

TOM JACOBS

Sonnets of Light, 2019
Archival photographic print, 20 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

GRACE W. ROGERS

Peace Umbrella

An act of kindness
in war, remembered

The soldier, an army interpreter, was tired. His boots were dirty. His war was over. He was twenty-one; he wanted to go home.

This was moments after European hostilities had ended that spring of 1945. Three days of the American occupation had been peaceful.

“Your orders, sir.”

The American soldier sighed. Home must wait. His assignment, Lüdenscheid in the Sauerland region, was a small, mostly intact town in northwestern Germany. His early mastery of languages while attending a private college preparatory school must have been the reason for this assignment. He spoke French and German like a native. He had been “conqueror and occupant” in Lüdenscheid for thirty-six hours. The town needed to be secured. He passed a school and was intrigued. He would start there. He pushed open a heavy wooden door and walked around as casually as he could, knowing his drab olive uniform and rifle might inflame fear in these teens. He stepped into a classroom. Silence and fear intruded; the tension, like retreating shock waves, imbued the air. Students stared at his rifle and steel helmet. Compassion filled his heart. He greeted them, one by one, his tone relaxed, friendly. One teen didn’t look up; his steel-tipped wooden dipping pen, in and out of an inkwell, kept moving. The soldier lingered.

“What are you doing here?” the soldier asked in German.

“This is my school,” the student said. “I am here to learn. I would like to be an author.”

The soldier looked around the classroom. “Where are your books by Thomas Mann?”

“Who is that? I’ve never heard of him.”

“What! You don’t know Thomas Mann? After Luther and Goethe, he is the greatest and most inventive master of your German language!”

The soldier looked around and, finding no books by Mann, reached for a volume by Goethe and read a poem. The boy was mesmerized, intelligence brightening his blue eyes. The soldier’s German was flawless. The soldier pulled over a chair and sat down. They talked about their dreams for a peaceful future. Images of conflict faded like evaporating water on slate as their perspectives on literature and music passed one to the other and back again. The soldier needed to move on, and he asked where the boy lived. The boy, no longer afraid, told him. The soldier offered the boy an American cigarette.

The soldier then left to continue his methodical reconnaissance, not yet knowing this encounter would change his life. A bell sounded the six o’clock curfew. The balmy evening raised his hopes that he could locate the boy’s family. The armed American stopped at an intact basic housing area. He climbed a locked gate in his full military helmet, rifle, and all as they say. Many ceased tending their vegetable gardens, their fright and apprehension palpable. Some heads looked up, some likely expecting no mercy. He pushed up his heavy helmet with his free hand and nodded in friendly greeting. He wanted his warm smile to open hearts. He made inquiries and someone pointed towards the boy’s parents. The boy, nearby, stood up.

“Guten abend,” the soldier said, his voice kind, warm. The boy reassured his parents, transforming their faces into pictures of embarrassment. The boy led the soldier into the building.

The residual scent of boiled potatoes and fat greeted them.

“Onions must be scarce this spring,” the soldier said.

They ascended the stairs—*stomp, stomp, stomp*—their mud-encrusted boots resonant in the hollow-sounding space. The soldier’s skull pushed against the steel’s weight atop his head. His free hand lifted the helmet. He looked around, then hung it next to the father’s hats. He ensured

the safety was secure before hoisting his rifle and, with measured slowness, he rotated the weapon until the muzzle was centered over the umbrella stand. He lowered it, the expected gentle resistance signaling it was peacefully at rest.

The boy, his eyes wide, understood this American had just done “something that no German soldier would have done.”

“Sir,” the boy said. “Sir, you must know that fraternization with the local population is strictly forbidden.”

“Too bad for silly orders,” the soldier said. “Tell me more about your dreams.”

The soldier and the boy, relaxed, sat side by side like two longtime buddies. They discussed literature and the musicality of the German and Russian languages.

“You Germans actually belong more to the East than to the West,” the soldier said. “Think about learning Russian.”

“I predict an imminent conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union,” the boy said.

“You!” Heat lit by the war’s senseless tragedy burst from the soldier’s voice. “You have been poisoned by all the Goebbels-type propaganda and bluff!”

The boy did not answer.

The soldier walked toward a book lying open on a table.

“You know Goethe, I see. May I read aloud from it?”

A slight nod.

“*The Sorrows of Young Werther* is a tragedy, I think. Does this mean the war feels like dying to you?”

His hand gently approached another book by Goethe on the table, as if to calm a butterfly. He read the German.

O'er all the hilltops
Is quiet now,
In all the treetops
Hearest thou
Hardly a breath.
The birds are asleep in the trees,
Wait; soon like these,
Thou, too, shalt rest.

The soldier closed the book and said, “It’s called ‘Wanderer’s Night Song.’”

They sat silently, united in the quiet.

“I must go,” the soldier said.

He retrieved his helmet and rifle.

He left a package of American cigarettes on a table near the threshold.

* * *

Thus began a friendship that was to last the soldier’s lifetime. Along the way, he and the boy shared many poems by Goethe, music, mountain-climbing expeditions, milestones, and sorrows. Later, in the Rhine town of Sankt Goarshausen during the Rhine in Flames festival, the former soldier, now US government employee, sat with Hans Wilhelm, no longer a boy, “on some rocks right in front of the feebly flowing waters of the great river.” Albert, the onetime soldier, burst forth with news yet unknown to others: “You know, I have found the woman of my life and I am going to marry her.”

Hans Wilhelm, no longer a boy, gave the eulogy at the soldier’s memorial, held in Paris fifty years later. He recalled how Albert had given him his first American cigarette—and so much more. For Hans, this incident was a symbol of this war’s successful end.

This creative nonfiction tale of refusing to let war scar humanity is based on a true story of a twenty-one-year-old uniformed American soldier who placed his rifle, muzzle down, in an umbrella stand and hung his helmet next to the boy’s father’s hats. He read Goethe to calm the frightened sixteen-year-old German lad, who, half a century later, delivered the eulogy at the American’s funeral. Hans Wilhelm died in 2013.

Grace W. Rogers holds a PhD from the Professional School of Psychology, a master’s degree from Dominican University, and a bachelor’s degree from the University of Michigan. She was a 2017 semifinalist in the William Faulkner–William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition for her creative nonfiction novel in progress chronicling the disability-challenged life of a neurofibromatosis sufferer, *Pete: A Life with Neurofibromatosis*.

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Between Two Worlds, 2019
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