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## **‘You’d stand in line to buy potato peelings’: German women's memories of World War II**

By Gail Hickey<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

How do U.S. women immigrants remember their experiences of World War II? In what ways do these women choose to transmit their memories to the next generation? These are the questions explored in this study.

Women immigrants have been treated as if they were insignificant actors in history and socialization (Kelson & DeLaet, 1999). Feminist scholarship challenges this portrait of women as insignificant actors, arguing against gender-biased perspectives on the immigration experience. Yet scholarly sources provide little information about the “real life problems” of women immigrants (Barber, 2005).

Immigration research historically has tended toward historical and demographical data compilations, resulting in a database devoid of personal voice or lived experience (Errante, 2000; Heinemann, 1996). Researchers have largely ignored women immigrants’ stories. Studying contemporary European immigrant women's narratives of wartime experience can provide scholars with fresh perspectives on the World War II era.

This article draws from both the feminist framework and oral history research methodology to record and analyze European immigrant women’s experiences with and memories of war and to illuminate scholars’ understanding of women as civilians during times of war. The researcher recounts 10 European women's experiences of and memories about World War II. The study adds to the available literature by considering women’s experiences of war, as told by women, and as passed down to successive generations.

*Key Words:* Immigration, World War II, oral history

### **Introduction**

“You’d stand in lines for potato peelings — to buy potato peelings,” Tina<sup>1</sup> declares. Tina’s stories about her life in Europe, like those of other immigrant women in this study, often reference memories of war. More than six decades after the end of World War II, the dead cannot tell their stories; many remaining survivors are in ill health or are too traumatized to recount their war memories. The paucity of access to World War II survivors' stories calls for action on the part of researchers. Firsthand descriptions of everyday life during the World War II era from a variety of sources are vital to our understandings of its impact on the lives of individuals and families. As psychotherapist Ruth Barnett (2004: 100) urges, “We need to gather as much personal experience, through dialogue and recorded testaments, as is still possible ... [we need to know] what it

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was really like for them as they lived it, and not rely on selected images from news reels of the time..." (Elizabeth Heineman, 1996, 2001a, 2001b).

More than one in five U.S. residents are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Prior to 1965, the majority of immigrants came to the U.S. from Europe. Narratives detailing European immigrants' everyday lives during important historical eras — stories that help define identity and character — will be lost to succeeding generations without specific scholarly focus on this population (Thompson, 2012; De Fina, 2003).

It was anthropologist Erika Bourguignon's compelling question, "How do ordinary people live in extraordinary times?" (Schneider, 1998: x) that brought focus to my own research efforts. Women immigrants' stories detailing personal or family memories of everyday life during World War II, such as those featured in this study, address Bourguignon's question in unique and, until now, largely unavailable ways.

Most scholarship on Germans' experience of World War II emphasizes "the pain the Nazis inflicted on others [rather than the] suffering of German civilians" (Popper, 2003). Scholars have only recently begun to contest the absence of viable civilian accounts. This study contributes to a new and growing body of literature that challenges a simplistic view of Germans primarily as agents and perpetrators of war by focusing on U.S. German women immigrants' memories of World War II. I include excerpts from ten German women's stories of survival in the broadest sense of the term, and depict their various roles as civilians during wartime. The main emergent theme of *Memories of War* is explored in this article, along with subthemes of Emotional/Psychological Trauma, Deprivation, and Displacement. The article enlarges upon researchers' understandings of survival through contextually rich narratives depicting how ordinary people lived during this extraordinary time of extremes, upheaval, loss, and suffering.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

A review of recorded immigrant history reveals "women's *vecu* — their ways of living, feeling, and thinking... their praxis — has been profoundly distinct from that of men" (da Rocha Lima, 1984, 81). Yet scholarly sources provide little information about the "real life problems" of women immigrants (Smith, 1985) since women's experiences are subsumed under those of men (Halliday, 1994; Jacoby, 1979; Kelson & DeLaet, 1999). Recent photographic essays and media coverage document German women during World War II are portrayed as having occupied typically male positions in factory, government, and military jobs (Taylor, 2011) or in romantic liaisons with American soldiers (Williams, 2009). Feminist scholarship challenges this portrait of women as insignificant actors in migration history and civilian war life, arguing against gender-biased perspectives. Peterson and Runyan (1993) support the use of a gender-sensitive lens to provide a more comprehensive view of world politics. Tickner's writing (1992) reveals the scholarship in transnational relations neglects women's lived experiences and perspectives, resulting in a masculine bias and providing an inaccurate and incomplete representation of global politics. A portrait of the immigrant woman "as a personality in her own right, with specific needs, expectations and aspirations" is needed (van den Berg-Eldering, 1984).

