VINTAGE

MARTHA GELLHORN
A LIFE

CAROLINE MOOREHEAD

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About the Book

Martha Gellhorn’s journalism tracks many of the flashpoints of the twentieth century; as a young woman she witnessed the suffering of the American Depression and risked her life in the Spanish Civil War. Her despatches from the front made her a legend, yet her private life was often messy and volcanic.

Her determination to be a war correspondent — and her conspicuous success — contributed to the breakdown of her infamously stormy marriage to Ernest Hemingway. In this mesmerising biography of a life that spanned the twentieth century, Moorehead reveals how passionately Martha fought against injustice, and how determined she was to capture the human story.

About the Author

Caroline Moorehead is the biographer of Bertrand Russell, Freya Stark and Iris Origo. She is well known for her work in the sphere of human rights, and has written a history of the International Committee of the Red Cross. She lives in London.

Also by Caroline Moorehead

Fortune's Hostages
Sidney Bernstein: A Biography
Freya Stark: A Biography
Beyond the Rim of the World:
The Letters of Freya Stark (ed.)
Troublesome People
Betrayed: Children in Today's World
Bertrand Russell: A Life
The Lost Treasures of Troy
Dunant's Dream: War, Switzerland and the
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Iris Origo: Marchesa of Val d'Orcia

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TO DAISY AND MILLIE,
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MARTHA

Caroline Moorehead

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Preface

In the last years of her life, Martha Gellhorn wanted to see her friends just one way. She liked to meet them in the late afternoon or early evening, in her own flat, over drinks that could go on for many hours but that very seldom turned into dinner. Restless, energetic, always on the move, she resisted when in London leaving her own sitting room. And, since, in the over twenty-five years in which she lived in London, she never changed the bamboo furniture or the plain blue sofas, nor bought new pictures, nor allowed any clutter in the room, nor varied where she sat or what she drank, these meetings with Martha have remained absolutely distinct in the minds of her visitors. It is as if the friendship itself were contained in the passage of a Greek play, one event, in one place, at one time. It gives a peculiar frame to memory.

In 1970, when Martha was in her early sixties, she decided to stop wandering and to make London her home. She liked the easiness of the city and its parks, and it was where a few of the closest of the friends she had made while moving from country to country now lived. She found a flat in Chelsea, the top floor and attic of a tall, gabled, red-brick Victorian house in Cadogan Square. It was here that the visits took place. First, the heavy door in from the street, with its iron grille and bevelled glass, so heavy that if you were carrying flowers, you needed to push hard with your

shoulder to get past. In the hall, immediately to the right, above the bold black and white checked tiles, hung a large, rather ornate mirror in which to check appearance, for appearance, you knew, was not altogether unimportant. At the end of the hall there was a narrow lift, that shuddered as it rose and threatened often to stall. The fifth floor had a deep red pile carpet; three steps led down to her front door. It was here that you would find Martha, leaning against the door frame, in black trousers and sweater and expensive shoes, fashionable and clean, with rather red lipstick, her fair-grey hair, short and slightly curly, brushed back. Her voice immediately suggested the anticipation of pleasurable laughter; her smile was both expectant and quizzical. She was always elegant.

The sitting room opened to the right of a large and airy hall, empty except for a bamboo coat stand, and it gave an immediate impression of lightness and the colour blue. Wide 1930s windows, with functional cast-iron frames, looked across a view of the rooftops of Chelsea and Kensington as far as the Catholic church in the Brompton Road, because views – the low round bumps of the Welsh hills, the plains and volcanoes of Africa, the wooded valleys of Spain – were always necessary. Two sofas, at right angles to each other, both covered in the same cobalt-blue linen which never seemed to fade, with bamboo and glass tables for lamps and ashtrays in between and on either side. Above one, an oil painting, done by a friend in America, of a trout swimming in shallow water over round, smooth, speckled stones; above the other a picture of flowers by the same painter, Bernard Perlin; and on either side bookshelves, though most of the books were upstairs in the study or in the bedroom by her bed. The drink was kept on a dresser made of pine: glasses on the shelf, bottles and the ice on a tray below. It was essential to have ice. By the window stood a bamboo screen and a tall, green plant, that, like the sofas, never seemed to age. Tidy, clean, neutral:

what one interviewer described, to Martha's irritated surprise, as 'austere'. This outer tidiness, she would explain, was to counteract the extreme disorder of her mind.

