Recollections:
The Middle Tennessee Voices of Their Times Series

Television Program with

Ortrun Gilbert

1986

Interviewer: Dr. Bob Bullen, Professor of Educational Leadership
Middle Tennessee State University

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ABSTRACT: Bob Bullen interviews Ortrun Gilbert, retired MTSU professor of German and music. Mrs. Gilbert shares her experiences of growing up in Nazi Germany, which included spending time in Hitler’s Youth, being forced to support the war effort as a member of the “SD,” and working as a medical aide in a concentration camp. She also recalls her education, her marriage and emigration to the United States, her teaching career, and her life in America.

PART 1

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<th>Time Count</th>
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<tr>
<td>0:00:00</td>
<td>Opening title screen</td>
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<tr>
<td>0:00:09</td>
<td>Dr. Bullen introduces himself and announces that this interview is sponsored by the MTSU 75th Anniversary Committee.</td>
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<tr>
<td>0:00:25</td>
<td>Bullen introduces his guest, retired MTSU professor of German and music Ortrun Gilbert, a native of Bremen, Germany.</td>
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<tr>
<td>0:01:01</td>
<td>Bullen reveals that Mrs. Gilbert grew up in Nazi Germany. He continues to give an overview of her early life and arrival in America.</td>
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A black-and-white photograph of a young Gilbert is displayed with the caption “Ortrun Engehausen.”

Bullen asks Gilbert if the traumatic events she experienced in the Second World War had longtime effects on her.

Bullen inquires about the area of Germany where Gilbert was raised. She briefly describes the geographical attributes of North Germany.

Gilbert recounts her experiences growing up with her “good, middle-class” family.

A black-and-white photograph is displayed with the caption “Frau Gilbert’s Family in the Back Yard.”

Bullen states that Gilbert was born in 1924.

A black and white photo of a baby is displayed, captioned “Ortrun Engehausen.”

Gilbert reveals that she was born a year after “the inflation” in Germany and that she recalls very little about the period.

Gilbert reports that she had a “good” childhood and continues to reminisce about cultural activities and the early presence of music in her life.

A B&W photo captioned “Ortrun Practicing Her Piano.”

Gilbert discusses celebrating German holidays.

Gilbert reveals that there were no “supermarkets” in Germany at that time and the shopping had to be done at individual specialty stores. She continues to recount everyday German life.

Gilbert describes traveling to nearby European countries with her father, an “explorer,” mountain-climber, and car owner.

Gilbert reveals that her mother’s first husband died in WWI and that her mother participated in an organization that tended to burial sites of these veterans.

Bullen asks about Gilbert’s father, a mechanical engineer who built U-Boats at one time. In 1927 he went to work maintaining machines for the Unilever firm in Bremen, which manufactured oil and margarine.

Gilbert again describes the geography of Bremen.

B&W photo, “Hiking Outside Bremen”
Gilbert illustrates the history of trade in Bremen.

Gilbert is once again asked to discuss her childhood.

Bullen asks Gilbert to contrast her education to the educational system of the United States. She explains the German educational system, which demanded physical standards as well as academic.

Black and white photo, “Ortrun in 2nd Grade”

Bullen asks about discipline in German schools. Gilbert admits to being mischievous and tells a story about playing pranks on a teacher whom the students secretly dubbed “150 percent Nazi.”

Gilbert details the German student exuberance regarding the first day of school due to the traditional gifting of candy at the end of the school day.

Gilbert is asked to expound upon her talent as a musician. She discusses her musical education, which was mainly in piano.

Gilbert recounts her experiences being sent to school in England (Northampton) during summer breaks starting at age 12.

Gilbert’s mother, born in 1887, was a schoolteacher in England and France.

Black and white photo, “Dorothea Engehausen”

Black and white photo, “Camping With British Friends” appears while Gilbert describes her family’s friendships with English people.

Gilbert cites Bremen’s close geographical location to England as the reason for England’s great influence on Bremen.

Bullen asks Gilbert what she remembers about Hitler’s rise to power in Germany. She replies that she was only nine years old in 1933, and then continues her account (which includes the age of her sister as nineteen in 1933.)

