Omi and the Christmas Candles: A Tale of Nine Christmases during the Nazi Era

Skip Eisiminger
Village church, Wolsdorf
Foreword and Dedication

Several years ago I read that the German weekly bread ration from the end of 1939 to the end of World War II fell from 2400 grams a week to 1178. The meat ration fell over the same period from 500 grams to 222. And the fat ration likewise was slashed by more than a half. Furthermore, understand that much of this six-year-long period for German non-combatants was spent in bomb shelters. For my wife’s family in Wolsdorf, it totaled 499 hours spread over just the last year and a half of the war. Though the post-war era involved no time in bomb shelters, far more Germans died of starvation immediately after the war than during it.

I began to ask myself how my German in-laws made it through a war that took the lives of some 55 million people over six years, and I began pestering them with questions about their survival. The result of these interviews is the book you are now holding. It was written with our three grandsons in mind, Edgar, Sterling, and Spencer. Though Edgar is just beginning to read in 2005, I tried to key the diction and syntax so that when he is twelve or thirteen he’ll be able to read the story for himself. If I failed in that attempt, the fault is entirely my own.

Perhaps a word about “Omi” is in order. The grandchildren all fondly refer to my wife Ingrid as “Omi.” I realize that for German readers that will create some difficulties because they will know that “Omi” is best translated as “Granny” in English. But since the book is for the boys, I decided to stick with “Omi.”

Finally, Omi and I would like to dedicate the book to our sainted Mutti who at this writing lies stricken with Alzheimers. Most of the stories retold herein are hers.

This is the town of Wolsdorf’s coat of arms emblazoned on a traditional shield consisting of a stylized oak tree representing the Elm, Elz, and Eitz Forests, which ring the town, a stylized stalk of wheat representing the area’s abundant farms, and two crossed hammers representing the nearby open-pit coal mines.
Family tree made for Nazi officials to “prove” there were no Jews in the family going back six generations to 1766. This research had to be completed before Mutti and Vati could legally marry.
Simplified Rautmann-Barmwater Family Tree

Friedrich Rautmann (Opa) (b.1875-d.1945) married Klara Beck (Oma)(b.1879-d.1962) in 1905.

Ernst Barmwater (b.1888-d.1932) married Minna Löhndorf (Oma Minna) (b.1890-d.1970) in 1912.

Friedrich and Klara produced Ilse Auguste Charlotte Rautmann (Mutti) in 1918.

Ernst and Minna produced Otto Heinrich Barmwater (Vati) in 1913.

Ilse and Otto married in 1938 and produced Ingrid (Omi) Barmwater in 1939, Rolf in 1940, and Manfred in 1948.

*L to R: Omi, Mutti, Rolf.*
Map of Wolsdorf and the Surrounding Area

Wolsdorf (population 1132 in 1939)
Plan of the Rautmann Home, Courtyard, and Garden

Village Street 67, first floor, Wolsdorf, Germany, c. 1940
Chapter I, 1939
Once upon a time many years ago, the country of Germany lay under a spell cast by the evil sorcerer, Adolf Hitler. During that terrible time, Omi, as we know her today, was born in the bustling city of Magdeburg under the shadow of the great cathedral where her parents, Mutti and Vati Barmwater, had married the year before. Her mother remembers that Omi arrived on a cold day in January, and the midwife she’d hired had a hard time reaching the family’s home for all the snow on the sidewalks. Omi was actually given the name “Ingrid,” which was chosen from a list approved by the government. Though Vati had a middle name and Mutti had two the new German authorities would not allow Omi one whether it was on the list or not.

In Magdeburg on Otto von Gericke Street, Omi lived with her mother, Mutti, her father, Vati, and many aunts, uncles, and cousins. When the war started, Omi’s Opa or grandfather told the entire family, “Soon bombs will be falling on our beautiful city. We must move to the countryside. Oma and I were here in the Great War, and we remember how hungry the people in the cities were. As you know, I have a modest summer home west of here in the village of Wolsdorf. I think we should all move there before someone is hurt.”

Mutti and Vati discussed Opa’s warnings and decided that Opa was right. As soon as Omi’s brother Rolf was born the following year, they decided they would pack all their belongings and move from the city to the little farming community of Wolsdorf, population about 1100. Here, though there were a half-dozen streets, everyone lived on “Village Street,” the news was broadcast by the mayor who doubled as the town crier, and no one had a mail box. Every time a rare letter did come to the village, it was delivered by the postmaster directly to the person named on the envelope.

As Opa predicted, the war’s disruptions were soon felt in industrial Magdeburg, population 200,000. Though no bombs were falling yet, life became more difficult. For one thing, Vati lost his job as a carpenter whose specialty was building beautiful spiraling staircases. Unable to find any work, he volunteered to serve in the German air force. It was the only place he could find employment at a time when many in Germany were without a job. Vati’s first job in the air force involved repairing the wooden biplanes of the previous war. Later at an airfield outside of Magdeburg, Vati was trained to be a navigator, who guided the pilot in the air, and a mechanic, who fixed the planes on the ground.

