

Coming of Age Under Hitler, Truman, and Stalin

by Tamara Holtermann Schoenbaum

Extraordinary public events affect the lives even of ordinary people. In the twenty-one years between my birth and the death of Stalin, I endured World War II and German National Socialism, I experienced American capitalism, and I was tempted by communism. Pacifism also claimed my attention, but I hesitate to rank it with the other three. Since ideologies, for all the energy they generate, warp the mind, distort the truth, and obscure the distinction between right and wrong, I learned to distrust all of them in the end.

My experiences were neither spectacular nor even typical. It was my great good fortune that they included neither deportation nor violent death personally witnessed. However, they did include attempts from various directions to win my allegiance and bend my mind. I grew up among Germans temporarily intoxicated with power, reckless, even murderous, who inflicted and suffered terrible destruction. In 1945, when World War II ended, I was thirteen years old. Greater than the deprivations of which I suffered a small share, greater, too, than my memories of terror, was my appetite for enduring ideas and beliefs. Though I actively began my blind and unguided search upon reaching adolescence, ideas and ideologies had been in the air I breathed long before that.

I was born in Aachen in 1932, one year be-



The author and her family, 1942: From left, Tamara, Aurelia, Waldo (in back), and Jan Holtermann.

fore Hitler came to power. My hometown was, and still is, within walking distance to the German border with Belgium and the Netherlands. Before World War II, it was a middle-sized city with a predominantly Catholic population. The city boasted a history of almost twelve hundred years and a special link to Charlemagne. Because of this and its proximity to four other countries, many regarded this city, and it certainly regarded itself, as a cultural hub and the heart of western Europe.

My father came from a north-German Protestant family. He had wanted to become an architect. Instead, he inherited a wholesale business and reluctantly made it his own. To compensate for his unhappiness with an occupation he had not chosen, he kept company with artists, musicians, and literary people, many of whom fashionably leaned to the left. Most of his close friends believed that everyone should vote for the Communists, in order to keep the Nazis out of government, and they turned each other's first names into Russified diminutives of endearment, a testimony to their belief that the heirs of the Russian revolution represented their only hope for mankind. Waldo became Vaninka, Ida became Idasha, Wilhelm became Villushu.

My mother was born in Poland in 1906 as the seventeenth child of Jewish parents. As

the family grew and prospered, it became progressively assimilated, until its roots were almost severed, religious practices were shed, and not much Jewish identity was left, except in the eyes of those who hated Jews. By the time my mother left Poland, in 1926, her only brother and many of her sisters had died, most of them in childhood epidemics. Of the four surviving sisters, one went to America, one to Germany, and two perished later in Auschwitz.

There was a basic difference of civic disposition between my parents, of which I was dimly aware as a child. I never heard my father say anything political, at least not until I was virtually grown up. In the presence of children, he would discuss neither politics nor money. Behind the discreet curtain of bourgeois respectability, personal lives in my father's family were not exemplary. Still, my father was a law-abiding citizen. In contrast,

my mother, having grown up in Poland under Russian dominance, firmly believed and would often say, that laws were there to be transgressed. The only laws she seemed to know were unjust laws. Her keen survival instincts and a great compassion for the down-trodden persuaded her not to leave politics to the politicians.

When Hitler's regime began to close in on us, this difference between my parents became quite apparent. My father was subjected to increasing pressure from his relatives and business associates, all active Nazis, who urged him to abandon his Jewish wife. I became aware of this because we suddenly stopped seeing these relatives and sharing festive occasions with them. My father was quite scared, but inclined to keep quiet and wait for the nightmare to pass. In contrast, my mother was alert, adept at beguiling the Nazi functionaries she despised, and pre-

COURTESY THE AUTHOR



The author's hometown, Aachen, Germany, after an air raid in July 1941. Aachen is within walking distance of the border with Belgium and the Netherlands, and was briefly the home of another Jewish girl—Anne Frank—when she and her family lived with her grandmother in 1933.

pared to fight for her life and her family, not with weapons or underground activity, but with charm, ruse, and deception. Occasionally, she did dangerous things: she voiced opinions or helped people she was not supposed to help.

In 1940, when I was eight, my mother invited me to her bed to tell me, under the blanket, that the people in power, that is, the Nazis, were all common, and not so common, criminals. She said that I should remember this whenever I heard or read their propaganda, I should minimally cooperate in school, and I should never tell anyone what I heard or observed at home. I wondered indiscreetly what my father's political position might be, were he not married to my mother, but basically, I was a good girl. I did cooperate, and I did not tell anyone what my mother had said.

