

Memories from my childhood in Geesthacht-Dueneberg

A few days ago I have found a Blog and a Geesthacht Web Site. After having looked at the beautiful photos, and have read about improved living conditions in Geesthacht-Dueneberg, I was very pleased and had the idea of writing about my childhood memories in Dueneberg. Dueneberg is a separate part of Geesthacht.

My parents had lived until their wedding in Berlin until 1921, where father had studied. After his studies they moved to Saarau/Schlesien. There, father has worked as a Machine Designer for IG Farben. In 1929 a better paid job was offered him, by the same factory, in Dueneberg, which he gladly accepted. At the time linoleum and other plastic material was manufactured by IG Farben.



With my grandparents in Bockswiese- Hahnenklee/Harz 1929

I had been taken to my grandparents in the Harz Mountains during the move. In February I joined my parents too in Dueneberg. It was a big surprise for me to live in a large house. The house was adjacent to a forest, and a country lane led along our house. The house had 8 rooms, a very large cellar, and an equal large attic. We had now also central heating, and from the factory every employee received 80 hundred weight of coke every year.



Our house in Dueneberg, Heuweg 31

The house was owned by the factory. There were three of the same type on the Heuweg and three others were further away by a moor.

The Heuweg (The Hay way)

The Heuweg was named because the Farmer, who had his farm opposite the moor, drove his wagon and horses every year back and forward to collect the mowed grass from the meadow by the river Elbe to be stored in his barn.

At springtime his herd of sheep were driven along the lane by a shepherd. Newborn lambs had then already joined the herd. The sheep remained on the meadow for a while.

Because the Heuweg had not been asphalted yet, when a vehicle went past, it had sent red clouds of dust quite high up. On the other side all across the lane stood lime trees. Into one of them, my school friend Klaus, had cut our initials. They are now very high up in the tree, so that I could not find them on my last visit in 1988 to Dueneberg. The trees still looked very healthy and had grown a lot.

To go shopping, it took half an hour through the woods to get to the Dueneberg shops, but delivery came daily to us. Freshly baked rolls were delivered at six in the morning by a baker boy. Everyone who wanted rolls, fastened every night a little cloth bag on the gate for the rolls to be put in, and the boy didn't need to ring the bell. He came by bike and the rolls had been put into a basket on his bike.

Daily came also a girl, driving a milk van from the dairy shop "Katzmirzack." The milk was given out by a measuring jug. We had to boil the milk, because the milk was in those days not sterilised. The butcher came to take orders for the weekend. Also the bread man came with horse and closed-up cart. He came originally from East-Prussia. I liked to listen to his accent when he spoke. And then also came the Greengrocer and the fish man. The fish man had his shop in the vicinity of the girls' school in Geesthacht. Anni von Dein, our daily help, lived also in this street with her parents. Her father made wickerwork baskets. This was his profession. Next to the von Deins' was also a very small Delicatessen Shop.

(It was sad that Anni had later a fatal car accident)

Most houses in Dueneberg had been built by the IG Farben. I have heard, at the time that all those very well built brick houses were built just after WWI. The occupants have modernised the interior now.

I was really very surprised that at the time the factory engaged Polish workers, because of the great unemployment.



The Mittel Strasse and workers houses

There were a lot of Polish children in my class, with the names of: Wirwinski, Zaplinski, Novak, Schmelevski und Gulinski. The Gulinskis had a small fruit and vegetable shop on the corner of the Dueneberger Strasse and the Geesthachter Strasse. From there, across the road was the dairy "Katzmirzack." Their daughter Toni, was also in our school, but she was older and in another class. When she left school she took the milk round on, but later managed the dairy.

