

Alice Resseguie

Wartime Experience: Immigrated to the US

I was born on 31 July 1921 in Trier, Germany and named Alice, the third daughter and fourth child of Max Goldstein and Ella Schapira. My brother Heinrich, the first born, died a few weeks after birth while my father was in the German Army during World War I. My oldest sister Gertrud, called either Trude or Trudchen as a child, was born on 31 July 1917 and my sister Miriam was born on 22 April 1920. The fact that I was my parents' last child and was not a boy, had a great influence on my life. I was constantly told how disappointed my parents were when a third girl arrived. My parents owned a beautiful store for fine laces and linens. My mother had received my grandfather's store as a dowry in lieu of a large cash sum. My grandfather, Abraham Schapira, had come to Germany from Lithuania as a child to avoid being drafted into the Russian Army. My grandmother, Jakobine Abraham, and all her brothers and sisters, had been born in a small village along the Moselle River, as was my great-grandmother Johanna Aaron. In these villages, along the Moselle River, Jews were allowed to own land and vineyards while they were not allowed to live within the domain of the archbishopric of Trier.

Until I was four years old, we lived above our store and in 1925 we moved into our house in Lindenstrasse where I lived until I left for the United States. When Hitler came to power in January 1933 my mother immediately said that we had to leave Germany. My father did not agree with her because he believed that the government would respect the fact that he had served honorably in the German Army until he was wounded and had received the Iron Cross for bravery in the trenches. My mother who was very intuitive, stated that no one would respect anything regarding Jews and immediately began to press for immigration. As a life-long member of the small local Zionist Group she wanted us to go to Palestine. My sister Trude went to Luxembourg, to learn to be a farmer and I was registered for the Youth Aliyah.

Meanwhile my mother wrote to her brother who had lived in the United States since 1926 asking for an affidavit of support for all of us in case we were unable to go Palestine at least we could find refuge in the United States. She did not know that her brother was not financially able to guaranty for more than two people. My parents then decided that my oldest sister should go. She would be able to go to work and I was young enough to go to school.

Although by this time my Youth Aliyah papers had arrived my parents decided that it would be easier for the family to re-unite in the United States. I really would have preferred to go to Palestine as a pioneer to build the land for the Jewish people. Life would then have a true and real purpose. I was sort of frightened to go to another country—without an emotional purpose. To leave my friends and schoolmates with whom I had grown up since kindergarten was scary. In Trier and in the Rhineland, it was customary to send children to religious segregated schools. There was one class for Jewish children from the first to the eighth grade and two classes for Protestant children. These Konfession-schulen were a concession to the Vatican in those parts of Germany which were predominantly Catholic. The Jewish population in Trier was about 600 souls including the families and there were about 100 Jews who had come from other

countries. They had their own Synagogue, but the children went to school with us. In reality, we only went to the segregated elementary school for four years. Usually most of the children of middle-class parents went to the secondary school in the fifth grade. They were segregated by gender—the boys went to the Gymnasium and the girls to the Lyceum. Although religious instruction was part of the curriculum, twice a week the priest and the pastor came to give religious instruction in separate classrooms. We had our religious instruction after school and on Sundays. We lived a very nice and comfortable life—very secure in the community. My parents had many friends Jews as well as non-Jews. All of us formed lasting friendships. As it was customary for girls to form a friendship circle we had a circle of three Jewish girls and two non-Jewish girls who were our classmates. I felt secure in my surroundings—there was school, then homework and going for the afternoon walk with the Nanny who would make us memorize French vocabulary or multiplication tables. When my parents began to talk about leaving, I first thought it would be a great adventure, going to new country and meeting new people. Meanwhile life in Trier was changing rapidly. My mother with her realistic approach to the Hitler Regime began to be known as the prophetess of evil. She would say that "we" Jews better start leaving Germany rapidly otherwise we would all perish. Once in America or Palestine we could feel safe. Many of my mother's cousins were born in Luxembourg and felt secure not having German citizenship. They would say that they would be safe in the "Little Holy Land"—the nickname for Luxembourg.

