

A GERMAN CHILDHOOD DURING AND AFTER WW II

My husband was born two weeks before the beginning of WW II in Friedland, Germany, and during his first years he had a normal childhood: hardworking parents who loved him very much, a big brother 10 years older than him who occasionally played with him; a lovely cousin as old as his brother, aunts and uncles. He remembers his days in Kindergarten, family gatherings, nice neighbors who used to sit on a bench at the front entrance of the apartment building and talk during the summer afternoons. It was a tranquil small city in the mountains of Silesia, the most eastern province of Germany. The textile industry and coal mining were the main supporters of the economy in the region. There was no big city close by and maybe this was the reason why the effects of the war came slowly to them. But suddenly his uncles started disappearing one by one as they had to enter the military. Father and mother seemed preoccupied for no apparent reason, and the neighbors' conversations were not so cheerful as always; they feared bad times were coming soon and talked with dislike about a man they called "Adolf".

He does not remember birthday parties, but he remembers he was five years old as the inferno began. His brother had to enter the military as soon as he turned 15. One day he went with his mother to visit him in the barracks and he saw her crying. She never had cried before, so he knew it had to be something bad going on and he felt sad too. Many boys like his brother were in these places. By the end of 1944 his father almost went to jail for expressing his fears that the war was going to be lost. Because he used to listen to forbidden radio stations in hiding, he knew the truth was not what the propaganda was telling them.

On the outskirts of the city, there were two prisoner camps. He sometimes saw the men walking in lines escorted by guards. One day his mother heard about a Russian prisoner who crafted toys and she ordered an airplane for him. He went to pick up the toy with his mother; and because by then money was scarce, she paid with a piece of cake. The exchange took place through the wire fence, and the guard looked the other way. He still remembers the anxiety with which the man devoured the cake before he returned to the barracks. His mother murmured: "He has to be starving."

By the end of 1944 his brother came home and spent about three months with them. During this time he returned to the local bank where he had been enrolled in an apprenticeship since the year before. Someday in the spring while working in the bank, his brother and colleagues heard a strange rhythmic noise and ran to the window. There they saw a column of prisoners wearing wooden shoes, the source of the noise. Guards escorted and beat them. By the end of the column, the weaker were carried by others and finally his brother's friend who worked with a farmer followed the column with a horse wagon carrying some dead prisoners, the ones who died of exhaustion or were shot in order to keep the column going.

Then his brother was called to serve again, he had to whip up the abandoned cattle as far away as possible from the front line, which came closer and closer, faster as the cows could run. His father didn't need to serve as a soldier because he was a miner, and all miners were exempt from the service; instead, they had to work harder in order to produce as much coal as possible for the armories.

By the beginning of May 1945, the cry "The Russians are coming" sounded louder and louder. Soon, columns of different groups of people, passed the city going to Czechoslovakia just two km ahead. They were fleeing from the Russian Army, abandoning their homes and farms to save their lives, taking only what they could carry with them, some had horse wagons with their belongings, followed by cattle, even some retrieving German soldiers were part of the columns, many times they came back days later with nothing and in deplorable conditions. In the last days of the war, his father had to help dig trenches, which were supposed to stop the Russian tanks, so they were told.

One day rumors came that a military depot was abandoned, and everybody was taking groceries. His father took a hand cart and went as soon as he could, taking him on top of the cart. On the way home, he had to walk and carry some small bags. Whenever his father knew of a place to get cheap or free food, he went and filled his bags, pockets, even his boots with food; and before he entered his home, he shared with the neighbors' families whose fathers were away at the front.

On May 7 most of the people in the city looked for shelter in the nearby

forest behind the Catholic and Lutheran churches, which had stood together at the edge of the city for centuries. The two clergies walked between the people and spent the night through praying and trying to calm the terrified population. The noise of the artillery and canons got louder by the hour. Suddenly, in the middle of so much chaos, his brother appeared out of nowhere; he was happy to see him again, and at some point he fell asleep.