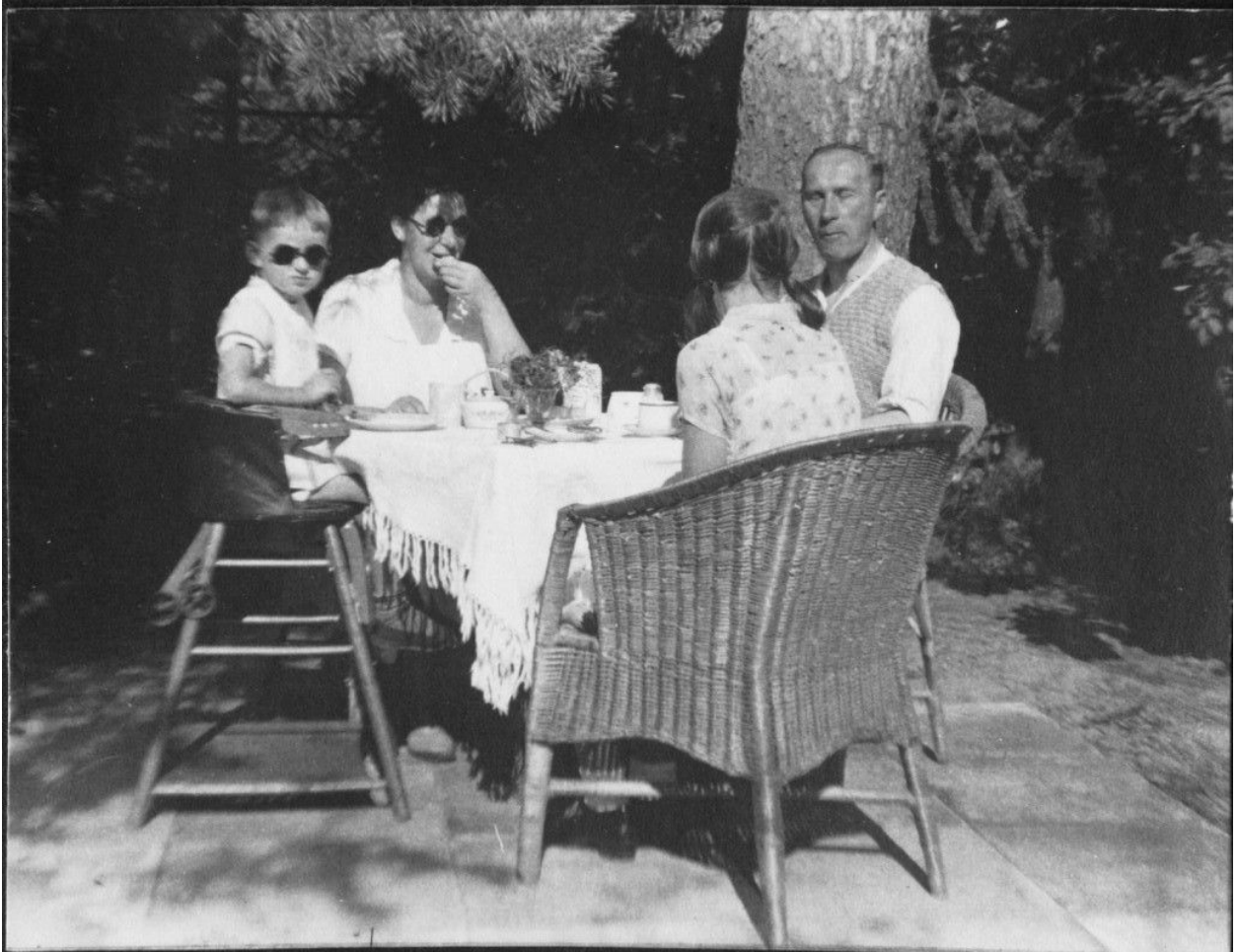
With our house came a large garden. Father grew all sorts of vegetable, and mother enjoyed growing many sorts of flowers. We had always bunches of flowers in every room. In the garden grew many apple trees, which lasted us all through the winter. We had special trays for them in one of the cellar rooms. There were also a plum tree, several gooseberry- and redcurrant bushes. But the best was the huge cherry tree with black and juicy cherries, which I picked climbing up the tree.



