

Erika Hublitz

Wartime Experience: Remained in Germany

We remember the good in our past; as the poet says: we tend to forget unpleasantness. My early years, until about ten, were mostly happy and untroubled. My hometown, Nürnberg, an industrial city in northern Bavaria, had then not quite half a million inhabitants. I remember our address and telephone number. Not until I entered first grade was I taught to remember my birthdate: 14 June 1926.

My father Hugo Hublitz (Vati) grew up in Pirmasens in the Palatinate which was called Bavaria 'left' of the Rhein. My mother (Mutti) Margarete grew up in Amberg in an exceptionally poor region of Bavaria proper 'right' of the Rhein. My parents' origins could not have been farther apart socially. He the son of a manufacturer who had invented an attachment that permitted sewing leather on the recently invented sewing machine; she one of eight children whose father was petty farmer, miner, and itinerant butcher. My father, a freethinker, influenced and educated my mother. They decided to bring us up without religion. When I went to school in 1933, I was indeed untouched by any faith. My mother's Catholic family lived 100 kilometers east, in Amberg.

My father and mother owned a small factory in which he manufactured tabletop lathes.; The factory occupied the entire ground floor of Sportparkstrasse 13, the larger of two buildings. 11A, smaller and set back from the street, was of red brick, consisting of four very small one bedroom apartments. We lived upstairs of nr. 13. Both buildings sat in perhaps an acre of land, surrounded by a 5' high grapestake fence for the most part, interrupted for a while by a short sandstone wall. A chain-link fence separated 13 from 11 A

Next to our house, whose thick sandstone walls reached to the top of the second floor, loomed another large structure, the Scheune (barn). Its first-floor walls were of the same thick sandstone but interrupted by large openings where wagon entrances and window should have been. The house and the barn had belonged to the Metting Schloss, a former baronial seat, dating back to the 12th century. The original Schloss and its 19th century addition sat behind a thicker sandstone wall on the other side of 11A. Two thirds of the street block were taken up by the Schloss: our property accounted for the other third.

The yard surrounding the buildings was our garden and my playground. A swing hung from the rafters of the large barn, right in the middle of a gaping wagon entrance. On it I spent many hours swinging and singing. A ladder to the rafters and another ladder resting between them were my secret playground. It amazes me to this day how my parents were so unconcerned about my safety to let me play some eight feet above ground in those rafters from about six on, probably because the floor of the barn was sand. I turned six in 1932. Into my childhood, the adult world intruded when the redshirts and the brownshirts had a scuffle about half a block from our garden gate. Two young men came inside and asked my father for help to use our telephone. One of the redshirts' comrades had been knifed. The redshirts were the commies

and the brownshirts the Nazis. My father told my mother, sister and me to go to the living room from where we could neither hear nor see anything. My parents never mentioned the incident again. My sister Martha left that year for Hamburg to learn cooking at a hotel cooking-school. Our house and our neighborhood were quiet.

One winter night, we heard activity about two blocks from our house. Zerzabelshof, a village, had been incorporated into the city of Nürnberg in the 1920s. Nowadays it would be considered a suburb. Men marched with torches and sang. We could see them if we stepped outside our gate. Several neighborhood children and I watched from there just after the early winter sundown until, my mother firmly marched me into the house. Mutti sent me to bed; but with all the noise and singing and, marching outside I did not fall asleep. My parents never went to sleep that night. I heard my father argue on the phone. Then my mother and father talked so excitedly that I left my bed and came to the living room. They told me to go back to bed. I heard noises as if from fireworks and got up again. This time my parents didn't notice I was up. I had never seen my father so agitated. He saw me and chased me back to bed. It was the night of January 30, 1933, when the Nazis took over the government of Germany.

Our family existed in comparative calm. One day that spring, my mother and I went shopping for nothing in particular, to 'the Schocken Department store, a kind of upscale Woolworth, less than a mile from our house. When we arrived there, some brownshirts stood at the entrance but did not deter our entering. As we left, the brownshirts stuck little red signs to our coats that said "Sie kauft beim Juden" (she buys from Jews). I don't remember what or whether my mother had bought anything. Mutti grasped my hand and we walked home. We entered my father's study (usually we did not disturb him during the day)--her first words were "Sogar dem Kind, schau Dir das an" (Even on the child, look at it). Then she sent me to the living room, and my parents talked.