Gilbert reveals that her mother listened to BBC radio broadcasts, which was their only avenue of learning the truth beyond Hitler’s propaganda.

Gilbert admits that she took part in the Hitler Youth, aka German Youth, and describes the group’s activities.

Gilbert informs Bullen that Jews were not permitted to participate in the Hitler Youth group. Gilbert’s neighborhood friend was one-quarter Jewish and therefore not allowed to join, but Gilbert’s mother managed to obtain membership for her.
Black and white photo of two young girls dressed in winter attire holding hands. No caption.

Gilbert is asked to recall the hardships imposed on her Jewish friends. One anecdote describes her friend’s father being “taken away” in the night and returned four weeks later, only to be demoted from his job as Headmaster at a local school.

Gilbert lists her interests as a girl growing up in Germany, which was mostly playing music and dancing.

Bullen asks if Gilbert remembers any pro-Nazi rallies in Bremen. She answers to the contrary, but goes on to describe her first viewing of an American marching band.

Bullen asks if Gilbert met anyone famous. She replies that she saw Rudolph Hess, “Hitler’s deputy in those years,” a man whom she describes as charismatic and well-liked. She also saw Baldur von Schirach, who was the supreme leader of the Hitler Youth at the time.

Gilbert describes her mother as being a “critic” of the Hitler regime and her father as being a “Patriot.”

Gilbert reports that her family spent summers in Austria until the Nazi regime prohibited border crossings.

Black and white photo, “Austrian Dolomites.”

Black and white photo of a small country chapel, “Tirol.”

Bullen asks Gilbert if she was aware of a “military buildup” at age fifteen or sixteen. She replies that she did witness the bolstering and expansion of the harbor in Bremen, as well as bunkers being built, which were started well before the war.

Gilbert reminisces about a visit to Berlin in 1937 to audition for a music and theater school there.

Gilbert reveals details about her uncle, who was an inventor, chemist, and employee of the German government.

Bullen asks Gilbert about German television, which was viewable only in Berlin.

Gilbert gives her impressions about Hitler speaking on the radio.
Gilbert relates that German residents were required to practice “blackouts,” in which shades were drawn over windows so that no light could penetrate. They also suffered food rationing.

Bullen reveals that Gilbert’s father was “heavily involved” in civil defense. Gilbert goes on to describe his work for the government.

Black and white photo, “Dorothea & Wilhelm Engehausen.”

Gilbert recalls her view of Germany’s invasion of Poland in 1939.

Gilbert recounts the experiences of the young males in Germany, who were guided into military service after completing high school.

When the frequency of air raid sirens became unbearable, Gilbert’s parents evacuated the family from Bremen to the Black Forest area of Germany, near the Swiss and French borders.

Gilbert reveals that she was traumatized by the sounds of war, including the sound of air raid sirens, which are similar to modern-day fire trucks.

Gilbert reports that a few of her family’s friends were early casualties.

Gilbert’s mother refused to believe the propaganda, predicting that the war would not be a blitzkrieg but a long, drawn-out engagement.

Bullen inquires as to the state of medical care in pre-war Germany. Gilbert reports that Bismarck founded socialized healthcare, which was available to all citizens.

Gilbert discusses the manufacture of small home goods, the proceeds of the sale of which were redistributed to small artisan businesses.

Gilbert reviews German taxation, including a church tax.

Gilbert reveals that there were only two types of churches in Germany at that time, Catholic and Lutheran; other groups like Baptists existed but were very small in number and met only in private homes.

Sales tax was not levied.

Bullen reveals that Gilbert was also a talented athlete with a desire to compete in the Olympics. Unfortunately, there were no Olympics held in 1940 or 1944, when she was ready to try out for the team.

Gilbert admits that she was not the highest-ranked student in her high school class, and so she attended a musical school before university.
Gilbert recalls a constant stream of letter-writing and toffee-making to support her friends in the war effort, which resulted in unfinished homework.

Gilbert shares her experience of the first time she lost a friend to the war. She goes on to name more of her friends and family that fell on the battlefield.

Bullen asks Gilbert how German families were notified of deaths. Gilbert is unsure but supposes that the notification was hand-delivered by a messenger.

