Klaus Stemmler

October 25, 1921—December 5, 2012

In Memory

Klaus Stemmler, my father, never liked being pushed around.

Old age is dishonest and not to be trusted. The little old man we all saw at the end of his life was no longer the living Klaus Stemmler—but he ***was*** the result of Klaus Stemmler's life, and the further we go back into that life, the more we look for his "Rosebud" moments, the more clues emerge to explain why he was the way he was, not only during his 91-year struggle to survive and prosper, but also at the very end, when personality was supplanted almost totally by primal reflex. His formative years made him aloof, reserved, and sometimes almost bitter, but also self-aware, self-reliant and determined not to be pushed around.

Like most people with this sensitivity, he was pushed around a lot as a kid. His mother, as she told me more than 50 years later, was not very happy about pushing out more than 13 pounds of him at birth. It was a trauma from which she never totally recovered and which helped poison her feelings toward Klaus's father, and probably toward the son as well. Certainly, she told me, she never even considered having another child.

Klaus Stemmler in March of 1943, reassigned to a new unit in Belgium after two months of recovery from wounds suffered in the Battle of Stalingrad.

So Klaus grew up an only child, moving frequently, often with only one parent, sometimes living with strangers. His father Willy moved the family often while he was working for the national railroad, and he took a leave of absence from his job in 1928, leaving behind a German economy destroyed by hyperinflation and war reparations, and following two sisters who were enjoying relative prosperity in the booming United States. Wife and son waited over a year, living in a furnished room in Berlin's Charlottenburg district until sent for in September, 1929, when Klaus was almost eight.

Years later my grandmother showed me photos of her husband taken on a trans-Atlantic ocean liner, and she archly pointed out "the other woman." It wasn't until I reread Klaus's memoir that I realized Elfrieda and Willy hadn't crossed the Atlantic together, but on separate ships more than a year apart. The Stemmler household, when it was together, likely was not a warm one. Might feuding parents make a child withdrawn, but also very adaptable, and more inclined to rely on his own inner strength? Klaus was on his own a lot, and he learned to find strength in his own skills and determination.

The Stemmler family settled first in Rochester, New York where both Willy and Elfrieda worked for Agfa, the German company that made Ansco film and cameras, but Klaus wasn't with them. As he wrote in his memoir, he was literally "farmed out" to a family outside of town while the parents worked. Friends gave them rides out to visit their son on weekends.

Klaus instantly became the dumbest kid in class as an eight-year-old non-English speaker. Short, pudgy, and foreign, he was bullied until he finally "beat up" a lead tormentor "after he had goaded me to the limit." Klaus didn't like being pushed around. He did what he could to improve his situation, and what he could do was learn English quickly. From the age of eight to twelve, Klaus was a student first in New York, and then in California public schools. Those four years were the only formal education in English he ever had, save for a couple of years as a minor subject in a German high school, yet later in life he emigrated to the United States and enjoyed a successful career in business–all, of course, in English. He is one of the few people I have met who could speak in two languages without a trace of an accent in either one.

Even more remarkable was his skill in writing English.

His memoir, composed on a word processor and completed when he was seventy-two, spans more than 70 pages and is not only virtually error-free, but instantly engaging, unpretentious, and written with a conciseness that wastes not a single word. Could he write that well in German, too? Is there a gene for writing? Although Klaus never role-modeled writing for his family, and his talent went largely undiscovered and unappreciated, three of his four children made their livings as professional writers for at least part of their careers.

The Depression was now tightening its grip on the United States. Willy bought a small, second hand Chrysler coupe and headed across the country on his own, working wherever he could. He left his wife and son for almost a year before settling in Los Angeles and sending for his family once more.

While living in Hollywood, Klaus was a disappointment again to his mother when he scuttled her dreams of joining the movie star set. Elfrieda had befriended German silent screen star Anna Sten, and when she learned the studio was dubbing into German "The Champ," starring Jackie Cooper as the little kid, she took Klaus in for an audition. "Much to the chagrin of my mother," Klaus could not force himself to cry on cue. He "blew it" and did not get the part.

