

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



Eleanor Ramrath Garner *on **Eleanor's Story:** **An American Girl in Hitler's Germany***

During the Great Depression, when she is nine, Eleanor's family moves from her beloved America to Germany, where her father has been offered a good job. But war breaks out as her family is crossing the Atlantic, and they cannot return to the United States. Eleanor tries to maintain her American identity as she feels herself pulled into the turbulent life roiling around her. She fervently hopes for an Allied victory, yet for years she must try to survive the Allied bombs shattering her neighborhood. Her family faces separations, bombings, hunger, the final fierce battle for Berlin, the Russian invasion, and the terrors of Soviet occupancy.

Q: *What inspired you to tell your story?*

A: I had suppressed my experiences for so many years, trying hard not to think of them. Often, I was haunted by terrible nightmares and memories, and I developed a low-grade depression. I went into counselling and synchronistically met Sarah Smith, an editor and a coworker of mine who heard some of my stories. She encouraged me to write them down. In the meantime, Sarah moved to Atlanta to accept an editing position at Peachtree Publishers and I continued writing with her encouragement. Subsequently it was published by Peachtree. Best of all, I reconnected to that child within who had been buried under the ashes of Berlin for so many years, and I felt a healing take place.

Q: *Your younger siblings were born into war-torn Germany and had to experience the devastation at a very early age. Did they have different memories and feelings of your time in Germany?*

A: They were just babies. My youngest brother was born in January 1942 and my little sister in May 1943. They had little memory of those days, only fragments. Occasionally Tommy had a memory of his stolen shoes that couldn't be replaced—mentioned in the book. He was 3 years old then, right after the war. Sister Elizabeth

(Bassi) was just two years old. She has no memory of those years. My oldest brother, Frank, is 20 months older than I am. He experienced the war differently than me. He was a boy who was tough and tenacious, and he went under the motto "Boys don't cry!" He was an adventurer, while I was a dreamer and saw the events unfolding before me through the eyes of a sensitive child.

Q: *You and your brother Frank joined the Hitler Youth at the beginning of the war. What was it like being part of this social group as an American?*

A: This is an important part. It shows the subtle influence Hitler used on the young, how he created loyalty and enthusiasm through pride in their country. There were folk songs, patriotic parades with lots of fanfare, and youth body-building competitions, all things to pull children into backing their leader. I was 10 when I joined under Mother's protests. But all my new friends were in the Hitler Youth. They were having so much fun. It reminded me of the Girl Scouts in America. I had conflicted feelings between the two countries, but I wasn't interested in politics yet, and felt myself part of something bigger than myself. At that time, America had not yet entered the war.

Q: How similar/different do you feel your experiences and “coming of age” milestones of growing up were because of your unique situation of being in Germany during WWII?

A: Children of war are forced to grow up way before the psyche is ready to do so. They are robbed of their childhood innocence. I know exactly when that happened to me, that moment of awareness when I knew nothing would ever be the same again. It was the first big air raid on our section of Berlin. I was twelve then. I never really overcame the struggle with fear of death and loss of family members and friends. I was torn between two countries. Here the Allies were bombing my family and friends, yet America had my most precious memories that kept me alive, always yearning to go home.

Q: Throughout the story you refer to “the invisibles” as a source of faith and strength. How do you think that helped you through your experiences?

A: As the war progressed, Father worked for the Electric Company of Berlin and was gone all day, and Mother had the hard task of keeping our family together, taking care of the babies, and finding food for us. I had to find my own inner resources to cope with the threatening world about me. In my imagination, the invisibles were 14 angels that surrounded me. I saw them in an opera on Hansel and Gretel, and I thought, if Gretel can have 14 angels for herself, I could too. I imagined them to be bigger than life, with golden wings. Often, I could feel their wings flutter past my face and I was deeply comforted by them. In addition, I had a copy of the Botticelli Madonna hanging over my bed who also watched over me. In later years I realized that I lived in a totally one-sided masculine world. My psyche, unconsciously, sought refuge in the feminine. I could not pray to a Wotan-like God who was presented to us in German mythology as a fierce, merciless warrior god. I saw his face in Hitler and his henchmen.

Q: In chapter thirteen when you learn the American soldiers have arrived in Steglitz, you mention that you always felt like an American, even after living in Germany for about 6 years. How did your attachment to America stay strong through all that time?

A: Again, thanks to my imagination, I often remembered the happy childhood days in Stratford. At the beginning of an air raid I would often imagine running up the

walkway to the house in Stratford, pulling down the shades of the living room and settling down on our sofa until the air raid ended. Other times I felt myself being pulled between two countries, but always I thought of myself as an American. I was born in that country and my loyalty belonged to them. I was happy to see the first American soldiers as they came to our area of Berlin. I saw them as our saviors.

