German History in Documents and Images

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Frau Marion Beyme's Memories of Marburg and Berlin during the Third Reich
(Retrospective account dating from the early 1990s)

Historians have long been preoccupied with the social basis of the Nazi regime, especially as it pertained to the implementation of the National Socialists' most radical social and racial policies. The recollections of a contemporary witness who lived through the Third Reich as a young woman help shed light on this subject. In this account, the witness shares her personal experiences with various forms of conformity, disobedience, and resistance, all of which existed in constant interaction with government coercion and seduction.

The Ambivalence of Avoidance

The town of Marburg, about an hour's train ride north of Frankfurt, is celebrated for its lovely setting, its centuries-old university and library and other cultural jewels, and for being the workplace of the famous chroniclers of German fairy tales, the Brothers Grimm. As fearful children and frowning parents around the world know, most of the tales are filled not only with obstacles but with cruelty and violence, and typically end only after a plucky male hero saves and gets the female and/or the kingdom.

For some Germans in the 1920s, another fairy tale about another Reich was just beginning. And one local Marburg girl who must have looked perfect for a role as a Teutonic fairy tale princess was Marion Beck[1]. She was tall, blonde, and, given her striking looks in her seventies and eighties, exceptionally pretty. And she, too, numbered among the German youth pulled to the seemingly heroic Nazi movement.

For her and her classmates, the lure came early, about 1928. She was about seventeen. "We went to an office here called the 'donation ring.' It was a precursor to the Party. You could donate something, money or whatever. It was already very National Socialistic. We were *full* of enthusiasm and marched right over. I did it just once, went there and donated three marks or something so they could do something good with it."

Had her gesture met with enthusiasm or apathy at home, her course might have been different. But, upon hearing of the donation, "my mother, who was very political and very alert,

[1] At the request of author Allison Owings, the original German names that appear in her 1993 book have been changed for the present Internet publication.

enlightened me. She talked about what kinds of dangers were coming, how horrible she found the whole thing. She'd already surmised there could be a war. My mother was very keen of ear and eye." And as for Marion's inchoate enthusiasm for National Socialism, "that was the end of it." The larger tale, however, had just begun.

Among the families it would affect was the small united matriarchy headed by Frau Klara Beck, a First World War widow with two children, Marion and Joachim. Frau Beyme mentioned, many years after we first met, that her father had been a lawyer who was assigned during the war to rule on desertion cases. She said he began empathizing so much with the scared young soldiers who had run from battle that he was unable to sentence them to jail and refused to continue in his job. As punishment, he was sent to the front as a soldier himself. There, he was killed in battle.

The family he left behind knew well the potential price of opposing the government.

Thanks in part to both her parents, Frau Marion Beyme has the clear conscience not to have been a Nazi. But at the outset of our interviews, she said she was not the "active anti-Nazi" described to me by the American man who put us in touch. Meeting my first and rather eager question directly, she said an active anti-Nazi would imply someone who had hidden a Jew or done something along those lines. And, she said, she had not.

Barely disguising my disappointment, I asked on. Eventually Frau Beyme proved to be, although less brave than advertised, more intriguing. It is easy to judge heroes or criminals or even fellow travelers by their responses to the Third Reich, but it is not easy to judge a person who represents what might be called a universal dilemma of degree—a person who opposed the Third Reich more with heart and brain than with life and limb, a person who chose not to go along rather than to go against, a person who was, in sum, a passive anti-Nazi.

Frau Beyme still lives in Marburg, in a bright, attractive home she designed herself. She shares it with her second husband, Leonard Beyme, a folklore scholar. He is a thoughtful man of droll humor. It was evident from the start the Beymes live a comfortable, and readerly, life. Their home exudes careful taste and much evidence of her family's prosperous past, including such treasures as a lovely oval oil painting of her lovely mother and the remainder of her father's antique beer stein collection. (Frau Beyme said most of it was destroyed in the weeks after the war, when American occupation soldiers tossed the steins out the window and onto the sidewalk, apparently after drinking from them.) Herr Dr. Beyme's collection of prints of old Marburg lines one room. Thousands of books are here and there, neatly, in bookcases. The wooden floors gleam, the tea is choice, the bedsheets are of ironed linen (Frau Beyme had invited me to stay before we met), and the herbs are homegrown, in Dr. Beyme's organic garden.

It also was evident from the start that the couple's life is cultured old-world conservative every way but politically. The reason seems largely to be the Third Reich. The passive anti-Nazi

turned into an active antimilitarist and antinationalist. But being active in the 1980s helped no more than being passive in the 1930s and '40s, said Frau Beyme. Freedom to protest changed nothing. She listed all she had done, to no apparent avail, she said, against nuclear weapons. And being horrified by the Germany of the early 1990s, and reading about it constantly, helped nothing either.

