

In Loving Memory



Gudrun Snethlage

June 13th 1939 - September 5th 2026



The excerpt below is from Gudrun as told in 2021;

My story begins with my birth on June 13th, 1939, in Oschatz/Sachsen, Germany. I was born right before the beginning of World War II, which started September 1, 1939. My mother's names were Elisabeth Engelke, nee Latsch. My father's name is Friedrich Wilhelm Engelke. I was named Gudrun Elisabeth Adelheid Engelke. We lived in Oschatz because my Dad was stationed there as a pilot in the Airforce. He was a transport pilot flying the Junkers U52 plane. Dad was shot down 3 times during the war. Two times he and his crew got out of the plane unharmed, but the third time only he and his copilot got out safely, the rest of his crew burned to death. Dad could never forget their cries for help.

We did not live in Oschatz long, because my 2 years younger brother Hans Jürgen was born in Landsberg/Warthe, where my mom's parents lived. Two years later in 1943, my sister Edelgard was born in Berlin, and we lived on Tilsitter Straße 15, near the Ostbahnhof. So, I guess we moved a lot during those early years of my life. One of my earliest memories is sitting under the dining table in our apartment to straighten out the tassels of the green fringed area rug by raking them with my fingers. I must have been about two to three years old.

I remember visiting my father's parents only once in Bärwalde/Newmarket (Mark Brandenburg). I do not know how old I was, but I have some vivid memories of the apiary my grandfather had, and how proudly he showed the hives to me. I remember my grandmother, and the beautiful stained-glass window in the staircase, and especially the two lovely garden gnomes in front of their house. (Note: Both my grandparents died in 1945, they were starved to death by the Polish occupation force that took over that part of Germany (now Poland).

We did not live long in Berlin either. My Dad had told my Mom to make sure she got some of our most valuable treasures to safety, he knew Berlin was not very safe. We were bombed out and fled to my grandparents, Richard and Melanie Laatsch, in Landsberg/Warthe. They had their own house, and we stayed there until January 1945. My youngest brother Wolfgang was born there on March 12, 1944. There was a lovely garden with fruit trees and berry bushes, a sandbox and a swing with a nice sitting area and espalier fruit on the house wall.

At some point in my early years I had a bad case of meningitis with diphtheria or scarlet fever. Mom told me that the doctors had given me up, but because Mom was a nurse, she fought for me and took extreme care of me, so that I survived.

On January 14th Omi Laatsch's birthday was celebrated without the shadow of war. Then came that fateful day on January 28, 1945. Every night Mom prayed with us before bed. That night she prayed that the Russians wouldn't come, though we could see the red sky towards the east where the war front was. We always kept the shutters closed to be invisible for bombing raids. Grandfather Laatsch worked for the railways, he was the station master in Landsberg. At 5 am that fateful night there was a loud banging on the shutters. We were told to hurry! The last train was leaving the station shortly. It was a train filled with wounded soldiers. It was winter with lots of snow. Mom got us out of bed and dressed us with layers and layers of underwear, leotards, socks, dresses, as much as would fit. We could not take much, only what we could wear. For Christmas I had received a new schoolbag, Ranzen, and a Celoloid 12" tall doll. I begged to be allowed to bring these two items. I was allowed to carry my schoolbag like a knapsack, and Mom made a sling out of bandages for the doll so it would hang around my neck. The doll survived our flight, and I still have it today. Mom put little Wolfgang (Wölfi) into a baby carriage which we filled with feather ticks, (our blankets) and Wölfi on top tucked in. Grandma and Grandpa stayed behind, but we went back from the train station to persuade my aunt, Tante Lena, to come too. I remember

her having a suitcase soooo heavy that we attached a belt to the handle and dragged it over the snow. On the train ride Tante Lena took a pair of her socks off and gave them to a soldier who had none.

On our journey a bridge was bombed, and our train was bombed as well, so we could go no further by train, and had to carry on foot. Somehow, we acquired a little bandwagon, which was made of wood, and was high on the sides and could take quite a load. It could take our bedding and some other belongings. It would also carry Wölfi and maybe Edelgard, who was only 2 at that time. Jürgen and I walked. I do not remember a lot from that walk, only aloooot of snow. The world was white. We slept in a barn and trudged through the snow. We finally ended up in Mücheln. Mom found us a place to live, some rooms in a long building. We must have stayed well into the summer, because I remember going with Mom to work in a field to help a farmer thin out the beets. We would take out the weak plants and leave only the strong ones at certain distances. I don't know whether it was sugar beets or Rutabagas.

On other days Jürgen and I would go to Kindergarten hand in hand.

Another memory is hearing about a just crashed plane just outside of town in a farmer's field. We went to see it even though we were not supposed to go see it.