"On the whole, I think I was quite happy in California," he later wrote, somewhat unconvincingly, in his memoir. He had friends, although later he could only recall one by name. They played war, and since the games were based on the most recent one, Klaus was always put on the losing side. "I would have preferred cowboys and Indians," he wrote. Whether he felt lonely or neglected is hard to say, but he was very bitter later in life about how little attention was paid to him as a child. He told us how he jammed his finger one day during recess at school and had nobody to tell about it. After a couple of days it stopped hurting and nobody ever asked about it, but his middle finger had been dislocated and became permanently crippled. Indeed it looked bad when he showed it to us, and his feelings became still more vehement with the retelling.

In 1933 Klaus was pushed around again and pulled in two directions when his father opted to return to his railroad job in Germany before his leave expired. The family rode with others across the country, camping at night, all the way to New York, and Klaus kept a journal of the exciting things they saw on the way. When they got to the docks in New York to set sail for Europe, Klaus boarded the boat with his father, but his mother did not. He was now an only child, abandoned by his mother, his schooling interrupted, thrust once again into an alien language environment.

The frequent moves made him ever the outsider in his student years. In New York, he had been "the kraut," and upon enrolling in school in Frankfurt, he was labeled "amerigo," until he was moved to Eberswalde and became merely "the American." Finally, his command of German quickly restored, he found himself in Rostock, among Mecklenburgers who prided themselves on their insular Plattdeutsch dialect, and he was disparaged again, this time as "the Prussian."

His father remarried, and as Willy began his second family he pushed the unfortunate reminder of his first marriage out of the nest and sent Klaus to live with his new wife's father in the North Sea port of Rostock. Klaus later referred to those as his happiest and most stable years, this time staying in the same school for four years. Still, he couldn't shake the ghost of neglect. In his late 80s, after his memory had lost huge tracts of his past, he recalled how, when he needed money for something as a teenager in Rostock, he took it from a household money box. Nobody ever told him he could, and he couldn't imagine asking, so he just took it, although it still bothered him that he did, and that he had to.

While Klaus sat alone in his third-story room in Rostock tending to his studies, the world outside was conspiring to pummel him with World War II. His father had gone to America just in time for the stock market crash of 1929 and as the depression worsened he gave up his hopes for a better life in America and returned to Germany just in time for the launch of the Third Reich. My father had been born to the generation that lost the Great War, and he had been bred, unknowingly but together with his entire generation, to fight the next one.

"I witnessed some of the most spectacular events of modern history while I was in school," he later wrote about his teen years. By 1934 Hitler was "beating the depression in Germany where it had been as bad as in America or worse. For this he received the acclamation of a grateful people." A referendum in the Saarland returned an important industrialized state to Germany in 1935, "which turned out to be a triumph for Hitler." Hitler moved his forces back into the Rheinland in 1936, declared the Treaty of Versailles null and void, and sought and won 99 percent voter approval—"officially, anyway"—of his actions in a referendum. "Rearmament, covert so far, became overt." When Austria was annexed in 1938 "there were many voices insisting that absorbing Austria was unwise," but "after all, we rationalized, Austria was ethnically German," as was the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia, annexed that same year. "In the face of all this, Hitler was the champion of steadily growing German nationalism and expansionism."

When it came to studies, Klaus had learned what I preach to my students today: doing well in school is a young person's only real opportunity to exercise some control over their own lives. Learning English quickly had transformed his American years. When he returned to Germany in Frankfurt, he quickly had to make up almost two years of schooling by Easter of 1934 to stay with his age group preparing for the advanced track in Germany's very class-stratified school system. With one tutor to help him quickly relearn German, and another to teach him enough French to qualify, he got

the passing grades he needed and "was very proud of it." There were lots of outside activities to distract him and his peers in the college-prep "gymnasium" in Rostock. About a third of his homeroom flunked once and had to repeat a year, but Klaus always crammed and passed, in part because his father threatened occasionally to "take me out of school and make me learn a trade."

Klaus applied for acceptance into the Reichswehr as an officer candidate in 1939, at age 17, doing what was expected in following the footsteps of his father and grandfather. He passed the preliminary physical and athletic tests and was accepted, subject to passing exams for the "abitur," the diploma required for entry to a university or the officer corps. He also underwent three days of "psychological" testing by the army in Vienna, which he passed. He was sworn into the army just a few days after his eighteenth birthday.

