

GERDA LEVY

Gerda's family escaped Europe and spent the war years in Bolivia and Argentina.

"My father had hidden in a neighbor's house when the soldiers approached. My mother and I watched as the SS men threw my piano out the window, and then, piece-by-piece, all of our furniture followed. Our home was destroyed"

Gerda was born in Breslau, Germany, in 1925 the only child of Georg and Gertrud Bielski. Her father, a well-established businessman had fought for the German army in World War I. He felt that he was a German first and a Jew second and that we had nothing to worry about.

When Gerda was thirteen, SS troops burst into the classroom of her Jewish school and murdered the teacher in front of the students. It was to be the last day of Gerda's formal education. Her parents attempted to get visas to leave Germany, but it was too late, none were being issued. Their funds were confiscated, and their situation began to look hopeless.

An aunt in Switzerland sent money which Gerda's father used to purchase counterfeit visas and tickets on a ship scheduled to leave Europe, but that voyage was cancelled. The next ship on which the family had reservations cancelled their tickets the night before sailing. They received a telegram saying that ship had burned at sea a few days later. They finally obtained passage on a ship sailing from Genoa. After two days of waiting with neither food nor water, they boarded and were crammed into a cabin with about fifty other people. There was little to eat during the entire voyage, but at last they were leaving Germany.

Upon arrival in Chile, officials discovered their counterfeit visas, but a Jewish organization arranged for the family to land and continue on to La Paz Bolivia. When the government announced that too many immigrants were living in La Paz, they had to move to the interior to a small village where they opened a primitive hotel and restaurant.

Three years later Gerda left to move to the city on her own. She met and married a photographer who was twenty years older than she was. They crossed the border illegally into Argentina where Gerda worked in a photography studio and took borders into their home. Gerda eventually moved to California where she became a successful businesswoman owning a chain of photography studios.