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Gilbert, Gabrielle Kahn

Gabriele Kahn (Gabriele Gilbert) was born in 1927 in Mannheim. She was 5½ years old when the Nazi party gained control of the German government. She was 6 years and 3 months when she escaped Germany with her governess. Not yet even 6 years of age, she experienced directly the hostile society: the police, the uniformed men (some armed), the officials, the shop owners who began refusing service to her family, and the school teachers of this violent state. She had to be warned when on the street not to speak to persons she knew, for that might cause them harm. She tried to go to a summer camp. Her family did not know that it was already Nazi. She was not allowed to be in any of the camp activities. She tried to enter the first grade at the same school where her mother had gone. It was already Nazified. She could not sit with the pupils, nor speak with them. At home, she asked her parents to sing and march like the others.

Gabriele's father, Dr. Richard Kahn, was an attorney-at-law and banker. He was director of large Mannheim bank. Nazi law did not allow Jews to practice any profession. He was put in prison twice. Influential friends were still able to free him at that time. But Dr. Kahn knew that next would be police like the Gestapo who needed show no cause. Dr. Kahn and Gabi's mother escaped to Paris. Gabi's governess, Irena Kaufer, not Jewish,

chose to leave Nazi Germany with the family. They went to Paris by way of Switzerland in order to avoid any entanglements by the Nazis at the border.

At age six, Gabi had little understanding of these events. She began to form an idea of herself as "some kind of freak." She thought her parents and close family must have something very wrong about them. The family was German. They had no ideas as to their social and national identity. Gabi knew nothing about Judaism.

Gabi's family was prominent in Mannheim. Her mother was Annelies Kahn, daughter of Elena and Paul Koppel. Annelies and her two sisters Hildegard and Lily were trained in music, and other arts, according to the wishes of the parents. Hildegard played the violin; many years later, when the family had all been forced to flee Germany, Hildegard played first violin in the Westchester county symphony in Riverdale, New York. Lily became a well-known pianist and played with Furtwanger and other such conductors in Germany. Annelies, Gabi's mother, played the cello. She was also a dancer. Her photograph, dancing, was in local cultural publications in the 1920s. Her photograph was also in the 1967 cultural historical review "Mannheim So Es War" published by the city government of Mannheim.

The home of Gabriele's grandparents is also in this 1967 publication. In 1967, the house, now a hotel called the Hotel Kuppel, was shown and

pointed out on a photograph map of one of the sites. Gabi's grandparents' property was taken by the Nazi government from the Koppels, as well as all their other holdings in 1936. The Koppels arrived in the United States in poverty with no belongings but their baggage.

The home of the Koppels was filled by artists, writers, actors, musicians. On most weekends, concerts were held there with both professionals and talented amateurs performing. Gabi spent many days there in what was, for her, a fairy land.

For such seizers of property, as in the cases of Kahn and Koppel, there is no rationalizing excuse such as claims of "confusion of war" and the like. This was a time of peace, 1933-1936. The families were very wealthy.

Before escaping Germany, Dr. Kahn had hid many of his valuable possessions in churches and with friends, and distributed them so they could be sold, not looted by the Nazis, which supported the Kahns through nine years of hiding and as refugees in Europe.

When Gabi in Paris, she entered Ecole Pascal, a few doors from the Arc de Triomphe. She learned French rapidly, so that she would not speak German again. She never did, not even to her parents. Despite the freedom of the Paris streets, she often felt an unreasonable fear and an unreality about herself, especially compared to other children. After about a year and a half

in Paris, the Kahns took up residence in Holland. Gabi arrived in Amsterdam where Dr. Kahn had taken an apartment on Michelangelo Street. She entered the Montessori school where she met Anne Frank again. The Dutch were friendly, Gabi learned the language rapidly. She now spoke Dutch. She had companions. Like the Dutch children, she skated or bicycled to school. Despite her remaining feeling of not being real, the way "they" were, or being somehow weird, she thought she might become a real Dutch girl someday.

But the Nazi menace began to appear again. Her parents became apprehensive of war. By this time, Gabi was twelve years old. Her parents sent her to spend two weeks with an English girl and her family. Gabi had the choice of remaining in England, but she chose to return to Holland with her father and mother and governess.

The situation was dangerous. They moved to a small town, Amstelveen, then to a village, Blaricum. The Germans invaded Holland in May 1940. They went into hiding. Dr. Kahn still had some funds. They bought a house. Sympathetic neighbors arranged to give the impression of living there. By avoiding the windows, and allowing only her governess and Dr. Kahn ever to go out, they avoided detection. They were immigrants who

had arrived in Holland after Hitler became Reichscounselor in 1933; they were thus the most searched for by the occupying Germans.