The year was 1939.

For the next six years Klaus Stemmler was pushed around by forces beyond his control. The political manipulation that pushed around the German people in the 1930s preceded the forced obedience of wartime service. As he later wrote, "I became a part of what happened during the next six years as an officer in the German Army because I was influenced by Germany's history in the making during my formative years."

An early sign came when his father "ran into political trouble caused by altercations with some local party bigwigs. He was arrested and spent a couple of days at Gestapo headquarters in Berlin." When he returned, all evidence of his membership in a World War I veterans group was removed from the house and he joined the Nazi party "for his own job protection." A motto became popular as Hitler's power grew:

Und willst Du nicht
Mein Bruder sein
So schlag' ich Dir
Den Schädel ein…

"…meaning if you don't want to be my brother, I'll bash your head in."

The social pressures that came with one-party rule didn't always keep boys from being boys. When attendance at Nazi rallies was compulsory, Klaus and other students "would sit there and count the grammatical errors" the local party boss "uttered while trying to imitate Joseph Goebbels."

Once in uniform, of course, his life was no longer his own. Klaus Stemmler later came to understand how he had been pushed around by history. Accepting one's role in history is not for the faint of heart or mind, particularly when that history was tragic and cataclysmic. "The facts of history are indisputable," he wrote in his memoir. "How to deal with them from the perspective of personal experiences without hindsight and guilt is painful."

After twenty months of various training programs, Klaus found himself on June 22, 1941 crossing the Bug River into Soviet-held territory as second in command of a battery of four high-trajectory artillery pieces supporting infantry. A year and a half later he found himself with the Sixth Army encircled at Stalingrad. On January 7, 1943 his bunker took a direct mortar hit. He was able to walk to the medical aid station for treatment of multiple shrapnel fragments. While he was sleeping, the station took a direct hit and the roof collapsed, and though he suffered a major concussion, he was still alive, so he was put on a truck and taken to the last air strip. After a day of watching helplessly as the incoming planes dumped supplies without touching down, he collapsed at the edge of the field. "A couple of anti-aircraft gunners took pity" and dragged him to their bunker by the edge of the runway. The next day, January 11, a Junkers JU-52 set down because it had no copilot. The landing crew pushed the cargo out and because the cargo door was missing, the gunners pushed Klaus in as the plane picked up speed on the runway. He found out several days later that only one other plane touched down before planes could no longer supply the encirclement, and 93,000 soldiers effectively disappeared with the final surrender January 31.

Klaus was now 21 years old.

When I got my first job working for the House of Representatives in 1977 Klaus expressed modest delight that I would be working in politics and government. Government and politics beyond his control had caused him and his generation much suffering. It was his youth, and his unmet need for family, that had allowed the politicians to push him around, to bring him into the army and to send him into the "frozen, wind-swept open steppe" east of the Don. He felt some satisfaction that his son would be working at the level of making policy, not just being pushed around by it.

Indeed, he had been pushed around by the politicians. It was the hubris of Supreme Command at Stalingrad to change the original plans "for advancing close enough to destroy the city's function as an armament and transportation center by means of heavy long-distance artillery and air strikes," and to resort instead to "a battle of attrition involving a whole Army grinding to a halt in the streets and buildings of an... industrial city." The soldiers laughed when they heard Hermann Goering had guaranteed to Hitler that the Luftwaffe could supply the 330,00 encircled soldiers. General Paulus presented plans on two occasions in December to have the Sixth Army fight its way back to the main front, but Hitler ordered it to "stand and fight to the last man." The battle grew more one-sided through December. Finally, "To add insult to injury, our short wave radios picked up reports from Germany declaring that 'our heroes in Stalingrad gave up their lives for Führer and Vaterland.' This while thousands of us were still alive."

Klaus served almost six years "in an army under whose protection unspeakable atrocities had been committed while my friends, comrades in arms, and I were dedicated

to removing the wrongs of the Versailles treaty, building a country to include all ethnic Germans, and defending that country...No joy, no honor, no recognition, no privileges—just sorrow, sadness, and nightmares." He once told me that of the 17 members of his first officer training cohort, only two survived the war. "Yet, I was fortunate to have a home to come back to" and "people who cared... There were hundreds of thousands of soldiers whose homes were destroyed, who couldn't find their families because they were dead," or whose "towns and villages were no longer located within their country's boundaries."