Exploring the living memories of contemporary women immigrants through oral history interviews provides researchers and policymakers with valuable firsthand information. Studying contemporary immigrant women's narratives of wartime

experience can provide scholars and other interested parties with fresh perspectives on the World War II era. I draw from both the feminist framework and oral history research methodology to record and analyze immigrant women's experiences with and memories of World War II, including those memories passed from generation to generation.

Oral history's potential for exploring female experiences and female values has been well documented (Carlson, 1972; Gluck and Patai, 1991). What has come to be known as the standard oral history frame, in which the interviewer controls topic selection while the informant responds only to questions asked, however, stifles the conversational way most women communicate. Men feel comfortable talking about actions and events (Minister, 1991), traditionally conversing with one another about "personal and affiliative issues that reflect *what they do*" (Stewart, Stewart, Cooper & Friedley, 1990 — italics in original). Women, on the other hand, are comfortable talking about personal relationships, and traditionally converse with each other about personal and affiliative issues that reflect *who they are*. This means that oral historians who insist on using the standard oral history frame when interviewing women usually find the results less than satisfactory. Historian Kathryn Anderson (1991, 12) questions oral historians' poor record for documenting women's subjective experiences, and advises

"My own interviews and those of others show a definite preference for questions about activities and facts and a conspicuous lack of questions about feelings, attitudes, values, and meaning. Traditional historical sources tell us more about what happened, and how it happened than how people felt about it and what it meant to them."

If oral history is to become a vehicle for collecting and preserving women's experiences, its advocates must take into account the differences in style and content in men's and women's conversations. What is needed is an alternative frame for women's oral histories. Kristina Minister elaborates on the concept of an alternative oral history frame in Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai's (1991, 27) book *Women's Words*:

"Once understood and accepted by the participants, the frame regulates the situation and latitude of what the participants do and say within it.... My purpose ... is ... to justify for oral history method the kind of interviewing that women intuitively would like to use when talking with women.... [W]e will not hear what women deem essential to their lives unless we legitimate a female sociocommunication context for the oral history situation."

What is it that women want to talk about? Psychologist Carol Gilligan's (1982) research found women tend to operate from a social context, while men tend to operate autonomously, and that for women the most significant social context is the family. This phenomenon includes women who work outside the home as well as women who do not. Women's issues identified in the intergenerational ethnic oral histories conducted by Corinne Krause (1991) extend beyond the expected life cycle events to work/family conflicts, relationships, food, holidays, and work in the context of family ties.

When the concept of war enters the discussions inherent in oral history methodology, Robert Benford's (1996, 189) words help to crystalize the debate. "Whose

history [of war] should be told?" Benford asks. "Should it be his-story or her-story?" As is true with their experiences of immigration and resettlement, women's memories of war tend to differ from those of men. In her study of female experiences of war in Germany 1942-1948, for example, Elizabeth Heinemann (1996, 359) found German women's own narratives of World War II "typically begin with their husbands' or fathers' departures [and] emphasize [women's] sufferings and losses". Women's references to women's and girl's everyday activities during World War II universalize war experiences through stereotypically female experiences. Yet Heinemann claims German women's narratives of war came represent the experience "of the entire wartime generation... Everybody was trying to get something on the stove to feed their children; everybody was clearing away the rubble" (Heinemann, 1996, 354). Similarly, Rosenthal (1991) notes World War II civilian narrations — usually women's — provide researchers with accounts of expulsion, flight, changing dwellings, and other everyday experiences not available through other sources. The government counted on women "to make up deficiencies in diet, clothing and comfort brought about by war" (Braybon & Summerfield, 1987, 235). Civilian women coped with "rising prices, low wages, food shortages, blackouts, bombing, poor transport, childcare and care of the elderly and sick relatives, as well as evacuation, conscription and loneliness" (Macey, 1991, 43).

When researchers set out to document women's experiences of war, they tend to rely on primary source accounts already in existence, such as diaries and letters (Macey, 1991). This study represents a departure from previous feminist research on women's memories of war in its use of oral history methodology. Oral history research recognizes the historical value of ensuring the systematic collection and preservation of living persons' accounts in their own words. In fact, oral history methodology's narrative underpinning has been found to be a normal and natural response to war experiences. Cultural anthropologists view narrative as a way individuals attempt to make sense of chaotic life events, such as trauma or illness. War as trauma introduces "biographical disruptions" into individual's lives because war disrupts normal social structures. War narratives serve as powerful means for accessing meaning, but also facilitate integration of war experience into the normal fabric of daily life (Becker, 1998; Kilshaw, 2005). Individuals use narratives to rebuild their sense of self and of their social location by telling stories to articulate and mediate disruption. These narratives permit individuals affected by war to restructure and reconfigure disrupted identities (Becker, 1998). As medical anthropologist Allan Young wrote, narrative "gives the chaotic surface [of war-disrupted identity] a coherent subtext" (Young, 1985, 185).

