

Ich heisse Maria Helene Otrechnik Bengel. On April 13, 1926 I made my first appearance in this world. I was the first born of Wilhelm and Janina Otrechnik. My father was a coal miner and my mother was a housewife. We called Beuthen, Oberschlesian home. Beuthen was a German industrial coal mining city on the border of Germany and Poland. Beuthen was a part of Germany until after the war. When the Russians took over the East there were parts of Poland they wanted for themselves so they gave Obersilesian and other parts to Poland. After WWII, children had to go to Polish schools and learn to speak Polish.

I was the oldest and only daughter growing up with two brothers, Hans, the youngest and Josel. My childhood was like any other German girl. I enjoyed school and was pretty good at sports since we were required to participate in Physical Education, which included swimming. As a young person growing up, certain memories stick with you and you recall them fondly throughout your life. For me, my father played the violin and I loved listening in the evenings as he and his friends entertained us with music.

In my later years, whenever I would hear "Ave Maria," I couldn't help but get teary-eyed remembering how beautiful my dad played that song. When he was sent to a Russian Labor Camp during the war, he couldn't take his violin and he vowed never to play it again.

As a young teenager, I loved going to the opera and the theatre. I never lost this love of the cultural arts and I rarely missed an opportunity to attend plays and dinner theatre in St. Johns or PW and later on, at the Wharton Center in East Lansing..

After the war started, everything had to be purchased with ration stamps, like gas, food and clothing. My friends and I got used to the idea of having our clothes mended over and over rather than being able to purchase something new. Growing up we were never allowed outdoors without shoes because our feet would be black from the soot floating in the air from the nearby coal mines. We lived in an apartment building in the back on the first floor. Before school every morning my job was to wash down the windowsills outside our apartment which were always covered in black soot. It wasn't so bad since everyone else, including shop keepers, were doing the same thing. It was also my responsibility to check on old Mrs. Miller upstairs, and help her out with anything that she couldn't do herself.

In 1942, when I was 16, I left school and started working as a stenographer/typist along with my good friend, Lieze. I enjoyed this work and was able to contribute to my family's financial needs. Although I went to work and life seemed somewhat normal, Germany was in the throes of major upheaval. We heard rumors of terrible events and wide spread persecutions. For the most part we were clueless. Germany had undergone some major positive growth under Hitler's influence. People were working again and the country's infrastructure was being rebuilt after suffering devastation during WWI. We were told we were winning the war, all the while the Russians were moving toward Germany and the Americans and French were fighting Germans in France. During the war years, our windows had to be covered so no flicker of light would be visible when the English started bombing our city at night and the Americans were bombing during the day. Nothing was more frightening than hearing the sirens go off in the dead of night. Everyone scrambled to the basement where we had a bomb shelter. Huddled with other families from the apartment building we prayed and waited until the second siren sounded the "all clear." These bombing raids continued for months and it wasn't unusual to sleep in your clothes, knowing you might be running again for your lives. One such raid hit our home. We emerged from the shelter to find the entire back of our apartment complex in rubble. The front apartments were untouched and we soon discovered that the only spot untouched in our apartment was where our shoes were lined up. Those of us now homeless moved in with the neighbors

whose apartments survived the bomb blast. Our landlord upstairs took us in, all 5 of us. Since he only had 2 bedrooms, I slept on the couch and my brothers on the floor.