Klaus Stemmler's life was haunted by isolation. Most kids don't think of themselves as "isolated," but being abandoned by the father for years at a time, and then by the mother permanently at the age of 12 must have an effect on a child's personality. Once back in Germany, Klaus and his father shared an apartment, but Willy was gone most of the time catching up on his railroad job, and Klaus wrote he was "mothered" by the landlady. He was physically isolated—practically banished—when Willy started his second family.

Klaus wrote that he liked his father's new wife and her family, and moving to Rostock to live with his new relatives likely made the separation from his father in Munich seem less heartless. But what could he have thought as his father transformed into the classic family man, replacing Klaus with four lovely little half-siblings in five years? There are black and white home movies from Christmas of 1940 that show Willy and Ruth looking like Ozzie and Harriet, surrounded by the rambunctious Peter and Rolf, four and three years of age, Monika adorable at age two, and newborn Axel wrapped in swaddling clothes in his mother's arms. Off to the right lurks an awkward teenager, sitting stiffly in his uniform and officer's polished boots. This can't be the brother of these little children. Is he an uncle? Surely this isn't the brother of the now 49-year-old Willie. Who is he? The 19-year-old Klaus, home on leave from the army, operates a large electric train set, a gift for the children who clearly are too young to operate it themselves. Later he and Ruth step into a wintry city street and the young officer strides confidently toward the camera dressed in the classic German officer's military hat and overcoat. Klaus has a new family now.

In fact, he had been taken into a new family when he joined the "Jungvolk" club for boys ages 10 to 14, and once he had settled down in Rostock, his continuing association with Jungvolk "became my major project." The Jungvolk leadership were chosen from the older students, while other 15 to 18-year-olds who were apprentices or already working went into the "Hitlerjugend," which eventually became the "Staatsjugend," or state youth organization, with compulsory membership. His schedule included leading Jungfolk physical education classes two afternoons per week, and Jungfolk "service commitments" three afternoons per week and every other Sunday.

Klaus's relationship with his father must have been complicated. Even today, my three siblings and I refer to Klaus as "Vati," or Daddy in German, yet it's impossible to imagine Klaus using that diminutive with his own father. In his memoir Klaus seemed to favor his father and blame his mother for the separation and divorce. Yet, never once did Willy visit his son or grandchildren in the U.S. I was the first grandchild to have any contact with him at all, being in Germany when he turned 80 in 1971, and I was 22. As I was leaving I shook his hand, and found myself holding a 100 Deutschmark note. More than 30 years later, I mentioned I had left a note on Willy's door when I found nobody home during an earlier attempt to visit. I had addressed it to "Willy," and Klaus apparently had heard, and expressed belated outrage that I would have presumed to be so informal! Willy eventually became a millionaire when he inherited his older sister Erna's American estate, yet Klaus was not included in the will when Willie died in 1977. The fortune passed to the second family. Ironically, Klaus, a virtual only child, was Willy's only offspring to have a large family of his own, adding four grandchildren to the lineage while the four children from the second marriage produced a total of two.

My grandmother was no icon for familial bonding. Whatever the drama might have been in 1933, when she refused to board the boat with her family, Elfrieda earned permanent enmity in 1949 when she signed for Klaus, but refused to sponsor my mother, Karla, for immigration into the United States. Klaus was certainly resourceful enough to devise a workaround, but we children only saw our grandmother twice, once as a house guest in Illinois, and once when our family visited her and her husband on their islet on Black Lake in upstate New York in 1960. We did occasionally succumb to her offer of a dollar bill for any letter we wrote her, but my three siblings and I grew up largely isolated from any family outside our house in Park Forest.

Klaus never experienced a father role model, so he wasn't likely to become one. Perhaps because we were four kids living in a kid-oriented community, we amused ourselves without a father playing sports or games with us, or taking an interest in our activities. I distinctly recall accompanying my father one Saturday on a trip to a steel mill under construction in southern Michigan. I held one end of the tape measure as he prepared plans for a locker installation. The memory is so clear in part because the time spent together was so rare. Just as he retreated into himself as a response as a child, so he seemed to put a distance between himself and his own family as a parent. Years later, after he had written his memoir, he still could not persuade himself that people had read it, not even members of his own family!

