



Prologue

Locating Weimar, Göttern, and a Family

ON MY WAY OUT of Berlin on August 4, 1991, en route to Leipzig, I decided that Weimar was where I would make a study of an East German family. Ever since November 1989, when the wall came down, I had been thinking of doing anthropological work in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). I was interested by the singular opportunity it offered to investigate the lives of persons who had been witness to, and actors in, various moments in the sequence of political, social, and economic changes that had occurred over the last seventy-five years of East German history: the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, the GDR, and now a united Germany. It was my opinion that looking at the history of a family, an “ordinary” family, offered a fruitful way of locating people in a setting to reflect the impact of critical historical events while also revealing how one particular family managed its own historical adaptation to these events.

I walked and drove through Weimar for two days. In the end, it was the actual physical relationship of the German National Theater, where the constitution of 1919 had been approved, the houses and museums of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, and the Buchenwald camp—set in the beech forest on the northern outskirts of the city, where Goethe and Charlotte von Stein had picnicked—that brought home to me the degree to which Weimar encapsulated within its own history the contradictions of modern German history. It seemed to me that Weimar and its surroundings—at the confluence of much that, for better or worse, was essentially German—would be an appropriate site from which to carry out

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my study. The identification of a family, however, would have to wait another several months.

The school year 1991–1992 was the last I taught at Amherst College, where I had been a professor of anthropology since 1964. Plans for carrying forth what I had, by then, named the Weimar Family Project were laid aside until the mid-year break, when I returned to Germany. After a few days in Berlin, I traveled to Leipzig to make contact with a 1990 Amherst graduate, Stephen Kampmeier, then a student of German literature at the University of Leipzig. I had written to Stephen of my desire to identify a family to research in Weimar, and he had agreed to help me in any way possible.

After meeting up with Stephen, we began our drive to Weimar, stopping to spend the night in Jena, some 13 miles to the southeast of Weimar, to meet with Terry May, a professor of German at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York. May was in Jena for the year teaching American studies. As he was knowledgeable about Weimar, I used the occasion to speak to him about my expectations for the Weimar Family Project and how best to go about identifying a family for study.

As chance would have it, May knew of a family whom he thought might be appropriate, as he knew them to be particularly forthcoming and hospitable. They lived in the small town of Göttern, some 15 kilometers to the southeast of Weimar but still within the county limits. In fact, he happened to be going to a birthday party at their house that afternoon and would gladly introduce us if we would be so kind as to give him a ride. When I readily accepted, he telephoned ahead to say that we were coming. I was delighted and surprised at the prospect of locating a family so soon and yet disconcerted by the fact that the family was so far from Weimar. I was not yet ready to scuttle my plan of researching a family in the city.

On the way to Göttern, Professor May told us about the Schorcht family and how he had come to know them through Heidrun Schorcht, an assistant professor of American studies at the University of Jena. The Schorchts, once a farming family, had been unable to resume private farming after *die Wende* (literally “turn,” referring to the fall of the GDR regime) due to the dislocations created by the enforced collectivization program of the 1960s and 1970s; at that time, however, farmers’ children were afforded many new opportunities as a result of industrialization and higher education.

When we arrived in Göttern, I felt favorably disposed to the family we were about to meet—all the more so by my captivation over the great wooden gate that opened to allow us to proceed into the courtyard, around which the farmstead was built. I felt as though I had been admitted into a different world, distant in time and place from the once-industrialized countryside around us.

A sense of the possible readiness of the Schorchts to entertain the idea of being subjects of a book was evident in their warm welcome of two strangers

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to partake in a family celebration. We quickly became conversant with the family members present: Edgar Schorcht (born 1922), head of the family and retired farmer; Wally, Edgar's wife (born 1926); Erhard, their older son (born 1951); Heidrun, Erhard's wife (born 1952); Maria, Erhard and Heidrun's thirteen-year-old daughter; Roswitha Netz (born 1959), Edgar and Wally's daughter; Manfred, Roswitha's husband (born 1956), whose birthday it was; and Roswitha and Manfred's two children, Katherina (thirteen) and Philipp (six). I gathered that both Erhard and Roswitha and their respective families lived with their parents in the converted homestead, while the other son, Norbert (born 1955); his wife, Renate (born 1957); and their three children, Magdalena (fifteen), Julia (eleven), and Anna (two), lived in a nearby town.