That spring I started school. I don't recall any problems in school. I was a daydreaming child and many times chastised for inattention, but so were other children in class. During the next two years, he succeeded in teaching me the three Rs. The year 1933 overwhelmed my family. In May, my sister Martha came back from Hamburg obviously pregnant. Shortly my niece Gabi was born.

Three of the four grown children from my father's first marriage had left for South America during the previous years: Fritz to Brazil, Lena and her husband and the youngest son, Herbert, to Peru and Ecuador. Georg, the painter, who had won the Albrecht Dürer Prize in 1928, had stayed behind. He, off and on, lived with us at Sportparkstrasse. My father had converted two rooms in our ten-room apartment above the factory as Georg's bedroom and atelier. Georg and I were friends. I was allowed to sneak into his atelier any time. That summer, shortly before recess, I came home from school one day. My mother met me at the garden gate dressed to go out and said Georg had committed suicide. A few men stood around my father at the factory door. The next morning, my mother and I left for Amberg to visit her relatives. I missed Georg. I spent many hours alone in his atelier. It was my first reckoning with death. I felt the dull pain of

no longer looking into his handsome face or being teased by my grownup half-brother, who tried at times to be like a child.

Toward the end of the year, my father's friend Oskar Kasper, a Berliner, and an accomplished painter, came to visit and stayed with us a few months. He occupied Georg's bedroom and painted in Georg's atelier. Kasper, as we called him, spent many hours talking with my father. The word Dachau was often mentioned, a place where you were sent if you did not keep your mouth shut.

The next political incident was during an election. I think it was spring 1935, Two S.A. men came to the house late one afternoon. They wanted my father to go somewhere to vote. He refused and lectured them about the futility of voting. Impatient, the two men grabbed my father by each elbow and assisted him downstairs. My father returned alone about an hour later. He looked downcast. I was sent to bed. A day or two later, the local paper reported the election results. It said only one person voted against Hitler and We know who it is. My mother and father had an argument that day.

I had spent the first two years of grade school at Urbanstrasse school. For third grade, I had to walk to a fairly new and modern school building. Soon after I started going there, I was sent home with a note that I needed improvement in reading. My parents did not concern themselves much with my progress in school.

I don't remember ever being admonished for speaking up. With this note from the teacher, my father decided to monitor my reading. When he took his nap I was to sit beside him and read from a book of my choice or from the school reader. I did this just once. I read a few minutes and my father sent me away. He told my mother, she reads well; Mutti assured him she knew.

That summer, the Sportparkstrasse Club, as we called it, played an important game for the German title. Many people were expected to attend. A block warden walked from house to house and requested that flags should fly in Sportparkstrasse. My father told the man, yes, yes. When the day came almost every house had the swastika flag out. Our house showed no flag. An S.A. man came to us and demanded that my father put out the flag. My father said he had no flag. The man left. Then two policemen came and told my father that he must put out a flag. My parents found a line of pennants alternating with the flags of Nürnberg, Bavaria, and the black, white and red stripes of the Weimar Republic.

On warm days, my father took his nap on the balcony couch. Eventually, we all gathered there and watched the crowds stream, from the sport park. My father suffered from tuberculosis that caused him to cough and sometimes he had to spit. Toward the side of the balcony, a mild wilderness of rambler roses had taken over part of the yard, and the house and balcony side walls. My father, occasionally sneaked a spit into the roses. Just as the Gauleiter, standing in his car and giving the Nazi greeting, slowly drove by below us, my father coughed and spit over the railing.

As we sat down for the evening meal, the bell rang, my sister opened, two policemen entered and demanded to see my father. Had my mother been at the door, her quick thinking would have avoided what happened next. But my sister called for my father, and as soon as he stepped forward, the policemen arrested him. My mother and sister debated whether I should go to school the next day. I think I did not. Instead, she sent me to Herr Flax, one of my father's friends and translator for our international correspondence, to tell him what had happened. He called my mother and then went to our attorney. Both men first told my mother they could not help my father. I went to school the next day told not to talk about what had happened. No one asked.

Days of confusion ensued. My mother made many trips to court and after some days, my father came home in a taxi. Even to my nine-year-old child's perception, Vati look very weak. He had always been accessible to me. I was allowed to enter his study but not interrupt if he had a visitor. For some weeks then he did not allow me to be much with him. He coughed more than ever.

