

Oral Family History – The Women in my Father's Family [in Germany]

On my father's side, I spoke to my grandfather, Richard, about my grandmother, Gertrud, his mother, Berta, and Gertrud's mother, Frida. Since I was in the US during my childhood, I have not spent a lot of time with my father's side of the family. Unfortunately, shortly after we moved back to Germany, my grandmother got sick and died in 2006. This assignment helped me start a relationship with my grandfather, and I hope to visit him more often. I enjoy talking to him about history and he is quite funny.

Berta M. was born in H. near L. [in the Stuttgart area] in 1901. Her father was a farmer. Berta had eight siblings, five of which were from her father's first marriage. Berta went to school for seven years, which was normal for this time. At school, children were often beaten. Berta had to work hard on the farm because everything was done by manual labor. Berta's family always had enough to eat even though food was sometimes scarce for the rest of the population. For example, during WWI food was very scarce and the use of wheat was rationed. The Secret Field police watched the public bake house and made sure no one baked white bread.

Two of Berta's brothers died in WWI. When the other brothers returned after the war, the girls were no longer important on the farm. It was then better they got married. Berta became a "daughter of the house" with a family in K. in order to learn how to manage a household. In 1923, Berta married Albert, a farmer from N. At this time, there was hyperinflation and people traded goods and services without using money. My grandfather says: "One didn't even know what money looked like anymore." Berta had two boys and one girl. Life on the farm was difficult for Berta when she was pregnant and had small children. During the summers, Berta had a lot of farm work to do, so the children had a nursemaid.

Berta and Albert never had a car, but they had a horse and a tractor. They were the second farmers in the village to get a tractor, which was a status symbol at that time. In 1938, the family bought a radio to listen to on Sundays and in the evenings. The family also bought the [local paper] regularly, which they later used as toilet paper. On Sundays, at least one or two members of the family went to church.

In the 1930s, Berta had to become a member of the National Socialist Women's League. At the beginning of WWII, the family's horse was taken away by the government, and Albert had to join the army. His oldest son, Eugen, then became the "man" of the household. The neighbors also helped one another during the war years. The years from 1939 to 1943 were not bad years for farmers because they at least had enough to eat. During the war, the "Food Front" ("Ernährungsfront") was very important to keep the soldiers fed. Farmers were seen as the "blood source" ("Blutquelle") of the country during the war. Food ration cards were also distributed. Albert returned home relatively quickly from war duty due to his age. However, Eugen, was drafted into the army and sent to the Western Front. A Ukrainian prisoner of war, Nikon, moved in with the family during the war to help with farm work. Eugen was taken as a prisoner of war in France by the Americans and returned to the farm after the war.

Berta was always under the men in the family. Throughout her life, Berta never worked outside of a family household. She had a physically hard life and died in N. in 1976.

My grandfather's mother-in-law was Frida. She was born in 1902 in U. and spent her entire life there. Frida had one brother who was killed in 1914 in the Battle of Ypres during WWI. Frida's family had a farm on which they mostly grew wine grapes. In 1932 Frida married Fritz M. from E. Fritz moved to U. and took over the farm from Frida's family. Frida and Fritz continued growing wine grapes. They had two daughters, Gertrud (1932) and Marianne (1935).

Fritz did not have to serve in the military during WWII. He was called on to serve in the Mobilization for a few days and had to take care of horses in C. He supposedly told his commander that he had no time for such duty because he had to pick his plums at home on his farm. Fritz was luckily soon released from duty. Therefore, Frida's life during the war continued as before. Her husband was at home to work on the farm, and the family had enough to eat during and after the war. In 1943, Frida's house was hit by an American bomb and burned down. She

sent her daughters to live with Fritz's relatives in E. while she remained on the farm with Fritz. After the war Frida re-built the house.

Frida never had a car and never traveled outside [the region]. She dominated over her husband, because the farm came from her. She was also very controlling with her daughters. She often refused to let her daughters do social activities. She wanted her daughters to remain with her on the farm and work. Frida did not encourage education for her daughters.

In 1957, Getrud married and left the farm. Fritz died in 1967, and Frida and Marianne tried to maintain the farm. It was, however, eventually too much work for the two women, and they had to lease most of the land to other wine growers. In 1985, Frida fell and broke her thigh bone. Afterwards, Frida had to stay in bed. Marianne lived with her and took care of her until her death in 1997. Marianne never got married and never left her mother's property.

My grandmother, Gertrud, was born in 1932 and grew up in a simple but stable household. In her family's house on the farm, there was no toilet, refrigerator or bathtub. During WWII, Gertrud was often sent out to help neighbors or relatives with chores. Gertrud's mother was very controlling over her daughter's social activities. Gertrud did, however, go to a [...] Fall Festival in 1956, and there she met Richard.

Gertrud and Richard got married in 1957. Richard was a baker, and Gertrud wanted to go to a Bakery School to help her prepare for her new job, but Frida did not let her. With the help of both their parents, Gertrud and Richard bought a house with a bakery in L. and for many years had a successful bakery. The work, however, was a lot for Gertrud. She had to work in the bakery and at the same time run the household and take care of her children. Gertrud had two sons, Albrecht in 1958 and Martin, my father, in 1962. The winter after my father was born was very cold and even Lake Constance was frozen. Heating oil was scarce, but Gertrud was able to get oil because of the baby. Gertrud stressed education for her boys, and it was important to her that they do their homework and do well in school. Gertrud was very proud of my father's accomplishments in school and was pleased later on that he got a degree at university [...].

As the bakery business grew and Richard started delivering bread to butchers, he got the family's first car, a VW Variant, in 1965. Gertrud, however, did not ever learn how to drive. During the 1960's, Gertrud and Richard were not interested in the student revolts. They were satisfied with their lives and did not have time to be concerned with demonstrations. Richard and Gertrud did not identify with the politics of Chancellor Brandt and Chancellor Schmidt in the beginning. Later, Gertrud liked Schmidt and even found him attractive.

During the late 1970s, grocery store chains started to spread through German cities. This made business for family run bakeries like Richard's more difficult. The bakery business began to slow down, and Richard eventually closed the bakery in 1992. Richard and Gertrud retired and moved to U. In her later years, Gertrud suffered from bad knees caused by standing all day in the bakery, and she had both knee joints replaced. Gertrud enjoyed retirement and kept busy by working in her garden, canning fruits, making jams and cleaning the house. Now that she was back in U., Gertrud could see her sister more often, and she also regularly met her classmates from school who still lived in the area. Gertrud and her sister both died in U. in 2006.

Looking back at these interviews

Once again I see the important role education plays in letting someone break away from a certain life style. My father is the first in his family to graduate from a university, just as my Opa in California was the first in his family. I find it interesting my German grandfather seems to be more of the same generation in manner, clothing and habits as my great-grandfather in the US rather than my Opa in California. The same is also true for my grandmother in Germany. She seems to be more of the generation of my great-grandmother in the US rather than my Oma. I am also surprised that my Oma and Opa in California had a more difficult or sad childhood than my grandmother and grandfather in Germany. At least it appears my grandparents in Germany had more stable lives. Both my Oma and Opa in California expressed feelings of sadness when talking about their childhood, and my Opa also said how scared he was most of the time. One similarity I see in both sides of my family is everyone was or is a hard worker. I also see that my great-grandmothers in Germany, Frida and Berta, and my great-grandmother, Marion, in the US were very strong women and had to endure a lot throughout their lives.