

## At Home During War: An Interview with Lieselotte Ludwig about her Life in Germany during WWII

Anke Sandleben

*Lieselotte Ludwig was born in 1918 as the second of four daughters to a postman and his wife. She has spent her entire life in Brunswick, Germany. As a childless, yet physically strong woman, the authorities assigned several different jobs to her between 1939 and 1945, such as home help, cook or work in the local ammunition factory. Due to his job as a railway welder her husband was enlisted only shortly before the war ended. In an interview Mrs Ludwig reports in a relentlessly honest way how she perceived those years from her personal angle, how the cruelties she had to witness especially in the military hospital haunt her until the present day, and how she managed to remain unharmed in spite of her open dislike for the Nazis. Her account offers a perspective often neglected, giving an insight into the way the war affected the lives of those who were not immediately involved in it. Between the lines, and perhaps even unintentionally, Mrs Ludwig makes the reader aware of the significant role the women played during the war.*



Lieselotte, her mother and two of her siblings

NOTE: The interview was carried out in German and translated by author.

*Mrs Ludwig, let us talk about the years of the war. How much did your life change with the beginning of the war?*

When the war broke out I was 25 years old. Life as such did not change in a radical way on that day in 1939. After all, the Nazis had already been around for a while. Much to our dislike, I have to say. Nobody in my direct surroundings supported them in any way. Well, my father as a postman was obliged to wear the swastika, and as much as he hated it, he abode by the rules

when he was at work. Like most of us, he was basically frightened he might otherwise be added to the GeStaPo<sup>1</sup> officers' "list". Notorious and easily recognisable by their long leather coats, they would eliminate anyone on that list, one by one, mercilessly, with the proverbial German thoroughness. My husband, an open supporter of the trade union and the social democrats, was beaten up by Nazis in the trade union house once, but was luckily left alone before they could start torturing him. Oh, you would not believe the horrors I have seen done to people! Especially after the war had started dissenters were persecuted more drastically, and if they were caught they were exposed to the extreme brutality of the Nazis. Many of those who had joined the Nazi party obviously enjoyed the power they now had, e.g. to torment others, and quite a few turned out to be rather sadistic pigs – pardon my language. I remember my friend telling me that her father broke his leg when he jumped out of a second-storey window in the Newspaper house at Magnitor<sup>2</sup>, where SPD<sup>3</sup> men and other opponents of the regime used to meet. The Nazis had discovered them and stormed the house and beaten up the men in such an inclement way that in his desperation my friend's dad figured that the only chance to escape alive would be a jump out of the window. Some of the trade union men were hanged on the outskirts of town. Given all these facts – and I know I am by no means the only one who has stories like that to tell – I feel ashamed of Chancellor Merkel. As you know, one of her first directives as chancellor was to allow the NPD, the follow-up party to Hitler's NSDAP<sup>4</sup>, to persist.



Lieselotte in her early 20s, here at the outdoor pool with her husband

*How did you learn about the fact that Hitler had attacked Poland?*

It was my father who brought us the news that Hitler in his megalomania had attacked Poland. He had learnt about it when listening to the radio.

*You were a housewife in your end-20s, early 30s at the time. With large numbers of men being enlisted did the authorities make you take over a job? Or did you volunteer?*

As far as I remember – but I might as well be wrong here – we women were indeed made to work. But frankly I did not mind: I did not have children to look after, and my husband spent almost the entire day pursuing his job as a welder for the German Railway.

*What kind of a job did they give you? How long did you stay on that job? Can you give us your impressions?*

The first job that was assigned to me took me to a large laundry and the ironing and pressing section. Apart from other things, we were in charge of the correctly ironed shirts worn by the officers of the German Luftwaffe<sup>5</sup>. Our foreman belonged to the majority of Germans who agreed with Hitler, his visions and his political ambitions, and one night one of his fervent speeches was broadcast from Berlin via radio. She was so exalted to listen to him and tried to elate us, too! As usual I had a good excuse right at hands, telling her that before I could indulge

<sup>1</sup> "Geheime Staats-Polizei" - "Secret State Police," the official secret police in Nazi Germany

<sup>2</sup> place in the centre of Brunswick

<sup>3</sup> Germany's social democratic party

<sup>4</sup> official title, German National Socialist Workers' Party

<sup>5</sup> German airforce

in the pleasure of listening to the Führer<sup>6</sup> I had to fulfil my obligations, i.e. finish pressing the number of shirts allotted to me.

