



THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN
LISTENING SERIES

A House for Reconciliation

by Marissa Melton

Marissa Melton: I'm Marissa Melton. This story starts in Berlin, Germany, in the early 20th century. There was a girl named Elsie Alexander, who wanted to be a journalist. Her father, Alfred Alexander, was a prominent physician in the German capital – his clients included Albert Einstein and Marlene Dietrich.

In 1927, the family built a vacation home by the shore of Groß Glienicke Lake, about 45 minutes' drive from central Berlin. They had weekend houseguests and parties. Elsie described the house as a place where one could feel young and beautiful.

Elsie and her family were Jewish. By the mid-1930s, she had been kicked out of Heidelberg University. Things had gotten harder for her father, too, and the family was forced to sell the practice and move to England. But Elsie remembered fondly her time at the lake house.

Thomas Harding: She called it her soul place.

Marissa Melton: That's writer Thomas Harding. He is one of Elsie's grandchildren. He spoke to me at the Lake House. You can hear construction going on in the background.

Thomas Harding: So Elsie was this larger-than-life character. She was fierce. And she loved the lake house. This is where she grew up. Her father built it.

Marissa Melton: The lake house was in an extraordinary location, right on the border between the city of Berlin and the state of Brandenburg. During the Cold War, this was the border between West Berlin and East Germany. After the Cold War ended and the Berlin Wall came down, the villagers of Groß Glienicke began researching the Jewish families who had made up 25 percent of the village before World War II. They contacted Thomas Harding, who had mentioned his family's lake home in a previous book. Harding researched the history of the Alexander House and ended up writing the book *The House by the Lake*. Published in 2015, it became a bestseller in the U.K.

Thomas Harding: Yeah, they were saying you need to come back and have a look. They'd been doing research into the Jewish community of Groß Glienicke, including my family. And without

that acknowledgement of history, we couldn't have the reconciliation. Without truth, you can't have reconciliation. And for my family it was very important.

Marissa Melton: The book describes the Alexanders' happy times on the lake shore, and what happened to the families who lived in the house after the Alexanders left. Those families saw fighting in the village between, the Germans and the Russians in the final days of the war. That was followed by a brutal Russian occupation. One resident described those years as 'falling into hell.'

In 1961, the Berlin Wall went up. In 1989, it fell.

And in 1993, Elsie returned to the lake house. She brought her grandchildren, most of whom were in their late teens or early twenties. Harding was 23. He brought his video camera.

Thomas Harding: She hadn't been back since she had left in 1936. And she started down the sandy lane, with her cigarette in one hand, and bright red lipstick and a handbag, and we're met with this barking dog. And this man came out with this floppy hat: Well, what are you doing here? And she said: Well, we're the Alexanders. I used to live here. Oh, the Alexanders! Come in, come in!

Marissa Melton: They had a good visit, comparing notes in German. In Harding's video, Elsie and the man who lived in the house – his name was Wolfgang Kuehne – chatter and share pictures, while the young adults in the room stand around a little awkwardly. One of the grandchildren translates the German into English for the others. Harding says the lakeside view from the house was a shock.

Thomas Harding: Outside, he said: Yeah, and that's where the Berlin Wall was. And I didn't realize until that trip that the Berlin Wall had been built between the house and the lake.

Marissa Melton: Harding's American fiancée Debora – now his wife – was also there in 1993. She said the visit gave her some insight on what it's like to live through a war.

Debora Harding: I think what was most moving to me is, being from the States – and I find this living in England, as well – I never understood how lucky we were to not have the destruction and the trauma on our homeland.

Marissa Melton: She, too, was struck by how closely the house stood to the dividing line between East Germany and West Berlin. The house was on the East German side, about 10 meters from the border. The wall hadn't been torn down yet.

Debora Harding: It was insane. You'd look out at the view and the wall was right there. You couldn't see the lake.

