

The Greatest Gift

By Rudi Bethke, Jr.

The year was 1940. It was the second year of the war. German Chancellor, Adolf Hitler was in his seventh year as the leader of Germany. The Chancellor had assumed command in 1933 in the throes of the Great Depression under the National Socialist Party (NAZI). He created fervor of national patriotism, which had rallied Germany to unite all German People, *Deutsche Folk*. Germany, devastated by the First World War, had been forced to pay reparations to the victors in the terms of peace dictated at Versailles. To pay the reparations, Germany incurred significant debt. When the United States stock market collapsed in October 1929, the United States demanded Germany begin repaying their loans to the United States in 90 days; this sent the Germany economy even further into debt. Between September 1928 and January 1933, the number of unemployed jumped from 650,000 to 6,100,000. The NAZI Party drilled into the populous that all of Germany's financial woes were the result of the Jews. A country clamoring for any relief became mesmerized by its leader's speeches and followed him on the path to war.

To achieve the Chancellor's unification of the German People, he had begun a series of annexations to unite the German people under National Socialism. Beginning in 1938, Germany had annexed Austria (the Anschluss of March 1938), Sudetenland (Munich Agreement September 1938); Bohemia and Moravia [present day Czechoslovakia] (March 1939); Memel [part of Lithuania] (March 1939); and Slovakia in 1939. What the Chancellor could not annex with political agreements, he outright took with the Blitz Krieg. The Blitz Krieg or Lightning War was a new form of warfare. Learning from the long drawn out trench warfare of the World War I, The Blitz was a fast moving warfare that took its objectives quickly. Beginning with Poland in September 1939, the Blitz precipitated Britain and other countries to declare war on Germany; thus beginning World War II. In rapid succession Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, France and the Channel Islands all fell in 1940. Sharing his thirst for power, Benito Mussolini of Italy, leader of the National Fascist Party, had aligned with Germany in June 1940 and entered the war. Italy had already invaded Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1935, and Albania in 1939, and by October 1940, Greece.

In Germany, beginning in 1933, laws were enacted to strip Jews of their rights as citizens and even as humans. Laws were enacted against the overcrowding of German schools and universities; laws to ban professions [chiefly Jewish ones]; and laws to expropriate funds from Jewish émigrés. The Nuremberg Laws were established in 1935 to protect German Blood. They forbade Jews marrying Germans; forbade sexual relations between Jews and Germans; forbade Jews as domestic servants for Germans; forbade Jews from displaying national colors or Reich flags but permitted Jewish colors. In 1938, decrees bared Jews from the streets on certain days, decreed the compulsory sale of Jewish real estate; decreed abolishing Jewish agencies that catered to non-Jews; and created directives providing for the concentration of Jews. As early as 1933, labor camps were established for the detainment of Jews and other enemies of the State. These camps ultimately evolved into nothing but extermination camps to rid the world of the Jewish population. Europe had gone mad!

This was Europe in 1940; this was the Germany Rudi Wenk was born to on July 29, 1940. He was the second child of Hans Hugo Otto Wenk and Margarata (Schönig) Wenk. He was born in Darmstadt, then the cultural center of Hesse, Germany and home of the Grand Dukes of Hesse.

Darmstadt itself did not escape the war unscathed. It was bombed no less than five times. Rudi survived each bombing.

On the night of 23/24 September 1943 Darmstadt was bombed by 21 Avro Lancasters and 8 De Havilland Mosquitos of No. 8 Group of the Royal Air Force (RAF). Although it was a diversionary raid to draw night fighters away from for the main raid on Mannheim with 628 aircraft, the small force of bombers caused extensive damage in the university town that had little industry and which had not been seriously bombed before.

On the night of 24/25 April 1944, some RAF planes bombed Darmstadt and other towns when, due to low clouds, they failed to find the main target of the night which was Karlsruhe.

An attack on the night of 25/26 August 1944 by No. 5 Group RAF was a failure. The Master Bomber had to return to base and his deputies were shot down en route. The pathfinder "Illuminating Force" flares were dropped too far to the west. As a result, most of the Main Force did not bomb at all, with a number diverting to bomb Russelsheim instead. A total of 95 buildings were hit in Darmstadt and 8 people were killed by the scattered bombs which did hit the town.