It was on January 19, 1945 that my life forever changed. Neighbors came to alert my family that the Russians were on the outskirts of town and were looking for people whose names were on a list. At a young age, all boys and girls were required to become a member of a club, the Hitler Youth. It was the youth organization of the Nazi Party in Germany. We wore uniforms and attended rallies. We performed community services such as making toys for kids, working in hospitals, even digging trenches which we thought were never going to be used. Adolf Hitler believed that the support of the youth was vital to the future of the third Reich. In December 1936, membership of the Hitler Youth became virtually compulsory for all boys and girls aged over 10 years. Girls aged 14-21, of which I fell into that age group, were also taught good health practices as well as how to become good mothers and housewives. They also learned about Nazi views on racial purity and anti-semitism. My name was on that list. My parents were told there was a last train leaving the city that night. After leaving my friend Lieze at her door, I headed home from a typical day of work. As I walked into the apartment, still living with our landlord, I could tell something was terribly wrong. My mother was adamant that I pack a suitcase and leave to catch this train. She assured me that the Russians wouldn't bother an old lady like herself. She was 41. But I would be in their crosshairs. I was devastated and left amid tears and goodbyes with mom's words giving me some comfort. "We'll see each other in a couple of weeks". I knew in that moment I would have to convince Lieze to come with me. Arriving at her house, her mom did not know where she was. It crossed my mind that she had left without me. I was so hurt and more scared than ever. I hurried on to the train station alone where throngs of people were scrambling to get on the train. Finding a seat, I asked someone where we were going. No one seemed to know, just West - away from the Russians. When the train stopped at a town called Gerlitz, I got out while others traveled on. Growing up my family knew a couple who lived in this town and I managed to find my way to their house. I lived with them for a short time until a friend I had met while in this town came with a warning that the Russians were advancing. My mother's words echoed in my ears and at that moment I realized they were never coming true, "we'll see each other in a couple of weeks". My friend told me there was a convoy of trucks taking the families of German service men farther West. My friend convinced me to stand with the hundreds of families in the hope that someone would take pity on me. The soldiers called off the names of families. I was the only one left standing on the street. Two soldiers realized I had no family and thankfully allowed me to squeeze in with their families instead of sending me away. Once on the convoy, I realized I would have had no choice but to leave this city walking like hundreds of others with wagons and strollers loaded down with their few worldly possessions. We drove for days. Everywhere streets were crowded with people and entire families fleeing for their lives. Bombing continued throughout this journey.

Finally the convoy stopped in Bavaria located in southern Germany. It was here Germans living in this area were ordered to take in "refugees" as we were now called. An older woman who had only a small apartment chose me. I called her home my home. This whole journey, from the time I said goodbye to my family until I was plucked out of a crowd, was 3 calendar months but a lifetime to me. The German Army-Work Corp, with headquarters in the vicinity, needed clerical help. I was advised to take the position. Three months later, the advancing American Army occupied Bavaria. I lost my job and the German Army-Work Corp left for the mountains. I saw no point in going along. Being persistent and needing a job, I moved in with a young family in Munich and worked as a nanny for 3 young boys. I was lucky to be part of the Hartmann family. This family remains to this day dear friends of our family. Coincidentally, the matriarchs of our two families are both named Maria. During these many months living in Bavaria, I had no idea what happened to my family and best friend, Lieze. I kept sending letters to my home address, not realizing that Russia had given that territory, where we