What Martha liked to do was to talk, a tumbler of Famous Grouse whisky by her side, a cigarette in a holder, eyes slightly narrowed against the smoke, accent unmistakably still of the American Midwest, voice almost a drawl, full of irony and curiosity and indignation. Occasionally, there were some nuts to eat, though her feelings about weight and figure were rigid. No one, she would say, at any age, should give up their physical vanity: keeping fit was both basic discipline and a 'public service'. In Martha's case, this meant good muscles, a weight of exactly 125 pounds; and great style. She was particularly pleased with her feet, which were long and so thin that she had to have her shoes made for her. In summer her toenails were red. She said that old age, once she had got over a period of loneliness and inability to write, was 'spiffing' and talked of writing a book on its pleasures. She used words like 'pooped' and 'whopping' and expressions like 'oh my'. 'If you live long enough,' she would say, 'you get to be a monument. I am now a monument.' It was a thought that she did not altogether dislike, particularly as the 1980s were a good time for her kind of writing, for the sort of hardy and solitary travel she thrived on, and the personal reporting she had made her own. 'I have only to go to a different country, sky, language, scenery, to feel it is worth living,'[1] she wrote to a friend, explaining her need to move, to get away. '*Flâner*,' she would say,[2] 'is as necessary as solitude: that is how the compost keeps growing in the mind.'

At around the age of seventy, in the late 1970s, after the bad spell in which writing had become so tough and the fiction seemed to have dried up, Martha began to meet what she affectionately called 'my chaps'. They were

women as well as men, writers for the most part, or in some way connected to the world of writing, but television people too: not teenagers, who bored her, but people in their late twenties and thirties with work and adventures behind them, early loves dissolved, current relationships floundering, people who did things. 'That's my trouble,[3] I can't love without admiration,' she once wrote. 'Who said: "*Je pense, donc je suis*"? Descartes? I think it wrong. I act, therefore I am. We must be the product and sum total of our actions.'

Martha liked people who shaped their own lives, who, like her, travelled to look and ask and carry back what they had seen; and after ill health severely reduced her ability to see and get about, she relied on the chaps to bring her the news she had once gathered herself, to report from the war fronts, both real and emotional. 'I believe passionately,'[4] she would say, scornful and impatient, 'that we are responsible, here and now, for ourselves and our acts; there is no escape from that.' The capriciousness of luck she tended to disregard, particularly at her tougher moments, allowing only – and, improbably, an odd concession in someone so rational – an intervention by the stars. Scorpios, she wrote,[5] referring to herself, were either 'geniuses or miserable or both, well known to be very spiky characters … for whom life is not lined with smiling faces'. Lucky people, she maintained, had lucky natures; either way, good behaviour was immutable, as was strength of character and purpose. Only the weak 'sat on their arses'; the people she liked got out there and fought. Selection as a friend was more or less instant; not everyone made the team, and not everyone had the appetite for it. Even to someone who had known her since childhood, as I had, the touches of imperiousness could feel a little like bullying.

Martha enjoyed it when people were 'in the beam', her description of being consumed by passion, yet would sometimes say that she didn't really know about that sort of

tyranny and that she could not accept that any woman could be destroyed by a man. ‘In the beam’ was one war zone she had never visited. She liked to hear that the world was full of shits, and was a little envious of the good sex she said that she had never really had, and the *tendresse* that she had only read about. ‘I’ve never known complete love,’[6] she told an old friend. ‘Except of course for Miss Edna, who is the true north of my life.’ Miss Edna was her mother, and long after her death in 1970, at the age of ninety, Martha continued to compare herself to her, always to her own disadvantage. True north meant old-fashioned values, toughness and courage, a time of better hearts and minds and manners, and being ‘gallant’.

