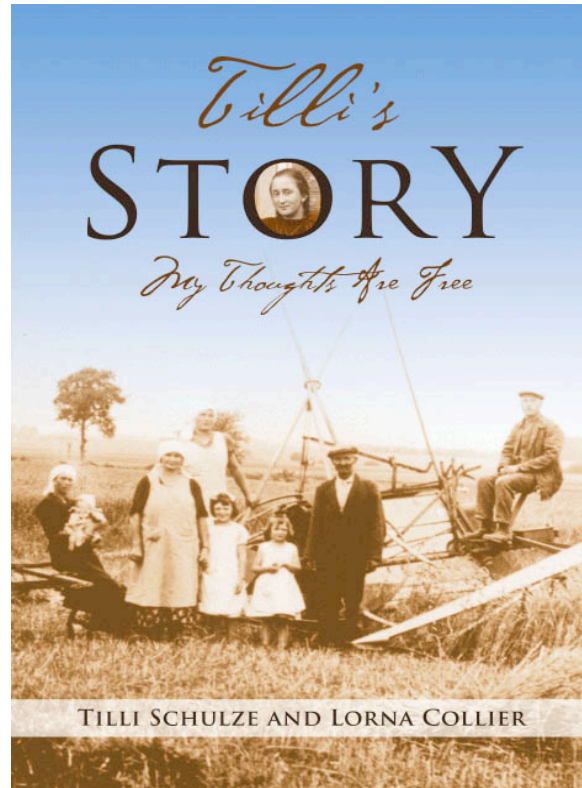


“TILLI’S STORY: MY THOUGHTS ARE FREE”

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE



Hardcover ISBN: 0-595-67342-2 | Paperback ISBN 1-58348-072-2 | iUniverse.com
269 pages text | 10 pages pictures | Published Oct. 2005

www.mythoughtsarefree.com

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Overview

Tilli's Story: My Thoughts Are Free, by Tilli Schulze and Lorna Collier, is the true story of Tilli's childhood in eastern Germany during and after World War II, before her escape to freedom at age sixteen. The book is unusual in the field of World War II memoirs by showing what non-Jewish, rural Germans endured under Hitler and by portraying East German life after Russians invaded the country and imposed the Iron Curtain.

Tilli wrote the book with Lorna Collier, a freelance writer and journalist. Lorna interviewed Tilli intensively over a two-year period, meeting her for sessions once or twice a week. Using her imagination, Lorna would try to enter Tilli's mind, to see with that young German girl's eyes and write from that vision, using Tilli's taped accounts and interview notes to recreate what happened. As the interview process continued, Tilli's recollections of that pivotal time in her life became even stronger. She often would wake in the middle of the night, remembering another detail to share with Lorna. The two women toured antique shops and pored over photo albums so that Lorna could visualize Tilli's life in 1940s and 1950s Germany. In the process of the collaboration, they become close friends, and it is that friendship that enables Lorna to speak in Tilli's voice with such resonance on the pages of this very special memoir.

This guide is intended to provide additional resources to book clubs in order to enrich conversations about the book. We are eager to hear from book club members who have comments and questions. Please visit our website (www.mythoughtsarefree.com) to see news about the book and to post your comments.

Best wishes and happy reading,

Tilli Schulze and Lorna Collier

Die Gedanken Sind Frei / "My Thoughts Are Free"

The song "My Thoughts Are Free" ("Die Gedanken Sind Frei") is an old German folk song, dating to at least the sixteenth century. According to *Songs of Work and Protest*, by Edith Fowke, the song appears to have been written during the Peasants War of 1524–1526. The song was used in a Schiller play and sung in schools during pre-Hitler Germany. Other accounts state that the song was banned by the Nazis. German immigrants brought the song to the U.S., where it has been performed by various artists, including folk singer Pete Seeger and the punk group Brazilian Girls. The song also is listed in the Unitarian Universalist Church hymnal. The author of the song is unknown.

Several versions of the song exist, with differing translations. One of the most popular is a translation by Arthur Kevers, copyrighted in 1950 and reprinted with permission.

Die Gedanken sind frei Volkslied

♩ = 150

Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei, wer kann sie er - rat - en,
 sie flie - gen vor - bei wie nächt - li - che Schat - ten
 kein Mensch kann sie wis - sen kein Jä - ger er - schie - ßen
 es blei - bet da - bei: Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei

Die Gedanken Sind Frei

Die Gedanken sind frei,
 wer kann sie erraten;
 sie fliehen vorbei
 wie naechtliche Schatten.
 Kein Mensch kann sie
 wissen,
 kein Jaieger erschieszen;
 es bleibt dabei:
 Die Gedanken sind frei.