In Mùcheln there were big public bomb shelters. We went into these shelters as the retreating army rolled through with tanks and soldiers, followed by the Russian Occupation Army. We were very scared.

I don't know how Mom fed us all?!?

One night in the summer we heard a LOUD knock on our door late at night. We wondered who that could be? When we opened it was my dad. He had fled from the Russians and found his family. He told us we would have to leave very quickly, because if he was caught, he would go to a Russian prisoner of war camp and that would be very bad in the Russian Occupation Zone.

We, in Mùcheln, were not far from the English Occupation Zone. So that was Dad's plan to escape. Only some meadows with a creek in the middle separated the Russian- English Occupation Zones. That creek would eventually become the border to East Germany. With care we could get across at night. That is how we ended up in Büchen, which was really close to the border.

BÜCHEN 1945 to 1952

One night I was allowed to go along to the border, so I knew what it looked like. I was allowed to hide in the grass beside the creek while dad took something across. We had a distant relative in Büchen. Büchen is 60 km away from Hamburg and was in the English Occupation Zone. Mom had a sister Ruth. She was married. Her husband's sister married a Lutheran Pastor, who lived and worked in Büchen-Pötrau. His name was Johannes Harten and his wife was Tante Naemi.

One night that summer of 1945 we made that secret trip across the creek/border and ended up in the Parsonage in Büchen with Tante Naemi. Onkel Johannes was not back from the war yet. This added 6 refugees to the Harten household! Not an easy situation. There was a large attic floor with rooms, all finished. My brother Wolfi was left behind in Mücheln with a farmer-friend for a year because he was soooooo thin, he needed more food than we had. Wolfi felt that as a rejection!

Dad needed to find work fast and we needed housing fast. So, when Mom and Dad heard about this deserted and empty army camp outside of Büchen, they went to check it out. Yes, here were the barracks, all empty. A little way off was the administration Barack, which had

also served as a triage centre. It was deserted, dirty, with straw and feces in the corners on the floor. But Mom and Dad saw it as a refuge and applied to get two rooms and a hallway with a door. They cleaned out the rooms with a lot of determination and elbow grease and Lysol! We had no beds, so Dad built them, just a rectangular box with boards across to lay on. We had no mattresses, so we had burlap sacks with straw inside to sleep on. Mother was able to get some of our feather beds (thick featherbed covers) from Mùcheln. The border could still be crossed with great care. That is also how Dad went to pick up Jürgen to join us in 1946.

These barracks were made out of tongue- and-groove boards, one layer only against cold and heat. The hallway served as our kitchen, with only a handwashing sink for all our water needs. That's where we got the water for cooking, bathing, laundry etc. Our part, in the small part of the L-shaped barrack with the hallway, had a door part way down, which closed off our apartment. The hallway/kitchen had about four or five windows. We had a kitchen stove in the "kitchen" for heat and for cooking. The bedroom (for us three children) was unheated. Wölfi stayed in Mom and Dad's room at the other end of the hallway. For the living room Mom and Dad had a "Kachelofen" built.

Dad found work in Glinde with the English Occupation Bureau. He had to take a bicycle to the train station in downtown Büchen, then take the train to a little town called Schwarzenbeck, then take another bike, (which he had stored) to his place of work in Glinde. He did this every day and returned home the same trip reversed. It did not pay much, but it helped to keep us alive.

By this time, it was harvest time. We gleaned grains, oats and wheat in the farmers field after the harvest. Dad took the grain to the mill in Büchen-Pötrau to convert it to oats and flour. We had a little garden plot assigned to us, so we grew vegetables and onions. When the farmers had harvested all of the fields, we followed and redug the field with a garden fork to find the leftover small potatoes.

I remember two incidents about the gleaning and the Kartoffel stoppeln (potato gleaning). When we had gleaned all day after the harvesters, (we picked up leftover stalks from the ground until we had a handful, then we cut the grain heads off with a pair of scissors into a bag). The straw we threw away. The farmer sent the police and demanded our grains. I was one of the gleaners, only six years old. Another time the police demanded the potatoes we had sooo painstakingly dug up after the field was harvested. This injustice sooo angered my Dad that he decided to go to an

unharvested field at night to dig a sack of potatoes. As he was digging by a flashlight, he saw a light across the field. He crept up to investigate. Who did he find but our Mother, who had the same anger at the injustice, and had the same thought.

