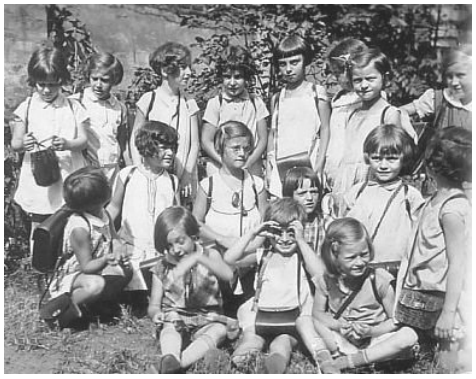
Recollections of my life in Nazi Germany and my emigration to England

by

Mrs. Susan E. Sinclair

Why this story was written

Our first grandchild was born in 1988 . On a holiday that year, it occurred to me, that this was also the year of the 50th anniversary of the *Kristallnacht*, and that possibly I had a duty to record how it affected me. Perhaps one day our children and grandchildren might want to know what happened and by then I might not be here to tell the tale! So I sat down and wrote my story till the early hours of the morning. Some of the events that occurred produce such powerful emotions, that after 50 years I still feel them very strongly.

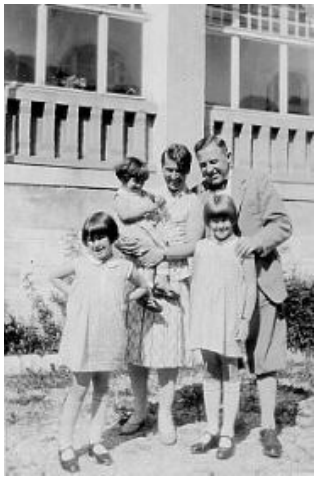


In the late 1920s at the private girl school *Institut Lohmann*: in the back row, 1st on the left Suse Oppenheimer, to her right her lifetime friend Anne Berlin followed by Grete Hofmann and Ilse Feistmann; 2nd row, 2nd on the left Suse Sulzbacher

(Photo: Mrs. S.E. Sinclair)

A happy childhood despite of Hitler

I have to begin my story when Hitler came to power in 1933, a few years before *Kristallnacht*. The event had very little effect on the 10-year old, happy and carefree little girl I was then. We lived in Nuremberg, and my life was warm and comfortable. I quite enjoyed school, we took lots of good holidays and we had lots of friends and relatives, who visited regularly. For a time, my life continued much as before. I did notice that the grown-ups around me were worried, but very little was discussed in front of the children. Our lives were to continue normally if possible. We were warned not to speak about the Nazis, or how they were discussed at home.



Happy days: The Oppenheimer family on holiday in Churwalden (Switzerland) in 1928; from left to right: Susan, Lisa on the arm of her mother Paula, father Siegmund and the oldest daughter Eva
(Photo: Mrs. S.E. Sinclair)

Developments at school

I was obviously not interested in political matters. In 1933 I was to leave Junior school, and had to take an entrance examination for the *Lyzeum*, the girls' high school. My main worry was to pass that exam, and later on to adapt to the new school. I made new friends there, and did quite well, particularly in my two favourite subjects. Mathematics was one, and German - particularly writing essays - another.

However, gradually various problems arose. A difference was made between "Aryan" and "non-Aryan" children. The "non-Aryan" - Jewish - children were told one day to sit at the back of the class from then on. Jewish children were not allowed to join Latin lessons. (I could never understand why.)

Then, the other girls had to join the Hitler Youth. Quite a few enjoyed that. In the Hitler Youth, apart from singing and parading, they were taught all kinds of anti-Semitic things and started to hate their old friends. I was hurt and puzzled. I had not changed, so why were they not my friends anymore?

Eva, Lisa and Susan, the three Oppenheimer sisters in 1929
(Photo: Mrs. S.E. Sinclair)

Gradually, only the Jewish girls were my friends. “Jew Stinker” was often shouted at us. Whenever possible, I would shout back “I am the Jew and you are the stinker”, and then I had to run away fast - if there were more of “them”. In class we were in effect told that we were not allowed to have good marks. My essays were no longer read out. The reason given for that was that “only a true German could be good at German.”

Consolation for a girl’s hurt feelings

At home, my parents tried to balance the hurt inflicted on us at school. My father spoke to us often about Jewish achievements in science, literature, music, medicine and many other fields. He pointed out the very high proportion of Jewish Nobel Prize winners, and spoke to us about the long and proud Jewish history. He managed to make us proud to be Jewish, and sometimes in spite of all the hurt which became part of daily school life, I felt quite sorry for anyone who was not Jewish.