SHSI (DES MOINES)



Iowa children like ten-year-old LeRoy Powers experienced the war far differently than European children. Powers (from Emmetsburg) was champion of Iowa's rural school milkweed pod collection contest. His teacher, Ella Mae Bruck of Osgood, shares in the honors at the statehouse, 1945. Powers collected 150 bushels, to be used as a wartime substitute for water-resistant kapok fiber in life preservers.

Cooperating with the Nazi regime meant holding up my right arm during the frequent public singing of two consecutive anthems. Whenever I could, I nonetheless rested my aching arm on the shoulder of a child in front of me. Cooperation meant participating in marches and other outdoor activities, or waiting for hours on roadsides for Nazi dignitaries to drive by, and feigning enthusiasm when they did. My parents acquired a framed photograph of Hitler and stashed it behind a tall row of art books. Cooperation meant whisking out the Hitler portrait from behind the books and hanging it on a designated nail, whenever a certain inquisitive Nazi official in uniform came to visit. Cooperation meant not regaling my classmates with the political jokes I heard at home. (My father, a witty and whimsical man, never told political jokes, but my parents' friends did not hesitate.) It was not easy to keep a mental distance from the world outside my home. Even though I felt honored by my mother's trust, and the thought of denouncing her therefore never crossed my mind, I was afraid of betraying my family inadvertently. I remember my inner conflict and the constraints on my behavior on the day when Hitler was almost assassinated, and on many other occasions when the enthusiasm of my classmates clashed with the truth I had learned at home.

Nazi propaganda depicted Jews as subhumans, and hateful propaganda, with hideous caricatures of Jews, was posted in all public places. It was always present on the radio, in speeches, on the lips of our teachers. My mother decided not to tell me about our Jewish identity. Rather than allowing people around us to define me as an outcast, and possibly as subhuman, she decided to have me live like other children of my age. She let me be inducted, with other ten-year-olds, into an organization for aspiring Hitler youth; she also let me join my Catholic friends in church whenever I felt like it. I enjoyed the folk songs we sang with the youth group, the solemn music I heard in church,

and I learned a lot about the many ways of winning children over to a political or religious cause.

Not until the war was over did my mother tell me about being Jewish. In the mid- and late thirties, before the borders were closed, my mother and I had traveled to Poland several times to visit her sisters. It was easy to avoid the issue of Jewishness; I was still a small child then, and neither my mother nor her sisters were practicing Jews. My aunt kept me amused by treating me to rides in horse-drawn taxi carriages, while my mother, as she told me much later, assembled false testimony and photographs to help her construct the story that cut her Jewish family tree in half and hence would later save us.

My mother's original name was Rajzel Florenstein. When she was born, her mother was fifty-four years old, or so it was remembered in the family. This remarkable circumstance became the basis on which my mother rewrote a part of her history. She claimed that her mother was not that woman of fifty-four, but a non-Jewish maid. She produced a statement from two Poles, one Catholic and one Protestant, addressed to no one in particular, but tailored to fit my mother's needs, in which these "witnesses" claimed, in 1936, that on his deathbed in 1931, my grandfather had made a confession to them: he had had an illicit affair with a household maid, who later disappeared, leaving the baby with the real father, his wife, and his sixteen other children. In this statement, my grandmother's age at the time of my mother's birth was quoted as fifty-seven, which made child-bearing even less plausible. Since no one in the early 1940s had heard of a menopause accident at fifty-four, let alone fifty-seven, resulting in a healthy baby, the story seemed credible to the authorities.

Nonetheless, we were summoned to the Office of Racial Affairs in Berlin, where photographs and measurements of our skulls, noses, ears, and feet supposedly tested my mother's allegations. I remember the journey, but did not understand its purpose. The Nazis cultivated a dubious kind of biological anthropology with simplistic and extreme stereotypes of Jewish physical appearance. Since

we did not look Jewish to them, we passed the test. My mother was rubber-stamped as "half-Jewish." This, and being married to a non-Jewish German citizen, saved my mother from deportation to a death camp. My brother and I were now considered "quarter-Jews," and that saved him and me. None of us had to wear yellow stars, but when we saw people in the street who did, my mother always whispered to me her outrage and compassion. Apparently there were many people who knew the real truth about us, because they had come to know my mother long before she reconstructed her past, but they looked the other way and did not talk.

