



“To Bring Something Good Out of This Suffering...”

The Second World War and *The Skin of Our Teeth*

By Jerry James

The germ of my play, once started... fixed its thoughts on the War and the situation of the eternal family under successive catastrophes... I was astonished at the fact it was never listed among plays dealing with the war, the preoccupation then in everyone's mind. — Thornton Wilder



Europe 1940

Virtually the entire continent is under the control of Nazi Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union

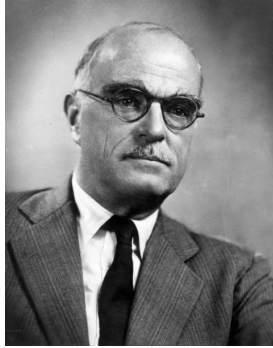
When *The Skin of Our Teeth* opened at New York's Plymouth Theatre on November 18, 1942, Thornton Wilder, the author, was not present. Nor had he attended any of the rehearsals. Why? Because Captain T.W. Wilder, US Army Air Force Intelligence, was stationed at Hamilton Field, California. (He did manage to see the show in Washington on November 9.)

Wilder had begun the play 2 years earlier, on June 28, 1940, the day before France surrendered to Nazi Germany after a 6-week *blitzkrieg*. His close friend Gertrude Stein lived in France, along with her *intime*, Alice B. Toklas. Artists, lesbians, Jews — red flags for the Nazis. Wilder had despaired of finding a subject for a new play. Now, with his friends in peril, he found one.

In Act I of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, written before the US entry into the war, the Antrobus family takes in refugees. In Act III, written and rewritten during 1942, with World War II in every American's face, they have become refugees, somehow making their way back to their home.

Before we look at the ways in which the war affected *The Skin of Our Teeth*, both in its writing and in its production, let's take brief looks at Thornton Wilder and Nazi Germany.

Wilder in Brief



Thornton Wilder (1897-1975)

Because he wrote *Our Town*, Wilder is invariably linked with small-town American life. In reality, he was a globetrotting cosmopolite who spoke 5 languages. Wilder met James Joyce, drank with Pablo Picasso, hobnobbed with Sigmund Freud and befriended Ernest Hemingway.

Young Thornton's father despaired of his son's ever earning a nickel. Then, Wilder wrote *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927). After that, he was the financial mainstay of the family, up to and after his death.

Wilder met Gertrude Stein in Chicago in 1934. In the next few years, she would sometimes occupy his apartment there, while he worked as her unofficial agent.

In the summer of 1939, Wilder made his last pre-war trip to Europe to see Stein. (His friend Freud had fled Vienna in 1938.) Although Wilder was not particularly fond of France or the French, he had earlier written, "I hate Hitler."

Nazi Germany in Brief

In January 1933, Adolf Hitler was named Chancellor of Germany. Within 8 weeks, the Enabling Act granted him absolute power.

Persecution of minority groups, the Jews chief among them, began almost immediately and was codified by 1935. (It is chilling to realize that everything the Third Reich did was perfectly legal.)

In 1936, the Nazis occupied the Rhineland. In 1938, they took over Austria and those Teutonic areas of Czechoslovakia called the Sudetenland. In 1939, all of Czechoslovakia became a Nazi protectorate.

That August came the biggest shock of all. Mortal enemies Hitler and Joseph Stalin signed a non-aggression pact. World War II began 9 days later, September 1, 1939, as Russia and Germany swarmed over Poland.

And for 8 months, there they stayed. It was called the *Sitzkrieg* — the Phony War.

1940



Adolf Hitler (1889-1945)

In April 1940, the Nazis occupied Denmark and Norway. In May, the *Sitzkrieg* ended, as the Nazis swept into France through Holland and Belgium. In June, Benito Mussolini's tagalong Italy declared war, too.

By mid-July, Wilder had finished the first act of his new play. Stein and Toklas had fled Paris for their country home in Bilignin. And Adolf Hitler stood supreme on the European continent.

True, Hitler had failed to destroy the British at Dunkirk, an unforced error that allowed the evacuation of 338,000 troops. But now, his invasion of England couldn't fail. Except that it would never get started, because the German General Staff had no idea how to mount an amphibious invasion. The Nazis expected England to surrender. It did not.