Soon he left for a sanatorium because of the tuberculosis. When he returned he looked well and had a wee belly. I often heard my parents discuss and argue through closed doors. I went to school routinely. Herr Flax came often to the house--he was a chain-smoker and made my father cough. He wrote many letters to foreign countries where people owed us money.

The problem was that whenever my father shipped a set of lathes to Poland, Hungary, Romania or South America, he was no longer allowed to accept payment in those countries' currencies. There was a lot of talk about the need to get paid in sterling or to accept payment in goods from the country and sell these to get our money or sterling. My father said he was an engineer, not a tradesman. Some days we were so short of cash that we could not buy groceries.

Once I needed to bring one mark to school the next day, though I have forgotten for what. Neither Vati nor Mutti could scrape together a mark from the change in their pockets. Our kitchen floor was of old wide wood planks. Between these planks occasionally some coins had disappeared. That day, we broke open the floor to search for coins and harvested five marks. I could go to school instead of staying home.

To me these experiences were not embarrassing. I was still a happy child, played with neighbor children, went to school, practiced piano without too much supervision from my mother who could not play an instrument. I was aware of occasional trouble brewing. It was never hidden from me nor was I burdened with it. We no longer went on weekend outings to the small historic towns around Nürnberg. Instead Vati took me to galleries, bookstores, and museums.

In 1936 I was ten. Our life was quiet, even pleasant. My little niece Gabi was three. I walked with her all over the neighborhood. My sister was off and on at home, frequently an irritation to my parents. I had fun at school and many friends whom I invited to my tenth birthday party.

Mutti, a fine baker, had baked two large yeast cherry cakes she served us with lemonade and ice cream. it was a sunny day.

At school my class consisted of four Jewish children, myself (when I started school my parents had entered 'no religion'), and about evenly Catholics and Protestants. The priest came to instruct the Catholics, the Protestants went to another classroom for their minister's instruction. The Jewish children and I had time off. We often blew the hour by running in the football stadium or just walking along Hauptstrasse. At home I was allowed more freedom. I walked with Gabi as far as a shallow manmade lake from a dozen small ponds, about a kilometer away. Herrn Flax lived near there and it was easy to go there during the Reichsparteitage, the Nazi holiday. I took Gabi with me to see the parade. People gathered on the sidewalk when Nazi big shots were driven by and thousands of Nazi troopers marched. Between the Nazis and the people on the sidewalk, the S.S. troopers formed a chain so no one could go into the Street. We saw Hitler drive by. I told Mutti I had seen "him". That put a stop to these trips. We never mentioned him by name.

We visited other children a block or two away. I sometimes stopped in on the Kahns, an elderly couple, in an apartment house behind us. One day Mrs. Kahn said: "You should not visit us anymore". On one side of us lived the Prohaskas. He conducted of the Nürnberg opera. The Prohaskas suddenly moved away. On the opposite side, in the Schloss, lived the Wieters; he was tenor at the opera. They did not move away.

Vati decided I should attend the Lyceum in the next school year. He went with for enrollment. The director told him the school could not accept me. He tried to persuade her. I stood right next to them. When their conversation ended, she and my father looked sad.

My father's oldest son, Fritz visited us from Brazil that year. He stayed one day; they talked many hours. Fritz said we should try to leave for Mexico. Though my father had tuberculosis, Mexico might let us in. Mutti wanted to go. I remember her standing in front of the mirror, trying on a wide brimmed tropical hat, her black hair and gray green cat eyes sparkling. She said: "Don't I look like a señorina? "Senora", my father corrected her, "Without the factory no one will take us."

My parents seldom talked about what was going on when I was around. One day, the manager of the Club asked if my father was home. When I said he was, he promptly came with me to see him. My father soon told me in the presence of the. manager that I longer could go to the Club for sports or swimming. I did not know what to say and backed out of the study. At dinner he told what happened. Mutti said, " so, we must just go to Mexico. if it were only possible Vati said.

At school, we were told to join the Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth) when we turned ten. In the upper grades, many children had joined, and I looked forward to it Sunday afternoons, we would meet in our uniforms and sing songs. I told my parents about this. When I learned I would not go to the Lyceum and could no longer belong to the Club, I took the statements

calmly because I did not understand the serious implications of these refusals. When I wanted to join the Hitlerjugend, my father said joining was out of the question; his was an absolute Nein; we did not join them and we did not belong with them. A Hublitz would never join them and you are a Hublitz. On Sundays, when other girls went to these meetings I had to stay home. From then on, as a reward, Vati gave me 35 Pfennige and said I could buy a large block of milk chocolate with hazelnuts. My parents carefully monitored my intake of sweets. So it came that what I had been forbidden to eat much of was now encouraged. I soon forgot the uniform and the other children, and looked forward to the regular Sunday chocolate indulgence.