My mother then said: "It is not far enough—do you think Hitler will stop just because he is crossing a border?" Unfortunately, my mother with her intuitive thinking, was right and most of her cousins were deported and perished in the camps. My mother's sister who had lived in Düsseldorf was sent eastward never to be heard from again. Her husband, my Uncle Georg, was beaten to death on the street where he had been forced to scrub the street with a toothbrush. Another brother, Fritz, had dropped out of the family circle when he and his wife, my Tante Blanka, divorced. My mother always loved my Tante Blanka like a sister and she forced Uncle Morris to send an affidavit for her and her daughter Ruth. Both arrived late in the United States. Tante Blanka lived to be 96. On my father's side—his family was not so well known to the us. My father came from Northern Germany an unknown realm to us. My father's brother Moritz died a natural death in Berlin. His daughter, who had worked all her life in a high and trusted position for a manufacturing concern was summarily dismissed from her job. She then worked in the Jewish hospital in Berlin until Berlin was "cleansed" of Jews in 1944. She committed suicide on the train going East either by taking poison or she hanged herself. My father's sister who was 15 years his senior, died a natural death in 1943 before the deportation orders came and is buried in the Berlin cemetery next to her husband Albert who had preceded her in death. Other cousins on my mother's side fled to Holland only to be sent to the extermination camps later. Of one family with seven children, only three survived.

My sister Trude and I had gotten our visa and we were ready to leave. My parents took us to Hamburg to the ship. The USS Washington left Hamburg on February 26, 1936, and Trude and I stood on the deck waving goodbye to Mama and Papa who seemed to get smaller and smaller until we couldn't see them anymore. It really didn't sink in that I might never see them or my sister again until I arrived in the United States on March 5, 1936. The reception by my uncle

Morris and his wife, Tante Lina, was anything but friendly. I immediately felt that my Tante Lina was less than enthusiastic to have to take responsibility for a 14-year-old who didn't speak English and who had actually never been out of the small-town milieu where she had grown up. Tante Lina was not Jewish and did not want to acknowledge that she had married a Jewish man. Tante Lina had been raised a Catholic so they decided to be married in the Protestant, the State Church.

Tante Lina always referring to me as "my husband's niece" sent chills up my spine. There was this unknown quantity of rejection in her tone of voice in everything she said. Uncle Morris never interfered or made a gesture of familiarity to make me feel more welcome. Once in Brooklyn I was sent to PS 152 and sat in the 6th grade class trying to learn English. Life in uncle's household was very regimented. There was a day for everything. Mondays was wash day and Fridays was cleaning day—and the formula never changed no matter what else was going on. If I came home at five after five instead of at exactly five o'clock, I was not allowed to go out for a week and could not talk to anybody outside the household. We had a few friends from Trier who had also emigrated and lived in New York and who tried to help us to overcome the newness in a strange land. My sister Trude was sent immediately out of the house and started to work as a domestic in the household of the famous Labor Leader Sidney Human. She was treated like a slave, and they did not want to give her a day off. Trude and I would sit in my room and cry, and we kept saying: Where are the parents? Why have they abandoned us, we want to go home!

In September 1936, after summer school, I started as a sophomore in Erasmus Hall High School. I still didn't speak much English and I was immediately referred to as: "that little refugee girl". I wanted to kill them. It was bad enough to remember being that "Jewish girl" during the three Nazi years and now here was stigmatized again. By the time my parents arrived on November 11, 1937, Tante Lina and I were no longer on speaking terms. She was glad to get rid of me. She had threatened to send me back Germany not knowing what life was like under the Nazi regime for Jews. Tante Lina's frame of reference her time during Kaiser Wilhelm's Empire. My parents had never mentioned the so called "good old times". As to sending me back to my parents, in my mind's eyes I had imagined what that would be like—my parents meeting me at the railroad station in Luxembourg receiving me in shame for not behaving in the United States. As soon as our parents were in America, I not only left Tante Lina and Uncle Morris' house, but I also dropped out of school in my junior year. I went to work in a factory working six days a week and earning \$10.00 a week. I gave it to the parents keeping \$1.00 for car fare. As I really did not have much to offer as an unskilled worker who had not even finished high school, I enrolled in a commercial training school where you were sent out to do part time office work earning \$10.00 a week and paying the tuition with that money.