once lived, to Poland. The name of my hometown as well as all street names had been changed to Polish. Some kind hearted postman, who knew the former street names, finally delivered one of my letters and contact was made. I found my best friend, Lieze, and a reunion was set up. This friendship lasted throughout the rest of my life. Shortly after this reunion, life for me took another unexpected turn. I counted my blessings to be in the American occupied zone instead of the Eastern Russian Zone. Russians had the reputation of being ruthless, and uncivilized. Every day after work, I would walk home which usually took about an hour. I noticed this American soldier standing guard at a little shed. Private Julius Bengel stayed on after the war ended in May 1945, censoring mail for the army, managing a PX, and performing guard duty. He would often smile as I walked by and one day asked if he could walk me home. We became friends and he was accepted into our German family circle. If it hadn't been for Julius and his giving heart, my German family and friends would have starved after the war. He saw to it that we had the basic necessities to get by. Julius proposed to me and we were engaged at Christmastime, 1946. Julius had been discharged from the army and had taken a civilian job working for the US government. Times were getting better. We were married in 1947 and our first daughter, Dorothe, was born in March of 1948. You may think we just boarded a plane to begin a new life in Westphalia, Michigan. No one realized how many months, or even years, it took before permission was granted to enter the USA for any European woman married or intending to marry an American soldier. I saved all the correspondence. Letters were written from Julius' commanding officer and soldiers who served with him vouching for his character. German women who worked with Julius after the war wrote affidavits. My mother and father and friend Lieze were contacted by the German government and asked to supply information and character analysis on my behalf. The older woman who took me in as a refugee and the Hartmann family were also asked to supply documents. My father-in-law's father, Theodore Bengel, wrote several letters asking for permission to allow me and my daughter to enter the US. Then we had to deal with the demands of the US government, 3000 miles away. The priest serving in Westphalia, wrote a letter confirming Julius' status as a catholic. My father-in-law, Benny Bengel, had to declare the value of his assets, land and finances and guarantee that Julius would have employment as a farmer when he returned. The bank of Fowler issued a document revealing Julius' savings, value of his bonds and any potential army bonds he would be entitled to. Keep in mind that all of this correspondence had to travel back and forth across an ocean. Translations from Polish, German and English had to be written up. Most problematic of all was the fact that most of Germany and Europe was in ruins; buildings, offices, streets, entire towns. Communication in general sometimes was non-existent. I had to have in my possession a valid visa issued by the American Consul abroad. I had to undergo a thorough physical exam to declare that I was healthy. I had to pledge that as an alien (me) coming to the US, I was married to a citizen who had served honorably in the Armed Forces of the US during WWII or that a valid marriage would take place within three months of coming to the United States. Lastly, the prospective American citizen's spouse, Julius, had to furnish a bond in an amount sufficient to cover the cost of deportation of the alien if the marriage was not concluded or recognized. I don't know how many months it took, but eventually Dorothe and I boarded a plane and arrived in New York City. My father-in-law, Benny, took the train to the Big City, with pictures in hand, met us for the first time and accompanied us back to Westphalia, Michigan on Memorial Day, 1948. Since Julius could not leave Germany at this time, we lived with Theodore Bengel and his very large family on the homestead, which is where Ted and Brenda Bengel live today.

In August of 1948, Julius came home. It was the first time he'd set foot in Westphalia since he left for boot camp in Texas in 1944. Our little family of three moved into our home on Centerline Road with my new father-in-law who lived with us until his death in 1973 at the age of 83. My youngest son Jeff and his wife Tammy now reside on our centennial farm. Julius and I raised seven children on that small 80 acre farm which we ended up purchasing from Benny, my father-in-law in 1964.



When I arrived in the US, I didn't know a word of English but since Julius and most Westphalia people spoke German I felt very comfortable. It was when I realized my children were hearing and starting to speak German that I had to learn English for the sake of my children. Since there was no tv in those days, I learned much of my English from listening to soap operas on the radio. It was my strong wish to become a citizen so I enrolled in a correspondence course through the University of Michigan to earn my citizenship. In 1951 I became a US citizen, having fulfilled the requirements of being able to speak English, have a knowledge of the Constitution and be able to sign documents written in English.

I immersed myself into my new life as a mother and a wife. But I was driven to achieve more. I earned my high school diploma and was among the first graduating class from the new PW High School. I joined the Christian Mothers and was a member of the Home School Council at St. Mary's. I knew early on that I had to become more self sufficient so I enrolled in a Drivers Ed. Class to earn my drivers license. I was a voracious reader. I never threw away newspapers or magazines until I had thoroughly looked them over, even though there were piles sitting next to my chair. Cooking and baking were my passions, and I can't tell you how many magazines with recipes along with recipes clipped from newspapers I collected in a drawer that I was determined to try. Over the years we were honored to host the priests and nuns in our home for an authentic German meal.

