Dance on the Volcano

My Fears and Challenges

A Young Anti-Nazi German Woman in Hitler's Germany

A Memoir

Revised

Renata Zerner

A memoir of what it was like living in Germany during the Third Reich and World War II.

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by

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Names of, and some personal details about, various persons depicted in this work have been changed to protect their, or their heirs' identities.

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For Chull Wan Ihm,
In friendship

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Los Angeles, California, 2009

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A FIRESTORM OVER BERLIN

Berlin, March 1, 1943

Sirens shattered my sleep. Half awake, I got up and stumbled into my mother's bedroom. I had heard the sirens go off many times, but I had been in such a deep sleep that I was confused and asked, "What's this noise?"

"It's the alarm, get dressed," my mother called back.

The reality slowly came into focus. Back in my room, I pulled on my old clothes reserved for nights in the shelter, and together with my sister, I followed my parents to the basement.

It was certainly not the best place for protection—a direct hit on the five-story apartment building made of brick and plaster could be fatal, but there were no fortified shelters in the area, and the subway station at the Bayerische Platz where we lived was not deep enough. Not like in the London tube.

So far, the air raids on Berlin had not caused much damage. In all of 1940, Berlin had about thirty air raids; in 1941, the number dropped to seventeen without damages in our area. And in 1942, there were only two raids on Berlin, one by a single British plane and another by the Soviet Air Force, both ineffectual. Generally, the air

raids on Germany concentrated on the industrial areas in the west, the Ruhrland, and on Hamburg and Lübeck, where the warships were built.

Although the Berliners did expect that the attacks on their city would increase, they still believed, as they had all along, that only specific sites would be bombed: railroad stations, the government buildings in the center, and perhaps some factories in the east of town. Never the residential areas, they thought, except for an occasional stray bomb that had missed its target. Then, in January 1943, Berlin experienced its first daylight attack, and nearly two hundred people were killed, although not near us. Yet we still thought it an anomaly, or a terrible show of force that would probably not be repeated. We were wrong.

It was still quiet outside as we crossed the backyard to the entrance of the basement. Contrary to their access to the coastal cities, the British planes had to cover well over one hundred and fifty miles of German territory to reach Berlin and were picked up by the early warning system soon enough to give us time to reach our shelters.

On the way down, doors slammed as the families from the other apartments started their trek into the basement. Most of the tenants took the servants' stairway that led directly to the basement door. No one used the elevator in the front entry; it was much too slow. My parents, my sister Jutta, and I joined them. Soon the basement rooms filled and the tenants began to chat.

Berliners do not make friends easily with their neighbors. They greet each other as they pass on the stairway or stand together in the elevator, make polite conversation, and then disappear into their apartments. Now this had changed, because so much time was spent together in the shelters.

Some tenants stayed in the large room, while we young people went to the second smaller room to sit together and play cards. We knew each other well; we were the same age and some of us went to the same school. I was sixteen, tall and slender. Everybody said I looked like my father. I had his brown, deep-set, almond-shaped eyes and his straight nose. I wore my ash-blond hair in the popular pageboy style, just below the ears. I was quite fashion-conscious, but, of course, in the basement, during the air raids, I wore old comfortable clothes like everyone else.

The two rooms in the basement were equipped with old tables and chairs that had been sitting in the tenants' attics, about to be discarded. Like the two shabby maroon colored armchairs with worn and faded upholstery in the larger room and a small rocking chair, its white paint chipped. Various straight chairs were placed around two kitchen tables, one table for each room.

Someone had decorated the walls with large posters of grimacing Soviet soldiers. Why? I wondered, to frighten us? The situation was scary enough without a poster to help us think about being confronted by a Russian soldier.

In the smaller room, two bunk beds with wool blankets rough as sandpaper stood in a dark corner. I sometimes stretched out on one of them, but I could never sleep. It was always dusty down there, my skin itched, and the only air supply came through the long corridor that led to the backyard. Usually the door to the entrance was closed, though not locked, so the air was dank and stale, smelling of mildew. Eventually more furniture would be added. The rooms were brightly lit by plain light bulbs that hung from the low ceiling. We must have been about twenty people. The janitor, his wife and daughter never came down.

One of the tenants, a dentist, was the air-raid warden. He took his job seriously—dressed in jodhpurs and boots—and he carried a huge flashlight in his hand. Soon he became so officious that he caused resentment. If a tenant decided to stay in bed after the sirens had gone off, which a few did during the first air raids, he rang the doorbell and ordered him to come down immediately. Everyone objected to his bullying, and there were arguments. Finally, one tenant, a lawyer, was fed up, and in a dark corridor with no inconvenient witnesses, he slapped the warden briskly across the face and sharply rebuked him for his self-importance; after that, the warden kept a low profile. However, to everybody's amusement, this minor incident ballooned into a full-fledged neighborhood rumor that a murder had been committed in our shelter.

