

## Angelica Eisenhardt

Wartime Experience: Took Refuge in Uruguay

I was born on May 8, 1925, in Freiburg, Germany. My maiden name was Angelica Benndorf, daughter of a Jewish mother, Alice Alsberg, and a Lutheran father, Martin Benndorf who was a medical student at the University of Freiburg at that time. My maternal grandfather was the chief of staff of the Jewish Hospital of Hamburg, and my paternal grandfather was a Lutheran minister in Braunschweig. My mother converted to the Protestant religion to please my father's family. Her family background was not religious – like so many German Jews, they were the “Drei Tage Juden” (the Jews who are observing the religion only on the high holidays), feeling German rather than Jewish.

After starting out as a country doctor in Gilge, East Prussia, my father moved to my mother's hometown Hamburg where he became quite successful after many years of struggle to establish his medical practice. My awareness that Nazism affected all our lives began quite early. In 1935, we were sent to private school to avoid public school. On my way to school I would see huge posters of Jewish caricatures published by Goebbels' “Stuermer” newspaper and signs of “Juden Raus” as well as “Juden nicht erlaubt” (Jews forbidden to enter) in swimming pools and cinemas. When my mother traveled with me to Munich in 1936, we could not stay in any hotel because of the anti-Semitic signs; a convent took us in which impressed me profoundly.

But perhaps the biggest shock occurred when my girlfriends in school told me in 1937 that they could no longer visit me or see me because of my mother. The only girlfriend loyal to me was half Spanish. Even in this protected private school we had to listen to the screaming Nazi speeches over the radio once a month on Saturday. A Nazi teacher ridiculed the poet Heine in class, calling him a decadent Jew. There were countless incidents to show the traumatic effect of Nazism on a child who was deeply religious at that time and believed in justice.

My father had had the chance to emigrate in 1937 to California and work in a hospital but declined this opportunity after hearing the climate in that particular city was too hot! His mother convinced him that he better stay in Germany to make a good living, since he had had to struggle so hard to establish his practice. He did not want us to have to join the German youth movement (BDM), so he sent my sister and me to a formerly German boarding school on Monte San Vigilio in Italy, near Meran. We learned there that he “had to divorce” my mother because his patients refused to come any longer for having a Jewish wife. My mother had fled to Italy. When Mussolini decreed his anti-Semitic laws in 1938, she converted to Catholicism in the hope that Pope Pius would protect Jews who had converted. Just like the efforts of the Jews during the Inquisition in Spain, her conversion was to no avail.

The boarding school had to close as well and in 1938 we were sent to another boarding school in Gland, Lake Geneva, Switzerland that was run by Max and Gertrud Bondi who had to flee from their former school in Marienau, Germany. The school witnessed the terrible time of the

infamous Munich conference and Crystal Night. Many children came as refugees from the Czech Republic and Austria as well.

My mother was given refuge by the Salvation Army in Geneva and tried desperately to get a visa to some country that would take her. My father considered sending us back to live with my paternal grandparents in Braunschweig, as the possibility of war seemed more and more imminent. He had smuggled some money to England for my mother. My mother was able to get a tourist visa for Uruguay. She went to Rome because she spoke Italian. She had turned down a permanent visa for Ecuador because she thought, "we would be killed there by the Indians". She had heard that Uruguay had mostly inhabitants of Spanish and Italian descent, which would make it less "dangerous" for a woman alone and her two young children.

We saw our father for the last time at Christmas in 1938 at a family reunion in Italy. On November 16 of 1939 he committed suicide leaving a note that he could no longer endure life without his children. Apparently, he had tried to get to Denmark on September 1, 1939, when all the ports were blockaded. None of us ever found out what his plans were while my grandfather kept preaching in his sermons that Hitler was sent by God to save Germany and that Germany was a victim of "invading enemies", never realizing that Germany had started the war. (His sermons spanning over 40 years are in my possession now).