Being parents is such an intense, life-changing experience that it accelerates time itself. Klaus wrote that the years in

Park Forest "went by in a flash." That period was the first and most complete casualty of his damaged memory after his cancer treatment. Most remarkable was the complete disappearance from his memory of our mother and his wife, Karla, who preceded him in death by almost 18 years. When we took albums with pictures of our Park Forest family days along on our visits to Mesa, they were met with quiet if not discomfort by Klaus in his late 80s. He did make several references to the parallel between the neglect he suffered as a boy, and the neglect he showed as a father. Several times he expressed regret that he had not been a good parent.

Being an outsider followed Klaus from his school days right to the end. After the war, unlike in the United States, returning German soldiers were not treated as heroes but as painful reminders of a dark time. Klaus registered at the University of Munich School of Veterinary Medicine in 1946, subject to volunteering 100 hours of cleaning bricks by hand, a requirement applied only "to those of us who had survived the war as officers in the German armed forces." After three semesters of study, he "threw in the towel" and took a job with American Express. His step-mother, Willy's second wife Ruth, later told me it must have been hard for him, after six years of giving orders, to sit in a classroom and take orders.

That "Junker" aristocratic air, handed down through three generations of German officers, must have rubbed off on me at times. My German teacher in high school, an American veteran who had served in Germany in the early 1960s, more than once referred to me as a rich kid. I thought that ironic, if not comical, but later understood he was picking up on an aristocratic vibe I didn't know I had, and which he had encountered during his tour of duty. Rich East High School's history teacher once gave a lecture on the rise of Hitler to a crowd of classes so large they had opened the folding wall between two rooms. Afterward the teacher approached me in the hall and asked me if he had gotten it right! Yes, I assured him.

The Berlin airlift helped Americans learn to like Germans once again, and transferred that residue of war hatred to the new enemy, the Soviet Union. Yet, even after being naturalized as an American citizen in 1957, there was still that difference in history that separated Klaus from the people around him. "I never talked about the war unless I was asked, and that did not happen very often," he wrote. "I was reminded of the years in California in the thirties when I was constantly cast on the side of the loser." Ironically, when Klaus bought the house in Park Forest where his children "grew to adulthood," he assumed a GI loan, and my parents chuckled that the bank officers thought Karla was a war bride brought back by a veteran. In business, he must have been charming, but not chummy. He was hired for what proved to be his final job "at the ripe old age of 36" because Lyon Metal Products "needed a mature individual to deal with purchasing and engineering personnel at some of the largest industrial complexes in the country." He successfully resisted pressure from his boss to join the Shriners, which he considered "a form of blackmail in which I was not about to become involved, aside from not being able to afford it." His few friends during his adult years were other European immigrants, mostly in the travel business. Social life in Park Forest included a Saturday night bridge ritual with a few select couples and Thursday night bowling. While my mother attended Toastmistress club meetings to polish her public speaking and bond with her demographic, Klaus bowled in a league. Avid smokers during the 1950s, my parents generated so many empty Marlboro cartons that we played with them as toy blocks. They both quit, but I can't recall if Klaus quit before or after his years of Thursday nights spent in the oxygen-deprived, cigarette smoke-infused frat house that was the Park Forest Lanes.

Probably all children, if they and their parents live long enough, encounter that sudden moment when they confront undeniable evidence that their elder's capacities have diminished. Often, it happens in the car. The competent, confident driver we remember from childhood passes the freeway exit to the destination of an afternoon's outing and the adult child struggles to broach the subject without openly displaying fear for everybody's safety. Gaps expand in memory, skills and abilities, and just as the elders need to plan for a life of less independence, they lose the power to plan. Klaus's second wife of ten years, Gwen Besser, remained lucid into her nineties, but could see her husband's gradual decline and commented at times on how sad it was.

