



Charlotte Bauer

by
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Charlotte and her brother Erich at their First Communion in 1938.

Charlotte, known to family as “Lotte,” was my aunt. She was the eldest of Michael and Margareta Bauer’s six children, born on September 11, 1927, in Forchheim, Germany.

She was 11 at the start of World War 2, and, as the oldest of the children and with her father away much of the time, was responsible for helping her mother take care of the others. The early years of the war passed without many hardships. My mother (Marianne; Lotte’s sister) wrote in her journal that Lotte, like most children of that era, attended Hitler *Jugend* (youth) camps during the summer months. At least one of the camps Lotte attended was a *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (BDM) camp on a *Gut* (estate or manorial farm) in Pomerania, along the Baltic Sea in what is now northeastern Germany. According to my mother, the camp was a wonderful experience for Lotte because she enjoyed activities like hiking, playing sports, and outdoor survival training. She also learned domestic skills such as cooking, sewing, and childcare.

As the war progressed and the tide began to turn against Germany, the wartime experiences of Lotte and her siblings became more somber and worrisome. Huge bomber formations passed over Forchheim on their way to Nürnberg, darkening the skies and terrifying the residents. Although Nürnberg was the target, the people of Forchheim could never be certain that an errant bomb might fall on their city or that bomber crews might mistake their town for a suburb of Nürnberg, and so they scrambled for the air raid shelters whenever the warning sirens

sounded. The air raid shelter was about two blocks from the Bauer house, but the trek was still difficult for the family, especially at night when the city was blacked out. Lotte, as the oldest, was responsible for making sure her youngest brother was ready, while her mother took care of the baby. The four middle children took care of themselves.

Lotte never spoke about or wrote down her experiences during those years or immediately following the war. However, family photos from that period show that she remained close to her siblings and enjoyed many happy occasions. Sometime in the early 1950s she met Hans Kotz, another Forchheim resident. Lotte was 26 when they married on January 9, 1954. By all accounts, Hans was good-natured, fun to be around, and well-liked. Unfortunately, he battled alcoholism, which led to friction in their marriage and their eventual divorce on November 28, 1961.

Not long after her divorce from Hans, Lotte met Ludwig Holmer, a tool designer from Kerschbaum. They married on September 7, 1962, and settled in Munich. My family visited them often while my father was stationed there. Ludwig was always kind to us kids but, like Hans, he had a drinking problem. Unlike Hans, Ludwig was not a

cheerful drunk. Unfortunately, that marriage did not last either, ending after instances of domestic violence related to Ludwig's drinking.

After her separation from Ludwig, my mother invited her to join us in Fort Riley, Kansas. She accepted, and on May 5, 1967, she left Germany for good. Although she remained a German citizen her entire life and visited Germany many times over the years, she never moved back.

Lotte accompanied us when my father, a career soldier, was reassigned to Fort Ord, California. She found a job as a live-in housekeeper and cook for the priests at the Carmel Mission Basilica. We visited her often, and it was through her that we met Father Felix, a priest who doubled as a magician and quickly became one of our favorite sources of entertainment. In 1969, she accepted a similar position at Madonna del Sasso Church in Salinas to be closer to our family, as we had recently moved there.

In the fall of 1970, Lotte moved to San Francisco to be near her new boyfriend, Keith D. Willis. She took a job as a grocery clerk. In September 1972, Keith helped her petition for a formal divorce from her estranged husband, Ludwig, who was still in Germany. The divorce was finalized on June 18, 1974, by the Superior Court of California for San Francisco County.

Sometime after September 1972, Lotte and Keith parted ways, and she returned to Salinas. There, she resumed her role as a live-in housekeeper and cook at Madonna del Sasso Church, where she left a lasting impression on the priests she served—so much so that Father Michael Cross dedicated an entire chapter to her, titled *In the Presence of Charlotte*, in his memoir, *Remembering Big Jim*.¹

Father Cross remembered her as “a dear, sweet, but highly opinionated housekeeper” who still spoke with a heavy German accent. He estimated that Lotte waited on and cooked for at least 30 priests over the years, feeding them, doing their laundry, and keeping their living quarters immaculately clean—you could literally eat off her floor. He said that if Lotte “didn't like a particular priest, she was never lost for words—you would hear all about it. But, if she liked you, or better yet, loved you, there was nothing she wouldn't do for you.” He believed Lotte must have loved him, because she spoiled him rotten and always called him “Father Boss.”

