

Renate ANKENBRAND

Irma Renate Hoffmann was born in Berlin in 1932. She arrived early in this world. Her pregnant mother had fallen off a ladder, resulting in the premature birth of a little girl, only 875 grams. Too fragile to even hold, she was not expected to live. For the first weeks of her life she was fed with an eye-dropper. Years later this “Miracle Baby” would serve 15 years as volunteer editor for Saskatchewan German Council’s quarterly Postillion magazine.



Renate (she has never used her given name Irma) was the daughter of Hans-Wilhelm Hoffmann and Kaete Kessler. Both the Hoffmann and Kessler families had moved to Berlin from Posen and Bromberg after World War I looking for better educational opportunities and better jobs. Hans-Wilhelm Hoffmann was born in Posen in 1902 and studied Mathematics at the University of Berlin. He became the head actuary¹ for a large life insurance company. Kaete Kessler was born in Bromberg in 1905, and studied to become a high school teacher. Her father, Oskar was a railroad inspector. Hans-Wilhelm Hoffmann and Kaete Kessler married in 1929 in Berlin.

Renate has vivid memories of her youth in Berlin and she says the family enjoyed a good middle-class lifestyle. She grew up in the happy company of two brothers, Horst Walter who was two years older and Hans Wilhelm, named after his father, who was two years younger. A third brother, Hans Wolfgang was born later. Although always small in stature, Renate grew into a lively and energetic little girl. She learned to ice-skate when she was four years old. She also had roller skates. She took swimming lessons at a beach on the River Spree with her older brother. She remembers a large public festival and parade under the Brandenburg Gate. She remembers seeing Zeppelins in the sky². She even remembers what she was wearing at the time!!

Renate says she had a wonderful childhood in Berlin, and she has very fond memories of family gatherings at the home of her Kessler grandparents. Her Grandfather Kessler had built a large home in 1936 in Eichwalde, a suburb of Berlin. Birthday parties were exciting family gatherings where they sang songs, participated in puppet shows, and learned new games. Nearly every Sunday, Renate’s family joined aunts and uncles and cousins at the Kessler residence to enjoy Oma’s baking and cooking. Oma Kessler loved to tell stories and made everybody laugh. Renate’s

¹ An actuary is a person who compiles and analyses statistics and uses them to calculate insurance risks and premiums. (Oxford dictionary)

² This may have been the large military parade in September 1937 when Italian Fascist leader Benito Mussolini paid a state visit to Berlin. Or it could have been the opening of the 1936 Olympic Games in August in Berlin. Another possibility is the 700th anniversary celebrations of the founding of Berlin in 1937. MW

Vater often took them to the movies. She was fascinated by Shirley Temple. In the summers, they traveled and took vacations where they went on hikes.



Renate started her school years in Berlin. But in 1940, her father Hans-Wilhelm accepted a transfer to Posen, Poland (today Poznan), 500 kilometers east of Berlin. This was a homecoming of sorts for Hans-Wilhelm because he had been born there.³ By 1940, after the start of World War II, Posen lay in German-occupied Poland. The family rented the main floor of a large home. Another family lived upstairs, and the home came with a furnace “caretaker” who lived full-time in the basement. The Hoffmann family employed a housemaid and a gardener. The maid’s brother had a small carpentry workshop in the basement. The Hoffmanns were the only Germans; the rest were Poles, whom the Hoffmanns always treated as equals. The maid always ate with the family; that is, until a Nazi officer informed them that this was not acceptable. In another

instance, Renate’s mother convinced the police to release the maid’s mother, wrongly accused of stealing. It was a real risk for a German to be seen as a Polish sympathizer. Renate’s mother taught in a High School in Posen. So many men had been drafted and teachers were in demand.

At the time, many families felt the children would be safer in the country, away from the city. So Renate attended the Oberschule or High School in Schokken (Skoki in Polish) which lay 30 kilometers north of Posen. A school had been converted to a combination school and boarding house where 50 girls lived with two teachers and a supervisor. Other teachers came to Schokken by train to teach different subjects. The girls were rarely allowed to leave, and so Kaete came to visit Renate in Schokken.

