

Clandestinely: 1943—1945

Based on the collective memory of my late mother, my brother and myself—this is an account of my parents' failed attempt of symbiosis, and of the family's survival during the Hitler years. Some parts will never be fully explained, some questions may never be answered.

My parents had met in the late 1920s in the bustling metropolis that was Berlin. Despite their differences in family background, intellect and, seemingly ignoring the brewing political upheaval, they fell in love, found enough common cultural ground, and decided to marry in the spring of 1930. Each of them brought something different to the table that, in light of mounting external pressures, was to alter their lives irreversibly and had grave consequences for their growing family.

My mother, born shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, second daughter of an emancipated, upper middle-class Jewish family, she was the second-generation of Berlin Jews whose ancestors came from Czarnikau in Posen. Having attended a lyceum she later became a private secretary in Berlin's legendary Wintergarten

My father was seven years my mother's senior. As the youngest of eight children of a poor family, still a product of the waning 19th century, he hailed from a largely rural area in South West Germany where his forebears could be traced well back to the Thirty-Years-War. All ancestors were Protestant Germans. By profession he was a bookkeeper. During the First World War he briefly served in the army.

While my mother continued to be the main bread winner as my parents moved from the commercial centre of Berlin to the quiet suburb of Tempelhof, my father had secured a position of civil servant at City Hall. Their first son was born in 1933, seven months after Hitler's ascension. The family idyll of the young couple was only slightly disturbed by external events such as the unfolding of a police state. Both were still convinced, as so many were, that National Socialism was an apparition that would eventually fade from the scene. The proud parents took great pleasure in raising their child, enjoying regular vacations in the country side and at the Baltic Sea. A first test of the of the family's fabric appeared in 1935 with the proclamation of the Nürnberg Racial Laws. While within the family nothing changed, outwardly an official classification now regarded my parents' union as a "privileged mixed marriage,"—of which my father became the "privilege-giving" partner—and my brother became one of Germany's 72,000 Mischlinge, erster Klasse,

i.e. "offspring of mixed race, first degree."

By 1938, however, fractures appeared under the veneer of their union. Among other issues, diverging views on the upbringing of their son, a matter that had simmered for some time, came to the fore. Matters that commonly sort themselves out in a good marriage, were slowly overshadowed by their different cultural horizons. Added to that situation was Goebbel's constant racial diatribe, the byproduct of institutional anti-Semitism. My father's ability to cope rationally with the shifting external circumstances was severely tested. Relationship between our parents deteriorated as our father now felt stigmatized by having a Jewish spouse. When all my mother needed was comfort and reassurance, more frequently she found scorn.

Thus my mother thought that appeasement would be the panacea to the growing marital discord. To placate her husband she decided on a process that would culminate in apostasy. First she took the initial step of Austritt, her formal resignation from the Berlin Jewish community, (shedding one's religion was still a legal option in the Germany of 1938). Now the path so many Jews had taken before her, lately and during the past century—her conversion to Christianity—was clear. Our mother was in the mistaken belief that only practicing Jews, not Jewish Christians, were affected by the racial laws, that she was now safe

from persecution and on an equal footing with her husband.

For a time the dark clouds over their marriage seemed to lift, marital harmony returned for a while, before a state of bickering returned and our father only too often forgot himself and resorted to verbal abuse that was racially motivated, fuelled by the poisonous political atmosphere around them. In addition, to our mother's shock and to exacerbate the situation, after the November pogrom of 1938 and following the outbreak of war, our mother was still officially regarded as a Jewess, despite her conversion. She was called up to be dienstverpflichtet, which meant daily slave labour in houses of Nazi families, cleaning floors, windows, etc. That dreadful situation only ended with my mother's advanced second pregnancy in 1941. However, as doctors were no longer allowed to treat Jews, it had become almost impossible for a Jewish woman, even in a mixed marriage, to get admitted to a hospital without pleading with the staff, let alone give birth. My mother went from one hospital to another until one compassionate doctor was found who was willing to bend the rules.

1941, the year of my birth—historically perhaps one of the most important years of the twentieth century.

Once again family bliss seemed restored, albeit under taxing circumstances of food rationing, occasional bombing attacks and increased hostilities by the regime that saw no limits in the use of the media to de-legitimize Jews at every turn. Non-Jewish spouses were urged to divorce their partners—a move that our father knew well but still resisted, although, in anger, he now more than once threatened to do when renewed family discord erupted—that would spell the death sentence for the Jewish part of a marriage at a time when it had become public knowledge that deportation trains filled with Jews began to go to Poland.