I experienced the war much as did other German children. In September 1939, when it began, we were in a health spa where I was being treated for bedwetting. A heavy sense of doom descended on us. My mother loved Poland, and Germany was now at war with it. I also remember the invasion of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands in 1940. Many airplanes suddenly roared overhead in the night. My father was in Belgium on business and detained for a while. As each successive declaration of war was announced over the radio with loud fanfares, I concluded from the reactions of my parents and their friends, that Hitler had gone mad, but that no one was able to stop him.

My father was drafted in 1942, but since he was already forty years old, he was only sent to occupied France to collect food for his unit. He hated being a German soldier. When a French resistance fighter shot through his right hand as he was holding a helmet full of

COURTESY THE AUTHOR



This profile of Tamara Holtermann (the author as a child) was photographed for the Nazis' Office of Racial Affairs to determine if she fit their physical stereotypes of Jews.

eggs on his lap, he was almost grateful. But the war was far from over. My father's hand was repaired, though never well enough for him to pull a trigger, and he was sent back. He was captured in 1945, almost starved to death in a prisoner-of-war camp on the Rhine, and was released, too weak to walk, but glad to have survived.

My school days were frequently interrupted by air-raid alarms, and I spent many days and wakeful nights in public air-raid shelters. In the spring of 1944, when the front advanced from the west, the government sent all the children of my school to Malmedy, a small town in occupied Belgium. I was billeted with the family of a poor and ignorant but loyal Nazi who had already lost two sons in the war. His wife wept and prayed often and was very good to me.

In May 1944, the house in which my family had lived was destroyed by bombs. I returned the next morning from my temporary quarters in Belgium on a scheduled home visit and stood before a heap of rubble. A corset dangled eerily from my favorite chestnut tree; piano wires hung over the foundation. I wondered where my mother and my little brother might be. A guard discovered me, told me angrily of unexploded bombs, and sent me to the nearest shelter. There, I found neighbors sitting in candle-lit semi-darkness, waiting. There was no water. Behind a bedsheet strung across a doorframe, there was a tall heap of human excrement. A baby, covered with sores, scabs, and flies, lay in a carriage in the sun, naked and alone. My mother, who would sometimes spend the night across the border in occupied Belgium to get some sleep, had escaped the bombing and found me several days later.

When the battle on the western front became audible, my hometown was evacuated. We fled east, to a small town in Westphalia where my father's hand was being repaired. The hospital where we found my father had previously been an insane asylum, but the Nazis had quietly done away with its residents. We came to live with the families of the hospital orderlies, who whispered dark things about the fate of their former patients. This was all that anyone in this small commu-

nity seemed to know of Nazi depravity, but it was enough to turn these good people against Hitler's regime and keep us safe among them. My mother sent me out to watch for surprise visitors; then she covered the radio with a blanket and listened to British and Russian broadcasts, an offense punishable by death. She was consumed by one desire: to outfox and outlive the Nazi regime.

There were many young Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish men and women in the area, who had been deported to Germany as slave laborers. My mother often talked to them and tried to help them, ignoring all risks. Sometimes, she took me along. As the front drew near, these people ran away and banded together in the woods to wait for their liberators. Some twenty of them were caught and summarily executed by the SS. (Later, this became known as the Warstein Massacre.) I remember the horror on the faces of those who found out. The war was almost over before even my Jewish mother knew anything about these or any other Nazi atrocities.

We were liberated in April 1945. Together with many other people, we had taken refuge in a cave-like shelter, where the air was so thin that candles would not burn and oxygen bottles had to be brought in. My mother fainted and had to be carried out, just in time to greet the first American soldier. For another month, we lived in terror of being reconquered by what was left of the German army. When peace was finally proclaimed on May 8, I did not trust it, and even when it became reality, there was much reason to be grateful, but no cause for celebration, for many more of the horrors of the war were brought home to us then.

