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LADY ROOFER TO LIBRARIAN:
FROM EAST GERMANY TO RUSSIA OR AMERICA ?

by Christel Ludewig McCanless

On November 3, 1953, at age 13, I arrived in Huntsville with my parents in the middle of the night. This was after 12 days at sea on an Army troop transport ship, the General Alexander A.M. Patch, followed by two days and nights on the train from New York City. I knew not a word of English and had only the clothes on my back.

To begin at the real beginning, we must go back to my birth in 1939, two months after World War II began in Germany. My parents, Emmy and Hermann Ludewig, were living in Peenemuende where the von Braun team was developing military rockets, but their real dream was to explore space. My father was the deputy head of the fuselage group which was responsible for the design of the German V-2 rocket fuselage. We were living in very nice government-owned housing within a few hundred yards of the Baltic Sea and life for the first few years of my existence was quite comfortable. I still have the wonderful 8mm colored home movies (some of Kodak's earliest film of this type) which show trips to the beach and nearby farms to get fresh butter, cheese, and eggs. However, on an August night in 1943, our lives changed drastically when an air raid destroyed the house we were living in.

My mother and I had been evacuated from Peenemuende the morning of the air raid. We went to Trebbin, a small town approximately 45 miles south of Berlin where my paternal grandparents were living in retirement on a small fruit orchard. My father survived the air raid in the basement of our two-story townhouse in Peenemuende but most of our belongings were destroyed. We returned to live in temporary housing near Peenemuende until the end of the war in 1945, and then all three of us sought shelter with my elderly grandparents back in Trebbin. This part of Germany had by then become part of the Russian-occupied territory of Germany. My family's livelihood until 1953, when we fled to the United States, consisted of tending a small fruit orchard and selling its yield to local merchants under the quota assigned by the Communist government. To make ends meet we raised our own vegetables, milked a goat, and sheared rabbits to spin yarn to make our own clothes. A more dangerous source of income was derived from my father's smuggling of eggs to our relatives in Allied-occupied Berlin to sell on the black market. This was before the Berlin Wall went up in 1961. To get the eggs through the border patrol without confiscation, my mother sewed them into the hem of a black winter coat, and of course, this meant my father could not sit down during the train ride.

School in East Germany in the early days after the war was a bit sporadic. We met in homes since the school served as a hospital and we were required to bring a briquette of coal each day to heat the teacher's home.

By decree of the Communist East German government each citizen had to fill out a questionnaire annually which listed all previous places of employment. My father knew to admit publicly that he had worked in rocket development during war time would get him into trouble. Therefore, he always stated he had worked at the factory across the street from the rocket plant which made elevated train cars. This decoy worked until such time as my father had been found by his former Peenemuende co-workers who were by now in Huntsville and were actively looking for members of the Peenemuende von Braun team to bring them to America. Dr. Eberhard Rees, who was Dr. Wernher von Braun's deputy and technical director of the Army's ballistic missile program, had offered my father a job on behalf of the US Army in Huntsville, and at the appropriate time we would leave Trebbin. The contract had been signed at the American consulate in West Berlin. Wilhelmine Jaglitz, my maternal grandmother, played a very important role in these delicate negotiations. All mail from America went to her apartment in West (American, British and French-occupied) Berlin and she in turn sent a postcard to Russian-occupied Trebbin with the stamp on it upside down. This meant there was mail from America, and it was time for a visit.

On a Thursday early in May of 1953 two Russian soldiers with machine guns over their shoulders arrived at our house in Trebbin and ordered my father to accompany them to the courthouse where he was interrogated for over two hours. The major questions revolved around my father's employment in Peenemuende and finally an offer was made for a job on the border of Poland. Of course, my father continued to deny involvement in rocket research for fear of reprisals. At that time Russia, the United States, France and Great Britain, were all actively searching for Peenemuende von Braun team members to further their causes. Since it was close to harvest time and we had my 85-year old grandfather, Richard Ludwig, living with us, my father begged for a two-week grace period to consider the job offer, which he knew was not in Poland but in Russia. The timing of the arrival of the Russians at our front door suggests there was a leak in the American consulate.