It was in late 1942 that my mother was eaten up by anger and fears of her survival, that she desperately sought a way out of her quagmire. Although for the time being we lived under the false umbrella of the rubric “privileged mixed marriage,” our mother wanted to remove herself from an abusive husband and hide from a regime that was bent on annihilation of all Jews. She never explained to me how she made the fortuitous acquaintance of a young woman who was employed in the offices of the NSDAP. She soon became our mother’s confidant and saviour. This humble woman was willing, out of the good of her heart, to provide our mother with a forged document: an Arbeiterpass der NSDAP. A workers’ identity card, linked to a Jahreskarte der deutschen Arbeiterfront, an annual membership card of the German Workers’ Front, part of the KdF (‘Kraft durch Freude,’ i.e. “strength through joy”), a Nazi program designed to demonstrate a sense of community and social coherence that sponsored vacations for select individuals, i.e. party members and generally Nazis at large. Complete with photo ID, official rubber stamp and the suffix evangelisch (protestant), but without our mother’s very Jewish-sounding maiden name Simonstein—this virtual internal German ID card was to become our family’s subterfuge for the rest of the war. (the details of this document were revealed to me by a close friend of my mother who, in near-identical circumstances, had obtained the same life-saving papers)

Goebbels’ obsession to make Berlin Judenrein were only hampered temporarily by the “Rosenstrasse Protest” on the 27th of February 1943 that saw dozens of non-Jewish spouses insisting that their husbands be spared deportations. Most people knew by then that hundreds of Jews still kept disappearing under cover of night, never to be heard from again. Our mother had not forgotten Hitler’s speech at the time of my birth in the autumn of 1941, in which he made it clear that “exemptions from deportation were temporary and could be retracted at any time.” Our status was rumoured to be ambiguous at best and said to be frequently interpreted on a personal whim of party members, several of whom—family Hell is best remembered—resided in our building in Tempelhof. They rarely forgot to threaten our mother with “your deportation will come too” when they saw her, making her terrified any time our doorbell rang. Only the Kellermann family, our landlord, was very sympathetic to our plight, especially so when, usually at night, we had to scramble down three flight of stairs to seek safety in the building’s dank cellar during air raids and sit crammed among other tenants whose hostility was never in doubt.

By 1943 the increasing bombing raids on Berlin made the regime anxious to secure a voluntary temporary migration of all Aryan women, children and the elderly whose presence was non-essential for war purposes. The threatened metropolis was to be cleared of ‘unnecessary people’ and ‘superfluous eaters.’ Schools were closed as it was planned that within the space of three months about one million women and children of all ages would leave the city for the safety of the countryside.

The growing acrimony between our parents forced our mother to give father no alternative, having decided that her own safety and that of her children lay in getting out of Berlin into the anonymity and perceived safety of rural parts of the Reich. With her falsified ID papers in hand she successfully applied to be included in the city’s evacuation. My brother had been beseeched not ever to mention our privileged

status to anyone so that we could pass as Aryans while the Nazis continued to refine their lists of undesirable non-Aryans. He was nearly ten years old at the time and consciously absorbed the seriousness of the evacuation, while I was a mere twenty-one months old, just out of diapers, as we subsequently left Berlin by train at the end of July 1943, the fifth year of Hitler's war.

No one's life was safe in 1943 if a hint of a "Jewish connexion" became known to Adolf Eichmann's all-knowing Judenamt, the Jewish Office. Our exodus solved several problems; the most important being—since our mother didn't expect her immunity to last—that our mother would no longer be in constant fear that her privileged status would be annulled; that she would not find herself in danger any longer of being recognized as a Jewess and betrayed by so-called Greifer, catchers (Jews themselves who had become tools of the Gestapo by being promised to be spared deportation by betraying other Jews), one of whom, by the name Sternfeld, lived in our vicinity); that she escaped our father's ill will; and lastly, that we might become victims of the increasing bombing raids. In early March parts of Berlin were a sea of fire after several particularly frightening nights of Allied carpet bombing.

## Leaving Berlin

We boarded the evacuation train with several suitcases filled with bedding, blankets, utensils and clothes to last us for months, in the company of hundreds of Aryan mothers with small children and teenagers who travelled alone. Our father at that time, still able to continue work as a bookkeeper at city hall, not infrequently got critical stares in the streets for not being in uniform. Some of his parting words to our mother included the lament that he was wehrunwürdig, i.e. he “unworthy to serve the Führer because of his Jewish spouse.”

