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## Local woman relives WWII through writing

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Posted: 2008 Mar 07 - 01:41

By Michelle Gentile

Staff writer

JUPITER - Local author Christel Behnke Gehlert tells the story of love, life and war in "Recollections of a Hamburger," a catchy title, written to trumpet the life of someone who lived through World War II, fell in love with America and found herself in the process.



"Recollections of a Hamburger," was written by about the heaviest assault in Germany's history in 1941.

Later, they would call it the "Hiroshima" of Germany where more than 50,000 lives were lost.

"I am strongly anti war," said Ms. Gehlert. "I have a healthy respect for all living things."

This from a woman who grew up in war-torn Germany, where 9,000 tons of bombs were dropped between 1943 and 1945, destroying more than 250,000 homes.

As a child, she was aware of her circumstances and endured gnawing hunger, constant moving and general upheaval.

"I try to return kindnesses, because I remember how the kindness of people after the war helped my parents and siblings survive the desperate times," said Ms. Gehlert. "There was an organization in Hamburg, a major book club, which organized Christmas parties for children who wouldn't have had any presents otherwise."

She has lived in the Bluffs in Jupiter since 1994 with her husband, Dick, and loves living so close to the ocean because it reminds her of her childhood in Hamburg, close to the North and the Baltic seas.

"I remember not having coal for the stove, because either it wasn't available or my family couldn't afford it. The memory of feeling numb from the cold never quite goes away. Many times, my brother, sister, and I went to bed fully dressed, and we huddled together to stay warm," she said. "I think that being a child and having friends in the same situation helped me survive the war. The



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conditions we lived in were similar, although some people seemed to get back on their feet more quickly than others. I remember having dolls, but I could not recall ever playing with other toys. Playing in bombed-out buildings was fun.

Longing for new clothes was not fun, but having our family intact was critical to

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planks, singing in a community choir and fantasizing about America kept her whole during the conflicts and when her adolescence was cut short.

"My love for America began after I entered high school (in the seventh grade) and began visiting the 'Amerika Haus' in Hamburg, the American information center," she said. "My infatuation was with material things at first, looking at magazines with people who were dressed smartly; appliances, like refrigerators (which we didn't have); photos of beaches in California and Florida, such tropical and lush places.

"So I think I wanted to fantasize about America, because living conditions in Germany, even in the 50s, were so lacking in comfort and beauty. Reading about America was a way of forgetting what was in front of my eyes.

"I met a few Americans in the 'Amerika Haus' but they were so friendly and kind, I fell in love with each and every one of them."

Ms. Gehlert came to America in 1962, at age 21 after working in England as an au pair. By 21, she was legally allowed to leave Germany without the permission of her parents, although they supported her trip.

"My mother was terribly sad to see me go, but she consented nevertheless (she died three weeks after I arrived in Virginia)," said Ms. Gehlert. "I obtained employment in New York through the company I worked for in Hamburg, BP. I worked in New York City and New Jersey as a bilingual secretary. Two years later I moved to Michigan and got married to an American."

She went on to have two daughters and received a bachelors of arts in German and French in 1976. She then received a master's degree in linguistics in 1984, and taught German, and sometimes Latin, in public schools in Bloomfield Hills, Mich.

"I had to write the book in order to get past the war. I thought about the war every day of my life. When I saw people not finish the food on their plates, I thought about the war. When I heard fire engine sirens, I thought about the war. When my children asked me for stories about my childhood, the war came to mind," she said.

"Throughout the writing process, I felt a great burden of dredging up all that happened to me, but as I was writing about my teenage years and my very young adult years, I was able to recall the normal, joyous times of going to movies, going on trips, having parties with friends, falling in love."

When asked about how the soldiers of today will feel or how they might be coping, she had words of encouragement.

"I am sure that our soldiers and their families have to reach very deep inside to find that moment of grace that allows them to go on. I think my saving grace was the nurturing I received from my parents," said Ms. Gehlert. "When we, as children, became despondent about conditions around us, we could always go to our parents and get the assurance we needed. But where did they get their strength?"

Her answer to her own question is perseverance.

"The heavy physical labor performed, constant worries about where the next meal was going to come from, the inability to give their children normal times, running from bombs, walking 500 miles back to Hamburg after eviction from Czechoslovakia and the lack of comforts that my parents had grown up with," she said about her family.

Ms. Gehlert became a writer as a way to express all she has lived through, attesting that even through most difficult of times, people are capable of great achievement.

The book is available at iUniverse.com, amazon.com, barnes&noble.com and booksamillion.com.

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