and returned to the cemeteries in their hometowns. Given the might of the U.S. Army at the edge of our village and the passionate resistance of the Nazi fanatics, it is remarkable that these were the only deaths at that time.

I can still hear my Marxist grandfather's voice on that fateful Sunday. Equipped with a white flag hanging from a pole, he tore open our front door and shouted inside, "Are you ready?" My father came quickly with a pole to which he had nailed a white bed sheet. I watched them shakily balance the poles on their shoulders as they wobbled down the street on their bicycles. As they rode over the Ammer Bridge to the edge of the village, they yelled, "The Americans are coming... Hang white sheets from your windows!" My two role models, predicting that the Nazi mayor

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would not appear when the victorious "enemy" arrived, had long planned this act of bravery. Their action defied SS Commander Heinrich Himmler, who had issued an emergency order to shoot all males whose dwellings displayed white flags welcoming the liberators. As a little girl, I was very proud of my father and grandfather who delivered our village peacefully to the Americans.

Who was my grandfather? He came from the small farming village of Alteglofsheim, near Regensburg in lower Bavaria, where vast fields of wheat danced in the sun of rich farmlands and beautified the countryside. The son of a struggling farmer and one of many children, he had decided to become a metalworker. His education and certification obliged him to become an apprentice and travel from place to place to make a living with his craft. In this way, he met my paternal grandmother in Unterammergau, fell in love, and produced an illegitimate son, my father. He decided to remain in the village, get married, build his own house, and open his own metal shop. My teenage father had to work for years at the big farm of a farmer who provided my grandfather with a hay wagon and horses for transportation. My father was tasked with "working off" the debt my grandfather had incurred to build their house.

Yet, despite settling in the village, my paternal grandfather remained an outsider. Bavarian villagers did not look positively at those who were not born in the village and did not accept them as equals. Moreover, my grandfather's ideas about the world were controversial and out of step with those of the conservative local Catholic farmers. He proudly challenged the status quo, believed in the philosophy of Karl Marx, and held regular meetings of like-minded individuals at his house until the local Nazis forbade him to hold these meetings under threat of arrest. Although my father never discussed Karl Marx with me, I know that early in his life he already had recognized the grave dangers of authoritarianism and fanaticism and would later recognize the same brutality of the Hitler Regime.

American Soldiers on Tanks

What seemed like hundreds of U.S. tanks with soaring U.S. flags rolled down our street on the day the American forces entered our village. We children of war waved to the Black and White soldiers sitting on top of these tanks, overwhelmed to find them throwing us bananas, oranges, and Hershey bars—fruits and sweets we had never seen before. A contingent of the Third U.S. Army 10th Armored Division settled into our village; the remaining armored division moved on to Oberammergau and other villages until it reached the Austrian border, only miles away, to liberate the German people from the Nazi Regime. The American troops had only minor skirmishes with the retreating Nazi Waffen SS officers. The occupying contingent in my village was part of the overall Allied Forces occupation, implemented throughout defeated Germany by

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the British, French, Russian and American victors, who divided the country into four occupation zones.

As the Americans settled in the village, they evicted several homeowners in order to set up U.S. headquarters and sleeping quarters in the two-story houses. When we were given just one hour to evacuate our house, my mother quickly borrowed an ox and hay wagon from our neighbor so we could throw our feather beds down from our second-floor balcony. But by the time Mama had found a neighbor to take us in, the Americans no longer needed our house; they had found bigger ones for their purposes. Used to a hard life, Mama showed no anger toward the Americans. She was just relieved that we could stay in our pretty 18th-century house with its blooming geraniums on the balcony—her pride and joy.

One afternoon, we children apprehensively gathered near some of the soldiers and they gave us a soccer ball, another surprise we had never seen before. We began to realize how genuinely kind the American soldiers were. Another time, they allowed us to taste a trout they had caught in our Ammer River and had asked my mother to cook. We had never tasted fish before because, unlike in the United States, fishing in Germany was strictly for the affluent. One day, having never seen people with black skin before, I mustered all my courage to walk up to an African American soldier and asked him in my halting school English if I could touch his skin. When he laughingly consented, I licked my right forefinger and swiped it along his arm, certain that the black paint would rub off. I still remember him smiling at me with perfect white teeth, patting me on the back, and shaking his head. The kindness and generosity of the African American soldiers toward us war-scarred German children remains deeply carved into my memory. It is the same kindness I later experienced with my African American colleagues after I moved to the United States.