This failure to have been overwhelmed by the anguish of real love did not stop her giving advice, that sounded worldly but was somehow too decisive, too black or too white, though even she would admit she felt on surer ground when talking about writing. Martha knew more painfully than most about a writer’s life: she called the bad times ‘chewing cement’.[7] This was a war zone she had visited all too often, weeks, months at a time when the words came and later turned out duds, or did not come at all, and the hours passed and nothing happened. She felt very strongly about the craft of writing. ‘You must not only know how to write,’ she told a writer who was stuck. ‘But you have to be privately, personally, sound at the core. Not sane, but sound. If not, it always shows. Slight smell of cheese in the air, and the work gets a limp, rotting, glazed look.’ Reporting from this front line meant bearing witness; like love, it had a true north. Sloppiness, dishonesty were worse than poor behaviour: they were evil. Quoting Nadezhda Mandelstam, who said that if there is nothing else to do one must scream, Martha wrote: ‘I long to scream.[8] But where? But how? I am screaming all the time inside me and it will end by giving me severe stomach pains as it already gives me insomnia.’ Cowardice repelled

her. Railing against the unfairness of life was encouraged, as long as it was done with humour and grit; moaning and whining were taboo, and what she called the ‘archaeology of psychoanalysis’ was deeply suspect, along with all prodding and peering into childhood. Freud, she said, had done ‘hell’s own damage,[9] giving everyone the right to *blame* someone else. That’s a filthy way to live.’ Her feminism was a simpler affair: she had never allowed the fact that she was a woman to interfere with anything she did; and she was not greatly impressed by the idea that other women could not do the same. ‘Buck up’ was a phrase we all heard when we strayed too near to self-pity.

She was often furious; furious with apocrophiars, a word she coined for those who rewrote history, particularly to their own advantage; furious with critics who read fact into her fiction; with trimmers and prevaricators; with those who had no guts for the fight and those who destroyed others, casually; and furious with the crassness and arrogance of governments.

Like lying, sitting on the fence was contemptible. Martha’s horizons were peopled by villains, politicians in particular, men and women such as Nixon and Kissinger and Mrs Thatcher, who led the innocent into chaos and the dark night, stupidity and arrogance. She was haunted by a world out of control. ‘My God, what sort of world is this?’ she would ask a visitor in disbelief after some act of terrorism or political chicanery. A friend once wrote to ask her if she was ever afraid. ‘No,’ she replied. ‘I feel angry,[10] every minute, about everything.’ Anger fed her, and she felt it her duty and her calling to keep a constant watch on injustice. As it became increasingly hard for her to do so, her sight almost gone, her hearing poor, her back painful, so she spoke of the ‘relay race of history’, and how she relied on her chaps to stop the human species, like scorpions, from stinging itself to death.

Her blind spot was the Palestinian cause, in which she saw nothing honourable or good. A few chaps braved the fury and challenged the magisterial dismissal; most preferred to leave the subject to one side. This clarity of right and wrong, seldom tempered by doubt, remained as absolute as it had been when she set out, in 1937, to catch a train to Barcelona and register her outrage against Franco and his fascist army. To the very few reporters permitted to interview her, and on the rare occasion she grudgingly agreed to join a discussion panel, she would speak, in tones of genuine incomprehension, of what she called 'all this objectivity shit'. How could anyone not have a view or take a side?

