

6. Richard Müller, interview by Michael Corley, Bountiful, Utah, March 14, 2008.
7. Heino Müller, interview by Michael Corley, Salt Lake City, February 29, 2008.
8. Rose Eichler Wood, “Biography of Rose Wood” (unpublished), 8–9; private collection.
9. Lilly Eichler Love, telephone interview with Jennifer Heckmann, April 2, 2008.
10. Charlotte Schulz Bever, interview by the author in German, Schwerin, Germany, June 11, 2007.
11. See the Wobesde Branch chapter for more about Rose’s experiences in 1945.
12. Wilma Müller Voge Taylor, “Life Story” (unpublished autobiography, 1985); private collection.
13. Margarete Damasch Eichler, autobiography, 70–71. The Boy Scout program in Germany was dissolved by government order in 1934. The twelfth article of faith reads as follows: “We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.”
14. Eichler, autobiography, 60–61.
15. The Celle Branch was part of the Hanover District of the West German Mission. No other soldier from the East German Mission is known to have had a similar opportunity. Most were totally isolated from the Church while away from home.
16. Eichler, autobiography, 80–81.
17. Ernst Eichler, interview by the author, Spanish Fork, Utah, March 31, 2006.
18. Eichler, autobiography, 91.
19. *Ibid.*, 100.
20. *Ibid.*, 115.

ELBING BRANCH

The city of Elbing is located forty miles east-southeast of Danzig. To attend district conferences in the Free City of Danzig (the center of the Church district and German territory until 1919), Elbing Saints needed to cross an international border.¹

Elbing (now Elblag, Poland) was a city of about sixty-five thousand people in 1939. Among them and living nearby were sixty-one members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They held their meetings in the second Hinterhaus at Adolf Hitler

Strasse 11. Young Meta Semrau (born 1924) recalled using a long but not large room as the chapel and having one other small room for a second class. She recalled that attendance at meetings may have been about twenty members and friends.²

Gertraude Bsumek (born 1937) lived with her family at Skaggerakstrasse 2. She recalled taking a long streetcar ride downtown to church. The family of Edwin and Ella Bsumek had moved to Elbing from Göttingen in western Germany in 1939 and immediately sought out the local branch of the Church.³

Elbing Branch ⁴	1939
Elders	3
Priests	1
Teachers	2
Deacons	2
Other Adult Males	10
Adult Females	34
Male Children	4
Female Children	5
<i>Total</i>	61

Meta Semrau and her mother became members of the Elbing Branch when they moved to Marienwerder—about fifty miles to the south. They had moved from Westphalia in western Germany after the death of Meta’s father. Because it took two hours to get to Elbing by train, the Semraus were not able to attend church very often. They were pleased that the missionaries came to visit them on occasion, but that ended in August 1939 when the missionaries were withdrawn from Germany. Later, Emil Voge (president of the Danzig District) came with his wife, Wilma, to visit the Semrau family in Marienwerder.

In 1938, Meta was fourteen and became a member of the League of German Girls (Bund Deutscher Mädel). About the experience she recalled:

We had to join, but it was the very best [experience] that I ever could have. We didn't talk about politics. We came together every week, and we sang songs, and we talked about all kinds of things—not about Hitler. We made nice trips to the mountains, which were very far away from Marienwerder, and we went on bike trips.

The war caused little stir in Elbing for several years, but family life was subject to significant interruptions. Meta Semrau's two older brothers were both drafted and were gone from home for much of the war. Gertraude Bsumek's father was drafted early in the war and came home only a few times before 1945.

As time went on and it became clear that Germany could lose the war and be invaded, people began to think more about their personal security. For example, Gertraude Bsumek described how they safeguarded their most important documents:

My mother had a baby stroller, in which she kept the critical documents for our family. She buried them down below [the baby], and that baby stroller, of course, went with us wherever we went because we had these little boys, my younger brothers. And that's where she hid the documents.

Meta Semrau recalled that the president of the Elbing Branch was a Brother Scherwinski. He was eventually drafted into the army and came home after losing a leg in combat.

Bad news came to the Semrau family as the third year of the war came to a close. Meta's brother Fritz (twenty-two years old) was killed in battle on August 24, 1942, near Wornisch, Russia. More tragedy befell the family two years later. The elder son, Wilhelm (twenty-eight), contracted malaria and was sent home to a hospital in Marienwerder. He died there and was buried in the late summer of 1944.