He remembers awakening on a nice, quiet morning, no shots or scary noises. It was May 8, 1945, the end of the war. Later in the morning loudspeakers started calling the people to return to their homes without fear. Otherwise, they would be treated as partisans. Everyone came out of the forest, and what they found was horrifying. The downtown park was covered with wounded or dead people, animals together with destroyed horse wagons and their contents, all covered in blood. Some were the neighbors who hadn't escaped on time and were caught up by the Russian troops. The tanks didn't even notice the trenches his father and others built days before. Between the wounded was the girl who sometimes babysat for him. She was his brother's classmate. She and her mother didn't survive.

On the same day some Russian soldiers paid them a visit. They came for food and drinks and didn't look so terrible. Some sang with his father who did the impossible to protect his family and some even danced, taking him in their arms. His mother was scared because all were heavily armed and didn't let go of their weapons for a second. After they left, his father said, "something has to be done in case they return," and he pushed a big cabinet in front of the bedroom door so that the big kitchen appeared to be a one room apartment. Next day early in the morning a second group of soldiers stopped by, but only one of them was there the day before; and he kept quiet, just giving sliding glances to the cabinet while his father acted as if he was living all by himself. In the bedroom with his family were also hiding together: his aunt, the nice cousin, and two neighbor ladies. Sometimes his brother and cousin had to hold his mouth closed with their hands when he felt like crying or wanted to ask questions. Other visitors who came on those days were the prisoners from the nearby barracks who were liberated and didn't know where to go and didn't have anything. They came looking for food and clothes.

Two days after the end of the war, he remembers coming back from Czechoslovakia, a column of German soldiers, civilians, and a company of

deserter Russian soldiers who were fighting with the German Army, known as Vlasov Army. All were captured and handed over to the Russians by the Americans in Czechoslovakia. His brother and some friends, ran with a bucket of water and offer them something to drink, but a Russian Red Army soldier, kicked the bucket and chased them away.

The following nights he could hear soldiers roaming the streets, and everybody was scared, so much that one night he saw his mother jumping from the second floor window to the house garden. Much later she came back with scratches and bruises, and said she was hiding in the bushes. Little by little some order came back, but soldiers came collecting radios, clocks, watches and said everything belonged to the state now. Many people fled to the West. His father said it was too dangerous, and as a miner he still had his job and did hope everything was going to be fine, one way or another.

In September he was supposed to enter school, but there was no school at all. Then strangers started to arrive. They were Poles. Many had their families with them, and soon the school opened, but only for Polish children. Germans were second class people and had to wear a band on the arm identifying them as Germans. They were treated with disrespect. Soon the Russians disappeared, and the Poles took over. Some were worse than the Russians. His brother was not accepted back in the bank to complete his apprenticeship, so his father took him to work in the mine. As a German he didn't get good treatment and sometimes he was even beaten. One of his uncles who was fighting at the frontline, was lucky to come back home, only to find a Polish family living in his house, and no one knew the whereabouts of his family. He remembers his uncle crying like a terrified child. Another uncle never returned home, and the ones that came back didn't feel like playing anymore. Miraculously, his missing aunt who was trying to flee through Czechoslovakia with a group of other desperate people, came back with her two girls, after they were send back by the American forces. After that, his uncle decided to escape to the West with his family. His almost 17-year old brother said, "I want to go to the West with them," and they left. Then, he was just with his parents, a few old neighbors and no relatives at all. He doesn't know what happened with his maternal grandfather, who used to live close by.

On Christmas Eve 1946 they were invited to spend some time with a

German lady whose family had left for the West also. It was kind of gloomy as they passed in front of the City Hall, when suddenly several militiamen jumped in front of them shouting in Polish and giving them to understand they should lie down, and so there they were lying face down in the snow, he was between his parents, holding his Christmas present, a little wooden rocking horse. After a while the men pulled them up and again, with signs, gave them to understand that the mother and the child could go back home; but the father should follow them, so this was his worst Christmas Eve ever. Next morning his father returned home; he was not hurt.