Before she was, as she put it, half-laughing, a little hurt, 'rediscovered by the young' in the late 1970s, Martha would say she no longer had anyone to laugh with. Laughter was like truth, not a luxury but necessary for existence. 'What happened to laughter?[11] Do you know?' she asked an old friend as she turned seventy. 'I remember it as the central and loveliest fact of life … Are other people doing it still or has it gone out of fashion? I'd give anything I have to meet someone who made me laugh.' She could be cruel to old friends, quick to deliver the chilling *coup de grâce* to those who developed the fatal flaw of becoming boring, but she missed the 'helpless laughter among chums who were glad to be alive because they knew about death'. With the chaps, and particularly with the men, she laughed, and there was something pleasurably seductive in the laughter, something distinctly flirtatious, that gave the friendship its colour. One described it as 'like a great affair without the sex'.[12] The uniqueness of the relationship of each of us with her is something that we all remember. 'I always suspected there were other doors to worlds I didn't inhabit, rooms she would go to with others where I was not invited,' says a woman who knew her well for over twenty

years. ‘But that was fine. What she gave me was enough. I left feeling that each visit had been a complete occasion.’

Compartments were seldom breached; even husbands and wives paid their visits alone. Separate, but also a gang, the gang she had never had, preferring to live with single friendships, accountable to no one, once writing: ‘My chosen and projected status is that of an outsider.[13] I have never seen any place or group I wanted to join: not their taboos, rules, games, ambitions … I am an onlooker.’ It was what had lent her war reporting its edge: the independent, lucid eye, telling it how it happened, not worried about who it might offend.

For most visitors, the evening was just a drink, or many drinks, sat over long after it got dark. But there were times when she felt that the chaps needed feeding, and then terrible concoctions would appear. Martha loathed what she called the ‘kitchen of life’, or, in her blacker moments, the ‘kitchen of death’. It made her frantic with irritation and impatience. And though the kitchen of life took in buying light bulbs and ringing the plumber, it also covered her rare attempts at cooking. She was an imaginatively bad cook. One appalling day she discovered a dish that consisted of frozen sweet corn, tuna and condensed milk. Many of the chaps, cooks themselves, took to turning up with food they would prepare, or brought picnics of smoked salmon. With the arrival of a microwave came what she alarmingly called ‘microwave feasts’ though she was delighted to read in a magazine that custard or gravy, left too long to heat, would explode and cover the kitchen with slime.

And at the end of the evening it was hard not to leave a little drunk, with that uneasy feeling that you had talked too much, revealed secrets you had sworn to yourself not to mention. But Martha, who had a remarkable ability never to repeat herself, and an apparently genuine curiosity about the intricacies of the lives of those she was fond of,

was not, as she put it, ‘leaky’. Confidences did not get repeated, and nor did she play her chaps off one against the other. Walking down the street afterwards, past the other tall irregular redbrick Victorian houses, past the gardens in which her admirer H.G. Wells and Arnold Bennett had once played tennis, you felt a little better about yourself. The disastrous turn in the ailing love affair had been in some way cushioned by her laughter and understanding; the work that was advancing so very slowly was, after all, not something to be ashamed of. You could take a certain modest pleasure in not having made a fool of yourself. The world had been sorted out and American foreign policy, always a snake pit of immorality, had been suitably denounced. A few things might perhaps need a little correction, but that could all be done in a humorous postcard. And if you happened also to come away a little bruised, suffering from some sharp rebuke – for Martha’s addiction to truth telling could be merciless – then there was always the next drink at which to do better. ‘She wasn’t always right,’[14] says one woman friend, ‘but I miss her every day.’

Under her attentive cross-examination, each had brought to the encounter the best of themselves. The reporters had described skirmishes in inhospitable places; the travellers told of horrors and misadventures; the writers lamented over blocks and rejections; and everyone, at some point, had dipped into their personal lives. A few exaggerations, perhaps; a situation milked for its comedy. For her part, Martha would have listened, rewarded those who touched chords with her complete concentration, her eyes flickering encouragingly and very shiny, lighting one cigarette after another; she, too, would have talked, though not so personally, about journeys of her own, about new places she had discovered where she could snorkel or swim in empty and unpolluted sea, about the hell of writing, about fresh villainies heard late at night on the radio when