We returned to Aachen later that year. It took us a week to travel some one hundred miles by train. Germany was in ruins, and everyone was on the move. One price of war had been the rationing of food. The price of peace, ironically, was an almost total lack of food, and a shortage of everything else. The older people remembered starvation after the First World War and taught us about all the unlikely things one can eat. We ate

nettles, which grew everywhere as a weed; they burned our fingers but tasted as good as spinach. We made gourmet meals with huge turnips ordinarily fed to pigs. When school resumed in 1946, the "Quaker soup" dished out in the morning, a heavy mass of oatmeal, milk, and chocolate, was for many children the only meal for the day. Again, I was luckier than most. My mother found employment as an interpreter for the United Nations Relief & Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in nearby Cologne. She came home with food on weekends. I also remember the peanut butter, cans of corned beef, and pajamas in garish colors that came in packages from my aunt in New Jersey.

As people carved out of the rubble a makeshift place to live and plucked weeds from the rubble for food, there was plenty of food for the mind. Though people were hungry and cold, they displayed great ingenuity for finding and exchanging things to read, especially books that had been banned or burned. Every book that appeared under license from the Allied occupation forces seemed desig-

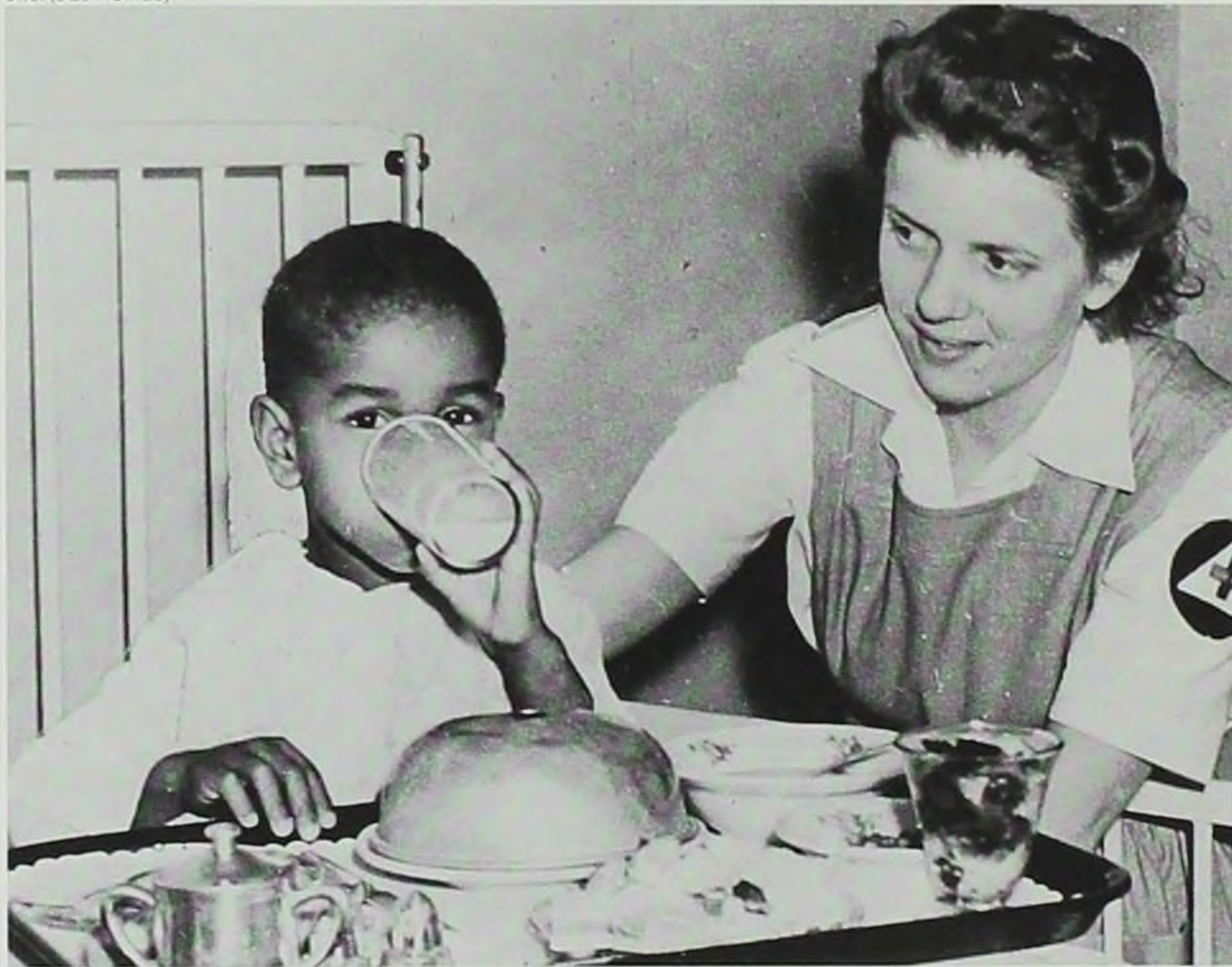
BOTH PHOTOS: SHSI (DES MOINES)



