

## **REMEMBRANCES OF GERMANY AFTER WWII**

**By**

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Our journey to West Germany really started in June of 1963 when my husband graduated from RMC and had to choose a regiment to join. He joined the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry which were based in Esquimault, BC and scheduled to be posted to Germany with NATO troops that year. We had a week after graduation to stop in Orillia to collect our 10-month son, Craig and drive to BC, stopping in Edmonton along the way at the regimental tailor's to be measured for uniforms. Once in Esquimault, we found a third-floor furnished apartment on the Saturday and the men left on Monday for 6 weeks of war games in Wainwright, Alberta. I was left with a baby, a car I didn't have more than a learner's permit to drive and knowing no one in the city. It was a difficult 6 weeks. At the end of October we sold the car and took the train across the country back to Orillia. In November, my husband left for Germany and to find a place for us to live.

Craig and I joined him early in December of 1963. The flight from Trenton was 11 hours in a turbo-prop plane - one of the last dependent flights to Germany for that posting. It had all the odds and sods on board, including 56 children, 22 of them infants in arms, 6 pregnant women (of which I was one), a couple of single soldiers - and one kid with measles whose mother had brought him on board. My husband was the officer on the ground in Dusseldorf in charge of the flight and the air is probably still blue over the Atlantic with "discussions" of the measly kid. Quarantining the whole planeload was one option, but fortunately that didn't happen.

The apartment Glen had found was in Iserlohn, a small city in North Rhine Westphalia, West Germany. Not wanting to live on the military base, the apartment he found was "on the economy", as they called civilian housing. We had the ground floor of a large house at Hagener Str. 66, with our landlady, Frau Helga Graumann and her two adult children, Ute and Volker, living on the second and third floors. There was a walled garden at the back, with fruit trees, flowers and a pond with a small fountain. The front door opened into a large stone-floored unheated central area, with a staircase going upstairs (with our toilet on the first landing). That was a cold trip in the winter! Each of our rooms opened off this area - a large living room/dining room, huge bedroom with marble double sinks, a smaller bedroom which led to the garden and the kitchen. The kitchen also contained the bathtub and handheld shower, behind a plastic curtain. It was very comfortably furnished, with a lot of built-in cupboards, sideboard, and so on, each with a key.

Craig took an almost instant delight in all the keys. They were soon removed and put away until we left. There was large grandfather clock in the corner near our bedroom, but we eventually got used to its chiming and hardly noticed .

Frau Graumann (Tante Graumann to the children) was well-educated, speaking English, French and German. Ute was a professional photographer for the newspaper her grandfather had started and Volker was attending university in Cologne. All of them were very welcoming and kind to us. Our rent was actually paid to Frau Graumann's sister who lived in Berlin. Ute often used me and the children for photos in the paper, like the magazine here. Janet was 10 days old in that picture, taken under the blooming pear tree in the garden.

We bought a car early in 1964, a Volkswagen station wagon. When you took it to be serviced it was swarmed by a crowd of young boys, apprentices in auto mechanics, with the boss in a white lab coat supervising. One of the other cars I remember seeing sometimes was a three-wheeled vehicle which was very small and opened up in front of the driver. Other vehicles new to me were articulated lorries, two large trucks joined together with a pivot. We parked behind the garden wall in front of a school. One evening when I was alone in the house with the children, a man came to the front door trying to tell me that I had left the lights on on the car. We were speaking through a metal grill in the door, and I couldn't understand him. All I noticed was the smell of beer on his breath. The next day, when I was supposed to go for tea to the Adjutant's house on the base, I realized what the kind man was trying to tell me. The battery was as dead as a doornail by then! By the way, the adjutant was John de Chastelain, who was very prominent, a General, in the Department of Defence on his return to Canada. We had two weeks leave three times a year, so we had ample time to travel on the continent. Our first trip was to Italy, and we didn't know about the toll roads, so the trip was shorter than we expected. We also saw a lot of Germany, Belgium, Holland and Luxemburg and France. Our last trip was to Spain, Gibraltar and Tangier in November 1965.