Yet the lessons of the Third Reich permeate the way the Beymes see the world. During a first and extensive discussion, they mentioned, for instance, being wary of the Greens' movement. They did not like its celebratory view of "Made in Germany" products. The emphasis seemed nationalistic. And as the Berlin Wall came down, the Beymes were aghast at other Germans driving to East Germany, buying carloads of cheap state-supported goods, and gleefully showing them off back home. "We're ashamed," she wrote me. Herr Dr. Beyme, who had retired after careers in teaching and radio programming and an avocation in peaceful protest, said at one point he has given up and just works in his garden.

But Frau Beyme continued to fulminate. Her letters to me usually included a neatly clipped and underlined newspaper article about something that she deplored, from the United States' bombing of Iraq, to West Germany's politics toward East Germany, to the neo-Nazi hate crimes. It sometimes seemed to me that she had never relaxed since the Third Reich ended, or began.

The Nazis' boycott of Jewish-owned stores in April of 1933 may have been Marion Beck's first confrontation of conscience. Her mother led her through it.

"She always went into Jewish stores, even when the SA stood out front to see who entered. Once I went in with her. SA men in uniform stood outside. My mother really gave me courage.

"This Jewish merchant was someone from whom one could buy sewing needles and cloth and wool and scissors and so on. It was so terrible—such a very large store and completely empty. The owner came over to us. He was so *thankful* that someone *came.* My mother really had nothing to buy, but wanted to show him, I'm still coming. So she bought two small spools of thread. And in his zeal and happiness that someone was there, this man, Herr Blumenfeld, said, 'Shall I have them sent to your home?' But it was sad, naturally, he said it."

Frau Beck, declining the offer, put the thread in her purse and left with Marion. There were no consequences from the Nazis at the door. "We probably were very lucky. More could have happened. Nothing really did. They just half looked at us and could have recognized us, but didn't write down our names. One stood at each side of the door. It was so dumb. They'd been ordered there, probably hadn't thought about it a lot."

Soon after similar shopping excursions, "the stores were closed. The problem was taken care of." Frau Beck then followed a personal dictum of not buying from Nazis.

"My mother loved chocolate and went to a fine small shop where the best chocolate was. And one noted very early on in conversation, they were Nazis. So we never went there again. In a certain sense it wasn't that simple, since she liked this chocolate so much, but she didn't go again. Those are such *small* things one could do. It's really only that one relinquished something, but one did nothing active. Not that."

Thinking of "nothing active," I asked what happened to the family that owned the dry goods store. Speaking very slowly, Frau Beyme said, "They left, but I believe they got out in time. To the U.S. I did not hear they were killed." She said specific fates generally were learned after the war, when a survivor wrote to old friends. "It was talked around who still lived and who did not. But it took years until one knew."

In the meantime, she herself saw some of what was happening in her hometown. "Once, to my horror, I saw, who can that be? A lawyer suddenly having to do road work, to dig out the tracks for the streetcars. I could see him. He'd dug a deep hole in which he stood. He'd hacked it out. Suddenly I recognized him as a fine gentleman I'd seen on the street."

The Nazis also went after one of Marion's friends, "an *unbelievably* beloved gymnastics teacher. She had so many students. She was also very musical and always played beautiful piano accompaniment to the exercises, especially beautiful. And she put a little box on the piano and one threw one's money in for the gymnastics course. She never checked to see if everyone paid. There were so many, she couldn't. She was so beloved. Then suddenly came word she's half Jewish and can't give classes anymore. From one day to the next.

"There was another gym teacher here who worked at the school and was a Nazi. She had made it known. And my friend, who was married to a lawyer, moved to Berlin and hid, so to speak. You can do that easier in a big city. Two small daughters. They lived in a rented apartment in the middle of Berlin and I visited her there a lot. She gave classes to me and another friend, in her room. Her husband later was punished for marrying a half-Jew. He was put in the Waffen-SS, on what one called a 'commando trip to heaven,' with which one figured you didn't return. But he did." Safely.

I asked if he might be one of the Waffen-SS soldiers buried in the cemetery in Bitburg. She said yes.

Back in Marburg, the prevailing mood was pro-Hitler. Frau Beyme said she would gauge her own neighborhood as 90 percent for and 10 percent against. "You could not say anything on the street. There was something called the German look [der deutsche Blick]." She demonstrated it by looking behind her and to each side before talking. Another street routine, she said, was to develop a wait-and-see attitude with people whose politics you did not know. "If they liked Hitler, you could tell very fast. For instance, I met one on the street, from my old school class. I noted *immediately* she'd become a Nazi, and since then we didn't speak." She said the classmate would not have greeted her with "Heil Hitler!" although it was compulsory. More likely, she said,

the woman "had spoken enthusiastically about the war, 'Now we have another great victory,' and so on.

"Most apparent was who was for [the Nazis]. They said it loudly and acted the same way. You could tell by their uniforms or insignia. The opponents, naturally, were much softer and quieter and more hidden. It's hard to say how many opponents there were. The supporters certainly were in the majority." In tallying supporters, she included the "ones who simply went along with it and didn't get outraged by it."

