

Growing Up in Nazi Germany

By Claudia Martin



Claudia Martin grew up in Munich, Germany. After earning her degree from a German *hochschule*, she graduated from the Munich Interpreters School with a degree as translator and interpreter for English and German. She also studied piano and voice at the Munich Conservatory. She moved to the USA with her husband Hubert in 1953.

Language and music have been the focal points of her professional life. She worked as a translator and has published essays and stories, including a book of whimsical fantasy stories, *Imagine That!* Several of her previous papers have been published in *The Torch*. She taught piano at her private music studio for many years and was choir leader and music director at various Unitarian churches.

She and her husband Hubert have been married for 66 years and have three children, four grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. The couple now lives in Winchester, VA, where Claudia is active with music groups and with writing assignments. They became *Torch* members in 1992.

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The recent events in Charlottesville involving Klan members and neo-Nazis who swung swastika flags were almost incredible to me. I grew up in Nazi Germany and experienced the racial, nationalistic, and militaristic delusions brought about in a poverty stricken population, whose hope focused with quasi-religious fervor on a new German nation, free of the fetters of the punishing Versailles Peace Treaty and restored to its previous boundaries. Several millions of Germans became enthusiastic and dedicated "National Socialists." Today, there is again a rise of dictatorships, of tyrants using the social inclinations of the human animal to form group identity and fervor. To create this fervor, they also need an imminent enemy outside the group. Their fervor leads to mass killings, justified by a delusional, supposedly sacred cause.

Hitler and his National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) gained control of the German government in 1933. It is a commonly held misconception that the Nazi Party was elected to office by a majority of all the German voters. However, the Hitler regime came to power with only 13 percent of the total vote in late 1932 (the Communist Party received 6 percent and the remaining 81 percent of the votes went to multiple small splinter

parties). At that time I was four years old.

My family lived in the town of Bitterfeld in the province of Saxony. The main employer was the huge chemical concern IG Farben. There, thousands of workers were organized mainly in the Communist party, called the Red Front, and the Nazi party. They both were socialist workers parties; the Communists had international goals, the Nazis national and racist ideologies. Only these two parties among the 30 different parties comprising the post World War I German Weimar Republic¹ had marching militias: ruffians prone to violence, assassinations, and gun battles. The Nazi storm troopers (Sturmabteilung, or SA) were identifiable by their medium brown uniforms, which initially were the inexpensive discarded uniforms of the Weimar government's toll and border agents—the famous Nazi "brown" was adopted through sheer circumstance. Eventually the SA numbered over 300,000—more troops than the Weimar Republic military had.

Dictatorships rule by instilling fear and terrorizing their population. Fear defined my first encounter with Nazism when I was three. Brown-shirted storm troopers came marching down the street with raucous singing. My mother quickly closed the window shutters

and shooed us children into the back of the house. Gunfights with Communists were feared. Another time we were walking down the street when we heard the ominous singing. My mother pushed me into the nearest door of a store till they had passed. I sensed the fear.

I had a maiden great aunt who had been a life-long nurse in a Lutheran hospital and had a very passionate Prussian soul. She regularly sent me, as a four- to six-year old girl, postcards with photos of Hitler with little children and dogs, with flags and patriotic events. He was the hero of her innocent heart. I was supposed to put them in an album, but never did. I did, however, absorb some of this feeling of hero worship.

I saw Hitler twice. My father, a great Richard Wagner enthusiast, took me to the famous Bayreuth Wagner summer festivals as an eight-year old. I was fascinated by the Valkyries and Teutonic gods. Hitler appeared in the King's loge; the audience had to stand and turn around and salute him with raised arm.

The other time was after our family had moved to Munich. In September 1938, Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Neville Chamberlain, and Édouard Daladier—the heads of state of Germany, Italy, England, and France—met for a conference in Munich. Grade school children with little flower bouquets were recruited to line the street. When these four leaders stepped out on the balcony, Hitler and Mussolini in uniform and Chamberlain and Daladier in suits, I, a nine year old,

stood a mere 50 feet away. The masses surged forward and almost crushed the group of little children. We were supposed to witness a great moment in history, but I only felt fear.