Ich denk was ich will,
 und was mich begluecket,

My Thoughts Are Free

Die Gedanken sind frei
 My thoughts freely flower.,
 Die Gedanken sind frei
 My thoughts give me power.
 No scholar can map them,
 No hunter can trap them,
 No man can deny:
 Die Gedanken sind frei!

I think as I please,
 And this gives me pleasure.,

Doch alles in der Still,
und wie es sich schicket.
Mein Wunsch und
Begehren
kann niemand verwehren,
es bleibet dabei:
Die Gedanken sind frei.

Und sperrt man mich ein
in finsternen Kerker,
das alles sind rein
vergebliche Werke;
denn meine Gedanken
zerreißen die Schranken
und Mauern entzwei:
Die Gedanken sind frei.

Drum will ich auf immer
den Sorgen entsagen
und will mich auf nimmer
mit Grillen mehr plagen.
Man kann ja im Herzen
stets lachen und scherzen
und denken dabei:
Die Gedanken sind frei.

My conscience decrees,
This right I must treasure;
My thoughts will not cater
To duke or dictator,
No man can deny:--
Die Gedanken sind frei!

And if tyrants take me
And throw me in prison,
My thoughts will burst free,
Like blossoms in season.
Foundations will crumble,
The structure will tumble,
And free men will cry:
Die Gedanken sind frei!

Neither trouble or pain
Will ever touch me again.
No good comes of fretting.,
My hope's in forgetting.
Within myself still
I can think as I will,
But I laugh, do not cry:
Die Gedanken sind frei!

To find out more about the song and its various versions, go to the following websites:

[http:// www.jlrweb.com/whiterose/free.html](http://www.jlrweb.com/whiterose/free.html)

[http:// www.cs.rice.edu/~ssiyer/minstrels/poems/1185.html](http://www.cs.rice.edu/~ssiyer/minstrels/poems/1185.html)

One public-domain version of the song exists, published in 1922 in *Folk Songs of Many Peoples* (National Board of the Young Women's Christian Association of the United States), by Florence Hudson Botsford. This translation, by Jessie Lemont, is slightly different from the version Tilli learned as a child. For example, the title of the song, "Die Gedanken Sind Frei," translates correctly as "The Thoughts Are Free," although the more commonly known English title is "My Thoughts Are Free."

Map of Present-Day Germany



Note: Doelitz (where Tilli lived) is in the northeast corner, south of Rostock. It is marked with a star. Gnoien (where Tilli went to school) is two miles from Doelitz.

Interview with Tilli Schulze

1. How did you and Lorna meet?

Well, that's a very interesting story! I lived in Rockford, Illinois, in the early 1960s, and among our neighbors was the Beck family, who had a little girl named Lorna, who played with my daughter and who loved to read huge stacks of books that she would check out from the bookmobile in the park every week. We moved to Belvidere, Illinois, in the late 1960s and never saw the Beck family after that.

Then, in 1991, I worked on the book for a while with another writer, but she couldn't continue. So, I asked her to recommend someone else, and she suggested Lorna Collier, who also lived in Belvidere. We set up a meeting, but in the meantime I said to my daughter, "Do you think this could be Lorna Beck?"

My daughter said, "Why would it be our old neighbor? Just because she has the same first name?"

But it was indeed her, now married and with a different name. I recognized her right away. She had grown up and moved to a house not even two miles away from mine!

2. What happened to Willi after he was detained by the Russian soldiers during your escape?

Willi was arrested but he was released the next day, though I didn't know about that until I finally was able to get the news from home several weeks later. I was very worried about him! I don't know why he was arrested—maybe because he had lost his right arm and looked suspicious to them.

3. Were there any reprisals against your family as a result of your escape?

I found out later that my mother was watched, but she couldn't tell me about it at the time because all our mail was being opened and read by the East German government. At least she ended up all right.

4. Did your mother or anyone else in your family ever come to America?

My mother came to see me twice. When my mother was in her sixties, the East German government let her move out of the country and go to West Germany because she was of retirement age, and they didn't want to pay her old-age pension. Once she was in West Germany, she was free to come see us. She visited in 1971 and 1977 before she died in 1979. She loved it here. She was very happy. Each time she stayed five to six weeks, and she also went to see my brother, Hugo, in San Diego. She loved how both of us lived. After her first visit to San Diego, she said, "When I was young, I never made it any farther than the manure pile, and now I've seen paradise."

My brother Helmut was never able to come. He died in 1981 of cancer. Heinz didn't make it here, either. He died of cancer in 1974. But my brother Hugo lives here. My husband and I sponsored him, and he lived in Chicago first, then San Diego, and now he lives in Las Vegas. My sister, Paula, has been able to visit five times, but she still lives

in East Germany. My sister, Dora, came over quite a bit to visit her daughter, Ingrid, who now lives in Florida.