When the older children went off to school, I landed my first job. With my son Dave in a stroller, I walked across the road to Leo and Marcella Wacker's Slaughter House (a meat market of sorts). There I learned the meat industry, from butchering the animal, to its preparation : cutting, packaging and selling. Leo and Marcella became my substitute mom and dad and my childrens' "grandparents". When a supermarket position came up in the meat department in Westphalia, I applied was hired and worked there for three years.

I also prided myself on being a life long learner. When adult education classes started popping up at the high school I enrolled in everything and anything from ceramics to bookkeeping, typing, to macrame, cake decorating, knitting, crocheting and some academic classes. Everything piqued my interest. Germans are known for their hard work ethic and I was no exception. I was never one to shy away from hard work. Taking care of seven children, a husband and father-in-law was more than a full time job, especially in the 50's and 60's. There were not a lot of modern conveniences or short cuts in cooking and baking that are customary today. We always had a huge garden with a multitude of vegetables and fruits that I canned and stored in our Michigan basement. Animals were raised and butchered for the meat that we put on the table. My father-in-law was a salesman of sorts and sold certified seed to other farmers as a side business. Since Benny was often on the road, I wore the salesman hat accompanying farmers to the grainery, explaining the various bushels of seeds, making the transactions and then logging everything meticulously into the farm books.

As hard as we worked, we played hard too. I loved to dance and as often as we could we joined other couples at German dance clubs and other music gatherings. The one down side, I could never get Julius out there to dance not even at his three daughters' weddings. Many weekend nights you could find Julius and me playing cards with other couples. We belonged to quite a few different card gangs and I quickly learned the various card games people around Westphalia played. If the card gang consisted of family, kids were always part of the mix. Cousins were as close as brothers and sisters in those days. My kids were always spending time at the homes of Helen and Jerome Barker and Jean and Bernie Bengel, especially during summer vacations. Of course, the nieces and nephews were right back at our house too.

From the time I said goodbye to my close knit family in 1945, I never stopped wondering what became of them. Any mail sent to Germany was of course censored. When the area was given to Poland by the Russians my home town became known as "Bytom". I continued my letter writing campaign and finally, my letters reached my parents. They were living in an area now referred to as "behind the Iron Curtain". Common items like coffee, sugar, chocolate, cigarettes, nylon hosiery were unavailable to those living in postwar regions so I began sending packages with these items and whatever cash we could spare to my relatives. I learned that my brother Hans got married and had two children. He was determined to leave Bytom and try for a better life in West Germany. For that to happen, he had to find a sponsor who would pay for him and his family's departure with western currency. After brother Josel was drafted, no one heard from him for thirteen years. Everyone assumed he had died in the war. After being discharged from the German army, he had settled in West Germany as well. At some point, my brothers raised enough money to have our parents relocate from "behind the Iron Curtain" to the city where they now live in Essen Germany. Thankfully, people living "behind the Iron Curtain" were not prisoners like the people in East Germany and could have someone sponsor their departure from the area now held by the Polish. It wasn't until 1964 that I made my first trip back to Germany and reunited with my family who I hadn't seen in 20 years. It was then that I discovered what fate had befallen my family after I left which of course my parents could never write about since mail was censored in both directions. Spending time with them in 1964, I learned when the Russians advanced into our city in January 1945, my father had been taken to Russia to work in the fields. They were fed little, mostly tomatoes, and worked and lived in the most inhumane conditions. After sometime, my father was released by the authorities and sent home to die. As my mother tells it, no one recognized my father as he came trudging down the street in our hometown. He was bloated and barely able to walk. Only my mother knew him and with her loving care, nursed him back to health. He became, from that time on, an accomplished gardener who was hired by prominent people in his new hometown of Essen. He did pick up his violin and bow again and lovingly played the melodies I remembered growing up. Early 1945, my youngest brother was working somewhere west dismantling factories and railroad tracks to be shipped to Russia. My mother was part of a work detail assigned to unload railroad cars. Suffering from diabetes, she sometimes struggled to keep up. A soldier once hit her with his rifle butt in the stomach when she couldn't get up from having fallen. She was saved by a young German doctor who just happened to be the son of our landlord from our old home town. Later, my mother found a job in a bakery. Instead of being paid, my mother was allowed to take the left-over bread and cakes home. Often my mother would empty her bag of food on the way home giving the little she had to German prisoners. She always hoped and believed that if she gave generously to the German prisoners, someone would be kind to her missing oldest son, Josel. Nobody had heard from him since December 1944. After the war was over, my youngest brother returned home and was working in the mines. Being 16 years old and headstrong, he would canvas the neighborhood and collect food for the German prisoners working in the mines. These revelations and more were heartbreaking for me to hear. But to everything there is an end. My mother visited me in 1969 and died in 1975. My father died in 1973. My older brother, Josel, visited me in 1982 and died a few months later, Hans, his wife and some family members visited in 1981 and Hans, at the age of 60, died in 1990.

