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FOREWORD

The following is a personal history, covering three generations of Agthes, my grandfather, my father, and myself, during the turbulent times of the twentieth century. My father was born in 1906 and died in 1997, ninety-one years old, my mother lived from 1909 to 1992. They were born under an imperial monarchy, which was overthrown by a revolution at the end of the First World War, in 1918. Then followed a short-lived democracy, the Weimar Republic, and a brutal dictatorship, the Nazi regime, ending with the Second World War and the almost total destruction of Germany. In East Germany one dictatorship was replaced by another. There the communist system was one of the most Stalinist regimes in the Eastern Bloc. It took another thirty years for my sister and I to get our parents out of the East to West Germany, where they lived in peace and freedom for the rest of their lives.

The twentieth century was a century of extremes, changing from monarchies to fascist and communist systems fighting with democracies; periods of peace were interrupted by wars. We all suffered through wars, World War I and II and the Cold War. My grandfather was wounded in the First World War. My father served in the second from the very beginning to the bitter end. It was a miracle he survived. I remember this war very vividly. I was nine years old

when it started and almost fifteen when it ended. My parents lived in East Germany during most of the cold war. I was lucky to escape to the West, first to West Germany and then to the USA.

I did not attempt to write a history book. Others are more qualified to do that. I only wrote about what I experienced myself or was told by my grandfather, father, and other members of my family, friends and neighbors. Though, whenever appropriate, I have tried to put the personal experience in the context of the broader historical picture. I tried to give an inside view of the events that shaped our lives. Most historians provide a look of the twentieth century from the outside in; I looked from the inside out.

History happens in real time, but historians can only describe afterwards what they think happened, and this is mostly open to interpretation. We learn after the fact and interpret events in different ways. We think we know what happened but never really do. I know I am not alone in having difficulty explaining how an evil maniac like Hitler could ever come to power in Germany. The best explanation I found so far is by the British historian Ian Kershaw in his excellent two volume Hitler biography (W.W. Norton & Company, New York – London, 2000.)

We only learned about the Yalta conference afterwards and only a few people would have predicted its effect on the next forty-five years of Cold War in Europe, or

the central role of Berlin in that conflict. The whole brutal truth of the Holocaust surfaced only after the end of the war. Now we are told “you should have known.” In today’s environment of twenty-four hour television news and instant communications through various media channels, it is hard to imagine that the whole world did not know at the time. The truth is that the very limited information we received through newspapers, radio and infrequent newsreels in movie theatres, was tightly controlled. We also had a very limited geographical horizon due to lack of transportation. Our family, as most other families, had no car. During the whole war I hardly traveled further than fifteen to twenty miles from home mostly on foot or by bicycle.

Looking back I am amazed how just a few pivotal decisions and events determine one’s life. A year at Indiana University in 1956 changed my whole life. It was one of the most crucial events for my future career. Also, just a few outstanding personalities had a great impact on my life, foremost my father and grandfather, as well as a professor in Berlin and one in Indiana. Later on I found out that the same truisms are found in corporate life. A few major decisions and a few key people can fundamentally determine the course of a company or a career, for better or worse.

Admittedly, luck played a significant role in my life; for instance, when I made my way to Berlin and from

there to West Germany and finally the United States, instead of getting trapped in the East. However, I also found out that the more I studied and learned and the harder I worked the luckier I got.

This book was not written in one smooth sweep following a strict chronological outline, but instead in different intervals over the course of a few years. Thus some repetitions and overlapping stories crept in. My memory may not have always served me right and some historical facts and figures may be wrong. But my memories make it possible to share this personal perspective, they have helped me learn life's lessons, and have kept the people important to me in my life alive.

* * *

A note on some of the names and terms quoted in the text: Sometimes I used the English expression and other times the German, or both. I hope these inconsistencies do not cause too much confusion. Just a few examples of the different uses of German and English: My home state in Germany is Thüringen or Thuringia; the East German state was called "Deutsche Demokratische Republik" (DDR) or "German Democratic Republic" (GDR); the state party was the "Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands" (SED) or the "Socialist Unity Party of Germany".

Some of the chapters are based on previous publications and manuscripts of mine. Parts of the

passages on East Germany after the Wall in section VI are based on my book "From Communism to Capitalism – A Businessman's Diary of the Changes in East Germany", published by Indiana University International Business Forum, Bloomington, Indiana, 1992. The chapter "Corporate Life" in Section V, "Road to America" contains some passages from my unpublished 2004 manuscript "Corporate Life – A Balancing Act".

Whenever I quote from other publication or use them as source for some historical facts, these publications are duly noted at the corresponding place in the text.

KLAUS E. AGTHE

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