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A HISTORY OF MY PARENTS AND BEYOND

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Harriet M. Ammann

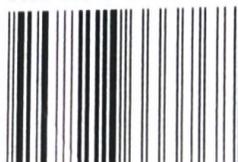
**T**his is the story of a young girl born into Nazi Germany and how her parents and five older siblings survived that time, eventually ending up in America as booty of war. Grounded in their faith and trusting in their close friends, her parents persevered, imparting their strengths, values and moral code to their children. The author carries those lessons into her own career and activism.

**HARRIET AMMANN, BS, MS, PhD**, made a career in toxicology, public health, and teaching. She has presented, taught, testified, and published on toxic exposures and effects from air contaminants, indoors and out, on sensitive populations, and on other health issues throughout the state, nation, and internationally. She was a senior toxicologist at the Washington State Department of Health, and later at the WA Dept of Ecology Air Quality Program. She consulted on air pollutant and toxic mold exposures, and taught at the University of Washington, School of Public Health. She was active in the peace, anti-nuclear, immigrant protection, and prisoner rights movements. She follows in her parents' footsteps in promoting and living her concerns for peace and justice, compassion and kindness.



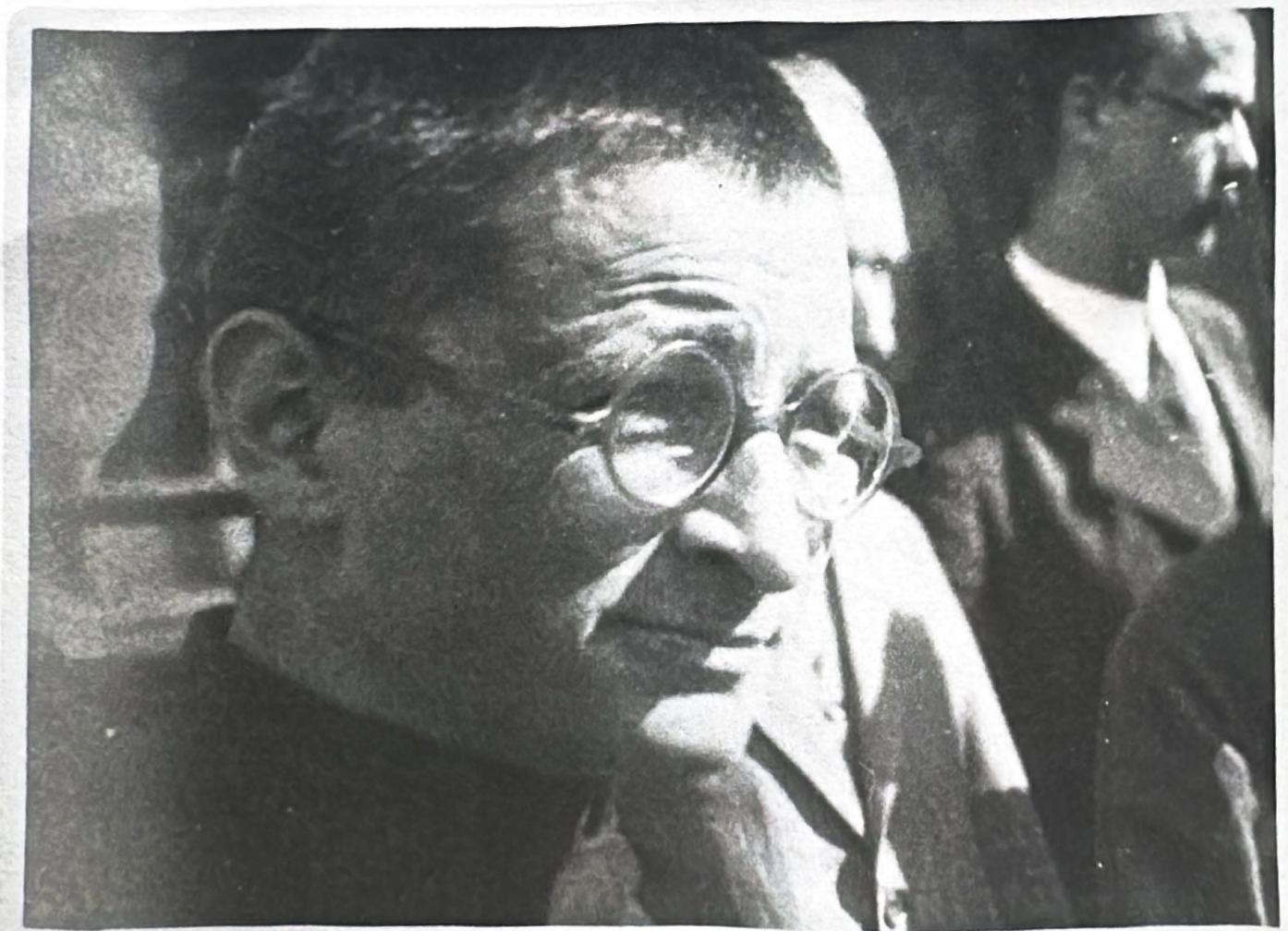
ISBN 979-8-218-33376-8

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My Onkel Hans is my Mutti's younger brother, a Benedictine monk who lives in his monastery in Grüssau in Silesia, where my Mutti's family is from. His monk name is Pater Anselm. The Pater means he is a priest. He is active in Quickborn since he was fourteen, and continues his participation after being ordained a priest. He leads retreats and pilgrimages with young Quickborners. He travels and preaches. He speaks from the pulpit against the regime's new policy of killing physically and mentally handicapped people, and against the persecution of Jews. His monastery learns that he is to



*Photo 10. Pater Anselm Werlé, Order of Saint Benedict,  
Mutti's younger brother. Circa 1940-41.*

be arrested, which would mean certain death for him. The prior of the monastery finds a way for him to be inducted into the German Army to serve in the Medical Corps as an orderly and stretcher bearer, tending the wounded. My uncle serves as a tender of souls to his fellow soldiers as well. The unit to which he is assigned is called the Himmelsfahrtkommando (Ascension to Heaven Commando), referring to the fact that members of the unit are highly likely to be killed.

