My great-grandfather, Emil Sauer, was born in an Austrian settlement in the Romanian part of Bucovina, a region in Central Europe. Eventually, his family returned to Vienna. Around the beginning of 1914, Emil and his mother made the transatlantic voyage to Canada, landing in Halifax, Nova Scotia, before traveling to the prairies of Saskatchewan to visit friends who had recently moved from Austria.

However, what had been as a visit of pleasure quickly turned to tragedy when Emil’s mother contracted typhoid fever and died, leaving the sixteen year-old penniless in an unfamiliar country an ocean away from his home. To make matters worse, the First World War broke out in July of that same year and with it, any possibility of returning to Austria vanished. With no money and no family, Emil decided to follow the lead of his hosts, who had graduated from Queens University in Kingston, Ontario. He was granted a scholarship as well as two years added to his degree based on two years’ prior education in Austria. After eating his undergraduate degree, Emil remained at Queens for medical school, where he met his wife, Eleanor Quinn, a native of Kingston. It was never clear what compelled Emil to study medicine. Perhaps he was motivated by his early exposure to illness with the death of his mother, or perhaps he was simply weighing job opportunities.

Once they had graduated, Emil and Eleanor both found jobs in Saskatchewan, Emil in a tuberculosis sanitarium and Eleanor as a schoolteacher, and decided to settle there. The ensuing years were eventful. Emil grew his base of patients, became part of the Canadian army, and had three children, Dorothy, Karl, and my grandmother, Eleanor. Growing up, my grandmother was always acutely aware of her father’s German nationality. Emil had a thick accent, was a lover of German art, and often reminded his children of their German family. During the interwar period, this wasn’t problematic, but when Canada entered WWII, anti-German sentiment grew. Eleanor faced the repercussions of this at school. When I asked her if there was a particular moment when she realized she was considered German and not Canadian, she told me that it was when her schoolmates would call her names: “Hitler Youth, Aryan Princess,” and shove her down at school. Because of this, Eleanor grew up with an understanding of war’s effects on community. Eventually, she followed her father’s footsteps and went to Queens, where she met her husband and my grandfather, David Matthews.

After university, the two were married and moved from Canada to New York, where David earned his MBA from Columbia. They never considered New York to be a culture shock. Not only was it geographically close to Canada, but its cultural values were similar. But after my uncle, also named David, was born, my grandparents left New York after my grandfather was offered a job with Coca-Cola, in Atlanta, Georgia. Today, Atlanta was a vibrant city, but in the 1960s,
Coca-Cola was one of, if not its only, international corporations. The company was a major source of philanthropy in the city and offered its employees access to clubs, private schools, and even financing. My grandmother still remembers how easy it was for them to get a loan for their home once the bank knew they worked for Coca-Cola.

Despite these benefits, my grandparents were apprehensive about the social ramifications of moving to Atlanta. Yes, they had been accepted as Canadians in New York, but would that hold true in the American South? My grandmother feared that her experience in Atlanta would be all-too-similar to her father’s in Canada. At that same time, in 1966, Emil passed away. Shortly after, however, my aunt Jane was born, and she was followed by my mother, Rachel. And to their surprise, Canadian roots were not seen as a cultural divide in Atlanta, but as a benefit. With Southern resentment about the Civil War still rampant, my grandmother’s neighbors only cared that she was not a “Yankee.” Although Canadians generally sided with the Union during the war, their perception as separate from the North allowed my grandparents to assimilate into Atlanta’s society.

This poses a significant question: how does war affect American communities? From the anti-German sentiment my great-grandfather experienced during the world wars to my grandmother’s memory of the divide between North and South still present from the American Civil War, it is evident that war has the ability to alter the fabric of our communities by redefining our concepts of enemy and ally.