

## Marianne Gerhart

Wartime Experience: Remained in Germany

I am often asked, sometimes with barely disguised suspicion, "If you and your Jewish mother lived in Germany during the Nazi time, how come you survived?" Part of the answer is that my non-Jewish father was decorated with the Iron Cross in World War I at age 17. He was thus a hero in the eyes of the Nazis and entitled to certain considerations. My mother was a well-known actress and perhaps this too gave us a measure of protection. But even in Bavaria, which was Catholic and less fanatical than other parts of Germany, this would not have been enough. We survived because at critical moments there always appeared in our lives people who were willing to take great personal risks on our behalf.

I was born July 19, 1923. I was nine and a half years old when Hitler came to power. My parents knew how dangerous this was for our family and instructed me in the absolute discretion that was critical for our survival in the years to come. As a young girl I had to make judgments about whom to trust, how to keep secrets and how to remain unnoticed. I went to a public girls school where the principal and most teachers were staunch Nazi party members. One morning I entered the classroom, and to my surprise all the girls were wearing their Hitler Youth uniforms that day, except for the three Jewish girls and me. Swastikas had been drawn on the three desks already, and a girl was walking toward my desk, chalk in hand to do the same. As she started, I slapped her in the face so hard I almost lost my balance. I ran out, bicycled home, and told my father I'd never go back to that school. My father found a courageous principal of a Lutheran parochial girls school who was willing to accept me. The principal tampered with my papers and spread the rumor that I had a heart condition preventing me from joining the Hitler youth. I occasionally staged heart palpitations to everyone's satisfaction.

Despite his Iron Cross, my father lost his position as a psychologist because of his marriage, and moved to Berlin in 1939 where he was accepted as a training candidate at the Jung Institute. As a protection to us, he periodically showed up in Munich and walked in the neighborhood with us so everyone could see that my mother was still married to an "Aryan".

In 1933 the Nazis barred my mother from her position as a drama teacher in Munich, but she quietly continued to give private lessons at our house in the evening and on weekends. During weekdays she was assigned a job without pay at a printing press along with other Jewish women with non-Jewish husbands. Since her teaching could not be recognized, former colleagues offered to go on record as the official teacher for her students. One of her students had so little talent that my mother couldn't understand why he wanted to become an actor. Then one day he broke down and confessed to her that the Nazis assigned him to spy on her. To our knowledge he never spoke against her.

We half-Jewish women in Munich were in some ways better off than many non-Jews. I was able to finish high school and while barred from studying at the university or from employment, I was able to enroll in a private course for chemical technicians. All the students were half-

Jewish! This was a safe haven until the course ended when the building was bombed. Then Nazi headquarters assigned me to a night job washing streetcars. The regular employees were amused and offended that their work had been meted out by the Nazis as punishment for well-educated half-Jewish young women. They were kind to us and insisted that we work little and that we could rest in the streetcars before the nightly air raids. The food rationing board, not realizing why we were assigned to this work, even allotted us extra food coupons for what was considered "heavy labor". Yet we knew that at any moment we could be rounded up and sent away - we knew not where.

The air raids intensified and I worried for my mother's safety at home. I also felt increasingly vulnerable at work where we could be so easily rounded up and sent away. My solution was to eat cigarettes dipped in vinegar, which I had heard would make me too sick to work. The medical official was puzzled with my symptoms but sent me home for a month to recuperate - no questions asked. I repeated this treatment a second time, successfully, but after that it was no longer necessary, the Allies had bombed Munich into chaos.

Toward the end of the war, we had to confront our worst fears. My father, emboldened by the progress of the Allies in early Fall 1944, made an anti-Nazi remark in a public lecture and the Gestapo shortly thereafter raided his apartment in Berlin in his absence. He went underground and often we didn't know where he was. Then in December 1944, my mother got papers for Theresienstadt. The end of the war was in sight and I was determined that she would not be taken away at this late date. In desperation I turned to a jovial neighbor across the street who always displayed his golden Nazi party button, which meant he had joined even before 1933. He had cars and was well fed in the midst of scarcity. SS officers came and went from his house. His basement was the air raid shelter for the street and he always saw to it that neighbors got there in time. He and his sons once helped us douse a fire in our house after a bombing. I gathered my courage and went to his house and told him of my mother's plight. His reaction frightened me. He cursed as he pounded his fist on the table. He then said softly, "Go home sweetheart, I'll come to your house tonight". At 10PM during a total blackout, I heard his door slam and his footsteps on the pavement and our doorbell ring. Even though it was dark, I could see his face beam; with a choked voice and a big embrace. He said, "I gave the jerk 300 cigarettes and all your mother's papers have been burned. She officially no longer exists." I later learned that he had helped many Jews over the years.

My father was able to return to Munich, and our family was reunited a few days before the Americans arrived. We survived because there were people of courage, integrity, and compassion in our lives, and I am forever grateful to them.

I arrived alone in New York in 1947, and after three months left for California. I worked as a nursery school teacher and attended the University of California at Berkeley getting a BA and Master's degree in Social Welfare. I have been in private practice as a psychotherapist since 1968. I am married to John Gerhart and have three children and two grandchildren.