Occasionally he was expected to drop the plane’s bombs as well. He had learned how to do this by dropping darts from a barn loft into a crosswind created by a large fan. Sometimes he brought home old silk parachutes from which Mutti sewed dresses and shirts for her two children. (Late in the war after cutting out the swastika, the crooked black cross in the middle, one of Mutti’s friends even sewed a red and white dress from an old German flag.)

Mutti also recovered umbrellas with silk after she dyed it black and waterproofed it. New umbrellas were no longer available in the stores. Mutti had become a fine seamstress working in her father’s factory. There Opa, when he wasn’t going to the opera with Oma or teaching himself Latin, had employed ten people to sew firemen’s and policemen’s uniforms. But Opa closed his business before the family fled the on-coming war. When the family moved to Wolsdorf the following year, Mutti carried with her one of her father’s foot-powered sewing machines because she knew that during the war she would have to make her own clothes as well as the children’s. She also knew that the electric power would be off at times. Even with all the difficulties created by the war, Mutti was never content just to make a dress; she embroidered all the clothes she made for Omi and Rolf including doll clothes with bright-colored flowers and stars.

Despite the gauzy, golden light provided by the candles, Omi’s first Christmas was very sad for her mother. Omi who wasn’t even walking yet had a bad cold and cough, and Vati was far away. Mutti remembers that Omi had more fun with the empty boxes and wrapping paper than she had with her rattle and doll. The best news from the country’s capital in Berlin was that the war should be over soon.
Chapter II, 1940
In Wolsdorf, Omi lived with Mutti and Rolf on the first floor of their new home; Oma and Opa, Omi's grandparents, lived on the second floor, and in the attic lived a steady stream of refugees fleeing the war in the east. Omi only remembers two of these poor souls: Käte, who was about ten, and Schorsch, who was about twelve. Sister and brother, this pair arrived one night, filthy and covered with lice. They looked and acted like wild animals. DDT powder took care of the bugs, Mutti and Oma took care of the children's hunger, but no one could replace the parents they had lost when a Russian bomb fell on their house.

After a few months in Wolsdorf, they went to live with a relative who had finally been located near Braunschweig. No one in Wolsdorf recalls seeing them again.

Refugees and family alike shared the vegetables and fruit which came from the fenced garden and apple orchard behind the house to which Opa had brought them. Chickens, geese, rabbits, and two female pigs named Peter and Paul supplied the meat. (No one remembers why the sows were always called Peter and Paul, but most agree there was an implied prayer in these Biblical names.) Though the family missed their city homes and friends, they were happy to be together in the village. With no regular newspaper and a town crier for news, at first the family didn't pay much attention to Hitler or his war, which—for now—was far away in Russia and France. Later in the war, Opa would trade for a small radio which, it seemed to Omi, brought the fighting right into their heads.

One detail that did concern them was disturbing and persistent rumors about their Jewish neighbors in Magdeburg. Opa had hired a few Jewish seamstresses to work in his uniform factory, but for reasons he never fully understood, they stopped coming to work when others were begging for employment. Neighbors said that trucks had shown up in the middle of the night and taken them to the train station where they boarded cattle cars. In Wolsdorf, the one Jewish family in town had moved away before Omi and her family arrived. No one ever heard from them again, and few asked where they had gone. Survival was a full-time job even with a garden in the back yard and a farm across the street.

In the early years of the war, Mutti carried on as if the war were rain in April or snow in December—necessary but not always pleasant occurrences. If she needed to visit a doctor in Helmstedt, which was about five miles away, and Oma was unavailable for babysitting,
she seated both children on her old bicycle, Omi in front, Rolf behind, and pedaled the three of them over cobble-stone roads to town. Omi’s job was to scan the sky for airplanes and listen for the air-raid siren.

Mutti washed clothes every Monday in a large metal tub, the same tub that served as the family’s bathtub. If the weather permitted, she used her scrub board in the courtyard. If not, she washed in the basement until the hot water and lye soap bleached and dimpled her fingers. When soap became scarce, she made her own. Likewise, starch was unavailable in the stores, so she boiled potato peelings to get some. After washing and drying her laundry on the clotheslines in the courtyard, she ironed the linen bed sheets with two five-pound, cast-iron “Anvils,” as she called them. While one was in use, the other was being reheated on the stove.

Vati had been sent by the air force to the eastern front where very heavy fighting had begun. Occasionally, he was given a short leave to visit his family, but for nine years, Vati was rarely seen in Wolsdorf. Indeed, during the last three years, he was not present at all. The letters he wrote home, however, were always a reason to celebrate. Hard as conditions were at the airfields along the front, Vati seldom complained—perhaps because he knew Mutti would read the letters to Omi and Rolf. Indeed Mutti did read Vati’s old letters to the children before they went to bed. One of their favorites described a flight from Warsaw to Paris and back to Warsaw. As always, Vati took his harmonica along to entertain himself and the crew. He also told stories in a German dialect called Platt that the others found funny. Before the good times ended, Vati had flown more than a thousand miles all because their commanding officer wanted some French wine.

