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BRYN MAWR COLLEGE

Emeritus Gatherings

Modern Wars and the Civilian Experience as shown in my experience in World War II

Greta Zybon
September 11, 2003

Why would I want to talk about my experiences as a German civilian in WW II, a horrendous war that never should have happened? Why should I subject you to listening? My concern is less about the German experience, than to tell what it means to be a civilian in a modern war. Wars are going on now. We know that by September 1, 2003, more than 247 American service members were killed since the start of the Iraq war. Over 6,076 civilians were reported dead in Iraq (AFSC). I do hope that the world would learn from those catastrophes and develop preventive and alternate methods to settle problems. War technologies receive more attention than knowledge and the search of alternate methods to settle problems.

I am painfully aware that Nazi-Germany started the war. Nazi Germany started the bombing in Warsaw, Rotterdam, Coventry and London, and continued to cause extreme suffering and loss to Europe and the World. I still cannot comprehend the persecution of the Jews and the Holocaust. My heart goes out for the soldiers who fought the gruesome wars. I do wish that mankind learns to avoid the horror which has been done to countless innocent victims.

I checked the literature to become more secure and knowledgeable about events and timing in relation to my experiences. Visiting the Goethe Institute in New York, I found a lot of material on WWII and on the Holocaust. There was very little information on civilian victims of the war. I believe that the here are reasons for that. Dealing with civilian tragedies started about half a century later. Best known is Guenther Grass, author of The Tin Drum, who was born in Danzig, now Gdansk. He focused attention on "ordinary Germans" who also became victims of WWII. In The Crab Walk he wrote about "the terrible sufferings of Germans who fled or were driven from their homeland during the last winter of WWII." More specifically, he focused on the sinking of the "Wilhelm Gustloff," torpedoed by a Russian submarine near the end of the war in January 1945. This tourist boat was built by the Nazis and was designed to hold 1,400 people. When it sunk, over 10,000 refugees and wounded soldiers were aboard. You may have read the book discussions in the New York Times, its Sunday book review section, the New York Review of Books, or the Foreign Policy Journal.

In regard to the Eastern frontier of WWII, I recommend Russia at War by Alexander Werth, a Western reporter who lived in Russia throughout the war. Joerg Friedrich wrote about the mass deaths by fire and suffocation and about total destruction in Der Brand (the Fire). He also wrote Das Gesetz des Krieges(The Law of War), a one thousand year history of European wars. I believe that the videotape about the Hitler years in Berlin could serve to teach many techniques of brain washing and de-powering a vulnerable population.

Some related issues are relevant. Much material exists on the German resistance, a sad story. They were killed.

- Distant Suffering by Luc Boltansk, describes the role of the spectator.
- In Regarding the Pain of Others Susan Sontag asks "are viewers inured or incited to violence by the daily depiction of cruelty and horror?"
- Quite relevant to all is Hard Choices: The Moral Dilemma of Human Intervention, by Jonathan Moore, which covers current concerns.
- Leighton Whitaker wrote Understanding and Preventing Violence: the Psychology of Human Destructiveness. We have Encyclopedias of Violence and of Peace. Violence is part of our culture, but so is goodness

My Experience

While thinking about my war experiences, it occurred to me that I was affected already by the German situation after WWI. In the beginning of the 1920s my parents had moved from the Silesian mountains to Berlin so that my father could pursue his civil service career. My brother was three months and I was 15 months old. My parents told me that the food situation was critical at that time, especially for children. After having been able to walk for 7 months, my legs could not carry any more. I stopped walking for a while. The value of one dollar had risen to billions of marks. At that time it happened that Hertha Kraus, whom some of you may remember, was in Berlin working with the Quakers to feed starving children. She came to the USA as a Nazi refugee, helped others to escape, and then taught at BMC. A lone fighter, she focused on the importance of the community and of social legislation to social functioning.

Sebastian Haffner, a Nazi refugee who went to England, wrote in his memoirs: "The year 1923 left those Germans the characteristics which cannot be understood by mankind and which are inconceivable and dismal (*unheimlich*), the limitless, cynical, fantastic, the nihilistic pleasure of the impossible. Taken away was the self-serving dynamic that provides balance, conscience and morale." He said: "At that time the soul was taken away from a whole generation."

As a child I was aware that French and German officers got together, concluding to never have a war again, and that the League of Nations has been founded. They lost.

When the war was announced in 1939 I got sick in my stomach. What was my situation? I was a teenager, interested in people, who they were behind their facade. I was training to be a nurse and dreamed about going into the world, thinking about Albert Schweitzer in Africa.