Aunt Lieschen, uncle Erwin, Gisela, Mother and Dieter

(Aunt Lieschen and uncle Erwin came to pay us a visit, from Berlin, in a small rowing boat. They rowed along the river Havel, and then along the river Elbe, until they arrived at some part of the beach in Dueneberg. Father and I went to meet them. Both were tired and looked like red lobsters. It had been a very hot day. We had a lovely time together, but after a week they had to row all the way back again. They must have been strong! I did not see both again, until we had a family meeting in Bockswiese/Harz Mountains in the eighties. While staying in a Guesthouse in Bockswiese, aunt Lieschen opened the curtains in the morning and had a shock, because a deer looked at her through the window. My mother had moved there to be near her sister after father died in 1987. Mother died just before her ninetieth birthday. My grandparents had owned a Guesthouse in Bockswiese, where mother, Dieter and I spend our yearly eight weeks summer holidays. The whole of the Harz Mountains is a vast forest of fir trees. All the Spas are set in this idyllic scenery.)

Through the Kitchen door one came to our terrace. Half of the terrace was over roofed. Branches from a large walnut tree hung over the balustrade. In the afternoons the sun shone on to this side of the house. It was our favoured place to sit and relax. At the same time we always had our meals out there too. Little birds, tits, came to visit us and were waiting for crumbs to be put on the balustrade. A swallow family had built a nest over the lampshade and flew undisturbed back and forth. Every Year for 8 years the same swallow family came back, and we could watch how they feed their young. Squirrels and ravens went to the top of the cherry tree to feed to hearts contend. We did not mind, because we could not reach the very top of the tree anyway.



Sunday breakfast under the large pine tree

Sunday mornings we breakfasted under a very high Pine tree in the garden. A simple wooden table stood permanently on a patio. In front of the patio was Dieter's little sand pit. I remember the time, when we put him into it for the first time. He cried, because he did not like the sand, which was sticking to his little hands.



Mother, Dieter Gisela and father in our Wood Garden (Family Hoppe)

Opposite to the right stood a wash house. It looked quite big, and it had also been built with bricks, the same as the house. In front stood an Apricot tree, but he never yielded any fruit. It was far too cold for this kind of tree during the winter months. Inside the wash house stood a built in very large boiler. Mother had hired a washerwoman on a regular basis, who used the washboard scrubbing the washing with sunlight soap. Several doors opened to small rooms for garden tools and it led to a pigsty, which we never used. Every single home in Dueneberg had a pigsty. People kept a pig each, had meat all the year around and did not need to buy any. Next to the pigsty was a chicken run, and next to it a zwinger (a high fenced space) with a dog kennel. From there I watched sometimes little mice playing. I did not tell my parents, because I found them very adorable.

Our two meter high Fence encircled the whole Garden. We could lock the gates. Also the same sort of fence went right through the middle of our garden and ended by the zwinger. The fence was hidden by fir trees. The other half of the garden was already part of the forest we loved so much, and we spend in the very hot weather some picnic time in the shade of the high pine trees. The forest went far and wide all along the Schwarzer Weg (Black Road). This road started where the Heuweg ended, turning sharp right, all along the river Elbe to the famous Vierlanden, where strawberries and other fruits were cultivated.



Dieter 9 months and Gisela 8 years old in the wood garden



Little Dieter all on his own

The Heuweg went straight along to the Elbe-meadow. From there a small path led direct to the Elbe. On my visit to Dueneberg, I found a dock in the middle of the meadow, and a bridge over the river had been built.

On the meadow grew each year a sea of Marguerites. We children picked large bunches of them, and to give it more colour, we added Sauerampfer which is a grass with a red top and the small leafs taste a bit like vinegar. I always took mine home, but some children sold them to passers by on the corner of the Heuweg and the Schwarzer Weg.