As Omi’s second Christmas drew near, Mutti took some old army blankets that she had sewn into coats and went in search of a Christmas goose. There were no turkeys in Germany at the time, and a roast goose was the traditional favorite. In the nearby town of Helmstedt, she found a man who said he would trade a fat goose for a coat Mutti had sewn. The “goose” certainly felt fat, but Mutti had bought what we in America would call a “pig in a poke.” After she bicycled home and opened the burlap bag, she discovered, not a goose, but a swan. Mature swans, you should know, are almost inedible for humans because they are so tough. But Mutti made the best of the bad bargain. She plucked the feathers for a pillow saving the longest quills to write with, boiled the sinewy meat for its fat, and fed what was left to the village cats and dogs. Nothing went to waste in Mutti’s kitchen. Indeed, she, like everyone else in Wolsdorf, had no garbage can or waste basket until many years after the war! Most of the food waste went into the pig’s slop bucket; the carrot tops were saved for the rabbits, and the egg shells were crumbled and given to the chickens and geese. But because of the swan disappointment, Omi’s second Christmas was brightened only by the candles on the tree. By trading Omi’s wagon that Vati had built her, Mutti was able to give the children a few small locally made toys: a wooden car for Rolf and a clown that danced when his string was pulled for Omi.
Chapter III, 1941
Life became quite a bit harder for the family in the third year of the war. Many villagers including Oma, Opa, and Mutti, wondered aloud why it wasn’t over yet. Money was scarce even though Vati sent his pay check home each week. Rations were often short, so Mutti made butter by shaking a container of whole milk. Omi listened at the window for the footsteps of spies because making your own butter was against the German law. Like milk and butter, bread was rationed. Each person was allowed to buy a set number of grams of bread every month. If you used up your ration early in the month, you had to go hungry until the next ration card was issued. Fortunately, one of Mutti’s aunts was a baker in another village near the Harz Mountains. Every so often this aunt would send her niece some extra ration cards. She was not legally permitted to do this and could have been punished had she been caught, but she did it anyway thinking that no one was really hurt by her disobedience. Likewise, Mutti was occasionally forced to break the strict German law in order to place food on her table. Once she received a sheep in a trade on the “black market,” and Mutti slaughtered the animal in her kitchen. As Omi and Rolf listened at the door for spies and Opa held a rag over the animal’s face to keep it quiet, Mutti slit its throat.

Mutti also made syrup from sugar beets that she had “stolen.” Mr. Schulze the farmer that Mutti occasionally worked for allowed her to “steal” some of his produce, that is, take more than the government allowed her. Beet syrup on a piece of bread was often all the family had to eat. But after one bigger-than-usual sugar-beet harvest, they had so much syrup, Mutti, Omi, and Rolf took the train to Lübeck on the North Sea and delivered several gallons to Vati’s elderly mother and father who had very little to eat. Omi remembers that she and Rolf slept in the net luggage rack suspended over Mutti’s seat on the train coming home. She was glad they could help their other grandparents whom they rarely saw and who had lost a lot of weight.

When they arrived home, they discovered that Omi’s Uncle Fritz was visiting his parents. Uncle Fritz was an admitted thief, and Opa had once thrown his only son out of his house in Magdeburg for stealing from the family. Fritz promised to behave because he said he did not want to go in the army and risk his life fighting in the war. But a week after he arrived in Wolsdorf, Fritz disappeared in the middle of the night with Opa’s bicycle. He was never seen again.

Now the family did have another bicycle and an automobile as well. Vati had left his old DKW behind when he entered the air force, but no one knew how to drive it! The car had a very tricky clutch that was designed to save precious gasoline. The clutch auto
matically allowed the car to coast when the driver’s foot came off the gas. But saving gas was never very important to Opa after the government required everyone to turn in all automobile tires and fan belts. For most of the war, the car sat on wooden blocks behind the house and was slowly bartered away piece by piece for food or cigarettes which could be traded for food.

Shortly before Omi’s third Christmas, the family heard a loud explosion and everyone ran outside to see what had happened. An American bomber, a B-24 Liberator, had crashed on its return to England in the sugar-beet field across the street from Omi’s house. Mutti always said that her hair started to turn gray from the instant of the terrifying shock she’d received. Except for the pilot, the crewmen had parachuted to earth and were captured miles away, but their wrecked plane would soon provide a fine playground for the village children. Omi never saw the dead pilot and neither did Mutti, but Omi and Rolf did see a severed finger that a neighbor had found and kept in a cigar box. After the raid, the sky was strangely orange though the sun had set hours earlier. “What’s that?” asked Omi pointing east.

“That are the candles burning on the Christmas trees in Helmstedt,” Mutti replied.