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Not long after, on November 9-10, 1938, the so-called Kristallnacht (“Crystal Night,” or “Night of Broken Glass”), anti-Jewish violence was instigated by the SA. All over Germany Jewish store windows were smashed, synagogues and Jewish private homes burned. Allegedly it was a populist uprising against Jews, because a German diplomat had been assassinated by a Jewish teenager in France. The solid, law-abiding German citizens, however, were just as surprised at the fires and shattered glass as the Jewish German citizens. In our affluent neighborhood lived a Jewish family. Their elegant villa was set aflame. House fires were unusual in Germany, because of the solid brick and mortar buildings. My mother and I heard the fire engines at night and walked to see the fire.

I asked my mother: “Why do the firemen only hose the neighbor houses down, but not the house on fire?” She slapped her hand over my mouth and pulled me away in fear. She had never slapped me before and refused explanation.

Despite the rise of anti-semitism, many German Jews had not left the country before that incident, because they felt they were legal German citizens first, not a separate Jewish population. They had served in the army during World War I, and many of them had converted to Christian Protestantism. My family’s Jewish friends were all of a professional elite. In general, German Jews were doctors, lawyers, scientists, university professors, musicians, authors, bankers, and businessmen. They were totally integrated into German society—or so it had seemed.

Under the Nazis, 36,000 Jewish German citizens were killed in concentration camps. 300,000 of the Jewish Germans were able to escape to other European countries, but most were murdered when German armies occupied those countries. Unfortunately, the United States turned away boatloads of Jewish refugees, though many were also granted asylum.²

The Nazi government required that all citizens research their ancestry and fill out an ancestry passport. Citizens hoped not to find a Jewish grandparent among their forebears. A young, blond, blue-eyed daughter of friends lived with us for a while. One day we found

her in desperate tears. Her fiancé had broken off their engagement; as a German Army Lieutenant, he was not permitted to marry her, since she had a Jewish grandmother.

Along my way to school I passed the office of an anti-semitic newspaper, *Der Stürmer* (“The Storm Trooper”) with outrageous photo displays of bearded, criminal-looking, hooked-nosed Jewish faces, the very devils incarnate. We also had a picture book in the school library, showing mean-looking Jews with bloody knives slaughtering innocent animals. Even as children we felt these pictures were unreal—we never had known such persons.

However, the propaganda must have affected me. In my school class was a blond, beautiful girl, the class princess with her group of friends. They bullied me. Finally, at recess I blurted out, “You daughter of a Jew!”—which she was, her father being Jewish. A curious consequence followed. After recess, the whole class of girls remained standing when the elderly, kind teacher came in. “Claudia called Margot the daughter of a Jew!” The teacher was dumfounded. Every schoolteacher had to be a Nazi Party member, no matter what his or her convictions. What should she do? She told the class to sit down, fold their hands, and observe five long minutes of silence. I was in tears with shame. Then she calmly took out the lesson book and continued teaching without mentioning the incident. Fortunately, Margot’s father could flee in time, leaving his family. I really had liked him. He made great birthday parties.

Many Germans shared the fear for their Jewish neighbors. While millions of Germans and other Europeans definitely had been racist for centuries past, I think it is the truth that the full extent of the slaughter of Jews in extermination camps was not known to the general German population—largely because it was primarily carried out in Poland. Their idolized Fuehrer, most would have assumed, would not do such crimes. Coping with the extreme conditions of the war, people were sequestered in their neighborhoods and hard pressed to survive. Returning soldiers may have been silent about the horrors committed, and news was scarce.

their parents as a patriotic duty. Some did.

World War II brought many new fears into all our lives, fear for our male relatives and friends who died in increasing numbers in action, fear for our families and friends during the years of bombing attacks of city and countryside.