We learned to be satisfied with very little. We collected mushrooms, which were plentiful in all the forests. We cleaned them and canned them in used cans. We picked raspberries in the woods for jam. I was very good at mushroom and raspberry picking, and I really enjoyed both! We got sugar beets from a farmer, cut them and boiled them down in a washtub for molasses. We fetched stinging nettles from the side of the road with gloves, just the leaves, and made a sauce with a flour roue and ate it over potatoes as spinach with scrambled eggs. It was very good and full of iron. Eggs we had from our own chickens, which we housed in the shed Dad built and in the attached wire chicken run. It was parallel to our kitchen-hallway. It also included a pigsty. I do not remember how many chickens we had, maybe 3 or 4. Later on we had a pig, grew it and butchered it. With our refrigeration everything had to be preserved by canning in jars or cans, smoked, sausaged, or even pickled. We used cans of all sizes. A neighbour had a contraption that cut the rim of the cans off and turned the rim out. We would take them home, wash them, and

fill them with mushrooms or meat. Then we would take them back to the neighbour. He had fitting lids for the cans, so we would fit them on, and the same contraption, on a different setting, would turn the rims with the lids under to close them. Then we took them home and boiled them to preserve them. Dad made a very good sandwich spread out of the lard by adding chopped onions (from our little garden) and marjoram when he rendered it with a few bacon bits in it. It was delicious!

We never had butter, it was always “Sanella”, a margarine. Even in later years we never ate butter. It was waaaaay too expensive. We only started eating butter when we came to Canada. When Gisbert’s father came to visit for the first time in 1967, he said “you don’t have to buy butter for me, I’m ok with margarine”. Haha, we laughed, we don’t need to eat margarine in Canada, we can afford butter in Canada!!!!

I went to public school in Büchen, a long walk from our barracks, 5 km one way. For me that was a very long walk. We were fed “Schulspeisung” for lunch. We had to bring our own dish, and it was mostly soup. I also remember hearing about the “Währungsreform”, the devaluation of our currency, in school. It was a very big deal!!!!

Our teacher, Lehrer Behnke”, was an old gentleman. He was very strict. He taught us innumerable German Folk Songs, and we had to learn all the verses. I guess it was his way of declaring and preserving our German heritage. I still know and remember them today! He was a good teacher.

Büchen was the central train station, where the trains crossed from east - west, and north - south, an Eisenbahn Knotenpunkt, or relay station. Beside our Public School there was a track higher up, where freight trains could be parked for further travel. One such freight train was filled with unprocessed coconut rinds. When Dad and a few friends heard about it, they went by night and procured some. He had, after all, a hungry family to feed. Word got out that somebody had broken into those boxcars. The police came to search our rooms. Dad had rendered some of the coconut already and you could smell it. To hide the smell Dad burned some creosote drenched ropes and that covered the smell! So we got away with it.

Mom was a nurse by profession. She was a nurse who worked as an assistant in the operating room. In Büchen, not far from where we lived there was a Lazarett hospital. In our early years there was a Typhoid epidemic. The Lazarett was used as a Typhoid hospital. Mom worked at that hospital until she contracted

Typhoid Fever herself. Because of our undernourished status it hit her very hard! We almost lost her. We obviously could not visit her, but one evening Dad took us to see her in her bed through the window. She was so very, very ill! But she did recover, eventually. It was a long and painful road!

Büchen is close to the Elbe-Trave Canal, and there is a side canal for barges to dock for a time, called the “Stichkanal”. That was, and is still there, but was not used while we lived there. This is where we all learned to swim, Jürgen, Edelgard and I. We spent many happy summer hours there and have fond memories. As a child you don’t pay special attention to the hardships, it’s your normal. You find your fun and enjoy life anyways.

We had a “Sister” Schwester Ilse” come from 60 km away Hamburg by Bike once or twice a year to teach the children God’s Word. She also met with a group of adults for a service. She was Pentecostal and brought her guitar to sing songs with us, she told us about Jesus and challenged us to give our lives to Jesus to follow Him. In the evening she would meet with the adults in our barracks. Through her ministry I wanted to follow Jesus with my whole heart. My Dad frowned on us going to church, so I had to sneak away some Summer Sunday mornings to attend a church 7 km away.

Our life was very primitive. Our hallway/kitchen had only a hand-washing sink for water, that served also for laundry, dishes, cooking, personal hygiene, cleaning etc.

We had our "apartment" in the short wing of the "L" (the foot) shaped barrack, and only one other family of four shared it with us, the Daus. The toilet (water closet with pull string flushing) was also in this wing and shared by both families. It worked quite well. For toilet paper we cut newspapers into squares and hung it on a nail or string.

I do not remember how Mom did laundry. She boiled the laundry on the stove and then used a scrubbing board in a big square Zink tub. We rinsed it in the same tub. This tub was also our bathtub every once in a while.

Dad was very innovative. He had a gun hidden in the forest (at the end of the war all guns were confiscated). With this gun he went hunting and he found us meat every once in a while. We also had rabbits that we grew and ate.

