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## FIRST PERSON

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# What Did You Do in the War, Mommy?

An Essay to Mark the 50th Anniversary of the End of World War II

by Christina Bolgiano

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From the upland gardens of Dachau Palace, the city of Munich, where I was born in 1948, unfurls like a scroll along a flood plain at the foot of the Alps. The script of its steep rooflines and Gothic twists is illegible at this distance, but the bold, vertical dash of the modern Olympiatower punctuates the sky. Below it, smudged by haze, is a scribble of small hills. This is the Schuttberg, the rubble mountain. It was built from bombing debris, shoveled onto trucks and a little railroad constructed expressly for the purpose. The mounds were covered with clay for waterproofing, then with earth for parks. Meadows and groves now grace them. "Everything I owned is buried there," said my mother, pointing, as we stood on the heights of Dachau.

We were strolling through the palace gardens during an anniversary reunion of the Riemerschmitt School class of 1941. Seventeen women whose childhoods were swallowed by the Thousand Year Reich stirred tall glasses of iced coffee and ladled whipped cream from bowls onto slices of enormous, fanciful cakes, for which the cafe of Dachau Palace is famous. The first reunion had been organized in 1978, and my mother flew from her home in the United States for it. Since then, the group had been meeting monthly, and as she grew older, my mother returned once and sometimes twice a year to join them. The ladies leaned toward each other across the white linen of the tableclothes, touched hands, joked, exclaimed. Above the din floated my mother's laugh.

She was born to a single mother during the Weimar Republic, Germany's first democracy, itself born from the ruins of World War I. It was a time of great idealism and catastrophic reality. Political factions brawled in the streets. Hordes of unemployed men roamed the cities, searching desperately for a way to feed their families. People fainted from hunger on the trains. My mother lived with her grandpar-

ents in a country house on the fringe of Munich, with a garden and orchard, woods and wild strawberries. Her earliest memories are of pulling carrots from the ground, and washing her feet to stamp cabbage into sauerkraut for her grandmother's pantry. There was a train track nearby. When I was a very small child, I stood with my hand in my great-grandmother's calloused palm, and together we counted cars. Before Hitler invaded Poland, the woods were cut to prepare for a huge railroad connecting station, but not until recent years was the house bulldozed and construction begun. My mother and I drove through the remaining neighborhood of modest homes hidden behind trees and bushes. Tears filled her eyes when she saw that where her grandmother's house once stood, landscape engineers had planted a tree in an embankment.

At the age of eight, my mother was sent to a Catholic convent boarding school in the city. She peered out a window to watch flickering torchlights celebrate the tenth anniversary and the triumphant reversal of Hitler's failed 1923 beer hall *putsch* (coup). When Hitler took over the government in 1933, unemployment disappeared quickly as he began building the Autobahns. In that same year, he opened the first concentration camp in a 1,200-year-old hamlet called Dachau, just north of Munich.

Later in the 1930s, my mother marched to the airport in the ranks of the Bund deutscher Maedel (League of German Girls), the female division of Hitler Youth, to welcome him on one of his visits. He stuck his hand into the crowd, and she grasped it. Everyone belonged to Hitler Youth then; it was required, and after all, why not? "On Wednesdays, we got together to sing and on Saturdays, we took hikes," she said. "It was fun. The leaders were girls a few years older than me. They couldn't possibly have done much political indoctrination." To this day, my mother sings the traditional German national anthem, "Deutschland

Ueber Alles," with fervor.

Surrounding Dachau are rich farm fields where her youth group was sent to help pick hops. This was the first real salary she ever earned, and she spent it on her first permanent at a shop where today on a quiet, tree-lined street in Munich there can still be found a hairdresser's shop. The Venedig ice cream parlor still occupies the same corner where more than half a century ago my mother would hop off the street car to buy a cone on her way home. Such constancy both reassures and terrifies me.

Recently, my mother revealed that her mother had been a member of the Nazi party. "I've been wondering for years whether to tell you," my mother said. My grandmother joined in 1930, early enough that after the party came to power in 1933, she was rewarded as an *Altparteimitglied* (old party member). Maybe, like many young Germans, she was seduced by Hitler's adroit manipulations of idealism. Maybe she thought he really had the answer for Germany's troubles. At any rate, she needed a job, and it was obvious that party members flourished, while others floundered. As a party member, she applied to Das Braunes Haus (the brown house), the Nazi party headquarters in Munich, and was hired as the receptionist. Hers was the smiling face that greeted Hitler whenever he arrived. I see it as if I were the proverbial fly on a scrubbed German wall, and it is a picture that chills my heart. After a few years my grandmother married and resigned—German women were discouraged from any career except motherhood, until in the last years of the war they were conscripted out of absolute necessity to run the armaments factories.

