

Memo from: *Claire Welch*
To: **Michlean Amir Reference Archivist**
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Subject: **My History; 1938 +**

I thought the photo heritage album I put together a few years ago would be enough, but several family members have asked me some questions that aren't answered in them. These will be my recollections and I hope they are correct. It's always a surprise to me when I see the same events viewed differently by all who were there. Memory is a funny thing.

In 2007, at age 72, I was just finding out some things about my life. Amazing! I heard these stories and had some recollections, but from a child's eye. Now I'm finding pieces of my life I never knew!

It actually started with my brother, Bernd and his wife, Pat. They have friends, Steve and Laura, who had exchange students from Gottingen, Germany. Steve & Laura met the parents of Clara Kind &/or Hannah Rüttgerodt after college while travelling Europe ... or somewhere and they became friends. (Perhaps after I meet the Rüttgerodt and Kind families I will have it deciphered correctly.) So in 2006 Steve and Laura opened their home to Clara and Hannah. There was 1 week that Steve & Laura were going away so Clara and Hannah stayed with Bernd and Pat for that time.

Sometime during their stay, Bernd mentioned my immigration to the USA from Germany. When Dad (Berthold John, aka B. J.) and Rose, Dads' second wife, moved from Walton, NY to Florida, they decided to give me old papers and photos they had in boxes rather than cart them to their new home. I was happy to get them, but with work and family I stuck them in a closet as most of the papers were in German. These are their passport photographs; Dad on the left and Opa on the right.



One item I had was something my Opa (Max Weinberg) wrote while we were living in Chicago. I can still visualize him typing away on his German typewriter. He asked me then (1947) if I was interested in reading what he wrote and I know I disappointed him by saying I wasn't. 13 year olds aren't interested in family writings.

While I was teaching, the aide who was assigned to me - Carol Allen, asked me if I had any work for her as she was bored. A week later I remembered the typing Opa had done and knew there were German translation programs for the computer. So the next time Carol asked me for work I asked her if she needed to know what she was typing. She didn't and said

she'd love to do the typing for me on the computer. She typed the German writings of Opa into the computer. The translation program I bought didn't work and Opa's missile languished this time in cyber space. One time I must have mentioned Opa's writing to Bernd and he said he'd like a copy so I emailed a few attached pages until he had the entire 40+ pages. And then it languished at his house, too.

Bernd mentioned these German writings to Clara & Hannah and they said they'd like to see it. Then they asked if they could practice their English and try to translate it. We were elated and for Christmas each family member received a copy of the translation. The girls enjoyed the process and it turns out that Göttingen is not far from Brake and the girls visited Brake when they returned to Germany.

That spurred Bernd and Pat to visit Germany. They invited us to go, but we had already paid for an Alaskan trip which was at the same time. And I had mixed feelings about going. Dad really colored my view of the German people as he was always bitter that we had to leave Germany. Few people were openly defending the Jews at that time.

After the war Opa began corresponding with his former German friends. Every time a letter would come from Germany dad would become very angry and there were huge arguments. Opa could not explain to dad how he felt because Dad would get so angry and that's what the girls translation explained to us. Opa told us about his friends and how he never felt any antisemitism from them. Opa also said his English was not so good nor was his hearing and he would love to go back to his homeland where he could at least understand all the conversations. He was 72 when we arrived in Chicago. Opa also said he was very grateful to be in the USA and knew he couldn't go back, but did want to remain in touch with his German friends. The arguments ceased after Dad read Opa's writings, but Dad still didn't like the letters coming.

After Bernd and Pat's visit to Brake we see that Opa's view of Germany was "rose" colored. Their last 5 years there were not the most pleasant, but as a child I was oblivious.