It was not until many years later that Omi realized Helmstedt had been bombed that night. When she was much older and living in Helmstedt, she would walk beside these ruins on her way to the bank where she worked. Inside the house in Wolsdorf, however, the family’s Christmas tree blazed brightly with the customary candles made of beeswax. This holiday there was no goose on the table, nor a swan, but there was a baked chicken. Under the little fir tree that Opa had cut in the state-owned forest stood a picture of Vati, who was still far away. Omi’s only gifts that Advent season were the pictures of toys on her Advent calendar. For Christmas, she received a few homemade doll clothes and a shriveled orange that was delicious after Mutti peeled it and dipped each section in beet sugar.
Chapter II, 1940
In Wolsdorf, Omi lived with Mutti and Rolf on the first floor of their new home. Oma and Opa, Omi’s grandparents, lived on the second floor, and in the attic lived a steady stream of refugees fleeing the war in the east. Omi only remembers two of these poor souls: Käte, who was about ten, and Schorsch, who was about twelve. Sister and brother, this pair arrived one night, filthy and covered with lice. They looked and acted like wild animals. DDT powder took care of the bugs, Mutti and Oma took care of the children’s hunger, but no one could replace the parents they had lost when a Russian bomb fell on their house. After a few months in Wolsdorf, they went to live with a relative who had finally been located near Braunschweig. No one in Wolsdorf recalls seeing them again.

Refugees and family alike shared the vegetables and fruit which came from the fenced garden and apple orchard behind the house to which Opa had brought them. Chickens, geese, rabbits, and two female pigs named Peter and Paul supplied the meat. (No one remembers why the sows were always called Peter and Paul, but most agree there was an implied prayer in these Biblical names.) Though the family missed their city homes and friends, they were happy to be together in the village. With no regular newspaper and a town crier for news, at first the family didn’t pay much attention to Hitler or his war, which—for now—was far away in Russia and France. Later in the war, Opa would trade for a small radio which, it seemed to Omi, brought the fighting right into their heads.

One detail that did concern them was disturbing and persistent rumors about their Jewish neighbors in Magdeburg. Opa had hired a few Jewish seamstresses to work in his uniform factory, but for reasons he never fully understood, they stopped coming to work when others were begging for employment. Neighbors said that trucks had shown up in the middle of the night and taken them to the train station where they boarded cattle cars. In Wolsdorf, the one Jewish family in town had moved away before Omi and her family arrived. No one ever heard from them again, and few asked where they had gone. Survival was a full-time job even with a garden in the back yard and a farm across the street.

In the early years of the war, Mutti carried on as if the war were rain in April or snow in December—necessary but not always pleasant occurrences. If she needed to visit a doctor in Helmstedt, which was about five miles away, and Oma was unavailable for babysitting,
she seated both children on her old bicycle, Omi in front, Rolf behind, and pedaled the three of them over cobble-stone roads to town. Omi’s job was to scan the sky for airplanes and listen for the air-raid siren.

Mutti washed clothes every Monday in a large metal tub, the same tub that served as the family’s bathtub. If the weather permitted, she used her scrub board in the courtyard. If not, she washed in the basement until the hot water and lye soap bleached and dimpled her fingers. When soap became scarce, she made her own. Likewise, starch was unavailable in the stores, so she boiled potato peelings to get some. After washing and drying her laundry on the clotheslines in the courtyard, she ironed the linen bed sheets with two five-pound, cast-iron “Anvils,” as she called them. While one was in use, the other was being reheated on the stove.

Vati had been sent by the air force to the eastern front where very heavy fighting had begun. Occasionally, he was given a short leave to visit his family, but for nine years, Vati was rarely seen in Wolsdorf. Indeed, during the last three years, he was not present at all. The letters he wrote home, however, were always a reason to celebrate. Hard as conditions were at the airfields along the front, Vati seldom complained—perhaps because he knew Mutti would read the letters to Omi and Rolf. Indeed Mutti did read Vati’s old letters to the children before they went to bed. One of their favorites described a flight from Warsaw to Paris and back to Warsaw. As always, Vati took his harmonica along to entertain himself and the crew. He also told stories in a German dialect called Platt that the others found funny. Before the good times ended, Vati had flown more than a thousand miles all because their commanding officer wanted some French wine.