We were plied with *Kaffee und Kuchen* in honor of the celebrant's birthday. Later, when the dishes were cleared and Professor May had cued the family as to the principal reason for my visit, we began to talk. I told them of my hope of finding a three-generation family willing to work with me in reconstructing its history in the form of a book, to inform others of how its members had negotiated the radical swings in the political and economic fortunes of recent eastern German history. I added that I hoped they might consider being that family.

That I had touched on a responsive chord seemed evident when Edgar Schorcht brought forth a family photo album, as if to say that it was none too soon to begin our work together. The album was largely devoted to pictures of his father, Edwin, a veteran of Verdun. Edwin had assumed control of the family farm from his father, Hugo, in 1922. He, in turn, had signed the farm over to Edgar in 1967. Officially retired, Edwin had continued to live on the farm with Edgar and his family until his death in 1976. His wife, Elly—Edgar's mother—had died several years before Edwin's passing.

It was becoming clear that if I were to have the good fortune of working with the Schorcht family, I would have Edgar and Wally Schorcht's resources in helping bring Edwin and Elly to life at the moment the farm became theirs, when the Weimar Republic was still in its infancy. I learned that Edgar, like me, was born in 1922. He came of age in the Nazi period and was a member of the Hitler Youth. He had fought on the Russian Front while I was engaged in the war in the Pacific. In April 1945, Edgar was taken prisoner by the Americans. When the Russians took control of Thuringia from the Americans in July 1945, the Schorchts entered into the long encounter with Communist hegemony that resulted in the partial and then later complete collectivization of the farm by 1971.

I learned that Erhard, Heidrun, Roswitha, Manfred, Norbert, and Renate, all born in the 1950s, were at first Young Pioneers (members of the state-run youth organization) and later members of the Free German Youth, or *Freie Deutsche Jugend* (FDJ), as the regime attempted to make of them

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“well-rounded socialist personalities.” Like everyone else, they were taken unaware by the sudden turn of events of November 1989, ushering in yet another Germany, which their children know to be their own.

By the time it became opportune to bid each other good-bye, I left tired yet privileged to have made contact with a family so hospitable and so willing to share their experiences and memories; it boded well for a possible collaboration in the future. I told them I would write when I returned to the United States, allowing them time for family deliberation.

By the time we arrived in Weimar later that evening, it was clear to me that I would be well served in letting go of the idea of studying an urban Weimar family whose history would be interwoven with that of the city. Instead, I would study a family living in the countryside, where socialist policies were radical in their intention. Such a strategic shift in the focus of the project would depend, of course, on the assent of the Schorchts. I was confident, however, that they would agree. Nevertheless, the wealth of archival and other resources pertaining to Weimar as the administrative capital of the district in which Göttern lies would undoubtedly continue to prove invaluable to me, just as the city’s own rich history would inspire in me a respect for historical detail. The project would, I envisioned, be headquartered in Weimar, with trips to Göttern for interviews. As one condition of working together, I had assured the family that I would be as minimally intrusive on their privacy as possible.

In the next two days, we made contact with the mayor of Weimar, the director of cultural affairs, and those in charge of the relevant libraries and archives, while obtaining information about the possibility of living arrangements.

When I left Germany toward the end of January 1992, I was optimistic that the Weimar Family Project would, in fact, get under way as planned. What remained was to complete my last semester of teaching at Amherst College, apply for project funding, and prepare to return to Germany by July so that the research and my retirement could go hand-in-hand.



Introduction

Family

THIS BOOK follows in the footsteps of its predecessor, *The House that Giacomo Built: History of an Italian Family, 1898–1978*. I have written both of these books with the understanding that what we call “family” provides an institutional context for referring to processes that are both personal and social. It is this strategic location of family as a point of conjunction between what is specific to the individual and what is general to the community that makes it a fruitful subject of investigation. Family research offers a way into mentalities and a window on the larger world.

