

# Return to Berlin by a Holocaust Survivor - Visit September 1 – 8, 2009 [04/25/2010]

By Denny P. Jacobson

The September 2002 edition of the Old Epsomian published an article which I had contributed :- “ My Story – The Impact of the Holocaust on My Life “. Now, some 70 years after my family was forced to leave Berlin I accepted an invitation to visit the City again. The visit was made under a program run by the office of the Mayor of Berlin to invite back to the City people who were obliged to leave under the Nazi regime; in my case, it was having been born there in January 1939 and my family making the move to England in March of 1939.

**PERSONENBESCHREIBUNG**

Beruf	<i>Ärztin</i>	Ehefrau
Geburtsort	<i>Berlin - Kottbusserof.</i>	
Geburtsdag	<i>7. 10. 1908.</i>	
Wohnort	<i>Berlin</i>	
Gestalt	<i>mittel</i>	
Gesicht	<i>rund</i>	
Farbe der Augen	<i>grünbraun</i>	
Farbe des Haares	<i>schwarz</i>	
Besond. Kennzeichen	<i>keine</i>	

**KINDER**

Name	Alter	Geschlecht
<i>Helga Sara</i>	<i>30.10.1938</i>	<i>weibl.</i>
<i>Tenny</i>	<i>10.7.1939</i>	<i>männl.</i>

**VISA FOR UNITED KINGDOM**

Dat. 24.10.1939, No. 92525

GRANTED AT BERLIN

Sgt. *Alten*

IMMIGRATION CONTROL OFFICER

GOOD FOR SINGLE JOURNEY ONLY

24.10.39

Freizug, Monat *Marz 39*

Im Besitze von *RM 100* erworben

Polizeibehörde ausgehändigt

Dat. 22. MRZ. 1939

Deutsche Verkehrs-Kredit-Bank

Passport and United Kingdom Visa

After starting the process with my application letter in July, 1997, I was very glad to receive early in 2009 confirmation of my participation in the visit planned for September 1 – 8, 2009. In anticipation I had been gathering information on the different addresses where family members had lived in Berlin in the 1930's as well as studying maps and brushing up on my German. From family documents such as birth certificates and from an extensive diary that my grandmother Henriette kept I was able to compile quite a lot of information. I believed that her diary was now in the Jewish Museum in Berlin. So in the days before departing I felt reasonably well prepared for the experience. I was eagerly looking forward to this opportunity to fill in many of the blanks of my family's life prior to moving to England and trying to see Berlin, a city that might have been home to me, as it was in the pre WW II years both in general and related to my own personal history as well as experiencing the City as it is today.

The group invited included some 27 people many accompanied by spouses, family members and friends with dates of birth ranging from 1922 to 1944 and coming from the USA, Israel, England and Argentina making a total of about 60 people. It was a diverse group with the common link of those who were born in Berlin and had to leave under difficult circumstances. There were as many different stories as there were participants. Among them were those who had gone to the U.S.A., to England, some with Kindertransport, to Shanghai, to Israel and to Argentina. The organization and planning for the visit had been done by Rüdiger Nemitz **[Picture 1]** of the Mayor's office. It was with great anticipation that I boarded the plane in New York on August 31, 2009 for the non-stop flight to Berlin.



**Picture 1** *Denny Jacobson and Ruediger Nemitz*

Arriving on Tuesday, Sept. 1 we were met at the airport in Berlin and taken by coach to the 5 star Hotel Concorde, just off the Kurfürstendamm. From my room on the eighth floor I could look across to the steeple of the bombed out ruins of the Kaiser Wilhelm

Church, which have been left that way since the end of WW II as a constant reminder. After being given information about the plans for the week this was a free day, so I used the time to become familiar with the area and to start my search for the locations where my parents had lived and where I was born. From family documents I had the addresses, so having marked them on a map I set out walking from the hotel through the nearby Charlottenburg and Wilmersdorf districts. It was a strange feeling seeing for the first time the area that had been home to my parents and grandparents. For me now there was almost no personal connection beyond the places which I knew about; the only living family member is Eva Ruben, widow of Ernst Ruben a distant cousin of my father's who had stayed in Berlin throughout the war years and had compiled an extensive family history.