Iowans joined relief efforts by sending a variety of materials to war-torn Europe. Above: Jerry S. Engman of Des Moines donates his brother's raccoon coat to Russian war relief, March 1943. Below: Members of the First Church of the Open Bible in Des Moines prepare packages for British relief, about 1940.



SHSI (DES MOINES)



In Ottumwa, Iowa, far from battlefields, this young patient at St. Joseph Hospital is helped by a smiling nurse's aide, assigned to relieve registered nurses for more critical, wartime nursing tasks.

Below: Children in Page County, Iowa, witness machine-gun demonstrations by Lawrence Nash and Vernon Davids, soldiers from the prisoner-of-war camp in Clarinda.

SHSI (IOWA CITY); ORIGINAL OWNED BY RUTH S. WATKINS



nated to help Germans find a way out of their bewilderment and give back to them what their government for twelve years had thought unfit for them to read. This, incidentally, is how I came across the *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx, a treatise that was to become my gospel of social justice.

Cultural activity was unusually intense. There were plays and concerts, even though there were few places left that could serve as auditoriums. There were religious revivals, though many places of worship had been destroyed. People gathered in small groups to talk about twelve-tone music or the latest books of German writers scattered abroad. Actors held readings of poetry that focused on timeless subjects, but especially on the evils of war. Some of these poems had been written during or after World War I. They tended to treat war like the bubonic plague, something visited by God on innocent mankind. Newspapers and periodicals agonized about the recent past and explored the possibilities of democracy. Hans Werner Richter speaks of these first postwar years as "the beautiful, lean, hopeful years," and this is how I remember them. It was an exciting time to be alive.

When World War II ended in 1945, my parents thought that there would soon be another war, this time between the United States and the Soviet Union. They wanted to leave Europe and go to America, where my mother's only remaining sister lived. This was not easy, since millions of other people, most of whom had no other place to go, wanted to do the same. It took us four years to get our visas. By the time these were issued, in late 1949, a currency reform and the Marshall Plan had already paved the way to serious economic recovery in Germany.

I was now almost eighteen, and I did not want to leave. I was attached to my school and a few close friends. I admired my violin teacher. Except for jazz, nothing that filtered through about America seemed attractive to me, be it the popular music, the chewing-

gum culture, or more important things like American support for the corrupt old order in China. When my aunt wrote from New Jersey that "the best things in life are your family, your friends, and the American dollar," my heart sank. Capitalism introduced itself to me, and its face was ugly. However, three more years had to pass before I was legally of age. I had no choice but to follow my family to America.

In November 1949, we arrived in New Jersey on a semi-cargo steamer. My aunt invited us to a welcome dinner at her house in West Orange, a wealthy suburb of New York. A black couple in white smocks and gloves waited on us. No one introduced us, and they never spoke a word in our presence. When we were finally alone that night, in the overheated apartment my aunt had rented for us, I wept. I wanted no part of such ostentatious wealth and the class distinctions that went with it. In good times, my parents, too, had had a maid, but she was like a member of the family. She would eat and laugh with us and was never asked to wait on us in uniform.

When I earned a scholarship to a nearby college, my life took a brighter turn. I discovered the wonders of American libraries, I was invited to play chamber music with interesting adults, and I found a cohort, namely refugees and other young alienated students. Still, negative impressions prevailed. The radio station WQXR told us many times a day that New York was "a city of opportunity, where nearly eight million people live in peace and harmony and enjoy the benefits of democracy." Even though New York was probably a better place then than it is now, I found it hostile and segregated and the radio message an act of wishful thinking or even deceit. I saw only white Americans in white-collar positions, and blacks doing menial work. Opportunity and the benefits of democracy seemed illusory for some kinds of people.