In my early teens sport was very important to me, particularly athletics. And then one day we were excluded from all sports and physical education at school. The way out of that was to join a Jewish sports club, and this became an important part of my social life as well. As the child of a former WWI fighter, I became a member of the *Sportbund des Reichsbundes jüdischer Frontsoldaten* (sports association of the national federation of Jewish front soldiers). There we were encouraged to train hard and to gain our badge of achievement in athletics and cycling, which required the same standards as that taken by the “others”. Receiving my badge and diploma was a very proud moment. Activities also included *Winterlager* (skiing in the Allgäu mountains).

Der Sportbund
des
Reichsbundes jüdischer Frontsoldaten
verleiht hiermit
als Anerkennung für vielseitige Leistungen
sein
Leistungsabzeichen
in
Kupfer
Berlin W 15, am 31 Mai 1938
Nr. 189/12
Vorname: Ruth
Nachname: Oppenheimer
Geb. am: 14. Januar 1920
Mitglied der Sportgruppe: Fürth
Eigenhändige Unterschrift
Die Vereinsführung bestätigt hiermit die [illegible] Angaben. Bedenken gegen die Verleihung des Leistungsabzeichens liegen nicht vor.
Ort: Fürth am 19. Mai 1938
Vorsitzender

Diploma of the sports association of the national federation of Jewish front soldiers for Susan Oppenheimer (1938)
(Photo: Mrs. S.E. Sinclair)

I also joined a Zionist youth club; but although I enjoyed the outings, play reading and other activities, I found it impossible to have any enthusiasm for the ambitions of Zionists of living in a hot, dangerous and uncomfortable country, and so I left the youth club after a few months.

During the summer of 1938, we were told that all Jewish children had to be educated at Jewish schools. I therefore had to go to a new school, which was in Fuerth, a town attached to Nuremberg - only a road sign showed where one town ended and the other began. I started there in the autumn term, and because emigration became an obvious necessity, even to the most optimistic Jews, I also started short courses in cooking and sewing, to enable me, if necessary, to earn a living in another country. I took these courses for a very short time only, because then came the dreadful 9th November, when my life changed dramatically.

Kristallnacht

A young Jew in Paris had killed a German diplomat. This event was used as a trigger to commence long planned raids on Jewish homes and businesses, well organised pogroms.

That night I woke up to noise, shouting and screaming. About 8 young storm troopers, drunk or crazed in some other way, smashed up our home at Vestnertorgraben 15. By the time they came into the bedroom I shared with my younger sister, they had done a lot of damage to other rooms and had locked my parents into their bathroom. My parents were terrified for their children and I could hear them screaming and shouting and then I became very frightened. I could not imagine what was happening to them.

When the storm troopers came into our room, they pulled me out of bed and tore my night-dress to shreds. As a 15-year old, I was above all embarrassed. They then told me to get dressed and to get my clothes out of my wardrobe. This was of the heavy, continental type. When I stood in front of it, the 8 young men threw it over. No doubt this was to kill me and they left the room. Luckily there was so much destruction in the room, that a table, previously turned upside down, held the wardrobe at an angle long enough for me to wriggle out from underneath. The memory of that event will stay with me forever.

My concern was also for my little sister. She had crawled under her blankets, and her bed was strewn with mirror glass, but she was all right. The men departed to do more damage in other houses, and we were able to release our parents and survey the wreck which had been our home.

Our elderly maid could not believe that Hitler, whom she admired, could be responsible for anything like this. (“If only our Fuehrer knew about this!”) A friend of mine, who was staying with us, was hiding on the balcony; she was freezing cold in her night-dress on a cold November night. She had told me the day before that she did not know whether to accept what her much loved Jewish step-father had explained about the Nazis, or what she had been told by her aunt, who was an ardent Nazi supporter and whom she had just been to visit. After that night she knew. When I took her to the station the next day, she begged me to come and stay on their farm near Munich with my family, so that no harm would come to us.

The flight from Nuremberg to Munich

The following morning, at my father's request, I got onto my bicycle and went to check on our family friends. No one dared to use a telephone, and this was the only way to see that they had all survived. All had terrible stories to tell of events the night before. The general opinion was to get out of Nuremberg that day. The reason for this was, that Nuremberg was administered by Julius Streicher, Hitler's chief Jew baiter, and he had called a big public meeting for that evening. All sorts of dreadful things could happen after that.