In later years, when the kids were grown and Julius was retired from Oldsmobile, other interests opened up. Evelyn Weiland, a dear friend, suggested I might be able to help her translate the many church records from German into English. Many of these older records were written in the old German script, impossible to read, unless you were brought up learning this style which is no longer used. Evelyn and I, along with our husbands, Leon and Julius, made a great team.



One activity that held great appeal to me as I got older was visiting community members and friends who were then in Assisted Living Facilities or Nursing Homes. Before these visits, I would spend a day in a whirlwind of baking. My pistachio coffee cakes were baked, 5 or 6 at a time, and put in the freezer until we made the rounds visiting people. Of course, Julius was my chauffeur and he enjoyed the visits as much as I did.

Another past time that Julius and I took advantage of was a program called Elderhostel. Elderhostels were held at college campuses all over the US and abroad. They were programs offered primarily to retired people where you could exercise your mind, as well as your body. We lived in the dormitories and took advantage of classes and activities geared to the locale where the colleges were located. We went white water rafting in Colorado and hiked the Grand Canyon, just to name a few. The trip I remember so fondly was the Grandparent/Grandchildren Elderhostel held on Mustang Island in Port Aransas, Texas. We took our two granddaughters, Jessica and Stacy, and spent a week horseback riding, swimming, exploring, socializing with other grandparents and kids and taking academic classes all while living on "Island time". This program has evolved over its 34 years in existence. It is now open to adults of all ages and has a new title reflecting its appeal to all adults, especially baby boomers. "Exploritas", as it is now called, is still an "Adventure in Lifelong Learning".

In November of 1989, the month the Berlin Wall came down, my daughter, Nancy and I traveled back to Germany to visit my terminally ill brother, Hans. Little did I realize this would be my last trip to my homeland. The following February, Julius and I had planned a cruise to Alaska. Life again threw me a curveball. Shortly before this next travel adventure, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Following treatment and many prayers, I had hoped this horrible disease had been defeated. Unfortunately, my life as I knew it would once again change dramatically. After the Grandparent Elderhostel trip in July of 1993, I learned my cancer returned. Julius was my constant caregiver during those 5 difficult years until my death in 1995. My daughter, Nancy, returned to the area from St. Louis, Missouri to help Julius and my oldest daughter, Dorothe manage this new normal. There were numerous doctor visits, chemotherapy and radiation sessions, not to mention the daily chores that needed attention. During those years, many friends and family members often came to see me. I had good days and not so good days and more often than not my visitors would carry on the conversations as I sat there too tired or depressed to acknowledge their time spent with me.. Those last few days in December, I was no longer able to communicate but felt the presence and heard the whispers of my loved ones. At the age of 69, I left this earthly life from my second Westphalia home at 119 E. Main Street on December 7, 1995 surrounded by my children and grandchildren. Today, September 2017, reflecting on my life, I realize I truly live on through the lives of my 7 children, 8 grandchildren and 13 great grand children.