The German military advances were scary to me. The war, hot and cold, would last 10 years of my life. In 1940 the bombing started, always a nerve-testing experience. I never got under cover. The Chief, by the way, was a highly respected Jewish surgeon. Work was exhausting. Some times I did not hear the alarm alert and woke up only when the windowpanes shattered in. In 1942 the bombing intensified. My four-year old sister reacted with terrible anxiety attacks, so that my parents had to bring her to live with relatives in Silesia. Many children were send away from their families in England and Germany. I agree with Anna Freud that this was wrong to do. But what was right?

It was not until after the war was over that I read any newspaper, owned a radio or a telephone. School, combined with work, was consuming. The war served to drive the totalitarian control of the Nazis to the extreme. I thought it would be impossible to fight the system. On the personal level, I did not even know endangered people.

In 1942 I went to the northern city of Kiel to study medical social work in one of the schools least affected by Nazi ideology, e.g., professors made anti-Nazi jokes. Schooling was again intensified because of the war. I declined to join the Nazi Party. After my graduation in 1943 I took a position in what is now Gotenhafen/Gdynia, near Danzig/Gdansk. I was attracted by the landscape, the Baltic Sea, the huge wandering sand dunes on the Hela peninsula, and the medieval Hanse city of Gdansk. As a social worker I was responsible for the health conditions in a district. One time, when I visited a family outside in the country, always by foot, I saw a group of sad looking laborers in the field. So I went to get food and gave it to them. Soldiers told me that I could not do that. The next day I took food again, but they were gone. I could not find them anymore, anywhere.

All through school and then in my work, I seemed to be the youngest in the group, and was quite aware that I had much to learn. But when we, the group of social workers, were told that a lot of stealing was going on in the organization and we should play a part in stopping that, I reacted strongly. I said that we were not the police and should not do that. We didn't. Another incident, the Polish maid of my landlords, Bronja, wanted me to meet her parents who had a farm. When we got there, a big group of men was having a meeting. It happened to be the Polish Resistance.

I heard little from my brother who was sent from one frontier to the other, and all too often wounded severely. It was hard to see a dear friend whom I had known as a student, a most unlikely soldier, die at the hospital from war wounds. From time to time cousins and friends stopped to visit me on their way to the Eastern frontier. I knew I would not see them again.

Little more than a year later, in the fall of 1944, the political situation grew increasingly tense. There were propaganda reports of victorious German armies while they were driven back. I did not know that people from the

propaganda reports of victorious German armies while they were driven back. I did not know that people from the Baltic countries and East Prussia had started their way East to escape the much feared gruesome vengeance of the Russians, fueled by the Russian Generals and publicized by the Nazis. The Nazis also forbade the East Prussians to go West, forbidding to take a westward train for more than six miles. My landlords dug their valued belongings into the garden. We wished that the Americans would take all of Germany, fearing the Russian soldiers. These soldiers had suffered so much, all too long, in that cruel war.

Wanting to visit my family in Berlin at Christmas 1944, I found the train so full that I could get in only through a window of the toilet. At home there was a grateful awareness of being together, We did not talk about the future. Being emotional was a luxury one could ill afford. When I left to return to Gdynia my father gave me a little pistol to defend myself. I dropped it into a gully, so nobody could find it. The train East was almost empty. When I returned to the office early January 1945, the chief social worker called us together to tell that we are free to take care of ourselves. Working quite independently, each in our district, I did not know my coworkers well. I did not ask what they would do. The next morning I went to the office, finding that all had gone. What should I do?

East had arrived to escape by boat. It was one of the coldest winters in memory - the temperature dipping to less than minus 10 degrees F, with lots of snow. Most of the refugees, women, children, old people, had horrible war experiences. They had been on the roads for months, leaving on the way those who died and the belongings they could not carry any more. Children had frozen to death in the arms of their mothers or got lost in encounters with the Russian army. May had crossed the frozen Baltic Sea. They got stuck in deep snow and drowned in the breaking ice when the load got to heavy. At the end of January, five million refugees were on their way going westwards. One hundred and twenty thousand people died or were killed on the way. In February 1945 half a million refugees were in Gdansk, about six miles from Gdynia. I could not determine how many refugees were in our harbor.

The Russian Army had passed us by, closing the city in, hurrying to reach Berlin. Now the only way out was by boat. I have mentioned that on January 30, 1945 the ship Wilhelm Gustloff, after having left our harbor only the evening before with over 10,000 refugees and wounded, was sunk by a Russian submarine. On that ship was a family I had taken care of during the past year, a mother with 10 children. Over two million refugees and wounded were transferred West. Three more boats were sunk.