While the Hoffmanns lived in Posen, the rest of the family lived in Berlin. Wartime conditions made it very difficult to travel for personal visits. Hans-Wilhelm died in July, 1942 in Posen of tuberculosis. He was only 40 years old. Renate’s youngest brother Hans Wolfgang, was born in February 1943. Kaete, now a widow with four children, took on a job which allowed her to work from home, supervising the files of district health and welfare claimants. Nevertheless, a nursemaid was hired to look after the new baby. Despite the war-time conditions, life continued in what seemed like a normal fashion to a young girl. However as the Nazi war efforts began to collapse, the Russian army advanced into German-occupied territory.

In December 1944, Renate was able to spend Christmas in Posen with her mother and three brothers. She received skis as a present and tried them out on the riverbank. Renate and her brothers also went sledding, but soon she had to return to Schokken.

³ Prior to World War I, the city of Posen belonged to the Kingdom of Prussia. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles created the independent country of Poland. This may have been the motivation for the Hoffmann family to re-locate to Berlin.

On January 20, 1945, the students at Renate's school were told that the Russians had arrived, and that they had to flee. They were told to take only what they could carry. Renate chose to keep her skates, and left her doll behind. About 30 girls, aged 12 to 14, fled into the forest. The teachers and the cook accompanied them, but soon the head mistress abandoned them. They walked 20 kilometers in cold winter conditions (-25 degrees Celsius) and then rode on an open freight car by rail to Stargard in north-western Poland, near Stettin (Szczecin). The chunks of bread they left with were soon frozen hard as rock. Renate was now separated from her family. Her mother and brothers had also to flee from Posen and Renate did not know where they were. She sent regular postcards to her Kessler grandparents in Berlin, so that the family knew where she was. She would later learn too that her Grandmother Hoffmann had died while fleeing to the west that same month.

In Stargard, Renate was billeted with a doctor's family which took her in to look after a four-year old child. Renate was delighted to go sledding nearby with her new little friend. Next the group of young school girls was supposed to take the train to Dresden. However the train was already overcrowded with wounded soldiers, and they were not allowed to board, a stroke of good luck which meant they missed the brutal Allied bombing of Dresden in February 1945. They eventually ended up at Usedom, a resort area on the Baltic Sea now filled with displaced children from the east.

Meanwhile, Renate's mother and brothers (one a two-year old) fled Posen for "the West" on a small wagon pulled by a pony. Thousands were doing the same. The few trains running (because there was a shortage of coal) had been commandeered by the army. At one point, the baby was placed in the covered wagon of another family to protect him from the -20 degree weather. The trek of wagons got split up at one point, and Kaete lost track of the baby. She had no choice but to continue to Eichwalde (Berlin) where her parents lived. As soon as they arrived, Kaete began to back-track, asking people about a lost child, and luckily found young Hansi with an elderly couple. It took two weeks to find him. Back at her parents' home, Kaete learned from Renate's postcards that she was in Usedom, about 200 kilometers to the north. Kaete immediately set out to bring her only daughter back to Berlin. This took several days because of the intermittent and un-predictable train service.

For a short time, Renate and her mother and brothers lived with Opa and Oma Kessler in the big house in Eichwalde, along with Tante Irma, Kaete's sister. There were continual sirens and air raids which led to Kaete's decision to move her family to the small city of Rathenow, about 85 kilometers west of Berlin. Rathenow was full of people like them who had fled from Posen. They found an apartment in which to live, and started to attend school again, but attendance was sporadic. They continued to hear bombing in all directions, and by April 1945, it was reported that Russians tanks had surrounded the city. Renate's older brother, Horst Walter ("Hoffi" to his family) was picked up by Army recruiters and taken to fight against the Russians. Hoffi was later captured and held in an American POW camp.

Fleeing Rathenow along with hundreds of others, Renate remembers spending a night with her family in an underground earthen bunker formerly used by the military. Hansi was sick with measles. The next morning they realized they had spent the night in the middle of a battle zone as the combatants fought street by street. The Hoffmanns continued westwards on a road jammed with retreating German trucks and cars filled with German soldiers. When airplanes strafed the road, they jumped into the ditches or ran into the adjacent forest. One time they caught a ride with a Red Cross truck. The entire caravan stopped for the night in an abandoned farmyard. The soldiers shared what food they could with the refugees. By morning, the retreating German soldiers had disappeared. In Renate's words, "it is hard to imagine all the commotion."