The various jobs I held as a student introduced me to the general populace and to racism American style. A middle-class white woman for whom I cleaned house told me that she would never hire a black woman for this job, because she would have to allow her to use the toilet in her house. Others sug-



A groom in military uniform smiles as his new wife signs the marriage license—one of the happier scenes in the war's aftermath. Other scenes were less joyous: families searching for missing relatives, veterans suffering from trauma and wounds, and individuals everywhere trying to make sense of a war that had lasted far too long.

gested that I avoid working for Jews. This puzzled me. Had not Americans, both white and black, fought to defeat Hitler and racism? As a summer waitress in New Hampshire, I met open hostility from my superior because she knew that I was from Germany and believed that all Germans were Nazis. I knew that things were not as simple as that, but I found no words to demolish such prejudice.

I know now that America really is a country of opportunity, that its society is wonderfully diverse, basically decent, and that it has great civic and cultural vitality.

This was probably also true in the early fifties, but my perspective was limited by my age and social environment. I see and understand many things better now. But at that time, in New Jersey, American society to me seemed frivolous, irresponsibly wasteful, and rather smug and bigoted. I found it hard to accept the noisy tyranny of business interests, the shallowness and complacency of my young peers, the racism, and the fully automatic, self-righteous anticommunism. To me, these were serious flaws, but I had not come with great expectations, and so I did not look very hard for any saving grace. Unlike those fellow students of mine who had fled from Soviet

Communist occupation, well aware of what it would do to their freedom and well-being, I did not have to like America; I could always return to liberated western Europe. And so, when America failed to persuade me of its superiority, I did just that.

I returned in early 1952, at age twenty, after I had saved enough money for a ticket on an ocean liner. However, the country to which I returned had changed in my absence. Germans now wanted nothing so much as to be normal again, which to them meant being well fed and well dressed, and to forget the past. They had turned their attention to making money and rebuilding their lives. New research and documentation came out about the horrors that Germans had inflicted on Jews and other Europeans. Many Germans responded to this information with stories about their own suffering. It was undeniable that Germans had suffered. Twelve million East Germans had been displaced by annexation; almost all Germans had endured terror, devastation, privation, the loss of family and friends. Yet, in the one-upmanship that people displayed in the accounts of their suffering, the question of how all this had begun was usually overlooked, and that seemed to me in poor taste.

I had learned in America that it was important to read a newspaper regularly, and I began to think more seriously about politics and ideology. Pacifism was immensely appealing. I wanted an enduring peace in the world more than anything else, but I knew that without American, British, and Russian willingness to fight against Hitler, I, too, would eventually have been declared an enemy of the German state, with consequences by then well known.

Several of my friends were communists. Like them, I believed that communism, at least in the abstract, had a better grip on social justice than the capitalism I knew, but I resented the ideological rigor that was demanded of me. My bourgeois background and my interest in religion were often held against me and constituted permanent grounds for suspicion.

The ideological posture of the West German Christian Democrats then in power

bothered me, too. If there was to be any hope of seeing Germany united again, and of keeping the Cold War from catching fire, it seemed to me that one should at least keep an open mind about the Soviet Union and not form a military alliance against it.

In 1953 I was invited to Bucharest as a sympathizer and potential convert to communism. This was my first visit behind the Iron Curtain. I witnessed much privilege and little social justice there. Despite Rumania's great wealth of natural resources, all Rumanians I saw looked harried and poor, and all the shops were empty. Despite the proclaimed brotherhood of socialist republics, Rumanians were not permitted to travel anywhere, not even within the boundaries of their own country. When a young physician recklessly confessed to me his hope for another war, which he saw as the only instrument of relief from communist repression, I began to realize that the communist road to social justice was too long and rather ugly.

Later that year, I spent some time in Paris and discovered the great writer Albert Camus. I learned that it is possible to pursue social justice, and even a moderate form of socialism, without having to tolerate intimidation and repression. I learned that it is possible to be truthful to oneself and others, without sacrificing humanitarian ideals. Communism had lost its seductive appeal for me, long before I came to read about the horrors of the Soviet model under Stalin. I was now twenty-one and, by German law, old enough to vote. For reasons of luck, instinct, or precocious skepticism, none of the ideologies of my time had won my unreserved allegiance. The war had sharpened my sense of bigotry, deceit, and inhumanity perpetrated in the name of a cause. That year, I understood that I could only accept a system that would allow me to think for myself. That system would be strong, yet vulnerable, carefully conceived, yet untidy in its application. In return for respecting my humanity, it would require vigilance and hard work, but never unconditional surrender. □