As Omi’s second Christmas drew near, Mutti took some old army blankets that she had sewn into coats and went in search of a Christmas goose. There were no turkeys in Germany at the time, and a roast goose was the traditional favorite. In the nearby town of Helmstedt, she found a man who said he would trade a fat goose for a coat Mutti had sewn. The “goose” certainly felt fat, but Mutti had bought what we in America would call a “pig in a poke.” After she bicycled home and opened the burlap bag, she discovered, not a goose, but a swan. Mature swans, you should know, are almost inedible for humans because they are so tough. But Mutti made the best of the bad bargain. She plucked the feathers for a pillow saving the longest quills to write with, boiled the sinewy meat for its fat, and fed what was left to the village cats and dogs. Nothing went to waste in Mutti’s kitchen. Indeed, she, like everyone else in Wolsdorf, had no garbage can or waste basket until many years after the war! Most of the food waste went into the pig’s slop bucket; the carrot tops were saved for the rabbits, and the egg shells were crumbled and given to the chickens and geese. But because of the swan disappointment, Omi’s second Christmas was brightened only by the candles on the tree. By trading Omi’s wagon that Vati had built her, Mutti was able to give the children a few small locally made toys: a wooden car for Rolf and a clown that danced when his string was pulled for Omi.
Chapter V, 1943
Though he could not be home for Christmas and his gift didn’t arrive until late January, Vati sent his family a large salami, a hard sausage that Mutti sliced very thin for open-faced sandwiches. Since this was enough meat to feed the family for a couple of months, Mutti hung it from a string on a bedroom clothes hook for safekeeping. Neither Omi nor Rolf could reach it, but they could smell its mouth-watering flavor. Likewise the neighbor’s cat could smell it, and thanks to an open window without screens she could reach it as well. When Mutti came back inside from the wash house, all that was left of the salami was the string and a small part of the casing. Omi and Mutti chased the cat but could not catch it. Omi’s not sure what they would have done with the beast if they had caught it, but from then on that bedroom window stayed shut.

Hunger was a gnawing problem for everyone in Wolsdorf, and that included the pets and farm animals, but the villagers realized that their hunger was not as severe as it was in nearby cities like Helmstedt, Braunschweig, and Magdeburg. These poor folk lived much further from the farms and gardens of the countryside, and therefore had much less to eat. Many city dwellers despaired of the war ending any time soon. They realized that even if the war stopped immediately, it would take a year or two for food to reappear in the groceries. As a result, several people during the war walked out of Helmstedt to the famous Black Bridge which was about half way between Omi’s village and the larger town. Standing on the tarrred bridge, they waited for the next train. Seconds before it passed, they jumped onto the tracks. Mutti did her best to shield Omi from terrible stories like this, but the children whispered of these things just like their parents.

When there was money and an uncancelled ration card, Omi was sent next door to the bakery for some bread, to the grocery in front of the house for some butter, or down the street to the butcher shop for some sausage. Often the clerks, who all knew Omi by name, would give her a free slice of salami or a stale roll. Knowing how much Omi loved butter, Oma often made her a “Hahn” when she was buttering a slice of bread for her granddaughter. A “Hahn” was the extra butter scraped from a knife as it was drawn across a crust of bread, or Happen. Oma said the butter resembled a rooster’s comb, or, loosely in German, a “Hahn.” The longer the war wore on, the smaller the Hahns became.

The winters in Germany are very cold, and often this meant that “ice flowers” blossomed on the inside of the windows. This was especially true in the bedrooms which were unheated because of the high price of coal and wood. No one had central
heating or a furnace; instead, each living room had its own tiny stove. The nearby forests were filled with wood, of course, but the law said no one could cut down a living tree for fuel or Christmas decorations. Knowing how cold the bed sheets were, Mutti would snuggle into the children’s feather beds for a few minutes to warm them. When they were toasty, she would yell for the children to come running from the heated living room. Omi always appreciated what her mother did for her because her friend Kristel had to warm her mother’s bed for her. This meant there was no one to warm Kristel’s bed except little Kristel.

Before Omi’s fifth Christmas, Mutti pretended she could not afford any toys or candy at all. Then she told Omi that there was a little girl on the other side of the village who did not have a baby carriage. Reluctantly, Omi said that the little girl could have hers. Mutti then took the carriage into the basement where she painted it pink, lined it with the last of the silk parachutes Vati had brought her, oiled the wheels, and smocked a new fabric hood. Mutti always had to be careful to cover up the carriage because the basement was the family’s bomb shelter, and the family spent many nights huddled together down there waiting for the “All-Clear” siren. When Christmas Eve arrived, there under the tree to Omi’s delight sat her “new” carriage. Rolf’s gift consisted of some toy soldiers and an orange wrapped in thin silky paper. When he asked thoughtlessly for a banana, Mutti told him that because of the war there were none in Germany. When he asked what they looked like, Mutti said, “They are like cucumbers, only yellow.” Just about everyone in Wolsdorf hated the war at that point, but Omi always enjoyed the cozy gatherings around a few lit candles in the basement, which smelled of firewood and apples. She often wondered if Russian children were huddled in cellars while her father dropped bombs on their towns.

Omni and her doll in the courtyard, 1944
Chapter VI, 1944
In the fifth year of the war, the Germans began to retreat from their Eastern front. Vati wrote that his plane had been hit by Russian gunfire and forced to land. Fortunately the pilot had spotted a tree farm and was able to bring the plane to a safe landing in the boughs of the supple young trees. Vati said, “It was like falling into a feather bed—softest landing I ever had.” After that, they evaded the Russian soldiers, who had seen them crash, and made their way back to Germany in a Polish hearse that they found abandoned along the road. With some fresh gas, oil, and a new fan belt scavenged from the motor-pool, the hearse was good as gold. Vati wrote that he was now in the south of Germany helping engineers build jet fighters in the huge hangars where airships like the Hindenberg had been built before the war.