We were about an hour's drive from Arnheim in Holland and often went there. We had Canadian army plates on the car and the Dutch customs officers just waved us through, barely slowing us down. You have no idea how welcoming the Dutch are to Canadians, especially military. They never forget that Canadian troops liberated their country at the end of WW II. Generations of Dutch families lovingly tend Canadian graves. Every year the Dutch royal family sends hundred of tulip bulbs to Ottawa in thanks for Canada providing a safe haven for them during the war. Princess Margret was born here, on territory that was declared part of Holland temporarily to protect her Dutch citizenship. On the other hand, I have seen German cars at the Dutch border - luggage spread out around the car, sometimes hubcaps or door panels removed. There was certainly no love lost there. One of the most memorable meals I have ever eaten was an Indonesian riz tafel, a rice table, in Amsterdam. There was a base of rice and then dozens of small dishes of savoury, sweet, spicy additions. More than 50 years later, it is still memorable!

On the street in Iserlohn we were easily recognized as foreign. Craig's parka was an Eskimo-type jacket with a fur-edged hood. The stroller we brought from home was also very different. It had a seat, with Craig's legs hanging down and a canopy that clipped onto the handle. German strollers were much higher and had a sort of bunting bag/sleeping bag lining. The child was cocooned in this thick padded liner, with their legs straight out in front of them. Often children looked to be 5 or 6 years old, still being wheeled around rather than walking. When Janet was old enough to be wheeled around outside, I put Craig in a harness to keep him close by and Janet in the stroller. You should have seen the looks I got on the street! To them it looked as though I were walking a dog. Because of our foreign appearance, I often got looks from black-clad women, obviously widowed during the war. On the other hand, the nearby grocery store staff were very welcoming. Craig was usually picked up and walked around, treated to biscuits along the way. The butcher shop next door would always offer him a slice of salami or some such treat. When I went to say goodbye just before we returned to Canada, the grocer and the butcher had tears in their eyes and gave me gifts, such as a calendar. The only really unpleasant encounter I had was at the post office. We had bought some marquetry pictures which were made in Heidelberg. We were instructed to go to the post office and buy something which is a cross between a money order and a cheque which is deposited directly in the seller's account. I waited my turn and when I got to the wicket I asked the clerk to write the amount on the document for me. I could say the words for the amount, but was unsure about spelling the numbers correctly. He yelled at me IN ENGLISH that he wouldn't. With my hand shaking, I filled it in myself. It took him longer to correct than it would have to do it himself in the first place. When I got home I told Frau Graumann, and she assured me that the post office treats everyone that way.

Much of the housing we saw had been rebuilt after the war and was mostly gray cement. Our house was red brick, so it had obviously escaped bombing. Women would be out scrubbing their front doorsteps every morning. Iserlohn was a very clean city, as were other cities I saw.

Friends of ours from 2RCHA (Royal Canadian Horse Artillery) arrived a few months after we did. They found an apartment in Iserlohn on Gartner Str. in the home of Herr Wilhelm Wessel and his wife. Herr Wessel was General Rommel's official war artist and had accompanied him wherever he was fighting. There was a large charcoal portrait of Rommel on the landing outside John and Carol's apartment door. Frau Wessel was a stained glass artist. She and I once attended a performance of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet when it came to Iserlohn. Herr Wessel was a courtly European gentleman, one of the few German officers we met who admitted being on the western front. There are two books here which Frau Graumann gave us the morning we left. One of them has a picture of one of the stained glass church windows designed by Frau Wessel and a painting done by Herr Wessel.

We were aware of being the “thin red line” between the Soviet Union and the West. It was still very much the Cold War. The officers and men were not permitted to cross into East Germany or communist block countries because they would be trained to recognize things of military importance. I could have gone but had no desire to venture there by myself. On one occasion I was truly frightened. Frau Graumann and her family were away at their hunter house in Hesse and the men were away at one of their periodic war games. The air raid sirens went off! I was home alone with the children and had no one to ask. Obviously (now) it was a test of the sirens and that had been published in the local newspaper which I couldn't read. On another occasion, I was helping Frau Graumann take out the garbage cans when some British tanks rumbled past, absolutely shaking the street. Even though I knew they were British, they are still very formidable beasts. I cannot imagine what it would be like to have them approach for real. All of the Canadian troops living on the economy had to have a cardboard square in a front window identifying their address. A war games session would begin with a ring of the doorbell announcing a “Quick Train”. That gave the soldier about ten minutes to dress and be ready for the truck to return to pick him up. Of course, that always happened in the middle of the night.

