

Lilly Urbach

Photographed with her husband Karl

Wartime Experience: Immigrated to the US

My name is Lilly Mendelsohn Urbach. I was born in Berlin in 1928. I started school in 1933, the year Hitler came to power. It was not long before we Jewish children began to feel the changes--no more visits, invitations, field trips, etc. Eventually, we had to carry identification at all times.

Around 1936/37, my father lost his job as a chemical engineer because the systematic dismissal of Jews was now national policy. His ex-boss, though a Nazi Party member, continued to give him small, covert jobs on which he could work in our small kitchen. For these he received the meager compensation on which we lived.

By the winter of 1937/38, it was clear to my parents that we had to leave. My mother, Lithuanian by birth, had studied piano at the Conservatory of Music in St. Petersburg, and had met my father at the University of Kiev. In 1919, married, with a child, and branded political undesirables, they had to literally flee for their lives from the Bolsheviks. They, like thousands of other Russian refugees, settled in Berlin. A soup kitchen sustained them, but their baby died. By German law, they remained foreigners, and my sister and I were decreed Latvian citizens. It was this quirky law that eventually enabled us to quickly obtain the necessary documents for leaving.

My mother wanted desperately to go to America--to New York, where her brother's family had emigrated in 1937--but my father was determined to return to Latvia. He was one of eleven siblings, spoke the language, and work had been arranged for him, etc. To this end all was in readiness when he fell in March, and died within a week. Medicine was no longer available to Jews, although non-Jewish friends had tried to help. My mother turned to her brother in New York. and with the help of friends and relatives, we had our affidavits and other documents within months. By the time we had it all together, my sister had turned sixteen. The conditions for leaving also stated that anyone sixteen or older, could leave with one suitcase and one hundred marks. For that reason, my sister was sent off alone to America, where she arrived in September 1938. My mother and I arrived in New York on November 7, 1938, two days before Kristallnacht. Of the few personal items in our suitcase, the family photos were the most precious.

My mother's family--my grandmother, aunts, uncles, and cousins--died in the Kovno Ghetto during the German occupation. One cousin escaped. In my father's family, an aunt and an uncle survived Auschwitz and came to the United States in 1947. Neither one has ever spoken of Auschwitz. The rest of the family was wiped out.