Yet understanding of familial existence inevitably begins with lived experiences of specific families, whether our own or others. Only later do we make the cognitive leap to the inferred category of family: the Italian family, the German family, the Western family, and so on. To assign a greater truth value to the existence of any one family, however, as opposed to family in general is not to make the essentialist assumption that actual families are a given in nature—they are, like their more abstract counterpart, social constructs, even though they are constructed at a lower level of inference.

Narration

The writing of a family history involves the telling of a story—that is, narration, or transformation, to paraphrase Hayden White, of a sequence of events into a discourse, a story, an “emplotment.”¹ Telling a story about the way things seem to have been requires transforming those events into an

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intelligible representation, for the real world is not represented in the form of well-made stories—it does not come to us already narrated. The intelligibility that the representation of reality requires necessitates the imposition of imagination on the part of the narrator. The alternative would be a mere list of dates and events that would not constitute the “realism” that we demand of history. As the author of a history of the Schorchts of Göttern, I am more than a passive chronicler of their history. I am the creator of that history, establishing its contours and interpretive direction. This involves selecting, from among the wealth of information I am privy to, what merits inclusion as family history and what deserves omission. I have made judgments in regard to inclusion/exclusion at every step along the way. In the best of all possible worlds, the reader would be made privy to that ongoing process, but the resulting cumbersomeness would be intolerable.

What I am saying in respect to the authorship of historical texts is nothing more or less than what Clifford Geertz has stated in regard to ethnographic authorship: “that all ethnographical descriptions are homemade . . . are the describer’s descriptions, not those of the described.”²

History, Memory

The narration of a family history entails moving beyond its confines to engage in the multiple stories that encompass it, if only because family members assume roles outside as well as in the household. The identification of this intersection of histories—personal, familial, regional, and national—lies at the heart of what C. Wright Mills has called “the sociological imagination.” He writes, “No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history, and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey.”³ In a study that is in large part oral history, biography appears as subjective memory. Memory, however, is of problematic value for recovering the past, even though it constitutes important testimony about it. Its importance lies not in being more authentic or “truer” than history but in suggesting how the past was experienced. Thus, memories are not enough; history must be there as well, “to transform them,” as Jacques Le Goff writes, “into something that can be conceived, to make them knowable.”⁴

In the case of German history, and particularly that of the Third Reich, the relationship between history and memory is special. As the Jewish historiographer Yosef Yerushalmi writes, “Memory and modern historiography stand, by their nature, in radically different relations to the past.”⁵ On the one hand, “Jewish” memory is “drastically selective” in its unrelenting focus on the Holocaust as “the central event in modern German Culture.”⁶ On the other hand, “German” memory is, as Saul Friedländer

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points out, characterized by various degrees of avoidance and denial in its representation of the Nazi epoch.⁷

As the narrator of the history of a German family that includes twelve years of Nazism in its scope, I assumed that questions and issues, especially those pertaining to National Socialism, might well be treated like skeletons in the closet, better left in the dark. The obvious queries had to do with the Nazi Party and membership in it, Adolf Hitler, the war, the Jews, the Holocaust, and knowledge about the nearby Buchenwald camp—all profoundly moral questions. As I began working, I intuited a hidden agenda at work when these topics came up—an inevitable residue of the war in which Edgar and I had been mortal enemies. I sensed an expectation on the part of the Schorchts that I, as the “other,” would want to know, above all else, about those matters and their involvement in them. The anticipation of judgments leveled against a people proud of their heritage kept these topics away from the center of our concerns. That they were more peripheral than central could have been due to the degree to which they were engaged with them at the time. Yet I knew that this was an issue that I could not readily resolve.

