

## ONE

---

### *Few Safe Harbors*

PETER M. DOUGLAS'S FORMATIVE YEARS

THE FIRST THREE DECADES of Peter Douglas's life brimmed with traumatic wartime struggles to survive, followed by adventures along the California coast and exotic, low-budget overseas travel. Memories of a precarious childhood amid the horrors and devastation of Nazi Germany in World War II remained etched in his mind long after that conflict ended.

Leaving his native country and coming to the United States in the war's aftermath gave rise to a whole new range of peacetime experiences and opportunities that would further shape the youth's unfolding life. Specifically, growing up in coastal California placed the Golden State's imprint on a boy who early on was smitten and awed by the Pacific shore of his adopted home. Later, his pathway toward entering a career in coastal management was filled with twists and turns in both his personal and his early professional life.

#### WAR'S CHILD

Peter Michael Ehlers was born in Berlin, the capital of Adolph Hitler's fantasized Third Reich, on August 22, 1942. Maria Ehlers, the infant's mother, was Jewish, making her son and daughter, Christiane (born in 1941), Jews in accordance with German law. That meant life-threatening danger in a city where Jewish shops and synagogues had been earlier vandalized and set ablaze on Kristallnacht, the "Night of Broken Glass," in November 1938. Though some Jews had fled the city, in 1942 Berlin still had Germany's largest Jewish population, making these Berliners prime targets for mass deportations to ghettos and extermination camps in Poland and elsewhere.

That Peter, his sister, and their mother survived the war was due largely to family connections, Maria's resourcefulness (enhanced by a limited use of English), and, especially, the ingenuity of a devoted nanny, Paula Elisabeth Vetter. Peter and Christiane's gentle father, Reinholt Claren, was a well-connected prominent industrialist and patent lawyer. Peter said he was assured his father was not a member of the Nazi party. Their father, with whom Peter and Christiane had little contact, used his ties with officialdom to protect his vulnerable family from persecution. Hoping to provide an added layer of religious cover for her children, Maria had Peter and Christiane baptized Catholic.<sup>1</sup> On December 5, 1944, an Allied bomb destroyed much of the family home, landing Peter (who had sought cover in the family's self-built air raid shelter) in a hospital for hernia repair surgery. Thus began, upon his release from the hospital, what Peter described much later as "our desperate flight from the Russians,"<sup>2</sup> whose armies were invading Germany from the east and despoiling nearly everything and everyone along the way to Berlin. By then Peter's parents had separated permanently, and he, his sister, his mother, and Paula scrambled literally from one sanctuary (often the urban home or farmhouse of a friend or acquaintance) to another. "Traveling by tractor and train, by foot and horse-drawn wagon, we joined a desperate flood of refugees and ran for weeks, stopping only upon reaching relative safety just inside the American zone of control in Bavaria."<sup>3</sup> Looking back on this "fear-filled, harrowing period of our lives," Peter attributed their survival largely to the "incredible resourcefulness" of Paula, whom he and his sister referred to reverentially as their "soul mother."<sup>4</sup> Christiane recalled how Paula, when food had become increasingly scarce, fed Peter and her by cooking two batches of potato soup: the first using a peeled potato, and the second using only the skin. Hunger, disease, terror, and death stalked them and other German refugees on the move, and not every family had a Paula.

Maria, whose art world connections gave her some measure of influence, not only struggled to protect her children and Paula but also worked to undermine the Nazi regime. An example of Maria's risky, pro-Allied efforts was her resistance activity in the Bavarian town of Mitterteich near the end of the war in early May 1945. As American troops were approaching, the Nazi mayor of the town, wrote Douglas, planned a last-ditch stand against incoming U.S. forces by furnishing rifles to boys and old men while overseeing the positioning of a small detachment of German SS soldiers behind city hall.<sup>5</sup> When the mayor learned that Maria had stirred up the townspeople to

protest the German war effort, he tried to have her hanged. The citizenry quickly came to her aid, forcing the mayor to flee.