Overnight my parents made the decision to flee. When I came home from school on Friday, I was told we were leaving everything behind and going to America. It was the first time I had heard about any such plans. My only question was could I take with me two possessions--my dog, a small white Pomeranian named Teddy, and my bicycle. It was a well-used one, assembled from odd parts, that I had saved money to acquire at the tender age of 13. The answer to the first part of the question was "yes", but the bicycle had to stay behind-- a real heartache which many, many years later was resolved, when I once again rode that bicycle in West Berlin. A friend had brought it across the border and my aunt used it for transportation to and from the grocery and cemetery in Berlin.



The author, with her treasured bicycle.

The plan to flee on such short notice, that same weekend, was discussed with mutual friends who encouraged my parents to leave as quickly as possible because it was well-known that people just disappeared during those times. (See Dr. Ernst Stuhlinger's article in the Winter/Spring 1996 issue of the *Review*.) It was decided that my grandfather, Teddy the dog, my mother and I would leave by train on Sunday morning, and my father would follow on the next day. In later years my mother told me that my father expressed hesitation about uprooting his aged father, who at first refused to go, leaving Germany forever and starting fresh at age 55 in a new country where he did not know the language or the customs. My mother's overriding reason for favoring the flight was that the Communist East German government had decreed her daughter could not go on to school after the eighth grade because we were "capitalists". This designation came because my grandfather owned his house with a small orchard! The government had chosen a career for me. Christel would be trained to become a roofer! My mother who lost her father at an early age and was the oldest of four children, had known hard times, having to deliver rolls to apartment houses before daybreak at age 14 and later working in sweatshops 12 hours a day sewing for minimum wages. She did not want history to repeat itself for her daughter. So the decision was made.

Early on Sunday morning wearing two sets of clothes, my grandfather, Teddy the dog, my mother, and I left on the train for Berlin. The dog was carried in a basket which had a false bottom containing valuable personal papers such as birth and marriage certificates. When we arrived in West Berlin, my uncle insisted I go back immediately to get my father, since he thought we had been shadowed. I took the next train back to Trebbin where my father was busy destroying documents and burying some family keepsakes. All this was difficult since we had a Communist informer living in a room on the second floor of the house. She spent her days hanging out the window and observing our activities, and surely reporting them to the Communist East German authorities.

The next morning, Monday, my father and I dressed in two sets of clothes proceeded to the train station. Two local policemen were waiting for us and detained us until the train had left. We went back to the house but never went inside since we were afraid of walking into a trap. Instead we went through the fruit orchard and hid in a neighboring farmer's haystack during much of the day. I was sent to the home of a neighbor who had worked during harvest time with my parents and could be trusted. She gave me food, put me to bed, and threw some hay on a wagon and fetched my father from our hiding place. Later that evening her son, who had been my classmate in the eighth grade took us under cover of darkness with a friend of his on three bicycles to a nearby village where we were to catch the train to freedom in West Berlin. My father and the two young boys each had a bike and I rode on the handlebars of one of them. We rode along the train tracks eight miles to Ludwigsfelde, where we boarded the black (steam) train. The two boys were making a living by assisting people during the night who were fleeing, which meant they spent their days in school sleeping through lessons. We later learned that as the train left the platform at Ludwigsfelde, one of our rescuers was arrested and accused of helping the Ludewigs flee. He served his term in jail and much later my father was able to write him a recommendation for more appropriate employment in the West.

We arrived in Teltow where the trains changed from steam power to electricity. My father and I opted to go through different border check-points. Once the electric train left this station it entered West Berlin and we would be free. My father reasoned if one of us was not allowed to go through, then at least the other could join my mother and her family in freedom in Berlin, albeit 24 hours late. Thoughts of this kind were commonplace in Russian-occupied East Germany since we had not played the political game of the times. Not only had we smuggled eggs, we did not always fulfill our quota in fruit production due to varying local weather conditions, and my parents had not encouraged me to join the Young Pioneers (the political party for young people). We also listened to Radio Free Berlin with earphones and knew the news of the free world. Of course, none of this was in open defiance of the system, but in the privacy of our home possibly observed or overheard by the informant living upstairs.