Soon after moving to Elbing from her hometown of Tilsit, Waltraut Naujoks Schibblack was called to be a Sunday School

teacher. She was pleased that the branch there still held regular meetings; the Church and her faith constituted hope. As she recalled:

This was also a large branch, but much of the priesthood was gone [drafted] already. All the sisters were very active, and I felt much more of a friendship than in the Tilsit branch. . . . I can remember being able to attend a meeting every Sunday during the war.⁵

The Red Army first set foot upon German soil in the fall of 1944 in East Prussia—just 110 miles east of Elbing. Soon the government encouraged civilians to evacuate to the west. Waltraut Naujoks Schibblack recalled quite clearly how she learned of the evacuation of Elbing:

One day in January 1945, my husband got up from the dinner table and told me that we had to leave. The first six Russian tanks were already in Elbing at that time. I took only the little bag that I used to take with me into the air-raid shelter, and we left. It was January [1945]; we had to walk, and it was very cold. My mother-in-law was not a member of the Church, and she cried for a long time. She did not want to leave her beautiful home and her city. My husband told her that he would leave whether she came with us or not because he knew what would happen [when the invaders came]. She joined us.

Gertraude Bsumek recalled the circumstances surrounding their departure from Elbing:

I remember one day, the word went around the community, "Everybody from such-and-such neighborhood is to meet at this-and-that particular location." In different neighborhoods, all the people went to certain gathering places, as instructed. [City officials] told us the Russians were coming and we had to leave the city. Now, my father was in the army, so he was away. My mother was there, just with us little kids. I was only seven at the time, and my three brothers were all younger. So we packed up what we could and went to the gathering place. My aunt refused to go because she was pregnant, and her husband, my Uncle Paul, was one of those really loyal, never-say-die Germans who believed that they could keep the Russians out of town. It was October 1944.

Gertraude Bsumek tried to help her mother on their trek west. With the two youngest boys in the baby carriage, there was little room for family belongings. As a soldier at the front, her father, Edwin Bsumek, was not there to help. In fact, he had already been taken prisoner, and his family did not know where he was. When they left their apartment, Ella Bsumek and each of her children wore several layers of clothing, both because it was very cold and because it was a convenient way to carry more clothing for the journey. Gertraude described what happened next: “At the railroad station, they stuffed us into a cattle car, but there was no room to sit down. We traveled to the small town of Dahlen near Dresden to my Aunt Lidia, who was not very gracious about taking us in.”

Shortly after their arrival in Dahlen, Ella Bsumek and her four young children were witnesses—albeit from a safe distance—to the firebombing that destroyed Dresden on February 13–14, 1945. According to Gertraude, “We could see the lights in the sky from the fires. And in the other direction, toward Leipzig, another huge city, when the bombers caused fires there, we could see that in the sky, too.”

In the town of Marienwerder, people were leaving their homes and hurrying westward. Just to the west of town was one of the largest rivers in the region, the Vistula. Meta Semrau recalled that her family had often walked out to the river and looked west across the river to Poland. When it came time to leave town, that river very nearly stopped Meta and her mother from getting away before the enemy soldiers came. They had delayed their departure until January 1945 and found that as they approached the Vistula bridge, an army truck pulled up by them, and a German soldier said, “You’re lucky we’re still here. We’ll take you across the bridge, and then we’re going to blow it up to slow the advance of the Russians.”

Making their way north toward Danzig, Meta and her mother were fortunate to find a succession of rides on army vehicles for five miles, then ten miles, then five miles again. They had left nearly all of their possessions back in Marienwerder and knew when they left that they would probably never see their home again. She later wrote, “It was a very, very sad day.” They had heard refugees from farther east telling how the Soviets were destroying homes, and they had no desire to return to see what had happened. From Danzig, they tried to find a train to transport them farther west.

Meta Semrau and her mother always seemed to be just one step ahead of the invaders. They probably would not have survived the hectic journey west had they not been transported many times for short distances by the retreating German soldiers. One night, they knocked on the door of a farmhouse to ask for a bite to eat and the privilege of sleeping in the barn. The farmer’s wife nearly turned them away but then paused and said, “Why not? After all, we’ll probably be refugees like you very soon.”