Next, something remarkably fortuitous happened. As American troops entered the town, Maria walked out to meet them “waving a white handkerchief.” “Hello, boys!” she said, and then warned them about the SS detachment behind city hall. The American soldiers surrounded the small German force, which surrendered quickly. Shortly thereafter, Maria was brusquely asked for her identification papers by the U.S. officer in charge, who was on the lookout for Nazi sympathizers among the townspeople. Such documents had been lost in the family’s harried flight from the Russians, she replied. Sensing the urgency to prove her support for the Allied cause, Maria handed the officer photographs of her sister and brother-in-law (in U.S. Navy uniform) who had been living in Southern California. “What’s his name?” demanded the officer. “Chapman Wentworth.” The interrogator paused, stood, “took mother’s hands and embraced her,” said Douglas. As fate would have it, the American inquisitor—Special Agent Bert H. Dreebin—had gone through Officer Training School with Chapman Wentworth and, like his comrade-in-arms, lived in Los Angeles!<sup>6</sup> Officer Dreebin then sent telegrams to Alice Ehlers (Peter’s maternal grandmother, residing in Southern California) and Christina Wentworth (Maria’s sister, also living in the Southland), telling them that Maria and her children were safe and how they could be reached by mail. Shortly thereafter, care packages from Mrs. Ehlers in America began arriving in Mitterteich, and Special Agent Dreebin saw to it that these parcels reached Maria and her family. The packages included chocolate, sugar, powdered milk and eggs, puddings, biscuit mix, and sometimes U.S. dollars. Highly beneficial at the time, the chance occurrence of Maria meeting Officer Dreebin in May 1945 would be of even greater importance five years later.

In the aftermath of the war, Maria actively helped the town of Mitterteich recover from the carnage. She aided the Red Cross in reuniting families in the town that had been separated by the chaos of hostilities. According to Christiane Douglas, their mother worked with the American officers in that town as a “liaison” between them and the citizenry, thereby fostering a less problematic postwar occupation. Maria’s involvement in Mitterteich in the years 1945–1950 did not go unnoticed and would soon stand her family in good stead.

With Germany in ruins in the late 1940s and welcoming relatives living in Southern California, Maria, Peter, Christiane, and caretaker Paula were more than ready to try their luck in America, a land relatively unscathed by

AFFIDAVIT OF BERT H. DREEBIN

STATE OF CALIFORNIA )  
                              )SS  
COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES )

BERT H. DREEBIN, being first duly sworn, deposes  
and says:

My full name is Bert H. Dreebin, and I am a citizen of the United States of America, residing at 441 North Sierra Bonita, Los Angeles, California.

In July of 1945, I was Special Agent attached to the 970th Counter-Intelligence Corps, United States Forces in the European Theatre, stationed in the Weiden Sub-Region District in the American Zone of Occupation.

Our orders were maintenance of security and apprehension of war criminals in that region.

In November of 1945 the Region assigned to us was enlarged to include the town of Mitterteich, which is in the District of Kreis Tirschenreuth. In the course of my duties I called upon the office of the Burgomeister and met Maria Ehlers, who was at that time Assistant to the Burgomeister and in charge of rationing and related matters in the operation of the town, a highly responsible position. In obtaining the background of Marie Ehlers I interviewed the Public Safety Officer of the Military

FIGURE 1. Letter written by Bert H. Dreebin, special agent, 970th Counter-Intelligence Corps, United States Forces, dated August 13, 1946, attesting to Maria Ehlers's assistance in the American-occupied town of Mitterteich, Germany. Photo courtesy of Christiane Douglas.

Government Detachment in the aforementioned town. I found that Marie Ehlers had materially assisted the American Military Government in the administration and enforcement of the law at the time when the Americans first occupied the town and through-out the balance of this occupation.

Marie Ehlers was of great assistance to the Counter-Intelligence Service of the United States Government in obtaining the names and background of Nazi leaders, and in one instance advising us of the return of a high Nazi party official and as a result of this information this person was apprehended by the United States authorities.