One time, the pull of the Nazi phenomenon came close to nabbing her again, too. She happened to be in Hanover on a day Hitler was there for a rally. And she happened to be standing where the Nazi motorcade drove by. From an open car, Hitler waved to the wildly cheering crowd. "I noticed, although I was opposed, how such a mass of people screamed so enthusiastically and raised their hands and threw flowers, that I was in danger of being pulled along. It is very dangerous to stand in such a throng of people. Somehow it's fascinating. The throng's so enthusiastic, it can infect you. And you think, could you be wrong and all the others be right? One does become uncertain."

She recalled a related pull. "I am very much against the military. But when I hear military music, somehow I get goose bumps." She paused. "And I must make it clear to myself I don't want anything to do with that. It is a danger."

She also spoke (as noted in the Introduction) of the dangerous pull of words during the Third Reich, that is, the diabolically and alliteratively clever nouns and phrases that emanated from Joseph Goebbels's propaganda ministry. One example was the slangy double-*k Kohlenklau*. It meant a "coal snatcher," but implied a person who squandered precious fuel. "If someone merely came into the heated room of a house, the rest of the house was cold, and left the door open, someone would say, 'Kohlenklau, close the door.'"

Were such words and slogans repeated on the street?

"Oh, always, always. Everyone knew them. They were used a lot." Her husband added, "You heard it once, then you knew it. Goebbels was really a master in such things. And in the face of this clever psychological work, a normal human being could hardly defend himself, hardly preserve himself."

Neither the lure of the crowd nor the cleverness of the phrase swayed Frau Beck, however. She continued thwarting the Nazis in her own way, by trying to ignore their directives. One directive was to buy a Nazi flag. The encircled black swastika on a field of red—the bigger the flag the better—was required decor for many German homes, especially those facing a street on which Nazis paraded.

"It eventually got very difficult. People were always coming and saying why haven't you hung out a flag, for Hitler's birthday and so on," said Frau Beyme. "You almost went to jail. It was very dangerous if you didn't do it. One person after the other came, rang the doorbell, and said you haven't hung out your flag yet. Finally, my mother bought a real tiny one. You were supposed to hang it on a pole. She simply hung it over the balcony like a little rug you put by the bed."

The degree of maternal heroism may seem negligible in comparison to that shown by others. But for the daughter who lived through the time and the fears with her, the admiration never wavered. "My mother was a brave anti-Nazi. I really got my attitude from her. It's not something I earned on my own, but I thank my mother for it. She was incredibly courageous and not always very careful, so we really were afraid for her.

"She was consistently against the Nazis. She was supposed to attend evening meetings of Nazi groups. She always said, ach, she couldn't, she couldn't walk that far. It was a bit away from town and it was too dark in the evening and she'd be afraid. Nothing but such excuses. Then a terrible neighbor came over, an Ortsgruppenleiter, and he told my mother, 'If you're afraid, I'll take you there and bring you back home.' My mother told me, 'For God's sake, I'm more afraid of him than I am of the dark.'"

Frau Beyme laughed high and delightedly at the memory. "She never went once."

One evening, the ever-hopeful Ortsgruppenleiter's attempts to get Frau Beck to attend a meeting put both women in danger. "This horrid man came into the house to persuade her to go with him and we had our radio dial set to the enemy station. My mother literally trembled that he'd look over and notice where the dial was set. But he didn't, and nothing happened."

If the consequences of going into Jewish stores, of dallying about flying a Nazi flag, and of resisting attendance at Nazi meetings were not precisely known (although still feared), there was no mystery about what happened to people caught listening to verboten foreign radio broadcasts. One person who was caught listening was Marion Beyme's religion teacher. Unbeknownst to Frau Beyme, the teacher was Jewish and had converted to Christianity. (My initial confusion as to which way the conversion went prompted Frau Beyme to explain, "Jewish race. Christian belief.") The teacher, "a *highly* intelligent woman," not only taught religion at the high school, but also lectured at Giessen University about Christianity. "She probably hardly thought of herself as a Jew. For many, it was a surprise to return to the consciousness, 'I am a Jew.' She lived, I later learned, with a non-Jewish girlfriend in an apartment. The apartment being relatively large, I never saw it, they rented rooms to two or three women students. These students heard that the two ladies listened to foreign radio broadcasts and told their professor [. . .]. This professor was a super-Nazi. And he made sure that the two, the Jew and the non-Jew, were sent to a prison nearby. The one who was not Jewish died there. She couldn't take the punishment.