So my father went through the checkpoint for locals going to the electric train while I took the checkpoint for folks changing over from the steam train. I was stopped and interrogated since I had a small accordion in a black carrying case. During the last night in our house my father had taken the voice keys out and installed personal papers inside and underneath. I had been coached to say the accordion needed repair, would not come out of the case, and I was going to Russian-occupied East Berlin to have it repaired since the small town of Trebbin did not have a repair shop. My interrogation about the accordion caused enough confusion that my father slipped through and eventually I was also let go. After what seemed a like an endless set of stairs, we were both on the train platform, one of us in the front and the other in the back, and after what seemed like an eternity the train arrived. We boarded at opposite ends pretending not to know

each other. As soon as the doors of the electric train closed, my father and I knew we would be free. My mother was hysterical by the time we arrived at grandmother Wilhelmine's apartment in Neu-Koelln since they had had no word (there were no telephones) from us for 24 hours. They were imagining the worst!

After some recuperative time with both sides of the family we flew (a first for my mother and me) from Berlin to Frankfurt. Then we went by train to the American Army base located in Landshut near Munich in the region of Bavaria. There we were fed four meals a day, relatives were allowed to visit, my parents became re-acquainted with other members of the Peenemuende von Braun team, and we were allowed to tour the surrounding country side until it was our turn to go to America. The best thing for my parents was that after eight years of struggling to exist, my father was getting a steady salary which began in June, the day he arrived in Landshut.

We left Germany in mid-October from Bremerhaven on the General Alexander A.M. Patch which was bringing American troops home. Small groups of German engineers and scientists and their families selected to come to Huntsville were part of the manifest. It was on this trip that the Ludewig family first met Ruth von Saurma and her family. The women shared cabins and so did the men. I recall having my first orange, banana, greasy eggs and bacon which had never been part of our sparse diet in East Germany. But novel foods mattered little since we were all quite seasick. Our cabin steward was special in that he would "requisition" a menu from the dining room during his meal and bring it to us to translate with a small English pocket dictionary before it was our turn to eat. Most of the time we did not finish translating enough of the menu, so that pointing to anything on the menu worked just as well.

Our arrival in New York coincided with Halloween and we were a bit amazed that "this land of milk and honey", as my mother said I learned even in East German schools, was full of Halloween spooks. Two more days and nights on the train and Huntsville greeted us in the middle of the night. One of our favorite family stories is that my mother said "coming to Huntsville where she knew only a few Germans, did not speak the language, had no clothes, and having left her extended family behind could not be all that bad because Huntsville had street lights burning in the middle of the night." In East Germany we only had two hours of electricity each day, one in the morning and one at night. After our 2 a.m. arrival, we called our Peenemuende friends, Bernd and Ilse Tessmann. Mr. Tessmann came to the train and took us to our apartment. The Tessmanns and other German friends from Peenemuende days, Trude, Willie Schulze and their daughter Erika (now Erika Gerth) had furnished our rental apartment on Longwood Drive near the present HealthSouth Complex with loans from their households, and we began learning about our new country.

At age 55 my father went to work at Redstone Arsenal, and my mother became an American housewife. Since she had only limited contact with Americans, her

English did not improve very quickly until George McCanless, became part of the family during our courtship and marriage, and during the 40 years he knew her. Later we moved to the College Hill Apartments, which stood where the Exxon Station and Hardee's is now at the corner of Franklin Street and Governors Drive. In October of 1953 I was sent to the old Huntsville Junior High School which is now the parking lot of the Annie Mertz Center to repeat the eighth grade which I had never quite finished in Trebbin. With not a word of English, only German and Russian, my very astute teacher, Eva Johnson, seated me next to, Ingeborg Haukohl, a German-speaking girl. Together we muddled through, but it was soon found out I could do the mathematics problems but did not know the names of the numbers to give answers. Ms. Johnson let me go to the blackboard and write them down. To this day I do all of my math in German and my family says if it comes out the same in English and German, it must be right!

I learned English quickly in school and my father, who had studied it more than 40 years earlier, was learning it at the office. However, one night a week we had English lessons in our home taught by Hermann Beduerftig, a von Braun team member. I soon became a nuisance since I was bored with what my mother and father were learning, and luckily I was sent to the movies one night a week. But there was a downside to all this, I was required to speak German when I crossed the threshold of our apartment, and at age 14 I wanted to be like everybody else, not different. In later years I saw the wisdom of it all, when I was able to earn money translating, studied German literature in graduate school, and traveled easily in foreign countries. Much to my regret I have lost the Russian I was required to learn in East Germany.