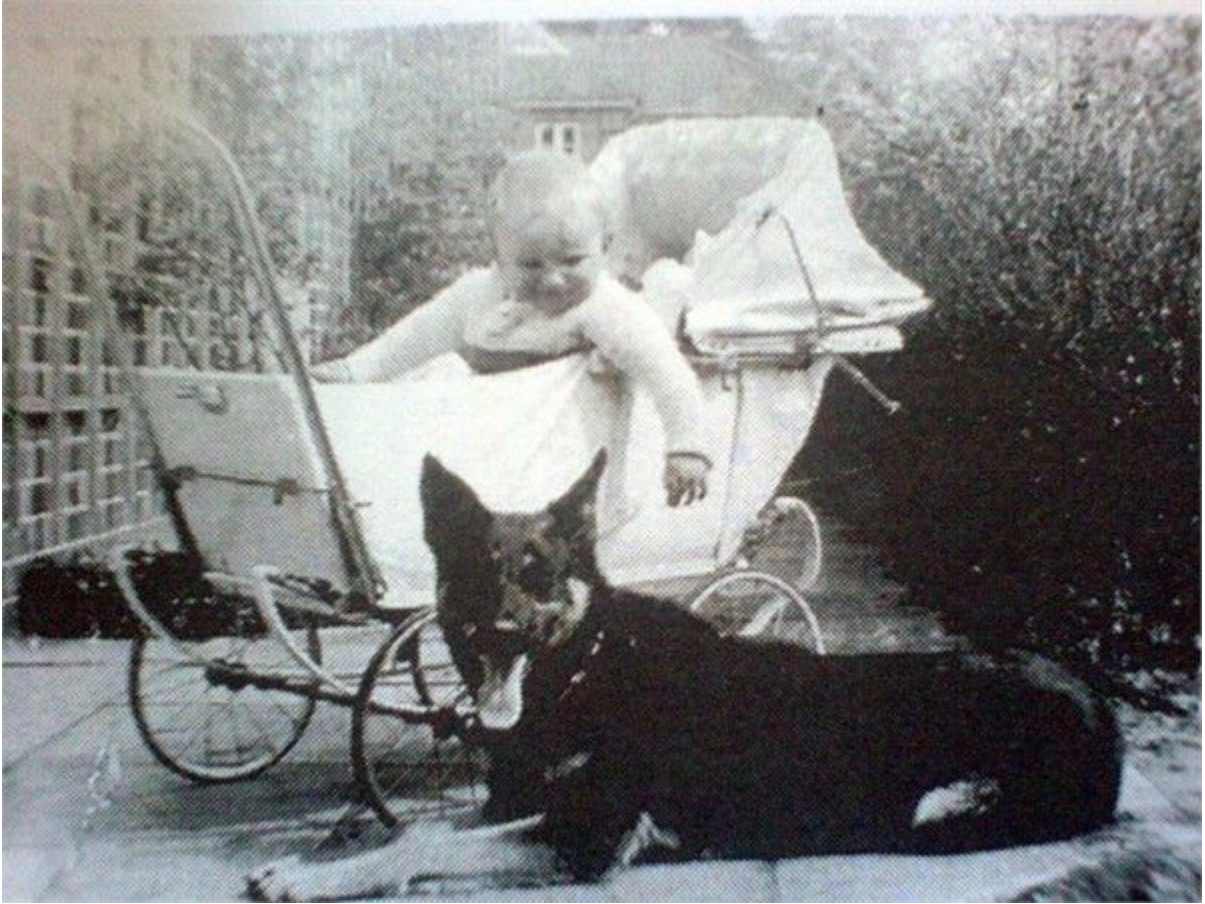
Our situation did not affect us with all the misery which came to all those many people without work. Only the factory provided work, which was only a percentage of the residents in Geesthacht-Dueneberg. All unemployed were paid only RM5.00 a week. People starved and had no money for clothes and shoes. In my class some boys came wearing wooden clogs. People, who had saved their money before the war, had lost it all now. Thousands in the whole of Germany committed suicide, because they had lost all hope. Father's friend, Walter Schroeder had been unemployed for four years. He committed suicide too, shooting himself. Father new him from the trenches.