Reconstructive narratives cannot be developed in isolation. Instead, such narratives must be produced through dialogue with others (Young, 1995). The current literature on feminist frame oral history methodology depicts oral history interviews as a dialogue "created by the interaction between women recalling their lives and the researcher seeking historical knowledge" (Barber, 2005, 69). Stories from the past are told and retold to make sense of current experiences (Neisser, 1994). Through feminist frame oral history interviews (Minister, 1991), the women immigrants in this study retell World War II experiences while reconfiguring disrupted identities from the past in ways that help them make sense of the present.

Paula Hamilton's (2005, 11) discussion of "how remembering [is] a constant ongoing revision, a dynamic process" informs this researcher's understanding of the place

of oral history in the preservation of war memories. Marilyn Barber's (2005, 69) feminist oral history perspective of giving "voice to women who otherwise are silent or subordinate in the historical record" lends validity to the research process. Similarly, Alessandro Portelli's (2003) illustrative examples of oral history researchers' ability to amplify the voices of individuals and place other accounts of war into the public domain serve as theoretical models. This article recounts gender-based experiences of and memories about World War II. The study adds to the available literature by considering women's experiences of war, as told by women and as passed down to successive generations.

### **Methodology**

Ten European women immigrants residing in a city located in the Midwestern United States participated in audiotaped oral history interviews averaging 2-4 hours in length. Interviewees arrived in the U.S. with their families as children or young adults between 1947 and 1971. Nine interviewees self-identify as ethnic German; one interviewee is Austrian. A semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire lent consistency to the interview process.

All interviewees were voluntary participants. Local residents who learned of the study identified some interviewees; others were identified through snowball effect. Drawing upon Kristina Minister's (1991) feminist frame for interviewing, immigrants were individually interviewed in their homes or workplaces. A professional transcriber typed the audiotaped interviews. Each interviewee reviewed her own transcript for clarity and accuracy. Data from transcribed oral history narratives were analyzed using both open and axial coding. As Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest, written narratives may be coded for main themes and sub-categories that intersect with main themes, as well as analyzed for code, concept, and category. Narrative excerpts relating to the main theme of *World War II memories* were included in the analysis for this article. Subthemes, including Memories of Emotional/Psychological Trauma, Deprivation, and Displacement, are interspersed with immigrants' narrative excerpts and discussed in the next section.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The emergent theme Memories of World War II, coupled with subthemes of Emotional/Psychological Trauma, Deprivation, and Displacement, is the focus of this article. While some interviewees did not recall personal memories of trauma or hardship, each was affected personally by her family's wartime experiences. Narrative excerpts illustrating the main theme and/or subthemes are considered below.

#### ***Emotional/psychological trauma***

Survivors of war and genocide often have strong memories related to the emotional and/or psychological trauma they and their family members endured. Representing survivors' memories the way they remember them does not take away the trauma. It does, however, "validate their sacrifices, legitimize their wartime deeds ... and most important, infuse their past with moral meaning" (Benford, 1996, 191).

Hildegard was very young when her family first left their home in Germany. She has specific memories of the war — both of her family's and her own individual experiences.

“When the tanks came by, we ran into the fields because we didn’t know what would happen.... They couldn’t care less who or what they ran over. If they ran over a wagon with people, so be it — it didn’t matter.”

“I was eight years old when we left our farm,” Hildegard recalls. “We didn’t even question [why]. See, my folks never had a radio — so you didn’t know what was going on during 1940 to ‘45 in Germany [or] Poland. A lot of people just ... didn’t know.”

In retrospect, Hildegard believes her father was in denial about the war. “My father was not for what was going on,” she explains, “and since he was not for all what was going on, what little he heard by word of mouth he did not have to listen to.” If neighbors who had gone into town returned with the news ‘Hitler is going to speak tonight,’ Hildegard’s father would not listen. “He just went about his work, and we children went about our school.... I would just work on the farm, and go to school, and then come home .... do your homework, be a kid, and that’s it.”

Once friends and neighbors began to disappear from Hildegard's village, her father could no longer ignore the political situation. “They took the mothers with tiny babies and sick people first, and put them on a train and took them out,” she remembers. “This was in 1939 and 1940. Hitler took all the German people out about ‘40. Later on, all the mothers with older children left, and then at the end the men with horse and buggy were allowed to leave.”