Hardly any strangers from the street came at night, except the taxi drivers from the stand at the park across the street. They watched us kids play *Skat*, the popular German card game. Taxi drivers were known to play a good game; they passed their time that way while waiting for customers at the stands. They taught me to play. Many times one of them stood silently behind my chair and pointed to the card I should play and I became good at the game.

Though we were relaxed and playing cards, at the same time we were wide awake and alert. Soon we heard sounds of shooting, some yak-yak-yak from the flak, and in between the hum of the airplane engines.

"They'll go to another part of town." Someone was optimistic, but tonight his voice was tense.

So far, the east side of the city, where the factories were, had gotten the worst of it. But now we heard more airplanes and more flak, and then explosions.

As the sounds became louder, we youngsters grew anxious and moved silently into the other room to sit close to our parents. We had long stopped our chatter and games, listening to every sound. I huddled together with my parents and my sister Jutta. The barking of the flak became steadily louder, then a detonation, and nearby another one. It had never been that close.

People talked in low voices, but at each blast, they flinched and then they stopped talking. Someone whispered, "They are close now,

right above and around us." My mother pressed her lips together, her eyes staring straight ahead. She looked at my father and whispered, "Hans?"

He nodded, wanting to calm her, and said, "It'll be over soon; we'll be all right, Liska." A young woman, trying to overcome her fear, kept playing the solitaire she had started earlier. She dropped a card and listened. But after a moment, she picked it up and continued to play.

I concentrated hard on the sounds outside and did not notice how tense I became, my arms wrapped tight around my body, leaning forward as if I could hear better that way. I waited for each explosion, each crack of the flak, waited for it to stop, waited for silence. But it did not end.

Suddenly, there was a whistle, and then a loud bang and the whole building shook. With one violent sweep, the woman playing solitaire pushed her cards off the table and screamed. Cries cut through the air—then stillness. My heart thumped; I could hardly breathe. Terrified and speechless, I looked at my mother, and she saw the fear in my eyes. She murmured, her face white and dead-serious, "It's all right; I think the bomb dropped very near us." My father stood up and said, "It must be the house behind us." Though he looked concerned, his voice was steady and calm.

I always felt safe when he was there. He had gone through it before and survived. I thought of the story he told us when he was in

Bulgaria during the First World War. A grenade hit the mess hall where he was having lunch with his fellow officers, and they were all splattered and soaked with food, but no one was hurt.

Finally, someone said, "That was a close one." It broke the silence. People started to talk frantically, "Where did it hit?" "What do you think it was?" "One of those large explosives…someone really got it." Then they quieted down again and listened. It was not over yet. The flak was still going strong. I had heard that bombs never fall twice in the same spot, and I mumbled the thought to calm myself, wondering at the same time if it were true, and where I had first heard it.

Eventually the sounds moved farther away, then it became quiet and soon the all-clear siren sounded.

"Let's go," my father said as we rose and brushed ourselves off. Everyone lined up, and we filed down the narrow corridor and into the street.

What a sight! The rooftops of most of the houses around us had been hit by incendiaries, and the unchecked fires burnt like giant torches. A firestorm blazed in the sky that blew the sparks into the air from rooftop to rooftop and covered the black sky with a pink cloud.

An explosive bomb had indeed hit a house behind ours. People were rushing around, shouting or standing in small groups looking at the fiery spectacle. "Fireworks," someone murmured, "this is the real thing." But mostly they did not say much.

The men organized to take turns standing guard in the attic so that any fires caused by sparks could immediately be doused. I was glad that my father was not chosen. He was already in his sixties. As a physician, he had to be on call anyway. Besides, I thought that my father would be pretty useless should a fire break out. He was not good in practical matters.

I did not hear or see any fire engines—too many fires. They burned unchecked for a long time.

"Take the dog for a walk. He needs to go outside," my mother said after we came upstairs. We could not take Tommy, our Welsh terrier, to the basement. No pets were allowed there.

I wondered how he felt when the bomb hit. I loved that little dog. Suddenly, I was filled with such pity for him that my chest ached. I saw him shaking underneath a couch looking at me for help. At least now, he seemed glad to have us all safely home again.

With Tommy on his leash, I crossed the street and went into the little park. The view was horrifyingly spectacular. Huge flames reached into the sky everywhere and caused such a storm, as I had never experienced, never could imagine. It roared and howled. The fire wind tore through my hair, my eyes began to burn, and the smell of smoke penetrated my clothes and skin.