While in Brake, Bernd and Pat met Hans Berger, a man in his 80's who remembers our Opa. Mr. Berger told Bernd & Pat that his mother sewed for our family. Mr. Berger spoke no English and Bernd only understood some, so it was a good thing Clara & Hannah were with them. Mr. Berger gave Bernd a book, Ist Denn Du Was Gewesen (Did It Really Happen) and it tells the story of the Brake women that were affected by the Holocaust. The Germans kept very good records. This book primarily deals with the women in the region.

The inn keeper at the Hotel Ambiente, had asked Bernd why he would be in Brake for so long, as it is not a normal tourist spot. Bernd explained his mission. A few days later the inn keeper knocked on Bernd's door and he also had a book about the Jews of Brake; Juden In Der Wesermarsch that he lent to Bernd. Bernd and Pat looked over the parts that pertained to Weinberg or Brodek, my former landlord the last year in Brake. We could read pieces of the books, but not all so when they got home Bernd & Pat found someone that could translate the parts that pertained to us. We knew the German language out of necessity, but were speaking English as much as possible. It was not comfortable to be German in the 1940's. (When we got to Brake we were given an English translation of the book, Juden In Der Wesermarsch.)

After they got home from Germany and subsequently had the pertinent parts of the book translated, we decided to meet at Paul's house, our youngest child, because it wasn't far from Walton, NY where Bernd was going to attend his 50th high school reunion. That first night we were all together Bernd, Pat, Chuck and I. We waited until the children were tucked away (10:00 PM) and then Bernd reviewed the translations of the books.

That's when he went over what the book said with Chuck & me: that it wasn't only Dad that was picked up Kristallnacht, but Opa, Mom and ME, too! I was 3 then and I'd never heard that! Dad died in 1995 and never shared any of his experiences; only his bitterness towards his homeland and with good reason. I was always under the impression that only Dad was picked up and then sent to Sachsenhausen. Opa was detained by the police for a few days and Mom and I were detained only a few hours. Dad was released on 14 Dec. 1938. The mystery is how he was released.

That mystery has also been solved. In the spring of 2008 Bernd sent me a book with my name at the top of the book! At the time I wondered how he did that and was very impressed! I did not have time to look at it then as I had an appointment and decided to read it when I got home.

When I got home Chuck asked me if I saw the marker that Bernd had put in the book, The Rise & Fall Of The Nazis. When I read the page it states that 20,000 to 30,000 Jews were released from the concentration camps if they promised to leave Germany and not return. Since we had already had started that process, Dad was released on 14 December 1938.

And the book with "my" name on it? It wasn't. The author has the same name, but no royalties for me. Bernd happened to be going through a Border's Book Store and stumbled on the book.

When Mom, Dad & Opa got their citizenship papers (14 December 1945 ... the same day as his release from Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp, but 7 years later) they asked me what I remembered of Germany. I've often told the story of my trip to the bakery or sweet shop just before we came to the USA. I remembered going to the bakery with Dad and he told me to pick out something I'd like and he'd get it for me. We were the only customers and I was delighted to be able to enjoy a treat. I remember it being a chocolate purse wrapped in red foil with chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil in it. But the clerk looked frightened and didn't want to sell it to us. Dad insisted! That's when she went to the front door, looked up and down the street, saw nobody and then gave us the confection and asked us to leave quickly. Dad told me that was a few days before we left Germany.

Now that I've read the book translations I fully understand why Dad was so angry, but also understand why Opa saw with "rose" colored glasses. At his age it was easier and bitterness is not easy to live with.

I was born on 21 December 1934 in Brake, Germany at St. Bernard's Hospital and my name IS Claire Weinberg. There was some debate about my name. I was named after my paternal grandmother, Clara.

Since I can't read the script on my birth certificate, I really did not know how my name was spelled. When I was in college a professor translated my birth certificate and took the "Claire" that I gave him as my name, because he could not read that script either. When my maternal grandfather died there was a death notice sent to us and in it my name is spelled "Cläre." And now I found out that I was named Claire. That's what it states in both of the books; Ist Denn Da Was Gewessen? by Ursula

Bernhold & Almut Setje-Eilers and Juden In Der Wesermarsch 1933 - 1945 by Gerd Strachotta. Again, the Germans kept great records.