Hildegard’s family was forced to leave their home when she was eight. By the time Hildegard was fifteen, she and her family were separated. As an able-bodied young woman, Hildegard was classified as a "worker" and forced to serve the wives of a series of military officers in au pair or maid capacity. “I had to learn early in life that you have to fend for yourself,” she acknowledges. Her life often was extremely difficult. “I remember sleeping out in the open field ... sleeping on steps — cellar steps just to be out of the cold ... just hoping that nobody would [rape] me.”

For a time Hildegard actually contemplated suicide. “It was getting bleaker and bleaker.” Yet her faith was strong. “My source of strength was the Lord,” Hildegard states, “[and] I just knew full well that that was wrong ... to even think of doing away with your life.” Further reflection causes Hildegard to realize her upbringing also was influential on her decision to stay alive. “What if my parents would find out I died by my own hand ... by my own will?” she says. Finally, Hildegard and her newfound friend Sophie decided to take matters into their own hands and determine their own fates. “I decided to run away [from my au pair job],” she remarks. “I mean, if they were torturing me to where I would [commit suicide], then I was willing to risk it all.... War is very cruel.”

Hildegard’s father and brother were taken to boot camp, ending up in different camps until after the war ended. “My brother was only sixteen at the time,” she recalls. “[Both] my dad and my brother were mistreated — beaten.” Hildegard’s father doubts he would have survived to bring his family to the United States had he not eventually been

released. Her father often told the family stories of his time in camps. Here is one example:

“You might lay down in the evening and [be] so cramped that if one wanted to turn around, the whole group of ten men that was in that tiny little room, on the floor on straw, had to find ways to turn because they are so crowded. It was not unusual [to] wake up in the mornings and you would be laying next to a corpse ... a dead body.”

Annie's mother was pregnant when she and Annie's father escaped. “I was born in Klivenfut, Austria, in 1945. So, I was born right after the war ended,” she relates. Annie's parents' stories of their wartime trauma, as well as Annie's own refugee camp experiences, helped shape her personality.

“There were periods of time when my parents traveled, when she was carrying me that the bombs were falling. It just so happened that it was when she was carrying me. But people would say, 'Go in a bunker'. And she would say, 'No, if I'm going to die, I'm going to die out here'. So, there she was out there running and watching the bombs falling and being eight months pregnant ... and having four little kids running around.”

“It's a miracle that we survived,” Annie continues. “During the war they didn't have medicine. I had pneumonia. I was only a few months old and there just wasn't any medicine to give [wipes tears from her eyes]. Just the thought of what my mom went through....”

Annie's siblings also were deeply affected by their wartime experiences as children. “My brother Gene still has nightmares,” Annie insists. “He'll scream at night because he'll see the planes falling and the bombs.... Well, he was about 4, just an impressionable age, old enough that he knew something was happening, but he couldn't understand it.” Now Gene is an old man, Annie opines, “and he is still having nightmares about something that happened so long ago. So it hasn't gone away. It is *with us*.”

Sigrid was a toddler when her family was forced out of Germany, yet the vivid stories of that difficult time are part of her character even now. “We were pushed into cattle cars, kind of like animals,” Sigrid shudders. “Train cattle cars with doors open [and straw in them ... they all stunk.” Sigrid barely remembers the train ride, yet she heard the story often from family members in Germany. “[It] just seemed to be something they couldn't get over real easily,” she concludes.

Sigrid's parents and older siblings, like Annie's brother Gene, still have fearful memories of the war. “It was like, you know, the Vietnamese soldiers [when war experiences] come back and things haunt them and then they have these relapses. My parents would talk about this neighbor and this family [being killed].” Sigrid's parents actually saw people “losing their minds and hanging themselves because they just couldn't handle the stress any longer,” she reports. “[People] would take belts or pant legs and just hang themselves from a tree, because bombs were falling all around them.” Friends and acquaintances who tried to escape their homelands “were shot.... They couldn't escape. A lot of people were shot because they tried to escape on foot at night



through fields and farms. Did I know anybody who was shot? No, but my mother did.” Sigrid’s account continues:

“I was only just two or three, so all I know is from hearing this over and over. Talking about it and *talking* about it ... until finally they got here. A good seven or eight years it was [before they stopped talking about the war]. You know, [they would] reminisce [about] those times when the bombs fell and Mrs. So-and-So and Mr. So-and-So got killed. When the bombs were falling all around us and I think that’s why some people just knew they were going to die — so they ended their own lives. They were scared all the time, and there was no food.”