Gilbert reports that upon losing a loved one in the war, the German custom was to wear a black armband on the sleeve and it was mandatory to dress in black for the funeral.

Gilbert reveals that she and her husband lost their first child, an American, to leukemia. She asked everyone attending the funeral to wear “colorful” clothes because she “hated” the glumness of all-black clothing.

Gilbert reminisces about her high school graduation, which was lively and “beautiful” and featured a ball.

Gilbert recalls that the attitude of her graduating class in 1942 remained “hopeful.”

Bullen announces the conclusion of part one of the interview.

Credits roll

END OF PART 1

PART 2

Opening title screen

Dr. Bullen welcomes the viewer back to the interview with Ortrun Gilbert, a retired MTSU professor of German and music.

Bullen announces that this interview is sponsored by the MTSU 75th Anniversary Celebration Committee.

Bullen briefly reviews Mrs. Gilbert’s employment at MTSU and recaps the previous interview, which left off at her high school graduation in Germany in 1942.

Gilbert informs Bullen that women graduating from high school were required to join the government in the war effort. To avoid being drafted, she volunteered for the women’s corps, but she was removed when she developed rheumatic fever.
Upon returning to her hometown of Bremen, Germany, she obtained a teaching certificate in music.

Gilbert recalls that in the years 1942 – 1944, people were awakened by air raid sirens up to three times nightly and had to flee to a shelter or bunker.

Gilbert discusses the effort to keep the city running as normal, which entailed speedy repairs to damaged areas. Cultural events were also continued as much as possible.

Bullen confirms that Gilbert’s father was employed in the civil defense and sometimes had advance knowledge of attacks which he would share with his family and community.

A black-and-white photo is displayed with the caption “Engehausen Home in Bremen.”

Though Gilbert’s childhood home was never struck by enemy attacks, the family garage was nearly destroyed, and some of the neighborhood homes were decimated.

Black and white photo, “The Engehausen’s Back Yard.”

Gilbert continues to discuss the damage done to the homes of her neighbors and of the Bremen harbor.

Gilbert describes the sounds of the different bombs as they fell to earth.

Gilbert recalls the collective neighborhood effort to extinguish incendiary bombs with bags of sand.

Bullen asks Gilbert if she ever witnessed any heroic or cowardly acts during this time. Gilbert replies to the contrary, but goes on to report that the members of the community pitched in to help their neighbors and accomplished extraordinary tasks under pressure.

Bullen asks Gilbert if she feared death when she was younger. Gilbert pauses and then replies that she never really thought about it.

Gilbert reports that her parents were very stable, “like rocks” at this time, and that her mother embarked on long bicycle rides for necessities like milk and bread.

Gilbert informs Bullen that her Bremen neighborhood was most damaged by German planes unloading excess bombs after being hit.

Gilbert describes public bomb shelters.
Gilbert explains food rationing amongst families. Though meat and flour were in short supply, she does not recall going hungry, due in large part to the numerous vegetable gardens in Bremen.

Gilbert goes on to explain that other necessities like soap and toothpaste were in limited quantities. As a result of the shortages of cloth and rubber, entirely new materials were invented.

Gilbert recalls that any leftover food was collected by the garbage man and fed to the state pigs.

Gilbert reminisces about the exciting new items that were sent to her friends and neighbors from German soldiers stationed in France.

Bullen asks Gilbert what the German people were told regarding the failed Russian invasion. She recalls finding it odd that the German government demanded the citizens to donate their skis to the war effort. The citizens were also ordered to donate wool socks and coats.

Gilbert reports that the hard leather boots of the standard German uniform led directly to the German failure to invade snowbound Russia.

Bullen inquires of Gilbert as to her direct knowledge of the censorship of German soldiers’ correspondence. She reports that undesired sections were indeed “blacked out” or marked through by the government.

Gilbert remembers Nazi propaganda assuring citizens that the war effort was still going well. Rather than admitting heavy losses in Russia, the government reported that troops engaged in an “orderly retreat.”

Gilbert informs Bullen that even toward the end of the war, the youth of Germany remained hopeful for victory. They had been led to believe that a “wonder weapon” would ensure Germany’s ultimate success.