Over time we found a piece of unused land near the Stichkanal, where we were allowed to grow potatoes. Dad had to dig it with a spade. It was totally infested with crabgrass. We kids had to help pick the crabgrass roots out of the soil. Dad planted it with potatoes. That

helped our food supply a lot. Dad also built a larger shed parallel to our kitchen, but across a driveway and along the boundary fence. He also built a chicken run beside the shed. Later the shed also housed a pig. The pig was fed boiled little potatoes and table scraps.

In the Barack we had bedbugs. It was a bad infestation! We looked for them in between the tongue and grooves of the wall and kill them with straight pins. It became such a problem that the whole population of the entire Barack had to be evacuated so that it could be sealed, tented and fumigated. We slept in the shed for a night or two. That was the end of the bedbugs.

I remember that one May we had a lot of Maikäfer, (June bugs). We caught Kazillions of them and fed them to the chickens. They loved them! But the result was that the eggs tasted like Junebug's.

Christmas was a very special holiday. The living room doors were shut one day before, December 23rd, and Mom and Dad decorated the tree with real live candles and Lametta (tinsel) and handmade stars (that I am an expert at folding from paper strips). The gifts were much anticipated, one each. Dad had made a pencil case, or a wooden horse to pull on a string for Wölfi, etc. Two of my most memorable gifts for me are the book Heidi, which I still have and just read to Gisbert this summer

out on the deck (2021). The other one was a recorder. I learned to play the Christmas song “Oh du Fröhliche, Oh du Selige Gnadenbringer der Weihnachtszeit....”) that very night. I loved those gifts! One year Dad was able to find and buy a miniature train set. He was sooooo proud of it. We were only allowed to play with it a little at Christmas, that first year. It was set up on the dinner table, so it did not stay up long. Then, the next year Dad had the brilliant idea to create a mountain built on the floor in the children’s bedroom. He built it in a corner using wood scraps, twigs and branches. The mountain had different levels, covered with burlap, and he cut holes into the burlap where he wanted to place houses. Dad was very handy, so he built the houses himself, chalets and mountain houses. The houses had windows, into which he glued coloured tissue paper. He put a bright light under the mountain, so the houses were lit up. The mountain had tunnel openings at both ends, so the train would travel through the bottom of the mountain. He used moss to create plants and painted pinecones green for trees. For rocks he used tree bark!

When I was 10 years old, my teacher felt that I qualified for higher education, so it was decided by my parents at the advice of Lehrer Behnke, (my teacher) that I should attend the Mittelschule, Middle School. We did not have a Middle School in Büchen, so I would have to take a

train to Mölln. That meant I had to take the train to Mölln, 20 km away. We lived on the outskirts of Büchen and the train tracks were right behind our barracks complex. There was a street beside our complex as well, so there was a railway crossing with crossing barriers lowered by person-guard and blinking lights etc. It was arranged that the train would stop and pick up the students that needed to go to the schools in Mölln and Ratzeburg (high school). We would also get off there on our return home.

Because Mölln was in the English Occupation Zone we learned English as a second language, which I loved. I tried to make my sounds like the teacher, who was from England. (Boy, that paid off when I came to Canada).

Around 1950 the Occupation Force closed its offices in Glinde and Dad lost his job. He tried different work, like welding in the shipbuilding industry, in Lauenburg, but it was not good. He was a pilot!?! When the opportunity came up to be relocated to South Germany into permanent housing. Mom and Dad decided that was the way to go. So, in the spring of 1952 we and all our possessions were moved. It was accomplished by train. When we arrived in Würtemberg province, in Reutlingen, we found out that our apartment was not finished. So we were placed into another camp on top of the mountain in Reutlingen. I don't remember much about

that spring and summer, only that it was the time when Lilly Of The Valley bloomed in profusion in the forest. I was 12 years old and Jürgen was 10 years old. We decided to pick a whole bunch of bouquets and try to sell them at the weekly farmers market in Reutlingen. We walked down the mountain and sold them all!!!! We were sooo proud of ourselves! By the fall we were able to take possession of our apartment.

Gudrun's story continued as she and Gisbert welcomed their children. As a typical 1950's mom, she took care of everything and made incredible meals. She cooked for the neighbours for years. There was always someone coming over for dinner.

They spent summers at the cottage. They loved going to beaches like the Pinery and Inverhuron, where they spent many summer days. Often, as a larger family they would go on walks where Gisbert would buy everyone pizza at the end.

In the 1980's they ran the business out of the house on Bishop Court in Kitchener. It started as Crafts by Gudrun, but once incorporated, it became All Things Beautiful. There were boxes everywhere, and they often ran out of space, which is what led to buying the house on Lakeview to be able to run the business out of the basement. The business even outgrew the basement

and eventually they rented a building. In 2003 they sold the business and settled into retirement.

They spent winters in Florida where they enjoyed the mild weather and abundant beaches until settling into Waterloo life for the remainder of their lives.

Gudrun. Schatzi. Mutti. Omi. Forever in our hearts.