Emotional trauma induced by war experiences marked Tina’s childhood as well. “I was born in 1938, and the war in Germany broke out in 1939,” Tina reflects. Many war-related experiences continue to affect Tina’s life as an adult. The popular songs of the time color her memories even now, she says. Her mother would not read to Tina because “we had to have our windows all covered. You couldn’t have [lights] on, mostly candlelight.” Tina’s mom sometimes opened up the oven and read to her children by the flickering firelight. “But every night she would rock me and she would sing to me,” Tina recalls. “Today, the country and western singers sing about life, about the times they live in. My mother sang to me about war time.” What were the songs about?

“About the war ... about orphans as the war came to an end ... about mothers whose husbands got killed and they want to marry a new man but the man didn’t want the children so the mother put them in the basement and starved them to death ... songs like this. These were songs about the times.”

Her mother’s songs, Tina believes, encouraged her to behave. “The worst thing I could picture was being an orphan and, to hear about all of these true stories about that actually happening ... to think mothers could actually do that [to their children], yes, I really walked the line,” she says firmly.

Their mother’s songs did not as heavily influence Tina’s brother, who was older when the war began. “When my brother turned 16,” she whispers, “he was handpicked as a Nazi Youth. He was one of those super little children, smart children [who] excelled at a lot of things.” Her brother’s teacher, Tina says, “was already a Nazi, but nobody knew this. [That teacher] groomed my brother and he went on a ski trip and never came back home again. They kept him.... We didn’t see [my] brother again until he was 22.”

What did Tina’s parents tell their children about the war? “We didn’t talk so much about the war,” Tina responds, “we just [lived it].” Tina recalls occasions when the entire family crept downstairs to their basement to sleep. “Like when the American [soldiers] came into town and would run through the streets and throw grenades, we always went downstairs into the basement and slept there,” she explains. “I always slept in the bathtub because the bathtub was iron and I [felt] safe in the bathtub.”

How did Tina’s family react when the war was over? “The war was ‘over’?” Tina asks rhetorically. “When a war is over, it isn’t *over*. The thing that is over is the shelling, the bombing. But life isn’t normal. Still is not normal.” How had everyday life changed?

“There is no food,” Tina says. “There is no housing. There is no water. There is no electricity. There is nothing. So you go for years and years and try to recover.”

Elizabeth was a young bride during World War II. She and her husband were displaced from their homeland in East Prussia to Osnabruck in West Germany. “We had always to expect that one day the Russians might move farther west and take over the territory where we lived,” reports Elizabeth about her family’s time in Osnabruck. “And we had seen so many horrible things committed by the Russians that, when we had a chance to go to the United States, we grabbed that chance!”

Susanne’s family was forced-marched to Poland, where they were obliged to farm Polish farmland (see section on Displacement, below). Hitler had “overrun Poland,” Susanne says, and “wanted a government where he was able to do what he wanted.... And we had very little (if anything) to say [about it],” Susanne concludes. “If you said too much ... he would have not hesitated to put you against a wall and ... give you a bullet!”

### ***Deprivation***

Some interviewees’ memories focus on personal and/or familial suffering as a result of the war’s demands on civilians. During World War II civilians coped with low wages, rising prices, food shortages, blackouts, evacuation, and poor transportation. In Germany, women took on the tasks of making up deficiencies in diet and clothing, and also sought ways to improve others’ comfort (Braybon & Summerfield, 1987, 235). “I had to personally suffer during the last two years [of World War II], physically suffer,” Elizabeth recalls with a shudder. “To live under those conditions was difficult.” When she and her husband arrived in West Germany, they quickly realized families there had not suffered the same degree of deprivation as those in East Germany. “These people had not suffered anything during the war,” Elizabeth states. “Most of them still had their houses intact. No air raids had been there, and they had to move together to accommodate ‘all those terrible refugees.’ They resented that and, consequently, we always felt that we were only tolerated and more or less hated.”

Hildegard’s family was displaced (see next section) and, when they attempted to return home, the family was stopped by Poles. “My whole family were stopped,” she recalls. “My folks, and brother and sister, had boots on and they were stripped of their boots. All four of us in my family, at that point, were stripped of the shoes from our feet — by the Polish people. And my father was stripped of his coat and given a coat that had patches upon patches upon patches. In my mind’s eye, I still remember that coat — and the cold.”

Sigrid and her family suffered the most deprivation after arriving in West Germany (see next section). “There was no place for us to live,” she reports. School buildings had been made available for immigrants, “which we were ... immigrants,” Sigrid sighs. Everyone — men, women, and children — all slept in schoolhouses, “with a mattress-type [bed] made of straw farmers used for the animals.... You got one blanket per person to use to cover up, and the straw was also humped together for your pillow. You didn’t have a pillow.”