At a time when the war was going badly for Germany we were unexpectedly slated to travel east to East Prussia, the furthest geographical point of the Reich, bordering the USSR and a distance of six hundred km from Berlin. We passed through the former so-called Polish Corridor, unbeknownst to us bypassing by a wide margin the death camps of Chelmno, the ghetto of Lodz and what had been left of Warsaw. There were numerous stops throughout the journey when many of our fellow travellers left the train for their allotted destinations. Frequently the police entered the train at such moments to look for deserters or “illegals” and stepped into our compartment to check mother’s papers. Although we were officially sanctioned to be on the evacuation lists, my mother was terrified every time at the sight of uniforms. At one stop she was questioned why she didn’t have the obligatory Personalausweis, a city ID card, a moment for which she had the excuse that we had been bombed out and had lost everything.

We arrived at the small town of Domnau, not far from Preussisch Eylau, changed to a side line that took us to the tiny hamlet of Georgenau, forty km east of Königsberg. We were the last ones to leave the train as no other families or evacuees were with us anymore. With papers in hand that confirmed our evacuation status, we were subsequently billeted in an old farmhouse. After the war neither my brother or mother ever elaborated on the kind of living quarters we were allotted, except to say that we lived on part of a large estate owned by a Count Hundsdörfer whose ancestors had been landowners for centuries in these parts. On reflection today, perhaps it was a case of noblesse oblige that the count put on a benevolent stance. I heard later that he had taken a particular liking to me, small as I was, patting me gently on my blond-haired head whenever he saw us.

Very little of daily life during the coming winter, spring and summer on the estate has been transmitted to me, it is safe to say that we were almost totally dependant on welfare from the count, which meant that we did not suffer any food shortages. When there was not enough to be had locally our mother had to go to Domnau to apply for food ration cards. My brother was soon obligated to attend school; looking for all parts the typical German blond-haired, blue-eyed boy, he drew no attention from the few locals but later remembered the anti-Semitic resident schoolmaster.

One of the most frightening moments that was recalled by our mother years later, related to her arrest in a street in Domnau where she was spotted studying a piece of paper in her hand, trying to get her bearings. By her seemingly suspicious behaviour in a country at war, she was denounced as being a spy by two zealous women who promptly called the police. Fortunately, the policeman who arrived on his bicycle examined the auspicious paper, only to realize that it was nothing more sinister than a to-do list of mother’s who had to go to see the shoemaker, baker and the town’s offices for more food stamps. After that incident our mother lived in constant fear of being denounced. News of the failed assassination on Hitler on 20 July 1944 did not reach us immediately, and little did we know that Hitler’s lair, the Wolfschanze, his headquarters since 1941, lay a mere fifty km south-east of “our” estate.

Our father never spoke of how he managed to explain our absence from the apartment or possibly bribed the ever nosy and vigilant resident warden, the Nazi Blockwart, the building’s party spy? For the following twenty-one months our father was fortunate that our building escaped being hit during the

increasing aerial bomb attacks on Berlin, -while more than fifty thousand civilians perished in the rubble of their ruined buildings.

## Flight

At the end of September 1944 we were ordered by the local party authorities at short notice to pack up and leave Georgenau, the outpost that had provided us with a temporary respite, perhaps a false sense of security in the midst of a vicious regime that had placed a price on our lives. Our four-hundred-day sojourn had come to an end as parts of the Wehrmacht were in retreat from the Red Army that had already breached the borders of East Prussia. (We heard later that the Count had remained on his estate and, as a landowner, was shot point blank by the arriving Russians.)

For the three of us the following months consisted of constant arrivals, layovers and departures as we mingled with the bedraggled lot of tens of thousands of refugees who streamed from east to west, but thereby making us near invisible to the authorities. We retreated from East Prussia, at a time when Hitler's death trains still criss-crossed Europe. At times, to dodge air raids, we were loaded at short notice together with other panic-stricken refugees onto lorries and buses, while being overtaken by military convoys. Together with another three families we were subsequently taken south west to the village of Friedersdorf in Saxony, approximately fifty km east of Dresden, not knowing that we were only a two hour car ride north east of Theresienstadt.