5. Did you see your father again after you came to America?

Yes, I did. In 1980, I went to West Germany for a visit. I was at my brother Helmut's house, near Mainz, when Helmut asked if I would like to see our father, who had asked to see me. Although I didn't really feel the need to see him, I said okay; but we didn't have much to say to each other. He started to run my mother down. I didn't want to see him again after that, and I didn't.

6. How did what happened to you affect your faith in God?

It never affected my faith in God, which has remained the same all the way through. I think God creates a plan for us in life, and then we just kind of follow that, and I never changed my mind about anything. It has helped me a lot to have my faith.

7. What were your impressions of American teenagers when you first came to America at age eighteen?

I thought American teenagers were terribly silly. I had to take the same bus to go to work in Evanston, Illinois, as the teenagers did to go to high school, and to me, they were just so silly and would giggle so much. I just couldn't believe how they were acting. But then, I had never had a childhood, so I didn't know what it was like. Once I started evening school in Chicago and joined the German-American Youth Choir, I got to be just like that. I really started having fun and enjoying life, and I didn't think they were so silly and stupid anymore.

8. What was your goal in writing the book?

My goal in the beginning was simply to let my children and my grandchildren know how lucky we are to live in a country like this, where we can have our freedom and say anything we want and live the way we like. We can believe in whatever we like, and we can have a great life.

After the book came out, we began speaking to many groups of people: book clubs, senior groups, community groups, and also to schoolchildren. I was amazed at how interested the children have been in my story and how much they have appreciated it. This has shown me beneficial it is for American children to know the histories of people who haven't had their freedom.

Also, I had the feeling when I first came here that everybody in America thought everybody in Germany was all for Hitler. That wasn't the case. There were many people who didn't like Hitler, but they weren't allowed to express their feelings about it. If they did, they were punished. That continued later with Stalin, but many Americans don't even know that a part of Germany was occupied by the Russians, and that Communism was introduced to and forced onto the East Germans in that way.

9. How has your life changed since the book came out?

I am glad I wrote it. For one thing, it was like therapy for me to do it; I have no more nightmares. And it's rewarding for me to find out that a lot of people are interested in this story and want to hear more about it. It's been very rewarding.

10. You suffered from kidney disease for years before receiving a kidney transplant on July 30, 2004—the same day the first author copy of your book arrived in Belvidere. Discuss how important getting a new kidney has been for you.

Kidney disease would have stopped me from doing everything I'm doing now—promoting the book and talking about it. To have the book come out the same day I got my kidney tells me it was meant to be, that I got the kidney for a reason.

Reading Group Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. When faced with anti-German prejudice in the United States, Tilli argues that she, too, was a victim of the Nazis [p. 210]. To what extent were rural Germans complicit in the atrocities of WWII? Do you see them as accomplices or as victims?
2. What was your reaction to Fräulein Meyer's comment about American children? "They were nice, but spoiled.... They didn't have any work to do, and they had so many things.... Anything they wanted, they had" [p. 183]. Do you agree with this assessment? Do you believe work and hardship are beneficial during childhood, or is a childhood free from all strife more preferable? How did Tilli's childhood experiences shape her character?
3. Tilli's mother and father have strongly opposed views regarding their family's involvement with the Nazis. Do you believe it is acceptable to join a movement you believe is wrong for the sake of your family's safety and security? Why or why not? If you had been in the position of Tilli's mother and thought that joining the Communist Party could keep your children safe, would you have done it?
4. On page 27, the narrator describes an argument between two women as seen through a child's eyes: "Then all the women started talking—rapid, frustrated, angry talk, their words hissing and spitting like bacon on the stove." How do you feel about memoir writers constructing colorful metaphors to describe things they saw, heard, felt, or tasted as children? This type of memoir-writing has been called narrative nonfiction or creative nonfiction; one acclaimed memoirist who uses vivid imagery to recreate his childhood is Frank McCourt (author of "Angela's Ashes.") Does this enhance nonfiction prose, or does this type of writing belong in fiction?
5. In a work of this nature, to what extent does historical accuracy, both on a personal and a larger scale, matter to you as a reader? If the author manages to capture the mood of the moment as he or she perceives it, do precise details matter? How would you characterize Tilli's reliability as a narrator?
6. Discuss heroism in Tilli's story. Do you believe any people in the book possess heroic qualities as you define heroism? Why or why not?
7. Tilli Schulze has stated that one of her goals in writing the book was to show what living without freedom is like, so that readers can appreciate and not take for granted their own freedoms. In which ways, if any, has this book made you think about the freedoms you enjoy?