Clara (Isreal) Weinberg

I have not said very much about Mom. Today I realize how brave she was to marry Dad at that time in history, as she was Lutheran. They met because they both were in a community choral group. Mom was a wonderful soprano and Dad a bass. They were both in their late 20's when they met. Mom never knew Dad with hair.

Dad was not always so easy. And he told Ann (my step-sister) that he would not have made it if he had stayed in Germany because he would not have kept his mouth shut.

Colleen, my daughter, wrote this next section as an assignment for a class to complete a master's degree in 2004 and we thought it was accurate. Most of it is. The *italics* within Colleen's writings are my amendments which I did after May 2008.

Passage to Freedom: One Family's Story

By

Colleen A. Davisson

The day came to a close and Claire, then 3 years old, headed off to bed. Well into the night, sleeping comfortably under her feather comforter, she was abruptly awakened by loud pounding at the door and rough, strange voices from the entry below. Fearful and alone in her room, she quietly crept out of bed and wedged herself behind the wardrobe set in an alcove of her bedroom. Once there, uncomfortable as it was, she stayed, soon to discover that she was stuck and could not move even if she wanted to.

After the commotion subsided and the strangers left Claire began to cry and call out for her 'mutter.' Thinking Claire had been asleep throughout the ordeal, Friedericke rushed to the bedroom to find her only child stuck between the wall and the large piece of furniture where she

had sought refuge. Together they worked to ease Claire out and then snuggled in bed together for comfort.

I always thought this was what happened. And I was told that it was a dream I had a few days after Dad was picked up. I believe that is correct; it was a nightmare I had and I hid, but it may have been on the night of 9 Nov. 1938.

Claire did not yet know it, but this night would change the course of her life. Her wealthy, Jewish father, Berthold John Weinberg, had been rounded up on this November night and taken to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp by the Nazi's. History recalls this night as Kristallnacht, the night of shattered glass. All Claire remembers is that her father was gone and the family was unsure of what was to come.

What I had never been told was that Opa, Max Weinberg, was picked up and detained for a few days in a jail of some kind, and my mother and I were also picked up. We, luckily, were only detained a few hours.

About a month later, on December 14, 1938, Berthold returned to the home of his father, Max Weinberg, Claire's grandfather. Claire recalls this moment vividly. She was brought to her father who was with his wife and Max. "The three of them," Claire says, "my mother, father and Opa just stood there embracing and sobbing. It was the first time in my life I had ever seen adults cry." The family suspects a large sum of money, perhaps from the family business or relatives already safe in South America or the States, was exchanged for his release. To this day no one knows for sure how Berthold was released, just thankful that he was.