Q: When you came back to America, did your experience make it difficult to find commonalities with other Americans your age?

A: Yes, indeed, there was a huge gap between myself and my American classmates. I was still trying to overcome the trauma I experienced. I constantly thought of the friends I left behind in Germany who had to endure hunger and find ways to live in the totally ruined city of Berlin while I lived in a world untouched by war. Stores were bursting with things to buy, people were well dressed, homes were intact, and people well cared for. It was hard to fit in anywhere and find a real connection.

Q: What was the most challenging thing about coming back to America after experiencing what you did?

A: I think it was to find a place of belonging somewhere in this crazy world I lived in. I wanted to be like everybody else. I wanted to be a real teenager with normal teenage longings. But I had grown old before my time. It all became a struggle. There were so many obstacles on the way. I had what is known today as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I felt myself once more torn between two worlds, but deep down I knew I could never go back. The way of life is always forward. It does not tolerate a backward trend.

Q: Prior to writing Eleanor's Story, in the years you worked and raised a family, were your colleagues and neighbors aware of your history?

A: Some neighbors and colleagues were aware of my history, but didn't really know to what extent until they read my book.

Q: What were your family's reactions to your memoir?

A: They were very pleased that a member of the family had the courage to write down our unforgettable story of surviving WWII in Berlin. Of course, there was also

criticism, but overall, there was approval and pride in my accomplishment.

Q: Did you feel differently about those years after writing the book? How did you feel about the changes?

A: It felt like a heavy burden was taken off me. The nightmares stopped, my depression lifted, and my joy in life returned. I could see the story from the adult perspective, which was different from the child's point-of-view. I realized this was a wonderful story of growing up under totally adverse circumstances. And I could clearly see that because of the child's authenticity, the story jumped alive for many readers around the world. In the process of writing, studying my childhood diaries, and looking at old photographs and letters, an amazing healing began to take place. The traumas I had experienced and tragedies I had witnessed in my most formative years were finally surfacing after more than 70 years and were given recognition. I came to the realization that this forgotten child in my interior was actually the most authentic, creative part of myself.

Q: How have your childhood experiences shaped your view of the world as an adult?

A: I think the whole traumatic experience of WWII as a child created in me, as an older woman, an enormous capacity for love and joy, and a deep reverence for the sanctity and mystery of life. I have the self-confidence needed to become old creatively, to explore the expanding inner world courageously while the outer one is shrinking. I treasure my family and friends and the many readers of my book who write or call me, and those who are out there in other countries, who loved the book and were changed by it. Out of the seemingly chaotic events of my life, I'm beginning to see an exciting pattern emerge, a theme, like a fine thread that pulls the chaos toward an invisible wholeness.

Q: How do you think your story resonates in today's political environment? What do you think we can learn from what you witnessed to prevent others from going through similar things?

A: Stories, like mine, teach us about the triumphs and failings of human nature, about the evils of injustice and prejudice, and about man's goodness and his utter depravity. It involves choices that we make and how they affect us. Staggering statistics, like 55 million dead, jump alive in a single story like *Eleanor's Story*. One really begins to understand the enormity in human

suffering war engenders. No one really knows how many children have been maimed or killed in the Middle Eastern countries today. While the physical scars of conflict are all too visible, the mental and emotional turmoil experienced by wartime kids goes largely unmonitored and untreated. To this day young people with their impressionable minds are influenced by unscrupulous leaders. As an American child, I was forced into conflict between pervasive Nazi indoctrination and my own innate sense of humanity and moral principle, and what choices I made.

Q: How do you think your story resonates with the youth of today?

A: From what I hear, students are fascinated by the book and ask good, reflective questions. An Amazon review written by a student said:

This book blew me away. I could not put it down. Eleanor's insights were extremely interesting because it allows us to see a first-hand American view of what was occurring in Germany at that time. Eleanor was a very brave girl and should be considered a role model for students everywhere. This book should be a school assigned book because of its historical value and literary merit. It digs deep and touches you on a different level than the Holocaust books.

In my book I wanted to show my readers how Nazi leaders exploited young, impressionable minds, specifically what coercive methods were used to gain the trust of the young and bend them to Hitler's will. It gives a better understanding how young people, if not aware, can easily be influenced by unscrupulous leaders.

Q: What do you hope readers take away from your book?

A: Only through eye-witness accounts of survivors can one truly understand the human impact of war. What is sown today will be the harvest tomorrow. If it is violence, prejudice, hatred, and revenge, the future of the whole world will be at stake and violence will become the way to solve the problems of the world. I think the story of one innocent little girl, honestly observing every detail of war unfolding around her, says more than volumes of history books.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eleanor Ramrath Garner attended Boston University, and pursued a career as a permissions editor for textbook publishers for many years. In addition to being a published non-fiction writer, Garner is an exhibited artist. She lives in California.

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