Abandoned houses were most often used for shelter. On one particular night, Kaete and her three children hid quietly in an attic after a group of Russian soldiers occupied the main floor. She gave the baby a sleeping pill so the baby could not betray their presence. In the morning they crept downstairs and slipped out of the house, while the drunken soldiers slept. Continuing west, they were often cold and wet, and always hungry. But the biggest fear was to be overtaken by Russian soldiers.

With the German army now in full retreat, the Russian soldiers relaxed, and began harassing the refugees for any alcohol, watches or valuables they could find. At night they would come with flashlights and take away women and girls. Their screams carried through the still night air, and Renate and her two small brothers cried in fright.

For two weeks they continued through forested areas until they encountered American tanks. They were totally exhausted, but because this was still contested territory, they had to move on. A sympathetic local farmer took them to Lüblow in Mecklenburg, where a blacksmith's family took them in. It was May of 1945. Kaete soon began teaching in the local school, and because she understood English, she began giving local farmers and shopkeepers English lessons, so they could capitalize on the presence of the American soldiers. Later they lived with a large family which had a huge garden and some fields with cows, sheep, chickens and beehives. The children picked blueberries and mushrooms. Every day this family prepared meals for 30-40 refugees who were passing through, and everyone available helped out. This included Renate. The Hoffmann family stayed in Lüblow until the end of 1946.

Her mother Kaete was desperate to learn about her parents in Eichwalde. In the spring of 1945 soon after their arrival in Lüblow, she left the children behind and managed to travel to Berlin. Upon arriving she learned that her father, Oskar Kessler had died the previous month. He was 70 years old. He had died of starvation, and Kaete's mother and sister were emaciated, "just skin and bones". Kaete took her mother and sister back to Lüblow for a few months.

The war ended in May of 1945. But the consequences would linger for years. For the rest of 1945 there was no mail service, and almost no train passenger service. Hunger soon spread throughout the cities as there were limited ways to get food into the cities. Renate's older

brother Hoffi was released from the prisoner of war camp and rejoined the family while they were in Lüblow at Christmas time of 1945. The family was together again.

Kaete began teaching again, and the four children attended a regular school again. The town pond froze over and they had fun sliding on the ice, and skating when they could borrow skates. (Renate's precious skates had been left behind at the doctor's house while on the trek.) Hoffi was confirmed in the spring and it was a big deal for the family. Oma and Tante Irma came from Berlin. During the summer, Renate and the others had to herd cows and sheep. They separated the cream from the milk with a centrifuge, made butter, picked blueberries and mushrooms. They had fun trying to ride the sheep. On Saturday evenings someone would show up with an accordion and they learned to dance waltzes and foxtrots in the kitchen.

In the fall of 1946, the family learned that the region which included the village of Lüblow had been turned over to the Russian sector, in exchange for concessions Russia made in the division of Berlin into four occupation zones. Because Kaete was worried about her mother in Eichwalde, she looked for work closer to Berlin and found a principal position in Wustrau, the town where she had her very first teaching position in the 1920s. It was 75 kilometers northwest of Berlin. They rented a room in the "Schloss", which had been converted to a school.⁴ Renate remembers that the school in Wustrau was very cold, with frost on the walls. There was no coal for heat, and no wood either, because every stick of wood had already been salvaged. The forest floors were raked clean. She remembers that one student had thick army-issue felt boots, and they each took turns wearing them in the classroom, in order to warm up their feet.

The war was over, but the post-war conditions were hard. Few had proper shoes or winter clothing. There were no school books. The electricity was rationed for civilian use to a few hours per day. The worst part was the lack of food. Food rations were not sufficient and families traded whatever they had with farmers for food. Renate remembers buns being delivered to the school for the students. Kaete brought her ailing mother to live with them in Wustrau in November of 1946. Oma Kessler was already quite ill, and she died in Wustrau at Christmas time of 1946 (December 23.)