"[Later], to my great surprise, I suddenly saw my old teacher again, on the street. I went to her, spoke her name, and wanted to ask how she was, and she said ..."—Frau Beyme lowered her voice to a whisper—" 'Get away fast, get away fast.' Then I learned she had only a short time, a day or two, to get some papers before being taken to a concentration camp." She paused. "To Theresienstadt." A longer pause. "I found it so decent of her, that she didn't want to put me in danger. Nothing worse could happen to her, but she didn't want something to happen to anyone else. Ja, if someone had seen us together, I probably would have gone with her to the camp."

"Probably" is debatable, but the danger certainly was there. And so was the other danger. Still, Frau Beck continued to tune in to the enemy. "Always, even during the war, she listened to foreign broadcasts, which was strictly forbidden. And she was always afraid someone could hear at the wall of the house that we were listening. My mother and I were completely unschooled technically and racked our brains trying to figure if someone could install a device on the house to hear from outside that inside we heard foreign broadcasts. We never knew if it were a danger or not. But nothing happened." And through the broadcasts, "we learned that a lot they had told us here wasn't true."

Frau Beck also may have expressed her anti-Nazi feelings in other ways. "Certainly if an SS man had sat next to her on the bus or the trolley, she'd have stood up and walked away. *That* I am sure of." Frau Beyme said she worried that her mother spoke her mind more freely than was prudent. But, again, nothing ever happened. They continued living at the crossroads of bravery, timidity, luck, and fear.

Frau Beyme had a vantage point other than that of Marburg. She had Berlin. Although she often returned to Marburg to visit, she moved to Berlin in the late spring of 1933 and lived there for five years. She had gone to pursue her career as a librarian. I had assumed it was what she wanted, but much later she indicated that she had lowered her sights to being a librarian, rather than raised them.

As for Berlin itself, true to its reputation, it was "unbelievably stimulating and lively," Nazis or no. Marion, then about twenty-three, got a job in a branch of the central Berlin library. Among her first sights was one especially distressing to a young librarian. It was the Nazis' book burning.

"I suddenly heard that books were being burned. And I went there with some acquaintances to see it, if it were really true. I saw that gigantic fire." Volume after volume by Marxist and Jewish and other disapproved authors, such as Thomas Mann (who had a Jewish wife), were destroyed. "They kept throwing in the books with great enthusiasm. Most were enthusiastic. Those who found it horrible, naturally didn't go."

The Nazis' heavy-handed clamp on German culture prompted one of her cousins, a young woman sculpture student, to flee Germany. Asked if she herself considered doing so, Frau Beyme said, "No. If I must be honest, no. I did not have that much courage, nor that much independence."

Nor did she leave her Berlin library job, even though her boss, predictably, was a Nazi Party member. "I would not say he was a great supporter of Hitler, but someone who was most proud of the Nordic race." He was a disciple, she said, of a then-famous professor, Hermann Wirth, who had immersed himself in old Nordic traditions, studying everything from runic script to ancient Germanic customs.

And he was smitten with his new employee. "It was ludicrous. Everything I said was terrific and wonderful only because I was blonde. We always took books home with us, which we had to read and discuss so we could advise the readers about them. Because we couldn't read every book, it was divided, and we all sat together once a week and told the others, this kind of book is for simple people and that's a fantastic book, very complicated in style and should be recommended only to exacting readers, and so on. And when I said what I'd read and thought, his reaction was, 'Fabulous, that is really the natural and healthy sensibility.'

"And in the library, we wore white smocks. It's always so dusty when one works with books. A smock is very practical. And because I had only a furnished room in Berlin, I sent my wash home to my mother. She was fed up with these white smocks she had to keep washing and sending back. So she made a brightly striped smock which looked cleaner longer. One day, I appeared wearing it and the reaction was, '*That* is again the correct sensibility. Not this *sterile* one, but *again* the healthy *color*.' So, it was again right.

"Whenever we wanted the afternoon off for whatever reason, I was the one to go and ask. Mostly the answer was yes. Only because of my blonde hair. But one day it came to an end."

That day was years later, in 1938. She no longer was a single librarian, but a married woman (married to her first husband, a Herr Koch) with a baby girl, named Annegret.

"I was taking a walk in Berlin with my daughter, she in her baby carriage, and I met this library director. He said, 'Ach, may I peek in?' and surely thought there would be this completely wonderful blue-eyed blonde child inside. At the beginning my daughter had very black hair and looked like she was from the Caucasus steppes or something. All he said was, 'Oh!'"

She laughed. "Horrified! 'Oh!' Since then he never spoke with me again." She laughed again. "That was the end of his enthusiasm. He probably thought I'd married some foreigner and not a racially pure German or whatever."

Incidentally, Leonard Beyme, whom she married long after the war, was having difficulties with racial stereotypes himself. The Beymes now make an unusually arresting couple as they walk along holding hands, but alone in the 1930s, he could not walk along the sidewalk with the ease she could. "I was treated as if I were a Jew. I was short, had a curved nose, I had dark hair, curls, and, whatever. Anyhow, I got it too, even though I'm not." During his undergraduate days at Marburg, he said, he was walking up the steps to a classroom building when uniformed SA

men blocked the door. They yelled at him, "Out! Jews out!" To escape such treatment, he fled—to the German army. He was sent to France and Russia, and was wounded five times.