Marissa Melton: Despite that unpleasant discovery, Harding says it was a good visit.

Thomas Harding: Walking away, she said to us that she was pleased that the house was being well taken care of.

Marissa Melton: Elsie died just over a decade later, and it was 20 years before Harding visited again, in 2013. This time, the house was vacant. And it had been for years.

Thomas Harding: So, when I came back in 2013 I was really shocked, because the house was in terrible shape. It was overgrown by bushes, the windows were broken, water was leaking through the roof. It was impossible to get around the house, it was overgrown so much. Inside

the house, it was filled with – I was able to get through one of the broken windows – and inside, it was filled with trash. There was broken furniture everywhere. And in one room, which was clearly being used as a drug den, there were mattresses and old sleeping bags and bent silver spoons and wax.

Marissa Melton: So that was a big shock. And worse, his family had signed away the house to the city of Potsdam years earlier. It was slated for demolition.

But Harding, a few of his relatives, and the villagers of Groß Glienicke came up with a plan to save the little home. Make it useful. A museum about the past, but also a workshop where people from different backgrounds could spend time and connect with one another. A place where divisions are overcome.

Harding says not all of his family members were on board at the beginning.

Thomas Harding: My family were – they were: What are you doing, are you crazy? You know, we've left, we don't want anything to do with Germany. You know, growing up, we didn't buy German washing machines, we didn't visit Germany. You know, we'd go to France or Italy, but we'd never come to Germany. We'd never buy a German car. So there was that. There were some people who were like: How can you do this from England? You don't speak German, you don't live there, what are you doing? You know, practical things. And then other people, my father included, were saying: do you really expect me to put my hand in my pocket to try and fix this up?

Marissa Melton: Harding says the reason his family could make peace with the idea is that the villagers of Groß Glienicke had made the first move. They had begun the research about the Jewish families who had lived in the village before the war.

Thomas Harding: If there hadn't been an acknowledgment of what actually happened, the real traumas ... we'd lost family members – they'd been murdered during the Holocaust. Buildings had been stolen. We'd been kicked out of the country. If those traumas hadn't been recognized, we couldn't have been involved.

Marissa Melton: Now, Alexander Haus is in the midst of its transformation. The rooms are pretty much bare, but new doors and windows are going in. The fireplace, the centerpiece of the home, has been cleaned up. It bears a set of blue and white Dutch tiles collected by Elsie's father, Dr. Alexander.

Thomas Harding: So the house is currently being renovated. We're taking it back to how it was before the war. So we're taking out all the wallpaper, which was put in during the East German time. We're stripping back to the wood that used to be there. We're putting in the walls that had been taken down. We're putting a porch back up, which had been removed. We're making it so it can be used as a place of education, a museum – where people can visit and can understand and learn about the history.

Marissa Melton: But not just history. It's also meant to be a space for dealing with differences that exist in Germany in the present day.

Thomas Harding: It's not just focusing on the Jewish history, but also on the East German history. Focusing not just on those Nazis, but also the Stasi. But also it talks about what happens today. How are we going to deal with a million newly arrived refugees in Germany? How do we learn the lessons of the past so that the Muslim population is not persecuted the same way the Jewish population was?

Marissa Melton: Thomas Harding's sister Amanda Harding has worked all over the world on consensus-building projects, teaching people to think and work collaboratively.

There's a group of nearly a hundred refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere housed at a former military barracks in Groß Glienicke. Through Alexander Haus, Amanda Harding and others have arranged gatherings centered on food, art, and sports to help the refugees integrate with the locals. They have also hosted student discussion groups to talk about the history of the home and the issues surrounding it. And once the renovation is complete, they hope to have an artist- or writer-in-residence program – someone who has been a refugee and can tell his or her story.

Amanda Harding: It's really all about trying to bring people together who normally would not have a conversation together. And creating the space to allow them to do that. To allow them to talk about who they are, where they come from, and where collectively they see their future.