Second only to Vati’s letters, Omi’s favorite bedtime story was “The Little Match Girl.” This was a famous but untrue tale of a poor little girl who sold matches on a city street corner to stay alive. One Christmas Eve, it was so cold that the orphan girl struck all her matches just to stay warm. But once she had burned them all, she froze. Omi and Rolf cried every time they heard this story. They loved it, however, because here in the story was someone who was worse off than they. Omi thought of the little match girl every time she had to pump water in the winter. If
she forgot her mittens and wasn’t careful to keep her hands dry, they would freeze to the pump handle. Once when this happened, she yelled for Mutti to bring some warm water to release her hands from the pump. As she waited, she imagined dozens of burnt matches lying at her feet, and she cried as if she were dying.

The surprising thing was that Omi and Rolf really didn’t know how badly off they were. Almost every day, they whirled their tops in the courtyard, rolled their hoops down Village Street, sledded down the hill to the Dorfkrug Tavern, and made toys and “jewelry” from pieces of flak. Flak was small metal fragments that the Germans fired at the bombers flying overhead. Sometimes pieces of the stuff clattered off the roof during the air raids. Once during a daylight raid, Omi dared to look through the black-out curtains at long, winding trails of condensation marking the paths of bombs falling on Braunschweig. After the raids, Omi and Rolf would collect the flak and the tinsel-like foil the British dropped from their planes to confuse the German radar.

While Mutti bartered for food with the cigarettes and coffee beans that Vati had sent her, the children hunted mushrooms and beechnuts in the nearby forests. From the stomach aches they had suffered, they knew better than to eat a raw mushroom no matter how hungry they were. They also knew that Oma passed judgment on every mushroom anyone brought home before someone ate poison. Oma also had a mechanical press to squeeze oil from the beechnuts the children collected. This oil was used to cook with; without it onions, turnips, and potatoes had to be eaten raw, something no one liked.

The press was actually Opa’s, but in the last year he had become quite ill. His illness seemed to start from the time he was shot at. He’d been hoeing weeds in the garden when the air-raid siren went off. Probably because he was hard of hearing, he was slow getting to his feet, and she cried as if she were dying. He also had become quite suspicious of everyone including his own wife, perhaps because he’d heard from the English-speaking announcers on the radio station for news of the war. The Germanlish radio station for news of the war. The Germanish radio station for news of the war.

At home before someone ate poison. Oma also had a mechanical press to squeeze oil from the beechnuts the children collected. This oil was used to cook with; without it onions, turnips, and potatoes had to be eaten raw, something no one liked.

The press was actually Opa’s, but in the last year he had become quite ill. His illness seemed to start from the time he was shot at. He’d been hoeing weeds in the garden when the air-raid siren went off. Probably because he was hard of hearing, he was slow getting to his feet, and she cried as if she were dying. He also had become quite suspicious of everyone including his own wife, perhaps because he’d heard from the English-speaking announcers on the radio station for news of the war. The Germanish radio station for news of the war. The Germanish radio station for news of the war.

When there was news, it seemed to contradict everything he’d heard from the English-speaking announcers. It was hard to tell who was winning (perhaps because his English was not fluent), but it certainly seemed as if the Americans, British, and Russians were ahead in this “contest” because they owned the sky. Opa may have been nearsighted (indeed, this and his age are what kept him out of the army), but he wasn’t ignorant. No one had seen any German plane, private or military, for months. And the little family could glean only from letters, made all but the most optimistic fearful that the Germans were losing.

Near the war’s end on a visit to Wolsdorf’s one elementary school, Omi heard the teacher say that he was planning a field trip. The children were very excited and wanted to know where they were going.

“To Farmer Schulze’s to pick potato beetles!” exclaimed the teacher who had been badly wounded in the last war and was a vocal supporter of the present war. “Over night, the Americans and British have dropped thousands of beetles from airplanes on the potato fields. The harvest will be ruined if we don’t help the farmers. The child who finds the most beetles wins five pounds of potatoes!” So off they went in a farm wagon pulled by two great draft horses to spend the day collecting beetles and dropping them in kerosene. Though all the children wanted to find a tiny parachute (surely there were parachutes), no one found one. The teacher said the beetles ate them the way they ate the potato vines. Some older children said the farmer just wanted some free labor.

To make up for toy parachutes that probably never existed and factory-made toys that were unaffordable, Mutti made Omi a doll by stuffing an old sock with wool and stitching a face on the toe. Rolf was given some “marbles” that Mutti baked in her oven. Vati sent a slingshot and two whistles for the children that he’d made himself. The children didn’t know how badly off they were. They shook so that he could no longer operate the oil press.