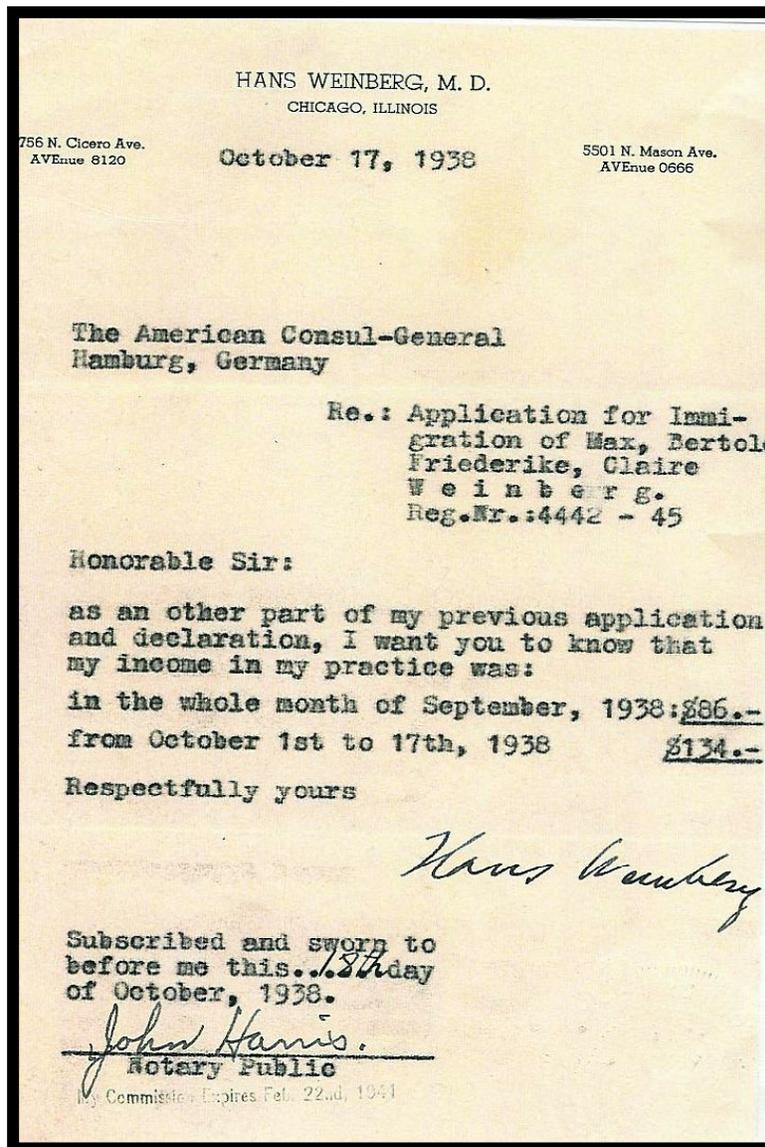
Berthold Weinberg and Friedericke Gramms were married on May 21, 1933. An unconventional union of sorts, a common Lutheran country girl and a wealthy, upper class Jew, the two had married despite their families' opposition. Nineteen months later on December 21, 1934 in Brake, Germany Claire was born. At six months of age it was determined that she had a cancerous growth on her left arm and would need the growth removed by amputation. While at the hospital awaiting the surgery, physician, Dr. Una overheard doctors discussing Claire's case. He intervened and suggested they consider a newly approved treatment, radiation. They could, if need be, resort to amputation if the new treatment did not work. Claire was one of the first success stories for treating cancer with radiation and wears the burn scar on her still attached left forearm.



Claire with swollen left forearm before treatment.

Earlier during the fall of 1938 the Weinberg family had begun making preparations to leave Germany. Letters of sponsorship to the American Consul-General in Hamburg, Germany, from Claire's uncle, Hans Weinberg, a physician practicing in the States and a dentist, Dr. Joseph Chapman, both of Chicago, Illinois had been received on their behalf. On the day before Berthold had been seized, November 8, 1938, the family received their Führungszeugnis, or Certificate of Good Standing, from the local police department in Brake. Months later, on February 2, 1939 Berthold presented himself to the Amerikanisches Generalkonsulat, American Consulate, in Hamburg, Germany, seeking visas for the family to travel to the States. Although Claire does not recall these months she pieced together the information from documents the family brought with them to the states.

Bernd came across a book titled The Rise And Fall Of The Nazis written by Claire Welch (not me) in 2008 that has a paragraph on page 122 that says the Nazis released those that promised to leave Germany within 3 months for good. We already had that process started. A theory is that the Germans did not think they would have as much success as they did and released the people who had a legal start in leaving, but the bribe theory is also a factor.



Letter of Sponsorship for Weinberg family.