The day the war began, said Frau Beyme, she fled for home. "I was going shopping for something or another that morning and read, in huge posters everywhere, war has been declared. I was insanely terrified and thought it's all going to happen at once with the bombs, which took a good deal longer. I took my child and the most important things and came here to Marburg, where my mother lived, because I thought it can't be as bad in a small town as a big city, which also was right."

Frau Beck turned out to be as prescient as ever. "I sat with my mother and on the radio heard big speeches about cannons instead of butter. My mother immediately said, 'It's all over for us. It won't go well. It's the worst thing that can happen.' She saw immediately we'd lose the war and what kinds of losses there'd be for all sides. She pictured it right away."

Family concern about the war immediately turned to the draft, and her brother Joachim. "My brother had to be a soldier, against my mother's wishes. He had no choice. But he didn't have to fight, because he was the only son of a father who died in battle [in the First World War]. The last male of the family didn't have to go to the front. To the contrary, he could even go to college. He studied medicine during the war. But he had some difficulties."

She said a junior officer complained in the barracks that Joachim had not laid out his underwear in an orderly enough way. Joachim replied that that was beside the point with a war going on, and added, "You're nothing to me but a little piece of shit." The remark constituted a criminal offense. Joachim was summoned before a military tribunal. His panicked family then "mobilized everyone possible" to help and found a "very nice lawyer. He *was* in the Party. But he was not a Nazi. There's that, too. And he helped my brother." Joachim was released.

Spared both jail and the front line, Joachim nonetheless was sent to France and Russia. At one point, he was made an officer himself.

Back at the Marburg home front, a matriarchy of four had evolved: Frau Beck, the future Frau Beyme, and two children, Annegret and Joachim (named after his uncle), born in 1944. Life was made up partly of drudgery and partly of terror.

The drudgery included milk buying, which Frau Beyme said took at least two hours every day—forty-five minutes for the round-trip walk to get it, the rest of the time waiting for it. "When the man who sold the milk finally came, some fifty women were standing there with their little milk cans. This milkman was such a sadist, he really enjoyed it. He saw how we all stood, greedily waiting for the milk, and he moved very slowly, making us all more nervous and waiting even longer. Then he made jokes. Finally, we got our little bit of milk. It was completely light blue, not white, it was so thin." Sometimes she took Annegret or the baby with her. By the end of the war, Annegret no longer went to school; it was shut down, partly because of the bombing raids. (The

effect of the bombs on Annegret showed itself decades later, when mother and daughter and others were on a walk in the mountains. A stunt pilot suddenly flew so low—probably to impress a girlfriend—that everyone ducked. But Annegret disappeared. "We found her crouched in a ditch. She'd hidden herself, in terror. A war child.")

An advantage of living away from major targets, as the family did, was that fewer bombs were dropped. A disadvantage was that there were fewer bomb shelters. Everyone was frightened wherever they sought shelter, said Frau Beyme. "We could only go to our cellar. That could have been a lot worse if you're trapped there by rubble. In the last year, my son was just born and I didn't go to the cellar at all because I didn't want to wake him. We hoped for luck. I didn't want to make the child nervous. During the day, we often went into the woods. I took the baby carriage and a bicycle, too, because in between I had to go back to the house to get food or clean diapers for the baby. We couldn't take everything with us at once. And sometimes I quickly warmed the milk or made soup. We could hang the can of milk on the handlebars of the bicycle, so I'd take that in the woods."

The war also came to Marburg in the person of prisoners.

"A French prisoner of war was assigned to the local coal store and hauled coal in a sack to the customers. Although we didn't have much, we could give him an apple or something. Not in the light of day, of course. But what is a terrible memory, we lived on a street where you could see everything. And every morning around four o'clock, I heard steps, steps, steps. It was Russian prisoners from a nearby camp going to work. They were brought here to our little train station. Every morning at four I woke and got up and saw these sad figures going by, some without shoes. In the *winter*. There was ice and snow. And *completely* starving and completely in rags. But I couldn't give them anything. There were always guards, German soldiers. It wasn't possible."

Frau Beyme felt that such memories, unlike those the soldiers had, led to much estrangement between German men and women. "At home, one experiences very grave things, upsetting things, unusual things. And the other [person] lives in Russia or France or somewhere in captivity and experiences things with which the woman could not empathize. Then suddenly he comes back. For everybody, that certainly was very difficult, and for many, it simply was impossible to be together again. The woman had learned how to forge ahead and help in emergencies and protect her children and earn money and get food or even steal it, if she couldn't find anything else to eat. She could no longer be the true devoted wife who only did what the man wants."