Before coming to America, my father never had the opportunity to learn to drive an automobile. After he had been in Huntsville for a few months, his German friends helped him buy a used car, and taught him to drive. Life in Huntsville was good to us. At first, we traveled in tandem by car with the Schulzes and the Tessmanns to the Smoky Mountains, to Florida and other exciting places. I was able to attend summer school at Huntsville High (now the Annie Mertz Center) and participated in all the extra-curricular activities of a typical American teenager in the 1950s. With added credits through summer school attendance, I finished high school in three years in 1957 and was then back in chronological sync with my peers. My father's co-workers in the Saturn Systems Office picked out Alabama College (now the University of Montevallo) to further my education, and I went there sight unseen and graduated with a BA in English in 1961. I thought I wanted to study mathematics but after calculus I decided I had met my Waterloo. A major in English was not much easier since I had to read aloud from Brer Rabbit for a final exam in a speech course when I had only been in this country six years. I could not read the words, nor had I ever heard that kind of dialect spoken. Shakespeare and old English were tough experiences along with the reality that I had to take French and Spanish for foreign language requirements. I was not allowed to study German since I was a native. In the summers I worked at Redstone Arsenal in the technical library and earned \$1,000 to pay my college

tuition. My mother made my clothes, my father bought my books and rides home were shared with friends. In 1958 when my future husband and I met at the library, the only money I had spent during the summer was five cents for a Coca-Cola since it took all the money I could save to go to college. By then I was fully aware of the life-altering decision my parents had made in leaving Trebbin and coming to America and not going to Russia.

In 1961 after eight years in the United States I enrolled in the Library School of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill on a probationary basis. I was unable to get a good score on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) and had to prove myself by taking extra courses and making good grades. Many years later Dr. Roberts explained to me I would never do well on standardized tests since I had not been educated in this country in the early years of my life.

The Huntsville of 1953 was a small sleepy cotton town, but the impact of the arrival of the Germans from Fort Bliss was being felt. The Kroger store on Governors Drive across from Huntsville Hospital where the UAB Medical School is now located, was starting to stock German foods, and was cutting flank steaks to make "Rouladen", a traditional German dish. The symphony orchestra was being organized, and some of the Germans were clearing land on Monte Sano to build their own homes. Despite all this, my father still brought home German sausage in his suitcase from business trips to Detroit. Once the suitcase was lost and arrived much later smelling pretty bad. From then on the sausage traveled in the briefcase and the business papers in the suitcase.

I returned to Huntsville in 1963 from North Carolina to marry George F. McCanless, Jr., of Morristown and Nashville, Tennessee, who had come to Huntsville as a soldier. He stayed on after having served two years in the US Army and worked in the Aeroballistics Laboratory of the Army and later NASA. As the proud possessor of a Master's degree in Library Science, I was hired as the first full-time professional librarian for the Huntsville campus of the University of Alabama, later to become The University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH). In those early days the library grew like Topsy and one year we had a bonanza book budget of \$250,000. By 1968 when I left the position of library director, we had had library quarters in portable buildings, in Dr. Robert's history classroom, we had shared an auditorium with Dr. Royce Boyer, first music professor at UAH, were in the Graduate Studies Building (now Madison Hall) and in the Research Institute. While at UAH, I designed the first phase of the permanent Louis Salmon Library and planned three additional connecting wings based on availability of funds. The library staff numbered 28 including student assistants when I left. I later returned to UAH part-time to establish a paperback bookstore, the UAH Book Nook, and I also did consulting work for the UAH Textbook Store.

