

Ruth Spencer

Wartime Experience: Fled to Unoccupied Zone in France

I was born April 30, 1929 in Karlovy-Vary (Karlsbad), a famous spa in the Bohemian Hills in Czechoslovakia. By the time I was 6 months old, my parents, Ignaz Davidovics and Elvira Davidovics, born Loeb, divorced. My father remained in Karlovy-Vary. My mother, with me, returned to her mother's home in Mannheim, Germany. I was subsequently raised by my mother and my grandmother and by Maia, our devoted maid of many years. My mother's sister, Martha, or Aunt Dadi, still lived at home as well.

My grandmother, Gunda Loeb, was widowed since 1925 and lived in a very large and dark apartment in the center of town, in the E6 block if my memory is correct. I still remember an endless corridor and a series of rooms I never entered. It must have been around 1934 when the whole family moved outside the Ringstrasse of Mannheim to a more modern and comfortable apartment on Venezienstrasse. Another move, in 1937, took us to Elisabethenstrasse, near the Rosengarten just across from a very big church.

As far as I can remember, my early childhood in Mannheim was fairly uneventful, neither particularly happy nor unhappy. I remember my grandmother taking me with her on vacations to a big hotel in the midst of pine forests in the Black Forest. It was she who taught me to spell words and the basics of mathematics during long walks in the woods. I remember afternoons spent in one "Kaffeehaus" or another with my mother or my aunt and their friends. I remember Sundays when Maia took me along to the garden she and her husband had somewhere in the suburbs. I went to school, had friends and still have the "Poesie Album" every child had at the time, with entries by friends, teachers and family.

Little by little, however, life became more difficult and restricted for Jews. I was hospitalized with scarlet fever and confined to a large ward with several other children. I was the only Jewish child there and got my first taste of anti-Semitism. It was a year or so later that a young boy, getting angry at me while playing in a courtyard, called me "dirty Jew" and hit me with a stone just above my right eye. I still have the mark. In school too, it was not uncommon to be ridiculed or called "dirty Jew" by other students.

Beaches along the Rhine, parks and public benches were no longer accessible to Jews. Neither were cinemas and theaters. There were frequent talks of men, often friends of the family or fathers of my friends, who were arrested, taken to Dachau or some other camp, severely beaten and sometimes again released. By then my grandmother's business at the city's abattoir had been confiscated. My mother was often away from home, working at whatever menial jobs she could get. Uncle Sally, my mother's brother, had emigrated to South America and Aunt Dadi, with her husband, left for the United States. Several of my friends left Germany with their parents. Meanwhile all Jewish children were banned from regular schools and forced to attend the only Jewish school in Mannheim. It was located in a small street somewhere behind the Market Place, near the main synagogue, quite a long way from home.

In November 1938, the day which became known as “Kristallnacht” began feverishly and with many phone calls. Jewish families called to inform each other that something terrible was about to happen although no one seemed to know exactly what. My grandmother asked me to take a very small suitcase filled with whatever valuables were still in her possession – Aunt Dadi had taken most of them with her when she immigrated to the US – to Maia’s home, possibly also to get me out of harm’s way. By then Maia’s husband had joined the S.A., or so called “Brown Shirts”. When he came home late that afternoon with a group of friends, all in uniforms, Maia quickly hid me under the covers of her bed in the bedroom. I could hear the men in the adjacent living room drinking beer and boasting about what they did to Jews. After nightfall Maia tiptoed me through a back door and walked me home.

It was a long walk taking us past stores owned by Jews: the windows were broken, the stores were looted. We passed Jewish homes and apartment houses, some where friends lived: everywhere, on the sidewalks, were huge piles of burning books, furniture, belongings. Large groups of S.A.s and people attended to the fires. It was horrible. When we arrived in front of my building several fires were burning on the sidewalk. We saw the lights were lit in our apartment and Maia sent me up while she remained waiting across the street until I signaled her from a window that I got home alright.

What I found is difficult to describe but remains deeply embedded in my memory. Both my mother and grandmother were in tears. Practically all the furniture was damaged, knocked over or broken; shattered glass was everywhere; a leather-covered sofa was slashed with a knife. Many things were thrown out the window and still burned on the sidewalk below. My mother and grandmother, while trying to pick up some of the glass and broken items from the floor, told me that ten very tall SA and SS men had entered the apartment and had locked the two women into the bathroom while they ransacked all the rooms. I too started crying and helped to clean up the mess.

The next day it was announced that nobody is allowed to sell anything to Jews. Nevertheless, my grandmother sent me to the grocery store next door to buy some milk. Despite the “verboten” sign already in the window, the grocer, who knew me, gave me what I asked for. I do not remember how the following days went by. There was no school anymore to go to. But I remember that suddenly my mother was away for a few days. Only later did I find out that she had tried to go to France but was turned back at the border because she did not have the required papers. We had relatives in France, cousins of my mother, and another family more distantly related. Somehow the decision must have been made that they will accept me in their home. They lived in the Lorraine border town of Sarreguemines.

