

Gertrude Chapman

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Abstract

Gertrude Chapman (née Senia Gertrude Weber) was born on April 9, 1932 in the Schönefeld part of Berlin. She was often called by her middle name, Manya. She had three older siblings: a brother, Alphonse born in 1927, and two sisters, Senter who will be 88 in January and Ruth and three younger sisters: Renee, Julia and Bela (Ginger). Her parents met in Hungary where he was a traveling salesman of umbrellas. Her (Catholic) father converted to Judaism and they moved to Berlin. The family was on welfare as Gertrude's father did not obtain steady employment until '38 when he was hired as an electrician. They were observant. In 1934 her father was incarcerated for eight months, possibly for saying the wrong thing. Gertrude saw the shattered glass on the street from the storefronts and heard screaming during Kristallnacht. She would take off her Jewish star when passing through non-Jewish streets on the way to school so would not be taunted. They were hungry after '42 as only permitted to shop from 4 to 5 when little food was left. Also, around the same time, her Jewish School for Girls closed. Her mother tried to save some Jews by bringing them to Berlin. The family ran to their basement during bombing. Their downstairs neighbor committed suicide and Gertrude's family kept their daughter. The children were converted to Catholic. Soon her mother was arrested and later the rest of the family. Except for the mother who was never seen again, they were allowed to go home and a family friend took them by truck to hide in his orchard. They lived in barracks in a laundry room and often had to beg for food. Her father and Alphonse remained in Berlin to work. Near the end of the war, Gertrude got hit by a truck and was taken to the hospital along with survivors of a bombing and required five surgeries. The Russians occupied her area. She was taken home from the hospital and they had to move to an empty apartment as theirs was bombed. The children were placed in several refugee camps and left May 26, 1946 on the first ship to America, a military ship, the SS Slasher. Her father did not come to America until ten years later when he had remarried to a woman with a daughter and they had a son. The Jewish Family Service sent the children to the Bronx until they could arrange foster families for them in Chicago. Ginger was adopted by a neurosurgeon and not seen for many years. Each child was placed in a different home. Gertrude was moved to several foster homes until she found one that was satisfactory and only left when she got married. In 1956 her father and his family came to Chicago where he obtained work as an electrician. Gertrude's daughter put information about her mother's life in a book. Gertrude feels lucky that she is married 61 years and has four children.