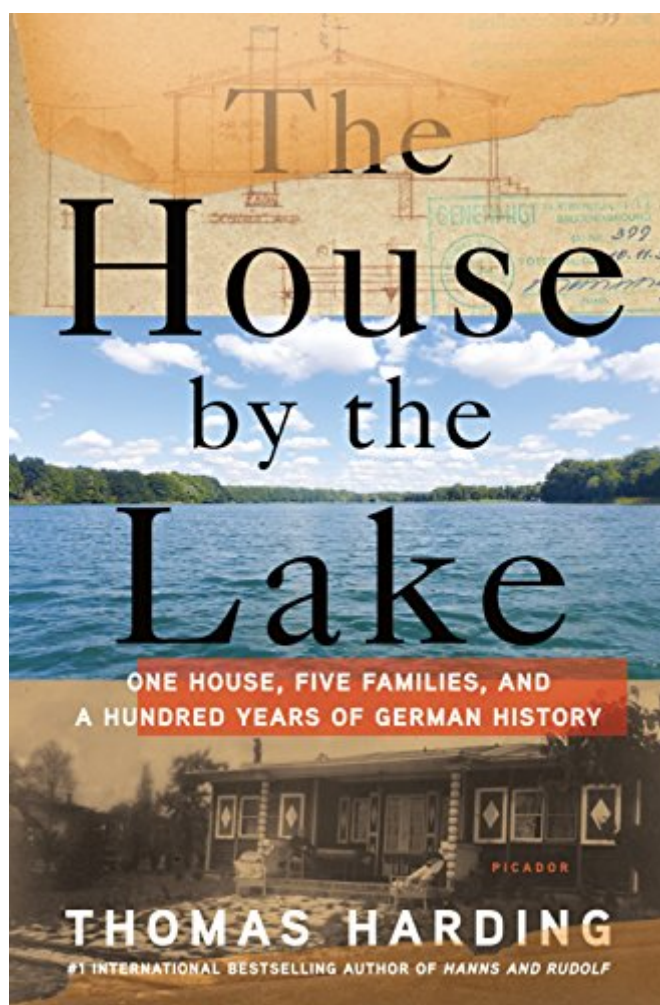


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# The House By The Lake: One House, Five Families, And A Hundred Years Of German History



## Synopsis

A Finalist for the Costa Biography Award Longlisted for the Orwell Prize Named a Best Book of the Year by The Times (London) • New Statesman (London) • Daily Express (London) • Commonweal magazine In the summer of 1993, Thomas Harding traveled to Germany with his grandmother to visit a small house by a lake on the outskirts of Berlin. It had been her “soul place,” she said • a holiday home for her and her family, but also a refuge until the 1930s, when the Nazis’ rise to power forced them to leave. The trip was his grandmother’s chance to remember her childhood sanctuary as it was. But the house had changed, and when Harding returned once again nearly twenty years later, it was about to be demolished. It now belonged to the government, and as Harding began to inquire about whether the house could be saved, he unearthed secrets that had lain hidden for decades. Slowly he began to piece together the lives of the five families who had lived there: a wealthy landowner, a prosperous Jewish family, a renowned composer, a widow and her children, a Stasi informant. All had made the house their home, and all but one had been forced out. The house had weathered storms, fires and abandonment, witnessed violence, betrayals and murders, and had withstood the trauma of a world war and the dividing of a nation. Breathtaking in scope and intimate in its detail, *The House by the Lake* is a groundbreaking and revelatory new history of Germany, told over a tumultuous century through the story of a small wooden house.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Absolutely fascinating history of Germany told through the lives of five families. It was so well researched and well written. I had trouble putting it down. It covered the period from the late 1800's to current times. The author's grandparents, a Jewish physician in Berlin, built the house but were forced to flee the country when the Nazis came into power. Interesting too, was life behind the Berlin Wall, as the house fell in the east zone. I googled Gross Glienicke, the town the house is in, and several interesting videos came up of the Alexander family, the original owners and the lake. I highly recommend this book especially to anyone interested in history and German history.