she could not sleep, about her friendships with Capa and Leonard Bernstein and Eleanor Roosevelt, or the day she arrived in Finland as the Russians were invading. New words made her laugh with sudden delight and she was enchanted when someone told her about anhedonia, the lack of pleasure or the capacity to experience it. It was, she said, precisely how she felt, and it was also a way of touching lightly on the fact. Just as her metaphors, visually sharp and designed to make you laugh, were a safe way of belittling unhappiness. 'I do most definitely feel that my life is like walking a Pekinese,'[15] she wrote to a woman she had known for many years. 'And it does not brighten me.' And, just occasionally, she would talk about Ernest Hemingway, to whom she had been married for less than five years, and whose shadow infuriated her to the point where she allowed no mention of his name, ever, in connection with her own. Hemingway, in her book, was the worst apocryphiar of them all.

Did her visitors ever really learn about Martha? They learnt enough to admire and become extremely attached; for some, she became their true north, the best confidante they had ever had; she gave them fun of a kind they never had with anyone else. She made *them* laugh. Her idea of friendship included perceptive generosity, cheques in the post, no discussion or thanks permitted. And it was exhilarating to be talked to with such sympathy, toughly delivered, to be told not to waste one's life, to listen while she announced that stupidity was original sin, that happiness was being fully alive, using all of oneself and getting better in the using, that contentment was a meaningless aspiration, that while fear paralysed, indignation was 'like being equipped with steady interior jet propulsion'. It made the chaps laugh when Martha insisted that they stop being led by their penises and use their heads instead. No one attended court, as the regulars affectionately called it, out of a sense of duty.

What very few of them were ever allowed to see, however, was the degree of loneliness, self-doubt and sense of failure that run like a sad refrain through a lifetime of letters, and that grew more marked in the last years of her life. It was then that she began to speak of the 'dark grey sludge pit'[16] of the mind, 'in which no light glimmers'. Letters, like views, were necessary; they were, she said, her way of staying alive. As old friends died, and others were cast off, as her failing eyesight blighted the two enduring escape mechanisms of her life, reading and travelling, so she wrote: 'Yes, life is tough and toughness carries us through and on average I'm as tough as the next one:[17] but the further thought is – why trouble?' She minded increasingly when the chaps failed to keep in touch. The cruelty of the world oppressed her and she began to tire of the idiocy of rulers. 'I know that I am old because passionate anger has turned into weary disgust: nothing impresses me.' She spoke of being 'permanently dislocated – *un voyageur sur la terre*.' Her body, she would say, was becoming too old for her mind. Unlike tenderness in a love affair, her looks had always been a factor; they were a source of pleasure and an acknowledged asset. Now she wrote: 'I feel very old, ugly, tired.' Being a survivor,[18] she said, was hard work.

But she did not complain. The courage that she valued above all other qualities did not fail her. At most, she recounted, usually with marked self-mockery, the minor accidents, the falls, the aches, the spreading blur to which the world was rapidly becoming reduced. 'I am sick of my body which seems to be copying Job,' she wrote to a friend she had first met in Spain, during the civil war. The letter was typed in capitals, picked out with the help of big characters another friend had stuck on her keyboard; but to read it back to herself, she had to carry the letter into the bright light, and use a magnifying glass.

True or not, she would say she remembered nothing, unlike John Updike or Saul Bellow, writers she admired, who could recall everything they had seen or heard or smelled, adding that this was a huge advantage in coping with old age. ‘Tell him,’ she instructed a friend who repeated to her what a fan had said admiringly of her achievements, ‘that I never look back, which is true; or anyway I only look back with heartache on lost scenery, ruined by the travel explosion. Tell him that I don’t remember doing anything that calls for great pride.[19] Tell him that one reason I cultivate my bad memory is that I remember well only what has caused me pain, hence I prefer to live in the present. Just this very day will do me fine.’