Gilbert reports that her mother risked the death penalty to listen to the BBC, the only means of finding out the truth. Gilbert also speaks of when the Gestapo arrived at their house to interrogate her mother about receiving letters from friends in England.

Gilbert recalls that the attacking flight squadrons came in waves, which was the reason that Germans had to flee to the bunkers up to four times a night at times.

In 1944, Gilbert went to the music university in Graz (in the southern part of Austria), a place that was not being bombed by the Allies but was occasionally terrorized by the Yugoslavs.
Gilbert reveals that songbooks at music college were edited. If a composer was Jewish, their name was removed from their music and replaced with “Anonymous.”

Students at the college of music in Graz were expected to travel to the front and entertain the troops. Gilbert was sent to Holland. Students played soldiers’ requests and performed short operas. Gilbert goes on to describe the effect of the music on the soldiers.

Gilbert recalls how low-flying airplanes intentionally struck trains, the traveling students’ main method of transportation.

Gilbert reports that her aunts were Kindergarten teachers.

Bullen prods Gilbert to discuss the events that occurred after her return to college in Graz. By then Goebbels had announced “total war” and everyone, including students, had to join the war effort. Men as young as 15 and as old as 70 were forced to join the army. Gilbert was assigned to the “SD” (Sicherheitsdienst) and sent back to Bremen.

The German people now knew that the war effort was a failure and they were surrounded from all sides, but they had to continue on as if everything was normal.

Gilbert enrolled as a nurse’s aide and worked at a field hospital in Bremen in early 1945. She goes on to recount her experiences dealing with mortally injured young men, lack of medical supplies, and the stress of the job.

Gilbert admits that she carried her accordion with her everywhere, which helped ease the tension for both her and others at the hospital.

Bullen reveals that the British were responsible for the attacks near Bremen. Gilbert reports that the British soldiers behaved in a “quite civil” manner toward the German people.

After Germany’s surrender, British soldiers commandeered Gilbert along with other nurses and medical staff and took them to the lesser-known Sandbostel concentration camp. She reports that the Jews detained there appeared to have been treated fairly well.

Gilbert recalls a British captain named Duncan who was stationed at Sandbostel during its liberation.

Gilbert’s mother searched for her daughter and, upon locating her, peddled her bicycle nearly 25 miles to Sandbostel. After spending four weeks at Sandbostel nursing once-captive Jews back to health, Gilbert returned to Bremen.
Bullen asks Gilbert if she and her girlfriends were fearful of being raped by British soldiers. Gilbert replies to the contrary, citing that her knowledge of jujitsu and the English language protected her.

Gilbert reveals that she was detained by Americans for four months, and promises to return to this topic later.

Gilbert describes the changes in her life after the end of the war and during the process of reconstruction.

Gilbert points out that the post-war years were tougher than the years during the war, with some resorting to cannibalism to survive.

Gilbert reports that she, “most of the time,” had a strong will to survive.

Bullen announces the end of part two of the interview with Gilbert.

End credits

PART 3

Opening title screen

Interviewer Bob Bullen welcomes the viewer to part three of an interview with retired MTSU professor of German and music Ortrun Gilbert.

Bullen recaps the two prior interviews, entailing Gilbert’s experiences living in pre- and post-World War II Germany.

Bullen begins the interview by revisiting Gilbert’s accounts of being stationed as a nurse at Sandbostel concentration camp during the camp’s liberation.

A black-and-white photograph is displayed with the caption “Rothenburg.”

Gilbert describes the prisoners at Sandbostel as being “political” prisoners of war of many different nationalities. She continues to describe the prisoners and their well-being.

Gilbert reveals that group burial services were held. Bullen asks if the graves were marked. Gilbert admitted that she did not know and that she had not been back to Sandbostel since she was released from duty.
Gilbert gives an account of being interrogated by “two very young Americans” about her activities before and during the war and subsequently being imprisoned for four days.

After four days of imprisonment, Gilbert was transferred to a detention center. She believes that the initial reason for her imprisonment was due to her brief stint in the SD. She later discovered that she was accused of being a Nazi spy during the war.

Bullen recaps the first two interviews and reminds the viewer that the purpose of the interviews is to give an account of Gilbert’s personal experiences, not political or social commentary.

