



## The View from Right Field

by Rick Ohler

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**“In Our Midst”**

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**I**n biology professor Dr. David Haskell's book, *The Forest Unseen*, the author chronicles the year he spent in a most unlikely pursuit: examining a square meter of old-growth forest in Tennessee. Before you say it, I know what you're thinking: why couldn't he examine a square *yard* of forest like a normal person, instead of a square meter? It's not Canada. But you know how those pedagogues (RIP Snake) are, always trying to impress us. I can guess what else you're thinking, too: what could possibly be the rationale for studying a plot of land 39.3701 inches by 39.3701 inches for a whole year? I mean, don't you basically have it down after a glance? Here's some dirt with some plants on it, maybe a bug or two, some dead leaves, a stick, an acorn hat. Well, he pulls it off; it's a fascinating book that teaches us how much you can learn about the whole by examining a small part.

I bring up Prof. Haskell's project because of its similarity to what we do at the world's best hometown newspaper, and what I try to do out here in Right Field. It's a fairly small area that your *Advertiser* covers; how much could there be to say about a few square kilometers that are home to 15,000 souls? Heck, Jeff Miers from the *Buffalo News*, did it in an hour and a half in his article "90 Minutes in East Aurora."

The difference between a big daily paper and a small town weekly paper is how closely we, and I, can look at things. I find that even after nearly seven decades of living here as the proverbial knows-everybody townie, I am still amazed by the fascinating and extraordinary people I find in our midst, often right under our noses. In fact, if the *Advertiser* ever added a subtitle to its publication, I'd offer up that phrase ("In Our Midst," not "Right Under Our Noses") for consideration.

Which brings me, pretty early on for a change, to the special subject of this week's musing from Right Field: Hedda Martens. Hedda, Dr. Martens to her university students, left us last week at age 90, after spending a short, but remarkable time in our midst. She had a life story that will make wonderful reading when her memoir

“Chocolate Fell From the Sky: My Journey Through Life,” is published soon. She also gave me the gift of her friendship, through which I learned about courage, resourcefulness, iconoclasm, humor and dignity.

I met Hedda in the fall of 2010, on a Thursday afternoon. I had been offering a class called Writing Your Memoirs and Family Histories through the Continuing Ed department of the school district for several years, and on this Thursday we were about to start a brand new session when into the room came Bruce Davidson and an 80-something-year-old woman.

I knew Bruce from youth sports, but I was taken aback when he said, “This is my mother-in-law, Hedda Martens; she has stories she needs to write down. Make sure she does. I’ll be back to get her at six.”

I didn’t find her name on my list of participants, but I welcomed her and we and another 10 or 11 writers settled around a table and began, tentatively at first, to introduce ourselves. At her turn, Hedda said something like, “My name is Hedda Martens, and my son-in-law told me I **must** come to this class.” It was an unusual introduction, but what was more noteworthy was the very obvious German accent that inflected her flawless, articulate English.

Hedda had, indeed, spent her first two decades in Germany, and had moved to East Aurora from her adopted hometown of Rochester to be with son-in-law Bruce, daughter Anna and grandchildren Carl and Erika after a long career as a teacher and professor of language, linguistics and literature.

Over the ensuing years, we came to know Hedda’s life story through her astonishing writing. As her fellow memoirists and I encouraged her, she began to produce frank, few-hundred-word weekly installments that offered a rich perspective of survival during World War II and afterwards that went so far beyond the textbook simplifications and folkloric half-truths most of us Americans had been exposed to in school and consequently upheld as gospel.

Some snippets: Hedda was born in 1928, which made her five when Hitler came to power and six or seven when goose-stepping Nazi soldiers marched down the *strasse* of Lübeck in northern Germany near the Baltic Sea. Her family lost their home to British bombers, the same British pilots who had thrown chocolates to German children on reconnaissance flights. She wondered about the sudden flight of Jewish neighbors and the persecution of her physician uncle, who was sent to Dachau, not as a Jew, but as a homosexual. Luckily he had friends who bailed him out of concentration camp, and he eventually made it to America by way of India, paving a path for Hedda’s emigration in 1951. An indelible moment came in May of 1945, when 17-year-old Hedda was forced to spend weeks at the Baltic shore retrieving corpses and body parts of concentration camp prisoners who had been packed onto a barge that had been blown up offshore. Then there was the occupation by the Allies and the deprivation and uncertainty it brought. And the

tales of her life after she left Germany—as an immigrant, pioneer, single parent, educator and writer—they are spellbinding as well.

These stories by themselves are worth reading, but what made them so memorable was the humanity, humor, elegance and grace that Hedda brought to them. She admitted, tearfully at times, that she had accepted the Nazi narrative out of patriotic duty for a time as a youngster. She participated in Hitler Youth, and she watched as her mother received an award for strengthening the Reich by having four children. Then she recounted the utter horror and disgust she felt as she began to understand the Nazi regime's atrocities. "Hitler," she often said to us, almost spitting out the words, "is with me every day." In an amazing turnabout, she approached the Holocaust Resource Center of Buffalo a few years ago, which resulted in the center recording her in two enlightening and haunting videos about her experiences during Hitler's reign. Imagine that. Visit [hrcbuffalo.org/heddamartens](http://hrcbuffalo.org/heddamartens) to view them.

Gradually, we readers of Hedda's stories began to insist that they be collected into a book; the world, we reasoned, deserved such an authentic history, especially as eye witnesses to WWII become fewer and fewer. As her health declined, Hedda realized that her life's work as an educator had not ended when she retired from teaching. She worked diligently, and with the help of her daughter and fellow writer Debby Sullivan, her memoir began to become a reality. She passed away, as she had lived, with dignity and with satisfaction that she had gotten her work done.

As David Haskell (remember him from 800 words ago?) theorized in his book, much can be learned about the whole forest from an examination of a smaller part. Hedda Martens taught us so much about the larger world by sharpening our focus and letting us learn the greater lesson.

Hedda often called me "teacher," in our memoirs classes, but I know better.