

After the Russians Came

Turning My Father's Story into Fiction

An author transforms harrowing family history into a compelling debut novel in *The Dog in the Wood*. **By Monika Schröder**

I did not grow up wanting to be a writer. As a child, I loved to read but felt discouraged by the writing required of me during my school years in Germany. I was almost 40 before I began to write fiction. It wasn't until, as an elementary-school teacher, I took a class on teaching writing, in summer 2005, that I first became excited about the possibility of becoming a writer. The instructor asked me to compose a narrative based on a family story, and I chose to write a short story about a boy named Fritz based on my father's experiences at the end of World War II. With encouragement from the instructor and my husband, I continued writing about the boy, and out of these episodes—and after

many revisions—came my first book, *The Dog in the Wood*.

Growing Up in a Divided Germany

The story is set in eastern Germany in 1945 at the end of World War II. Fritz has just turned 11, and he lives with his mother and older sister on his grandparents' farm in Schwartz. The Soviet army is advancing toward his family's village, and it will only be days until the foreign soldiers arrive. The book opens with a scene in which Fritz's grandfather shows him a hole he has dug in the forest where he hopes to hide the women of the family while he and Fritz fight the foreign army. But when the Soviet soldiers come, Fritz loses his grandparents and his home, and his mother is arrested and imprisoned by the military police.

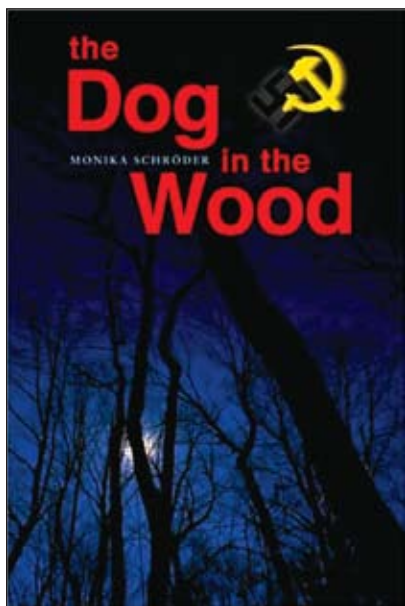
My father was born in 1939 in a small village northeast of Berlin. He left East Germany in 1961, a few months before the Berlin Wall was built, and settled in West Germany, where he met and married my mother. During vacations we often visited my grandmother's farm in East Germany. The farm was simple, but it seemed enchanted to me. I helped milk cows, witnessed the birth of calves, and heard my grandmother laugh at my shrieks when the beheaded chickens raced around the yard before stumbling down. There also was an outhouse, which, to my mother,

became the symbol for everything that was wrong with socialism.

The East German authorities didn't make it easy for us to visit our relatives. They thoroughly scrutinized our car and luggage each time we crossed the border. Once we had arrived at my grandmother's, we had to register at the county seat, which meant a long wait in front of black-and-white posters that showed us the evils of western imperialism. I remember stern ladies in East German police uniforms asking us many questions before they reluctantly stamped our papers. In later years we even had to pay a daily fee for each visit to our relatives. Because the socialist government didn't spend much money on modernizing the infrastructure of its rural areas, it was common to see bullet holes from World War II battles in the nearby town and to travel on cobblestone streets; my grandmother's farm remained unchanged as well. I regret now that I never asked her about the events of 1945. She died in October 1989, one month before the Berlin Wall came down.

A Dark Chapter in History

After the collapse of the East German regime, historians could access the archives of the Special Camps the Soviet occupiers had maintained in East Germany, resulting in exhibitions and publications about this dark



chapter of German history. In recent years several books about the experiences of my parents' generation of "war children" have been published in Germany. In the early 1990s, after Germany's reunification, when traveling to the east became easier, my father and I visited Schwartz and interviewed eyewitnesses about the Russians' arrival. Some of their anecdotes found their way into my book.

But the main resource for the book was my father. My questions about his past always triggered very emotional responses. I live in India, so we usually talked on the telephone, and our conversations often ended in tears. He remembers his grandfather's frantic attempt to defend the village; how they rode together on a horse cart while the old man yelled at other farmers to help build trenches to slow down the Russians' advance. My father also recalls that because of a shortage in caskets, his grandmother had to be buried in the wooden dowry chest that was kept in the attic. He also told me about the Russian officers who stayed in their house and the Soviet tank that was stuck on the slope by the pond near the garden.

Like every work of historical fiction, the dates of key events had to be accurate. I listened to a recording of Hitler's insane last speech from Berlin, during which he asks the German people to envision the rebuilding of German cities while Allied bombs are hitting the building that the speech was being broadcast from. I made sure that Fritz could have really heard Admiral Dönitz's radio address after Hitler's suicide, two days before the Russians arrived.

Turning Memoir into Fiction

While writing this book I learned that not everything that really happened made good fiction. My first draft resembled a memoir more than a fictional account, and maybe because I always had my father in mind when envisioning the story, I hadn't developed the main character. When I

finally summoned the courage to submit the manuscript to Stephen Roxburgh at Front Street, he responded with what my husband called "the best possible rejection letter," expressing interest in the story but pointing out that it was told from too great a distance and lacked opportunity for the reader to identify with the main character. Over the course of many revisions, and with the help of author Carolyn Coman, who became the "midwife" to the book, the manuscript developed from a memoir into a story with a plot culminating in a cathartic moment that leaves the character changed at the end.

Some historical realities had to be omitted in a book for children. The fact that Russian soldiers raped German women on their way toward Berlin, leaving many women dead from either their own hand or as a result of the violence, could not be mentioned in a book for children. The scene that depicts a drunken soldier harassing the protagonist's sister is only a mild insinuation of the sexual assaults German women and girls suffered during the advance of the Soviet army.

Other parts I changed because reality was too harrowing. My father's mother was taken at gunpoint while she and her children still lived on her in-laws' farm in Schwartz. My father and his sister were left standing alone outside their house. A refugee from eastern Prussia first cared for them and later notified their maternal grandmother, who took the children to her farm in a village named Zempow (I call it Sempow in my book). Local communists then divided up the Schröder's farm. For the book, I decided to let the land reform commission take the farm first and allow Fritz to get settled with Oma Clara before Mama and Lech were



Fritz, Gertrud, and Irmi Schröder, the author's father, grandmother, and aunt, around 1944.

abducted. However, like the fictional Fritz, my six-year-old father had no way of finding out where his mother might have been taken.

Finding an Audience

I hope that a German publisher will be interested in publishing *The Dog in the Wood* in German. A German edition would also allow my parents, who don't know English, to read the book. If I had written the book in German, not much would have been different, but some of the colorful idioms my family uses would have been easier to express in their original language.

While writing the book, I worried about whether it would find an audience in the United States. But I hope that a story about the effects of war and its aftermath on children, a story about fear and how to cope with overwhelming loss, will have universal appeal.

Sampling Schröder

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