Older children said the farmer just wanted some free labor.
The courtyard in Wolsdorf, 2000

The Rautmann-Barmwater house in Wolsdorf, 2000; in the foreground, L to R: Mutti and Omi
Chapter VII, 1945
In the last months of the war, the mayor of Wolsdorf insisted that everyone come to see some new films he had received from Berlin. Omi and Rolf had hoped for a Tom and Jerry cartoon, a Tom Mix western, a Tarzan jungle film, or a Laurel and Hardy comedy, but they were disappointed to see the same old tanks rolling across Poland again while the film’s narrator shouted something about victory being at hand. The children told the usher that they had to use the bathroom and then scooted out the back door.

The war was on everyone’s tongue, and though Omi and Rolf, now six and five, really didn’t understand who was fighting for what, they frequently found themselves playing at war. Indeed, one of Omi’s favorite games was “I Declare War!” This was played in the courtyard after a large circle had been chalked and divided by the number of people playing. Each player stood in his “country” while one player chosen by lots began by bouncing a ball as high as he could (but inside the circle) and yelling, “I declare war on France,” for example. The player who was “France” then caught the ball and yelled “Stop” at the others who began to run away as soon as the ball had been bounced. “France” then was allowed to take three giant steps toward his nearest opponent and throw the ball at him. If “France” hit his opponent, he returned to the circle along with everyone else and chalked off as much of his “enemy’s” territory as he could reach while standing in “France.” The player to seize the most territory won the game. Omi always wanted to be “America” most likely because she loved American movies, and she’d been listening to Glenn Miller’s music on Opa’s radio.

Mutti and the adults of Wolsdorf had their fun too even in the darkest days of the war. She and some of her friends organized a song and dance troop, and from time to time they
would perform German operettas which had been popular before the war. In the summer, they performed outdoors; in the winter, they used the small auditorium inside Schulenburg's Tavern where the propaganda films were shown. Though some sneered that the women should be home working, most villagers appreciated their efforts and enjoyed the results. Omi liked to sing in the chorus, and everyone said she had a lovely voice. Her favorite operetta was *Mask in Blue* because Mutti sewed a pretty blue dress for her and everyone wore a mask.

In the spring of 1945, the people of Wolsdorf were very excited. Though it was forbidden, Opa and others like him had been listening to the BBC, a British radio station broadcasting from far-away London. The enemy station was filled with news that the war would soon be over. A day or two later, some British troops arrived in Warberg, and Wolsdorf knew they would be “invaded” next. The very patriotic mayor of Wolsdorf ordered a large sandbag barricade to be built at the village crossroads. This, he thought, would slow the British tanks and trucks. Mutti and the other women of the village, however, worried about what the tank commanders would think when they saw the sandbags. So late at night, kitchen knives at the ready, Mutti and some of her friends cut open the bags that they had helped to fill. The next morning as the British tanks moved through town, they hardly hesitated passing over the mayor’s “speed bump.” Though Mutti had technically broken the law, she did not want to risk some frustrated tank commander blowing up her home. Indeed, Mutti and the other women in the village were used to “breaking the law”: Mutti had stolen potatoes and firewood for years. Getting caught was a risk she was willing to take. Starving or freezing were not.

A week after Rolf had boldly given the German salute to the British tanks rolling through Wolsdorf, the official announcement came: the war in Germany was over! The joy in Wolsdorf was muted, however, because most of village’s sons, fathers, and husbands were being held as prisoners of war in Russia, England, America, and elsewhere.

Though the long war was over, Omi and her family had no idea whether Vati had survived it. So when Omi’s seventh Christmas came, they felt cheated and guilty that they’d ever celebrated the war’s end. Opa had celebrated too, but he died in November, six months after the war ended. The family was still mourning Opa’s death that Christmas. Indeed, there was hardly a family in the village who didn’t have someone to mourn. The few candles that were lit were mostly in remembrance of some lost loved one.

*Map of the places in Helmstedt where bombs had fallen on Nov. 20, 1944*
Chapter I, 1939
Once upon a time many years ago, the country of Germany lay under a spell cast by the evil sorcerer, Adolf Hitler. During that terrible time, Omi, as we know her today, was born in the bustling city of Magdeburg under the shadow of the great cathedral where her parents, Mutti and Vati Barmwater, had married the year before. Her mother remembers that Omi arrived on a cold day in January, and themidwife she’d hired had a hard time reaching the family’s home for all the snow on the sidewalks. Omi was actually given the name “Ingrid,” which was chosen from a list approved by the government. Though Vati had a middle name and Mutti had two the new German authorities would not allow Omi one whether it was on the list or not.

In Magdeburg on Otto von Gericke Street, Omi lived with her mother, Mutti, her father, Vati, and many aunts, uncles, and cousins. When the war started, Omi’s Opa or grandfather told the entire family, “Soon bombs will be falling on our beautiful city. We must move to the countryside. Oma and I were here in the Great War, and we remember how hungry the people in the cities were. As you know, I have a modest summer home west of here in the village of Wolsdorf. I think we should all move there before someone is hurt.”