In my opinion, Marie Ehlers was most helpful to the American cause and as a result I would like to recommend that every assistance be given her in again visiting the United States.

Ruth H. Dreck

Subscribed and sworn to before me

this 13 day of August, 1946.

Grace E. Wallace  
Notary Public in and for the  
County of Los Angeles, State of  
California.

the late war, where, seemingly at least, opportunity for those willing to work hard abounded. With high hopes for a better future, the little band of war-weary refugees sailed across the English Channel to Dover, England, in early August 1950, and then, after a brief stay with the children's maternal grandfather in the Devon County town of Bovey Tracy, boarded a transatlantic ocean liner bound for New York City.

The voyage across the Atlantic made an indelible imprint on eight-year-old Peter—a highly positive one. Late in life he reminisced: “I spotted my first whale and giant manta. . . . My soul was drawn into the ocean as one given over entirely, without resistance, to the Siren’s song. . . . It was there on that journey an intangible, unbreakable, lifelong bond between Ocean and me was forged.”<sup>7</sup> This bond was strengthened and extended to the Pacific Ocean in the years that followed. Sailing past the Statue of Liberty, Douglas later recalled, brought tears to his young eyes. Some problems at the port’s immigration office were resolved “after my mother’s work with the Allies during and after the war became known.” Specifically, Maria carried with her a letter signed by Special Agent Dreebin attesting to her recent status with the U.S. military in occupied Germany and her work with the Red Cross in reunifying refugee families during the last few months of the war. Thereafter, “we were given the VIP treatment.”<sup>8</sup> Soon Maria, her children, and Paula flew to California, with a stopover in snowbound Chicago, arriving at the Los Angeles Airport just before Christmas.

They were met and picked up by well-to-do relatives of his mother in “a convertible automobile and [driven] along South Bay beaches to our new home in Palos Verdes.”<sup>9</sup> Seeing tall palm trees swaying in balmy breezes and feeling the sun on his face, Peter closed his eyes, knowing “without doubt, if paradise exists on Earth, this had to be it.”<sup>10</sup>

## GROWING UP IN COASTAL CALIFORNIA

While the new environment may have been paradise for the new arrivals, Peter and perhaps the others with him continued to feel the traumatic effects of war. Much later in life he reflected on how, after having settled in California, his boyhood might have been influenced by the cataclysm of World War II. “My drawings in class [second grade] were filled with fiery scenes of violence, death, and destruction. Mostly I drew depictions of diving airplanes firing cannons and dropping bombs on running people, hapless

animals, and harmless homes. I apparently also drew mangled bodies strewn across the page, occasionally pressing hard on my pencil until it broke.” He sought and enjoyed solitude, looking on himself as somewhat of a loner “in constant transit.” During World War II and throughout his life, he saw himself as “always being uprooted, of never belonging to a fixed place.” In addition to producing nightmarish depictions and carrying memories of collective violence and of being alone and on the move, Douglas “learned to be observant and noticed many things around [himself] that others missed.”<sup>11</sup> His powers of observation would serve him well much later when, as head of the California Coastal Commission, so much depended on his ability to master mountains of legal minutia and read the roiling, complex, ever-shifting Sacramento political landscape.

Peter’s change of surname in 1954 perhaps bespoke a newfound sense of agency, even happiness, for the California transplant on the cusp of adolescence. When Peter was twelve and living in affluent Rolling Hills with his sister and other relatives, the siblings became U.S. citizens. At the urging of an adult family member, Peter and his sister were encouraged to think about taking an American-sounding surname. The siblings’ oldest cousin, Peter Douglas Wentworth, lived in the Palos Verdes area, providing a familial connection to the name *Douglas*. Meanwhile, a neighbor in Rolling Hills—the CEO of McDonnell Douglas (Donald W. Douglas Jr.)—spent time with young Peter, taking him for helicopter rides. Drawn to their cousin, and to their neighbor, who may have become somewhat of a father figure to the boy, Peter decided to adopt the surname Douglas and talked his sister into doing likewise.<sup>12</sup>

