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On Hitler's Mountain
ISBN13: 9780060532185

How did you decide that the time was right to tell your story? Did you have any hesitations or doubts while writing *On Hitler's Mountain*?

When my mother died in 1985 I realized that her generation, the generation that brought Hitler to power and followed him almost to the end, was passing on and that vanishing with them were their stories and their memories of that darkest of times. The average Germans who were not famous or notorious enough to have written a book about their Nazi experience had for the most part been silent and the world and I condoned that silence, perhaps even insisted on it. It seemed that we had forfeited the right to talk about our pain and losses in the face of the suffering inflicted by Germany on others. Besides, the ordinary, non-criminal, moral Germans who had expected to live decent hard-working lives wanted to forget the Third Reich and their participation in it. Fifteen more years would pass until, at the urging of a few friends and my son, a historian, I finally broke my own silence and began to write *On Hitler's Mountain*. At that time, more than fifty-five years after the war, I decided that my own family's experiences, actions, and thoughts during the twenties and their acceptance of the ensuing fascism would offer insights and warnings for the present times when democracy, even in this country, seems vulnerable and under attack.

My hesitations were manifold. This was, after all, my first book and I wondered whether my decision to write it in English might get in the way of the German reality and my memories of the time. I worried whether using actual names was appropriate and decided that in all but one case (the Dehmel girls, whose real names I changed) it was. A very difficult matter, especially for my sisters, was being honest about some of my mother's secrets. Did I have the right, for instance, to expose her illegitimate birth when she had spent her life keeping it secret?

Since the publication of *On Hitler's Mountain*, have you been contacted by any schoolmates, or other people you once knew, such as Herr Schulz or Wiebke? How have people reacted?

My book tour in Germany included a talk in Berchtesgaden on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II and the Holocaust. To my amazement I was greeted warmly by many people I mentioned in the book and thanked for capturing our childhood the way it really was. I was especially surprised and happy that the younger generation (my friends' children) was deeply interested in the events that their grandparents had been so silent about. They did not deny their country's guilty past but were no longer burdened with personal guilt and were deeply committed to democracy, tolerance, and peace.

I did not hear from Herr Schulz, but one day in the fall of 2005 I received a phone call from Wiebke Molsen. In the voice of a sophisticated older woman she told me that she had read and loved *On Hitler's Mountain* in German and in Dutch. We have talked for many hours since and she confirmed my hunches about her family's anti-Nazi attitude and the secrecy they seemed to maintain. Every day little Wiebke's mother had reminded her not to tell anyone that they listened to the radio (BBC) under the bedcovers and every night the family was terrified that noises around the house meant Gestapo or SS spies. She and anyone I met from my early school years still share our hatred of Fräulein Stöhr. After Hurricane Katrina struck, Wiebke sent a financial contribution for victims of the storm in memory of all the refugees who had touched our lives as children.

You write that patriotism is a misused word, one that you began to hate. How do you feel about patriotism in America?

I fear that American patriotism is at times a naive and unexamined emotion that comes dangerously close to an exclusive, elitist nationalism. Patriotism should not be exploited to gain support for illegal wars and persecution of vaguely defined enemies. It must never include the dangerous notion of "my country right or wrong." Good patriotism means being proud of the cultural and natural heritage, political freedom, and humanity of one's homeland. The American flag and the National Anthem are much-revered symbols of patriotic values and fervor. But anyone who had to raise her arm to greet Hitler's swastika flag has learned not to blindly revere and follow these symbols. They are only as good as the lasting moral values of the country they stand for. They can be easily misused for political and propaganda purposes and to override reason and compassion.

Why do you think neo-Nazi groups are alive and thriving today? It was shocking to read that many Berchtesgadeners worried about the mountain becoming a pilgrimage site, but their concerns are well founded. What do you think feeds this enduring, rather grotesque fascination with Nazi trappings and memorabilia?

In present day Germany, Neo-Nazi groups are generally born of frustration with their political and economic situations, foremost in the former East Germany where unemployment is rampant and alienation and disappointment in a world of western capitalism is high. Hitler's sense of supremacy and messianic mission still has its appeal to these outsiders and the permanently insecure everywhere. The simple fascist view of a world of black and white where thinking and decision-making are left to a few self-appointed leaders has its attraction, too. Fascism feeds on paranoia and membership in groups of like-minded ideologues offers camaraderie and allows organized focus on scapegoats.

During my book tour in Germany, however, I found overwhelming opposition to Neo-Nazis and large counter demonstrations, such as candlelight processions, take place wherever they show up. The number of groups and individuals who over the years have come to "worship" on Obersalzberg is relatively small. They come from many different countries, including the U.S. However small their numbers on my last visit we did not see any signs of meeting places, mementos, graffiti, or carvings on the tall trees that now grow on the last remnants of Hitler's Berghof they attract media attention and the local population would rather they not come at all.

You tread lightly on life after your arrival in the U.S., but it must have been a difficult adjustment in so many ways. Would you consider writing another book, chronicling that stage?

I should very much like to write a book about my first years in the U.S., the struggle to understand this country and to be understood by it; also, of course, my evolving and changing relationships with the European and American Jews I got to know. In this book I would want to intertwine the adventures and stories of several non-German immigrants women friends from war-ravished Europe (the Baltic States and Holland) who forged new lives and yet are still to some degree under the shadow of those formative years in what was as near to hell as one could come.