Frau Beyme thought the war affected her first marriage, too. "Less my independence, maybe, than the completely different experiences. I kept evolving more to the *anti*–National Socialist side. And my husband, oddly enough, did not. I know he didn't take part in the worst aspects of the war. He saw no action. He wasn't in any battle. He always had plenty to eat. He was always somewhat"—she paused—"to the rear."

She continued, haltingly. "Perhaps it sounds perverse, but I sometimes wished [. . .] that he [would] experience something completely horrible. I did wish that on him. So that he really understood it, that it [would] really make an impression on his innermost being and not remain on the surface.

"Oh, he brought back nice things," she added, rather scornfully. "First of all, something to eat and also clothes. I do believe he bought it all. I mean, as an officer, he got paid and could buy things. Nonetheless, it wasn't very nice. We were momentarily happy for something to eat, that's obvious. Or if I had something for the children to wear. But I always felt terrible we had invaded the countries and also took something away from them."

When her husband was home on leave, however, their political differences were not that great, she said. "He was no Nazi. It was a sense of duty. 'Everyone's doing it, and so do I.'"

The couple's main differences were not political, but personal. Yet the political were great enough to involve the personal. "I wasn't a member of anything except in 1944, at the end, when I wanted to divorce my husband. He did not want a divorce. I was very scared he'd do something to me politically. And there I'd stand with really nothing to prove I'd done anything for the Third Reich. I thought, what in God's name *can* I do to show proof of something? So I went into the lowest-level organization there was. [. . .] It was some do-good undertaking." The organization, she later confirmed, was the Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (NSV) [National Socialist People's Welfare Organization]. (It was the same organization that furthered Frau Fischer's career.) About the process of joining, Frau Beyme said, "It all went so fast, I don't know now if I even paid something, but I had some receipt in my hand."

Whatever else her act proved, it also proved pointless. "He didn't try to do anything to me politically. I didn't need it. But I wasn't sure, and I was worried about my children. My fear of him wasn't that I thought he's such a big Nazi, but that he's so furious at me for wanting to leave, he might do whatever he wanted, in order to harm me."

Toward war's end, the divorce still pending, she made a gesture in the opposite direction. "Three or four weeks before the war was over, he was here on leave. And I knew, *clearly*, like anyone who could think, observe a little, it was ending. That we'd lost the war or would soon lose it. And I said to him, 'Stay here. Hide yourself here. Don't go back.' I'd have hidden him."

The offer was significant. The crime of desertion or hiding a deserter was treasonous.

"He said, 'I can*not* do that' and went away on a *bicycle*. No more trains were running, there was chaos everywhere, and he left on a bicycle just so he could get [to his unit]. Then he was taken prisoner. I didn't know where he was. He could have stayed here, but that sense of duty said 'No, I may not. Keep going.'"

What did he think of her suggestion? That it was sweet of a woman?

She laughed. "I don't think he found it so sweet, but completely impossible. 'A woman does not know a man's duty.'"

While her husband departed from his doorstep to his duty, German soldiers, looking "thin and gaunt," arrived from their duty to his doorstep. "They rang the doorbell and said, 'Take us, we need a hideout.' My mother said, 'No, I cannot.' Certainly, some of them were very frightened people who'd gone through terrible things and really hadn't wanted to. It was a hard decision to say no. But. For political reasons, one had to hold firm, to show one was against the war and against the soldiers, even if you felt sorry for the individuals.

"And a cousin of mine came, the black sheep in the family. He was an SS man. A completely dear human being, a completely faithful relative still. Who certainly never did anything bad, but was enthusiastic about this war. He had some gold medal, and was an SS officer. He came to us as he was fleeing. As a human being we liked him very much—helpful and loving and attentive and faithful and we let him stay here *one* night. Then my mother said, 'As hard as it is, you have to move on. We can't keep you here.' He had to go."

A "completely dear human being"? Without an investigation, neither of us would know how "completely dear" her cousin was.

The war ended.

"We sat there in the cellar of our house. For the first time, there were no more bombs and planes, but artillery. The shooting sounded very close. Then it suddenly stopped. And one heard that the Americans were marching in. Then we heard them. They weren't loud like our Germans, who had hobnailed shoes. The Americans, I think, had rubber soles. But when hundreds marched at once, one heard it. We'd have liked most to run up to them with flowers or something, but we were too scared and didn't do it. You weren't sure of the situation or if you might get shot."

Asked her first impression of the American soldiers, she sighed. "They looked very healthy. Well nourished and healthy and red-cheeked. Well dressed, the uniforms still in one piece and new. From our point of view, they looked fantastic. Ach, to us they looked like gods.

"We were crazy with happiness when the Americans came," she said. "Certainly not everyone was happy. We were, although afterward there was a big disappointment about how they treated us and absolutely did not want to know if one had been for or against. What the Americans did here was quite a disappointment that hit our family pretty hard. *Many, many* Nazis got away with no problem at all, but *us* they threw out of our house."

She said that between 1945 and 1957, she and her children and her mother had to move twenty-one times.