At that time, Peter and Christiane attended the private Chadwick School in Palos Verdes, where they learned English by immersion while working on campus to pay some of their expenses. Afterward, their mother enrolled Peter as a working scholarship student at the Robert Louis Stevenson School, an all-boys college preparatory academy located on the Monterey Peninsula, in upscale Pebble Beach. A boarding student who worked on campus to defray part of his tuition, he “lived happily in a converted tool shed behind the kitchen.” These Spartan quarters meant that he was left pretty much to himself. “Often on moonlit nights,” he arose and followed “animal tracks through thick woods to the rocky shoreline near Bird Rock.” There, he recalled much later, he first ruminated on life’s big questions: “Sitting for hours, searching star-filled heavens for clues to the essence of being, moved by the mystery and wonder of it all, I wrestled with grand, confounding questions. And I found some answers on that ancient seashore bathed in moonlight.” Mostly, though,



he concluded “there are no answers to the universal ‘why.’ It was there I determined that what matters most to me is living the questions I asked, and making my life . . . a worthy expression” of the search for whatever the natural world could teach an inquiring person. Overwhelmed by the beauty and rhythms of tides washing across rocky shores, he felt “harshness leave my life.”<sup>13</sup> Both time and the alluring California seascape seem to have coalesced into a healing balm, salving the boy’s wartime hurts, allowing him to more fully pursue the adventures of youth.

Another healing agent, as well, operated in Peter’s boyhood years. His German-born, Jewish grandmother on his mother’s side, Alice Ehlers (called “Mima” by family members), formed a strong bond with him while becoming “the greatest adult influence in my life.” A prominent harpsichordist, she had left her German homeland in the mid-1930s to concertize and thereafter remained abroad, first in England and then in the United States. A Johann Sebastian Bach specialist, Ehlers performed at venues in the Soviet Union, Israel, and South America, among other places internationally; she also performed at Pomona College (Claremont, California) and held a professorship of music at the University of Southern California. She had been a friend of the world-renowned organist, medical missionary, and Nobel laureate Dr. Albert Schweitzer.<sup>14</sup> Ehlers imbibed Schweitzer’s “reverence for life” philosophy, along with his pacifism. These teachings she instilled in her grandson, Peter, who saw them as forming the root of his ethical/environmental thinking throughout the rest of his life.<sup>15</sup> Simultaneously, the ties between the mentor-grandmother and her protégé-grandson—both of whom spoke English and German—deepened, to the satisfaction of both.

When not being schooled and mentored in the 1950s and early 1960s, young Douglas embraced an ocean-and-beach-going lifestyle; occasionally, though, he camped in the desert and Sierras. “I spent most of my free time on the beach or in the water,” he later recalled. Serving as a junior lifeguard at Redondo Beach spoke to his proficiency as an ocean swimmer. Surfing and diving brought him great joy. Douglas surfed on handcrafted balsa boards just as the wave-riding craze was sweeping Southland beaches. “I also did a lot of diving in those days and remember pounding hundreds of abalone steaks and eating fish caught in the rich nearshore waters just south of Torrance Beach.” Much later he would lament, “The sea of plenty is no more.”<sup>16</sup>

Beginning in his late teens, Douglas held a number of maritime jobs working “long hours” on tugboats, garbage haulers, and passenger craft. His nascent sense of environmental ethics had not yet taken hold. Crewing on a



converted transpacific racing sloop, he and his coworkers picked up garbage from ships in Los Angeles Harbor and dumped it in the ocean off the east end of Catalina Island. Sometimes they came upon barrels of floating “gunk” from U.S. Navy vessels; he and fellow crewmen shot holes in the metal drums, making sure they sank. Such “gunk” may have consisted of chemical weapons waste.<sup>17</sup> In hindsight, referring to the above incidents, Douglas told an audience of surfers in 1999: “Out of ignorance and an unthinking, foolish urge to dominate, I scarred the earth a few times in my youth.”<sup>18</sup>

### THE EDUCATION OF A POLITICAL ACTIVIST

Douglas’s maritime employments continued, as time permitted, even after he went off to college. He studied for a year at UC Berkeley in the early 1960s, during which time he grew uneasy about protesters and hippies on campus. Their drug usage and criticisms of his adopted country offended his immigrant, Republican, pro-American sensibilities.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, he transferred to the less politically volatile UCLA, living off campus with his grandmother, Mima, to save on expenses. His conservatism still intact, Douglas graduated in 1965 with a bachelor’s degree in psychology.