*How about your next job?*

Close to the Inselwall<sup>7</sup> they had erected a military hospital. Almost every day injured soldiers were taken there. I really liked this job, especially because the supervising inspector was clearly one of us, i.e. an SPD supporter, and apparently did not like the Nazis either. It was he who decided that instead of working as a kitchen help, which basically meant cleaning, I was needed as a cook. According to him the food did not exactly contribute to the soldiers' recovery, so he wanted me in charge of the cookware and the storage room. But then, we did not have a large variety of foods at hands, so on most days I, too, was restricted to cooking stews. However, I have never heard a soldier complain, they were happy enough to receive a warm meal. The soldiers by the way helped us to scrub the huge cauldrons. Oh, and a few times a transport with severely injured would arrive just when I was about to go home. The inspector then asked me politely whether it would be doable for me to stay a littler longer and cook an invigorating milk soup. Sometimes, particularly during a bomb alert, I had to assist in carrying the wounded men to the bunker. I can tell you, the injuries I saw were not seldom stomach-churning. My ratio tells me that even today certain conflicts cannot be solved by any other means than warfare, but my heart and my humanity wish they could cry out loud and share with the important politicians of this world this picture I carry around in my head. It is the picture of a young man with both of his legs amputated, and his intestines literally hanging out of his body. I should think anyone whose heart is not entirely made of stone would agree with me that one single dead soldier is already one too much.

The moaning and crying of the soldiers was even more depressing in the narrowness of the bunker. Whenever I had the choice I avoided the bunker during a bomb alert. My husband and I agreed: what use would the safest bunker make if a house collapsed on top of it? Rather than possibly suffocating miserably we often decided to put our fate in the hands of God and stay in our first floor flat.

Once we were forced to go to a bunker together with one of our neighbours, Lisa. She had an illegitimate child, about whose father no-one knew more than the rumour that he was Jewish. Apparently the Nazis had heard of it, too. Yes, the informer system seemed to be working indeed! All of a sudden GeStaPo men came checking the bunker, and my husband brought us in quite some danger when he whispered to Paul, Lisa's son, that he should hide under the bench, where he would be safe behind our legs. Luckily we were not found out. As you can see, I survived all those air raids over Brunswick, and amazingly, hardly any sensible target was hit. Brunswick was full of industry, but the allies seemed to have a problem hitting the precise spots with their bombs. They were not able to destroy the railway bridges, the Lutterwerke, the Miag, Schuberth<sup>8</sup> or others. Nevertheless, the bombs and aerial mines caused enough damage, killing innumerable civilians.



Lieselotte in the early 1940s

<sup>6</sup> Hitler called himself "Führer" meaning "leader of his people"

<sup>7</sup> street in the centre of Brunswick

<sup>8</sup> various plants with importance for the heavy industry

One year Hitler was in town to celebrate his birthday, and I was in charge of the dinner. For him, of course, the meals given to the soldiers were not good enough. I wish I had had the guts to poison his food, but then I was painfully aware that I would never get away with that other than decapitated or otherwise executed. Apart from that, I assume he had his taster anyway, just like all the big rulers in this world, a group that Hitler felt he most certainly belonged to. When our inspector was relocated and a new, Nazi-allegiant one took over, I claimed that I could not do the job any longer. After all, the silent agreement between the old inspector and me, which exempted me i.a. from the obligatory Hitler salute, would no longer be valid, and I knew that as diplomatic as I tried to be I would never be capable of hailing that man. I did not stay without work for a long time, though. Only a couple of days later I was given a job at an ammunition factory.

*How did you feel about working there? Did you think about what the mines and bombs you produced were actually meant to be used for?*

The actual work was alright, tough and dirty work, though, but as you indicate with your question I hated the thought of participating in the production of bombs. After all, every single one of them had the efficiency to kill thousands of people. So I told the officer in charge that my eyesight was not too good, and that I could hardly manage to fill the exact amount of gunpowder in. As expected, and much to my delight, they gave me another task. But all in all, working there was rather aggravating, as you felt permanently observed. At that point in time, fear was the most dominant feeling in our lives, especially as an opponent of Hitler and his Nazi regime you hardly dared to trust anyone any longer. Even those you knew as friends could have been brainwashed by the Nazis.