Marissa Melton: That's Amanda. She says history plays an important part in the discussions about how to handle things today.

Amanda Harding: And that's what I'm particularly interested in. I'm particularly interested in how this place and this sense of place, where so much has happened over 70, 80 years ... or really since the late 1920s, can actually use that history, the good and the bad – the history of refuge, the history of war, the history of conflict, of difference, of exclusion – to actually become something which is much more positive and looks towards a more cohesive, tolerant, inclusive future.

Marissa Melton: She says the house is a place where people of different religions can connect.

Amanda Harding: There's a really strong interfaith component in what we are doing. In what we're planning to do. Even if that's a hard thing to do in the current climate. And that's what I'm saying, you can't be shy about that. And so it's not just about being Jewish, it's about being Jewish, being Muslim, being Christian, being Buddhist. It's about different belief systems. But it grows from our ability to be able to anchor in real history.

[MUSIC FROM SERVICE]

Marissa Melton: Two other friends of Alexander Haus – a rabbi and a member of the local church council – recently held a joint service at the centuries-old village church, mingling the traditions of Judaism and Christianity. During the service the congregation recites a creed written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, an activist pastor who lost his life in 1945 because he opposed the Nazi government.

[CREED IN GERMAN, MARISSA MELTON VOICEOVER ENGLISH] I believe that God can and will generate good out of everything, even out of the worst evil. For that, he needs people who allow that everything that happens fits into a pattern for good.

Afterward, they sat down to talk about what they are trying to accomplish with Alexander Haus.

Rabbi Stuart Altshuler, who's American, is the rabbi at Belsize Square Synagogue, a London-based congregation founded by German refugees. He is one of the links connecting that Jewish community in London with the congregation of the [protestant] church in Groß Glienicke.

Stuart Altshuler: And to the family, it meant a lot in terms of what our community means in London. Because it was founded not only by the Alexanders, but other people who had to leave Germany, escaping the horrors of the Holocaust. Those were the lucky ones who got out

beforehand. So restoring that history and that connection here is very meaningful for me, both because of the personal connection and also because of the Jewish experience.

Marissa Melton: Moritz Groening's family has a home in Groß Glienicke. He has been working on Alexander Haus from the German side.

Moritz Groening: And I may say, you know – if you have one end of the rope, that's this house I may say I have the other end of the rope, actually coming not through the family to the house, but through the house to the family.

Marissa Melton: He describes the initial awkwardness between members of the family and members of the community on the first cleanup day in 2014. It was attended by Thomas Harding's father – the man who said he didn't want to shell out to fix up the lake house. After a day of working together with dozens of villagers, which was an awkward situation, given the language barriers, Frank Harding – who had grown up in England – answered a question from a villager in German.

Moritz Groening: Everybody looked at him and said: Oh you speak German! And he said, ja natürlich – of course I speak German. And that broke the ice. And that was the starting point for the project and the community. Of course, it hasn't been an easy journey since then, but it's a very powerful journey, I would say.

Marissa Melton: Altshuler and Groening see the house as a way for the descendants of Jewish refugees to reconnect with their German roots.

Stuart Altshuler: It's very important for the Jewish world to know that there's redemption, that there's a sense of moving ahead, of building new bridges. Because Germany, to many Jews, is a place of uncertainty. We all know what happened in the past. This presents a new light for the future.

Marissa Melton: Groening has traveled to London to visit with the members of the Belsize Square Synagogue. He said meeting the members of the congregation solidified his faith in the mission of Alexander Haus. It also convinced members of the synagogue that he was someone they could trust.

Moritz Groening: When I came to Belsize Square, this was – I realized – really what things meant to people. Having known that we started it, and then I came there, gave a lot of confidence to other Jewish families there. And that was one of my motivation factors, too. I'd say listen, this is a place where people who have long been very uncertain whether they can reconnect, can just come and get a bit more comfort, and take that as a starting point. And you see that it is the right time for that.

