20th-century history

Vantage point

The House by the Lake: One House, Five

Families, and a Hundred Years of German

History

I

N2007ThomasHarding,anEnglish

journalist, began probinghisGerman-

Jewish rootsafterhearingan amazing

storyata familyfuneral. The result was

“Hannsand Rudolf”, a bestsellingac-

countofhowhisgreat-uncle, Hanns

Alexander, tracked down and eventually

captured the kommandantofAuschwitz,

RudolfHöss.

MrHardingwasonlybeginningto

mine hisfamily’shistory, ittranspired. In

“The House bythe Lake”, a bookac-

claimed in Britain lastyearand now

available in America, hisgaze broadens

to the century-longsaga offive families’

fortunesand misfortunes. If“Hanns&

Rudolf” wasa sonata, “The House bythe

Lake” isa symphony, tellingthe story of

modern Germanywith one recurring

theme: historyasseen from the Alex-

anderfamily’slake house outside Berlin.

Alfred Alexander, MrHarding’sgreat-

grandfather, builtthe house atGross

Glienicke, 15km (nine miles) westof

Berlin, in 1927. Aprominentdoctorwho

counted Einstein amonghispatients, Dr

Alexandersoughta calm refuge forhim-

self, hiswife Hennyand theirfour chil-

dren. Thatidyll came to an abruptend in

1936, when the Alexandersfled Nazi

Germanyto England.

Thus“Aryanised”, theircottage

would, byan extraordinarytwistof fate,

offera ringside seatto the manycon-

vulsionsofGerman history. Thishouse

notonlyendured seizure bythe Gestapo

and had the Berlin Wall builtatthe bot-

tom ofitsgarden, butwason the front-

line ofeveryothermajoreventofGer-

many’s20th century: the 1936 Olympics,

Sovietconquestand massrape, the Berlin

airlift, the socialistrepublic, spies, sports

doping, and finally, the Wall’sfall in 1989.

“The House bythe Lake” skipsbe-

tween itsvaried occupantsand these

eventsto presentan admirablyclear and

concise historyofmodern Germany. It’s

an impressive featofarchival and in-

vestigative research. Fascinatingrevela-

tionsabound, such asthe factthat the

anthem ofthe Berlin airlift, “Berlin bleibt

doch Berlin” (“Berlin isstill Berlin”), was

written in 1948 byWill Meisel, the com-

poserwho tookoverthe Alexanders’

house in 1937 and vainlytried to reclaim it

afterthe second world war.

Yetforall itsdetailed digging, the

emotional side ofthe family’slossre-

mainssubmerged. MrHardingismore

comfortable with facts; with classic

English reticence, he burieshisfamily’s

responsesin footnotesand summaries. A

greaterwillingnessto explore the pain of

thishistorictheftwould have made this

powerful bookeven more so.