What pushed Klaus off the cliff was the course of chemotherapy doctors used to treat his diagnosis of non-Hodgekin's lymphoma when he was 87. A recent TV news piece reported research showing that chemotherapy damages the brain, particularly in older people. That seems so obvious it's almost laughable. Visiting Klaus was an expensive undertaking while he lived in Arizona, and when I was able to fly into Phoenix to see him after his treatment he told me, "I know who I am now." For a while, he had not known, and he understood that. He used his hands to explain what had happened to him, holding them out flat before him, finger tips of one pointing at the tips of the other. Gesturing with his right hand, he said the doctors had used the treatments to fix his body. But, what the treatments had given to his body, he said, moving his left hand over the right, they had taken away from his mental function. His eyes filled as he looked at me and he put his hands on his lap and wept.

It was as if his inner strength, that fortress against being pushed around or suffering from isolation, had been taken from him. He was left defenseless, and felt that way for the rest of his life. He had always been proud of his financial independence, even as he supported a family of six in his adopted country, and survived the corporate machinations that had deprived so many of his business colleagues of their

pensions. Now, he felt powerless without money. He felt pushed around by the assisted living facility in Mesa, and he pushed back. He was not a pleasant resident. When my brother Walt and his wife Mary made a saint-like sacrifice to bring the 89-year-old Klaus to live with them in Oakland, Klaus could no longer change those mechanisms in his character that made him think he was being pushed around, that made him push back, that made him seek the kind of isolation that had given him strength as a boy and a man. He spent his last seven months in an assisted living facility close to all of us in California and eventually he seemed to accept it. He expressed genuine and eloquent gratitude each time I visited him in his last months. He had regained much self-awareness by now, and he knew he was simply waiting for the end.

He had relearned to walk, stomping almost gleefully down the long hallways, brandishing his motley totem cane, as much a weapon as a crutch. He had become Oedipus's answer to the riddle of the Sphinx: only man walks on four legs as a baby, and then on two, and finally on three as an old man with a cane.

In this state, however, the medical industry, the ambulance, and the hospital were his final nemeses. When his terminal tumor announced itself, he fought off medical personnel and could not be calmed without restraints and medication. Walt supervised his ambulance rides and hospital stays as a buffer between Klaus and those who would push him around. At 91, he was not a candidate for major surgery, so his time had come. He was placed "in hospice care," with the prime goal being the comfort of the patient. Klaus's defensive reflexes had consumed his consciousness and he received his final visitors medicated and unconscious.

The contrast between father and son could not be more stark. At the age of 18, I was awarded my high school diploma and sent to college. At the age of 18, Klaus earned the more exclusive "abitur" and was sent to war. From the age of 18 to 24 I lived a life of almost complete indulgence, postponing college, happily based in countercultural Berkeley learning guitar, riding my motorcycle, fixing cars, partying and chasing girls, with few responsibilities to temper my "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness." From the age of 18 to 24 Klaus lived a life of continuous physical danger, following orders, commanding men operating complex pieces of artillery, being shot at and blown up, suffering retreats and defeats on the major battlefields of World War II, all for a cause that showed nothing but contempt for his own personal existence.

Klaus Stemmler ended his memoir wondering why God had allowed him to "survive the war with not much more than scratches" when, at the age of 72, "nothing out of the ordinary has happened" in his life. This is a shadow I have inherited from my father: the inexplicable expectation of being born to an extraordinary destiny, while the daily narrative of life is scorched with the ordinary. When "getting close to the end" Klaus wrote that "our children, who wouldn't be who they are without my help, and who have given us nine beautiful grandchildren, are destined to come up with the missing link."

What is that missing link? During the troubled years of the "generation gap" in the 1960s I felt revulsion when my parents sometimes said they had sacrificed their lives for their children. If they meant to be helpful, it was help we didn't want. Today, only eight years younger than Klaus Stemmler was when he completed his memoir, I have a different view of the next generation. When I look at my own children and their cousins, I appreciate their lives as original expressions of beauty they have had the freedom, for better or worse, to shape according to their own hopes and ideals. They have not been pushed around in the same way by war or hostile history, or, for better or worse, by the previous generation.

That freedom, denied my father in so much of his life, is the "missing link." It is our dream and our duty to utilize that freedom as the precious resource it is.

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