Mutti and Vati discussed Opa’s warnings and decided that Opa was right. As soon as Omi’s brother Rolf was born the following year, they decided they would pack all their belongings and move from the city to the little farming community of Wolsdorf, population about 1100. Here, though there were a half-dozen streets, everyone lived on “Village Street,” the news was broadcast by the mayor who doubled as the town crier, and no one had a mail box. When a rare letter did come to the village, it was delivered by the postmaster directly to the person named on the envelope.

As Opa predicted, the war’s disruptions were soon felt in industrial Magdeburg, population 200,000. Though no bombs were falling yet, life became more difficult. For one thing, Vati lost his job as a carpenter whose specialty was building beautiful spiraling staircases. Unable to find any work, he volunteered to serve in the German air force. It was the only place he could find employment at a time when many in Germany were without a job. Vati’s first job in the air force involved repairing the wooden biplanes of the previous war. Later at an airfield outside of Magdeburg, Vati was trained to be a navigator, who guided the pilot in the air, and a mechanic, who fixed the planes on the ground. Occasionally he was expected to drop the plane’s bombs as well. He had learned how to do this by dropping darts from a barn loft into a crosswind created by a large fan.

Sometimes he brought home old silk parachutes from which Mutti sewed dresses and shirts for her two children. (Late in the war after cutting out the swastika, the crooked black cross in the middle, one of Mutti’s friends even sewed a red and white dress from an old German flag!) Mutti also recovered umbrellas with silk after she dyed it black and waterproofed it. New umbrellas were no longer available in the stores. Mutti had become a fine seamstress working in her father’s factory. There Opa, when he wasn’t going to the opera with Oma or teaching himself Latin, had employed ten people to sew firemen’s and policemen’s uniforms. But Opa closed his business before the family fled the on-coming war. When the family moved to Wolsdorf the following year, Mutti carried with her one of her father’s foot-powered sewing machines because she knew that during the war she would have to make her own clothes as well as the children’s. She also knew that the electric power would be off at times. Even with all the difficulties created by the war, Mutti was never content just to make a dress; she embroidered all the clothes she made for Omi and Rolf including doll clothes with bright-colored flowers and stars.

Despite the gauzy, golden light provided by the candles, Omi’s first Christmas was very sad for her mother. Omi who wasn’t even walking yet had a bad cold and cough, and Vati was far away. Mutti remembers that Omi had more fun with the empty boxes and wrapping paper than she had with her rattle and doll. The best news from the country’s capital in Berlin was that the war should be over soon.
Chapter IX, 1947
As Christmas of 1947 neared, Omi’s ninth, Omi wondered if she would ever celebrate a Christmas with her father or for that matter see him again. Thus far, she had not. That fall, however, the family had received a letter and two pictures of Vati. They were elated. The letter came from the Red Cross and briefly explained that Vati was alive. He was working in a French vineyard not far from Bordeaux. In one photograph, he was smiling and holding some grapes. It was the first word they’d had from him in three years, and they were grateful for the news. Though France was far away, at least they knew Vati was well.

What Omi didn’t know was that Vati had decided that he had worked without pay long enough, so he left the unguarded farm. It wasn’t hard to escape. He just walked away after the harvest at a time when he knew the farm owner was in a drunken sleep. Vati walked for miles in his wooden shoes until he was reasonably sure no one was following him. When he reached a highway, he hitchhiked and rode a freight train back to Germany all the while nursing his sore feet. Many days and miles passed, but finally he made it to Wolsdorf.

As he was passing by the school playground, he casually said hello to Oma who was minding Rolf. She couldn’t believe her eyes. Rolf, who was frightened by this scraggy man his grandmother called “Vati,” threw a snowball at the stranger and ran home to tell his mother. Mutti, however, did not believe him, for Rolf had pulled this prank before—telling Mutti that Vati had returned when he hadn’t. She was about to spank Rolf’s fanny when Vati came through the door carrying a small wooden suitcase he had made himself and a half-empty jug of sugar-beet syrup. Mutti cried for joy, and so did Vati when he saw his picture standing under the Christmas tree. Immediately he knew that he had not been forgotten by his loved ones.

Omi was ice skating on Leech Pond with some friends, Vati at the French war prison farm, Bordeaux, France, 1947

Vati in Bordeaux, 1947
so Rolf was told to fetch his sister but not to tell her that Vati was home. When Omi entered the living room, she saw her father standing beside the Christmas tree lighting the candles. That was the best Christmas ever! No one cared that he had brought no gifts; he had no money. But he did give the children “camel rides” across the vast “Sahara Desert,” which was the living room. Occasionally he stumbled into one of those pesky “gopher holes” and the children fell laughing from his back onto the couch. Then Oma found Vati’s old harmonica and squeeze-box accordion, and the family sang and danced until the wee hours of Christmas morning.