

URSULA PEDERSEN AND NANCY GROSSO

Ursula was sent on a Kindertransport to England; her younger sister Nancy survived the war in Europe. They were separated for ten years.

“That first night together we talked for hours trying to piece together ten years and two worlds.”

Both Ursula and Nancy (née Schulz) were born in the free state of Danzig to a Jewish mother and a Catholic father. Although Danzig, ancient port city, was still nominally free, it was actually controlled by the Nazis long before its annexation in 1939. Ursula remembers the Hitler Youth storming through the streets and Nazi flags being flown.

The Kindertransport was organized by the Quakers in the months before the outbreak of World War II to rescue Jewish children and send them to England. Nine-year-old Ursula was sent to England on a sealed train May 1939. Her parents, sister and other relatives came to see her off at the train station.

The first family with whom Ursula was placed spoke no German and she spoke no English. She was re-assigned to a family closer to her own background. When Ursula set the table there, she placed a German/English dictionary next to her plate and an English/German dictionary next to theirs. Ursula lived in many locations during her ten years in Britain, including the homes of a farmer, a schoolteacher, a coal miner, a salesman, a juvenile parole officer, and at a boarding school. When war was declared, she, together with many other London school children, was evacuated to the south of Wales.

Five-year-old Nancy remained in Danzig with her parents. During the war, she was under strict orders not to tell anyone of their Jewish background, understanding that if she should let it slip, they could be sent away. She often did errands for the family and was sent to the train station to pick up messages. Nancy remembered watching her mother sew jewelry and money into the lining at the bottom of her grandmother's coat, because she was being sent away to an unknown destination with other elderly Jews. She was never seen again.

After the war ended, Nancy was sent on a Jewish transport to Berlin, where a cousin of her mother's found her in an orphanage. A few months later, Ursula received a telegram from Nancy with news about the fate of their family. Both of their parents were dead. Their father had been taken by the Russians after their liberation of Danzig and never heard from again. Their mother had died of typhus shortly afterwards. A grandmother, aunt, uncle and cousin had been deported and perished in the camps.

Ursula's English guardians offered to formally adopt her, but she preferred to emigrate to the U.S. to be with her sister. Relatives in California sponsored them, Nancy arriving in 1946 and Ursula following in 1949.

Reunited after ten years apart, the sisters began the long and complex process of piecing together their two worlds. They settled close to one another in Northern California where each worked, married and raised families.