



## What Life Can Be *Marieluise Hessel*

Culture is not a catalog of values, but a “way of life.” In one’s culture a human being finds peace . . . —*Octavio Paz*

“How did you become a collector?” “Did your parents collect?” “Did you study art?” These are questions I am asked frequently. Sometimes a visitor to my home points at a special artwork in the living room and says, “You must have paid a lot for this painting, didn’t you?” Usually my answer to all these questions is simply that I love art and need to be surrounded by it.

The reasons for my deep need to live amid art stem from my early childhood. I was born in 1939, at the beginning of World War II, in Munich, Germany. As is common with war children, most of the traumatic experiences from my early life are buried in my memory, never to be retrieved. However, three terrifying episodes have stayed with me, unburied, and have made me who I am today.

The first occurred in late 1943, when the carpet-bombing of German cities had begun. It happened long ago, but I can still hear the sound of sirens announcing the approaching Allied bomber planes. Everybody was instructed to run and hide in their buildings’ cellars. We waited and listened to the terrifying sound of the falling bombs. One night, the building next to us was hit, and I remember my screams of fear when my mother had to leave the cellar with the rest of the grown-ups to recover the people buried under the rubble in the neighboring cellar. From then on, I felt unsafe.

The second event, a time when I remember myself screaming and crying again, is when I found myself locked in a room, looking out the window at unfamiliar surroundings. I could see my brother, Dieter, two years older than me, with a group of other children, and when I screamed that I wanted to be with him, a stranger replied that I was sick and not allowed to leave the room. I was five years old and my mother was nowhere to be seen.

I had no understanding of how my brother and I ended up in this children’s home. My mother was never one to speak about the past, with one exception: shortly before her death many years later, she told me, “I am so sorry that I had to leave you and Dieter alone during the heavy bombing of Munich.” She explained to me that in June of 1944, she had been taken to a hospital to give birth to my sister, Christina. She said that a friend was supposed to take care of us and that she had no idea how or why we got lost and put into public care. All I remember is that we were united with my mother and baby Christina around Christmas six months later in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, a small Bavarian town.

The third experience took place in that town and involved the German government’s plan for relocating the families who had been left homeless by the air raids. Like many families, we were placed into somebody else’s house, and our new home consisted of one room. The four of us, my mother, Dieter, Christina, and I, lived in that one room for some time. Very quickly, I felt that the house’s owners did not like

Marieluise Hessel (née Behrens) in Garmisch, Germany, in front of her Borgward Isabella coupé, her prize for winning the title of Miss Germany 1958



Hessel on Post-Miss  
Germany Tour in 1960s

next to my mother when the woman told her that my father had drowned and my brother was in the hospital. I was eleven years old.

After those three episodes, life started to turn around. A few months later, five years after the war had ended, we finally moved into our very own home, and it was the first time I did not feel rejected or scared. Around that time, we had our first school outing, to King Ludwig II's Schloss Linderhof. I loved the castle and all the beautiful objects in it. I loved the fascinating story of the king's life and his mysterious death. In the castle, I found myself imagining a life in such surroundings, which I dreamt perhaps I could have had if it had not been for the war.

Then, when I was nineteen years old, I saw a chance to leave the village of Garmisch. Together with a girlfriend, and encouraged by a group of friends, we drove to Munich to participate in the beauty contest for Miss Bavaria. As it turned out, I won the contest and, a few months later, I also won the Miss Germany contest. That summer of 1958, I traveled to Long Beach, California, to participate in the Miss Universe pageant. My life had changed drastically. When I became Miss Germany, I received a well-paid one-year contract to represent the company that organized the contest; a three-year contract to act in six movies; an incredible wardrobe complete with suitcases, beauty products, and the most amazing car on the market, a 1958 Borgward Isabella coupé. I was overwhelmed, happy, and scared at the same time, as everything had happened so fast.

Back in Garmisch, I was invited to a reception in a beautiful house where, for the first time in my life, I saw walls full of abstract paintings and big art books on every table. The hosts and their guests talked about the paintings with great knowledge and enthusiasm. I had never seen abstract art but was immensely impressed with the owner's passion for it. My new life and work kept me traveling quite a lot.



us. My mother just said, "Nobody wants to be forced to take in a woman with small children into their small house." The people in the village hated us too, and sometimes on our way to school the children threw stones at us or hit us with sticks, yelling, "Pig Prussians, go home!" To those children, anyone who was not from their town was a Prussian. I was scared, but I soon learned to fight and defend myself.

My school was run by kind, but very strict, nuns. On Sunday mornings, I went to mass in a beautiful little baroque church, filled with golden angels, saints, and many exquisite ornaments. I especially enjoyed the beautiful singing and organ music of Sunday morning mass. I felt so good in my little church that often, on my way home from school, I would stop there to pray for my mother. I was always scared that something might happen to her and we would be left all alone.

I still have no clear understanding of how time passed during these years. My father had been held in a Russian war prison, and when he came back to Germany, probably in 1946, he came to visit us regularly, but he did not live with us. His visits were the happiest hours I can remember from that period. He always brought food, read poems to us children, and sang beautiful operetta songs. My mother spoke little. For most of my childhood, I remember her being depressed or sad. I have no memories of seeing her laugh until much later in her life.

Eventually, we were moved to a different house where we had a small second room with running water, a place to cook, and a corner with a table and chairs. Again, the owner did not like being forced to house a woman with three small children. I was terribly scared of him. When I came home from school, he would stand at the entry to make sure I didn't bring any dirt into the house with me.

My father's visits continued in this new home, and so did the happy hours with him. On one beautiful summer day in 1950, my father came to take my brother to a nearby lake to teach him how to swim. I remember this day like it was yesterday: sometime in the afternoon, the lady from our grocery store, one of the few with a telephone, came to tell my mother that there had been an accident. I was standing

Top (left): Hessel and her  
older brother, Dieter,  
in Garmisch, in the 1950s;  
(right) Hessel in Germany,  
date unknown



Hessel (center) and industrialist Ernst Wilhelm Sachs (left) in Salzburg, Austria, in the 1960s

On weekends, I started to visit museums and soon developed a desire to learn more about everything I saw.

In the 1960s, during my first visit to Vienna, I discovered the paintings of Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele at the Belvedere Museum. I instantly connected to the works' beauty and sadness. It was in front of those works that I felt the great sense of passion and the emotional power that art can trigger. It helped me to connect to my own suppressed feelings. The experience in Vienna added a whole new dimension to my understanding of art, especially drawings and portraits. It was like discovering friends that I could talk to without saying a word.

I believe that my childhood experiences are the reason I have embraced art the way I have, and why I became a collector. In a world that has totally changed since my youth, I continue to visit gallery and museum shows, and I continue to collect, as I have done for more than fifty years. I still trust that art and the artist's vision will introduce me to a contemporary world—the way young people experience today's world—one that I would not get to know without art. My passion for art has never waned and, most importantly, that passion has taught me to understand myself, and the world around me.

As a child, to find relief from my fears and loneliness, I would go to my beautiful baroque church or to King Ludwig's castle, to live in my imaginary world. Today, my art-filled home is my sanctuary, and when I sit surrounded by my artworks, I think of the Schloss Linderhof and I am happy, because, as a child, art taught me the importance of learning to dream about what life can be.