The American troops threw not only her family out of the house, but also their possessions, she said. In addition to the antique beer steins, the family china, among other things, landed smashed on the sidewalk, too.

You *were* the enemy, I said.

"Ja. They broke everything, and threw it all outside. Later, we found only piles of rubbish. There wasn't much left."

But to Frau Beyme, there were two distinct "they"s among the American troops: the fighters and the occupiers. "Those who came in the first few days were fighting troops and they had seen something of the war. But those who came later, from the USA, hadn't seen anything at all. And many of these very young soldiers wanted to experience something, like repeat a little of the war, nicht? Have some adventure. One could understand it, but when you're part of it, it's not so nice. An old man was walking down the street. They kicked him and threw him over a garden fence. And such things.

"We had original watercolors and so forth on the walls, which weren't framed, and they wrote all over them. In the cellar we had bottles of apple juice. When we wanted to get some later, after the Americans had left, they'd drunk it all up and filled the bottles with urine. Or, in our cooking pots was toilet paper, used toilet paper. And such, such dumb things."

She said, after a while, that although she agreed their actions were understandable, "it seemed as if the local commander might have taken a little more trouble to differentiate. To disappoint old non-Nazis was hard."

Disappointed or not, she applied for and got a job as a secretary with the American forces. There she met "a very nice Jewish officer" who tried to intervene with his commander to let her family back into its house, but without success. The commander could well have his doubts; back on the streets of Marburg there was nary a Nazi. "It was extremely embarrassing. No one was part of it anymore. It happened very quickly. They suddenly were dressed differently, all uniforms were gone, no insignia at all, and they'd all been 'forced.'

[. . .] The turnabout happened so fast, it was a joke. I never saw anything like it."

After several months of semihomelessness, the family was allowed back into its cellar, thanks to the intervention of "a very nice American" who was newly responsible for the house. He also later, secretly, allowed them to sleep in the attic, and finally to use the bathroom, rather than a pail.

Frau Beyme did not say whether the Americans' behavior was influenced in any way by whatever they knew or were learning about the newly freed concentration camp prisoners, or if they had asked her what she knew about the Holocaust.

But I certainly asked her what she knew. The subject came up in our first interview session and in several more over the years, years in which the Beymes offered friendship as well as hospitality. In fact, the friendship was one reason I felt obliged to press her more than I did other women. We were on a *du* basis, which she had extended; I could hardly let a *du* off the hook. Another reason for pressing her was that she seemed to have spent a good deal of effort in soul-searching and thinking about the Third Reich and her own place within it. Another reason was that I simply trusted her as at least trying to tell the truth.

That trust was confirmed when we experienced a bit of the aftermath of the Holocaust together. The Beymes had taken me to their vacation home, a two-hundred-fifty-year-old house in Herr Beyme's native village in the Eifel mountains. (At the puffy-cake kind of bakery run by a relative, he whispered, "Not a single ingredient has been ripped from nature.") One day, in typical German custom, we all, along with his cousin and wife, took a long walk in the nearby forest. Along the way, the cousin, a seemingly affable man, deliberately fell in step with Frau Beyme and me. He wanted to tell me about something that happened to him as a soldier in the Second World War, he said. It raised a question he thought an American could answer.

At the end of the war, in southern Germany, he began, American troops captured his unit. The American commander ordered the German soldiers to exhume an enormous pit of bodies, and lay the bodies side by side. (The Americans presumably wanted to count the bodies, try to identify them, and re-inter them.) While we continued to walk, the man continued to talk. Of standing thigh-deep within the pile of corpses. Of pulling at one body and the skin coming off. That was the trouble with moving them, he said. You'd pull on an arm and all you'd have in your hands was the skin. And boy, did it smell. When you went inside to sleep, you had to leave your clothes outside.

Throughout, he volunteered not a word about who the victims might have been, nor how they might have died. Nor did he mention the inhumanity that had led to this pit of horror, nor what it was like for him emotionally to undertake such a grisly task. Granted, I had no idea of his subconscious. But on the surface, he did not seem to be hiding anything. He seemed simply not to feel it. Then he got to his point. His friends laughed him off and didn't believe him when he told them about it, the skin slipping right off the arms like that. Could I find out which American troops had been in charge at the pit, to help him prove it was true?

Frau Beyme and I had the same response. Horrified as we were by his story, we were equally horrified by how coldly he told it. I suggested, coldly in response, he write the Pentagon.

The incident reestablished my trust in Frau Beyme (Marion to me by then), and of course made pressing her about the Holocaust more difficult. But press I did. Still, nothing she said changed over the years; it just became more pointed.

The first time the subject approached, I opened a wide gate by asking her response when she meets someone who claims not to have known "what was going on." She answered that anyone who read a newspaper could tell what was going on. I quoted a village woman as saying she had had neither the time, the money, nor the inclination to read a newspaper.