I remember driving back to Weimar after the first interview with the Schorchts, noting the place in the road between Magdala and Mellingen where the massive bell tower monument at Buchenwald becomes visible. The sight of the tower, built in 1955, had no relevance to the question of whether the Schorchts were aware of what went on there—in actuality, the camp was hidden from view by the crest of the Ettersberg hill—but it exists as evidence of a history that will not go away.⁸

Alltagsgeschichte

Much of family life is not complicit with large historical events but revolves around the responsibilities of everyday life, *Alltag*. The history of everyday life, *Alltagsgeschichte*, became an important new undertaking in West German historiography in the mid-1970s, encompassing as it did a wide range of historical initiatives regarding the lives of ordinary people as enacted in family life, in gender relations, in the workplace, and so on, to represent “history from below.” The emergence of *Alltagsgeschichte* signaled the inclusion of an anthropological approach in German social history in its emphasis on the experiential. As Geoff Eley writes, “This turn toward ethnology also involved a shift in the historian’s agenda from impersonal social process to the experiences of human actors.”⁹

As an American anthropologist, I welcome the convergence of anthropology with history that *Alltagsgeschichte* represents and the opportunity it offers to work under its banner. At the same time, I recognize that undertaking a study lying within its parameters bears its own set of respon-

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sibilities. The most serious concern is the danger that historical attention paid to the affairs of the everyday may normalize that deemed abnormal—in this case, the Third Reich. *Alltagsgeschichte* may elicit relativism by revealing that behavior and ideas bearing the stigma of evil in one particular historical circumstance inevitably have properties in common with the “normal” in other contexts. This is not to suggest that the danger of relativism is to be avoided by not subjecting the Nazi period to the focus of the history of everyday life but to recognize that the sources of evil are to be sought in the unexamined intentions of what is assumed to be normal. To think otherwise is to essentialize Nazism and more particularly the Holocaust at the cost of deferring their ultimate understanding.¹⁰ More concretely, to attribute historical status to the events of everyday life is to suggest the existence of a layered imagery of historical process in which political and ideological activity overlies a quotidian culture made accessible by historical ethnography. What is instructive about such a duality is that “below the barbarism and the horror of the regime,” as Ian Kershaw points out, “were patterns of social ‘normality’ that were, of course, affected by Nazism in various ways but that predated and survived it.”¹¹ In fact, the life course of both Edgar and Wally Schorcht and their “everyday” existence, molded for the most part by non-ideological considerations, cuts a swath through the political and ideological fluctuations of four Germans. The essential uniformity of their lives consisted of strands of behavior and thought whose basic properties remained effectually constant but whose surfaces were prone to elaboration and transformation. Indeed, the relativistic perspective that a longitudinal study of the Schorcht family provides suggests that the same fealty to the doctrines of the Third Reich and later to the GDR was to be found in a prior allegiance to secular authority.

Yet it is far from my purpose to draw attention to the Third Reich—so brief in duration, so murderous in intention—over that of the divided Germany that followed it.

Communalism

In the period subsequent to the defeat of the Nazi regime in 1945, the people of eastern Germany became citizens of yet another Germany, the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR). From its beginning, the GDR was an unintended political entity. Its inception was unforeseen by the victors as well as by German politicians during and immediately after the cessation of hostilities. The precedent for a division of Germany had been established in the demarcation zones of occupation established first at Yalta and later at Potsdam.¹² In default of agreement on the governance of Germany among the allies, the Western powers established the Federal Republic of Germany.

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In response, the Soviet Union proclaimed the German Democratic Republic. Founded on October 7, 1949, the GDR assumed the eradication of Fascism and the creation of an advanced socialist society as its historic task.

Even before the GDR came into being in 1949, the Soviet Military Administration in 1945 presumed upon the German leaders in the Soviet zone of occupation to launch a land reform program, designed to remove the “cancer” of Junkerism, perceived as a promulgator of Fascist adventurism. In its wake, land reform brought about a profound change in the power structure of East Germany.

Soon to follow in 1952 was a program of social transformation even more radical in its goals: the audacious collectivization of agriculture and the industrialization of the countryside, intended to bring into being a new person, the socialist agrarian worker. The extent to which the East German regime, in carrying forth its vision, was indeed successful in instilling within the people a “socialist” conscience—substituting “we” for “I”—was due in part to the survival of the National Socialist ethos of *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community), the idealization of the common good.¹³ Stephen Fritz effectively makes the point that the communitarian aspect of National Socialism, inherent in *Volksgemeinschaft*, had explosive appeal, especially among younger people. He writes, “The allure of Nazism, then, lay in its creation of the belief that one was in service to an ideal community which promoted both social commitment and integration.”¹⁴

It is perhaps ironic that those two Germanys, that of Hitler and that of Walter Ulbricht, left behind a legacy of communalism on the borders of Western Europe. It is a legacy that members of the Schorcht family have given their allegiance to at different times, in different ways, and to different degrees.