At school, things changed. Two of my girlfriends told me they were no longer allowed to come to my house. That mattered because I had been encouraged to bring my friends home instead of going to their houses. Now I tried to come to them. A few girls came out in the street to talk and play with me; one or two soon were called back in by their mothers. The boys in my class spent more time outdoors, and they became my friends. I turned into a veritable tomboy, learned to jump over fences, climb trees, or play tricks by pushing the doorbell buttons at a few apartment houses and run away. Soon after, one of the boys told me he could no longer play with me because his father had become an Ortsgruppenleiter, (a Nazi title).

Rumors about people having been picked up and sent to Dachau circulated among Mutti's friends. My parents thought of that possibility: If it came home from school to find the house empty, I was to leave on the train to Mutti's hometown, Amberg, I was to sneak on the train. I knew how having once run through the barrier ahead of Mutt without being noticed.

1937 was a fateful year. One day, on my way home from school, I saw on the short stretch of wall along our fence a large 6 painted on. My mother was next to see it and told my father. He thought we should not react. A few days later, the 6 was enhanced into a nose and Der Hublitz ist ein Jud was written below it. My mother urged to move. One day, after school, a group of children were nasty. I ran away and they after me. A few pelted me with gravel My classmate, sad-eyed Alfred Herzog, who. was not with the kids, followed me home, then hung back after I had safely turned into Sportparkstrasse. He followed me a few more times after that incident.

Toward the end of summer, the house was no longer ours; we had to move. My mother and sister (my father was too ill to arrange things) managed the move to an apartment. The movers were to come early in the morning. Before midnight, two large trucks drove in through a back gate on the side street. My mother talked with four men. I watched from the banister and reported to Vati: He said it was alright and to go bed. But I was 11, no longer so willing to obey, and watched how the men expertly removed the large lathes from their footings in the concrete floor, including the even larger polishing machines. I was not allowed downstairs. From the sound, I knew which machines were dismantled. These doings took less than two hours. I started fifth grade in another school. I don't remember the teacher's or my schoolmates' names, not even their faces. I have few visual memories of the time.

Vati became weaker every day. He allowed me to visit him only five minutes. Mutti seemed to be in perpetual confusion and I wished my sister would not be with us. On 13 October 1937, my father died in hospital. His death changed my world.

After that, the SA troopers marched often, held rallies in the squares, and yelled "Juden 'raus". (Jews get out) One evening, about a month after my father had died, they held a rally right in front of our second floor living room window. Before we knew it, they came upstairs and rang our bell. My mother opened and immediately said "my husband is dead. "Two young troopers pushed past her to the living room, took pictures from the walls and dropped them and pulled books from the case and dropped them. We stood against the hallway wall, not moving. An older SA man entered. The older man ordered the hooligans to leave with him. Since the flag and spitting incident in 1935, this was the most serious encounter we had with the Nazis. The SA men had satisfied their quota of threatening Jews. They never made it to the fourth floor where another Jewish family lived. The wife came downstairs around midnight and thanked us.

In Spring 1938, my mother and I moved to Hirschbach, a village reached on foot from the nearest railroad station. A postbus came and left only once a day. I turned into a country bumpkin, learned pitching hay or climbing into the thresher, made friends with horses, cows and geese, and helped the neighbor children herd cows into small remote valleys during summer vacation. In school, grades five to eight were taught in one room. I think the teacher also served as Nazi though perhaps not a convinced one. I don't recall any indoctrination in class.

I started high school one week after World War II broke out. The school required it. I got the uniform and attended the meetings. Amberg, however, was a poor, somewhat backward, Catholic town. Although the school required and urged one to attend meetings, my schoolmates and I did not go there every Sunday afternoon.

To make a living selling insurance, my mother decided to return to Nürnberg soon after the war started. After one year, I became a commuting student. Mutti and I lived in a two-room studio apartment among a few treasured belongings salvaged from Sportparkstrasse. During the night of 16 to 17 February 1943, the house and many other buildings in the city were fire-bombed. In March 1944, in Erlangen, my left eye was operated on and removed. In February 1945, I sought shelter with my relatives in Amberg and volunteered with the Red Cross.

