

My dear mother Gertrud Marie Elisabeth Koppitz was born on 21 March 1924, in a Hamburg hospital near the Alster lake.

Many people were out of work but her parents were industrious folk. Her mother Hertha worked as a maid and polished the silver- and glassware.

When mum was two years old her father landed a job as a riveter in the Blom und Voss dockyard; perilous work, suspended over the ship sides.

It was a time of galloping inflation. The prices were unimaginable and rose so quickly that within an hour the price of bread was beyond reach. On paydays workers had to run to the stores before the prices rose still further.

Before she reached the official school age of 6 years, mum was desperate to start school. She frequently followed the school children for a stretch making herself out to be a school goer too by taking a little bag with a small snack, paper, pencil, a sharpener and rubber contained in a metal box which doubled as a typewriter. Then she settled on a step, shooting her hand in the air to answer the imaginary teacher's questions.

I often wonder who looked after mum early mornings, as her mother worked from 4 to 8 am. As a cleaner in Hamburg's Levante Haus.

Mum recalls that her first school day was wonderful. Together with her mother and Tante Alma she went, as is the tradition dating from 1810, carrying her 'Schultüte, a cone filled with chocolate and sweets. Her father's cousin, Tante Emmi had done a grand job with the decoration.

Mum also fondly remembered her teacher, Frau Maier, reading romantic fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm.

Until her brother Herbert was born mum was an only child until aged 14.

Her teacher wanted her to stay on at school beyond 16 but her parents couldn't afford it; besides, her Tante Emmi had encouraged her to take a hairdressing apprenticeship. Mum aspired to work on the great liners and see the world. And so began a long and successful career.

These were the years of the Nazi regime, mum's father, Walter, was very opposed to the party; but in a dictatorship like that it meant endangering your life and the life of your family if you so much as uttered word against THE PARTY. Mum wrote "my father was involved in distributing leaflets for an underground movement and my poor mother was often beside herself with worry".

My mother's best friend was married to a Jew. They called him Onkel Alli. Only the fact that he was married to an Aryan woman and that they had a child, protected him from the concentration camp.

While working at the docks, the Red Caps had caught Walter 'stealing' 2 biscuits from the ground. (they were as hard as bricks). My mother and her friend Gerda

(who recently celebrated her 100th birthday) accompanied Walter to the local court. He pleaded guilty and spent a week in jail.

On the 24 July 1943, the day before Herbert's 6th birthday Hamburg was bombed and much reduced to rubble and ash. The bombing called Operation Gomorra, lasted 8 days and nights and was the heaviest air strike of the war. The British government called it 'The Hiroshima of Germany'.

My mother heard terrible tales of the destruction. Tante Emmi's mother and Tante Emmi herself were found in an air raid shelter in each other's arms and burned to a cinder. 15 family relatives and friends died. For several days the air was so thick with dust that very little light could penetrate. Thousands were sleeping in the open air.

There's a telling extract from the book given to mum by her father, Walter, with his inscription "For Gergi from Papa, never forget your hometown".

The book covers the history of the world-renowned harbour and dock yards and gives a snapshot of the refuge provided during the firestorm by Hamburg's principal church, the St. Michaelis or, the 'Michel'.

In the panic and confusion my mother and her little brother had lost track of their parents. For protection from the incendiary bombs, they took refuge in the canal. There they remained submerged for at least 3 hours otherwise they would most certainly have been taken by the fires or trapped on the molten streets. They were eventually rescued with a long rope.

The family had an allotment plot in Jenfeld about 13 Kilometres away where they usually spent weekends. The pair made their way on foot and eventually reached the path of Denksteinweg. They feared the worst.

It was a week before their parents arrived bringing with them several of their homeless neighbours from the apartment block. They used the little shed for shelter. Before the bombing mum had worked at a large hairdressing salon in Damtor Strasse. The bombing claimed the lives of the manager and seven of his staff.

There was very little employment to be had so my mother pursued an opportunity for work in Denmark to be able to support the family.

Following an interview with an officer of the Luftwaffe she was offered the job in the army compound as a hairdresser for the female personnel. It was becoming dangerous for the 50 or so women personnel to visit Danish salons. They had been experiencing sabotage and it was decided to be more prudent to have a hairdresser on site.

In contrast with Germany, where people were barely managing, food supplies in the compound were plentiful. Mum was able to send much appreciated food parcels home.

While the salon in the compound was being kitted out, she worked as a postal courier for six months. Flying each day between Skandaborg and Copenhagen. The war was nearing the end.

During the last weeks of the war mum and her family needed to hide Onkel Alli in the potato store. They lived with the fear of discovery; had the Nazis found him it would have meant certain death and probably mum's family too for hiding him.

These were anxious times. A fleeing SS Officer shot the local grocer dead. . . all for trying to prevent the theft of his bicycle.

The war ended on 2nd September 1945

In 1947 my mother saw her future husband. Edward, an English soldier at the local dance. Two weeks later they were properly introduced.

These were still very difficult times for Germans. Food supplies were tight.

How small the daily rations were of meat, fat and cheese. Added to the day's rations

330g (11oz) Bread

263g (9oz) Potato

16g (½ oz) Sugar

16g (½ oz) Fruit

and once a Month an Egg and ½ litre Milk

But Edward always managed to bring something to eat or something of black market value. Mum strongly suspected that he 'acquired' items from the army's provisions. They both became very close.

My mother helped her friend Irma with hairdressing theory. Irma's boyfriend, Bill, was an English soldier too and frequently gave mum generous cigarette butts to pass on to her father. One butt was worth 3 slices of bread; for a full cigarette you could get half a loaf.

Gradually on the allotment and with plenty of help the family were building a bungalow with bricks and heavy timbers that had been collected from the autobahn. Fortunately, the authorities were too pre-occupied to be concerned about the thefts. Onkel Hans, Tante Emmi's husband, and Onkel Friedrich, mum's paternal uncle showed how to build the bungalow The build took 6 months during which time mum slept on the sofa of Frau Pegel

It was at Frau Pegel's that Edward proposed marriage.

Sadly, there is nothing to be seen of the bungalow today. In 1995 it was demolished. The wonderful, mature blue-grey fir trees are gone. An extra motorway exit has since been constructed for Bundesautobahn number 1. I've seen it on Google Earth.

Edward's commanding officer was not in agreement with marrying German women and created many difficulties. In September 1947 when Edward had to return to England my mother feared she might never see him again. But finally the permission to marry was successful.

On 1 April 1948 the freight ship carrying mum departed from Landungsbrücken, Hamburg with mum's anxious parents and little brother waving from the key side not knowing whether they would see her again.

My parents married on 22 May 1948, in Ocker Hill, West Midlands, in the heart of The Black Country.

Until my father's death in 2002 they lived as Mr & Mrs Edward Holl for 54 years.

My mother died in March 2022 at the age of 98.

I have been truly blessed to have had such loving parents

Marion Lawson, Spring 2024.