I did learn how to type but never mastered shorthand because my mind did not comprehend English sounds. I was still thinking in German and found English spelling confusing. There were more humiliations in store for me when I arrived at an office, my accent immediately gave me away. I was told that "they didn't employ refugees" otherwise they would have to hire all their relatives who had recently arrived. Back to school in tears this time, but there was more to

come. I was hired by a distant relative, and I started to work in the office of a zipper manufacturing concern. Mr. Strauss loved humiliating me and constantly told me that if I were not a relative, he wouldn't have hired me. When the war broke out, I was forced to register as an 'Enemy Alien'. I reluctantly went to the registration office but objected to be called an 'enemy alien'. I told the interviewer that as Jews we had been deprived of our German citizenship and that I was 'stateless.' He said it made no difference to him what I was. I said I would not sign the paper and would stay there until they hauled me off to jail. Eventually we settled on the fact that they wrote 'Stateless, formally German.' I signed that. Meanwhile I had started to go to night school to obtain my High School diploma. GED tests were unknown in those days. Back from work at 5:30 pm, gulping down dinner and then off to Erasmus Hall Evening High School. I did get my diploma in 1943 and even thought about going to college but all I encountered were discouraging messages, why bother to go to college, I would get married and didn't need a college degree for that. I seriously doubted that I would ever get married. I wasn't particularly pretty but very smart and 'boys' really didn't go for brains.

The war brought many changes and more opportunities for women. I left the relative's office and found myself a job as an office manager of a small office of a wholesale hardware house. After Pearl Harbor, the military began to recruit women for non-combatant jobs. My sister Miriam and I immediately wanted to join the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. We took the entrance exams which we passed with flying colors, only to be rejected as we were not US citizens. During the war all naturalization proceedings had been suspended. My sister and I wrote a letter to Mrs. Roosevelt (I still have the letter) that we wanted to join the war effort by joining the WAAC's and could not be accepted until we were US citizens. Miraculously three weeks later Miriam was sworn in, and I was sworn in a month later.

Back to WAC's (meanwhile, they had deleted the "auxiliary") recruiting office to take the physical. Miriam, who as a child had always been sickly, passed with flying colors and I was rejected because I was so myopic—I can still see the big stamp that put REJECTED over all the papers. I was devastated. The eye doctor suggested that I should go to Government's Island to have my eyes re-examined and get a waiver. Thereupon I proceeded to memorize the eye chart. But when I got to the ophthalmologist, he had another eyechart

Miriam went off to basic training in the military and I was a sort of lost soul. Through a distant relative I heard that the Censorship Bureau was looking for people who could censor German

Prisoner of War mail and I applied for such a job. I also heard that the Office of War Information was looking for bi-lingual secretaries for their overseas operations. I left an application there and continued working in my little office. To my great astonishment received a phone call asking me to go to London. The V-1's had just begun to fly over England and my parents really didn't want me to go. I called the friend in the Censorship Office and they offered me a job after I had already committed myself to go to England with the Office of War information.