CHAPTER ONE

A Talking Childhood

‘I was never deeply interested in being a child,’ wrote Martha to her agent, Gillon Aitken, not long before her eighty-third birthday, adding that, were she ever to write her autobiography, and she had no intention of doing so, this would be her opening sentence. Indeed, she never did write it, but she did leave several fragments, written both then and thirty years earlier, around the time of her fiftieth birthday, chapters later filed away and forgotten. In all versions, her attitude to her childhood is the same. Her early years were happy, and, like happy families, happy children have no history. Only violence to children, cruelty caused by history rolling over them like a tank, which with the years came to preoccupy her more and more, seemed to her worth recording in anyone’s early past. In any case, she would say, her memory, untrained by either school or two years at Bryn Mawr, was more like a black hole or a compost heap than a useful implement for research, and she had no gift for introspection. Not just no gift: no taste for it either. Autobiography, the long journey through the past, for her spelt if not excessive self-love then at the very least self-absorption. It was conceit.

What never vanished into the black hole, however, was an enduring memory of talk. The Gellhorns were what she

later called a ‘talking’ family. They told each other things,[1] at meals in the evening at which the four children were expected to recount the adventures of their days, amusingly enough to make their parents smile. Laughter was rewarded. George Gellhorn, a busy doctor who was for a while St Louis’s only specialist gynaecologist and obstetrician, would offer a penny to any one of them who could make him laugh. Alfred, the youngest by five years, remembers that Martha was the one who pocketed the most coins. When the children argued and asked questions, which they did constantly, dictionaries and reference books were fetched; most evenings, the dinner table was piled high with books. Edna Gellhorn, their mother, an early suffragette and social reformer, no less busy than her husband, encouraged their many visitors and her husband’s medical colleagues to stay and eat with the family. Once they had reached the age of twelve, the children were allowed to take part; up until that day they sat on the stairs and watched the visitors come and go. But there were rules, administered by Dr Gellhorn as Speaker according to Roberts’ parliamentary rules: no gossip or hearsay but everything reported from personal observation or experience; and no referring to people by their race or colour. The Gellhorn house was one of the very few white homes in St Louis where black people came regularly for meals, and Martha was encouraged to bicycle to visit a black woman friend of the family who owned a cosmetics factory, where she was allowed to try on the lipsticks forbidden at home. The food served at dinner had to be eaten and no questions were permitted about what it was. Aubergines, greyish and mushy, were Martha’s particular nightmare. Telling tales on anyone was inconceivable, as was any form of self-pity, but bragging was contemptible. Martha complained later that this was why she never knew about the eminence of her brothers in adult life.

St Louis at the turn of the twentieth century was a city of some standing. Founded by a French fur trader in 1764 and named after the thirteenth-century French king, it had long since shed its rough pioneering past for a solid commercial prosperity. Beer, flour, boots, stoves, bricks, chemicals, and above all tobacco, had brought in enough money to landscape some of the finest parks in the country. It was here, on the lakes frozen in the extreme winter winds, that Dr Gellhorn took his only daughter to ice skate. Once crowded along the banks of the Mississippi and the Missouri, where the emigrants arrived by steamboat before buying tools and supplies for the long trek across upper Louisiana, the city centre had now moved west, to a pleasant district of faintly Italianate houses in timber and brick, set back from the street and surrounded by small gardens. Only the largest mule market in the country was a reminder of its pioneer days. Among the city's half million inhabitants were 100,000 Germans, which was one reason why the ambitious young German doctor George Gellhorn had settled on St Louis when searching for a toehold in the New World. The other was an introduction to Dr Washington Fischel, a local physician, who would, he hoped, help him set up a practice.

Family history has little to say about the extent to which George Gellhorn was consciously escaping the anti-Semitism of late nineteenth-century Germany. Son of a cigar maker called Adolph, he was born in the small town of Ohlau, near Breslau, in what was then East Prussia and is today Poland. An aunt, Dora Bloom, had brought him up. George had completed his medical studies at Gürzburg, then travelled for postgraduate work to Vienna and Berlin, where he had developed a love for music and a taste for wine, before signing on as a ship's surgeon to explore the world. Hating and fearing German militarism, he had nonetheless become president of his university Jewish fraternity duelling club, at a time when friendly duels

