



# THE CHILDREN'S WAR

## GERMANY 1939-1949

For Immediate Release

## World War II Through The Eyes Of A Child

### The True Story of Peter Bodo Gawenda

DALLAS, TX—*The Children's War: Germany 1939-1949* (Brown Books) by Peter Bodo Gawenda takes a riveting look inside World War II from a child's perspective. Based on his own real-life experiences, Gawenda dramatically recreates his family's flight from the Russian conquerors in Oberglogau, Upper Silesia (now Poland) to Austria, a journey accomplished mostly by foot.

Gawenda's richly detailed, and compelling memoir about his childhood in Nazi Germany, fills a niche largely overlooked by other accounts of that dark period. *The Children's War* is an unforgettable chronicle of how ingenuity and courage enabled a family to survive in unthinkable circumstances.

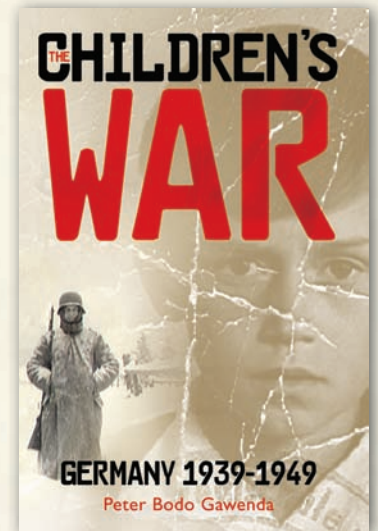
Watching with horror as the revenge-bent Red Army smashed Germany's collapsing defenses while separated from their father, a soldier who disappeared on the Russian Front, Gawenda recounts how his mother, Gertrude, gathered her young children during this distressing time and fled on a perilous wintertime journey. "My mother was a leader without fear. She always knew what to do no matter what situation we were in," said Gawenda.

"The most difficult part of telling the children's tale is to avoid introducing interpretations of the grown-ups, to remember what the child felt, how the child perceived, and how the child reacted," said Gawenda. "As children, we made it our mission to be cautious and suspicious. We also thought that we had to make it our task to help our families survive, to escape death and destruction—that's how it became our war, the Children's War."

An uplifting reading experience, *The Children's War* is a tribute to the adults who protected and nurtured youth during WWII, particularly the Gawenda parents and grandparents, and those who gave them refuge. The strength of those family ties carried them through the War and shaped Gawenda's childhood perspective. While the family journey lasted only eight months, its impact remains to this day.

Peter Bodo Gawenda resides in Brownsville, Texas where he is Dean of the College of Applied Technology and General Studies for The University of Texas and Texas Southmost College. For further information visit: [www.TheChildrensWarBook.com](http://www.TheChildrensWarBook.com).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Peter Bodo Gawenda

Peter Bodo Gawenda completed the German Air Force Academy and was commissioned a lieutenant in the German Air Force. After different assignments in the German Army and Air Force and graduation from Command and Staff school, his assignments in Germany included squadron commander, and staff planner in high-level German Headquarters and in NATO. In the United States, he held liaison positions in US Army Schools.



Peter advanced to the rank of lieutenant colonel and became a member of the German General Staff, spending an administrative assignment in the prestigious *Führungsakademie der Bundeswehr* (Leadership Academy for German and Foreign Military and Civilians earmarked for high leadership positions) in Hamburg. He spent time in France, Holland, and Denmark and left the German military in 1981 and immigrated to Texas with his family.

Peter completed his education with a master's in international relations and a doctorate in education. He currently resides in Brownsville, Texas, where he is Dean of the College of Applied Technology and General Studies for The University of Texas and Texas Southmost College. He has also served as Vice President of Business Affairs and Director of Institutional Research and Planning.



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Excerpt from Chapter 1

## Unmarked Graves

Oberglogau was home to my parents, Gertrud and Hubert Gawenda, and to Gertrud's parents, Ernst and Maria Müller, my grandparents.

My father was drafted into the *Wehrmacht* (German military) in 1939, when I was two years old. When he left for service, my mother stayed in Oberglogau and maintained a home for her young children until it became clear in January 1945 that Germany would lose the war and be overrun by Russians. Only then did she take us and flee the city.

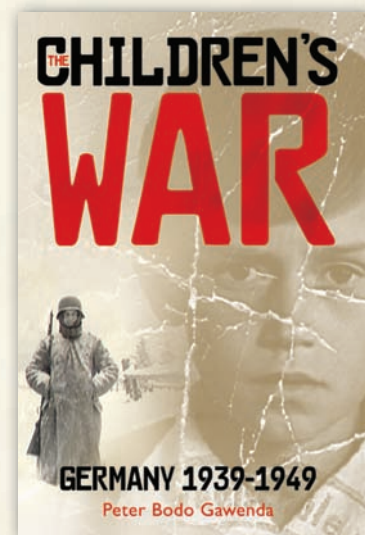
Mother was not the only person of influence in our lives during those six years. Her parents lived nearby, and they both played enormous roles, teaching, protecting, and shepherding us lovingly through a life without our own father. Through the eyes of Oma and Opa Müller and those of our father's parents, whom we visited in the city of Gleiwitz, we children gradually came to understand the constant changes in the world around us.