Gertrude Stein (1874-1946)

In August, the Luftwaffe began the bombing which would come to be called the Battle of Britain. In September, its objective shifted from destroying the RAF to destroying London. The Luftwaffe failed. By the end of October, the Battle of Britain was over.

Having observed all this, Wilder wrote on November 1 that his new play was “the most ambitious subject I have ever approached.”

Hitler now drew an insane conclusion: England was holding out only because she thought Russia might save her! Therefore, Russia must be destroyed. This would prove to be another unforced error.

1941

During most of 1941, Thornton Wilder found himself a cultural emissary, traveling to South America and England, where he tried to get a visa to see Gertrude Stein in France. Work on the play came slowly.

Hitler was vexed. Spain, where Francisco Franco owed his victory to the Nazis, remained neutral. Italian troops were being chopped to pieces in Egypt and Greece. So, when Yugoslavia offended him, Hitler put off his invasion of Russia to slap down the Southern Slavs. This shortened the amount of time the Nazis would have to defeat the Soviets before Russia could unleash its ultimate weapon: “General Winter.”

The Nazis invaded on June 22, 1941, 5 weeks later than originally planned. This was yet another unforced error, one which would eventually destroy the Third Reich.

On December 7, 1941, Wilder, due to a stint at the University of Hawaii, may have been one of the few Americans able to answer the question, “Where’s Pearl Harbor?”

Japan hadn’t bothered to inform Hitler of its plans. Still, he might have managed to avoid war with the US. (President Roosevelt wasn’t sure he could have gotten a declaration of war against Germany.)



Pearl Harbor: December 7, 1941

Instead, Hitler declared war on December 11. He knew the US to be “one big bluff,” controlled by Jews and Freemasons. It was — surprise! — yet another unforced error.

Hitler, of his own volition, had now taken on 3 of the world’s leading economic powers, England, Russia and the US. Unwise...

Meanwhile, the Japanese quickly took Wake Island and Guam. (It would take until May to take the Philippines.) For the US, it was a bleak December. For Wilder, it was also the spur to finish his play.

1942



Original Cast — “The Skin of Our Teeth”

Thornton Wilder finished Act III of *The Skin of Our Teeth* on New Year’s Day, 1942, when things looked very, very bad. He would make some revisions later in the year.

Perhaps Wilder began his rethinking as early as June 7, when Japan’s would-be hegemony in the Pacific was stopped short by the stunning US naval victory at Midway.

Shortly after that victory, Wilder was sworn into the US armed forces. At the end of the month, he would have been too old to serve, but he felt it was his duty. Wilder would later push to be promoted, so that he might be sent overseas.

In August, the Germans launched a summer offensive against Stalingrad. It would end disastrously, yet *another* unforced error.

On September 13, with the show about to go into rehearsal, Wilder wrote, “I reckon that I believe that a text counts 95% of a show, and I let all the rest go hang... Anyway, now the text’s established and I don’t have to think one more iota about that part of it.”

The Skin of Our Teeth had its world premiere in New Haven on October 15. It

would spend 6 weeks on the road before opening on Broadway. It was a hit, while the Germans froze at Stalingrad. They would surrender there in February 1943.

1943 and After

The Skin of Our Teeth won the Pulitzer Prize on May 4. But Major Wilder was overseas, there to interrogate those prisoners who spoke one of his 5 languages in Algeria, Italy and (eventually) Germany.

By the time the show closed on September 25, 1943, it was obvious that the Allies would win the war, but at great cost.



Lt. Col. Thornton Wilder, USAAF

A well-placed friend helped Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas survive, although Stein died of cancer in 1946. Toklas died in 1967.

Thornton Wilder served for the duration. He was finally mustered out on September 19, 1945, with the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Wilder never wrote another full-length play, turning instead to novels. However, in 1955, he adapted his earlier work, *The Merchant of Yonkers* — written in Tucson at 732 N. 6th Ave., around the corner from the Rogue — as *The Matchmaker*. The play is best known as the source material for *Hello, Dolly!*

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