Upon graduating, Douglas briefly entered the merchant marine world, gaining work and passage on a Norwegian chemical tanker crossing the Atlantic. The tanker job was a means toward achieving his twofold aims: to pursue further studies at the Philipps University of Marburg, Germany, and reconnect with a young German woman, Rotraut Schmidt. He had first met Schmidt, a recent pharmacy school graduate who was on vacation, at a puppet show in a beer garden in Salzburg, Austria, in 1959 while Douglas was on a European trip with his American relatives. Subsequently, the two had become pen pals. Later, in the medieval town of Marburg, finding his classes at Philipps University “excruciatingly boring,” Peter stopped attending and sought further education elsewhere: at a German tavern in the town. On one such visit, he met “an amazing curmudgeon,” Henri Lohrengel, “a retired high school teacher, concert violinist, linguist (he read, spoke, and wrote twenty-three languages!) . . . simply the most knowledgeable person I had and have ever met.” During the next six months the teacher and his pupil became close friends. They studied the Greek classics, Roman writers, Hermann Hesse, Buddhism, ancient religious texts, geopolitics, and humankind’s despoliation of the global environment. In addition to supplying Peter

with this rich tutorial in the liberal arts, Lohrengel nurtured the seeds of ecological thinking that earlier had been planted in Peter's mind. "His words of wisdom got me thinking about Earth and environment in ways I had not explored before."<sup>20</sup>

While Douglas's environmental thinking had been nudged forward during the year of self-directed study in Germany, he still needed to figure out how to make a living given his aptitudes and values. Though he was not particularly drawn to law, he valued what legal studies might teach him regarding how society functions and enforces norms through the justice system, and so he entered the UCLA School of Law. In hindsight, he remarked, "Little did I know then, how valuable my legal training would be."<sup>21</sup>

In his second year at the School of Law in the late 1960s, Douglas became what he called "a newborn activist": "My activism focused on social justice, civil and individual rights and liberties, antipoverty and antiwar activities, prisoner rights, fair housing, and student counseling (focused on resistance to a horribly misguided war in Asia)." Looking back on this turning point in his political life, Douglas affirmed: "I am a child of the sixties and proud I never grew up. I have worked consciously and continuously at maturing my idealism and commitment to service on behalf of people and nature."<sup>22</sup> He had not yet explored the field of environmental law. At that time Douglas served as chairperson of the Community Participation Center (CPC), a political activist group composed of law students who went into Watts and other impoverished neighborhoods to help residents organize and battle for fair housing and improved social services. CPC members also counseled young men on draft resistance. Fellow CPC organizers included John Lovell, Wally Walker, and Ralph Ochoa. Peter's classmate and fellow CPC member Robert H. Burnham, who went on to become Newport Beach's city attorney, recalled Douglas's passion for social issues and the latter's skill in facilitating the group's meetings at his apartment near campus.<sup>23</sup> Douglas's wife, "Roe" (he and Rotraut Schmidt had married in 1966), served as CPC executive secretary. She had been instrumental in liberalizing Douglas's politics, including his party switch from Republican to Democrat.<sup>24</sup> Before long, she decided that the CPC's reform efforts were futile and told Peter she planned to return to her German homeland.

Though Peter believed his CPC involvement worthwhile, his disillusionment about his adopted country waging war in Vietnam and sense of burn-out mounted.<sup>25</sup> So after graduating with his law degree and passing the California State Bar examination in 1969, he was ready to set out with Roe