We flew to Nova Scotia, then to Gander in Newfoundland each place refueling and having a meal as there was nothing on the plane. We slept over the Atlantic and arrived at Shannon,

Ireland in the morning to a wonderful breakfast. Then on the bus to Limerick where we were flown to Bristol, England. We took the train to London rather than flying because London was under constant bombardment with V-1s, Hitler's wonder weapon. In London we were billeted in former hotels which had been bombed out and had been reconstructed. Our work was at night until 7 am and it took a while to get used to time change and night work. I worked with two college professors translating from German into English. Many were broadcasts from the German Radio. We would then prepare replies for immediate broadcast as a rebuttal to the lies that Goebbels had just disseminated to his people.

Life in London was quite difficult with blackouts, this yellow fog and the endless rain. One had always one ear cocked to the sky to listen for 'Doodle Bugs'(V-1s) or the night flights going out and waiting to watch them return in the morning. We counted the planes watching to see whether there were planes missing in the formation. Going to Airbases on the weekends as honored guest for Dinner and Dancing was one of the diversions. The American men had been well instructed to be gentlemen toward American women. We always took our meals in the Officer's Mess at the Grosvenor Hotel, and you were seated with other Americans. So many a friendship developed through these casual meetings. During the winter counter-offenses many GI's came for R & R (Rest and Recreation) to England which brought the real war much closer to us. I had also met some Polish Jewish Navy personnel who told of German Concentration camps, Russian Concentration Camps and anti-Semitism in the Polish Navy. I kept fighting with the Polish sailor and told him I didn't believe him. It was too much to fathom that such things were really taking place. In August 1945 after the victory over Japan, we were sent to the continent to work with the Germans de-Nazification under the command of Gen. Eisenhower.

I was given a rough draft of a book to translate. It was written by Dr. Eugen Kogen, a political, not Jewish, inmate of the Concentration Camps who was the founder of the Christian Democratic Union later to become the major political party for the new German government. I could not believe what I read. He described the atrocities performed by the doctors in the camps and the names of the responsible 55-men or soldiers in charge of the camps.

In Germany we were under the command of SHEAF (Supreme Headquarters European Allied Forces). The Headquarters were in Frankfurt at the former I.G. Farben buildings which was occupied by American Forces. My sister Miriam who had been stationed on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay had finally received a transfer to Europe. We had planned to meet, and she was trying to get to London to see me. We wrote to each other and when we had the same APO number, she knew that I was on the Continent near her. We met in Frankfurt where she was stationed, and I was in Bad Homburg, 25 miles away. We did spend some time together until I was transferred to Berlin, and she went to work for the War Criminal Trials in Nuremberg. We had decided to go to the synagogue in Frankfurt for the High Holy Days. The Americans had forced the Germans to restore the synagogue in the Freiherr von Stein Street. When Miriam and I started to walk upstairs to the women's gallery, two GI's walked into the building at the same time. We looked at them and they looked at us and they shouted "Min Alice" and we shouted" Allons, Bernie". They were two "boys" with whom we had gone to school in Trier. There were other stories too numerous to relate. I found old friends of my parents', from Trier,

not Jewish, who had offered to hide my parents in their summer home in the mountains in case they were unable to leave Germany.

Miriam and I also went to Trier to see who was left from the Jewish community and to see whether our other friends had survived the war. We found a few young people who had been able to come through the concentration camps and who were waiting for their papers to go to the United States. Other were going to Palestine. We gave them money, food, and clothing as they really had very little of their own and the city of Trier supplied them with just the basic necessities. The city itself looked dismal. It had been bombed because of the large nearby railroad marshaling yard. Trier, being the oldest city in Germany, had begged the Nazi government to declare the city as an Open City, to avoid being bombed. They were denied this request because Goebbels had announced the "Total War until Victory" and so the city with its many Roman ruins and ancient buildings was bombed twice and many interesting and old monuments were lost.