My older sister Irmi’s husband, a university music student, was immediately drafted, at the war’s beginning, first to play tuba in a military band, but soon as simple cannon fodder in the infantry. He was wounded twice in Russia, but managed the long track back in retreat, mostly on foot. He related that the German soldiers were given stimulants like amphetamines and Pervitin to induce battle euphoria as well as to counter battle fatigue. My sister had given birth to a little girl during a bombing attack in the basement of a Munich hospital. Her husband appeared in the last war days at her door, after she had not known for months whether he was alive.

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At the time the Nazi Government took over in 1933, the majority of the German population was poverty stricken, with no money for newspapers or the new technology of radios. The Nazi Government ordered the production of cheap radios, “Folk Receivers,” with the goal of every household having one—the better to disseminate propaganda, probably.³ To listen to foreign news reports, like the BBC, was forbidden, with the threat of severe punishment. There was no technology available to monitor what people listened to, but children were asked to tell on

My mother and I were on a train during daytime in 1942, when it stopped on the tracks in the countryside. All passengers were told to jump down the embankment and run to hide in nearby bushes, because Allied fighter planes were reported as approaching, strafing trains. Nothing happened to us, except fear. But on another train a cousin of mine, who had already lost a leg as a soldier, lost his arm in a strafed civilian train. In this case there was no escape anywhere. With great courage, my cousin later graduated from university, got

married, and had children, with one arm and one leg missing.

Once, as we were arriving in Munich on that train, the city was burning from a daytime attack. Public transportation had shut down, so we walked an hour to our home in fear, not knowing if our family or our house was okay. (It was.) After daytime attacks, we school children were sent home in fear for our families. One could hear bombs sizzling down before the explosions. One landed in front of our house, made a crater, but only blew out our front windows, which we then covered with cardboard, making the house dark and cold.

But we were the fortunate ones. Our neighbor, who had “connections,” had a small underground bomb shelter of concrete built in his back yard. My family was invited to join them day and night when the sirens howled. Another neighbor asked for the same favor, but she was not invited, there just was not enough room. She cried bitterly, and I felt her fear and desperation. Why us and not her? But she and her house survived.

Our kitchen still had an extra old wood heated cooking stove. To find firewood, my mother and I sneaked around at four in the morning to salvage doorframes and rafters from bombed out houses. We dragged them home and then spent hours sawing them up. Whenever a new house was bombed, I ogled it with a certain delight, considering possible rafters to salvage. It was a dangerous job, climbing around on those ruins; I was not ashamed and

did not consider it stealing. This shows how values changed in time of distress. Once the owners of a bombed ruin caught us in the act and very politely asked us not to steal what was still their property. Months later, we invited them to a musical Christmas celebration in our house. They came with a neat bundle of window frame firewood as gift.

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The Bavarian State Library near our school held centuries' worth of old manuscripts and many volumes of old books. When it burned, we school girls had to form a kind of bucket line, moving fire and water-damaged volumes out of the building and to a truck. Junior high school age girls were also engaged without pay to sort mail for the military. We had to do paid harvest work on farms; especially arduous was the harvesting of hops, the indispensable ingredient of a Bavarian's beer. With all the food shortages, thin beer was always available. Eventually school children were evacuated to confiscated hotels in the mountains, but I wanted to stay home, so my mother hired a private teacher. My older sisters were already at universities, but had to work during semester breaks in factories and on farms. Before starting university,

they had to spend half a year in a labor camp doing farm work or childcare, wearing uniforms. This was also a political ploy, to integrate the upper classes with the farm and factory workers.

One more story about fear. We had a new, elderly housemaid. One day an SS official appeared at our door, claiming that our maid had denounced us as anti-Nazis at their office. Since my mother bargained for food on the black market, we were always “guilty.” But then the man laughed and said he had just come to pick the maid up. She had told the SS office that we kept her from marrying her bridegroom—Hitler. He said there were thousands of deluded brides of Hitler. I hope he took her to a mental hospital and not an extermination place. My sisters and I hugged our mother and we cried as the fear dropped away from us.

