

LIFESTYLE

REMEMBERING THE HOLOCAUST

Ella Mueller reflects on life in Germany with Holocaust Remembrance Day in her heart

Maggie Brown
Politics Editor | @maggieabrown

"Some things are so terrible, you don't forget," said Ella Mueller, who was born 90 years ago in Padew, a village in Poland home to a German community.

Her voice runs thick with a German accent. She can understand four languages — German, Polish, Russian and English.

Ella's apartment in Twin Lakes, a retirement home in Burlington, is lined with memories from her life in Germany. After moving around for many years, Ella moved to Burlington to be closer to her son during the last years of her life. Photos of her family and her late husband, Phillip Mueller, color every table in her home.

Phillip and Ella grew up together in Padew. He walked her home from grade school every day.

"I was in first grade, and he was in fifth grade. He would always hold my hands on the way home from school, telling me stories," Ella said, softly smiling.

After World War II ended, Phillip moved from Padew to the U.S. He was still in love with Ella, the girl from his childhood, so he found her address and started sending letters back to Padew.

She smiled, looking down at old photos of them together. They were poor, but rich in love, Ella said. Phillip returned to Padew on Christmas of 1952 to see her and they were married that day.

Phillip died from Alzheimer's disease 56 years later. Ella was stubborn and refused to put him in assisted living, even though taking care of him was the hardest time in her life.

"I wonder how I made it," Ella said.

Ella remembers most of the early years of her life — not because she met her true love but because when she was 11 years old, Hitler invaded Poland.

On April 12, Holocaust Remembrance Day, Ella wishes for

others to remember the atrocities that happened in Germany and to consider the weight of this historical event.

"We did nothing to deserve this, but there was nothing we could do," Ella said. Before she was a teenager, her village turned into a war zone.

"It made me a very serious person," Ella said. But through the years, Ella's sense of humor never left her.

"I have no grandchildren. I forgot to tell my children about the birds and the bees," Ella laughed. Her small eyes lit up behind her pink-tinted glasses, which matched the color of her room.

Everyone in Padew was friendly with one another, Ella said. Growing up, Ella was a Christian attending the Lutheran Church, and in her town, she was close to many German Jews. Her next-door neighbor was a Jewish family.

Because of what she described as "brainwashing" in German schools at the time, she acted violently toward the neighbors on many occasions.

"This is German property!" Ella once shouted to one of the German-Jewish boys, who was trying to cross into her yard.

But once the German officials started seizing the Jewish people in her community, she started to question authority.

"When they came after the Jews, I thought, 'That goes too far.' The Jews are people too," Ella said.

WWII TIMELINE

- 1928 - Ella was born
- 1936 - Axis powers were established
- 1939 - Germany invaded Poland, initiating World War II
- 1939 - Russia invaded Poland from the east
- 1940 - Germany attacked western Europe
- 1941 - United States declared war on Japan
- 1945 - Germany and Japan surrendered

“

IF I WOULD HAVE NOT PRAYED ANYMORE, I DON'T KNOW IF I WOULD HAVE MADE IT ONE DAY TO THE OTHER.

ELLA MUELLER
HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR

Ella's family thought it was their duty to help the Jews, so they took in a German-Jewish man named Erwin Kirschenbaum from their town. He became a part of their family and loved Ella as his own.

But in 1942, he was taken away from Ella's family. "They loaded him onto a wagon with all the other Jews, and as he was carted off, he called out my name two times," she wrote in her book.

In 2008, Ella published the book, "Life in Germany During World War II." The book has been recognized in the National Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. She dedicated the book to her friend Erwin, in honor of those who died like he did.

Today, Ella still remembers Erwin. She still remembers the sto-

ries he told her about the operas he used to go to and his favorite tongue twisters.

Ella also remembers a German-Jewish teenager from her village who was drafted to fight in the war. He ran away so he could return to his family. He was hung because he returned.

"They killed him like Jesus Christ, up in front of people. They opened out his insides, and he was bleeding," Ella said. His family watched as this happened, and they couldn't do anything about it, Ella said.

Despite these tragedies, some are skeptical about Ella's experiences, which disheartens her.

"There was a woman downstairs — she didn't believe me — here at Twin Lakes," Ella said. The woman thought Ella was telling

her a fictional story and not her own.

When she was growing up, she learned how to cope with suffering and was forever changed by it.

"I grew up as an innocent child, and I didn't know much but I learned," Ella said. "And I knew 'Thou shall not kill,' and makes you sick."

Ella went to a teacher's college in Gorlice, a town in southeastern Poland. Every night she prayed to God, and many times she felt her prayers were repressed by high German officials.

"I was called to the principal's office, and he screamed at me. 'Are you still praying to the Old Jew?... I said I cannot fall asleep without praying,' Ella said. "I remember all of us prayed quietly. Because whom do I hurt when I pray?"

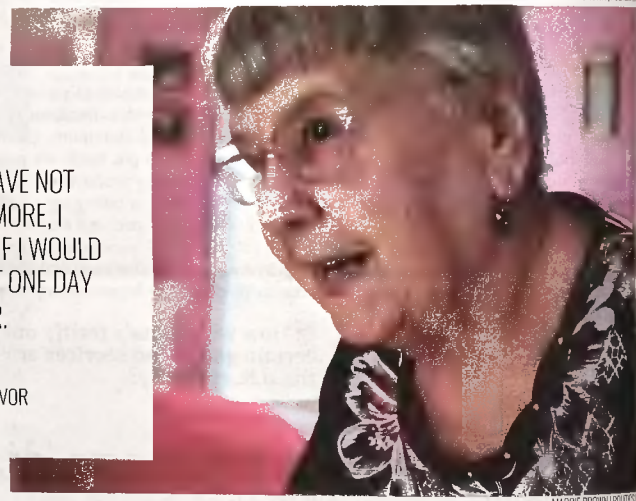
But prayer was essential. "If I would have not prayed anymore, I don't know if I would have made it one day to the other," Ella said.

Ella still prays and reads her German Bible every day. She attends the nightly church service at Twin Lakes on Sundays.

But now, Ella prays for something different. She no longer prays to stay alive anymore. It's she did during the war.

"Any day, I am ready to die. Every night I pray," Ella said.

Ella doesn't care where she is buried or about her memorial service. "As long as I'm in heaven with Phillip, that's all I think of."



MAGGIE BROWN | PHOTOGRAPHY

MAGGIE BROWN | PHOTOGRAPHY

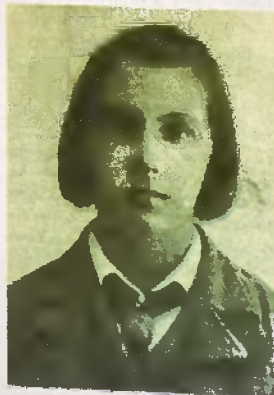


PHOTO COURTESY OF ELLA MUELLER

From top to bottom:

Ella Mueller's apartment at Twin Lakes in Burlington is covered with memories of her life in Germany.

Ella Mueller, author and World War II survivor, sits in her bright pink bedroom, wearing her favorite cat earrings.

Mueller at age 12 in 1940.