

CHAOS AND CONSOLATION

BY

Edith Cook

Whenever a war or civic strife enters my living room courtesy of television—Biafra, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan—I desperately pray the children caught up in the insanity will find their way to a bit of music. A rhythm evoked by rattle or drum, a voice raised in song and self-affirmation may—for the moment—mitigate the hunger and despair I recall from my own chaotic childhood and adolescence. While the trauma of armed conflict sticks with us all our lives, and that’s true for combat veterans as much as for civilians who’ve become “collateral damage,” so do the small consolations we manage to eke out.

I was born during a war; two years later, so was my brother Karl. With our dad fighting at the front, Mother and we kids remained in a house surrounded by fields in the Province of Saxony. Soon food became so scarce, Karl’s emaciated figure showed me what I, too, looked like. Karl owned a comb, a possession I envied—he got to comb his hair while my braids were under the control of a capricious mother. That comb served a more ephemeral function also. Occasionally Karl came across a bit of thin paper he draped across the comb’s teeth. Then he pressed the contraption against his lips and blew, extracting a noise resembling musical notes. If no paper could be found, he searched roadside weeds for hollow stems to use as a reed but never managed to extract one without damaging it.

On war’s end the eastern region of Germany, which included our province, became a satellite of the Soviet empire. Russian soldiers, stationed in nearby woods, struck fear in our village, not to mention our isolated home. In the city of Leipzig—Mother’s birthplace as well as mine—inhabitants watched as Russians dismantled entire factories to ship home. As an adult I was to learn the German army had inflicted unspeakable atrocities on their country. For two years the Nazi army encircled the metropolis of St. Petersburg to systematically starve its inhabitants. When desperate residents tried to flee, they were driven back with fire or water hoses. As a child, however, I knew only the hunger gnawing in my belly and the cold of our freezing home.

Mother owned a mandolin with a round belly and elongated fretboard, shaped somewhat like a miniature Middle Eastern oud. Unlike her lute and radio,

the modest instrument had escaped being traded for potatoes on the black market. While we waited for word of our missing-in-action dad, she taught me to play it.

The East German Soviet State had begun to issue monthly stamps for lard, flour, and coal briquets when Father returned from Soviet prison camp in late 1949, but the goods had to be rigidly rationed to last the month. Our dad rejoined us nine years after he was drafted, four-and-a-half years after war's end. As a prisoner, not once was he allowed to write home. I was eight when I set eyes on him and tried to figure out what life would be like with this stranger. Would he allow the mandolin-playing? I'm told he was with us while on leave for Karl's baptism, but I remember nothing of that time.

Mother loved to sing, and she possessed a distinctive voice. Dad sang regularly also; in fact, my parents met as participants in a concert of vocalists, where male and female chorale ensembles joined together. In the West, however, Mother's voice fell silent. We'd absconded from East Germany under cover of night, arriving in Father's hometown in West Germany with a few bundled possessions and our featherbeds. Eighteen months would pass before we were granted housing in a refugee settlement near the town of Bruchsal.

Although Mother rarely sang anymore, our dad regularly joined the Master Baker's Singing Club. Before the war he had gone through the training proscribed by his guild, first as apprentice, then as journeyman, then sitting for the exams that made him master of his trade. As such, he was able to secure the guild's approval for opening his own business in the refugee settlement. He started his bakery in 1952; a year later, my parents added a grocery-and-liquor store run by Mother—Mutti. Karl and I were recruited to help. At 6 AM every morning my brother and I delivered the hard rolls our customers demanded for breakfast, the families providing cloth sacks we filled and hung on their doorknobs. Afternoons we made the rounds with loaves of fresh bread, Vati, our dad, carrying the bread in a covered trailer coupled to his *Moped*, a bicycle powered by a small motor, while we rode our bikes. All the bakers in Bruchsal delivered to their customers as we did. All began the workday at four a.m. or earlier like our dad.