And what changes we saw. Air raids began and increased; food and other resources grew scarcer; our school was bombed, then closed. Relatives died or disappeared, and we lost our Jewish friends to men in German military uniforms.

On December 23, 1944, Opa Müller came to our house early in the morning. He asked Mother to get as much bread as possible from the baker next door and cut it in thick slices and take it to the basement without asking why. Mother and the neighbor filled several washbaskets with slices of mostly old bread and took them to the basement as Opa had asked them to do. He opened the basement windows toward the front of the house. There was a short concrete wall about half a meter tall in front of each window and a concrete cover on top. The covers for the basement windows had been built to prevent rubble from entering or covering the windows in case of a direct hit on the house by a bomb. We could easily climb out the window, sit behind the wall, and look out from the sides, observing what was happening on the street.

Opa told us, "There will be an air-raid warning forcing everyone into the shelters, but there will be no airplanes."

The sirens started howling at ten o'clock, and we all rushed into the basement. The neighbors joined us. Opa was with us at first but then went upstairs to stand on top of the house steps leading from the sidewalk into the house. Then we heard the shuffling of hundreds or thousands of feet and commands being yelled.



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Excerpt from Chapter 3

## Oberglogau in the War Years

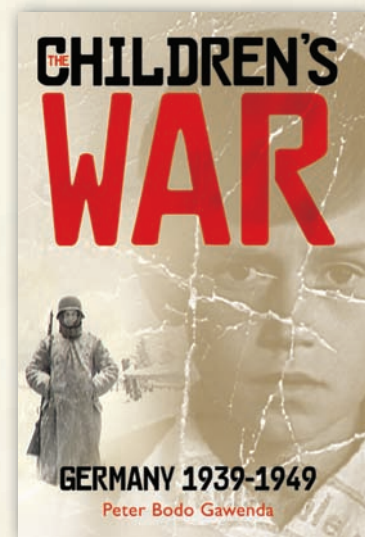
Because of the frequent air raids, Opa Müller began to teach us and let us practice how to stand still suddenly and not move when we heard the sound of an airplane, not to do anything when under cover, and just to sit down or drop on the ground and remain in one place when in the open. We would try to do that for maybe ten to fifteen minutes. “You must dissolve into air and become part of nature,” he always said. Being able to not move or to disappear came in very handy whenever an airplane attacked. We were able to remain immobile for several minutes and if necessary to crawl very slowly into a ditch or drainage pipe or the shadow of a bush or a fence. Opa taught us to observe continuously and scan our surroundings to recognize the best opportunities when we needed to hide.

We also learned that we eat when there is food, and then we don't eat or ask when there is no food. We were taught to put on our plates only what we could finish. We recognized that even with little or no food, we could survive if we put our mind to it. Oma always said, “Griping and complaining don't help and don't fill the stomach.” We also learned early how to share. Sharing became an automatic action. We never waited to be asked to share something, even though others might not have wanted to share with us.

Every day we were learning the most important lesson of all—to speak with care.

From the earliest times, we boys always wanted to know what was happening and who caused what. We experienced the bombings of the city and the surrounding areas, the railroad, the sugar factory, the prisoner-of-war camp, and some of the road bridges. Although most targets were missed, we still saw the big craters and saw some dogfights and the actions of the anti-aircraft guns. We also heard in church on Sundays the priest's announcements of who had died, and one time I remember Jürgen asking Mother very loudly, “Why are there constantly more dead soldiers?”

We also heard many remarks about Hitler and my Opa's membership in the Nazi Party. The grown-ups around us tried to reduce the potential of problems for themselves and their families by preventing many questions and avoiding answers. They taught all of us to watch our tongues and gave us a number of rules to follow.