In the spring of 1947 the Hoffmann family moved into a separate school house. Some of the Kessler furniture was brought from Eichwalde, and it began to feel like a home. But they were still always hungry. They thought constantly about food. In addition here was the stress and turmoil as the people adjusted to the new socialist economy. Small farmers received parcels of land which had been expropriated from the larger land-owners. But there was no money to buy tools, equipment or seed. Each teacher received two acres of land from the government program of expropriating the land of large landowners. They planted potatoes and sugar beets. Renate's mother purchased a goat for milk, and her brother had to lead the goat to a park in order to forage.

⁴ This was Zietenschloss. <https://www.ruppiner-seenland.de/en/poi/ruppiner-seenland/palaces-and-parks/zietenschloss-wustrau-castle/>

Renate's confirmation was March 31, 1947. Her mandatory black dress was fashioned from one of her Oma's slips. She borrowed some shoes for the day. Most of her confirmation gifts consisted of food – potatoes, vegetables, canned fruit, etc.

Wustrau sits on a beautiful lake where Renate and her friends went swimming during their free time. The potato crop on their land was plentiful enough that they traded potatoes for clothing, shoes and household goods. The Hoffmann piano was brought from Berlin and Renate and her younger brother received piano lessons in their home.

Renate graduated from the eighth grade, and in order to continue her education she had to go to Neuruppin, a small city 11 km from Wustrau. She attended an Internat or boarding school for girls. Renate has fond memories of the evenings spent dancing, organizing costume parties and going to the movies. But life was still far from normal. She remembers they had no shoes, and nothing to wear as old clothes wore out or were outgrown. The family had lost everything. Military clothing was salvaged because it was usually of good quality, so it was taken apart and re-purposed. Renate auditioned for the school choir, and on one memorable occasion, they joined two other choirs to perform in Haydn's opereta "Die Schöpfung".⁵ Renate's mother came from Wustrau for the performance and the hall was packed.

But this was East Germany, and by the time Renate was ready to begin Grade Eleven, it was a requirement to join the Young Pioneers, the communist youth group. Plus, the school no longer offered English language courses.

Renate decided to go back to Berlin, in order to attend a school in the western zone. Travel back and forth between the zones was not a problem at that time. The "Wall" did not yet exist. She found a school in Mariendorf, a district of Berlin which lay in the American zone. She lived with Tante Irma in the Kessler home and traveled back and forth each day. The 8:00 am start of the school day meant she had to leave by 6:00 in the morning. She chose the mathematics and science courses and two languages, English and Russian. In addition, she took private lessons to improve her English, and private typing lessons from the same tutor. It was a heavy work load. When it came time for her oral exam to complete her Abitur (similar to graduation from High School), a kind principal gave Renate some chocolate for extra energy.

Renate graduated in 1951 and hoped to attend a university, but war veterans were given first priority. So she began to apply for jobs. She could not apply for jobs in the eastern or Russian sector because anyone educated in "the West" was considered a traitor, or a spy. Renate landed a job in the Patents Office in West Berlin. Her private typing lessons proved to be a benefit. Her job was to verify that new patent applications were not duplicating something that was already patented. She enjoyed the job, and the people in the office were very good to her. But as always, politics eventually interfered. Each day she had to cross from the east to west and return. People

⁵ "Die Schöpfung" is an oratoria written in 1797 by Joseph Haydn and is considered to be one of his masterpieces. The oratorio depicts and celebrates the creation of world as narrated in the Book of Genesis. Wikipedia

in the West did not like someone from the east coming and taking a job away from a West Berliner. She applied for refugee status in West Germany.

Her application was accepted, and she was next flown to Uelzen, 250 km west of Berlin and south of Hamburg. Uelzen was a youth camp and recruitment center for eastern refugees looking for work. Renate was assigned to a resort area in the Harz Mountains of Lower Saxony– Clausthal-Zellerfeld. The authorities knew that Renate really wanted to live in a city where she could attend university, but until she was 21 years old, as a refugee, she had no choice in the matter. The refugees were used as cheap labor in the reconstruction of the German economy.

Renate worked in a hotel and restaurant in the resort area of Clausthal-Zellerfeld. Her education combined with an energetic work ethic quickly led from the role of kitchen maid to a supervisory position in the dining room. In the fall of 1952, she received permission to go to Köln (Cologne) and a train ticket to get there. She wanted to study Physics at the University of Köln but that department was already over-subscribed with young men, and accommodations in the city were hard to find. Besides, she had no savings to live on. But there were lots of jobs available everywhere.