On 28 April 1945, the American Army occupied Amberg. There was no resistance. Almost everyone was tired and hungry, and relieved the war had ended. I served as Red Cross volunteer nurse during the night the Army took the town.

The next morning, Emmy and I (We were two English speaking nurses) were brought to the barracks to care for hundreds of concentration camp inmates that had been liberated. Most were emaciated, weak and depressed; many seriously ill. I have never worked so hard again as I did between April and August 1945. The younger inmates, if they were not sick, recovered quickly, once they had food and care. Many had been guinea pigs, especially the women. Young

men showed wounds as if inflicted by harpoons. By modern standards, the care we gave was not professional. But we did everything: dispensed medication, changed the primitive barrack beds, washed, cooked, scrubbed and did anything that was necessary. We spent time with our patients, listened to their experiences, and brought them whatever food they wished from the Army supplies.

U.S. Army doctors and UNRRA doctors inspected once a day. I weighed about 90 pounds and several physicians thought I, too, had been a camp inmate. I made friends with several patients: and one wanted me to marry him and leave for Israel. I was not ready for marriage and adventure. My mother had moved to my sister's in Diessen am Ammersee. In September 1945, I joined them.

Although it was almost impossible to do, Mutti still tried to earn money selling insurance. In 1947, through her insurance connections, she became aware of the impending currency conversion. She thought I was most likely of the family to find work and draw a salary when the conversion came.

From the short time I worked for U.S. Army Special Services, I recall two events. Louis Armstrong and his band played at the service club. My supervisor, Harriett, a Texan, entertained Louis Armstrong but delegated me to serve a tray of cokes to him and his band. He thanked me graciously, both of us aware of the unmentioned situation. Several months later, the Texan Harriett left for the U.S. Her successor was Harriet Talmage from Chicago. One day, a young black soldier asked if I would address an envelope for him on the typewriter. I said 'sure' and proceeded to do so but was interrupted by a white soldier also desiring I type something for him. I said I would, as soon as I had finished typing the envelope. The white soldier insisted that I serve him ahead of the black soldier. He said he had preference of my service. I shook my head. The white soldier, in a strong southern accent, showered me with abuse. I got up and showed him the door. As he left, he said he would report me to the commanding officer. I said, "Do that."

During the encounter, Harriet Talmage sat at her desk, observing, not moving, not speaking a word. I finished with the black soldier whom I engaged in conversation and learned the envelope would contain his resume as he hoped to stay in Europe and find employment with an Armed Services radio station after his discharge. When he was gone, Harriet asked me to see the white soldier was waiting in the hall. He was not joking, "He is on his way to the commanding Officer." In that moment, Harriet and I became friends. I told her about my family. Soon I left the job. We stayed in touch. Harriet married Harry, a Belgian, who had spent five years in Mauthausen. She visited me in Diessen am Ammersee to meet my family. When she left, she said, if you want to come to the United States, I will sponsor you." Mutti said to me then, if you go to Harriet, you will be safe in America. In 1951, I wrote Harriet I wanted to come. By return mail, she arranged for sponsorship. In December, I received the immigration visa. On 7 April 1952, I arrived in New York harbor on the Swedish ship Gripsholm.

I stayed and worked two years in Chicago. During my first vacation, I was enthralled by the beauty of Colorado and had but one desire: to go West. After two years working in Arizona. I crossed into California at Needles on 10 January 1956 and the next day I arrived in San Francisco. Vera Kahn, Harriet's sister and her family, lived in El Cerrito, and Rubin and Emily Lewis, whom I had met in Munich, lived in Berkeley. From the day I arrived, I knew I would take the Bay Area my permanent home.

Until 1961, I worked as secretary in industry. Eventually, I minded the Lewis's and Kahn's urgings to seek work at the University of California in Berkeley to better myself. After several years of moving through some departments on campus, I managed to land a part-time position that afforded me time to study and enhance my language skill. In 1970, through the kind encouragement of Max Knight, the University of California Press put me on its roster of freelance editors with the distinction that I was freelance on payroll as J retained the other parttime position. Between 1970 and 1978, I edited 24 books for as many scholars and scientists. The experience at U.C. Press enabled me to become medical editor in the Department of Epidemiology and International Health at the University of California in San Francisco in 1976, a position I held as principal editor until retirement in 1991.