While his induction into the army thwarts his arrest (and likely execution), the regime tries to declare him "unfit to serve." This would mean that he will be arrested immediately upon leaving the army. His company commander writes a letter to the SS saying he knows Comrade Werlé personally and that he is an exceptional and reliable soldier. If he is to be labeled "unfit to serve" then he, the commander, should be labeled the same, and that he too must be kicked out. He reads the letter to Pater Anselm's company and tells them that anyone who feels the same should step forward. Every soldier in the company does. They all sign a statement to that effect, and my Onkel Hans is not dismissed from the army. In a letter to my mother, Hans writes about how the shepherd tends to his sheep, and even lays down his life for them.

The chaplain for the Army Division writes to my mother that the month before Hans is killed, that he, the chaplain, gave my uncle permission to say Mass, for which Pater Anselm was joyfully grateful. The chaplain writes how loved he was by all who encountered him, how dedicated he was to the service of the bodies and souls of his comrades, how his smile, warmth, and voice were an inspiration to his fellow soldiers. He dies during the Battle of Kertsch, on the Crimean Peninsula, during heavy fighting with the Russians on May 17, 1942. The chaplain writes to my mother: "He accompanied his unit into battle, caring for his soldiers in the most tender and competent

manner, during which God took him to Himself as he fell from a shrapnel wound to his head and neck. He was prayed to rest by his comrades in a single grave near the southern entrance to the town of Bakay near Kertsch.”

Before my uncle is sent to the Crimea, the Gestapo (Secret State Police: **Geheime Staats Polizei**) invade my parents' home and search all the books, papers, and correspondence in my father's study, and the house. They are looking for membership lists and correspondence for the Quickborn, for which my father is general secretary. The organization was forbidden to exist in 1939, but continues clandestinely.

Vater is warned of the impending raid by a friend who works in police headquarters. My parents quickly gather everything related to the Quickborn and pile it into a large hand-cart and cover it with a tarpaulin. As the Gestapo arrive, my oldest brother Erik wheels the cart out of our yard and down the street. Erik takes the paper-laden cart to a friend of my father's who owns a paper mill in our neighborhood, to have it pulped. All documents and membership lists are removed before the police come. The Gestapo searches the whole house. They take away a pair of pistols that belonged to my great grandfather. As the Gestapo leaves, the officer in charge of the search tells Vater, “You can be sure we will get you all.”