Renate worked for one year at a bakery in Mülheim, a district of Köln. She lived in a boarding house where she shared a room with three other young women. Here Renate met Inge Prasse and they became lifelong friends. She never did get to attend the university because she next landed a great job at the Bonner Lebensversicherung (Bonn Life Insurance Company.) Renate's mother still had connections with her father's life insurance company in Berlin. When Kaete Hoffmann let it be known that Renate was in Köln, an interview was requested and she began work in 1953. Renate, like her father, had a talent for numbers and mathematics; she quickly learned the accounting skills required of her to work with regulations and calculations of premiums and back pay for cancelled policies. It was a good job, and Renate worked here until she immigrated to Saskatchewan in 1957. Renate recalls that she and her friend worked hard, but they also had a lot of fun.

In 1953, her mother Kaete also applied for refugee status in Western Germany. She was sent to Essen. Like all refugees making the move from east to west, they had to leave everything behind and start over. Renate's younger brothers finished their schooling in the West. Essen was only 75 kilometers north of Köln. The oldest brother Hoffi was now married and living in Recklinghausen, another 40 km north of Essen. The family was together again in West Germany.

Sometime in 1955 Renate and her good friend Inge spotted an advertisement from young German men in Canada looking for "pen-pals". Looking for some innocent fun, they each wrote their letters, and Renate was soon corresponding with Adolf Kaul. Adolf had emigrated two years earlier. His family had had a large farm in East Germany, and of course, that was expropriated

by the state. Sixteen years old, Adolf had found himself in a POW camp at war's end. Upon release, he fled to Switzerland. He remained there until 1954, when he left for Canada and found work in Saskatchewan.

In 1956 he traveled to Europe to meet Renate. He traveled by ship to Naples, and Renate agreed to meet him there. It was her first trip outside of Germany. After spending some time together in Germany, they decided to get married. Renate made her own wedding dress and the wedding took place in January 1957 in Haltern am See, about 40 km north of Essen. They spent a one-week honeymoon in Sauerland, a tourist region in North Rhine-Westphalia. Adolf had come back to Germany thinking he might stay. But after visiting his mother, brother and other relatives in East Germany, he decided to return to Saskatchewan. Renate continued working at her job in Köln while she applied to emigrate with her husband as her sponsor. Renate's mother and her brothers drove her to Dusseldorf, where she boarded a flight to Amsterdam. From there, she flew to Goose Bay, Labrador (a weather diversion), then to Montreal, Winnipeg and finally to Saskatoon. She arrived on April 25, 1957. Her first impressions of Saskatoon were that it was a small city full of multi-colored houses, so unlike Germany. Clarence Avenue was the main street out of town to the south. Renate, the city girl, soon found herself living on a farm near Dundurn, Saskatchewan, where Adolf worked as a farm superintendent for the large Thodes Farm operation. They lived upstairs in a farm house which came with the job, but they shared it with another young couple with two small children, and one common bathroom. Renate started a small garden, and soon began preparing for the arrival of their first child. Georg was born August 29, 1957 in Saskatoon.



Left: Renate and Georg 1958, Dundurn farm. Right: Renate with George and Karin, Aylesbury ranch 1959.

Renate, Adolf and Georg left the farm in 1958 when Adolf found new work on a large ranch 16 miles east of Aylesbury, in the beautiful Qu'Appelle

Valley. Here they lived in a new house, and the closest neighbor was six miles away. Renate has fond memories of her two years in "Paradise". It was lonely, but another baby, Karin, arrived in September 1958. They had a milk cow, which Renate tried to learn to milk, and two pigs (one for the boss, and one for themselves). That same summer, Renate's good friend Inge from the boarding house in Köln came to Saskatchewan and married Adolf's friend. They later moved to Kitimat, BC. Adolf hunted deer in the valley, and trapped beavers in the winter time. Renate helped Adolf with skinning the carcasses and stretching the pelts onto frames made of bent

willow branches. The pelts brought in much-needed extra income. Adolf began to study diesel mechanics via a correspondence course. Renate helped him with his studies and with sending in the course assignments. He had to go to Edmonton for the final exams, leaving Renate at home alone with two small children and livestock to look after.