No-one new a way out, and thought that the communists could make it better. (I found that there are a lot of communists in poor countries.) Geesthacht-Dueneberg was then called "Little Moscow." Now rebellion started and many beggars came to the door. We gave them food. One beggar had been found frozen to death on the Schwarzer Weg.

The situation got worse. Now there were many break-ins. Self made bombs were thrown into windows. We closed our shutters at night.

In WWI in the year 1916, father had been badly wounded. He had spent one year in a military hospital in France, and was then sent to convalescent in his hometown. Through the good care, his wounds had healed, but the memory of the trench war has never left him. Out of this reason he has kept his revolver and his helmet.

Father and his friend, who lived near the moor, kitted themselves out and went on night patrol. Mother wrung her hands in fright. I was glad that they had not caught anyone. Father thought of buying a dog who would keep watch for us.



Dieter my little brother and Senta in our garden

Our dear “Senta” was a beautiful Alsatian, a bitch, who came to us. She was then only a few weeks old. She became my playmate. Every afternoon we let her have a run in our wood garden. She loved it and raced around the fence like the wind. When she was a little older, we took her daily for walks in the wood or along the Schwarzer Weg..

Father had been unemployed in 1932 for a year. Mother cried bitterly, because it was a very hopeless time. Then the IG Farben was taken over by the Dynamite factory

Mother had made friends with Frau Else Mancke, who with her husband Karl, lived on the corner of the Mittel Strasse and the Geesthachter Strasse. Karl was father’s colleague. Once a week, mother and Else met. One time at Manckes’ and the next time by us. I was always looking forward to the lovely cakes. Karl Mancke had also bought an Alsatian, with the name of “Minus.” The Manckes had also a zwinger and kennel for their dog. We took them with us on our walks, and they stayed in the zwinger when we went into the house.

One-day granddad wanted go for a walk in the woods like usual with Senta, but she would not move. Instead she stayed with me all afternoon and sat often down. I was worried, because she was always very lively jumping and running about.

Every morning before going to school I went to see her. She always jumped up on the fence to greet me. This time she did not come out of her kennel. I called her, but she simply did not come. I went to the kennel and touched her. She was cold and stiff. I wanted to pull her out, but she was too heavy. I called mother. We did not know why she suddenly died.

Four days later we knew that she had been poisoned. She must have been in a lot of pain. I cried so much. My dear friend was no more.

Three days after Senta had been poisoned, I returned from school, Father had already left to go back to work from his lunch break, when I went to our small launch to do my homework. Mother lay on the settee, to catch up on her sleep, because she got up early at 5.30 am. We had now a radio, but it was switched off, and everything was very quiet in the house. One could hear a pin drop. Dieter, my little brother, slept in his cot upstairs in our bedroom. He was about two years old.

In the evening, when we children were already asleep and father wanted to lock the front door, he could not find the keys. He blamed Dieter, because he had hidden them at one time before.

In the bedroom, on his bedside locker, he kept always his loaded revolver. It had gone, and so had mother's jewellery.

The burglar came at 3 pm, while mother and I were in our launch. He had entered the house by climbing up on the house, on the façade, and clambered on to the balcony, which led into father's and mother's bedroom. Anni, our daily help, had accidentally left the balcony door unlocked.

Next day, when I returned from school, (our school started at 8 am to 1 pm Saturdays included) two Gendarmes were in our house. We had highly polished linoleum in every room and on the stairs too. The Policemen could tell exactly where the burglar had walked, because the chalk from the outside wall had clung to his shoes. He had looked at Dieter in his cot, searched through the wardrobe to find money. Luckily father did get paid on the very next day. The burglar had been arrested in Hamburg, had first robbed an elderly couple of some money, and then planned a bank robbery. Someone alerted the police and the burglar with some of his accomplices was successfully arrested.