When we arrived in Montevideo in February of 1939, half the refugees on the ship "Conte Grande" were not allowed to land because they had gotten their visas from the consul in Paris who was not authorized to issue them but was one of the many opportunists of those times. My mother tried desperately to get an immigration visa for an Italian officer who had promised to marry her when she still lived in Italy. To this day it is beyond me how he managed to leave Italy as a military man. But he arrived in 1940 and the nightmare of our adolescence became real when my mother married this man whose culture was diametrically opposed to ours. Until he got there, we were living in two sparse rented rooms on minimal subsistence. They opened a grocery store in a low-income neighborhood where we had to help after school and on weekends.

Fortunately, my mother had sent us to a very good bi-lingual American school on scholarship money, where we learned both English and Spanish within seven months. I skipped a year of high school in order to support myself as soon as possible working as a bi-lingual secretary. Life in Uruguay was difficult because we did not belong to any community due to our mixed background and my mother's marriage nor could we assimilate into the Latin American culture.

The German Jewish refugees lived in a Ghetto-like life. The difficulties with my stepfather contributed further to my uprooted-ness, so I moved out at age 17 to live in a rented room with a refugee family –not an easy thing to do in a culture where young women stayed with their families until marriage at that time. My sister married a refugee from Germany at 18, so she was able to leave the untenable situation at home under far less stressful circumstances than I.

It was impossible to get a job with an American company as a secretary since everybody of German descent was “persona non grata”. Finally, the Italo American Committee for Democratic Education hired me in good faith since their staff consisted of Italian Jewish refugees fighting fascism in Latin America. In 1946 my mother’s sister enabled me to immigrate to the United States by arranging the sponsorship of a Quaker family, the Duvenecks of Palo Alto, California. The “American Dream” became true when I received an Alumni Scholarship from U.C. Berkeley and lived at International House where I met my husband, Rudolf Eisenhardt, formerly from Berlin. He too was a refugee from Germany whose parents sent him on a “Kinder transport” to England before getting him to join them in Bolivia.

We both graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1952 and got married in Chicago in 1953 where he got his Ph.D. in chemistry. Our first child, Miriam, was born in 1955, followed by Peter in 1957 and Monica in 1961 in Philadelphia. Rudi became a research associate at Harrison Research Surgery at University of Pennsylvania, and I became a “disciple” of Betty Friedan’s “Feminine Mystique” by getting my M.A. in education after initiating an elementary school Spanish program in my children’s school. I was appointed to teach Spanish, German and French at Philadelphia’s academic High School for Girls from which I was force transferred in 1972 to a neighborhood school due to affirmative action (interesting that this was very painful reliving the experience of former discrimination due to ethnic background), but was offered a position in 1975 at Central High School (academic high school for boys) from which I retired in 1988 after two wonderful years as a Fulbright exchange teacher in Luebeck, Germany from 1985-87. This opportunity enabled me to confront the past and to get an insight into the Germany of today, a never-ending task.

I moved to Berkeley, California in 1991 to be near my two daughters and their families as well as my son and his family who reside in Altadena, Cal. Thus, I am so far the proud grandmother of six grandchildren, including Monica’s fraternal twins.

Because of my deep concern for peace and international understanding, I am involved with tutoring visiting foreign scholars in English and interpreting in English and Spanish for medical cases. I am also active in the local Yaldeyi Hashoa group (children of survivors of the Holocaust), which deals with the innumerable issues of that period in each other’s lives. Recently I had the opportunity to give two talks on the “White Rose” movement in Nazi Germany (the tragic efforts of German student resistance in 1943).

There is also much exchange and visiting with former colleagues from Luebeck and the many cousins on my father’s side who are most concerned to keep the dialog alive – in the hope that healing may gradually occur in us, the survivors, despite the constant recurrences of discrimination and violence for political, racial, ethnic, religious or whatever reasons.