He also captured Lotte's dry wit and sense of humor well. On one occasion, Father Cross relates the following:

I always enjoyed having company for dinner, and I usually asked Charlotte to fix one of her famous German dishes. She went along with the request, provided that she liked whoever was invited to the table. One day I told her that I had invited Bishop Shubsda for dinner, as he always enjoyed coming by the house. He said he liked the good humor we seem to have (as opposed to some other rectories, I guess). One evening when he sat down at the table with us, I said to Charlotte, “Hey Charlotte, you know the Bishop is Polish. Why don't you put on your SS uniform with the swastika arm band?”

The Bishop's eyes became very big and his mouth dropped open.

Charlotte replied in her usual staccato quip, “Yah, veeth the high leather boots and de vhip!”



Charlotte Bauer - Hans Kotz wedding, January 9, 1954.

On another occasion, Father Cross recalled the following:

One time the Bishop was leaving the house and she walked him to the door. I was following behind them when Charlotte said to the Bishop, "Do you know why Father Boss is like a diaper?"

The Bishop turns around with a very inquisitive look, "No. Why is Father Boss like a diaper?"

Charlotte said to him, "Because he is always on my ass and most of the time he is full of s--t!"

I watched the Bishop go out to his car just shaking his head and (I'm sure) laughing to himself.

Father Cross wasn't the only priest on whom Lotte made an impression. Father Carl Faria, writing about Lotte in the church newspaper remembered a time when she taught him how to make hook rugs. Later, during one of the Bishop's visits, he recalled how Lotte couldn't wait to go up to the Bishop and say, "Bishop, I taught Father Carl how to be a hooker!"²

Lotte retired in January 1993, after more than 25 years of service to the priests in the parish.³ She bought a mobile home in north Salinas, right next door to her friend (and aunt), Gunda. To keep busy, she often cooked at my mother's restaurant, Little Bavaria. She spent countless hours with us, sharing in all our family occasions, and made many trips to Germany to visit her brothers. She and Gunda also took many one-day bus trips to Reno for exciting days of gambling on the slots.

In January 2000, Lotte suffered an aortic aneurysm and nearly died. Relatives rushed to her bedside, expecting to say their final goodbyes. Instead, she surprised us all, and what was meant to be a somber occasion turned into a joyful family reunion.

However, Lotte never fully recovered from the incident. She lost her appetite, leading to malnourishment and further weakening of her already damaged heart. She died in her sleep just two months later, during the night of March 12–13. Lotte was cremated, and my mother and brother Mike carried her remains back to Forchheim, where she was laid to rest beside her parents in the Bauer-Wolf family plot in the old cemetery on Birkenfelderstrasse.

Father Cross wrote in his book, "I'm sure that the Good Lord has a very special place in heaven for priests' housekeepers. I trust that Charlotte is happy—but not resting in peace. Knowing her as I did, she's probably up there in heaven with a dishrag and a can of Comet Cleanser cleaning dirty smudges off those eternal golden gates."

Lotte (right) and her Aunt Gunda on New Year's Eve 1979. Although they were technically neice and aunt, they were born only a few years apart and grew up more like sisters. In retirement, they lived next door to one another and often shared the same activities.



References:

¹ Michael L. Cross, *Remembering Big Jim: The Memoirs of a Parish Priest* (Felton, California: Pastor of St. John's Catholic Church, 2012), 341–343.

² Newsletter. Madonna Del Sasso Church (Salinas, California), "A Woman, A Gift, A Blessing," 26 March 1993.

³ Newsletter. Madonna Del Sasso Church (Salinas, California), "Mopping Her Way Into Retirement," 17 January 1993.