The main raid on Darmstadt was by No. 5 Group RAF on the night of the 11/12 September 1944, when 226 Lancasters and 14 Mosquitos, were directed to the medieval city centre as houses there were mainly built of wood. The raid was to incorporate a new technique where, instead of bombers flying along a single path across the target, the bombers would bomb along a fan of paths over the city. The intention was to deliberately spread the bomb load.

The attack started a fierce fire in the center and in the districts immediately to the south and east. The destruction of dwellings in this area was almost complete. The raid killed an estimated 12,300 inhabitants and rendered 66,000 homeless out of a total of 110,000 inhabitants. The RAF lost 12 Lancasters, 5.3 per cent of the Lancaster force. Darmstadt became one of the German cities with the highest rate of killed civilian population. RAF Bomber Command 60th Anniversary Campaign Diary for September 1944 states:

The Darmstadt raid, with its extensive fire destruction and its heavy casualties, was held by the Germans to be an extreme example of RAF 'terror bombing' and is still a sensitive subject because of the absence of any major industries in the city. Bomber Command defended the raid by pointing out the railway communications passing through Darmstadt; the directive for the offensive against German communications had not yet been issued to Bomber Command, although advance notice of the directive may have been received. Darmstadt was simply one of Germany's medium-sized cities of lesser importance which succumbed to Bomber Command's improving area-attack techniques in the

last months of the war when many of the larger cities were no longer worth bombing.

After the main raid, there was a further diversionary raid to draw night fighters away from the main target of Pforzheim by 4 RAF Mosquitos on the night of 23/24 February 1945.

The memory of the bombings remained with Rudi for many years. He recollected years later how the sound of thunder in his childhood often reminded him of the bombings he witnessed. He remembered also as a small child walking down a bombed out street holding his mother's hand and reaching for something shiny only to be quickly pulled back by the watchful eye of his mother. The young toddler was reaching for a watch on a burned body lying in the street. In the intersections, the dead were piled together to be removed outside the city limits for burial. The Gestapo had been called in to supervise the removal because of their experience of disposing the bodies of countless Jews exterminated in the concentration camps during the war.

Absent from these bombings was Rudi's father, Hans. During the war, his father served as a private in the Eisenbahn Gruppen or railroad army as private. He had been impressed in 1943 and remained in the Wehrmacht until November 9, 1945. During the war, Hans' unit was active chiefly in Northern Italy. In April 1945, his unit was reported near Milan, Italy. Sometime in late April, he was captured by American forces in the vicinity of Alessandria, Italy. The details of his capture were related by a family member, Gotthard Rudolf, some 50 years later:

"He [Hans] was in the Eisenbahn Gruppen. He wore a special uniform unlike all the other soldiers in his unit. He was captured while driving a truck down a mountain road. On the road, his truck was strafed by Allied aircraft and shortly after that he was captured by American soldiers. His truck was filled with wine that he was taking from Italy into Germany. He was smuggling."

After his capture, his father was sent to Prisoner of War Enclosurement (PWE) Camp #26 in Bad Aibling outside Munich, Germany. Here in PWE Camp #26, Hans would stay until his release in November 1945 by the U.S. Third Army. Unbeknownst to him at the time, an 18 year old soldier named Joseph Ratzinger, who had been drafted into the Wehrmacht, was also a prisoner. Young Ratzinger, who had been a seminarian, would go on later in life to become Pope Benedict XVI in 2005.

Living in the rubble of Darmstadt with his mother, brother Klaus and sister Karin, Rudi had no early memories of his father. Not until age 5 when Rudi's father returned home.

Although, the war was over, the hardships continued. Germany was now an occupied country and there existed a significant American presence in Darmstadt during the denazification of Germany that followed. The occupation of Darmstadt began on March 20, 1945 when the 4th American Armored Division captured the city. Approximately 78% of Darmstadt had been destroyed; approximately 50,000 of the original 190,000 inhabitants lived in the city; 70,000 were left homeless.