My mother left the convent school and moved in with her mother. Her mother's new husband was a motorcycle engineer at BMW who vehemently opposed Hitler. When her husband railed against the lack of free speech, my grandmother argued with him and begged him to stop. Joining the party was not compulsory in

private firms, as it was in the civil service, and he refused to join. He was bypassed for promotions from 1933 to 1945 but was too valuable to dismiss outright. The Allies immediately made him head of his department.

After my grandmother died of cancer in 1937, her husband honored his dying wife's wish and sent my mother to the Riemerschmitt School, where she learned bookkeeping, stenography, history, geography, literature, and English. By the time she graduated, not yet seventeen, most universities had closed, and she had three choices: work in an ammunition factory, in the government's *Arbeitsdeinst* (work duty) force as an agricultural laborer, or in one of the government-declared essential operations, like the postal service. Her stepfather steered her into the long-distance office of the postal service, where she worked as a switchboard operator. One evening she connected Hitler with Eva Braun. Of course, she eavesdropped, though it was illegal, but the conversation was brief because, as she put it, "they knew there would be 50,000 switchboard operators listening in."

"I want you to come to Berlin as soon as possible," Hitler said.

"Fine," replied his mistress from Berchtesgaden, "I will let you know as soon as I leave." That was in 1944. By then, Munich had already experienced many of the 455 air raids that destroyed about 60 percent of the city. My mother was bombed out twice. The first time, she was living at a house for young working women. The girls cowered together in the basement, praying; the detonation of the bombs lifted them up off their benches. The second time, she was living on her own as a caretaker for the apartment of an elderly woman who had evacuated. She came home from work to find the house in flames. She raced to the storage area in the basement, threw some odds and ends onto a tablecloth, and trudged out to her grandmother's, the satchel tied on a broom over her

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shoulder. Crisis was institutionalized: like other bombed-out workers, she was allotted two weeks off from her job to find another place to live.

Those were the years when the Nazis were methodically exterminating the Jews. They took pains to make many of their seizures as secret as possible, and Jews composed less than 1 percent of the German population; but at some point, it must have been obvious that people were disappearing and were not on vacation. My mother didn't know any Jews, she said, although after a little while she recalled a girl from some other apartments wearing a yellow star. She remembers *Krystallnacht*, a few days after she turned fourteen, because she took a bus through the city and saw the smashed Jewish store windows. I asked her how she felt when she saw them. After a long pause, in a low voice, she said, "I can't remember how I felt."

With the unquenchable adolescent thirst for gaiety, my mother went to skating parties on the waterways of Nymphenburg and gossipy luncheons with girlfriends, but social life was tenuous and shadowed. Boyfriends, an uncle, acquaintances disappeared into the maelstroms on the fronts. It was treason to express anything but optimism about the war effort. Once, when my mother was visiting her stepfather and thoughtlessly repeated a bit of propaganda about the coming victory, he yanked her toward an atlas and flipped it open. "Look!" he shouted. "Look at little Germany, you fool! We will lose this war!"

My father was Jewish, born in New York City only a year or two after his parents arrived from a village somewhere in eastern Europe. He died in an accident when I was twelve, and most of his immediate family died before him, so I don't know anything more about them. I like to think there were rabbis or scholars in his line, because my father was an avid bookman with a philosophical bent. There's no point trying to trace his family; eastern European Jewry was blown away by the Holocaust. Had I been born a decade earlier, I might also have ended up in the camps, a *Mischling* (hybrid) of

the first degree held by chauvinistic Nazis to be more Jewish if the taint came from the male side. The only mass demonstration against Hitler's treatment of Jews was made by German wives of Jewish men in Berlin in 1943, after SS troops made a roundup of Jewish workers in the factories. "We want our husbands," the wives protested through several days and nights as they stood outside the detention center on Rosenstrasse. The Nazis aimed machine guns at them but did not fire and finally released many of the prisoners.

But I couldn't have been born before the war. Like many others, I was spawned by it, but in an unusually direct way. The reward my grandmother received for joining the party so early was access to an apartment in an affluent section of Munich, to which she brought her new husband and her daughter. There, my mother made the acquaintance of a girl, who, just after the war, invited her to a party some Americans were giving across the street. My father was one of the hosts. Through a history distorted by Hitler, my parents met.