In 1972 our daughter Katherine was born and the joys of being a wife, full-time mother and community volunteer were part of my new life-style. Eventually I was

invited to establish a traditional newspaper library for the Huntsville Times. More recently, as a library consultant for the Alabama Library Exchange, a consortium of libraries in North Alabama, I facilitated workshops for librarians trying to cope with technology in the 1990s, and am currently rejuvenating the Art Reference Library and the Educational Resource Center of the Huntsville Museum of Art. Throughout all this, my avocation has been traveling, sailing with my husband, and doing independent research on Peter Carl Fabergé, the Russian court jeweler to Nicholas and Alexandra. I have published the definitive, annotated bibliography on the subject entitled *Fabergé and His Works: An Annotated Bibliography of The First Century of His Art*. Together with my co-author, Will Lowes from Adelaide, Australia, we have an encyclopedia, *Fabergé Eggs: A Retrospective* ready for publication and recently we have made the *Lowes and McCannless Index to Fabergé at Auction* available on the Internet.

So the journey from lady roofer to librarian, from East Germany to Huntsville, has taken 47 years. In the Fall of 1999 when I traveled to St. Petersburg, Russia, the Mecca of Fabergé at the turn of the century, I was reminded once again how lucky I have been to be in Huntsville, Alabama, during an exciting period of growth. But above all, I came to a country where freedom and democracy allowed me to receive an education and have a life of choice.

Often I have wondered what life would have been like if my parents had chosen to stay in Trebbin. I attended a reunion of my eighth grade class in Trebbin in 1994 after the Berlin Wall had fallen, and met many of my old classmates. We had not seen each other in over 40 years. Those who had escaped to the West had had jobs, traveled and made good lives for themselves. Those who had stayed behind had struggled and several of them upon learning that I had come from Huntsville, Alabama, in AMERICA seemed to think we could not talk to each other. To them travel, knowing more than one language and knowing more about the world than just their immediate surroundings seemed beyond comprehension. There was a sadness in their lives, their faces and their voices. What had they missed?

Of my three special childhood girlfriends, Margot, whose family owned the grocery store in Trebbin, and her husband fled to West Berlin in 1961 the night the Berlin Wall went up. They washed tour buses and had a variety of miscellaneous jobs before they were able to open a picture framing and glass shop, overcoming great odds. They have been free to travel, but with many restrictions and endless waits at border checkpoints. Their children have visited with us, and the McCannless trio took the whole family on a 5,000 mile trip to see the United States. On this unique trip the first time we came to a state line, they whipped out their passports and travel papers, expecting border checkpoints. They had been required to do that for more than 40 years. Freedom and wide open spaces as we have it in America were a marvel to them. On this joint venture we also realized that for four decades they had been restricted to an area the size of Madison County, unless they went through rigorous application processes before they could leave to see family and friends. Margot's husband, Karl-Heinz reacted

to the endless interstate highways we traveled on like a bird out of a cage. He loved being behind the wheel of our van, so we restricted every driver to a two hour limit. To him it was such a thrill to be free!

Another friend, Eva, after completing the eighth grade in Trebbin was advised by a teacher to join the Young Pioneers, the young people's version of the communist party, in order to get an education as a physical education/biology teacher. In 1999 she retired from the faculty of the Trebbin Goethe Schule where we had all been students in 1953. Another childhood friend, Baerbel, whose parents owned the local nursery which was confiscated by the Communist regime, joined the Communist party and was educated as an engineer in the paper industry. She and her husband are retiring soon and are just now beginning to travel outside of Germany.

I have had the opportunity to return to my grandfather's house in Trebbin with my husband, our daughter, and my mother after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. My father had died in 1986. The house and property were taken away from my family after we fled, and were eventually given to a leading communist for a token fee just before the Berlin Wall came down. Litigation has neither brought the property nor restitution for it back to my family. It appears this chapter of my life was closed in 1953. Looking back, I can say unequivocally life in my adopted hometown of Huntsville, Alabama, has been very good to my family and me.

Finally, it is especially exciting to be involved in planning for the May 13, 2000, dedication of the Von Braun Research Hall of The University of Alabama in Huntsville as part of the year-long Von Braun Celebration of the Arts and Sciences. A plaque honoring the original 118 German members of the von Braun team who came with their families from Ft. Bliss, Texas, in 1949 to a sleepy Southern cotton town, and those who followed in later years like the Ludewigs, will mark a half-century of phenomenal growth. German -born and native-born Americans who call Huntsville their home have shared and continue to share these rewards.



Wernher von Braun addressing a celebratory crowd on the courthouse square in downtown Huntsville, surrounded by city and county dignitaries and his admiring public