Eventually Sigrid’s family was able to move into an apartment building in West Germany. “Our first apartment in West German was in Luhdn, above a farmhouse. A family was living downstairs, and we were living upstairs.” The family remained in the Luhdn apartment until they came to the United States, and felt fortunate indeed to be able to live

together as a family in one enclosed space. “Many people were given barracks, you know, like [deserted] army barracks. People got those for housing. The country was just putting up everything possible just to give somebody a roof over their head. If it meant that two families had to live together ... two families lived together until everything was situated,” Sigrid explains.

A cousin in Milwaukee ultimately helped Sigrid and her family come to the U.S. While they continued to live in West Germany, however, the cousin sent the family “care packages. He would send us chicken; we would save that chicken for Christmas. We got another care package; we would save it for Easter. We hardly ever had meat on a sandwich and my Dad was the butcher and he always had a job there — we still didn’t have meat. [What we had] was a type of lard. We called it ‘*smartz*.’ We would take bread and just spread this *smartz*, which was like a lard, and we would eat it and I would like it,” Sigrid admits.

It is possible suffering deprivation during wartime makes one stronger, some interviewees believe. Silvia came to the U.S. in the 1970s. Silvia’s older sister and her aunt (the bride of a U.S. soldier) do remember events of World War II. Silvia herself has no personal memories of World War II, but believes her sister’s and aunt’s war experiences motivate them to react differently to everyday events than persons who did not experience the war firsthand. When U.S. Midwestern weather forecasters, for example, “predict a snowstorm ... this always amazes me,” Silvia laughs. “People just go *crazy*! They run to the grocery store and buy milk and bread and just stock up like this is the end of the world.” Americans panic at the least threat of danger, Silvia believes, “Maybe because [we] went through a war and a depression and shortage of food [we] do not react this way.”

Angelique also has no personal memories of World War II. Her mother's stories about the war, however, definitely affected Angelique's upbringing and her sense of self. She feels the deprivations her mother experienced in Germany during World War II facilitated development of coping skills, which have been passed on to daughter Angelique.

“The stories my mother told me about survival during the Second World War are kind of sad. [She told me stories] about food: even if the food was a little spoiled they still had to eat it because there was nothing to eat, especially after the war. And since they never had refrigeration, her mom taught her how to check the meat so to make sure you still could eat it and didn't get poisoned by it.”

Angelique’s older brother and her mother “had to flee to the other part of Germany.... She had a hard time. Her stories are ... mostly about survival during the war. [Those are] the stories I remember.”

Martha was an adolescent during the war. After the war, as the young wife of an American soldier, Martha’s character seems to have been deeply affected by wartime deprivation. “I married an American GI,” she says. “We looked forward to working hard, but getting paid for it.” There were no jobs to be had in Germany after the war, Martha recalls, “because everything was destroyed.... There were no jobs. Yes, the war was over in 1945, but in 1952 there still were no jobs to be had.”

“I used to live in a big city that was bombed. At that time Berlin was bombed very heavily,” Susanne reminisces. Susanne's terse "Berlin was bombed very heavily" and Martha's brief narrative focusing on post-war goals represent a kind of silence found in oral narratives. Interviewees may refuse to speak of their experiences, or they may speak of them only in general terms. Rosenthal writes about silences noted in British women's World War II narratives, observing that interviewees tended not to speak at length about anxious hours spent in shelters, tragic scenes after air raids, or specific bombing attacks. Instead, narrators tended to "describe how it was in general ... [since] when the women do touch upon [these subjects] it causes them some difficulties" (Rosenthal, 1991, 70). Troeger (1987) also documents silences in women interviewees' narratives, noting material conditions experienced by the German WWII civilian population were structurally comparable to material conditions of trench warfare:

“Firstly, there is the same break in the iterative structure of everyday time. One did not know when the attacks were coming, whether one could sleep at night, whether the electricity would function after the attack, or whether one's house would still be habitable. A response to living with such conditions was ... to live from day to day and not think about tomorrow; to plan for a day, but not produce long-term plans (In Rosenthal, 1991, 70).”

### ***Displacement***

“We left Berlin as a family because Berlin was bombed.... We couldn't stay there, so we went to my grandmother's home village, which was east of Berlin,” Gunhild states.

“At the close of the war, my father came back from fighting on the eastern front against the Russians to literally nothing ... rubble. His entire town was blown away.... ” Sigrid reports sadly. Sigrid's paternal grandmother already had departed to West Germany by the time her father came back “to what he thought was his home ... and he continued westward, hoping to meet up with his mother.” Finally Sigrid's father came to a town in West Germany where the family had distant relatives. ““Oh, yes! We've seen your mom — she's here!” they told him,” Sigrid says, remembering the many times her father has told the story. Mother and son were united “with literally nothing but the clothes on their backs.”