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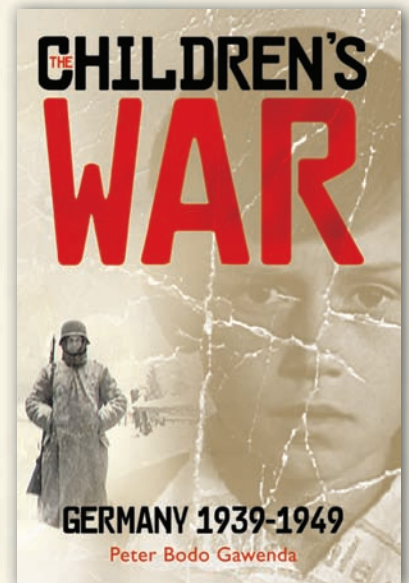
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## Q&A

With Peter Bodo Gawenda

### What inspired you to write *The Children's War*?

I had been writing about my experiences as a child during World War II since the late '40s. I consulted with my brothers, my sister and my mother on many of the details of the events. During Mother's visit to the United States in the '90s, we discussed our experiences in the presence of my children and my wife, Irma. That's when my family started asking me to collect my notes in a journal or book. I finished the first draft of the book before my wife's death in 2006.



### Who do you credit for instilling strong moral values and survival instincts in you?

My mother and all four of my grandparents.

### What impact did your mother have on you and your siblings?

My mother was considered by her children, relatives and friends as a leader without fear. She always knew what to do no matter what situation we were in.

### Where was your father?

Our father was drafted into the *Wehrmacht* (German military) in September 1937. He visited us during the War only four times, twice after the Poland Campaign and his escape from Stalingrad, and twice when he took sharpshooters to the Russian Front and passed through our hometown, Oberglogau. In January 1945 he was captured at Breslau and, although seriously injured, was marched to Siberia as a prisoner of war. We were notified that he had been killed and did not know that he was actually alive until right before his return in 1949. He stayed alive by exchanging his uniform jacket with that of a dead comrade.



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## **How did your mother manage under such duress with four children?**

Although Mother had received a back injury during a bombing attack on our refugee train and had a type of polio, she managed to hold on to her children during and after the War. She had a tough youth; she lost her own mother and had to take care of her two younger brothers, so she was probably better prepared than many of her fellow German women. Not once did we feel alone or abandoned, and I don't remember any time when we were not taken care of—even during days when there was no food.

## **What was the most profound turning point during your flight from Oberglogau, Upper Silesia (now Poland) to Austria?**

There were actually three events that hugely impacted us. The first was before Christmas 1944 when we had to witness the march and treatment of over 2000 concentration camp inmates through our town. The second was the receipt of the devastating notification that our father was missing in action and possibly dead. The third was when we were placed into an internment camp in Austria after the official end of the War.

## **Did you ever realize the magnitude of the danger your family was in or experience immense fear during your journey?**

Mother and our grandparents had prepared us for any eventualities, so we always felt very alert. We were made aware that we must realize and preempt dangers and were taught to cope with them when we could not avoid them. But growing up with the maxim of "Fear only Fear itself" must have shaped our attitude and helped keep us on guard. I do not remember our family ever panicking. Instead we did just the opposite—we always helped everyone to calm down, no matter what was happening.

## **Were you intimidated by the soldiers who occupied private residences?**

Not at all. We children would always befriend them very quickly.

## **Did the sound of bombs going off frighten you?**

No, they did not frighten us. We always heard the whistling sounds of the bombs when they were coming down and could somewhat prepare for the impact.





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**Was there ever a moment when you thought your family would not make it to safety?**

There were several times when we thought we would not make it. Mother had prepared us, but she had also instilled in us hope and the will never to give up. I think her faith had a lot to do with it.

**What thoughts went through your mind when prisoners of war and inmates of concentration camps were marched through your town?**

Before Father was captured, we were hoping that he would never have to share the same fate. Later we would think about our grandfather and uncles, hoping that they would be treated well. We always tried to do something to help these prisoners—at the very least we would smile at them.

**As children, how did you find ways to cope?**

We would always stick close to our mother and grandparents. We children would stay together and help each other. We would always try to find a positive side to everything, no matter how bad it might have been.

**Where are your siblings today?**

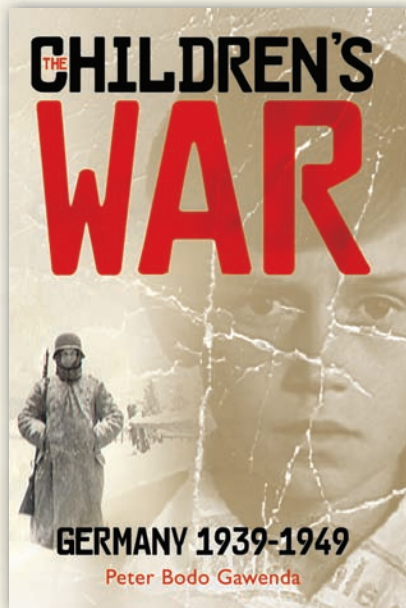
My oldest brother and my sister live in Germany; one of my brothers has died.

**What do you hope readers will gain by reading *The Children's War*?**

I hope the reader will get an impression of the impact war has on children and at the same time see how children can be prepared to cope with war. I hope that the reader recognizes how children perceive war.



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