The family struggled to find enough food to eat and coal to heat their home. The boys would do what they could to find vegetables; meat on the table was a special occasion. On at least one occasion, Rudi and Klaus persisted and asked their

father what type of meat they had for supper. Hans told them, "It is best not to ask boys." They continued, as boys will do, and their father, taking his hands against the table top, proceeded to imitate the sound of a galloping horse. They had been reduced to eating horse meat.

After the war, Rudi's father returned to the railroad and became locomotive engineer for the Deutsches Bundes Bahn or DB. The boys were instructed by the father that after his train had left the station in Traisa, a neighboring village, he would blow the whistle. This was the signal for the boys to be at a pre-designated location to pick up the bag of coal he would toss from the train as he passed. In this manner, they would have coal to heat and cook. Such was the basic existence after the war.

Most items that children take for granted now were, at the time, a luxury for Rudi. It was not until after the war that Rudi would delight in his first chocolate bar and it was only by the generosity of an American soldier. Chocolate was such a luxury for the boys that to make the chocolate last longer, his brother, Klaus, would often butter a slice of bread and shave some of his chocolate bar onto it and spread the shavings into the butter.

By 1948, Rudi's young world was again torn apart even closer to home. Since returning home from the war, Hans had had his doubts over his paternity for Karin. Based on Karin's age, he could not have been the father. During the war, Margarata had had an extra marital affair with Karl Loder of Friedburg sometime between May and September 1943; a period of time when Hans was away in the service of the Wehrmacht in Italy. The couple had tried to come to terms with the affair, but by 1948 all attempts had failed. His parents ultimately divorced on May 7, 1948 with the father oddly receiving custody not only of his sons but also of Karin on March 29, 1951.

After the divorce, Margarata moved to Roßdorf, a small town to the east of Darmstadt where her Schönig family had resided for generations before.

Sometime in August 1950, his father married Margarethe "Gretel" Emig and by March of 1951 the Wenks removed to the small village of Nieder Ramstadt south of Darmstadt. Nieder Ramstadt was the home of Gretel's family. The small village provided the children with rural opportunities of working on neighboring farms and playing in the nearby woods away from the devastation of the city.

Rudi's mother, in the meantime, had met an American soldier, Sergeant, Henry Carl Bethke. Henry was from a small farm outside Baltimore, Maryland. The two were married on February 20, 1954.

As a child, Rudi suffered from frequent bouts of asthma. Between November 6 and December 17, 1953, Rudi was sent to the Asthma Kinderheilstatte in Bad Reichenhall, an asthma clinic outside Munich. As part of the therapy regiment, the children were sent in the salt mines in the area not to work but to inhale the dry air and to relieve their symptoms.

Throughout Germany, the devastation left from the war remained visibly evident in the ruins of the once populous cities. Growing up in this environment was hardly ideal for any child. Like all Germans, Rudi wanted to leave the war behind and start anew. In 1956, his mother and Henry legally adopted Karin. Henry would be returning to the United States now that his overseas duty was complete. At 16 years old, Rudi was about to make the decision of his life. His mother and Henry offered to adopt him and take him to the United States. Here was the opportunity to shed the dreariness of the

remains of war and move to America, 'the land of opportunity'.

What must have been a hard decision for a father to make, Hans Wenk gave his approval for the adoption and on June 13, 1957 the adoption was granted by the courts. With the approval of the court, Rudi ceased to be Rudi Wenk and became Rudi Bethke; a new name for a new life in a new country. Rudi removed to Kaiserslautern where Henry was stationed. He found employment as a pinboy in the base bowling allies.

In the fall of 1958, the Bethkes departed onboard the U.S.S. General H W Butner, a U.S. Navy transport ship for U.S. dependents and servicemen, in Hamburg Germany. After approximately a week crossing the Atlantic, they arrived in Brooklyn, New York on October 10, 1958.

Before reporting to his new duty station at Fort Hood, Texas, Henry took leave and visited with his family at the family farm located at 8810 Pulaski Highway just outside Baltimore. The farm was located atop a small hill on the northwest corner of Pulaski Highway and Rossville Boulevard.