The greatest fear was the death toll hitting almost each family. More and more families had to dye their clothes black, to wear the customary mourning attire. One experience still haunts me. We junior high school girls had a beloved young music teacher, fresh from university. She was going to be married. One day she entered the music room in black and disheveled. She opened the piano, played the second movement funeral march of Beethoven's Sonata # 12, Opus 26, closed the piano, and left. Her fiancé had been killed in action. We were sobbing. We never saw her again. I still cannot play or hear this music without tears welling up. We heard she later became a math teacher

and never played music again.

Estimates about number of lives lost in the war vary, but according to the most apparently trustworthy statistics I could find, three million German men died in action, plus 800,000 as prisoners of war. Five million were wounded. Civilian air raid victims amounted to 500,000. Ethnic German refugees evicted from eastern countries, over two million dead. 300,000 German citizens killed by Nazi persecution, 200,000 physically and mentally disabled German persons killed by what the Nazis called "euthanasia". Uncounted are those citizens who died of hunger and disease. An estimated two million German women were raped by soldiers during the Russian occupation. Many committed suicide.

Looking back at my growing up in Nazi and Wartime Germany, I can say that my experiences were deeply touching and emotionally maturing. I think there was hardly a German family whose lives had not been permanently affected by living through this, in ways that defy complete reckoning. My father, Dr. Walther Schmidt, who was the first candidate to get a Ph.D. in the new field of metallurgy in 1919, became an expert in the field of light metals like aluminum and developed an aluminum-magnesium alloy which could be rolled into thin sheets. This became the fuselage material for airplanes, commercial and military. I do not know how many other scientists in the world were involved in these new technologies, yet a haunting question remains: how much did this scientific development contribute to the

death toll of the twentieth century? At the same time, my father lost all his properties in Germany because of the war. My mother never recovered the material losses caused by the war.

With so much loss, does it seem impossible that anything was gained? Yet I learned so much. I lived in a sisterhood of courageous women. Class distinctions, social and financial status had lost its divisive influences. We were all in this together in a true form of socialism, sharing sorrows and helping each other whenever possible, but also sharing the little joys life still had in store. I learned through circumstance that a lot of material possessions or status were not important for fulfillment. Books were my education and music filled my soul. I learned how precious life itself is. The war times gave me a depth of understanding and emotions far beyond my age. I thank all the good people who shared these years with me.

The twentieth century was the most violent in human history. 203 million people worldwide died of warfare and political violence. We certainly are the killer apes on this planet. There are war memorials to military deaths in many countries, but also to the enormous number of civilians killed. In Berlin is a stark monument, "To the Victims of Violence and Dictatorship". The monument is in an expansive old military sentry building, now called the New Watch. On a large, bare floor stands a Pieta-like statue by the German sculptor Käthe Kollwitz. It shows a grieving woman holding the body of her

killed son. The ceiling directly above it has a round opening to the elements, sunshine, rain, and snow, symbolically connecting many cities and countries all over our planet. In many German cities, prominent ruins were left standing as gruesome reminders. The cathedrals in Dresden and Coventry alike were rebuilt with international funds. In the year 2000, I saw workers in Dresden still digging carefully through church rubble, piecing together fragments of artful walls and statues like a giant puzzle. In Munich is a man-made mountain of the destroyed city's rubble, now covered in greenery as a monument to new life.

Germany has been in peace now for over 70 years. In Munich a gilded statue of the Angel of Peace hovers on a tall column over the Isar River. It was erected in 1895 and has survived all wars as a shining messenger of possible peace.

NOTES

¹ The "Weimar Republic" is a common term for the German state between 1919 and 1933, the years between the fall of the monarchy and the rise of the Nazis. Its first constitutional assembly was held in the city of Weimar—hence its name.

² When my husband and I emigrated to the United States in 1953, on the first day driving down from New York to Richmond, VA, we ate at a roadside diner which had a sign on the door: "No Jews allowed." Black segregation also was strictly enforced in Virginia.

³ Hard-working farm and factory workers did not listen to Hitler's speeches much, preferring the music programs.

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