Since the summer 1946 there were organized relocations of people. Long freight trains were departing with families going to the West, but his father was a miner, and the miners were not permitted to leave. They had a document that protected them from being displaced and entitled them to free heating coal. They also had food cards to make sure they had enough to eat and could keep working. New Polish families arrived every day, and they were looking for a place to live and to work, so they were permitted to kick out German families from their homes, letting them take with them just what they could carry and in the work places there was the same scenario. Soon the neighbors in the apartment house where he lived changed. His new neighbors next door were a couple of Polish Jews who met in a concentration camp. She was expecting and soon asked his mother for help in her household. Since he was not allowed to go to school, he was always with his mother or sometimes with his father. In this manner he came to have feelings for the Jewish couple, both were friendly and treated them with respect.

When the baby came, his mother helped more often and he played with the baby. Sometimes, the couple took him with them to the forest for a nice walk, and they treated him like family. Soon all the apartments were taken by Jewish or Polish families and his parents no longer felt safe in that house. They decided to move out, but being Germans was a problem since all their belongings were not theirs anymore. So they asked the Jewish neighbor for help, and he gladly helped them. Then one of his friends and colleagues was looking for a place to live. They were shoemakers and had a repair shop where his mother cleaned too. The new home was only two blocks away, in a medieval old house where no one wanted to live because of its bad condition. His father said, "here no one will bother us." They moved into the middle of the night, and the Jewish neighbor kept talking Polish all the way,

pretending they were Polish people moving.

He was seven years old, and his parents heard about an old German teacher who couldn't flee or be relocated because of his sick wife. The old man taught him and other German children in his home, next to his sick wife who was laying in bed in a corner of the room. No one paid with money since no one had it, but with whatever they could spare and so the children learned their first lessons, until someone denounced them and the militia came and took them to the police station, because learning was forbidden for German children. They took them in a double line, first the teacher and behind him the 6-8 kids, all between the ages of six and nine years. They were escorted by militia armed with Russian submachine guns, pointing at them and marching like a battalion until they reached the police department. The children could go home after the parents promised not to send them to learn anymore, but the teacher was held during the night in a flooded cellar. Months later the same teacher came into his home to teach him and his best friend. If some stranger came by, the children pretended to play board games; and the teacher hid wherever he could.

He had a cat and a bird, both adopted from families that were evacuated before. His new friend lived two houses away, and together they spent some time playing, learning and exploring the abandoned houses and orchards. They tried to build their own vegetable garden and transplanted some berry bushes and vegetable plants from an orchard nearby into their backyards. Sometimes they went into the forest and caught trout with their bare hands in the creek and brought them home for dinner. His friend's father had an old record player, and they liked to crank the handle and listen to the music. They couldn't go into the city streets because the Polish kids would hit them with rocks or whatever they had on hand and sometimes the adults too. That happened to him when some construction workers let a brick fall on his head. The Polish doctor for some reason refused him treatment, and his mother brought him to the church where the pastor gave him the attention he needed. Not all Poles were bad. His former neighbors were good people, and he knew two German girls who married Polish men and were happy, not so their families. There was a particular Polish man who sometimes, on his way home, made a short cut and pretended to lose a piece of kielbasa wrapped in a newspaper in front of his home. This was his way of sharing with them what he had.

His parents knew that sooner or later they were going to be relocated, and they were preparing to leave. Everything they wanted to take with them, not furniture of course, but clothes, personal items, blankets and small tools were stored in a tin bathtub mounted on four wooden wheels his father had ordered from a carpenter. One morning in summer 1948 his father came home from work and said, "we have to leave this afternoon, I just received the evacuation order," and so pulling the bathtub and carrying as much as they could, they went to the train station, first they had to go to the city of Waldenburg 15 km to the north west, in this city they were put in one of those freight wagons. It was a train with 50 wagons, each carrying 10 families with their belongings. They traveled in wagon Nr. 33. He was very lucky to find a pile of sacks with shoes that he could sit on and look outside through a small opening close to the ceiling. Most of the time the big doors were closed for fear of looters, and there were no windows. The heat was suffocating. He wondered what his cat and his bird were doing alone in the old house and also thought about his vegetable garden; perhaps his friend would harvest something soon.