Dr. Kahn went out most days. He was searching for some way to escape Holland and get to the United States. He had the appearance of a usual Dutch man. Gabi's governess went out sometimes to find food; the neighbors helped with that. The food was mainly cabbage during this war under the German Fascist rule.

In Nov. 1941, Dr. Kahn was at the Queen's residence in The Hague, which the Germans had taken for headquarters. He was behind a colonel. The colonel dropped a briefcase and did not notice it. Dr. Kahn picked up the briefcase and gave it to the colonel. The officer turned to him and recognized him. "Kahn," he said. "What are you doing here?" "Trying to get out of this Scheisseland." This officer was in charge of sending Jews to concentration camps. He was an old student companion of Dr Kahn's, when studying at Heidelberg. This colonel arranged for an escape for Dr. Kahn and family and sent them to the Spanish border through Paris with two soldiers as guards. Dr. Kahn was also able to save one other family in hiding through this colonel.

Gabi's governess had married a young divinity student, Klaas Bosma, a few weeks before this and disappeared from the SS into the Dutch citizenry.

The Kahns sailed from Libson on the last boat, "Musino," that carried refugees from Europe. The United States would be in the war in a few weeks. Gabi's two aunts and her grandparents assembled on the dock to meet Dr. Kahn and family. For Gabi, it was a great disappointment. She would never enjoy her exciting, happy, funny family again. Her arrival was also a great disappointment.

Gabi now lived in poverty. She lived in a garret in Riverdale in the Bronx, New York City. She went to a public school. She was now 14 ½ years old. The school district had a large population of tough kids, who carried knives and other weapons. She was not bothered by them; she had experienced so much threat of violence that she had no apprehension of such youth. Nothing surprised her. But she had great apprehension of the streets and public places. She organized her way to school as to spend as little time as possible on the streets. She learned English, her fourth language, rapidly. She never spoke German to anyone, as had been her way since leaving Mannheim. Coming home from school, she rode a short distance on the subway. Once off the steps that led to the street, she ran the distance to her

building. She never questioned herself about this behavior. There were many behaviors of this kind. These were symptoms, results from the Nazi terror, from the destruction of her family. 37 members were lost. Gabi discovered the destructive effects of these on other aspects of her life many years later.

Dr. Kahn did not find suitable work in New York City, but eventually took an opportunity to operate a chicken farm 65 miles north of New York.

Gabi attended high school, she was part of the school life, she did her studies well, and she was sociable. She was a cheerleader, playing basketball and baseball. Yet, she remained in private feeling different from the others. She did not have students who were friends from school to her home.

Gabi's grandfather was closely related to the Governor of the State of the New York, Herbert Lehman, and to also Nathan Strauss, a philanthropist. (Mr. Strauss paid for the first production of "The Diary of Anne Frank.") These families were concerned for Gabi's future. They had put up the guarantees for Dr. Kahn's entries to the United States, as demanded by the immigration service. When Gabi graduated from high school at 17 (which she did despite the years of school lost due to the Nazis and the new languages learned), these families wished to help her with college. She was offered schools like Sarah Lawrence and Vassar. She chose instead Keuka College in New York State. She did not know at that time what to make of

her choice. It was not satisfactory. She stayed a year, then entered general studies at Columbia University. She discovered many years later that such choices were more symptoms of her childhoods as she was menaced and excommunicated—the result of still feeling, deep down, like a freak.

She met her future husband in a writing class. He was a veteran of World War II and had been a Lieutenant Colonel in the Marine Corps. He was studying for a PhD in sociology.

Gabriele's companions became the graduate students, all of them about five years or more older than she was. She stopped taking courses proper to her stage in college, undergraduate courses. She took one course in the graduate school and received an "A" for her term paper. She took no more courses. She helped write her husband's MA. Her husband taught at Hofstra and later at the Foreign Service Institute in Washington.

Gabi had two children. For her children she demanded discipline and study which she had not asked of herself. Women in her family had been ambitious as had her two aunts and her mother. Her great-grandmother had been one of the first female medical doctors in Europe. Gabi sent her children to private school in New York City. They both went to college. She had been divorced when they were four and two years old and managed this with her own funds and business and with an inheritance from her husband's

family. She had the funds to buy a brownstone in Greenwich Village. She finally began to understand her lapses in thoughtful behavior. She sold her property in New York City and moved to a farm in New York State on the same property in which her parents had lived. She works to organize in her present life the same intelligent, cultured life that had first inspired her in the happy life of her family at the Koppel house in Mannheim. She is assisted in this by her friend and companion of forty-^{seven}~~five~~ years, James Hulquist.