Individualism

With the pronouncement of unification on October 3, 1990, the people of the former GDR became citizens of the amplified Federal Republic of Germany. Immediately, winds of change blowing from the West brought about the valorization of the individual and consumption in place of adherence to the community and to allocation.

In fact, however, the independent enterprise has not returned in every sector of the economy in the “new” German states (*Länder*), as it was assumed by many that it would. The family farm has all but disappeared. High start-up costs, the need for farms of large hectareage, the legacy of the extended fields, and the collectivized infrastructure have selected against the reemergence in the East of the independent farmer. In the case of the Schorchts, their land is now sown, cultivated, and harvested by what had once been a party-controlled collective, now operating as a privately

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controlled cooperative. After six generations of residence in Göttern, the Schorchts have ceased to be farmers.

Edgar and Wally Schorcht, now retired, enjoy their newly acquired freedom to travel. They can readily visit Edgar's sister, Irmgard, in the West without a visa or join others their age on a bus trip to the Italian lakes. They appreciate the comfort and convenience that goods not previously available bring to them. Nevertheless, they recall, almost daily, the absence of something they have missed since unification: being in the company of others in the pursuit of a common purpose.

Erhard, Heidrun, and Maria are all children of the GDR. Maria was twelve when unification occurred. Erhard, a freelance photographer, has worked in the free market since shortly after the Wall came down. He is, among other things, a regular contributor to the *Neue Thüringer Illustrierte*. Erhard is impressed with how effective the capital economy is in generating productivity when compared with the planned economy he grew up with. On the other hand, he is concerned with its social costs—the anxiety he has noted in those around him faced with the threat of layoffs. He is gratified that Heidrun's job pays well.

Heidrun was relieved and saddened by the collapse of the GDR—relieved that the cynicism and the obdurate authoritarianism of its government was over with, saddened that her strongly felt hope for a viable socialist society had been extinguished.

Born and raised on a small farm, Heidrun was gifted with abilities that were encouraged by the authorities. After being introduced to American literature in high school, she was accepted to the University of Jena, where she earned a diploma in language studies and a doctorate in American studies. Now Heidrun teaches German in the Lithuanian provincial capital of Panevėžys. She is proud of her ability as an independent woman to adapt herself to Lithuanian culture, just as she did in the United States in 1979 in the course of gathering material for her dissertation. Heidrun is confident that she can meet the new challenges flowing from the West, a confidence nurtured by her upbringing in the East.

Method

In conclusion, allow me to point out how I, in the company of my assistants, proceeded to gather data. Unlike in Italy, where an informal atmosphere reigned, a certain formality was the order of the day in Germany as concerned fieldwork. Appointments for a morning or an afternoon interview were made by telephone. Arriving promptly in Göttern from Weimar in my 1971 Russian Lada, we were met at the door by Frau Schorcht. I presented her with flowers, from which I first removed the paper wrapping, as custom requires.

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We were then joined in the small sitting room by Herr Schorcht. After a half hour devoted to sharing Wally's coffee and cake, the tape recorder was started, beginning the ninety-minute interview.

Edgar and Wally chose to be interviewed only together. Edgar was a magnificent respondent, a generous narrator, while Wally listened with seeming interest to much of what she must have heard on numerous prior occasions. From time to time, she interjected her own comments or called her husband to task on a question of fact. Edgar may have been selective about what he was ready to comment on. Questions about agriculture and the homestead were answered in detail; those concerning the Nazi period were responded to less generously than were queries regarding the communist era that followed. Edgar was only eleven when the Nazis came to power but was in full maturity during the Communist period. The Hitler years provoked painful memories of comrades lost in the war. Such moments would cause Edgar to break off from what he was saying, pause, and then—after recovering his voice—change the subject.

Erhard and Heidrun preferred to be interviewed separately. Like her father-in-law, Heidrun is a political activist and enjoyed the give-and-take of the interview. Erhard, more reserved, often strove to shape his response.