After reading 'All the Light We Cannot See', I have become preoccupied with the tumult of a nation caught in the grip of authoritarian regimes. My mother-in-law had her childhood interrupted three times by the events of WWII. She finally married an US GI and emigrated to the US. Details of Thomas Harding's book were reviewed last year in the UK press and I knew I would want to read it. The story of the families during one of the most turbulent periods in Germany's history is told through the history of this house on a lake. The Berlin wall would be constructed along the shore, separating the house from the lake in a draconian plan that only a totalitarian regime could design. With so much wall building the topic of today's political parlance, all American's should read this book.

This was a fascinating look at the effect of German history on one lake house and its occupants. This book captured in incredible detail the lives of a wide range of people who were affected by the events of the last century. It enriched my understanding to see the effects of the great historical events on the daily lives of the people.

I read his other book Hans and Rudolf and on the strength of that decided to read The House by the Lake. I enjoyed the book as it showed the different periods, regimes and changes that Germany went through in the twentieth century. It was also about people, changes in life styles as well as the

different ideologies that Germany chose for itself and showed how people adapted and took advantage of new circumstances. It was also story of a family that was transplanted in the United Kingdom searching for its roots and reclaiming an asses that was stolen from them. I can recommend this book to those people who are interested in contemporary European history. The book is well written and the author holds your attention at all times.

There are several ways to approach history. You can focus on the broad political and social trends in society at large and how they evolve over time. You can look into the history of technology, or business, the arts, or any other single discipline. You can study the leading individuals whose careers shaped the times in which they lived. Or you can approach the subject through the lives of one individual, one family, or one place. Often, the last of these options makes for the most satisfying reading. Thomas Harding's *The House by the Lake* covers the otherwise familiar territory of 20th century German history by telling the stories of the five families who inhabited a single home over the course of the last hundred years. The picture he paints is vivid and compelling. Much of *The House by the Lake* is dominated by the saga of the author's family, the Alexanders, who built a vacation home on the shores of a lake near Berlin in 1927. They were prosperous, assimilated Jews whose fortunes rose during the turbulent 1920s and then fell precipitously as the Nazis came to power. The house they built became home to a succession of four other families in the decades following their flight from Nazi Germany in 1934. In many ways, the story of this house must resemble what took place in other homes from which German Jews fled or were seized and shipped off to the death camps. Like so many other Jewish homes and businesses, ownership passed to a succession of Nazi families, some of them ideologically committed, others simply opportunistic. What makes this particular story truly remarkable is its location. Built on the shore of a lake in a picturesque village, the home's front yard was bisected by the Wall constructed by East Germany in 1961. Until the Wall was demolished in 1989, the Alexander house lived in its shadow. By relating the story of his family's former home, Harding adds a new perspective to the unfolding of German history from World War I, through the years of the Weimar Republic, the twelve-year reign of the Nazi Party, the establishment of the two post-war German states, and, finally, the period of reunification and the prosperous years that followed in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

A good story that emphasizes the personal decisions faced by relatively ordinary Germans during the 20th century. The bigger point, not really explored, was that if you were an American or Brit of

German descent than it would have been unusual to have a family history untouched by these events. I must admit that I sometimes tired of the details that seemed to be included to emphasize that the people were common folk and wished that the story explored the elements of character that pushed the people towards certain decisions but such a task is easier for a novelist than a historian. I've not visited Grosse Gleinecke but have walked largely abandoned towns in the old East Germany and certainly believe that this book has helped me feel why those cities are the way that they are.

Very well written and engaging. It really is interesting to understand how the house, and particularly it's occupants, were so much a reflection of the times. The location of the house, literally on the boarder between East and West, served to magnify the dramas of German society over time.

I was in awe of the research Theo's Harding had undertaken to write this book. An amazing effort. However that was a weakness for me. I found there was almost too much detail for an interesting read. Nonetheless an important social history of a very volatile period.

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