*When was your husband enlisted, and when did he return from the war?*

My husband was enlisted as late as 1944. The Railway needed him and his welding skills here in Brunswick. After he left, I took on another job as a home help with a big family in Leisewitzstraße<sup>9</sup>. My husband and his comrades surrendered to the French before the Russians could get hold of them. He spent over two years in French captivity, until he finally came home – well-fed and unharmed. Of course, I was overwhelmed when the Americans freed Brunswick, and I was glad it was all over. Quite frankly, I liked the thought that Hitler, the Goebbels couple and other high rank Nazis had decided to commit suicide. After all, no jury on this planet would have been able to punish them sufficiently for what they had become guilty of.

*How did your life change after the total defeat? How did you feel about the end of the war and its outcome? How did you experience the allies?*

My life changed in so far as I no longer had to be afraid to openly speak my mind or that a comment of mine might urge another person to denunciate me with the Nazis. When my husband was back from France he insisted that I gave up my job as home help. He earned enough to secure a decent living for both of us, and I must admit I was not exactly unhappy to be able to stay at home with the sole mission of providing a nice home for him. As for the allies, I had already got to know the Americans and their generosity at the end of World War I, when my friends and I, four years old at the time, had asked them for “chocolate, Mr.?”. Again they had saved us and they always treated us citizens with respect and dignity. Brunswick belonged to the British occupation zone all those years until the fall of the Berlin Wall, and we hardly ever

---

<sup>9</sup> another street in Brunswick

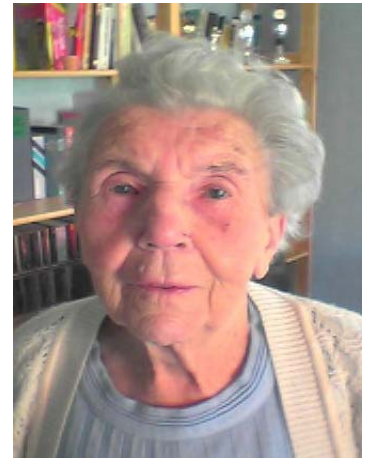
realised the British were here, as they were extremely secluded behind the gates of their barracks, and rather unobtrusive in case you ever met a “Tommy” at all. But that hardly ever happened, well, apart from their annual manoeuvre.

*Did you have to continue to work for the state rebuilding?*

No. Like most Germans, I invested most of my energy and the little starter money of 20 Deutsche Mark per person in our home. Politics were something nobody really wanted to be bothered with after the past 12 years. Gradually, all those soldiers who had survived the war returned home. Many of them were in a condition that allowed them to get back into the job they had done before the war, so we women had to give way. After all, the purpose of our work had been to replace our men while they were gone fighting a war that could never be won. That did not mean that all women were able to follow the traditional, familiar role allocation with the man being the sole bread-earner of the family, and the woman being in charge of household and education of the children. Especially in the countryside, women performed hard field work in order to contribute their share to the family budget. I guess the only ones who technically would have been eligible to force us to work were the allies, since we did not have a government capable of acting at the time. But, as I said, we here in the West were in the pleasant situation that neither the French nor the Americans or in our case the British seemed to intend to humiliate or punish us civilians.

*Thank you so much for sharing your memories with us. Is there anything you would like to add?*

You're welcome. Well, maybe one last thing. Only recently our ex-Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, in my eyes the best man ever in that position, spoke in front of young soldiers. What I found most striking about his speech was the fact that he expressed exactly the inner fears I have inside me when thinking of Germany's past and future in relation to each other. Like Schmidt, I am afraid that our German tendency to follow and obey a leader and to let us get carried away in exaltation without reflecting might – even if creepingly - clear the way for a new dictatorship, even though all those illuminating and educational measures are taken in order to prevent especially the younger generations from ever letting a monster like the Third Reich grow again. In that respect, I am grateful for my age, for it is getting more and more likely that I am dead before that happens. I sincerely hope that one day the world will come to the conclusion that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century war can no more be an acceptable tool to solve conflicts of any kind.



Lieselotte today

---

Anke is a MPhil student of English and American Literature as well as Nordic Philology at Philipps University Marburg/Germany, currently working on her M.A. thesis on 16th century poet Sir Thomas Wyatt. She teaches Danish at various evening schools and universities in Germany, and works part-time as a translator.