meant a web of honourable scars around the face and head. At the time he decided to end his roaming life and settle in St Louis, in 1900, he was thirty-one, and not altogether prepossessing in appearance. Though tall, over six feet, with impeccable manners and a good ear for languages, he was somewhat Prussian for American tastes, with his high collars, round-rimmed glasses and heavily scarred bald pate. He had a booming laugh, a good singing voice and he played bridge. The wife of Dr Washington Fischel, Martha, found him uncouth, despite an attractive smile. She did what she could to discourage him, when her husband's new protégé fell in love with their only daughter's thick crown of reddish-fair hair, glimpsed in the sunlight as Edna walked down the stairs to greet him. Martha Fischel was convinced that Edna could have her pick of St Louis's most eligible bachelors, but Edna assured her mother that she knew, with absolute certainty, that George Gellhorn would never bore her. Boring people, her own daughter Martha would soon be saying, was a sin.

The Fischels were socially minded. Martha Fischel, whose family had been bankrupted after the civil war, was a determined, handsome woman, with arched nostrils, a strong jaw and heavy black eyebrows. Her own granddaughter Martha would later say that it was from her that she had inherited a 'tendency to beat my cane on the floor and call everyone to order'. The Fischels were founders of the Ethical Society, and the Gellhorn children, brought up in an otherwise atheist household, attended Ethical Sunday school. They were all, Martha would say, 'great swells'.

Both Edna, who had not long graduated from Bryn Mawr, and George had strong views about the world they wished to see around them. It owed much to the vision of America left by Jefferson and Lincoln and to its Constitution, which the young German doctor had studied and admired from afar. It included liberal politics,

progressive education and, in the segregated and masculine Midwest, equality of every kind. When clubs or associations failed to meet these requirements, the young couple refused all offers to join, frequently going on to set up alternative establishments that did. It was to be a singularly happy marriage, something to which Martha would often refer when making the point that truly happy marriages are rare. It was another way in which the happy childhood had no history. Both she and Alfred remembered the way their mother would listen for George's return, running to stand by the front door so that she could be there to kiss him as he turned his key in the lock.

Their first child, born in 1902, was a boy, and they called him George. After him, over the next six years, came Walter and then Martha, in November 1908. Edna, who liked to read thrillers, was reading *The Circular Saw* by Mary Roberts Rinehart when labour began; Martha, who all her life insisted that she was poorly educated, complained that had her mother been reading Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* she would not have been so incurably 'unknowledgeable'. Alfred was born in 1913.

By 1910, when Martha was two, the Gellhorns owned a three-storey house in the central west district of St Louis, 4366 McPherson Avenue, halfway down a wide, tree-lined street with gardens both in front and behind. It had four bedrooms, a landing with a stained glass window, pale oak-panelled walls, Persian carpets with octagonal patterns on which the children played marbles, and heavy mahogany furniture. As in Martha's own houses later, nothing new was ever bought or added. The children had friends up and down the road. Martha from an early age protested bitterly that Tina, their German maid, was exacting and mean-spirited and taught her too early about injustice and the fatal habit of appeasement. She also accused her older brothers of bullying her. 'Walter and George tried to kill

me,’ read one of her earliest letters. ‘If you don’t do something about it, I’m going to leave home.’ Martha left notes like this stuck to the newel post, most of them cries of rage and injustice about her brothers. She would hear her parents laughing as they read them.

The family lived well. St Louis was an agreeable city for the comfortably-off. Two well-endowed universities attracted scholars from the east, and one of the city’s six newspapers was printed in German. There were tennis parties and Sunday excursions to a shared cabin in the woods by the Merrimac river, to which each family contributed a different picnic dish, eaten under the eaves of a huge porch. In the winter, the man who delivered St Louis’s ice door-to-door opened an ice-skating rink. Martha’s only spanking was delivered when she hid herself in the ice-man’s horse-drawn cart and was not found until long after dark; she protested that it had only been her intention to see the world. In the summer there were baseball games between the St Louis Browns and the Cardinals.