My first destination was to see the place where I had been born in 1939, Trautenaue Strasse 5 [Picture 2] , which after understanding the street numbering system I was able to find. The building there would have been a clinic and the building now at that address looks as if it could date back to the '30's



**Picture 2** Trautenaue Strasse 5



**Picture 2a** Max Jacobsohn, Liselotte Kochmann, Kurt Jacobsohn, Paul Kochmann – Sept. 1932

I then went on to locate the apartment where my parents lived after getting married in 1932 **[Picture 2a]** at Paretzer Strasse 15 and then on to where they lived after my sister Helga was born in 1935 **[Picture 2b]** at Wilhelmsaue 3 There are apartment buildings at both addresses, but it is hard to tell whether they are original from the '30's or rebuilt. Having grown up under the cloud of the first World War, I could see this as an area where my parents would have started to build their lives.



**Picture 2b** Helga Jacobsohn with Henriette Jacobsohn 1936

Visiting the different parts of the city and meeting current political figures was made possible through the excellent arrangements by the Mayor's office. All over the city it is remarkable to see the open monuments and references to the horrors which occurred under the Third Reich. In one of the pedestrian approaches to the Jewish Museum there are slabs with quotes from many well known writers, philosophers, scientists, etc. set into the walkway. A recent project is the placing of 'Stolpersteiner' [Stumbling Stones] in the sidewalks all over the city – 4 inch square brass plates – in front of the homes of Berliners who were persecuted by the Nazis. We travelled through the Tiergarten and on to Checkpoint Charlie, near to which a section of the wall has been left and around which a museum to the "Topography of Terror" is being constructed. It is located in Niederkirchnerstrasse, formerly Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, on the site of buildings which during the Nazi regime were the headquarters of the Gestapo and the SS. It was easy to feel the terror that the location evoked. In the 'East' there is the famous avenue 'Unter den Linden' along which one sees the Staatsoper, Humboldt University where Einstein taught and Bebel Platz where the Nazis held their first "book burning" on May 10th, 1933. Our guide told us the prophetic quote from the German journalist and poet Heinrich Heine [1797 – 1856] : "There where they burn books, so too in the end they will burn people". A glass window at the centre of the square looks down on an underground library that contains no books. Close to the Brandenburg Gate is the Holocaust Memorial **[Picture 3]**, a dramatic structure of large irregular vertical slabs by the architect Peter Eisenmann.



**Picture 3** Holocaust Memorial and Reichstag

The first official event was a City tour which ended at the Red Town Hall, so called not for political reasons but for the color of the brick in which it is built, with a reception and welcoming speech by the Mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit. In the reception area

were stained glass windows with the crests of the districts of Berlin; of particular interest to me was Wilmersdorf where my family had lived. Although it is 20 years since the Wall came down, its path now being marked by two rows of bricks set into the street, there are still many reminders of the formerly divided City. We visited the Jewish Museum, with the new section in highly symbolic architecture by Daniel Libeskind. After an all too brief guided tour there was a reception for the group. With the information that the diary of my grandmother, Henriette Jacobsohn, was in the museum, I had asked before the visit if it would be possible to see the actual diary. The reception was attended by Aubrey Pomerance a Canadian who heads up the archive department and one of his assistants, Franziska Bogdanov. They had brought the actual diary! It was striking to see it in the solid leather binding with the handwriting, photographs and pasted in notices. I told them I had other original documents and arranged to meet again at the museum to go through a collection of family documents including the original passports with which my parents left Berlin, a 'Family Tree Book' issued under the Third Reich which lists the male and female names parents were allowed to give their children, official letters to my father after the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. Walking back to the station I saw groups of children playing in a park and thought back to the happy children in my family photographs and how their lives changed.



**Picture 4** Family group in Berlin - 1914

The Friday started with a visit to the Reichstag. We had an address by Petra Pau, an elected member of the Deutschen Bundestag [German Parliament] since 1998 and now Deputy Speaker of the House. She stressed the work she and her party were doing to fight against all forms of prejudice and discrimination. This was followed by a guided tour of the Parliament building where we were able to see the chamber where the parliament sat, go through some of the older parts of the building where the Russian graffiti are still preserved and up into the new dome, designed by the British architect Norman Foster in glass and metal as a symbol of transparency in government. Following this we were taken to the River Spree for a cruise with buffet lunch as guests of the Berlin House of Representatives. There was an address by Walter Momper, the Speaker of the House. .