By then a civilian, after soldiering in France, my father was managing a PX. He courted my mother by sending chauffeured cars full of hams and flowers. Life for many Germans was even harsher after the war than during it. Winters were frigid, and dregs of the steaming tea that my mother drank at bedside to soothe herself into sleep froze solid by morning. Meals were mostly potatoes, with a couple of pats of butter per week. For clothes, she took whatever swatches of fabric she could find to her aunt, a talented seamstress. Hanging in my closet is a beautifully lined and tailored vest, cut from the lining of a billiard table.

"We had no youth," said the Riemerschmitt ladies. "We were busy surviving."

Survive is what they did in the war, barely keeping their heads above a raging current, most of them not even old enough to vote until the war was over. It is not the Riemerschmitt ladies but my grandmother's generation, the first women in Germany able to vote, who must answer for the rise of Hitler. Overlooked at first, the stories of these Ger-

man women have in the last two decades come to form a small literature of their own. They are not stories of great heroism. Where was the nurturing, the loving-kindness attributed to the feminine spirit? Limited to their own inner circles, apparently; even the Rosenstrasse wives had demanded the freedom only of their own husbands. Some who have studied these stories believe that if Nazism is viewed as a test of moral courage, German women mostly failed. Certainly my grandmother failed, although in fairness I must allow her the perpetual margin of having died before she could realize Hitler's full horror. Her contemporaries tell stories of heroics on a subtle scale: sacrificing a pleasure or convenience to thwart Nazi goals, refusing to greet others with the requisite "Heil Hitler," throwing rolls out where starving slave laborers would be sure to find them. Any of these actions stood a chance, especially in the last, feverish years at the end, of drawing retribution. The only universally shared emotions among the multifarious stories seem to be fear of the Nazis, heart sickness over Hitler's inauguration of war in 1939, and terror (justified) of rape by victorious Russian troops. And, for the most part, they give a similar answer to the question that non-Germans always ask.

"We didn't know!" my mother has told me with passion and pleading all my life, about the matter of genocide. "We didn't know," echoed Lola and Marta and Trudy, sitting across the table. Everyone, they agreed, knew there was a concentration camp near Dachau, but that's all they knew. My mother first understood what had happened there shortly after the Armistice, when 30,000 stick-thin liberated prisoners in blue-striped uniforms filled the Munich plaza called *Feldhermhalle*. More than 30,000 others had been murdered. Across the smooth expanse at the top of the *Feldhermhalle* monument, someone had scrawled, "Ich schaeme mich, ein Deutscher zu sein" (I am ashamed to be a German). Nearly 50 years later, my mother passed on to me a blouse a friend had given her. Its blue stripes are so disturbing she can't bear to wear it.

Dachau today has pretty streets lined

with interesting shops. Banners in the blue and white colors of Bavaria flap in front of half-timbered houses. The stream that flows through town is hung over with trees and greenery of suburban gardens. In early August, as I walked from the subway station up the hill to the palace, children ran past with cotton candy from the town's annual festival, where beer is half the price of Munich's more famous Oktoberfest. The palace parking lot was full of cars. Built in the 1550s by the Wittelsbachs, rulers of Munich, the white castle was a favorite summer residence because of its elevation above the humid flood plain. Its ornate salons display paintings by members of the artists' colony that loved Dachau in the late 1800s for its picturesque rural serenity, renowned breweries and happy tavern life. "We sincerely hope," writes Dachau's mayor in the English brochure for visitors to the concentration camp, "you will not transfer your indignation to . . . Dachau, which was not consulted when the concentration camp was built and whose citizens voted quite decisively against the rise of National Socialism in 1933." But the Dachau etched on the world's mind is composed of barbed wire fence, prisoners' barracks, crematoria, and wrenching memorials.

In the steaming sunlight of a full-length window alcove in the palace cafe, I sat in a different Dachau, with its laughing ladies and their endurance, their determination to find life worth living, their bond forged in fires of war. Behind me, the gauzy white window drapes hardly screened the sun's warmth, which burned my back. Iced champagne cooled my lips. The great dualities—past and present, good and evil, life and death—played over me in waves of light and shadow. I felt myself, half Jewish and half German, span the abyss between victim and tormentor. In the swirling wake of heritage, I stood transfixed, to face one inescapable lesson: I am capable of anything.

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