George Gellhorn insisted on his children taking exercise, thereby instilling in Martha a lifelong concern, at times even an obsession, with fitness. His belief in the goodness of fresh air meant that the children slept outside, even in the middle of winter, on an open porch screened by canvas curtains like sails, where they had pillow fights and ragged late into the night. And, as each child reached the age of thirteen, they attended the ‘Fortnightlies’, dancing parties held by their teacher Mr Mahler at his house on Wednesday nights, stopping for ice cream and sundaes on their way home. Martha, tall for her age and a little awkward, was not greatly in demand as a partner, though she had pretty fair hair and blue eyes. Mary Taussig, the daughter of one of Edna’s close friends, remembers her as rather clever and a bit superior,[2] but always very elegant. Martha herself would later say that she learnt the nature of social rejection

at these Fortnightlies, when she and her best friend Emily Post, one too tall, too talkative and too prone to laugh at her own jokes, the other too dumpy, with too much red hair and too many freckles, and eyelashes like those of a white mouse, hid behind the coats to avoid being singled out as wallflowers.

As a doctor, George Gellhorn owned one of St Louis's few private cars; for the most part people travelled by tram or bicycle. Dr Gellhorn's somewhat unconventional ways – he insisted on eating hot dogs and potato salad in their box at the opera, as he had done in the European theatres of his youth – were remarked on, but not held against him, though during the First World War, together with other resident Germans, he suffered mild ostracism. In St Louis, Berlin Street became Pershing Street. Martha claimed to remember nothing of the First World War, which ended when she was ten, beyond the day she came home from school to find her father sobbing: his favourite brother, also a doctor, had been interned in an English camp where he committed suicide.

Edna, like Dr Gellhorn, was half-Jewish. This fact, in a world in which anti-Semitism was an accepted feature of American life, appears to have played so little a part that none of their children seems to have been more than passingly aware of their Jewish origins. Several years after the Second World War, by which time the holocaust had forever altered the way that Martha would look at history, she tried to explain to the Russian Jewish doctor with whom she had fallen in love her first encounter with anti-Semitism; indeed, possibly her only childhood encounter, for she never mentioned or spoke of another. It concerned her first Fortnightly. Martha had a friend, a girl called Johnny Stix. When the day of the dance approached, she asked Johnny what she was planning to wear. Johnny said that she was not going, that she had not been asked because she was Jewish. On protesting to her mother about

the unfairness of it, Martha was simply told that if she wished not to go either, no one would make her. In the event, Johnny was embarrassed and cross, and Martha went with her brothers, suffering agonies ‘and very unpopular, due to not knowing how to talk to boys as a girl, but only as if I were another boy’. And so the question of Jewishness went away, since ‘my parents had no use for society (as it used to be called)’. Not until she was in Munich fifteen years later, in 1936, did the question arise again for Martha in such a way as to trouble her, though an adolescence of partly suppressed awareness of bigotry and racial slights may explain the later sudden intensity of her feelings.

More openly memorable, and with more immediate impact, was Dr Gellhorn’s attitude towards his daughter’s dress. The doctor believed that modern fashion was lethal to the female form and waged what felt to Martha like a personal vendetta against everything that to her seemed desirable. She was obliged to wear special shoes, called ground grippers, shaped like feet and laced above the ankles, so that the toes were not constricted. When the age of the flapper came in, and Martha’s friends wore bands of canvas clamped around their chests to flatten them, she was forbidden to wear one, with the result, she would say, that she enjoyed a brief popularity with the boys as she was the only girl with breasts, and that it never occurred to her to wear a brassiere at all until she was over forty.

The messages from these early days are contradictory. When Martha was about eight her father told her that the bones of the skull separate all human beings from each other, thereby explaining the painful solitariness of the human condition. This, together with a disposition for ‘inconsolation’ handed down by her Fischel grandmother and her German father in ‘unhappiness genes’, accounted for her ‘glum’ temperament, and for the fact that from early childhood on she would record each passing birthday