Mutti thinks that they found a letter from my Onkel Hans that she saved in a book, in which he made some comments about the regime. She always feels that he was transferred to the heavy fighting in the Crimea because of it. However, he was a thorn in the Nazis' eye for some time because of his effectiveness in raising the conscience and consciousness of Catholic youth. The fateful sermon that threatened his arrest happens during the Christmas holidays in 1940, which again informed the Quickborn conference attendees

of the Nazis' atrocities against Jews, handicapped persons and minorities, and urged participants to resist these. He is drafted into the Himmelsfahrtkomando in February of 1941, a year before I meet him.

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My parents had to be very careful about speaking their thoughts and feelings since there were eyes and ears everywhere. Before gasoline became generally unavailable to civilians, my father used to drive my older siblings to school, and take a neighbor to her job on his way to work. One night as the family gathered in the living room, my father heard a noise outside. He went out and encountered this neighbor standing outside the living room window. He asked what was wrong. She said, "I was trying to hear whether you were listening to the BBC." He was. It was a criminal offense which could land anyone doing so in jail, or in one of the many work camps, which were sub-camps to KZ (concentration camp, abbreviation of German term) Dachau (about 18 miles outside of München). Or they could be disappeared or shot.

My parents had friends and relatives they trusted completely, especially those associated with Quickborn. They instructed my older brother and sisters to watch what they said to friends (making fun of anyone associated with the regime was dangerous). A casual joke overheard by a passerby or a child who repeated it at school could result in months in a labor camp or worse for parents. Most boys were pushed by the government to join the Hitler Youth, attractive to them because of camping, singing songs around a campfire, learning carving and woods lore but also using other knife skills such as fighting, and marching and wearing a uniform. They were encouraged to love the Führer (leader), to salute him, sing to him, and report on their parents for the good of the Fatherland.

Girls were pushed to join the Band Deutscher Mädchen (BDM or League of German Girls) who likewise were schooled in camping, singing, and crafts, but more importantly, in learning to be a good German woman, with all the domestic skills that entailed, including childbirth. Praise was poured on teenagers who "Bore a child by a soldier for the greater good of the Fatherland and Hitler." Women were encouraged to bear as many children as possible to provide soldiers for future wars. Birth control was forbidden, as was abortion. Aid for "child rich" families was provided. After all, the war was depleting the Reich's armies that had to be replenished.

My older brother was in the FLAK Corps (Flieger Abwehr Corps); my brother Hans was too young for the Hitler Youth. My sisters were in the organization for girls, the BDM. I heard my sisters laughingly call the BDM "Der Band Deutscher Mattrazen" (League of German Mattresses). When I repeated this to Mutti she admonished my sisters and emphasized the need to avoid such talk. My brother Hans and I were told we could not, even to friends, repeat this, or talk about what we might overhear in the family. We especially should not make jokes at school, or talk about who came to visit, or talk about what anyone in the house might have said.

My older sisters, eight, ten and twelve years older than I, had to participate in the Kinder Land Verschickung (KLV) (Child Evacuation Program) which took children out of the cities being bombed by the Allies to the countryside for protection. My sisters were sent to look after the children in the evacuation camps, see to it that they behaved, entertain them and help them with their homework.

My oldest bother Erik, thirteen years older than I, and his classmates were required to participate in FLAK duty, that is, man the anti-aircraft cannons (Flieger Abwehr Kannone) stationed around the city of München. Boys as young as 14 and sometimes younger were

compelled to serve on searchlight and flak crews. At first they served as classmates until a bomb wiped out an entire class. After that teams were assembled from different schools. At age 18, men and women were compelled to participate in the Arbeits Dienst (Labor Service), performing unpaid work ranging from construction and rubble clearing to picking potato beetles, and later harvesting potatoes and glean- ing grain fields, planting or harvesting.

In the last year of the war my parents took in my mother's rela- tives from Silesia fleeing the Russian armies. Fräulein Lena, a retired secretary of my father's, whose house had been destroyed by bomb- ing, also lived in one of our attic rooms.

My mother was terrified for Vater since she knew that he had planned to surrender the BMW plant to the American Army. She was immensely relieved when he came home. The US Army command vetted him, realized that he had not been a Nazi Party member and allowed him to return home to Freimann.