Hildegard remembers the specific date her family was forced to flee their home. “We left on January 18 of 1945. People from all directions were trying to flee the front.” The family traveled in their wagon until January 21, when they came to a bridge that was blown out. “It was bitter cold,” she recalls, “30 [or] 40 [degrees] below zero. We had to turn back.” The family stopped for shelter at “a huge brick house, packed with people. My father and brother were trying to sleep in the [nearby] barn ... they [took] off of the wagon a feather bed [for warmth], but it was too bitter cold [to sleep].” Early the next morning Elizabeth and her family left the brick house in their wagon. They had traveled less than a mile when they spotted tanks approaching. “We fled out in the open field, and it took maybe fifteen, twenty minutes. But when we came back to the wagon, one horse was injured and one [ran] away.” It was still bitterly cold, but now Hildegard and her family must travel on foot. ““Will you go back where you came from?” people asked us,” Hildegard explains. “Whoever you talked to, they all wanted to go back where they came from. Everybody was in the same boat, not knowing what to do or which direction to turn.”

At the time they left their home, Susanne's parents "were told we were being taken to [West Germany], which was not true," she reports. "They took us as far as South Poland ... where [other] people from Wolynien were taken." Susanne and her family were taken first to a Polish farm, "which my father did not like at all. He always said, 'This [farm] is not mine and I should not be here.'"

Europeans experienced displacement during World War II in various ways. Refugees, evacuees from the eastern regions of the old Reich, Christians, those who felt themselves victims of Communism, war prisoners now freed but with no home to return to — all these persons have narratives to explain their unique experiences and represent how these experiences shaped individual lives and characters (Heineman, 1996). Interviewees in this study recalled such experiences differently from each other. Some interviewees rationalized their family's departure as an involuntary uprooting; some chose to live with relatives elsewhere. Still others' initial experience away from home was in refugee camps. The first home Annie recalls, for example, was in a refugee camp. Annie's refugee camp narrative is unique and contextually rich; it is included here verbatim:

"At the time [my parents] had the chance to come to America we were living in a refugee camp. You know, what kind of life is that? We were living in two rooms, an army barrack, that had been emptied by the armies. [My parents] were fleeing from the Russian army, so they went from one camp to another as the armies got closer. Maybe they would have an hour or two to pack up and go to the next camp, you know, get in a truck or on a train. So, what kind of life was that? They didn't have much of anything and, at that point, there were six kids. So at the last refugee camp there were eight of us in two little rooms. The only way to go was up....

We were in this refugee camp that held about 3,000 people. There was a pump, a central pump for water, and there were two outhouses — one for the men and one for the women — on opposite ends of the camp. And there were ... holes ... all over the place. I remember as a child, when I had to go, sitting on a hole that was about 3 sizes too small! Because I was afraid to [walk all the way to the end of the camp]! This may seem silly [to others], but it was really something to me. And we had to use leaves because we didn't have [toilet] paper. That is the kind of life we led.

At six [years of age] we started first grade in the camp. I remember going to school with Emma, and taking our little tin cups to school to get our Red Cross dry milk. That's about all the milk we ever had ... we didn't have much food. My mom would make do with [little] food. In the refugee camp we would get eggs once in a blue moon, and we wouldn't have much fruit. So if you did get an egg, she could put a lot of flour and other stuff with it to make it last.

A man from World Church Relief came to our refugee camp. He and a Lutheran minister (there is a [church] building in the camp) visited different

families, and they were trying to choose some families that would be suitable to send to America ... that they could find sponsors for. And because my dad was hardworking and he had held an office, and his family was clean and he worked hard and he had good qualities, they thought someone would sponsor [us]. So, we were chosen.

But it wasn't until about six weeks later that we actually found out that we were chosen, or that we could go, because we had to go through all kinds of medical examinations. If even one of us had a disease or [was] crippled in any way, we wouldn't have gotten to go. The only way to go would have been to leave that sick child or the sick person [behind]. In fact, some families did that. We knew of a family that left [behind] their child that had some kind of lameness or polio ... they left him back with an older brother that was married. So they really gave some thorough examinations. We just went from one doctor to another. I remember being naked and being powdered for ... lice [shudders].

Then [six weeks later] in October, we went to a town called Bremerhaven. We were in [the new camp] for two weeks. This camp was a nice facility — with running water and nice beds — and clean, because that's where they brought the refugees for the last two weeks before they were sent to America. There we learned songs like "I've Been Working on the Railroad" and "God Bless America", and a few things like "hello", "goodbye", "thank you" ... you know, just a few phrases, but they were trying to get us ready for America. "

Displacement also is experienced as *identity displacement* when one's homeland is drastically changed by wartime circumstances. As Susanne recalls it, for example, "There was such a difference of life in the East than in West Berlin... like going back in time. The buildings ... nothing was taken care of."