Marissa Melton: One person who has taken that message to heart is Sam Harding. She's Thomas and Debora Harding's daughter. A couple of years ago she and her dad acquired German citizenship through a program that restores German nationality to people whose families fled the country during the Nazi regime. Sam initially traveled to Berlin with her dad on a research trip a few years ago. At the time, she didn't want to go. But once she got there, she says she fell in love with the city.

In 2018 she finished a gap year, in which she returned to Berlin to study German and explore her roots.

Sam Harding: And so I packed my bag, I emailed some people, I said do you know anyone I can stay with. And I found somewhere to stay, and I stuck it out for eight months. A trip which was only meant to be, I think, two months in the beginning.

Marissa Melton: Sam spoke to me by telephone from her university in the U.K. She said she is used to having a dual identity. She has lived exactly half her life in America and half her life in England. But identifying as a German – that's new.

Sam Harding: I thought German was a kind of a funny language. If you'd told me three years ago that I would have spent eight months learning German, I would have laughed. I would have had no idea why that would be a reality.

Marissa Melton: As you might expect, her plan to live in Berlin for a bit for college was not universally embraced by her family.

Sam Harding: I didn't have too many conversations with my extended family about moving to Germany, kind of preemptively. Because I was worried that there was going to be lots of pushback that wasn't articulated in a very upfront way. I thought there would be conversations about: it's not safe, or you're too young, or these things. When underlying it all was: Don't go back to Germany after what they did to us.

Marissa Melton: The Harding family came around after they saw how well she was doing in Germany. But it wasn't all easy. She gave English-language tours of Berlin for a while, to earn extra money. But regular visits to the vast Holocaust memorial in the center of Berlin, and to the site of Hitler's bunker a few blocks away, began to wear on her. After a couple of months, she stopped. But in Berlin, despite those brutal reminders of hate, she found joy. She found it in that video of her grandmother's trip back to the lake house from 1993.

Sam Harding: I remember watching a video that my father had filmed in the '90s when his grandfather took them back to the Alexander House. And she's speaking German to this man in the house, and his cousin James is translating for everyone. And I remember watching the video in April or June, something like that – and I remember understanding my grandmother, and understanding what she was saying, my great-grandmother. And I called my father up and I said: I can understand Elsie. And he said, no, and I said: Yes, and it's amazing. And he said, I'm so jealous.

Marissa Melton: Sam has found a lot of meaning in going to the same places and doing the same things her German ancestors did. It really hit home last spring, when she and some friends took the train from Berlin to the lake house to attend an event there. It was hot when they got there, so they went straight for the water. And then a sudden realization stopped her cold.

Sam Harding: There's a beautiful kind of circularity about all this, about my family in the '30s driving down from Berlin and arriving at the lake house and immediately running into the water because it's so hot. And now here I am in 2018, kind of learning German, with a German passport, coming down from the city with my German friends, to engage in the exact same activity. That's kind of when I had that – oh wow, this is a big thing that's going on – moment.

Marissa Melton: Thomas Harding, too, finds satisfaction in reestablishing a place and a purpose for his family in Germany.

Thomas Harding: My great-grandfather built this as a place of joy. You know, they used to have their friends over. They used to go for swims in the lake. They used to have parties here. He used to grow vegetables. This is not meant to be some dry, quiet, somber museum. Our whole idea here is to have a place where people come and get together and try and see their similarities as well as their differences.

Marissa Melton: For more information about Alexander Haus, go to W-W-W dot A-L-E-X-A-N-D-E-R-H-A-U-S, all one word, dot org.

For THE BIG POND, I'm Marissa Melton.

The Big Pond - A U.S.-German Listening Series is brought to you by the Year of German American Friendship (Deutschlandjahr USA), a comprehensive collaborative initiative funded by the German Federal Office, implemented by the Goethe-Institut, with support from the Federation of German Industries (BDI).



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