Bundled in a winter coat, Claire and her mother head out the back door, across the yard, and into their neighbor's house. This was a common occurrence. The girls would play for hours outside in the sandbox during the summer or with dolls in one house or the other. Today, however, was different. Shortly after arriving there was a knock on the door. Before the door was answered, Claire and her mother quickly but quietly headed to the attic. "I remember the panicked look on my mother's face," Claire said. At this point Claire knew it was important to do as she was told without any hesitation. For only a short time she and her mother cowered in the attic. At the door had been a salesperson and the family was not interested in whatever was being sold, nor did they want to open their house to a stranger. The salesman left and the remainder of the afternoon Claire and her friend played as they always did while their mothers visited...for the last time.

While we were in Brake, Germany (September 2008), there was a press conference for me and somehow Leisel Roggenbuck, the former neighbor who now lives in Cologne, read the article and contacted me. Amazing and I'm sure thankful for the internet. She has email and speaks English.

The next day, the day before the family left for America, Claire and her father were out walking and decided to stop in at their favorite bakery. As a special treat he told her she could have anything she wanted. Carefully scanning the delicacies, Claire decided on a chocolate treat, (some things never change!). "I picked out the chocolate goodie," she recalls, "and the woman wouldn't sell it to us. I could tell she was afraid." Her father insisted and the woman went to the door, opened it and looked up and down the street to see if anyone was around. When she saw that no one was nearby she gave Claire the pastry, refused any money and apologetically asked that they leave immediately. "She could have been punished for just talking to us," [because we were Jewish] Claire said.

While many Jews stayed in Germany, the Weinberg family decided it would be best to leave. "Our family lived in a small town and we were the only Jewish family (*one of the few*) in the community," Claire said. "We didn't have the support of others like us, saw what was happening and could legally leave Germany and enter the States with a sponsor."

The family boarded a bus (*I've since found out that we were driven to Hamburg by a family friend. And, yes, we "only" brought our suitcase with some possessions, but we bought back our belongings from the Germans and had them shipped to America.*) and headed to Hamburg. They arrived and were ushered into a building to a room about the size of two school classrooms. Chairs bordered the perimeter.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Claire said to her mother.

"No you don't," she replied insistently.

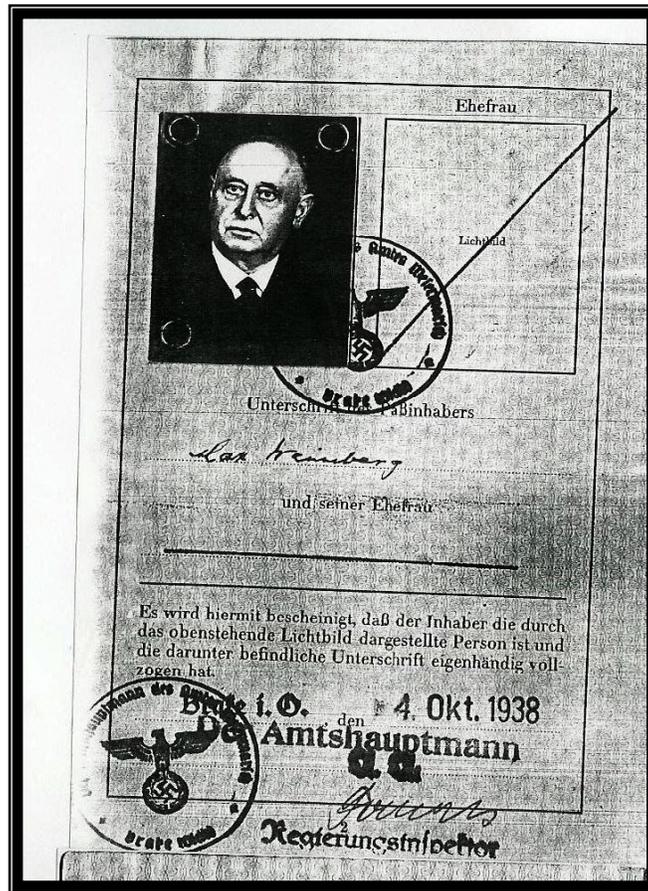
Persistent and oblivious to the uncomfortable surroundings Claire continued to pester her mother. Reluctantly, Claire's mother approached the door to the room and knocked. "I thought that was dumb," Claire recalls, "because I knew you knock to get into a place but not to leave." A soldier carrying a large rifle answered the door and Friederike explained that her daughter had to use the bathroom.