Meta and her mother crossed most of eastern Germany on their flight and ended up in the town of Stendal, about one hundred miles directly west of Berlin. It was there that the invading enemy arrived just one week before the end of the war. The Semrau family had survived the ordeal but had been totally cut off from the Church for four months. They had not escaped the war without sacrifice, but Meta and her mother recognized the hand of the Lord in preserving their lives, though her two brothers had lost theirs.

The first soldiers to enter Dahlen in April 1945 were Americans. However, they were soon replaced by Soviet occupation forces. Several officers chose the home of Gertraude’s Aunt Lidia for their headquarters and evicted the inhabitants. Had Sister Bsumek been allowed

to stay in that home, she would have been safe from marauding soldiers (who feared their officers). Instead, she moved out and found rooms with a Mrs. Pönitz close by. Now she had to be on guard against Red Army soldiers who were hunting for young women. Gertraude Bsumek was still a child at the time and did not understand the soldiers' intentions, but she did understand fear and physical danger:

One day, a Russian officer tried to rape my mother. I was only seven, and I didn't understand what his purpose was, but I heard her screaming and raced upstairs and burst into the room and saw him with her on the bed. I began to pound him and hit him as hard as I could. Well, he jumped up and backed away and left. And later on, he actually came back and apologized for what he was doing. I was too young; I didn't know what all this meant.

As had happened so many times before, a smiling providence had provided a way for a young mother to escape unspeakable suffering. Another blessing came in the early return of Edwin Bsumek. His English captors had decided to release him after just a few months of incarceration. He was united with his family in September 1945. Several months later, the family was reunited with the Church.

From Elbing, Waltraut Schibblack, her husband, and her in-laws went northwest to Danzig, then west to Kolberg, and then to Stettin, where they were fortunate to find places on a military train to Berlin. They ended up in Bertelsdorf in western Germany, safe and sound.

By the summer of 1946, all of the surviving members of the Elbing Branch had left or been forced out of the area and had found new places to live several hundred miles to the west. The Elbing Branch had ceased to exist.

IN MEMORIAM

The following members of the Elbing Branch did not survive World War II:

Ingrid Margot Herrig b. Elbing, Westpreußen, Preußen 30 Jun 1939; dau. of Paul Richard Herrig and Gisela Margot Martha Bsumek; d. whooping cough 27 Nov 1939 (CHL CR 375 8 #2458, 1939 data; IGI)

Fritz Gustav Semrau b. Nekla, Posen, Preußen 26 May 1920; son of Hermann Emil Semrau and Marie Martha Hildebrandt; bp. 14 Jun 1928; gunner first class; d. B. Stadniza, 10 km south of Semljansk, field hospital 239 24 Aug 1942; bur. Stadniza, Woronesh, Russia (Semrau; *Sonntagsgruss*, no. 20, Oct 1942, 80; IGI; www.volksbund.de)

Wilhelm Hermann Semrau b. 23 Oct 1916 Herne, Westfalen, Preußen; son of Hermann Emil Semrau and Marie Martha Hildebrandt; bp. 23 Oct 1924; d. malaria Marienwerder, Westpreußen, Preußen 1944; bur. Marienwerder (Semrau; IGI)

NOTES

1. See the Danzig District Chapter for details on this confusing geopolitical situation.
2. Meta Semrau, interview by the author, Salt Lake City, October 27, 2006.
3. Getraude Bsumek Arndt, interview by the author, Sandy, Utah, November 10, 2006.
4. Presiding Bishopric, "Financial, Statistical, and Historical Reports of Wards, Stakes, and Missions, 1884–1955," CR 4 12, 257.
5. Waltraut Naujoks Schibblack, telephone interview with Jennifer Heckmann in German, February 15, 2008; summarized in English by Judith Sartowski.

WOBESDE BRANCH

The members of the Wobesde Branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints must have felt quite isolated. Theirs was the only branch of the Church for miles in any direction, being about 130 miles east of Stettin and sixty-five miles west of the Free City of Danzig, the center of the Church district to which Wobesde belonged. To attend district conferences, the members from Wobesde had to first cross the border into Poland, then cross another border into Danzig. Jürgen Pawelke (born 1929) remembered making the trip