"One must grant her that," she said. "That can be right. Moreover, I believe it varies. I'd believe it of many, because there was much I myself didn't know. I *never suspected* there were so many concentration camps. I'd have thought two or three. And I only learned particulars about a concentration camp by pure accident.

"During the Third Reich, we lived in a two-family house that belonged to my mother. We lived in one half and the director of the humanities high school lived in the other half. He was a good anti-Nazi and had a lot of anti-Nazi friends who visited him. One day, a friend who'd been released from a concentration camp came to him and said a few things. Not a lot, but we heard about them too. Otherwise I'd have heard *nothing* about all the cruelties and the horrid games they played. For instance, when there was bread, the SS took the pieces, sort of big scraps, and threw them in the air and the hungry prisoners had to catch them. A completely humiliating, degrading thing. I heard about things like that." She said the neighbor also said his friend must have been shackled a long time, for he stood and slept as if he were still tied up.

The neighbor did put himself in what she called "a certain danger" to let his old friend stay with him and had to be careful whom he told about him, lest he endanger them both. (The Nazis forbade ex-prisoners to talk about camp experiences.) Yet in Frau Beyme's eyes, the neighbor was not altogether a good person. "A very cultivated man who ate and lived with great seriousness," as she described him, he missed the prewar good life. So when he was drafted and stationed "at some transportation place in France," he availed himself of whatever luxuries were to be had. "I really got angry about him. He sent an enormous number of things here from France. Vast quantities of tobacco and canned meat and everything, and a beautiful Jewish lamp. We did not find that nice. They had so much, they asked us to store things in our cellar."

She said she did not believe he stole the items, but took advantage of a terrible situation. "Maybe one could buy the crates of things from poor Jews, I don't know. But I couldn't have bought a Jewish lamp if it had cost five cents. Because one could think of its history, no? He was no enemy of Jews [Judengegner], and maybe one could say things were safe with him and he cared for them and knew their history. One *could* say."

She could not. But had she not known him, she maintained, she would not have known any details of the camps. "Therefore I can believe many people who knew little or nothing."

Herr Beyme, sitting with us just then, related an incident confirming his wife's statement. He said that during the war, he and some fellow soldiers tried to find out about the closing of a road in Weimar—near Buchenwald concentration camp. They had not even got to the barricade, he said, when armed SS guards peremptorily turned them away. If uniformed German soldiers could not find out what was going on, he asked, how could the German public?

One possible way was by rumor, or so-called whisper propaganda. I asked Frau Beyme about it. She said it "was not all that frequent. It certainly existed. But it certainly went right by a lot of people. One didn't even *risk* saying something of the kind. You'd be scared telling it to someone you didn't know well, for what he'd do with the news, if he'd report you and say, 'She's a defeatist, she's hindering our victory.'"

Such "defeatism" could, and did, lead to concentration camps.

Frau Beyme said her family's source of information remained mostly the forbidden radio broadcasts. I asked if they included reports of gassing. She whispered, "That I cannot tell you exactly. I don't know. I don't know."

I asked when she knew what.

"I did not see the transports," she said. "And learned the details definitely after the capitulation."

By "details" she meant gassing?

"Ja. One certainly had *heard* that. One thought everything possible, but whether it really was true was almost too terrible to believe. Only afterward, when one saw *pictures*, did one really believe it."

I tried to pin her down on when she heard which rumors. She said she had to disappoint me, that she simply did not know.

Then what were the specifics she did hear?

"That the Jews were being deported. First, we saw they had to work, lawyers and so on our streets, having to dig out the tracks for the trolleys." She added softly, "And didn't ride on them themselves. There they worked, very hard work which they weren't used to and which took away their strength. And one knew after they'd done that awhile, they were taken away. To a camp. One could not *imagine* more."

Yes, but rumors, I insisted [. . .]

"Perhaps it is unbelievable to you, but I did not hear much before the end of the war. It was more like a gloomy feeling [of] who knows what horrible things are happening to the people? But I did not hear particulars."

Particulars?

"Well, I did not know where the concentration camps were, how many concentration camps there were, what one was doing with them. And *gassing* certainly went on a long time before I knew about it." She whispered. "Even heard about it."

She also said she was unsure when she learned something, whether she learned something she knows now during the war, or after it.

What had she done with whatever she had known during the war?

She said her sole recourse was to tell her friends, and agonize together. "Things had gone so far, you could not undertake anything without being killed. It was already too late. We all woke up too late. It didn't help either, if you yourself were done away with." She said that because German women were responsible for elderly parents and children, they were the least independent and therefore least likely to risk their lives. "The man in the Third Reich thought, 'I can risk everything. My children are cared for.' The woman *did* concern herself with the children. But women could not count on a man to concern himself with the children."

"Furthermore," she said, "you needed a lot of courage. And it is my opinion not everyone is a hero. I believe one cannot expect every human being to be so courageous. That is asking too much."