My brother has no clear recollections of that period but our mother remembered that we were forced to stay in Friedersdorf for nearly five months and left that village only after Christmas 1944. Nothing has been transmitted to me about the people who had to endure the billeting obligations in the village, and of the tantrums my brother and I might have visited upon our mother who had to take one day at a time. In the midst of winter—my brother recalled the noise of artillery in the distance—we must have been very close to the advancing front, when we were ordered to board a train to the town of Bautzen, not far from the infamous concentration camp Schwarzheide. An empty school in Bautzen was our home for the next six weeks, living on meager rations. But in early February 1945, after weeks of pleading with those in charge of refugees to be sent further west, our mother succeeded and one day we were suddenly placed on an overfilled train to Dresden, a city that was clogged with vast numbers of refugees from the eastern regions of the country. What kind of quarters we were given there and with what kind of misery our mother had to deal with on a daily basis, given the shortages of everything and with two children in tow, was never clearly revealed to me. But I heard that we didn't stay longer than a few days for fear of Allied bombing attacks (which we barely missed by a day or two when, during five days and nights of retribution, Dresden was totally devastated). Another packed train took us four hundred km south to eastern Bavaria, (we did not know that the German rail system in that area was overloaded not only with refugees but also with Jewish concentration camp victims who were taken in open cattle cars from camps in the east to camps that still lay west, beyond reach of the advancing Russians. Some of those trains must have passed us. Other Jews were still being deported from the Saxon city of Chemnitz to the ghetto of Theresienstadt).

## Bavaria

After fleeing eleven hundred km from East Prussia to Bavaria, our pen ultimate stopover was the town of Übersee, not far from the Austrian border. The fact that my brother remembered the name of this little town suggests that we were actually given a choice of places before we left Dresden. Under the catastrophic circumstances the authorities in Übersee did their best to find us, as 'genuine evacuees,' accommodation in a farmhouse. The farmers had to accept us begrudgingly as elsewhere during our later stay in Upper Bavaria. None of us refugees were aware that two hours east of us in Austria lay one of the worst extermination camps, Mauthausen. My mother could not recall how long we stayed in Übersee, but it seems that at the end of March one of the last trains must have taken us first to the small town of Tacherting, and from its largely destroyed train station we had to walk through melting snow a distance to

the village of Schalchen, carrying what was left of our belongings.

Here some of my own memories emerge, fractured as they are. This tiny village with no more than three streets—not far from Traunstein (and a mere hour's drive from Hitler's redoubt of Berchtesgaden)—became our last retreat. Our mother, my brother and I were billeted in the loft of a farm house, at Schalchen 47, owned by the Langschartner family, Babette and Johann. Today I wonder, would they have denounced us to the local party big wigs if they had known of our Jewish ancestry while the war was still on? At right angle to the main house there was a large hay barn near our living quarters and the kitchen which we occupied. We had no running water or indoor plumbing, and I recall many a morning seeing mouse droppings amongst the crumbs on our kitchen table, and long garlands of sticky fly-catching paper.

Any money that our mother might have saved was spent by now. How we survived from day to day I shall never know, suffice it to say that many a day was spent foraging, what our mother would call



hamstering, going begging from house to house into neighboring villages asking the farmers for handouts of bread, flour or vegetables. "Some benevolent farmers added the odd egg at times," my brother recalls. Since much of our belongings had been stolen since we left East Prussia our mother made herself shoes with cloth uppers and thick platted straw soles; when I wasn't running barefoot in summer, I was wearing simple sandals with Bakelite soles. As children we were frequently told to go out into the nearby forest to gather dry wood so we could feed the stove in the kitchen. Not infrequently the farmer's wife saw us returning with twigs and branches and would accuse us in her Bavarian dialect of bringing back grian's huiltz, green, fresh wood. On occasions she observed, looking at me "Na Buar, du biest ja noch so spitzig!" which would translate to "Well, boy, you're still so skinny!" Not that I recall ever getting a single morsel of food from her. The smell of burnt wood and smoldering leaves seemingly always hung in the air; to this day I associate that smell with poverty.

After the war we heard that at the end of 1944 our father had been called up for daily work in the labor battalions of Organisation Todt, as one who had not served in the military. No doubt an extremely demeaning and disagreeable time for him as he had never experienced manual labor. He never spoke of his experience there.

In the postwar years when I was old enough to understand more of the world around me my mother recalled to me some details of the events of the last few weeks of war in Bavaria. For some time the war had come very close to Schalchen; in early March 1945 US aircraft strafed a train at nearby Tacherting, followed by a hit on an incoming train. One of the trains that did arrive safely was filled with refugees from Hungary. On 2 March a train with Jewish concentration camp detainees crossed Traunstein. The next day sixty-one of them were reportedly shot in a nearby village. In April heavy air raids destroyed the crowded railway station of Traunstein during which over a hundred people died. Some prisoners, remnants of the death marches from concentration camps, were led through our area and it became known that very few actually survived after they were set free by their fleeing SS-men guards. Subsequently, since 21 April no more trains were seen in Tacherting. While we seemed safe in our little village, there was mayhem all over the vicinity, with the Volkssturm being ordered to erect last minute tank traps and some bridges were blown up by retreating Germans as US bombers came by daily. The road to Traunstein was choked with vehicles carrying SS officers and Wehrmacht soldiers to the mountains, having shrewdly shed their uniforms first. Others tried to avoid US capture on horseback, bicycles or with prams filled with stolen goods. The nearby forest was littered with German military equipment and trucks, encouraging locals to go on a looting spree.