Between 1958 and 1959, Rudi lived in a trailer park in Kaleen TX. Unable to find work in Texas, Rudi packed all his belongings into two small suitcases and took his chances in Baltimore. He moved in with the Bethkes on the farm. The situation at first was probably ideal since German was spoken on the farm. The Bethke family had immigrated to the United States from Prussia in the later part of the 1800's. Henry's mother, Marie (Hölscher) Bethke was born in Hanover, Germany but had died as a result of complications in his child birth. Henry's father remarried another German immigrant named Lena De Vries. However, it wasn't long before it was "suggested" that Rudi move out and find a place of his own. He moved into town and found a small apartment atop Bridget's Beauty Shop on Eastern Avenue located in Highlandtown neighborhood of Baltimore. Rudi had secured a job at Sacred Heart Church and school around the corner as a painter and general maintenance person. It wasn't much but it was independence and a start.

In 1960, Rudi, by way of a mutual friend, was introduced to Charlotte German. Charlotte was born and raised in Baltimore. Maybe he assumed because her name was German, she knew German. Many of their first conversations were in very broken English. Whatever the circumstances, the relationship worked and two became a couple. Charlotte's mother, Edith, had been under the assumption that Rudi was an exchange student. She further assumed that as a painter working in the church, he painted the large ornate murals that adorned the church interior. The fact was, Rudi did paint the inside walls of the church – just usually one color!

Perhaps with an eagerness to repay his debt to his adoptive country and to learn a trade, Rudi enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1962. On April 24, 1962, he reported for his basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. After his basic training, he was sent to California where he was placed in support of the Nike Hercules Missiles. The Missile Program in the 1960's was sensitive to the security of the United States. Shortly after reporting, his supervising sergeant had come across the very clear fact the Rudi was not a U.S. citizen. When asked if this was an oversight, Rudi explained that it was a fact and that the recruiter said he would take care of it after he enlisted. It was not long after that Rudi found himself in the Motor Pool in support of the artillery.

On August 16, 1962, Rudi married Charlotte at the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on Cathedral Street in Baltimore. He proudly wore his summer

khaki uniform. The wedding was late and the reception was held at her parent's home at 3417 Lyndale Avenue.

Rudi's overseas duty during his enlistment was bookmarked by two watershed moments of the 1960's. In October 1962, the Russians began the installation of short and intermediate range nuclear missiles in Cuba. For nearly two weeks, the United States and Russia stood toe to toe on the brink of nuclear war. United States forces stood posed for a possible invasion of Cuba. In California, Rudi's embarkation orders for Korea were belayed, until a resolution over the Cuban Missile Crisis was secured. The Russians ultimately agreed to pull out of Cuba. The crisis averted, Rudi departed for Korea on October 27, 1962. At the end of tour of duty and on his return, the second watershed moment occurred. On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated in Daley Plaza in Dallas, Texas. Rudi disembarked on November 23rd. As a nation mourned the loss of their president, Rudi made a return flight to Baltimore before reporting to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. On board his flight, just a few rows from him sat Peter Lawford, Hollywood movie actor and the brother-in-law of the slain president was making his trip to Washington to attend the funeral of John F. Kennedy.

Not a month later, on December 16, 1964 in Raleigh North Carolina, Rudi's journey to United States citizenship became complete as he took the Oath of Allegiance to the United States.

"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God."

With these words he inherited the promise given to every American, *Liberty*. And so after lowering his hand he had perhaps imparted the greatest gift to himself and to his generations to come. He had earned the right to say, "I'm free to think and to speak. My ancestors couldn't, I can, and my children will." He was an American!

How different his future was in light of his past. He had been born under the dictatorship of a suppressive regime who not only cast aside freedom but basic human rights. The NAZI regime was responsible for the murder of over 5.8 million Jews; and responsible for a war costing the death of nearly 60 million people or a little over 2.5% of the then world population.

He had grown up in the aftermath of the war and suffered starvation while living in the rubble city of an occupied Germany.

Now, he was a citizen in a country of promise where a man was judged not by his religion or race but by his capabilities and where freedom above all was not just an idea but a reality.

