

Foreword and Acknowledgements

I first began to write this book in 1996, every day for an hour or two before work, over a period of about four months. At the time I was employed on the research and editorial staff of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* at The Australian National University in Canberra. I then circulated my manuscript widely to friends and acquaintances with different personal and professional backgrounds.

What came back to me was a surprising set of responses, different and contradictory even when applied to the same chapters. While one person did not want me to change one word of what I had said about the War, others loathed my exposure of Nazi activity in our camp, as if I was making it up. One person thought that writing about a Catholic education was nowadays an overworked exercise, while others liked those chapters particularly, for 'being exactly as [they] remember it', or for the 'ethnography', or for being written by a young 'convert' to Catholicism crossing the exotic Tridentine Catholic bridge in secular Australia. Some readers wanted to edit out the German influences evident in my English language, although this is itself an indicator of the problem of assimilating new language patterns.

In 1996 my English language was also suffering from the professional straitjacket of having worked for eighteen years with a project that published reference books. I decided to put the manuscript aside, allowing it to lie fallow, waiting for the book to germinate subconsciously. I also wanted to internalise some of the good advice I had been given without losing my own way of speaking. Above all, I wanted to combine open truthfulness about my memories of an earlier life and the way I now reflect on it.

I want to acknowledge by name those people who in 1996 generously gave me in writing or verbally their enthusiastic support and constructive criticism: Anne Boyd, Debra Dwyer, Morag Fraser, Amirah and Ken Inglis, Ann McCulloch, Jan and Hank Nelson, Joy Hooton and Marivic Wyndham. While I subsequently did not follow their advice directly, its value to me has nevertheless been great. I have left out the names of readers of the first manuscript who were kind, but who concealed their honest reactions. I understand that politeness precluded them from being frank. Their reservations seemed to include distaste for an allegedly romantic style; that my story was too personally revealing; that there was too much religion in it; that my memory could not have been as vivid as it seems; and that later incidents must have influenced my interpretation of the past. Such reactions were all worthy of consideration.

I revised this memoir in 2004. Although it relies substantially on my own reminiscences, I am grateful to my brothers Peter and Herbert Girschik and cousins Christine Robertson and Peter Erlanger who, at my request and without their having read any of the story, provided details of the family of my mother and her sister. My brother Peter corrected a couple of details about the camp. I expect that their recollections and interpretations do not correspond completely with mine.

What follows, then, are the thoughts of an ageing woman reminiscing about her young life—a life that was in part fractured but not permanently damaged. It expresses my compulsion to speak about circumstances about which my elders kept silent for almost forty years. Displaced as a child to a foreign land far away, with parents who were tarred as ‘enemy aliens’, I now know that my fate and such stereotyping were the result of a chance combination of politics and culture. It had nothing to do with the sorts of people we were. By sheer accident, I was privileged to have come out of it all relatively unscathed when so many others all over the world suffered terribly through no fault of their own. A philosophy of hope is therefore implicit in this story of my youth.

Denials sometimes persist for a long time. When my mother in the early 1980s wrote a letter to a German newspaper to support the view that Nazi activities did exist in Australian internment camps, her letter was not published. Powerful lobbies got in the way. Readers might ask why I still dwell on painful experiences that were all over and done with so long ago. I think that there is in many of us a drive to expose the secrets of the past and to learn from them. And, indeed, through the 1980s and into the

1990s, Germany has been at the forefront of acknowledging her crimes against humanity during the Nazi time. With my German and Austrian background, I retain some sense of communal responsibility for the past; just as with my Australian naturalisation, I have also inherited Australia's communal responsibility for its past history.

My particular thanks for bringing this project to fruition go to the Pandanus Books team: Ian Templeman, Justine Molony and Emily Brissenden, for their enthusiastic and generous professional encouragement. In the always risky editing process, I am grateful for the meticulous hand of consultant editor, Jan Borrie. Then came work in detail. To collaborate with Diana Giese brought reassurance, nurture, instruction and pleasure. Like a discriminating gardener, she pruned many tangled passages while leaving my blooms, my best sentences, completely unaltered, so that I felt I still owned the text. She also matched pictures and text with both serious and playful purpose.

My generous and perceptive husband, Jim Griffin, has always been my most steadfast and loving support, but also my most incisive critic. More than anyone throughout my married life, he has challenged my originally narrower view of things and stimulated my social conscience and psychological outreach. I am immensely grateful to my immediate family, their partners and my close friends. It is a source of sorrow that some of my offspring and their families now live so far away. My often unspoken gratitude to my family and friends lives always in my heart.

Helga Griffin
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