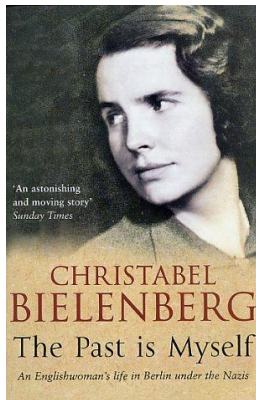


## *The Past is Myself* - Christabel Bielenberg

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*“Adam... had tried to find a possible formula for bringing hostilities to an early end. He had not been the only one; just the one we knew the best. Peter had been right, all the others had been right who had joined forces with him on his vain crusade; for I had learned that war brought with it much horror but also heroism; jingoism but also true patriotism; war in fact had blurred the issue completely.”*

Not only is *The Past is Myself* engaging and well written, but it also covers every topic regarding Nazi Germany, shedding a compassionate light on a tumultuous period in history.

Written in the first person, Bielenberg writes about life as a Brit in a hostile country. The account starts off in 1932, with marriage of the author to her German husband, Peter, who at the time was a lawyer in Munich. Right from the offset of the account, it is clear that Peter is far too opinionated and headstrong to lead a passive life under Hitler.

The couple, along with their young sons, move to Berlin, so that Herr Bielenberg can work for the Ministry of Economics, in order to try and influence politics. It is here that the work's protagonist faces some of her most daunting challenges and realities: rationing, air raids, questions as to friends and enemies.

One firm friend that the Bielenbergs do make is Adam von Trott zu Solz. From the start, Adam is described as a handsome, noble character. Early on in the novel, he travels first to Britain (where he studied as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford) and then to America, in order to try and persuade diplomats to help overthrow Hitler. Despite his failure in this task, he continues to try and influence politics.

Meanwhile, Christabel moves with her three young sons to avoid the constant threat of bombing in Berlin. She moves to Rohrbach, a tiny village in the Black Forest. It is here that the other side of war is revealed to the reader. As of this point, Bielenberg's experiences had drawn out all the traditional views on war: that it tore communities apart, pitting neighbour against neighbour. So many of the characters we met in Berlin were completely faithful to the Fuhrer and blind to his flaws. In Rohrbach, however, life putters along, and people appear, for the most part, not to care at all about politics. The physically isolated community provides welcome respite for Bielenberg, who had met many in Berlin who were very hostile to her British origins.

In one chapter, the Rohrbach villagers manage to 'capture' an American parachutist. The villagers, many of whom were uneducated farmers, were completely bewildered. Even the mayor has no idea what to do with the man. Ultimately, and surely against the wishes of the Nazis, the villagers treat their captor with the utmost reverence, with the owner of the town inn, Frau Muckle, cooking him a splendid Sunday Roast, with Bielenberg's oldest son, Nicholas, even acting as a waiter.

Peter Bielenberg's friendship with von Trott ultimately lands him in a concentration camp, after he is implicated in the July 20<sup>th</sup> Plot (an attempted assassination of Hitler). The reader soon finds out that von Trott has been killed, and feels with the

author her crippling grief at the loss of a good and noble friend. Bielenberg then embarks on a courageous journey to save her husband from the same fate.

One of the most touching, but also the most chilling scenes comes towards the end of the novel, when Bielenberg is riding a train from Berlin to Rohrbach after having been interrogated. She encounters an SS agent, and is at first very uncomfortable with his presence, but eventually they begin to talk. The man begins to tell her how he was a part of a Death Squad, and killed indiscriminately. In a moment of almost bizarre honesty, the man then goes on to reveal how he had himself transferred to the Waffen SS, in the hopes that he would die in combat and no longer have to face what he had done. Bielenberg falls asleep on the train, and wakes up to find the man's coat draped over her knees and his head on her shoulder. The scene is so emotive, because it makes the reader feel sympathy even for people who are deemed 'evil'.

Ultimately, the autobiography is really amazing because of the way it adds human faces to figures from history, and helps reflect the turmoil that war draws out in the hearts of all people.