Tommy was unruly and pulled at his leash. He stopped frequently to relieve himself and then tore ahead again. He was a

small high-strung terrier, but he had a lot of strength for such a little fellow. Finally, having had enough of the hellish scene, I took him back to the safety of our house.

From then on, everything would be different. I did not know it at the time, but the life I had known had changed forever.

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WALKING TO SCHOOL WITH GERDA

February 1944

The cold lasted for weeks. The icy air penetrated the single windowpanes in our room and let in a freezing draft. The bit of warmth that spread from the radiator was barely noticeable. Only the small electric heater helped a little, and we put it close to us wherever we sat. Still, the room was not much warmer inside than it was outside. To stay comfortable, we went to bed early with a hot water bottle and read until late.

My mother cooked in our room on the hotplate, which rested precariously on a cardboard box. We wore our winter coats when we ate dinner.

"Aren't you glad you didn't give away your fur coat?" I asked my mother.

I was referring to an appeal that went out after the German invasion into Russia: Donate warm clothing, especially furs, to help the German soldiers withstand the cold of the Russian winter. The German Army Command never planned for winter uniforms, never expected that the Russian campaign would last into fall and certainly not into winter. But that was a gross miscalculation, and the German

soldiers faced harsh weather, as cold and mean as they had never experienced it in Germany. The biting air penetrated their summer uniforms and their thin-soled boots. Many thousands froze to death. The newsreels showed us only some of this—soldiers stamping their feet on the icy ground, their breath turning into white clouds of condensation—nevertheless, they smiled and waved to the camera as if it all was great fun. We could not hear what was said; the sound of the film was marching music, and an official informed the audience of a successful advance.

On the day of the appeal for warm clothing—we were still in Berlin—our friend Mr. Becker rushed to see my parents, "Don't give them anything." he urged, "Sad as it is, you would only extend the war if you do, and the sooner it's over the better." Of course, my mother never intended to give her coat away. She kept it because she needed it herself.

***

One morning, my mother said to me, "It's time for you to go to school again." Her remark did not sit well with me. I never was an enthusiastic student. When the matter was brought up earlier, I tried to wriggle out of it, with little hope for success. My disenchantment with school started already in first grade and did not change much. There were certainly fond memories of all the friends, but not so fond memories of certain teachers and the discipline. I thought—and I knew this was nonsense—that I was through with school when I left

Cottbus. But I also admitted to myself that deep down, I really wanted to finish high school and then enter college as everyone I knew had done, or planned to do.

Still, now I asked my parents if this was really necessary. My father settled the matter, "Rubbish! You've got to go to school and learn something."

***

February 1944

For two months, I went to a girls' high school, which had been evacuated from Kassel to Bad Wildungen. I liked it there…and the students and the teachers. Except for the principal, Dr. Carsten. He was our history teacher, a heavy-set man in his fifties of imposing height and girth. His hair was gray and thick, his eyebrows black and pointed. On his lapel shone the Nazi Party button. I was surprised when he lit a cigarette during class. That was unheard of…a teacher smoking while lecturing! I had never seen a teacher do that, and I always thought it was not permitted. But, of course, no one said a word about it. I was afraid of him. We all were. He was serious and never smiled—not like our principal in Berlin, who had been a young, cheerful man with always a kind word for the students.

One day Dr. Carsten came into the classroom and announced, "Today I want to explain to you the new world order after the German victory." He proceeded to lecture us on how Germany would divide up Europe. I wondered if he could ignore how badly the war was

going. Did he believe the German propaganda? And who thought up the plan he was presenting to us, anyway?

Once, after the war, I met him in the street. He had lost much weight. His shirt collar drooped from his neck, and his jacket hung on his shoulders as if on a clothes hanger. Suddenly he stooped down and picked up a cigarette butt someone, probably an American soldier, had dropped into the gutter. Cigarettes could only be bought on the black market at a high price. The scene was pitiful. I had known him as a proud and arrogant man, and now he was reduced to picking up the butts of his former enemy. He did not see me, and I quickly walked away.

In retrospect, I am sorry that I did not confront him about his lecture of "The New Europe" and ask him if this was what he had imagined.

***

March 1944

Eventually, the school from Kassel was relocated to a village, and to my regret, I had no choice but to join the local co-educational high school. I had so much more in common with the girls from the Kassel school. They, too, came from a city that was heavily bombed.