In the huge cold harbor halls the thousands of refugees were crowded on the cement floor. It was my task to organize for women and children to get on the next boat. No identity questions were asked. The only coworkers I remember were the men carrying out the people who had died, burying them in the sea. I was impressed by the many layers of skirts the women wore. There was hardly any talk at all. I remember some good things. One day I had a blasting head-ache. One of the women started to massage my forehead. What comfort, . . . I never forgot it.

The Russians surrounded us, together with the German army. From outside the harbor two big German war ships were holding the Russian army back, shooting day and night. Somehow that felt safe. That stopped all too soon. The ships had disappeared. The end was coming close. The other shooting continued. A boat with food was sunk, so we got food for the refugees from the German Army which was enclosed with us. My landlords and I packed a little bag for our flight.

The Nazi madness did not stop. All men were forced to fight until death, all men, regardless of age and condition. Backing the German soldiers were SS, who caught those soldiers who tried to get away, and hanged them. One could see them hanging on the trees, so many.

Frequently Russian airplanes came to shoot people, like chickens. Once as I was crossing a big area at the harbor, a low-flying little airplane came toward me. I could see the pilot and his gun pointing at me. Too proud to lie down, I stood there, frozen. I never will know why he did not shoot.

One night when I returned back to my landlords' home overlooking the Baltic Sea, I found German soldiers lying everywhere on the floor in the house, deeply asleep. It was not easy to step over the bodies to get into my room. I never heard them leave in the mornings.

One evening in March 1945 I was talking with the captain of a boat which was ready to leave. It was a large whale boat with a wide-open back. Women with children had walked on and the wounded soldiers were carried on. The

boat with a wide-open back. Women with children had walked on and the wounded soldiers were carried on. The captain then asked me to get on the boat, saying that the Russian army was expected to take over the city any day, soon. (I know now that the Russians took Gdynia on March 13th.) I asked to get my landlords, having promised not to go without them, and I did not have anything but what I wore. I was told that it was getting dark and the ship had to leave soon, because a Russian submarine was waiting outside the peninsula. So I got on the boat. There was no place to spare. Bodies anywhere. The next morning the captain, who stayed on watch all night, told me that a submarine had followed us. Why did it let us go?

Gdansk fell to the Russians on March 28, 1945. 10,000 people were taken prison by the Russians. Many died. Many committed suicide.

It took us a couple of days with the heavy boat, to reach Copenhagen. The German coast was already taken by the Russians. The refugees were put into quarantine in schools. Because I was a social worker, I was allowed to go free. The Danes were good to me (but not to the German soldiers, who were shot from the back). They gave me clothes, a toothbrush and other things one needs. At night I was shown where to sleep. When I got into the upper and only empty bunk bed, I immediately fell through on the person in the lower berth. I never saw her/him the next morning.

Copenhagen was like a Shangri-La. With spring-like weather, very well-dressed people were sitting at side street coffees, eating cake. Nothing was destroyed. The food made me sick. It was too heavy. I felt I did not belong there, went back to the boat, and asked to be taken back to the refugees I had abandoned in Gdynia. They said no. Then I wanted to go to Berlin to see whether my family was alive. I was told that civilians were not allowed to go there, because the Russian army was very close. So I asked an officer on the street to get me a permit. Later I read that the worst fighting of the war and the most bombs were dropped between February and the 8th of April, the end of the war.

I boarded the full train to Berlin, but we did not get very far, stopping short of a destroyed bridge. That meant going via Hamburg, which we reached at night. There we had to get out. For hours we walked through the totally destroyed, burned out large city to reach the rail going south. Back on a train nobody talked, being totally numb. I do not remember eating or drinking. In Berlin I had to walk a long way. The big old apartment house, where my parents lived, stood, partly. The tenants had been living in the basement for months. My parents were alive and my little sister with them.

At night I went out on the street for a moment, an indescribable experience. The noise from the bombing and shooting was deafening. The sky was blood red, reflecting the burning city. You could see the lights from the shooting and the airplanes tumbling down, on and on. All senses were pushed into high tension. Joerg Friedrich wrote that bombing is like the end of the world. Or it might be hell. This was inferno. About those who survived, Jorg Friedrich said "you are signed for the rest of your life."