Immigrating to the United States

At the age of 22, I fell in love with an American military officer stationed in Germany. My father had prohibited me from ever marrying a man in uniform, but my future husband was a security officer with top-secret qualifications who worked at the NATO and Special Weapons School military installation in Oberammergau and wore civilian clothing. As a result, my father grudgingly allowed us to marry. In 1959, soon after I became pregnant with our daughter Andrée, I left with my new husband for the United States. We settled in New Orleans, Louisiana. I will never forget the faces of my crying parents saying goodbye to their oldest child at the Munich airport.

My border crossing proved overwhelming when I found myself confronted by the way of life in the American Deep South. With my marriage, I had chosen shotgun houses, rocking chairs on front porches, cooling fans, and debilitating humidity in 110-degree heat. I was shocked by the blatant segregation of African Americans in their daily life: “colored” water fountains,

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confinement to the back of the city bus, access to doctor's offices in the rear of buildings, Black children bussed to integrated schools only to be spit on by Whites. I observed the U.S. South's deliberately slow desegregation efforts in the hesitation of my mother-in-law's maid Yvonne to eat with me at the same table, and in my naïve insistence to drop her off at her housing project when she finally consented to let me drive her home. I saw cities burning, demonstrators beaten and killed by police, racial profiling, and unnerving race riots. We lived near the 9th Ward in New Orleans, an African American neighborhood that later was the very place where Hurricane Katrina drowned more of its victims than in any other part of the Crescent City. Were these not the same kind and generous African Americans I had encountered as a child of war, the ones who had liberated my village from the Nazi Regime? How could they be treated this way in the land of the free?

In my newly adopted country, I was seeing a different type of victimization and discrimination, but one similar to that which I had experienced in Germany, where Hitler had selected Jews as his main target. After immigrating to the Deep South, I learned that in the United States, in contrast to Nazi Germany, it was African Americans who had been the targets of injustice for centuries. I saw how this persecution operated through a kind of systemic racism that led to the slow and deliberate deaths of its victims.

My German education had not prepared me for this traumatic experience. For a young girl from the Bavarian countryside, it was difficult to understand the environment in which I now lived. Only with time and education was I able to put together the pieces and grasp the broad set of circumstances that had produced this other form of genocide, this slow-motion genocide in the country to which most of the world's people want to immigrate.

My own emigration from Germany also helped me gain insight into the complex experience of life as an immigrant. African American scholar W.E.B. DuBois (1903) best articulated this experience in his notions of double consciousness and the ever-present invisible veil that minorities often choose to wear for survival. Although DuBois's ideas refer to the African American experience in a predominantly white, racist society, I found that they also captured the dilemma that was keeping me separate from my newly adopted country. What caused this separation? It was, at least in part, inescapably linguistic. Although my accent reflected my cultural and linguistic background and made it possible for me to speak both Goethe's High German and the Bavarian vernacular, I still struggle to pronounce "th"—a non-existent sound in the German language—as well as the ubiquitous American "w." Like all immigrants, I also had to learn to navigate cultural differences.

What I missed most from the culture of my native country was celebrating Christmas Eve with an emphasis on the birth of "baby Jesus" and midnight mass. As a child, I saw no Christmas tree

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in my house until Christmas Eve, when Mama rang the bell and invited us children into the living room to see the tree decorated with burning candles. Before we opened our presents, we all sang in harmony *stille Nacht, heilige Nacht (Silent Night, Holy Night*). I maintained this custom in my new country and taught my children to sing the song in German. To this day, I have trouble accepting the American tradition of telling children on Christmas Day that Santa left presents the night before. In Bavaria, Saint Nikolaus, patron saint of children, sailors, merchants, and students, arrives on the sixth of December, when he goes from house to house to fuss at or praise children on their school performance and give out small presents.