8. Some readers have said *Tilli's Story* shows the importance of defending democracy and trying to rid the world of totalitarianism. Others see *Tilli's Story* as an anti-war book, arguing that war inevitably harms innocent families on both sides. What was your impression?
9. In a way, Tilli's memoir could be seen as a coming-of-age story, because it follows her from childhood to womanhood. Is it necessary in a personal memoir to see a progression in characterization throughout the text as you would in a work of fiction? Furthermore, is the narrator as qualified to define the events that served as turning points in the shaping of his or her own "character" as a novelist is? What were the seminal events that shaped Tilli's "character"?
10. In the early chapters of *Tilli's Story*, we see the war through the eyes of a five-year-old girl, whereas later in the story, post-WWII Germany is reflected through the eyes of a young woman. What are the benefits and limitations of restricting the point of view of the narrator to a certain age and perspective?

Pronunciation Guide

- * Boddin: BODE-een
- * Christ kindl: KRIST-kin-dull
- * Cuxhaven: cooks-HAH-vun
- * Doelitz: DER-lits
- * Deutschland: DOYTCH-land
- * Elbe: ELB ("E" is silent)
- * Fanni: FUN-nee
- * Fiebel: FEEB-ul
- * Gnoien: Guh-NOY-en
- * Häde: HAY-duh
- * Harz: HEARTS
- * Heinrich: HINE-rick
- * Helmut: HEL-moot
- * Hoppe: HOP-uh
- * Hugo: HOO-go
- * Ilse: ILL-suh
- * Jan: YAHN
- * Kassel: KASS-ull
- * Kreitz: KRIGHTZ
- * Liesel: LEEZ-ull
- * Ludwigslust: LOOD-wigs-LOOST
- * Mami: MOM-ee

- * Ohlerich: OH-lur-ICK
- * Oleniczak: OH-luh-NEET-zack
- * Pech: PECK
- * Regina: reh-GEEN-uh (hard G)
- * Rostock: RAH-stock
- * Scharnweber: SHAN-vay-buh
- * Schimcke's: SHIM-kuhs
- * Schuhmacher: SHOE-mah-ker
- * Schultute: SHOOL-toot-uh
- * Teterow: TET-ur-oh
- * Theis: TICE
- * Tillilein: TILL-ee-line
- * Uelzen: OOLS-en
- * Wernigerode: VAN-uh-gah-ROAD-uh
- * Wilhelm: VIL-helm
- * Willi: VIL-ee

About the Authors

Tilli Horn Schulze was born in Doelitz, Germany, in 1934. She was five years old when World War II began, eleven when it ended, and sixteen when she fled to West Germany. She immigrated to the U.S. at age eighteen, settling first in Chicago. She married her husband, Herbert, in 1954. In the early 1960s, the couple moved to Rockford, where they established Northern Prosthetics & Orthopedic Inc. Tilli and Herbert later moved to Boone County, where they reside today. They are the parents of two children, who both live in the Rockford area. On July 30, 2004, Tilli received a kidney transplant on the same day that the first author copy of her book, "Tilli's Story: My Thoughts Are Free," arrived from the publisher. Since her successful transplant, Tilli has traveled throughout the northern Illinois area speaking about her life story to schoolchildren, civic groups, churches, libraries, and book clubs. Tilli and her co-author, Lorna Collier, have signed a film option agreement with a Hollywood producer and hope to soon see *Tilli's Story* translated to film.

Lorna Collier is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in many major newspapers and websites, including the *Chicago Tribune*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Miami Herald*, *Arizona Republic*, *Orlando Sentinel*, and *San Jose Mercury News*. She has been a regular contributor to *Chicago Tribune* feature, *Crain's Chicago Business* magazine, and *Smart Computing* publications. A recent feature article she wrote about adoption is being reprinted in a book released this fall, *Contemporary Issues Companion* (Thomson-Gale Press). She writes about women's issues, health, parenting, education, and technology. Collier was born in Wisconsin but has lived in the Rockford area since age two. She graduated magna cum laude from Northern Illinois University in 1983 and worked as a newspaper reporter for the *Rockford Register Star*, winning several awards for feature writing. She also was a news producer for Rockford's WTVO-17 and a writer/editor for *Rockford Magazine* before becoming a freelancer in 1992. *Tilli's Story* is her first book.

Please visit www.mythoughtsarefree.com for more information about the book and an updated list of author appearances. Bulk discounts (five or more copies) are available when the book is purchased directly from the authors. If you do not have Internet access, contact the authors by writing to:

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