

THEIRS IS a quiet anguish.

Loneliness during old age must be frightening in any big city, bustling, uncaring. Berlin, however, has more than its share of the elderly, for reasons stemming from its unique history: the widows of war.

The city reportedly contains Germany's largest number of such women, little old ladies slowly, bravely watching life pass them by. Alone in their autumnal years. And Berlin, vibrant, booming, harsh in turn, has held them for long years now. Several of them are in their 80s, some even happen to be nonagenarian.

Half a century is a long time. Yet, if you chance to meet one of these women today, the immediate intimacy of the situation makes you understand that the cliché about time healing all wounds offers very little comfort for some.

Chance meeting

I met her one summer evening three years ago. It was on crowded Rhinestrasse, as I took my turn to wait in a telephone queue. A journalism student there then, I looked forward to calling my family here. A mild thud followed by murmurs abruptly cut short my thoughts, making me look up to see a bent frame. Elegantly dressed as she was, the woman was in a state of complete disarray at that moment. Moving with a walker, she had picked herself up on falling but was still weighed down with a small, struggling dachshund in one hand, three bags spilling with groceries in the other.

While I made to help retrieve the parcels the dog danced around her ankles barking madly. "Thank you, dear," she drawled in a querulous but marked American accent. Smiling, she pointed a trembling finger towards the phone booth — "Now, get yourself right back. Can't risk losing your place, you know." Then, touching a stray strand of my dark hair she asked: "New

SPEAK MEMORY



here, aren't you? And calling home?"

I nodded agreement to both questions then noticed she was happy speaking, seeming loath to pass on. Suggesting she sit on a black wrought iron bench just

MEHER MARFATIA

behind where we were, I promised to join her as soon as I was through with my call. She seemed glad to do so.

Talking to her was a rewarding experience. Her's was a compulsive evening ritual. She

walked to this spot daily, whether the dachshund needed the air or not. She simply *had* to get there, content to see callers use the booth.

Her glance would dart first to the amount lighting up beside the receiver. 30 pfennigs for a local call. More, she knew, indicated a long-distance conversation. "I think then. I think of parents, husbands, wives and children savouring every word they hear come floating down the wire. And I love dwelling on that image, turning it over and over in my mind."

Married to a French soldier, she had lost him along with two young sons in the action of the Second World War. Adequately provided for, she enjoyed social security benefits and kept reasonably good health for her age, apart from an arthritis problem. She was thankful her needs were looked after. Yet, the wizened features sagged, the wrinkled mouth drooped and the eyes were tinged

She is a lonely lady. Traumatized by the tide of war. Waiting for time to apply the healing touch

with wistfulness, speaking a language all their own. They seem to say: stay, stay with me, stay as long as you can. It was a silent entreaty.

There was also a certain nervousness expressed by those eyes. Had she confided too far to a stranger? Without even exchanging names? But I could wait no longer. I had an appointment and was due to go.

Fair representation

Finding myself moved by the encounter, I brought it up for discussion at dinner. Berliners for generations, my friends observed that the woman was fairly representative of her kind. The dog was typical too. Most old people, and almost every such widow, adopted a pet. Generally a dog, sometimes a cat or a tortoise perhaps, the pampered animal became something of a surrogate favourite child. So that explained the veritable parade of poodles wearing bow-clips in the hair, riding the U-Bahn and being softly crooned over.

The friends then cited the

instance of a 92-year-old German widow they knew of. She lived on her own in a comfortably large apartment, considering herself relatively fortunate. A daughter settled in Venezuela visited her every other year... better than no contact with a family at all, as she realised was the case with so many women.

Few people are aware that between 1945 and 1950 — at about the time of the dismantling of the Four-Power "Allied Kommandatura administration — Berlin saw the building of two "war memorials" with a difference. Actually erected by the women who lost husbands and

lovers, sons and daughters. Standing at Teufelsberg and Insulaner, they were formed from the ruined remains of the war. The sea of rubble the bombings left in their wake was collected, bit by bit, and piled together.

Today, ironically, it is all too easy to miss these grim relics. A green cover cloaks the hillocks, making them appear nothing more than gentle grassy slopes. Groups picnic here on sunny afternoons, children frolic and swim in the nearby lake, read picture books in swaying hammocks or pick blackberries from rows of bushes lining the site.

No plaque explains the story. It is possibly too personal a tribute, from a generation solitary in its grief. Public reminders might have converted this, like memorials the world over, into a mere tourist attraction swarming with visitors running wild with cameras.

Robbing it of its dignity, its poignant worth.

So, equally discreetly, the women live on. Each nursing an intense, private sorrow. Recalling memories of another day.