"No I don't," Claire answered hiding behind her mother's skirt frightened by the soldier's weapon.

"Yes you do!" she insisted and quickly escorted her into the 'badenzimmer', bathroom. "From there on I became very quiet and did everything an adult told me," Claire said.



Passport pictures for Berthold, Friederike and Claire Weinberg.



Max Weinberg's Passport with Third Reich Stamp

Sometime around mid-February (14th) the family boarded a ship (the *USS Roosevelt*, a cruise ship) from Hamburg and headed to the States. Their passage was one of comfort. All their belongings, those permitted, were boxed and shipped to the States. Claire and her parents slept in a state room while her Opa bunked in a dormitory with other single men. "Each morning a stewardess came and got me ready and delivered me to my Opa," Claire states. "My parents spent the entire trip in their suite, retching." Curiosity makes one wonder over what, anguish, seasickness or both.

Holding tight to her Opa's hand for fear of getting lost or falling into the ocean, Claire and Max strolled about the promenade deck of the ship eventually making their way into the dining room. Sitting at the table, Claire carefully placed the linen napkin in her lap as if it were a fancy skirt. Everyone around talked but Claire could not understand any of it. She only understood German and most of the passengers and crew spoke English. Ordering her liverwurst sandwich, the only food on the menu that translated to German, the two sat and discussed their plans for the day.

"Let's head to the kitchen after lunch," Opa suggested.

"Okay," Claire agreed and after eating they headed out.

"A cook spoke to me and gave me an orange," Claire recalls. "His language was gibberish to me. Opa tried to get me to say thank you, but in true stubborn child-like behavior, I kept my mouth shut ... not even a smile."

The ten day trip was coming to a close. The seas had calmed. Friederike and Berthold dressed and joined Claire and Max on the deck of the ship. Foggy and cold, a crowd had gathered. There was an air of excitement. Friederike lifted Claire onto her shoulders.

"Can you see it?" she asked.

"Yes. Now you can put me down," Claire answered afraid her weak mother would drop her. What was she supposed to have seen? All she saw were the heads of adults standing in front of her. Looking back Claire realizes that the ship had been passing the Statue of Liberty. "Today I realize what a thrill it was for them to see."

The Weinberg family was fortunate to be able to leave Germany when they did. Others were less fortunate. Max's brother, Bernd Weinberg, and sister-in-law, Reike, were both taken to a concentration camp during the war. Bernd died in the camp and 'Tante Reike' survived. She joined the family in the States after the war and sadly died shortly after arriving in Chicago. "I remember she had been a very happy person in Germany," Claire recalls, "but when she came over she was so sad and sick." Claire never saw her maternal grandparents again. They died shortly after the war of malnutrition on their family farm near Oldenburg, Germany.



My daughter, Colleen (Welch) Davisson, wrote the above article. Since we came back from Brake, (Sept. 2008) I think my father may have been wrong about his feelings that nobody helped him. Mr. Berger told us his mother shopped for us and when she was found out, she was denied shopping privileges at the bakery and got baked goods from a charitable organization.

All the stories I heard of Kristallnacht were of destruction or confiscation of Jewish belongings, but none of our things were touched; just a window at the business office was smashed. Someone must have signed or not signed papers as we had everything shipped; clothes,

furniture, linens, household supplies. The only thing we did not bring was some sterling flatware and some gold. We were allowed 1 place setting per person and the rest was sold. I have the receipt. The company that gave us money for those things we sold was sanctioned. (Juden In Der Wesermarsch 1933 - 1945 by Gerd Strachotta)

I am very grateful to be an American. I'm also grateful to see that the German people are owning up to the holocaust. We visited Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp and saw many school groups touring and being taught about it so it never happens again.