I didn't much like the local youngsters, though I had never really met or talked with any of them. I considered them country bumpkins with small-town mentalities, and I felt much worldlier and a little superior as youngsters all too typically do. Worst of all, I was far

behind schedule, having missed a lot of school because of the air raids and the move to Bad Wildungen. There would be much extra study.

I told my mother, "I don't know how I can possibly pass the *Abitur* (final high school and college entry examination) next year. Perhaps I should enter a class below my grade. It would give me the time I need to prepare myself for the *Abitur*. I've just missed too much." To my relief, my mother agreed, "Yes, I thought about it myself, and I'm sure they'll let you do that so you can catch up. One year doesn't matter." The principal accepted my petition.

The first time I entered the Bad Wildungen School, I was shocked. It was nothing like the high school in Berlin, a handsome building with three wings surrounding a well-kept, spacious schoolyard, bright hallways with circular water fountains made of decorative stone, large windows…and no boys. It was a girls' school. In contrast, the Bad Wildungen School was an ugly redbrick structure in need of repair, and the presence of boys made the atmosphere somewhat rowdy and loud.

Every morning from then on, I entered this plain building with its dark corridors, poorly lit from narrow windows on either end. The musty smell in the drab hallways, which had not been painted for years, lingered on. And when it rained, which was often, the odor mixed with the unpleasant smell of wet coats.

The yard, unfenced and unpaved, was muddy when it rained. Across from the main building stood two round, small, but compact

bunkers, built at the start of the war when the town was thought to become Göring's headquarters. A few steps behind the shelters, stairs led up to the street and from there to the old center of town.

To my surprise, I liked the teachers and none were disagreeable. After a few weeks, I made friends with the girls and boys in my class.

Still, school did not motivate me and I had little use for homework. But this was nothing new. I considered homework an intrusion into my free time, and I got away with a minimum of study. When my mother asked, "Have you done your homework?" and I nodded, "Yes," it was most of the time—nearly always—half the truth. I did the written work, but left much of the reading assignments to the recess before the specific class. Then I quickly scanned over the text. I wrongly assumed that if I would show interest in class, be active and participate, it would be half the battle and I would get away with a fairly good grade. Actually, it was less than "half the battle," but enough to pass.

Mathematics remained a problem. To me, it was a vile monster with a thousand heads I could never slay. I resented it like an irritating insect buzzing around my head. I did not know why I had to learn so much more of mathematics than I thought was necessary. I was certain that it would be useless in my future life, and in retrospect, I was correct. But despite it all I did make some progress because of an energetic young teacher who had a sense of humor.

I had never been an ardent student, and now the upheaval of the times added to my lack of incentive and concentration, rather than the school or the teachers. Underneath it all, the disruption of an orderly life, a sense of unease and confusion, caused me to spend less time than ever on my schoolwork. I excelled only in English because of the private lessons my parents arranged for me in Berlin in order to become fluent in that language, and when I started school in Bad Wildungen, I spoke English quite well.

***

It happened that Mrs. Block's daughter, Gerda, was my classmate. Gerda was as devoted to Hitler as her mother, our landlady, and I despised her from the start. Her dark-brown, kinky hair—a fuzzy mop—covered much of the left side of her face. An unfortunate hairdo, I thought. She could improve her looks, could even be pretty, if she changed it, but her figure was dumpy and her legs were short. Her small, black, piercing eyes were constantly on the move, darting here and there, as if she did not want to miss anything. She often wore the Hitler Youth uniform to school.

I told my mother, "She talks like an old woman, as if she has all the answers. She's self-righteous, ambitious, and seldom smiles or laughs. Did you see her in uniform? She, too, is a little leader. And the way she struts down the street in her black boots, stuck up and self-important, with that awful hairdo."

My mother laughed, "True, but I think she is cute."

"Cute? With that hair? No, never! And I don't like her!"

Though my hair was fine and thin, it was quite wavy, so it appeared fuller than it really was. I was proud of it; it always fell nicely along my face. A slightly reddish tone appeared in sunlight. My sister had inherited my mother's looks, her large blue eyes, her aquiline nose, and her dark, straight and thick hair that also had a reddish tinge. As a child, she wore her hair long, often braided into thick pigtails, while mine was always short, and for a while, I even had a boy's haircut that was fashionable for girls and women in the thirties.

"Just don't make any trouble. Be nice, we are their renters."

"I know, I know," I sighed.

In the beginning, Gerda and I walked to school together. But soon I avoided her. I preferred to go alone, and apparently so did Gerda. I could tell she did not like me either.

However, there were times when we could not avoid each other, and one morning I ran into her at the front door. There was nothing we could do but walk together making polite conversation. Among the people rushing to work, I recognized a shop girl coming toward us. I said a friendly, "Good morning," and the girl answered with a smile, "Good morning."