When I was fourteen, to my unending resentment, my parents removed me from school to “apprentice” with Vati, although I rarely set foot in his bakehouse. Instead, I washed (by hand) the diapers of my two youngest brothers and hung them up to dry. I helped in the grocery store and cooked meals as best I could, fuming inside at Mutti's taking ill. Later I thought the cancer must have been present before her youngest was born, and the pregnancy hastened the malignant growth.

I gained a lucky break when a guitar came my way from a bitterly poor family of Polish-German refugees. They begged my dad to allow their elderly grandfather to teach me to play the instrument in exchange for two loaves of bread

per week. The man was frail and hardly spoke any German, but he taught me guitar chords and even managed to convey a bit of music theory. I loved my weekly lessons and practiced whenever I had an evening to myself.

At seventeen I joined the guitarists and mandolinists of the *Naturfreunde*, Friends of Nature. *Naturfreunde* was a civic amalgamation of hiking clubs, singing clubs, and music groups. Harald, our youthful leader, played weekends in a dance band and during the week worked as a mechanic. Recently he'd convinced his fellow musicians to expand the group's all-male enclave in favor of including female participants. I was one of two young women who passed muster. "We have enough guitarists," said Harold. "You'll play mandolin." Mother's old-fashioned instrument having been left behind in the East, I acquired a used mandolin with the modern shape of a miniature guitar. A photo from my *Naturfreunde* time shows our group seated in a semi-circle in front of a poster proclaiming *Heimatchmittag*, "An Afternoon in the Home Country." We must have been performing at a folk festival.

That same year, on an Advent Sunday in late November 1959, our group played for Hungarian refugees who subsisted in German army barracks. The exiles had fled their homeland after an uprising against their Soviet overlords. Newspaper photos showed military tanks advancing on stone-throwing civilians. Those who managed to escape found themselves a long way from home and utterly bereft.

We arrived at the barracks in November drizzle and assembled in the courtyard. Since the damp would ruin our sheet music we sang and played from memory, confining ourselves to well-known songs of the Advent season. The Hungarian language has nothing in common with Germanic or Romance dialects, and our listeners would have had only the vaguest understanding of our songs. They seemed to appreciate the gesture, nonetheless. Hunched beneath shawls and babushkas and felt hats they nodded their heads, clapped to our beat, even tried to hum along. Only when we packed up did they shuffle back to their dank quarters.

At this I asked my musician friends if some of them would come to my house to play a few tunes. "My mother is ill," I said. "She loves Advent songs."

"If you donate a bottle of beer to everyone who shows up," Harald said. Age restrictions on alcohol consumption being nonexistent, I agreed. The boys who'd bicycled to the barracks bowed out but three of the guys who lived near Harald's piled into his VW. I led the way in my dad's recently acquired Fiat. Once there, the guys stationed themselves in the stairwell and tuned up while I stepped into the room, hardly larger than an American storage closet, where Mother lay on her couch.

She'll hate me for waking her, I thought. "Sorry to disturb you," I mumbled, touching her hand.

Mutti opened her eyes. "I was only resting," she said.

“The *Naturfreunde* are here. We’re going to sing and play a few Advent songs.” I left the door open as I joined the guys.

We repeated our earlier performance. To our repertoire of pre-Christmas songs, we added a hymn Mutti cherished about the power of love manifest in Jesus. Then I distributed bottles of beer and the fellows went home. Mother died a week later.

During my American life, I have often been impressed that Americans seem as hawkish as Germans once were. I remember hearing a former president who had served in WWII, Dwight Eisenhower, decry “our military-industrial complex” that manufactures weaponry for which uses had to be found. President Ronald Reagan funneled weapons to insurgents in Nicaragua whose regime had turned too socialist to suit him, and he continued the practice in secret after Congress enacted a law against it. Today other countries suffer American military “help” with drone strikes in Yemen and Somalia that turn bystanders into “collateral damage.” I cringe and cry inside for the children and parents torn asunder, hoping against hope that music may help.

Author Biography

Edith Cook married in California, where she and her husband raised three boys. She has taught at colleges and universities and her work has appeared in anthologies and literary magazines, in hard-copy and online. In Wyoming she received the Frank Nelson Doubleday Memorial Award. Visit her at www.edithcook.com