

Comparisons are odious, Ralph Waldo Emerson insisted; and so they are. But comparisons are also inevitable, especially in the genre of World War II literature. Rightfully, Christel Behnke Gehlert's first full-length book about her birth through her twenties in war-torn Hamburg, Germany can be judged, and rightfully so, to be a significant contribution to the body of literature depicting an individual's response—and that of her society—to an inhumane condition: war.

In the preface, the author, a retired teacher of German, intercultural consulting, and English as a Second Language, writes that her story isn't about Germany at war—rather it's about how she and her family coped with the enormity of events that befell them. Gehlert kept diaries between 1955 and 1961; studied the photographs she had; made several trips to Germany to interview her older brother and sister and to consult the state archives in Hamburg. Some of the memories were so painful, she relates, particularly those of the immediate post-war years that she burst into tears upon recalling them.

She reminds us, for instance, that as a major port, Hamburg was repeatedly fire-bombed killing over 42,000 people and successfully cutting off the city's lifeline to the world and ships loaded with food.

In sharing the story of her girlhood, Gehlert recounts an especially poignant experience of herself as a two-year old. Hearing the sound of the siren, she immediately walked out of her home, all by herself, to a bomb shelter with her small suitcase of belongings. Two years old!

Because she writes in the voice and the memory of herself as a child, an adolescent, and a young adult, for the most, the book is written chronologically. However, she explains, when chronology seems abandoned, especially in the beginning, "it is done so intentionally, as tangled memories are wont to do." Her book is rich with personal period photographs, a map, and interspersed with

informative paragraphs of short, terse, italicized statements reflecting what else was going on around her. For example:

“In 1949, German children played in ruins. A generation without fathers ... children fend for themselves while their mothers work. About 385,000 Germans still live in camps.”

The author was one of those children who played in the ruins yet she relates this experience as an adventure, one unlike the others of deprivation. She was almost always cold and hungry for something to eat other than makeshift bread with lard; tired and dirty from an endless forage for coal and wood; physically uncomfortable wearing clothing made from burlap sacks or walking barefoot or in shoes of any size or in any condition.

Nevertheless, she also relates stories of happy family celebrations with music, dancing, laughter and of pranks, and report cards but most persuasively about her determination to improve her mastery of English, her favorite subject which she learns in school as well as from books, movies and, surprisingly, from the religious evangelicals who roamed over post-war Europe.

At fourteen she was crying over the death of movie idol James Dean (pining for the release of “Rebel Without a Cause”), and studying Doris Day and Rock Hudson’s interaction in “Pillow Talk”; at sixteen she attended a Billy Graham rally, and at eighteen invited the young traveling Mormon missionaries who knocked at the family door into her home, ostensibly to “improve her English” but most likely to test her Lutheran faith and upbringing—and even to improve her social life.

At twenty, she persuaded her parents to permit her to work in London as an au pair as still another way of furthering her study of English. At this time, 1961, reports of the Eichmann trial began to appear in the English newspapers and on television. Then and there, she learned, on a larger scale, the atrocities committed by her countrymen.

“Why had my parents, relatives, neighbors, and friends been so silent about the holocaust? Why did they tell us only about how *they* had suffered? How scared *they* had been when the bombs fell, when *they* were starving and freezing and walking home from Czechoslovakia in the company of thousands of miserable men, women, and children? ... As a child, I was too devastated by my parents’ suffering to ask the questions that would sadden them all over again. Or, if I did pose sticky questions, it was only to learn more about their plight, and not someone else’s. When they told their stories, they often cried. I had read THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK as a teen, but I never talked to my parents about it. They hadn’t read the book and they never asked me questions about it. I guessed the silence meant I had to figure it out all by myself. Or did I avoid discussing the fate of this young woman because I wanted to make believe what I was reading couldn’t possibly have happened? Didn’t I want to know the truth?”

When confronted in England by “this horrific event from Germany’s past”, she feels vulnerable herself because of ‘my country’s shame’—and at the same time almost surprised by her feelings of love for her country, a country far different from the English view of a Germany encompassed by “mountains, lakes, beer, and sausage.” Heartsick and homesick, Gehlert remembers a “beloved Northern landscape—gentle hills, heather in sandy soil, villages surrounded by fields of grain as far as the eye could see...the rolling North Sea and its endless beaches.” (She also missed, horribly, fried herring, her favorite dish).

As she matures intellectually and socially (her solution to “the boy-girl accepted thinking of the times was, ‘I informed him that if I liked a boy, I would kiss him’”), she began to think more and more about leaving Germany for a while. “Germany is a place tethered to the war and all the reminders of it,” she observes. After experiencing the bleakness and deprivation of her formative years, a reader can identify with the author’s interest in fashion or her enrollment in a course in the Art of Cooking French Cuisine or the exuberance of her family after their long wait for a telephone and a washing machine.

As we compare her life story with ours, her maturation experience with ours, we admire even more her passage from the resourceful, rarely complaining child to an assertive, informed adult working woman who critically questions Germany’s role in the war, who questions the roles of education and religion, who charts the

course of her own sexuality—and ultimately the nature of her love affair with America.

RECOLLECTIONS OF A HAMBURGER succeeds in capturing the bittersweet coming-of-age of a lively, curious, intelligent, young girl and the process of her country's slow recovery from war. Thoughtful readers of THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK and Elie Wiesel's NIGHT will want to add this book to their reading list: an entertaining and loving family memoir, a historical account of a city under siege and occupation and a foreshadow of the emerging post-modern world.

Ruth Imler Langhinrichs, a published writer and a former associate editor of the Ladies Home Journal, is currently a Writing Consultant at the Writing Center at Indiana Purdue at Fort Wayne.