On a dull rainy Thursday morning the bus took a group of us to the Weissensee Friedhof, the large Jewish cemetery in what had been East Berlin and I was able to fill in more family history. Ahead of the visit we had been asked to provide the names of family members whose graves we would like to locate. I had given the names of both my grandfathers, Max Jacobsohn, who died in 1936 and Arthur Kochmann who died in 1914. The cemetery staff had gone through their records and printed out a copy of the original burial plot request as well as a map showing the exact location in the very large cemetery; there was a group of guides and a friendly young woman escorted me. It was a long walk through many areas that were suffering from neglect but it gave the opportunity to look at the many names and dates as we passed by. The actual graves had been marked with white stakes and it was a dramatic experience seeing both.

We had a tour of 'Jewish Berlin' going by the new Synagogue, and then on to see a recent memorial at Friedrichstrasse train station to the Kinder-transport' **[Picture 5]**, the program under which about 10.000 Jewish children were sent to England between 1938 and 1940 and placed with families there. Going back west across the city we visited the train station in the Grunewald district, departure point for transportations from Berlin to the concentration camps and now a memorial. Each transport is commemorated by a cast iron slab set into what was a basic platform showing the date, destination and number of people. I was able to see the slab for January 25, 1942 when my grandmother was sent to Riga **[Picture 6]**.



**Picture 5** Kindertransport Memorial



**Picture 6** Memorial to transport of Jan. 25, 1942

As part of the program we had been asked if we would like meet with a German family. I was really fortunate in the choice they had made for me, Cato Dill a lawyer who worked in Berlin but also had extensive dealings in Spain and Majorca. He said the plan was to visit the Max Liebermann villa at Wannsee on the lake at the western edge of the city. He first took me to his house in the Grunewald district and we then went on to the villa. Max Liebermann was the leading artist of the German impressionists. He came from a wealthy Jewish family, born in 1847 and died in 1935 and built the villa in 1909. The villa has been painstakingly restored, with many of Liebermann's works on display. Since the villa was not far from the now infamous Wannsee villa where the meeting took place in 1943 among senior Nazi politicians to agree on 'the final solution', I asked if we could visit there, which we did. It is now set up as a museum and another point of education and information on the Nazi regime. Just beyond the Wannsee is the town of Potsdam, formerly in East Germany; to reach it you cross a bridge which used to be a control point and is called 'the bridge of spies' as it is where exchanges of spies between the east and west used to take place.

The final event of the tour took place in the hotel, a reception and buffet lunch hosted by the Senate of the Federal State of Berlin. The address was given by Rolf Schütte, a former career diplomat who has had postings to the USA and Israel and is now Chief of Protocol for the federal State of Berlin. He is very focused on German / Jewish issues and referred to a paper he had published [March 2005] on "German-Jewish Relations, Today and Tomorrow". [This paper can be accessed:- [deutscheshaus.as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/6835/German\\_Jewish.pdf](http://deutscheshaus.as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/6835/German_Jewish.pdf) ] .

During the visit we had been welcomed by representatives of government at the levels of the German Federal Republic and the State of Berlin. For me one of the most striking things was the recognition of what had taken place under the Nazi regime from 1933 to 1945 both in the talks given by the political leaders and the physical evidence all over the City. In their addresses these leaders went to great lengths to show how the Germany of today was different, especially in its political institutions, anti discrimination laws and religious tolerance. Much of the symbolism in the architecture and memorials relates to the loss, that is the absence and loss of what had been a vibrant part of Berlin life, the Jewish community, and to the confusion and disorientation experienced by the people whose lives were disrupted and constantly at risk. The open resurgence of Jewish institutions and Jewish life was evident in many parts of the City. The hospitality, the concerted effort by all we came into contact with to make the group feel 'at home' and welcomed was remarkable; but throughout the visit I could not help the thoughts of how my life might have been different from going through my mind.