When I transferred to Berlin my experiences were quite extraordinary. I had never been to Berlin and therefore knew very little about the attitude of the population that were quite different from my childhood experiences in the small provincial town where I had grown up. I found their manners and speech patterns very irritating and offensive. Some of my interesting experiences were finding one of my father's cousins in a hospital in the Russian Zone. It was considered dangerous to go to the Russian zone, but I took the city train and visited her. It was very moving because she kept saying if she had married my father whom she loved I would be her child. A second cousin found me in Berlin. She had served in the German Army by claiming that her step-mother was her real mother who was not Jewish. I took care of her until she left for Luxembourg to join her biological mother who was my mother's first cousin.

Berlin was quite different from the rest of Germany. The Black Market flourished, and one could buy anything for cigarettes. That was the mode of exchange not money. More and more Americans came to Berlin joining the Army of Occupation not truly to serve but to make money off the Black Market. I left Berlin and Germany in disgust and went back home. I worked for a while in menial jobs and then decided I was going to do what I had always wanted -namely to get myself that elusive college degree. At age twenty-nine I started as a freshman at the University of Colorado. Arriving in Boulder I felt like a hungry wolf. I swore to myself that I would never go back East - and I kept that promise. I walked into the college curriculum like a starving person. I sucked up the course contents like a dry sponge finally getting some water. Not only was my mind being fed the surrounding mountain were balsam for my wounded soul, where the I could drink in the beauty of my surroundings. Aside from the course work I also partook in all Freshman extra curriculum activities trying to retrieve my missed adolescence. I had gone from childhood to adulthood and never had the opportunity to experience the carefree joy of being a teenager.

I graduated three years later - magna cum laude - and I was very happy when my father came out to Colorado to see me graduate. My mother had refused to travel. To her my academic achievement was meaningless because I was still unmarried and that constituted a

disappointment to her. My sister Miriam had gotten married in Israel and came to visit me in Boulder in 1952. (My sister Trude had gotten married at an earlier age and had two children.) Mentally that gave me the release to move to another stage in life. After she left, I took a clerical job in the Veteran's Administration with the intention of saving up some money and go to Israel as I had no intention to go back to New York. If anywhere I would go further west to San Francisco where Miriam had spent most of her war years and never stopped talking about it.

In the Veteran's Administration I met my husband, William Resseguie. There was an immediate mutual attraction. He was a man who was immaculately dressed as compared to other workers. He not only looked intelligent, but he was. We began to date and got married 9 weeks later. Bill returned to the university to finish his degree while I got a job in the university library. I also took some classes to get my teaching certificate. We then decided to go to Mexico so that Bill could get a master's degree in Spanish which was his major. Our son David was born in Mexico City and although Bill did not finish his degree we returned to the US where he had been offered a high school teaching position. We lived in a small town in the San Joaquin Valley in California where our second son was born. This baby needed special care which we could not give him, and I had to go back to teaching to make ends meet. After four years we returned to Mexico City and my husband finished his master's degree. I started on my master's degree while my husband was teaching Spanish and Russian in a small New Mexico University. With the extra burden of having to pay for our child's special needs, we were always financially strapped. Although we moved frequently as far East as Chicago, we had never given up the idea of settling permanently in the Bay Area where we were most comfortable and suited our lifestyle. Our marriage did not survive the constant strain and financial burden for having to maintain our little son in special care, we separated when our son David was fifteen years old. I had finished my master's degree and consequently was able to start in a new carrier as a para-legal with the Federal Government.

I enjoyed my work and retired after 20 years of service. I had promised myself that on retirement I would learn become computer literate. As soon as I bought my first computer, I realized that this would not be an easy task, but I was bound and determined to achieve my goal. I have been very happy with my computer - the third one- with the next one to follow within a short time. Seniors who are computer literate are not a curiosity but are numerous in this country whereas in Europe people were always astonished to find a senior who could talk about computers. The young people I met were almost shocked to find an "Oldster" and a woman to boot who asked for e-mail addresses and talked intelligently about hard drives and software.

Although my body refuses to cooperate at times my mind is as open, active, and curious as it always was. I am still curious to participate and experience whatever the new century has to offer.