Because the train stopped several times for many hours and no one knew why, the ride took a couple of days. Finally, they did reach the German border. In the train station, they had to stand in a line waiting to be checked and disinfected with a white powder that someone sprayed over them from head to toe. After that, women and children could board passenger wagons and the men continued the trip in the freight wagons, taking care of their belongings. After a short ride, the train stopped, and they were told this was the end of their journey. First, they were placed in a refugee camp; they housed in large barracks, with other families. There was food and work for everybody, even music and dancing on the weekends and prayers on Sunday. There they had to wait until a new place to live was designated to them. Every day, lists were posted on a wall with the names of the people who could leave. Sometimes he went with his father to see if their names were on the list. They expressed a desire to go to Westphalia (British Zone) where his brother was living and working, but they were sent to Saxony (Russian Zone) where coal miners were needed. A truck brought them into the city with another three families, and they and their belongings were downloaded in front of the house in which they were supposed to receive shelter, but the door remained closed until his father asked for help from the police. By force they got a room in the big house. The people living there were rude in the beginning, but later the relationship warmed up. Fortunately, his father

got a job right away in the coal mine, and after two months they could move to a small apartment.

He doesn't remember where he turned 9, but it must have been in some place on his way from Silesia to Germany or maybe in the refugee camp. It was already September when they arrived in Saxony, and he could go to school in the first weeks. The first two months he was in the second grade, but because he knew everything already they sent him the rest of the school year to the third grade, which he finished without any problem; he was 15 years old when he finished school. His life in Saxony was close to normal. As soon as his brother could, he paid them a visit and brought him a soccer ball. After that, he found many friends.

He attended a three year apprenticeship in the automobile industry, and after graduation, he didn't like what the work pool had to offer. Besides, Saxony was in East Germany and he didn't see a promising future under the communists, so he decided to flee again and with his parent's blessings, as soon as he turned 18, he took a train to Berlin. The Wall didn't exist at that time, and after a few days in a refuge center, he was sent by plane to West Germany where he caught his already married brother by surprise. Several months later he decided to emigrate to Canada. He turned 19 a few days after his arrival in The New World with nothing but a debt by the Canadian Government who paid him the trip. One day after his birthday, he started his first job in some place in Ontario. His life was very hard, he didn't speak any English, and he changed jobs frequently. After crossing the country in his search of better work, he was very lucky to find a good paying job with room and board during the winter months in Alberta, Canada, as a lumber jack in the Rocky Mountains. He could start paying back his debt. Always found people willing to help him. Thanks to them, he could keep going.

His life in Canada, Mexico, Germany and the USA as a successful businessman is worthy to be told in the future. Now at the age of 72, he sits in his comfortable home in Upstate New York and looks to the document nominating him an "Honorary Citizen" from the City of Jedlina Zdroj, Poland. In this city is a palace in the process of restoration, which belonged to one of his parental relatives from 1889 until 1945. Jedlina Zdroj is just 10 km away from Mioszow, Poland, the city he was born in and the one he remembers as Friedland, Germany.

Honorary Citizenship was granted to him for his contributions to the research of the local history. Then through his 10 year long genealogical studies, by searching for his ancestors, he had to study the life and happenings way back in to the fourteenth century in this region, and he is publishing all his findings through the Internet.

His work can be read at **www.boehm-chronik.com**

Written by: Bertha M. de Boehm (spouse of Guenter Boehm since 1960)
Dedicated to: Our Children and their descendants
May 2011 in Herkimer, N.Y., U.S.A.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.