Gilbert describes her fellow inmates, middle-aged women who served as SS guards during the war.

Gilbert recalls being escorted to physical therapy sessions, prison attire, and smuggling items in her underwear.

While Gilbert informs Bullen that she was still allowed to play piano in the detention camp, a black and white photo appears, captioned “Ortrun Practicing Her Piano.”

Gilbert reminisces about the ability to see, from a prison restroom window, her friends walking on the street, and how “beautiful” that was.

Gilbert reveals that she was released from detention due to being “badly burned” and then placed under house arrest. No charges were ever brought against her.

Following her release from house arrest, Gilbert confesses that she had grown to dislike Americans, but accepted a position as an English-German translator.

Gilbert recalls post-prison life in which food and essential supplies were scarce.

Gilbert describes meeting a trio of “nice” American men and bringing them home. One was the son of anthropologist Carlton Coone, another she referred to as only Ralph, and finally there was Turk, a “very talented” black painter.

Gilbert recalls meeting her future husband in the spring of 1947. She gave him piano lessons.

Gilbert details how she and her husband compromised over moving permanently to the United States.
Bullen asks how Gilbert felt about leaving Germany. Gilbert reveals that her new husband prepared her well for the cultural changes. Later, they moved to Birmingham, Alabama.

Gilbert reminisces about the thirteen days spent at sea traveling from Germany to New York. After arriving in New York, she grew homesick yet enjoyed her new surroundings.

Gilbert describes segregation and prejudice against her in Birmingham.

Gilbert reveals that after the couple lost their first child to leukemia, she returned to school at Birmingham-Southern College to become a piano teacher.

Gilbert recounts her journey to the middle Tennessee area as a judge at piano competitions. Linda Huffman, a piano teacher in Shelbyville, quit teaching piano and offered Gilbert her class.

Gilbert recounts that she was allowed to teach German to her fellow college students.

In 1952, Gilbert became a naturalized U.S. citizen. She goes on to describe the process of obtaining citizenship and the swearing-in ceremony held in Chattanooga.

A color photo appears, “Frau Engehausen Visiting The Gilberts.”

Gilbert recalls her first return to Germany in 1953.

Bullen asks how Gilbert’s German family felt about visiting the U.S. for the first time in 1951. She replies that they enjoyed their visit.

Gilbert reveals that, if asked now, she would rather live in America, citing that America offers a better quality of life.

Gilbert admits that she still carries guilt about the horrific Nazi crimes of which she had no knowledge. She urges the people of her generation to admit the existence of the Holocaust.

Bullen asks Gilbert if she thinks that the Holocaust could occur again. She replies that she does not know, and that “human nature is unpredictable.”

Bullen inquires of Gilbert if she anticipated having such freedom of speech in America.
Bullen asks Gilbert to reminisce about her employment at MTSU, which was MTSC when she began. She started out as a music department adjunct brought here by Margaret Wright.

Gilbert recalls providing German language tutoring to students such as Roy Clark, Herman Boyd, Albert Williams, and Roy Shelton.

Gilbert feels she is responsible for uniting German professors at MTSU and for working to build a German program statewide.

Bullen reveals that the Republic of West Germany recognized Gilbert’s efforts to overcome adversity and establish life in America.

Gilbert was also honored by the Daughters of the American Revolution for “being a good American.”

Gilbert details her relationship with students at MTSU and describes how she enjoyed showing them souvenirs of her youth in Germany.

Gilbert describes her efforts to encourage American students to learn more languages.

Gilbert confirms that she still feels emotional when giving accounts of her experiences.

Gilbert offers an epilogue for the people she previously mentioned.

Black and white photo, “Herr Engehausen Mountain Climbing.”

Black and white photo, no caption, presumably Gilbert’s father’s gravesite.

Black and white, “Frau Engehausen Visiting the Gilberts.”

Bullen asks Gilbert what can be done to prevent another world war. She feels that young people should travel more and strive to become familiar with the culture of other nations.

Black and white photo, “Wade and Ortrun Gilbert.”

Bullen thanks Gilbert for giving an interview and wishes her luck.

Conclusion, end credits.

END.