By the end of April the Wehrmacht declared Tacherting and surroundings a Lazarett-Gebiet i.e. a neutral zone with Red Cross flags flying everywhere, to be occupied by hospitalized German soldiers. All available farm houses were already occupied to the hilt by fleeing German soldiers. By 2 May the Americans were ten km from Tacherting, where white flags hung from every house. A few days later some of the freed concentration camp inmates from the region appeared, mainly Poles, and began to pillage and plunder as revenge for what had been done to them for years.

We now found ourselves, at the end of the war, in a part of the country that soon became the American Zone. I remember other children who may well have been refugees too, and not far from the farm house there was the Kiesgrube, a gravel pit, where I often went to play, finding discarded empty cans of Libby's milk, part of the jetsam the friendly American soldiers who were stationed nearby had tossed. To this day I vividly recall the smell of the empty cans of condensed milk and canned fruit. The Ammies, as we called the US soldiers with some affection, were our 'friends' who gave us children candies, although they had strict orders not to fraternize with the German populace.

We were forced to remain in Schalchen for nearly eighteen months. Only in the summer of 1946 did we

finally receive our Zuzugsgenehmigung, the official permission from the Allied occupation forces to let us return to our pre-war apartment in Berlin. I do not recall the train ride, though given the devastation of the country's infrastructure, the journey must have been quite lengthy. In Berlin, miraculously, the building and our apartment had escaped the war's destruction unscathed, a fact all the more remarkable in that Tempelhof had been home to several large war-essential factories. Life in postwar Berlin meant dark and desolate months, living on a day-to-day basis without electricity cuts and little if no coal. 1946 was one of the coldest winter in memory. However, our mother soon registered us with the authorities as Opfer des Faschismus, 'victims of Fascism,' which entitled us, in contrast to the average suspect German, to receive food parcels from the US Joint Distribution Committee and better rations. For the first time in years we had become the privileged. The legendary Büro Grüber that had tried during many of the war years to help "Christian Jews" provided us with badly needed clothing.

Throughout our flight from one perceived place of safety to another, our mother's ancestry had caused her terrible anxiety, grief and pain. We had survived the long night of Nazism and had reached the end of

an Odyssey. But our mother's psychological trauma was not yet at an end. Over the past three years she had had much time to reflect, to re-examine her life in which our father had played a heartless role. Now the time was ripe to act without repercussions, without fear of being abused or branded a Jewess. The years when her husband commanded her to "shut up, Jews have nothing to say in Germany," years that had made her life intolerable, were finally over.

On 19 February 1947 our mother's divorce proceedings came to an end, a turning point in her life and a victory she needed for her morale. Sadly, behind her lay sixteen years of marriage, eight of which had been marred by the terrible events around us and by intermittent quarrels with our father who had totally lost his civility and earned bitter disrespect. 'The accused party had insulted and verbally abused the plaintiff during the years of the marriage,' the divorce papers read.

### Reflections

In the final analysis our survival can only be described as a confluence of great courage, luck and circumstance as we swam safely through an ocean of danger and misery. For more than two years—with temporary interludes—we had been fugitives. We had travelled by passenger trains, in overloaded buses, on armored trucks in military convoys, on horse carts and on foot. Almost all our clothes had been stolen on the way as we escaped from one locale to another. We had left the dense forests, pretty lakes and fertile fields of the vast East Prussian countryside near the Russian border, then—over a period of six months we had traversed more than twelve hundred km of war-ravaged Europe. Only with the help of false papers had we been able to join the state-sanctioned evacuation and live under a camouflage by which the three of us had escaped a dire fate in the face of the final solution.

As I grew up our mother only occasionally spoke of what she knew and had experienced, leaving me to wonder whether she had subconsciously wiped much of that part of history off her mind, suppressing a feeling of guilt for having survived. Only four decades later in my advanced years when I began to reconstruct my Jewish ancestry, was I to discover the terrible truth she knew—forty-five relatives of our mother's family had been consumed in the Shoah. I subsequently took our mother's maiden name as my middle name.

Our mother died of cancer in 1954. For me, the figure of my father faded into oblivion. I completed my education in Germany and immigrated nine years later to South Africa where I enjoyed a successful career in my profession as goldsmith and designer of exclusive jewellery. It was there that I discovered and embraced the faith of my mother's ancestors and subsequently married a Jewish woman. Together with our two sons we immigrated to Canada in 1977.

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Toronto, July 2009