

## COFFEE HOUR IN FLENSBURG

Stories of War and Peace, of Adventure and Love---A Memoir  
(80,000 words)

### SYNOPSIS:

“...when the present is unbearable and the future unthinkable, the mind turns to the past  
and finds a resting place” (author unknown, ca. 1940).

This statement, more than anything, defines the aging German-American couple, CARSTEN and MARGARETHE DETHLEFS, and their tales spread like a feast before their daughter, ERIKA. Gifted story tellers, they brought to life adventures and experiences, beginning with immigration to the United States in the early 1920s, a fateful return to Germany before World War II and a subsequent search for a place where the family could find a home together.

An engineer by training, my father soon found success in New York and Florida, building docks, highways and hotels. My mother, a classically trained musician, was introduced to the progressive world of New York through her sister, married to an anarchist intellectual. Her brief career as a member of the *Art Singers of New York*, placed her into the fellowship of musicians in the early days of the Juilliard School of Music. Asthma soon made performances impossible, and she left for Germany, refusing to return to the States.

Chapter I, “The Ancestors,” looks at generations of German-Danish farmers on the father’s side, and staunchly urban Berlin bourgeoisie on the mother’s. Seven subsequent chapters offer a travelogue following their wanderings from New York into war and flight in Germany and Austria. A post-war return to New York for father and daughter, forced another separation since my mother was not an American citizen. Efforts at finding a new start in Angola, Africa, exposed father and daughter to its colonial conditions and opened a magic world for the child.

A final return to the city of Flensburg in Germany’s far north, brought reunion and a chance at family life. There, felled by illness and defeat, the parents told of adventure, excitement and strength that would become guideposts for the future.

These tales were a history lesson, but most importantly, stories of love in the hardest of times.

The final chapters center on their daughter’s experiences from a child’s view—eyes open to all around her but innocent of causes and consequences. This ambivalence demanded reflection by the adult, a historian, evaluating memories and tales, checking them against recorded history, including the painful question of what it means to be German.