Their daughter, Maria, was given to talking about what was uppermost in her mind—namely, the mores of student life—but was not afraid to pass judgment on what displeased her. What Maria, her parents, and her grandparents all had in common was a willingness to share information about themselves. As time went on, they increasingly reflected on their past.

In all, forty interviews were held between August 1992 and October 1995, most of them open-ended. Toward the end of our work together, I prepared questions in advance to get information about particular subjects. On my return to Weimar, the tapes were transcribed.

Besides these formal sessions, we were invited to take lunch with Wally and Edgar on several occasions in their ample kitchen as well as to attend family celebrations or to join in guided tours by Edgar of the village and the Schorcht fields scattered around the outskirts of Göttern.

Apart from interviews, Edgar and Wally were generous in allowing us to make use of family documents. Especially important was *Der Bauer und sein Hof* (*The Peasant and His Holding*), containing detailed information on the operation of the Schorcht farm, compiled by Edgar in 1940 as a course assignment in agricultural school. Also useful were the legal documents pertaining to the transmission of the farm from one generation to another. In addition to these, the Schorchts gave me permission to make copies of numerous family photographs, with those of Edwin and Elly Schorcht, the principal protagonists in the first part of the book, holding special importance.

Archives

It was my good fortune that pertinent archival material was available. I made use of the Göttern chronicle—a survey of local events maintained year by year by the village chronicler—as well church records stored in the mother church in nearby Magdala, particularly useful when I was seeking out genealogical connections among the early Schorcht settlers in Göttern toward the end of the eighteenth century.

In Weimar, we consulted files in four archives: the *Stadtarchiv*, housed in the city hall in the *Marktplatz*; the *Thüringisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Weimar*, maintained in the former grand duke's stable (and later Gestapo headquarters) on *Marstallstrasse*, particularly useful for information on the land reform program of 1945–1950; the *Kreisarchiv Landkreis Weimar Land* on *Schwanseestrasse*, containing files on the relationship between the local administration of Göttern and district headquarters in Weimar; and the *Verwaltungsarchiv*, the administrative archive housed in the former Nazi Party headquarters in Thuringia. In addition, I made use of two archival sources lying beyond the confines of Göttern and Weimar: the branch of the *Bundesarchiv* in Berlin (formerly known as the Berlin Document Center under Allied Control) to amplify information given to me by the family in regard to membership in the Nazi Party, and the U.S. National Archives for data concerning the movement of American military forces in and around Göttern between April and June 1945.

Presentation

The book is divided into four parts, each reflective of generational rather than historical time.

Part I introduces the first generation of the narrative: Edwin Schorcht (who inherited the family farm in 1922 from his father, Hugo) and his wife, Elly (with whom he entered into marriage in 1920 in the early years of the Weimar Republic). The narrative deals with the historical derivation of the land, its cultivation, the material culture of the farmstead, and the location of the village of Göttern in space and time.

Part II centers on Edwin and Elly's children, Edgar and Irmgard; their coming of age in Hitler's Germany; their engagement with the war years and the later occupation of Göttern by the Americans and the Russians; their reaction to land reform and the industrialization of the countryside; and their coming to terms with the new Germany created by the USSR, leading to Irmgard's defection to the West and Edgar's emergence as the mayor of Göttern during the last half of the GDR.

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Part III is the story of Erhard Schorcht and his wife, Heidrun; of their growing up in the Ulbricht years of the GDR; their matriculation at the University of Jena as favored offspring of workers and peasants, culminating in Heidrun's invitation to the United States in 1979; followed by her personal struggle with loyalty to the party in the light of her experience with American democracy.

Part IV turns to Maria, the daughter of Erhard and Heidrun. Also a child of the GDR, Maria finds herself looking back to the past in relation to the new Germany that history has bequeathed her.

Voices

The predominant voice in the following story is mine. When members of the Schorcht family speak, their statements, taken from the tapes, are indicated by quotation marks. On those occasions when I attribute behaviors or states of mind to persons, I am not presuming to read their thoughts or anticipate their actions but choosing to maintain the integrity of the narrative. To avoid imposing interpretive explication on the narrative, I have added a postscript to each chapter to include commentary.