One day, in February 1939, my mother and I went by train to Saarbruecken. We stayed overnight at a friend’s place and the next morning my mother took me to the railroad station. She was not allowed near the train which was to cross into France. I said good-bye to her at the gate and, carrying my suitcase and filled with a sense of adventure, walked toward the train. I did not cry; I did not turn around to wave another good-bye. Little did I know that this would be the last time I saw my mother.

It was a very short train ride and my relatives were waiting for me. For a child apparently no special papers were required to cross the border into France. I was made welcome by the distant relatives first and later moved to the cousins home. I went to school, learned French and spent the summer with some other very distant relatives near Strasbourg. Then the war broke out and border areas were evacuated. We were relocated to Bourbonne-les Bains, a small town in the Vosges mountains. Later I moved back to the Bachmann family, my distant relatives, who had moved to Blois. Bombardments became frequent and, in the spring of 1940, the invading German army was close to Blois. Like everybody else, we fled the city on foot taking with us whatever we could load on a small handcart. Like thousands of other people, including refugees from far away as Belgium, we headed south. To add to the horror, every now and then German warplanes submachine-gunned the endless convoy of refugees. After walking some 12 or 15 Km we were able to take refuge in a chateau where the owners were leaving for the South of France. After a few days, the advancing Germans occupied the chateau and we returned to Blois.

Not long after these events the war was over, and France was divided into the "Occupied Zone" and the "Free Zone". We left Blois for Poitiers to be closer to friends of the family. I did quite well in school and had a wonderful teacher who took me under her wing. But the German occupation began to be felt. Jews had to wear the "Yellow Star" wherever they went. And that included school. Our friends were interned in a camp outside of town where I, as a child, was allowed to visit them and bring them some food.

Meanwhile an agreement was reached between the German and the French Petain governments that all Jews still remaining in the Rhine region were to be taken to the camps of Gurs and Noe in the Pyrenees, in the South of France. The barracks in the camps had been set up for Spanish refugees during the Spanish Civil war. Both my mother and my grandmother were interned in Gurs. From time to time, I received a censored postcard from them telling me how well they are and hoping that we could see each other again.

Sometime in 1942 my relatives decided that it would be safer to live in the "Free" or "Unoccupied Zone". With the help of friends, we, illegally, crossed the border between the zones and joined some other friends in Cazerres, a small town South of Toulouse. We also hoped to visit my mother and grandmother. But it was too late. A card from my mother told us that she was working as a nurse in the infirmary and that her mother had died of dysentery. Not long after that, news reached us that my mother was taken away from Gurs for an unknown destination. Only much later did we find out that she was taken to Auschwitz. At the time we did not know about extermination camps with gas chambers for Jews.

We remained in Cazerres for about a year and then moved to the tiny village of Verrieres, about 75 Km West of Limoges. Another family, close friends of my relatives, already lived there. Although the village was in the "Free Zone", Germans showed up occasionally either to fight members of the French underground hidden in nearby forests or to make sure that no Jews were living in the area. On those occasions we went into hiding in a ramshackle shed at the bottom of the garden behind our ramshackle house without running water or plumbing.

It was there that a doctor from the camp of Gurs came to visit. He wanted to meet me and brought with him a ship trunk which had belonged to my mother. He got to know her while she helped in the camp's infirmary. He gave me photographs taken in the nearby town of Pau where some interns were allowed to visit. Even there, she was impeccably dressed. The doctor said that he tried to get her out of the camp but that she refused because she did not speak French and was afraid. This became the biggest legacy left to me by my mother: never to be afraid to move on in life because there is something I do not know.

We were "liberated" in 1944 and the war ended in 1945. I no longer wished to stay with my relatives and was accepted in a children camp established by the O.S.E. organization on the outskirts of Limoges. The camp was set up in a large mansion for Jewish children without parents.

In 1947 I married Erwin Salomon in Sarregumines. We had a daughter, Lydie, and a son, Serge. The marriage ended in divorce in 1956 and I moved to Lyon. In 1959 I traveled to Czechoslovakia to visit my place of birth and to inquire whether my father, or a member of his family, was still there. I had never known my father and knew nothing of his family. I found several people who knew the Davidovics family and who gave me some information about their past. A few months later the Jewish Consistory in Prague sent me an address of a sister of my father in New York. I wrote to her. Two weeks later I received a letter from my father who also lived in New York.

I met my father for the first time in the summer of 1960 during my first visit to New York. He was instrumental in my decision to move to the United States in 1961. In 1967 I married Herbert H. Spencer and my son Gil was born the following year. After a brief stay in Princeton, NJ, we lived in London for eight years before returning to the United States. I separated from my second husband in 1979.

I now live in Oakland, CA, after years in New York and Los Angeles.

Still today, one of the biggest regrets in my life is not to have looked back at my mother at the railroad station in Saarbruecken.

My mother died in Auschwitz.

My grandmother died in the camp of Gurs in the South of France.

Maia committed suicide during the war.