In 1960 Adolf found a job at the John Deere dealership in Radisson, Saskatchewan. His new qualifications as a diesel mechanic allowed him to earn more money than could be made on the farm or ranch. So the family moved to Radisson, a small town of 700 people. Another child Barbara, arrived in July 1960. Renate finally felt like she was back in civilization! There were shops and churches as well as neighbours and friends to interact with.

In the fall of 1961, Renate's mother sent her money and tickets for her first return trip to Germany. She took a train to Montreal and a ship to Amsterdam. She traveled with three young children, diapers and a potty! While in Germany, Georg was sick with pneumonia, Renate worked a few months in Germany to earn some money. She returned in March of 1962. Upon landing in Halifax, George required more emergency medical treatment. Renate recalls all this very matter-of-factly, as if there was no stress involved! Compared to her war-time experiences, this was very manageable.

In 1963, the John Deere dealership burned, and the owner decided not to rebuild. Adolf applied for the dealership, and with borrowed money, Adolf and Renate started their own business in a rented building – Kaul's Farm Service Ltd. Renate of course, did all of the accounting, as well as running the parts counter and anything else necessary to grow the business. A fourth child, Thomas was born in Radisson in 1964. In 1971 Adolf and Renate built a new shop to house their John Deere dealership. Five non-family employees now worked for the flourishing business. Financial success allowed outside investments in land, cattle, and a house in Sutherland (Saskatoon) in anticipation of the children attending university. Adolf and Renate became very involved in the Radisson community, through their church, the school, town council, the arena, the church choir, etc. Renate served for a while as a teacher's aide and the secretary at the High School. In Radisson the children learned English in school, and slowly it replaced German in the home. From Radisson, Renate fondly recalls camping/fishing trips to Dore Lake and Smoothstone Lake in Saskatchewan's northern parkland region.

And then it all suddenly changed. The marriage ended in 1976. Renate moved to the house in Saskatoon, and another chapter in her resilient life began. She found work in the accounting department of Cosmopolitan Industries⁶, and she began studying for certification as a Registered Industrial Accountant (RIA). In 1980 she was hired by Revenue Canada and worked there until 1988 when she retired early in order to have more free time to travel with her second husband, Fred Ankenbrand, a widower. They married in January 1988 in Saskatoon. Some of their travel destinations included St. Lucia in the Caribbean (several times) , Mexico, Florida, the Rocky

⁶ <https://www.cosmoindustries.com/>

Mountains as well as numerous trips to Europe visiting Germany of course, but also Switzerland, Italy, and Austria.

In 1981, Tillie Haunsberger invited Renate to join the Saskatoon German Club (German Canadian Club Concordia of Saskatoon). She was happy for the opportunities to speak German again. Through the German Club, she joined the choir. Thus began Renate's long association with the Saskatoon Volksliederchor Concordia, serving many years as its president. In this role, supported by her accounting background, she became the main event organizer for the choir. This is how she met Fred, who sang in the choir, and was also a member of the Concordia Brass Band. Renate was an enthusiastic announcer for years at FolkFest; she remembers many hoarse throats! She sang in the Choir for 34 years (1982-2016), at Maifest celebrations, Mutterstag events, Weihnachtsfeste, etc. There were usually about 40 members in the Choir and they traveled to many Sangerfeste (choir festivals) around western Canada.

Renate's work with the choir and with the German Club led to further involvement with Saskatchewan German Council. She took on the responsibility for the publication of its quarterly magazine, the Postillion, serving as volunteer editor for fifteen years, from 1990 to 2005.

Renate was the main local organizer for the 1996 Sangerfest in Saskatoon. A total of twelve choirs came, including Calgary (3), Edmonton (2) and Medicine Hat, as well as from Winnipeg and Regina, involving 430 singers. The event was held in the former Centennial Auditorium in downtown Saskatoon (now called TCU Place). It was a huge job coordinating hotel rooms, as well as transportation and catering services, not to mention arranging a three-day program.

Renate's daughter Karin, and Karin's husband, both took German language classes at Leslie Angele's German Language School. At the same time, their daughters danced with the Concordia Junior Alpen Tanzer. Renate's youngest son studied German in his High school curriculum at Evan Hardy Collegiate. As her home gradually emptied out, she was determined not to be depressed or lonely. One of her mottos: "Life does not come to you; you have to go out and find it." Today, in 2024, Renate's four children are married and living their own lives. Together they have given Renate seven grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. None live in Saskatoon.