Father was mad, because the police would not give him his revolver back. The robber had also taken the license for the revolver. Now he could not get it back, even so he described every little mark on his revolver. Father told us after he came back from the hearing that it was a good job we did not get out of the room, because seeing him would

have frightened us, because he looked fierce. He really was dangerous with the loaded gun in his hand. His name was “Bluemlein,” (Sweet flower) not very fitting!

One of the Gendarmes was my best friend Leni’s father. They lived in a quaint little house next to the schoolhouse in Besenhorst.

My first school years I have spend in a wooden barrack divided by two classes. I still remember my first school day, and also my first teacher, Herr Haase. I have never forgotten it, because a hase is a rabbit, but Herr Haase had two A’s in his name. I found it odd. The barrack stood on the street “Neuer Krug,” on the same side, but a little further away from the new church. The church had been built after we left Dueneberg in 1939. Almost opposite the barrack school, in the house were the pastor lived, we had Sunday Service. The large room downstairs was furbished like the inside of a church. I can remember our first pastor, a pastor Kelch, and the last one, pastor Knuth. I had been confirmed there and Dieter was baptised in this make-do church.

A few paces from our school stood the Co-op shop. It laid a bit back from the street, between some bushes. When I went on an errand there, the manager always greeted me with a courtesy. I found it very funny and laughed about it.

Our pastor cared a lot about the children in the orphanage. The orphanage was on the Geesthachter Strasse, not far from the Besenhorst-School. Sometimes I went with them on an outing. Easter, the pastor and his women helpers took the children to the woods, behind our house, and they hid Easter eggs for all of them. All the children wore the same clothes, dark blue.

Suddenly the children were not there anymore. I have often wondered what happened to them. Male employees from the whole of Germany’s postal services were now militarily instructed in those buildings. The men were called “Der Postschutz.”(Post Office Defenders)

Once every three months we travelled by train to Hamburg to go shopping. We took off from the Dueneberg Station, and had to change in Bergedorf. I am surprised, but the old and well kept train still does the journey twice a week now. The train is called “Karoline.”



The Dueneberg Station as I still remember it



The dear Karoline!

Going to school, we had to cross the railway line, because the train travelled across the street, the same as it still does today.

After two years in the barrack school, we were sent to the Besenhorst-School. For all children who lived in the vicinity of the Heuweg, it was a three-quarter of an hour walk over the moor. In winter it was still very dark at seven in the morning. It was a little scary. Often granddad took me part of the way.



Grandmother



Grandfather

My dear grandma had died suddenly. Granddad stayed then with us every winter, and come spring he returned to his Harz-Mountain home to open his guesthouse for the summer season.

In the meantime a new school had been built. It had a flat roof. Many people did not feel happy with the design, because it did not harmonise with all the other buildings. In the year 1932 it was finished and we could move in. We children were very much looking forward to it. The rooms had been painted white and the windows were very large. In the summer months it got at times too hot, because those windows for all classes looked out to the East. On those very hot days with 31C, we were sent home. I often suffered with headache from the heat in the classroom.

Every teacher had to go for a 6 week military training course, which left classes often without a teacher. We were given a free hour and mostly staid with friends who lived in the neighbourhood of the school. On occasions two classes were crammed together 58 pupils, which was very uncomfortable, and the teachers were not very pleased either.

Every day we had a glass of milk in the lunch break, and everything we needed for our schoolwork was free. It was all kept in a cupboard in the classroom, so that there was always a supply handy. From pen, pencil, exercise books and reading books and many more books, including a detailed Atlas. Every child became this, and could keep it.

