

The impact of the Holocaust on my life

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Now, over 60 years after the events, there is still widespread interest in the Holocaust, with many questions still unanswered. It is something that has always been part of my life and I am pleased to have the opportunity to tell another Holocaust story. It won't be about camps and death, but about my life and the lasting impact of the Holocaust on it. I would like to start by looking at when and where I was born and what happened as I was growing up; then to look at some of the events in my family in the years before I was born, at what happened to other members of my family; and finally to consider where I am today.

Let me start by going back to the year 1939 – a year that was momentous in Europe as the start of the Second World War and also a year with personal significance as the year in which I was born. The place was Berlin at the beginning of 1939. My family was Jewish and had lived in Berlin for many generations. My birth certificate clearly shows both my parents as “mosaisch” – the German word for Jewish.

As Jews in Germany in 1939, life was already highly risky; this was just two months after Kristallnacht. Daniel Goldhagen's book “Hitler's Willing Executioners” makes the statement that, “By 1938 even the most self-delusionary of Jews had to admit to themselves that Jews could not live in Germany; the pace of emigration picked up during 1938-1939, when an additional 118,000 emigrated, choosing to go to any country that would

admit them.” My family was fortunate to be in that 118,000.

My father was a researcher and technical writer in the field of photochemistry; he had written the basic textbooks on black and white photography, which had been published in several languages. As a scientist, by that time he grasped the reality of the situation. After being arrested by the Gestapo and briefly detained in a camp just outside Berlin, he was left with no further doubts. He had already made plans to leave Germany and move as many members of the family as possible to England. We also had visas for Shanghai!

I was barely three months old when we left Germany for England in March of 1939. My father had gone on ahead six weeks earlier. My mother left on a special transport plane with my sister, then three years old, and me, a babe in arms. We had passports clearly stamped with the letter “X” and visas stating “good for single journey only”, a requirement to register at once with the police and permission to stay in England for only 12 months. In those months leading up to the outbreak of war my father was immediately seen as being a possible Nazi spy; he was detained for several months in one camp for displaced persons on the Isle of Man, and my mother with my sister and me in another.

What brought my father and hence my family to England at that very difficult time when many countries were not accepting Jewish refugees? A key person in this was a Dr White, who was working in similar fields of photography to my father and

knew of him through his books. They established contact and he was instrumental in obtaining the vital visas for entry to England. Just 11,000 Jewish refugees were permitted to enter Britain in the five years before Kristallnacht and then mostly on a temporary basis.

During the war many production and research efforts were directed by the government; my father and his colleague had to put their mutual interest in research into photochemistry on hold and become involved in the war effort. This meant applying their scientific skills to producing disinfectants, soaps and shampoos for use by the British troops.

Growing up as a German in England during the war and the years immediately following it presented many difficulties. England was at war with Germany; the anti-German sentiment was intense. As a child I was somehow aware of this. However much I wanted to conceal the fact, we were seen as being German; there was very little knowledge in England at that time of why Jews had to leave. When forms had to be filled in, there was always the question "place of birth" and someone would inevitably see 'Berlin'; the word would get out, resulting often in my being taunted at school.

Even now, when I meet someone new and they ask what appears to be the most simple of questions. "Where were you born?" I have to think carefully what answer to give – a habit that comes from my early years of having to be very guarded on that response. As a defence and as part of the process many immigrants have of trying to become integrated into their new country, my parents, who had not been observant Jews, decided it would be best for us to be brought up in the Anglican church and

have an English education, hence Epsom College.

I was christened in 1942 at the age of three. In day-to-day life at home there was almost no reference to anything Jewish nor any practice of Jewish rites. We celebrated Christmas, although in the German tradition of celebrating on Christmas Eve, which made me aware from an early age of being 'different'. It was not until several years after the end of the war that we were able to normalise our status by becoming naturalised British subjects.

While our immediate family and my father's two sisters succeeded in leaving Germany, other members of the family had a different fate. My grandmother tried to leave via Holland; something was found to be out of order with her papers and she was turned back and is believed to have perished in one of the camps.

An uncle through marriage, Joseph (Sepp) Kreichauf, who was not Jewish, decided to stay on in Berlin. He had already had his problems with the Nazi regime. An art teacher and painter, he was told that he would no longer be able to work unless he divorced my aunt. This he refused to do. Word came through that he had died in mysterious circumstances somewhere around 1942 or 1943, but it was only after the war that we were able to find out what had happened.

He had been hiding Mr Silberberg, a Jew, in his own residence, who was arrested by the Gestapo and under intense questioning revealed his hiding place. This led to the Gestapo coming to arrest my uncle. However, as was common practice during that period, he always kept some cyanide tablets with him and before he could be arrested took his own life.

Another lasting aspect of this abrupt and

forced departure from Germany is the total absence of any history or continuity to the years before I was born, no grandparents from whom to hear stories, no places to visit with fond memories for my parents of their early years. What does this mean? In order to fill in the void and satisfy a natural curiosity, I have had to reconstruct from whatever sources were available. This task has been made easier by the existence of my grandmother's diary and by photographs and records. I have used these to try to piece together some of the past in Berlin. I also wanted to understand some of the events of the 1930s in Germany that directly affected people's lives, especially the impact of the Nuremberg laws. These laws came into force in 1935 and decreed that German citizenship was limited to "Aryans". Jews became mere subjects of the state with very limited rights. This had a direct impact on my father. As a professional technical writer he was a member of the Guild of Technical Writers. In March 1935 he received an official letter expelling him from the Guild, giving as the reason, "... because you are not Aryan ...", and barring him from publishing any more books.

When it was time for me to choose a career, my inability to trust in a single national entity influenced the choice. This was now the late fifties and, looking back, I can see that I chose a field where the skills could be applied anywhere in the world – the field of computer technology, which was then in its early stages; also a corporation that was as international as possible led me to IBM, rather than to working for a national enterprise. I felt a certain rootlessness, so in the early sixties decided to leave England and move to the U.S.A.

What am I doing today that I see as

being a direct result of the Holocaust?

There are three areas where I am actively involved. The first is in trying to come to terms personally with my background; I have participated in discussion sessions for survivors to share experiences with others having a similar background. I have visited the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and am on its register of survivors; the names of my uncle and grandmother are on the register of those who perished.

The Berlin City government has a programme to invite those that were forced to flee the City back for a visit; I am on the waiting list. Understandably, there are still many open questions and issues, the most difficult of which are the acceptance of my German heritage and my feelings towards Germans and Germany, and of being Jewish and my position and religious practice. I wonder if I will ever be able to say, "Ich bin Berliner" without feelings of ambiguity? The second is trying to help those who were less fortunate than I was in the impact of the Holocaust on them.

The third is being active in remembering the Holocaust by participating in education on it. I stay involved by subscribing to the Westchester Holocaust Commission, being on their speakers' bureau and participating in their events; also by subscribing to the World Jewish Congress, which has played a leading role in the claims against Swiss banks and German corporations.

This background is always with me. What effects does it have? It makes me aware how fortunate I am to be alive and here against all the odds, and means I try to live every moment to the full. I feel a lasting gratitude to England for having taken in my family and for the education I received at Epsom College, which has stood me in good stead.