Especially during her early years in Canada, Renate missed her mother in Essen and wrote to her every week. While the family still resided in Radisson, Kaete came twice to Saskatchewan to visit them. Sadly she died in Essen in April 1973, the result of a fall. By the time Renate got back "home" her mother was in a coma and never regained consciousness. Kaete had never-remarried. Renate's next younger brother, Hans Wilhelm had died in a military airplane crash in Germany in 1958. Renate is now the only one of the four Hoffmann children alive. The oldest and the youngest brothers also died in Germany, Horst Walter in 1997 and Hans Wolfgang in 2012. Over the years, Renate made several trips back to Germany, the last one in 2017. The Kessler home still stands in Eichwalde, but it is no longer owned by family. When last seen, family members were pleased to see that the house was in excellent condition.



In 1982 Renate purchased a cottage in Pike Lake Provincial Park, and this quickly became a gathering place for her family, and for her German Club “family” as well. She really enjoyed her summers at the cottage, and hosted many picnics for the Choir and the Brass Band, as well as for friends from the German Club. On one memorable occasion, 54 people squeezed onto the porch for a photo. Fred Ankenbrand died in October 1997, and life for Renate changed again.

Renate did not give up the cabin until 2023. She had owned it for 41 happy years.

In 2001 Renate traveled to Japan with her daughters Karin and Barbara. They went to visit Karin’s daughter Angela who was teaching English there. It was a fascinating two-week cultural experience.



Photo: Renate and her 4 children.

Renate has written her own memoirs, which I have used to supplement the notes I made during our two interviews. Her daughter Karin was present during both. When I visited Renate, she had just returned home from eight weeks spent in a Saskatoon hospital recovering from injuries incurred when a vehicle struck her while walking in a parking lot. But Renate

has never been one to feel sorry for herself. From her mother, she learned to never give up, to keep moving, and to always do the best one can under the circumstances. I could sense the same resilience, quiet resourcefulness, courage and positive attitude inherited from her mother. It is hard to put into words the stresses which Kaete must have endured during and after the war years.

When asked what differences she observed in Germany on her return trips, she answered that it was hard to notice differences because her mind immediately went back to her wonderful childhood. She visited the old Kessler home in Eichwalde and all the memories of happy family times overrode any impressions she might have made about post-war Germany. And when she visited Rathenow and Lüblow years later, her mind focused on the fun she had with her brothers and with friends. She has never regretted coming to Saskatchewan, where people are very friendly and out-going. Canada has been a country offering good jobs and stability to countless

immigrants. Canada is a beautiful country, she says, with numerous opportunities to enjoy and appreciate nature. Renate has always enjoying traveling in Saskatchewan and Canada.

Renate did note that life in Germany is generally more formal. First names are rarely used outside of family, and sometimes even within a family if a member is a doctor or a professor. Education is stressed more in Germany. And, she feels, people are also more conscious of current fashions.

Through frequent letters and many trips back to Germany, Renate has maintained close family ties with extended family and friends in Germany. In the early years, she always took at least one of her children along. Her children have maintained the family's ties to Germany.

Renate speaks very easily about her youth and her wartime experiences. Her memory is sharp and quick. She has a keen sense of history, and despite all that she has endured, she talks positively about life. But there was a moment when she quietly said, "You know, all families lost members during the war." It was her way of saying that the soldiers weren't the only ones who bore the brunt of the war.

This "miracle" baby has endured a lot in her life. How many times did she move (ie. change addresses) over the course of her lifetime? She has had an amazing and inspiring life. Will Saskatoon be her last stop? Who knows? Renate will continue to respond and adapt to life's circumstances just like she has always done. Through her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, her indomitable resilience will live on.

Renate, thank you for sharing your story.

Photo Gallery:



Left: The Hoffmann home on Baumschulenweg, Berlin.
Right: Renate and younger brother Hans Wilhelm, about 1942.



Left: Renate and Adolf's wedding in Germany, 1957.



Right: Opening of new shop, Kaul's Farm Service Ltd., Radisson, 1971.



Renate, Saskatoon, 2022