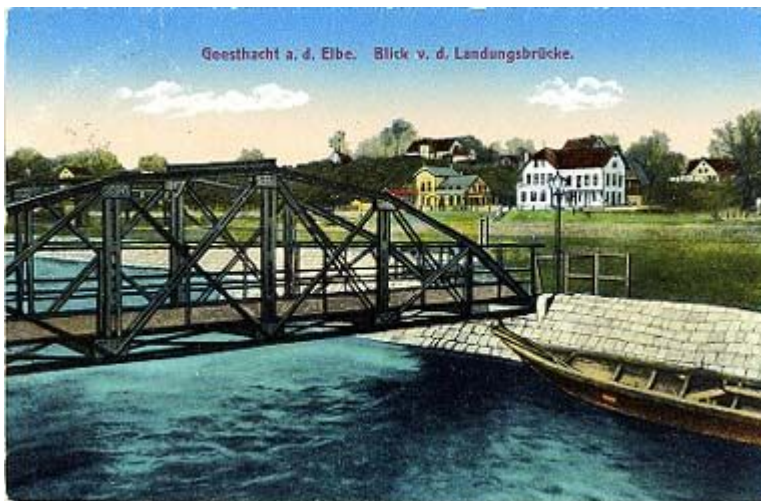
It is still a puzzle to me how it was possible, to build a school, and provide all pupils with all this lovely material in those hard times.

In my last school year, we all were transferred to another school. Our school was transformed into a secondary school for further education. This time we were sent to the Geesthacht-School, separate for girls and boys. Both buildings were on the same compound. This school has a large Gym with many facilities.

In the same year 1937, Dieter started his first school year. At that time father had bought mother a bike. Trying to learn to ride it, she had nearly broken her ankle, and did not want to try again. I was really glad when father gave me the bike and I would not have to walk all the way to the new school. Only poor Dieter had to walk all the way, because he started an hour later, but my school friend Klaus Beneke, took Dieter on his bike on our way home.

Klaus lived also on the Heuweg. He waited every morning on the corner of the Heuweg and the path through the woods for me, so that we could ride together. Now a road runs through this part of the woods.

Behind the houses of the Heuweg, a new road has been built, running straight through our former wood-garden. It's the Berliner Strasse, which leads into Lower-Saxony over a bridge, also newly built. Before, one had to summon a ferry from the other side, by ringing a bell. The bell was fastened on a wire, attached on two poles.



The Ferry-House opposite the Elbe in Dueneberg



Storks on the Elbe-Meadow



Elbe by the Schwarzer Weg



At the end of the Heuweg



Cycle path along the Elbe

Klaus and I rode sometimes along the Schwarzer Weg to Vierlanden to buy strawberries, or we cycled to Geesthacht along the river Elbe



Bombed out Bunker



There are many of those bombed Bunkers in the forest

In the years 1936-37, the whole forest had been fenced in. A small train run from the main factory to this part of the forest, to deliver material for manufacturing munitions to the then new bunkers.

Sometimes powder-kegs blew up. We could see when it happened. The sky turned blood red. I think alone 2000 workers came from Hamburg by train to work there, via Bergedorf-Dueneberg. Also many workers from the vicinity arrived by bike, perhaps glad to be earning money again.

Even now it is hazardous to go for walks in this forest, because munitions are laying about everywhere. Through the bombings every thing was flung about. The granates are faulty because, they have been exposed to the weather.



The forest is still as lovely as one can see on these photos

I am really glad that I have found those photos, because I can't travel anymore to visit Dueneberg.



On a little isle in the forest



Dunes in the forest

There are many dunes in this wood, where we children went with our sleighs in the winter. If there was no snow, it was possible to sleigh down hill on frozen pine needles.