I was told to immediately leave Berlin since the Russians were already encircling it. My little sister, whom I hardly had seen, did not want to go with me the next morning. And I did not know whether I would succeed in getting out. Much later I heard that my brother, an officer, wounded many times, was in a Berlin hospital, with his shoulder and his arm in a cast. He and another officer got into a tank and drove through the fighting troops toward the West, to be taken prisoner by the British. They used him as an interpreter. ,

. My train, going north to Schleswig Holstein made it through. There, nurses were badly needed. Particular poisonous diphtheria and typhoid fever epidemics killed many natives and refugees. I put on the nurses' cap once again. One night, I responded to the call of a student nurse to get help with a dying toddler, fighting for air. The young mother just had heard that her husband was killed in the war. I took the baby in my arm for comfort. Ten days later I was found unconscious. For a while I did not know whether I would make it. I wondered who would tell my parents if I died. During the long recovery time I got sheep wool, to spin and make socks and gloves. My hands were bleeding from the frost. No mail to Berlin, but through an illegal messenger I got word to and from my family.

In the summer of 1946 I returned to Berlin. I made it through the Russian Zone without being caught. Berlin was a huge ghostly city, full of ruins, destroyed bridges. The trees or bushes had become firewood for cooking and warmth during the extremely cold winter. So-called "rubble women" had cleared rubble from the streets. There was no public transportation. Water often had to be gotten from afar. The rationed hourly electricity was given, at times, way after midnight. The daily ration was 800 calories of food, such as black potatoes. People went to the burned out coal heaps

midnight. The daily ration was 800 calories of food, such as black potatoes. People went to the burned out coal heaps to find pieces of coal, which might be usable. It was survival in the most primitive way. Many refugees and expelled people from the East came. They were given the most watery soup you can imagine, a piece of bread, and were told to leave Berlin within 24 hours. Housing and food were lacking. Only nurses and doctors were needed.

Ten million people searched for others, especially lost children, The Red Cross did its best to help. For decades to come one could see search notes on any public surface. I remember a Furtwangler concert, in an overcrowded icy room, where I had walked to for hours. What a beautiful experience this was.

What is the difference between refugees and expelled persons? Refugees leave home and land for fear of what would happen to them, or they were driven out. Expellees are told to leave their home country, often immediately. Their added and deep trauma is broken trust. The wound of being forced to leave home and land, abandoned by people and institutions they trusted, may never heal. This is what happened to the Jews in Nazi Germany.

When I worked in a Berlin hospital, alone on night duty, I found a patient hanging in the bathroom. He was a severely injured man who had also lost his homeland, all his family and friends. Another example, fairly soon after my immigration to the USA, I met a fellow patient at the TB – sanitarium in Ithaca, NY. She died from a broken heart, because she could not get over being driven from her little farm in Bohemia. I did not suffer the same fate, but I also never was able to return to my beloved Silesian Mountains, now Poland, the land of my forefathers.

The large hospital was quite destroyed. Left of the surgical ward was a large room with twenty beds. Broken windowpanes were replaced with washed off X-ray pictures. Everything was scarce or lacking. For instance, when we finally got Penicillin, we collected the urine from the patients to extract and use it again. The nurses had to do much of the doctors' work. Work hours were long and demanding. Teamwork and spirit were excellent, making the difference in the survival of the patients.

Quite soon after I arrived in Berlin I had a chance to cast my first vote. Russians stood by the polls, threatening to do something to us if we voted for the Western powers. We did. Now I was proud to be a Berliner. The political situation continued to be tense. The Cold War had started. Berlin was surrounded by a large Russian Army. Streets were not safe. The Russians needed to send their quota of people to the Gulags in Siberia. Once, when the trains had started to run again, I came from East Berlin late at night, being alone in the wagon. A young woman came in, looking terribly anxious. Soon, at the next stop, a couple of soldiers walked in, took the woman and left. I am still asking what I could have done to save her?

Going to West Germany meant crossing the border, at times crawling on elbows and knees, not to be caught. A few times we were caught. Once, wanting to attend my brother's wedding, we were stopped at midnight by a soldier pointing his gun at my stomach. In 1948 all roads and trains to West Berlin were closed by the Russians. This was the beginning of the take-over. The Western powers countered with the amazing Airlift of food and goods. Planes arrived every 3 ½ minutes, landing in the middle of dense housing. American and British airplanes did their unforgettable work to sustain the population. A year later in 1949 the border opened. Conditions normalized quickly. I was free. At that time Africa did not look so good any more. The American Embassy opened, and I received my immigration papers.

What was left from the war? For more than four decades I had but one dream. Again and again, I found myself in a strange city, having nothing with me, and could not find the place where I was going to stay for the night.