Gerda frowned and joined in with a loud Heil Hitler, but the girl had already passed. Gerda's frown deepened, and she silently stared

ahead of her. Then she said as if to no one, but I knew it was meant for me, "The people from out of town never say Heil Hitler."

I was startled. Her remark put me on the alert. But I only mumbled vaguely, "Oh, really?"

Gerda blurted out angrily, "It is all the fault of the Jews. I mean the war and the bombs and what's happening now."

"Were there any Jews here?" I asked.

"Yes, two families."

"And what happened?" I wondered what she would answer. I was not sure if she knew anything about concentration camps.

It was dangerous to mention the camps to a devoted Nazi. The extermination program of the Jews, Gypsies and others in the concentration camps was a deep government secret. One could be denounced as a liar, one who denigrates the government, and be thrown into such a camp. Officially, they were called "re-education camps."

"One family left, and the other …" Gerda hesitated for a moment and then said with a sneer, "Well, the man jumped out of the window."

There was such hatred in her voice it frightened me. It's the propaganda, I thought, where else did she get all that? And what can I answer without giving myself away? I swear this will be the last time I'll walk with her. I became more careful. There was something so

forceful in her personality that I feared she would report anyone she suspected of being anti-Nazi. She could be dangerous.

I glanced at her angry red face as she marched at my side. Her mouth tightly closed and her eyes squinting, she stared straight ahead of her. She had no idea how much I knew, and she probably did not suspect it. We went on without speaking.

I thought, what would Gerda think of Elsali's family, of her sister Edith and her mother, old Mrs. Pincsohn? She would probably think it served them right, being Jews. What would Gerda do if she knew about the day when Edith came to see my mother when we were still in Berlin?

It must have been a year or two earlier. I was in the living room with my mother when suddenly the door opened and Edith burst in. Anxious and out of breath, she had rushed through the entry hall full of waiting patients and entered without knocking.

Before we could say anything, she gasped, "Nobody saw my star; I hid it under my coat collar. I don't want to give you trouble." Her mouth trembled and she had tears in her eyes. "I pulled my hat into my face when I came into the hallway. Can you trust your housekeeper?"

"Edith, what's wrong? Please, sit down. And don't worry about Hella. She's a Communist anyway. What has happened?"

"Mother got the card." Edith blurted out, "They are coming tomorrow morning to pick her up. It's Theresienstadt."

Edith was crying softly, wiping her tears. "Mother won't go, she is eighty-four, and she knows she will never survive the trip." She caught her breath. "She wants to die here at home with us near her, and she wants to take the pills tonight."

My mother reached for Edith's hand. "Oh, Edith, what can we do?" she murmured.

"Could your husband come over tomorrow morning very early," Edith asked, "before they pick her up, to see if she has died? She wants to be sure, because if she's still breathing, they'll take her. Maybe she needs a shot to help her end it," Edith sobbed, "Will he do that?"

"Yes, I am sure he will."

"But he must come early; they must never find him with us—that would be terrible for him."

"Of course, Edith, of course, he'll be careful. Wait here, I'll get him."

The next day at lunch, my father told us, "Mrs. Pincsohn was still alive, but unconscious, when I arrived. I gave her an injection. Then I left right away." He sighed, "I am a physician; I am supposed to make people well. Instead, I had to do this." He shook his head. "I liked Mrs. Pincsohn; she was a grand lady."

"Did anyone see you?" "No, and they won't see the mark the needle made." He paused for a moment, "Edith said her mother was calm last night and even consoled her. She was a courageous woman."

A week later, Edith came again and told us of the death of her elder sister, a physician who was no longer permitted to practice in Germany. She was found in a Catholic church where she had gone to take poison. Again tears rolled down Edith's face when she told us, "Most likely she felt no one would notice her in a church, and the Catholic churches are always open. She could not bear our mother's death, and she was so alone. They would have picked her up, too. I am protected because of my husband, but she had no one." Then she continued, "You know, my husband is so wonderful. After mother was evicted from her own house and came to live with us, we had to put up a sign on the front of the building: her name with a Jewish star. I came home from work when I first noticed it and ran upstairs in tears. But he took me into his arms and said, 'Come…come with me.' He led me into the street, and facing the sign, he said, 'Look at it, this is a beautiful star, it is a Jewish star, and it is lovely.' "

These thoughts flashed through my mind until Gerda and I were at the school. During the rest of our walk, we had not said a word to each other. Now I wondered—but could not imagine—what Gerda's thoughts were. We entered the building, and I followed her into the classroom.

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