

Skeletons at the Feast – The Backstory

by Chris Bohjalian

Like most of my novels, the idea for *Skeletons at the Feast* emerged from the minutiae of everyday life. There was a little girl in my daughter's kindergarten class here in Vermont, and one day her father, Gerd Krahn, asked me if I would look at his German grandmother's unpublished diary. His mother, Heidi, had just finished translating it into English and adding to it the recollections of other family members. This was back in 1998.

Usually, this sort of request is a novelist's worst nightmare: Most family histories are dull as toast and badly written. But Gerd is a very good friend of mine, and so I was happy to read the diary that his East Prussian grandmother, Eva Henatsch, kept from 1920 through 1945. Much of the diary focused upon the day-to-day activities of helping to manage a sizable estate in a remote, still rural corner of Europe. But then there were the passages that chronicled 1945 and Eva's family's arduous trek west ahead of the Soviet Army—a journey that was always grueling and often terrifying. I was fascinated. But I still didn't anticipate that it would ever inspire me to embark upon a novel.

Eight years later, however, in 2006, I read Max Hastings's history of the last year of the war in Germany, *Armageddon*, and I was struck by how often the anecdotes in Hastings's nonfiction account mirrored moments in that diary. Apparently, the horrors in Henatsch's diary were not unique. But nor were the moments of idiosyncratic human connection – such as the occasional friendships (and even romances) that grew between Allied prisoners of war who were sent to the farms in East Prussia to help with the harvest and the teenage German farm girls there. It was thus almost out of intellectual curiosity that I asked Gerd if I could revisit his grandmother's diary. It was on that second reading that I began to imagine a novel and started to research the period.



And while I did a great deal of secondary research, much of my learning came from my interviews with Germans who were alive in the period and my interviews with Holocaust survivors—including one woman who endured the sort of horrific winter death march that the character Cecile experiences in my novel. Everyone seemed to have stories that were as astonishing as they were wrenching.



My sense is that the last six months of the Second World War in Poland and the eastern edges of Germany had to have been one of the most brutal periods in human history—which is why, perhaps, I was drawn to it as a novelist. People behaved in ways that are almost unimaginable outside of fiction and the stakes could not possibly have been higher. The magnitude of the carnage is inconceivable. There were concentration camps that were still functioning; there were the starving, desperately ill prisoners from other camps whom the Nazis were marching west in the cold; there were the Russian soldiers dying in monumental numbers since a part of the Russian military strategy was simply attrition; there

were the German soldiers fighting like cornered wolves because they knew they didn't dare surrender after the atrocities their army had committed across the Soviet Union; and then there were the terrified German civilians— women and children and old people—plodding west ahead of the advancing Russian army. The scope of the crucible is always brought home to me by one single moment: The sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff on January 30, 1945. The former cruise ship was the very last vessel to leave the surrounded East Prussian port of Gotenhafen, and so over 10,000 frantic evacuees fought their way aboard. (Think for a moment of those images we've all seen of the last helicopters leaving Saigon in 1975 as the North Vietnamese were arriving—then move that chaos to a port and multiply it a thousand times over.) The ship was quickly sunk by a Russian submarine, and over 9,500 people went to the bottom of the Baltic—or six times the number of people who died on the Titanic.

When I had written my first complete draft of the novel, I had the manuscript read by historians and holocaust survivors—and, of course, by the Krahn family.

A great many books helped with my research, and there is a list of them in the novel's acknowledgments. One memoir in particular that I found both informative and inspirational was Gerda Weissmann Klein's poignant and powerful account of her adolescence and young adulthood, *All But My Life*. The fictional character in this novel, Cecile Fournier, owes much to her. To read *All But My Life*, visit your local bookstore or visit www.bn.com or www.amazon.com. To learn more about the Gerda and Kurt Klein Foundation and the work they do promoting tolerance and respect for others, visit www.kleinfoundation.org.

Now, it's important to note that although characters in *Skeletons at the Feast* endure some of the same trials as Eva Henatsch and her remarkable family, Irmgard Emmerich—Mutti in my novel—is not Eva. Nor is Anna Emmerich, my principal heroine, a recreation of Eva's daughter, Heidi. I hope the fictional Mutti and Anna have a semblance of Eva's and Heidi's monumental courage and resiliency and compassion, but they are nonetheless fictional constructs. Finally, although *Skeletons at the Feast* differs from my earlier work in that it's set in a particular historical moment, it still shares some specific universalities: It's about ordinary people coping with trials they had never before imagined; with young people coming of age in moments of seemingly unbearable stress; and, I hope, with the sorts of moral ambiguity that give us all pause and force us to examine our values.