Gunhild remembers when the [Berlin] wall was built. She was on vacation with friends in Western Germany when the group heard a temporary wall had been erected. The temporary wall "became a very deadly permanent wall," Gunhild recalls, "very tall ... two big walls with a strip of land in between that was 'No Man's Land.'" The Wall became a divisive force in many lives. "Families became divided," Gunhild states. "Friends were divided.... For the most part, it was impossible for people from [the] Western [side] to go to the Eastern [side]." Gunhild's narrative continues:

"Many changes happened during the existence of the wall. For a while all this was very strict... Then ... retired people could move from the eastern part of Germany to the western part because they were not productive people, so they were let go. Young people could not leave the eastern part of Germany to go to the western part. That was something impossible which created the fatal attempts to cross the border, cross the wall. Many, many people lost their lives attempting to do that. Many people did come over, and there were secret ways of helping those who wanted to come over.

It was not only the will of the people that finally brought the wall down, but obviously it was politics in the highest courts to agree to that. America had a very big role in that.”

Gunhild and her family think it is wonderful that people now are able to go back and forth between East and West Germany. “But Germans are not easily moveable,” she confesses. East Germany, or the German Democratic Republic, was poorer than West Germany (the Federal Republic of German). According to Stephan Gowens (2009), compared with their West German neighbors, East Germans experienced “lower pay, longer hours, and fewer and poorer consumer goods ... and restrictions on travel to the West” (p. 1). “Having lived under the Eastern regime, [where there were fewer opportunities for] education, information, and jobs,” Gunhild continues, “has made [the people] fearful and pessimistic, and very touchy when the West Germans come with all the freedom they have had and you haven’t [had].”

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore U.S. European women immigrants' memories of the World War II and, in so doing, to add diverse voices to the available literature on World War II civilian experiences. Anthropologist Paul Farmer tells us that personal and family narratives of "Holocaust, exile, and diaspora" bring the past into the present (in Rylko-Bauer, 2004, 9). Such stories can convey what happened to people just prior to the war, during the war, and in the wake of World War II: how did people feel? what did they think? how did they pick up the shattered fragments of their lives? Personal and family narratives also provide primary historical sources for contemplating the larger social processes at work during the lifetimes of the narrators. In the case of oral history interviews about individuals' and their family members' experiences during 1935-1950, such narratives offer unique insights into events and forces that shaped the World War II era and its aftermath, and serve to remind us of ongoing catalysts for violence and oppression at work in the present.

Previous scholarship on Germans' WWII experience tends to ignore the everyday and family experiences of civilians (Popper, 2003). This study challenges simplistic views of Germans as perpetrators of war through exploration of civilian German women's personal narratives. Interviewees' memories of the war itself, of fleeing from their homeland, and of adjusting to new social and cultural frameworks are highlighted.

The ten oral histories excerpted here do not focus on the millions of Poles evicted from their villages, the tens of millions of Europeans who died or who were imported as slave laborers, or the tens of millions who died in concentration camps or prisoner-of-war camps. The women immigrants interviewed do not, I believe, intentionally omit key issues of the war itself from their narratives. Instead, these interviewees talk about civilian and war memories that held or gained importance within the context of their own lives and the lives of their families. The interviewees emphasize those World War II memories that helped shape their identities, and those that continue to affect the lives of the immigrant women or their family members.

Feminist oral history scholars suggest women's conversations with each other tend to place greatest emphasis on social contexts. For many women, the most important social context is the family — its relationships, conflicts, life cycle events, and the work

relevant to family ties. Rather than being based upon descriptions of battle or war tactics, the narratives featured here illuminate everyday experiences of German civilians during World War II. Perhaps these 10 women's narratives do not offer new information about specific battles or military strategies. They do, however, bring to light personal civilian accounts of survival, determination, hope, and the importance of interdependence. Moreover, the teachings such stories bring have gained new prominence in our global society.

War narratives have been dominated by a male focus, with the experiences of male soldiers serving as the main unit of analysis. Research on Germans' roles during WWII has focused primarily on Nazi philosophy or actions. An examination of alternative perspectives, such as those of women civilians, would bring fresh insight into our understandings of the myriad effects and repercussions of international conflict while also providing a more gender-balanced understanding of specific wars and the general concept of warfare. Perhaps these 10 women's stories will serve as an impetus for research that broadens the way scholars think about war.

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