Years of War, 1939–1945

The war started when I was eight years old. The center of my hometown, Brandenburg, looked as it had for 250 years. The “Altstadt” (‘old city,’ first recorded in 1170) and the “Neustadt” (‘new city,’ first mentioned in 1196) were combined in 1715 on order of King Friedrich Wilhelm I of Prussia (see pages 1-5 and 3-36). Figure 1 is a photograph of the distinctive “Rathaus” (city hall) with the “Roland” in front, the sign of the market-right of the city. On the left is the ornate “Kurfürstenhaus,” the house of the “Kurfürst,” (an elector of the first German Reich, see page 1-1, Footnote 3). The electorate was established in the 15th century and the “Kurfürst” stayed in this building when in town. He never had his residence in the house, but the old and new towns were the biggest, most important cities of the “Mark” (Province) Brandenburg. City and “Mark” were named after an older castle on the Havel river. When the Kurfürst made Berlin his residence, Brandenburg lost the importance it held in the 16th century.

The street running towards the “Rathaus” is the “Steinstraße,” the first cobbled street of the New City. The “Hauptstraße” branches to the left, the “St.-Annen-Straße” and the market place go to the right. By the end of WW II, none of these buildings remained, and the “St.-Annen-Straße” was fully destroyed when the Soviet forces entered the town (see Figures 17–20 and 24). The Roland survived, having been stored outside the city. It is now standing in front of the “Rathaus” of the Old City on the other side of the Havel (see Chapter 3, Figure 26, and Chapter 1, Figure 6, point 2).

September 1, 1939 was a Friday. For our family, the day started very early in the morning. I woke up from loud talking, walking, and banging on doors. It started at the top floor and moved slowly down to us on the ground floor of the Wilhelmsdorfer Straße 70.1 Two soldiers knocked at the door and delivered Vati’s2 “Stellungsbefehl” (draft notice). He had to be, with his car, at 7 a.m. at a sports facility outside the city (“Turnerheim”). When Frank and I got up

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1 For residences and travel, see Appendix C, for locations, Chapter 1, Figures 5–6.
2 For names of family members and their relationships see Chapter 11, pages 2–4.
a few hours later, Vati had left already and Mutti was fully in charge. She gave us the news. She also told us that Vati had reached her by phone and we should go to the “Turnerheim” with our bicycles later in the day and bring things he had forgotten in this hurry, and also something to eat.

When we arrived in the afternoon at the sports field, there was an enormous crowd of men. Several tables were set up where the processing was done. After a little while, we found Vati and his car. His preliminary papers were already complete. He was attached to an officer as driver of his own car and had to await transfer to the barracks when all others were properly processed. We delivered our goods, and this was the last we saw of ‘private Vati’—until later in the evening of the same day when he came home on indefinite leave. The officer found a more experienced, soldierly driver. Vati had made a convincing case that because of his asthma it was a health-risk for him not to sleep on ‘safe’ mattresses (see page 1-3), and it was more important to get on with repairing and building of roofs over the barracks and armament factories than to join the army.

Once home, he worked the connections he had with the various industries which were pressed to meet the manufacturing quotas. Within a few weeks, Vati received a proper deferment from the army. Even in 1945 he was exempt when everyone between 16 and 60 years of age was drafted to the “Volkssturm,” the last-ditch effort to win the war. A few months later, Vati even got permission to extract his car from the army, and we were looking forward to seeing his ‘new’ car, painted in army camouflage. But, we received the message, officer, driver, and car were lost in Poland. What would have happened if Vati would have remained as driver? Since many men were drafted, it did not take long for Vati to find a second-hand car for his business, an “Adler Trumpf”.

Of greater significance was the other happening of September 1, 1939. What was to become World War II had started at 4:45 a.m. with the well-planned German attack on Poland. The story given over the radio in the morning was that this move was in retaliation to a Polish attack on a German radio tower and on border posts. Even when we first heard it, it was not credible.

Within two days, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany, pursuant to their week-old alliance with Poland created to forestall the fate that had befallen Czechoslovakia (see page 1-31). In five days, the Polish resistance collapsed, and on September 27 the “Blitzkrieg” ended with the fall of Warsaw after major bombing attacks on the city. As in Czechoslovakia, German territories lost after WW I were reincorporated into Germany, and the rest of Poland remained occupied and was given a German civilian government with the capital in Kraków (see page 2-21).

On September 17, the Soviet army also marched into Poland. The eastern provinces were annexed. This action was in accord with the non-aggression pact of the USSR with Germany. The USSR keeping this part of Poland after WW II violated the promise given by Great Britain before and during the war when Polish exiles joined the British army. Overall, the territory lost to the USSR in 1939 and the territory gained from Germany in 1945 moved Poland west by 100 mi.

On October 6, 1939, Hitler sued for peace under the condition of a status quo, but this was rejected by Great Britain and France. Would an end to the war at that time have prevented WW II and its horrors? Definitely not. Hitler’s planning included further expansion to the east. He would, however, have loved to gain a year or two to complete his rearmament.

Let me now summarize the first phase of World War II by following the major operations from 1939 to 1940. This period can be called the European phase of the war. In November 1939, the USSR bombed the Finnish capital of Helsinki and attacked its borders. By March 1940, the Finns were forced to sign the peace agreement of Moscow and lost considerable territory. Furthermore, the USSR annexed the Baltic Republics (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia) and parts of