

## Susi Robinson

Wartime Experience: Sent to England on a Kindertransport

My father was a salesman who died in Buchenwald. My stepfather was an owner of a men's cap factory before 1939 and later become owner of a small cleaning shop. My mother was a housewife and secretary before becoming a seamstress in my stepfather's cleaning business. I have no siblings.

I resided for 6 years in Nazi occupied Germany. under Hitler. I left when I was 10 yrs. old on January 6, 1939. In addition to losing my father in Buchenwald, my father's sister and my paternal grandmother died in Theresienstadt, and ten uncles and cousins from my own extended family and six relatives from my stepfather's family were all murdered. I don't know what happened to my schoolmates.

My life before Hitler was one of very close family relationships with my mother's brother's and sister's families. My mother and father were divorced in 1936. I visited my father, grandmother, and aunt (father's sister) twice a month at my grandmother's house. My mother married again in 1938 to my stepfather who raised me.

Both my mother and my father came from very wealthy families, and my stepfather owned a factory. A cultured background was emphasized greatly. My mother was even inclined to snub people who did not go to the Opéra or Theater or who did not have the equivalent of a college education. Our family kept the Jewish holidays: Rosh Hashanah, Passover, etc., and we also kept Shabbat every Friday night.

I spent summer vacations with my cousins in the vacation home we had by the river. My friends were all Jewish where I lived, and the kids where we had the summer house who weren't Jewish ganged up on me. My parents had their circle of friends, most of them Jewish.

All my life there seemed to be fear of Hitler and his rise to power in Germany. It had already started with posters and slogans in 1930, when I was not even two years old. I have seen photographs of these banners and posters. My family did not understand the full extent of the danger. They thought Germany was a democratic country, that if they did not like the government, they could vote it out at the next election.

It did cause anxiety and very much interfered with everyday life. Would we still be allowed to go to this or that park, theatre, cinema or restaurant or sit on the bench or seat that we chose? Would we be allowed to work in our job, travel on buses or subways, shop in the stores we wanted to, and go to the local schools or colleges? Parents had to be sure their children were constantly supervised so that groups of other children did not harm them.

The full impact was understood by my parents when they took my stepfather's sister's husband and son away because they were Polish, but I did not understand the full impact until later. I

was shielded very little; I think that was good. To see my parents and adults around me worried was a negative experience for sure. It is however, very difficult for me to recall my feelings as such. I can only say that my parents were supposed to be all powerful and I wondered how come they couldn't do anything to change things. It did not affect my family life, except to bring everybody closer together.

My mother coped very well; she did everything to make sure we got out safely and with as many possessions as possible. My parents didn't show their emotions in front of me or talk about these things. As the anti-Semitism began so early in my life (before my memory will allow) I knew no other way of life. I took it for granted that Jews were second class citizens. This makes it even more difficult for me to remember any emotions I had around it.

My father's best friends of 20 years were non-Jews. We called them on November 9th, 1938, to ask if we could spend a couple of hours at their house (until my father caught a train to the border). We had been at the station and people had pointed at us and shouted, "How come you Jews were not picked up? Did they forget you?" So my father wanted us off the street, and that's why he called his best friends. Their reply was, "We are tired and going to bed." Upon being pressed, they told my father that they could not understand why we had not left before, didn't we see that Jews were not wanted in Germany.

One friend, whose father was in the S.S., threw me off a swing because he didn't think Jews should be allowed to use it; I fell and broke my leg. We had to give up our summer cottage by the river because the non-Jewish children ganged up on me until I could not go outside to play without grown-ups. No one in my family was arrested while I was still in Germany. I did experience an incident of violence. Though it didn't have anything to do with my being Jewish necessarily, it was perpetrated by an S.S. officer.

As I was very young when this started, to me that was what life was like. I thought that being Jewish meant being a second-class citizen. Although I am not ashamed of being Jewish, I have at times wondered what it would be like not being Jewish. I don't remember feeling inferior or not, but I feel that as a Jew, I am not as worthy as the other person. I never wanted to join in the Nazi parades. These memories have affected my relationships with non-Jews. I have more trust in Jews.

I found out I was to leave my parents after my stepfather had left Berlin, on the evening of November 9th, 1938, for London. My mother told me that I was going to London to join him, that I was going by train with a lot of other children, and that she would follow shortly. I don't remember how I felt, and I don't remember any particular preparations as far as material things are concerned.

My mother had plans to leave for London on December 31. I knew a few months before I was to leave; however, it didn't happen on the anticipated dates. The date kept getting pushed further and further back. My mother had to leave me with my grandmother's sister until I could

leave on the train which she promised would be January 6, 1939. I don't remember my emotions around this. I just believed what she said.

The day of my departure, my great aunt, my mother's sister and her husband saw me off at the station. They gave me a packet of food (butter, salami etc.) to take to my parents who were already in London and had no money and must be starving.