The lovely forest



Sundown in the forest



The Elbe in Geesthacht



Wading in the Elbe



First school day



Gisela 14 years old



Klaus 14 years too



The Elbe-Beach by Dueneberg



Ingrid our cousin, Dieter and Gisela,

My school friend Klaus had started to learn to be an electrician after leaving school. But soon he was called up. His friend Henri Schmelevski had sent me this message in a letter. He said that Klaus had been in a panzer regiment, stationed in Prague for some time. From there they were sent to the Russian front. In the cold winter of 1942, they were stopped by Russian troops and Klaus was badly wounded. He had been shot in the head, had back and chest injuries.

In many report it has been described how many wounded have just frozen to death, but somehow Klaus arrived in a military hospital in Braunschweig. A metal plate was fitted into his head. He was so badly wounded that he did not even recognise his father. After one year he died. Also this has Henri written to me. He served on a U-Boat and never returned.

Herr Beneke, Klaus's father was so furious over his son's death that he mistreated many slave workers in the factory, where he also worked. After the war two of those foreign workers went to Beneke's house, called him out and shot him in the abdomen. He died on his door step.

Klaus had a military funeral, but soon after the war all the German soldiers' graves in that cemetery have been flattened and a memorial for Russian soldiers has been erected on this spot. This gave me a shock. Why did this happen? Did the authorities wanted to make an impression?



The Russian memorial

The years in Dueneberg were the best in my life. I am glad that I have found those lovely photos and at the same time write the story.

Really special were the outings with our school once a year. I still remember some of them. One outing was by coach to Travemuende on the Baltic Sea. There was a lovely beach with white sand and we could swim. On another day's walking we went through the Saxon-Forest to Aumuehle, where we visited Otto von Bismarck's Mausoleum.



Otto von Bismarck Mausoleum



To the entrance of the Mausoleum



Road through the Saxon Forest

Another outing was to see an old ancient grave from the Stone Age time. I was disappointed because it was empty, only the huge boulders were still in place. We walked for 31 km there and back and I arrived home with huge blisters on my heels

On these outings we had always glorious weather. Once we took a trip to the Lueneburg Heath. We walked again for many km, but took a small train first.

Once every six months a fun market came to Geesthacht. There were many stalls, and many round-a-bouts. Even then the sun shone all the time and we children enjoyed all the entertainments. Next day all children came to school with a rock, sucking it to a fine point. Even mother took Dieter. He enjoyed the rides, and when coming out of one of the little cars, he would not let go. In the beginning the owner smiled, but as Dieter was determent to hold on, the owner shouted at mother, who felt embarrassed. Dieter was usually such a good little boy. The reason was that he always wanted a little play car of his own, so he could sit in it and peddle along.

Mother went once with her friends to this market and one of the ladies belonged to a shooting club. She wanted to show what she could do and landed her shot at the target in the eighth's ring. Then she asked mother to try. Mother was reluctant because she never held a gun in her hand and thought that she would make an utter fool of herself. But in

the end she had to give in. She put the gun on her right shoulder and looked through the visor with her left eye, a very awkward way - and shot. I will never forget the faces of her friends, because she had hit the Bull's-Eye! For a long time they thought that mother had lied to them not being able to shoot.

One year we had a big plague of may-bugs. We children loved the maybugs and kept some of them in glass jars, feeding them with birch leafs. As we came to school one morning we were told that there will be no school today, but we had to go and collect as many maybugs as possible. We rejoiced! But it was really bad. We walked out of the Elbe-Valley on to the slopes along pathways. There trees and bushes were covered with the bugs. They were collected in buckets and when returning to school, they were destroyed. It was really daft, because it did not have any affect what so ever.

It was then Whitsun. Granddad had come to visit, and we drove to Travemuende on Sunday. We sat down in a Restaurant. I could see that there was not one single leaf on bush or tree. Instead of everything looking green, it looked brown. The bugs had eaten all the leaves. The plague was worse there then in Dueneberg.

I thought what will happen next year, when they have multiplied? But in the following year only the usual amount of maybugs were to be seen.

These memories stayed with me all through my life, and I am glad that I can share it with others too.

(Co)Gisela Cooper 2008