After coming to "Amerika" (as Germans refer to the United States), I also missed celebrating my "name day." In Bavaria, Catholic children are named after Catholic saints, so the day a child's namesake is celebrated is the child's name day. In fact, my mother once told me that in Bavaria, name days are more important than birthdays. I was given the name *Antonie,* after St. Anthony, because my parents expected me to be a boy. In my new country, no one congratulates me on St. Anthony's feast day except my sister, who phones me from Germany.

Since living in the United States, I also have missed the Bavarian cultural tradition of wearing a *Dirndl* (Bavarian dress) without being told by an American that I forgot to take off my apron! The *Dirndl* consists of a sleeveless dress with mother-of-pearl or silver buttons down the front, a white blouse underneath, and a half apron tied around the waist with long ribbons attached.

Like many immigrants, I typically feel compelled to perform my responsibilities with 200 percent competency at all times. Yet, despite my continuous efforts to fit in and gain acceptance, I always remain vigilant for some unanticipated consequence of my actions. I believe that I will always feel marginalized to some degree in the United States, though it is a country with which I fell in love. Yet, as with all immigrants, a dual identity steeped in two cultures is permanently ingrained in my psyche.

My border crossing from German Bavaria to the American Deep South, and my proximity to profound racism and discrimination, and even genocide, against African Americans and Jews, are experiences that have sensitized me to the struggle of the Other for social, economic, and educational justice. I feel deep empathy toward African Americans in the United States, particularly because of the systemic racism that still exists. I am grateful that my varied cultural and historical experiences have helped me develop a particularly deep level of cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural competence, and world-mindedness.

Visiting Home

Even after 60-plus years in the United States, I remain homesick and frequently long for my family and the mountains I used to climb. I have had the great fortune to return often to my Bavarian

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village during these long years in the United States. On these visits, my father would devote hours to conversations about the Nazi era. We would take a cable car to a mountaintop or sit in our family's log cabin, which he built near the village during the war. With a keen mind until his death, my father would elaborate on the horrors of the Nazi Regime, sharing even more than he had earlier with his unsheltered seven-year-old first-born daughter. As adults, we talked of the murder of Jews, gypsies, and dissidents, the euthanasia of the mentally challenged, the Waffen SS atrocities, and the forced laborers from Russia and Poland, some imprisoned in our village near our sawmill. The pages of my now-treasured diaries of these conversations overflow with inexplicable human tragedies.

One of these trips home stood out from the others. Papa told me of two anti-Nazi actions he had engaged in during the war, actions he had never revealed to me. Assigned to the *Messerschmittwerke* in Munich, Papa had to assemble airplane parts for fighter planes. In acts of resistance over years, he and two confidants from a nearby village deliberately left out key components to impair the reliability and effectiveness of the aircraft fighters. Their sabotage was performed under the threat of grave danger, as monitors continuously walked through the huge halls looking over the workers' shoulders. Saboteurs were shot on the spot.

My father also helped to avoid the detonation of explosives that Nazis had attached to the huge *Echelsbacherbrücke* (bridge) spanning the steep cliff beds of the Ammer River. The Nazis were desperately trying to stop General Patton's advancing Third U.S. Army 10th Armored Division tank columns from crossing the Ammer, and my father, along with other resisters, did whatever was necessary to prevent the blowing up of the bridge. Amazingly, none were caught, even though the Waffen SS officers might have suddenly appeared from nowhere, anywhere, anytime.

Reflections

I often think of my courageous father, and when I do, I realize how deeply his stories—*his* oral history—penetrated my consciousness. The perspectives and experiences he shared have irreversibly shaped me into the questioning individual I have become. His distrust of governments, authorities, and bureaucracies cultivated in me a highly critical mind. His abhorrence of war inspired the direction of my college teaching, curriculum writing, and academic publications. I have also reflected on the deep affection I felt for the African American soldiers who threw oranges and bananas and Hershey bars to us, children-of-war, when the tanks rolled into our village at the end of the war. Somehow, these interactions laid the foundation for the many deep friendships I am sharing with African Americans in my newly adopted country.

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