My feelings on the train were of excitement, the excitement of seeing my mother again. I hardly ever think about the trip. I had no friends or relatives with me on the train, and I don't remember if there were any adults along to guide me. There were a lot of children. I made friends with a set of twins. We were together while on the transport and also during the ten days we were in a transit camp afterward. I lost track of both of them after leaving the camp; I only know that they had an older brother and a sister.

When I arrived at my destination, instead of going to my parents straight away, I was put into the transit camp and given a change of clothes. My parents were supposed to have met me, and all I had with me was a pair of pajamas. I was put in a chalet with the set of twins. One of the sisters complained of feeling ill but did not want us to tell anyone, as she was afraid of being split up from her twin, her older sister and older brother. When the whole family left to go to a foster home, they discovered that she had diphtheria. The next day I was sent to an isolation hospital near Clichester. I was there for 3-4 weeks and treated royally. After that, I was allowed to go home to my parents.

My state of mind during the first few years was a bit 'lost.' I felt as if I didn't belong anywhere. I had difficulty with the language, and no one seemed to reach out to help me, except of course my parents, but they were so terribly busy trying to make ends meet. We were very poor, and my parents tried a lot of ways to earn money. When the war started, it was even harder for them to earn a living. At the beginning of the war my parents sent me to a Convent as schools were closed until shelters could be built. I begged to be allowed to go to Holy Communion and early Mass. I wanted to become Catholic because I was tired of always being different. My identification today is with Judaism. For years I felt like an outsider, even after I learned English. I mixed mostly with Jewish refugees. Over the years, the majority of my friends were ex-refugees. I was never as close with any of my other friends.

I did not start feeling resettled until some time after. Getting married helped me. I married an English Jew. I am probably in a worse position because of my family's contacts. My circle of friends is probably the same as it would have been, but I have no relatives except my daughter. The others are either dead, killed in concentration camp, or in Bolivia or Brazil.

It's difficult to say if the struggle affected me emotionally as I was so young. There has never come a point when I no longer feel like an outsider, or different in some way. I often thought about those who might have gotten away or those who didn't. I did not find out until long after the war though, through the Red Cross. We've talked about those times at home, though not

often. I don't know how deeply my daughter cares. I have never been back to Germany, and I don't like or trust any German who is not Jewish.

It is hard to say to what extent the Hitler period has altered my view of people and events. After all, I was a child, and I don't know how I would have thought and felt if there had never been a Hitler period. I know that I have never felt secure; I am constantly planning for the future and have an underlying fear of it all happening again. If I hear of an incident or read about something in the newspaper that the Israelis have done which doesn't meet with the approval of the author of the article, I am immediately worried. Will this trigger world opinion against us (Jews), and are we going to have another manifestation of anti-Semitism akin to the Hitler period? At times it gets so bad that I cannot even read the article or listen to the news item or whatever. I worry that if we (the Jews) have done something that is not in accordance with general world opinion, or is not 200% ethical, then every non-Jew will immediately hate all Jews.

I am much less trusting; I do not believe people when they say nice things to or about me or my family. I don't trust people when they promise something; I don't believe it until it happens. I try to substitute for not having any family by making friends. Although I have a few really good friends, they do not substitute for family. I feel a quicker commonality with ex-refugees and a special rapport with them. I have quite a lot of ex-refugee friends. I am very European in food and the way I cook, the way I furnish my home, my idea of culture - in every way.

I think living in Hitler's Germany until the beginning of 1939 has definitely affected my basic sense of self-worth. When day and night you are told you cannot go to this school, enter that building, sit on this bench, be served in that restaurant, play with these children, withdraw as much in money as you wish from your own bank account there is a loss of basic self-worth. Having to take your passports to the police station and told you are no longer a citizen, that you don't belong. Being molested and nearly raped by an officer in uniform at the age of nine and not being able to complain to anyone because you are only a Jew. Being jeered at for being a Jew and having small groups of boys set on you for sport.

Definitely there are a lot of emotional scars left from growing up being told that you and your family are "non- people" with no rights. Here in the U.S. everybody always tells you, you can't do so and so, it interferes with my constitutional rights. Imagine growing up not having any, at least not as Jews. Don't you think it would leave you feeling that everybody else was worthy but not you?

It is hard to say, however, if there had been no Hitler period if I'd never been told, "dirty Jew you don't count," it seems logical that I would have been a different person.

I frequently encounter particular times when I think of the losses such as holiday times when families get together, and I don't have any family. I cannot read about or watch scenes of violence against children. Any film or even ad about harm to children makes me cry. I cannot

say good-bye when someone leaves; I am always afraid they will not come back, and I'll be left alone, to grow old all alone.

For years I have had dreams; I was always being chased by more than one person and always running, but never able to run fast enough. I have never been able to suppress all memory of what I dream at night.

These events definitely changed my view of life and people, and I have only properly begun to realize it since I was at the Kindertransport Reunion. I did not know anybody at the reunion. The people whom I may have known did not recognize or remember me. I have a total mental block and cannot remember any names.