Initially I had gone to the Canadian clinic on the base in Hemer, but it was a difficult process to take Craig on the bus and see a different doctor every time I went. So I asked Frau Graumann for a referral and then went to an OB/GYN who practiced in the hospital five minutes walk from home. Frau Graumann came with me for every appointment to translate, as the doctor didn't speak English. Janet was born in Krankenhaus Bethanien with a midwife in attendance on Ute's birthday, April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1964. Frau Graumann had insisted on being called at 1 am when I went to the hospital. The hospital was set in a park and maternity patients were encouraged, indeed ordered, to go out for walks in the park. I had taken a little German/ English dictionary with me and the nurses liked to practice their English with me while I learned some German from them. When the nursing sister brought the babies, they were beet red and swaddled so tightly that you could have held them out on one hand and they wouldn't have bent. They were also stuffed in the middle of a big down pillow in the nurse's arms. When she took me to the nursery to show me how to bathe a baby (never mind that I had a child already), I learned why they were so red. The nurse nearly took a scrub brush to them. The poor sister was also puzzled by the Canadian clothes such as double fronted vests that tied on either side, and diaper pins. She also thought I hadn't brought enough blankets to wrap her in for the trip home. A receiving blanket and lacy wool shawl wasn't the German way. A friend of Frau Graumann's produced a lovely canopy-draped bassinet for Janet, not satisfied with the crib I was planning to use. Birthdays are a big deal in Germany, so Janet got extra attention from the family. On St. Nicholas Day in early December, Frau Graumann told us to leave the children's shoes outside their bedroom door. The next morning they discovered two bread men with clay pipes standing in their shoes.

Iserlohn was in the British-administered section. I managed a branch Library for the Army Education Corp. The Major in charge told me not to lend books to Germans. But books are meant for sharing and a German woman regularly came in. I lent her books and she always returned them.

A very important military occasion happened in August 1964 when Princess Patricia, with her husband Admiral Ramsay, arrived to present new colours to her regiment on its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. She was a young woman in 1914 when the regiment was formed and named in her honour. She had embroidered the original colours. There was a formal Trooping of the Colours ceremony during which survivors of the original regiment led the marchpast. They were a small group of proud, elderly veterans, led by Col. "Shorty" Calhoun, more than six feet tall and ramrod-straight. It brought tears to your eyes to see them. This year, 2014, is now the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Princess Patricia's, as it is of the Quebec regiment, the 22<sup>nd</sup>, called the "Van Doos" for vingt-deux. Both regiments have impressive histories of being first to defend our country.

A trip to Ypres in Belgium was one of the most enduring memories I have for the commemoration of soldiers killed in battle. Ypres is one of the Patricia's battle honours, along with the Somme and others. The Menin Gate is a huge monument under which the road runs. I have a picture of it here, so you can get an idea of its size. Every surface, inside and out is covered in inch-high letters of the names of men who died in the mud in Flanders and have no known grave. There are 50,000 names carved there, arranged by regiment and rank. It is absolutely overwhelming. We were speechless for some time. There are also WW I trenches with mess kits and helmets lying in the bottom. Now every day The Last Post is played on trumpets at the gate. I found the Menin Gate even more meaningful than the cemeteries full of white crosses with names on them, important though they are as a place for families to visit.

A couple of years ago I was on a cruise on the Danube which started in Prague. I took a bus trip to Terezin, a former concentration camp near Prague. The Nazis called it Theresienstadt and gussied it up as a showcase for the Red Cross. We saw a 12-minute propaganda film before the tour, showing window boxes of flowers, children playing the violin and well-dressed people strolling around. The people were newly brought in and so looked well-fed. We were shown a shaving room that had two long lines of sinks with a curved tap over each one. Apparently the Red Cross inspectors looked in there from the doorway, nodded and said how well the inmates were being looked after. There was no water connected to those taps and it's doubtful if that room was used at all - except to fool the international community. In Nuremberg, we were driven past the prison where Nazi war criminals were confined, tried, and in some cases executed. The guides were all too young to have lived through the war, but they were knowledgeable and made no excuses for the Nazi period in their country.

Today is the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bringing down of the Berlin Wall. Even in the 60's I saw posters for the unification of Germany. According to the stories in the current weekend papers, there is still some distrust and discomfort between East and West German citizens.

Let us observe two minutes of silence in honour of the end of World War I and World War II and the veterans who fought for the liberty we enjoy today.