My family's aim was to get to Munich. The British Consul had told my father to come to shelter at the Consulate, if ever things got too difficult. (It would have been nice for me to know that in that town there was a 17-year old boy, who would one day be my husband). We packed a few things, and my father gave me his important papers to hide in my underwear, so that he would not be carrying them and we departed during the evening.

The newly wed couple Paula, née Rügheimer, and Siegmund Oppenheimer in 1920
(Photo: Mrs. S.E. Sinclair)

On our approach to Munich we could see that cars leaving town were being stopped. Our driver told us not to worry, because he knew Munich quite well, and would take us in on a back street where there were not likely to be roadblocks. He was wrong, we were stopped and my father was removed from the car after being asked whether he was a Jew. He was put into a lorry with other Jews who had been rounded up. As the lorry drove off, my mother gave instructions to follow it. Eventually it pulled into the courtyard of some barracks, where although it was the middle of the night, there were people standing around jeering.

As the lorry was unloaded, my mother bravely followed her husband into the building. My sister and I were tired and frightened of the aggressive mob around us. One of the storm troopers came over to us and told me to start walking back to Nuremberg, as we would not see our parents again and they were confiscating our car. Obviously I had no idea how to walk to Nuremberg. I decided to do nothing and hoped my parents would come back soon.

My mother did come back after a while. She was distressed. She had not been able to achieve anything, not even to see my father. She decided to try again the following morning and meanwhile to find a hotel for us to spend the night. She had travelled a lot with my father and knew several hotels in Munich. At the first one, where she had stayed not long before, there was a notice at the entrance, which read "No Jews". We found that similar notices were on the doors of all other hotels we tried. It was too late at night to go to the British Consulate, and

while we wondered what on earth we could do, the doorman of one hotel followed my mother to the car. He gave her the address of a small hotel belonging to his sister and a note requesting his sister to look after us. We got there, were given a room, and we children went to sleep immediately.

We woke up late and found that mother was not there. She had left us a note, to tell us that she was going back to the barracks and that we were to stay in our room. Eventually she returned. She had not been able to see my father, had not been told where he was, but was told "we will send you his ashes". In fact he was by then on his way to Dachau concentration camp.

Refuge on my friends' farm

My mother decided to take the two children to my friends' farm near Rosenheim in Upper Bavaria, and to go back to Nuremberg to see what she could do to help my father. She found out that at that time one could get released from the concentration camp if one had a business or property which one signed over to the Nazi authorities. My father had both, and she prepared the necessary papers. One also needed a visa to go to another country before being released and she worked on this with the help of friends. She tried to obtain visas for America, for England, for Palestine and maybe other countries. After a week or two, an uncle in Switzerland sent his lawyer to collect my younger sister, so one member of the family was safe. I stayed on the farm and helped with all the work there.

Life on the farm started about 4 a.m. The farmer was a former diplomat, who found out that he was Jewish, although his family had converted to Christianity before he was born. He was not able to remain a diplomat, and therefore he and his family had settled on a farm. Everyone worked hard, but after breakfast, while his wife and daughters and I did mending or vegetable cleaning, he read serious literature to us for at least an hour.

There was a curfew for all Jews. We had to be indoors quite early in the evening. This became impossible for me one day, when I had to go to a medical centre in Munich to obtain a certificate my mother needed for one of the visas. The centre, a Jewish one, was in chaos, because so many people needed certificates, inoculations etc. I had to wait for hours, and missed the train, which would have got me back to the farm before curfew. I stayed with Jewish friends in Munich, but gave my friends on the farm a lot of worry, because I was unable to let them know where I was. I believe they had no telephone.

Back with my family in Nuremberg

Late in December, I was called back to Nuremberg because my visa for England had arrived. My father had returned home shortly before. In six weeks he seemed to have aged 10 years. His head had been shaved, and the stubble which came through, was grey instead of brown. He would not wear his hat, as he normally did. He wanted "them" to be ashamed, since he had nothing to be ashamed of, yet had been imprisoned. He told us of some of the horrific experiences of the previous month. He had always been kindly and patient, but now he was angry and nervous.

He wanted to get the family out of Germany as quickly as possible, and blamed himself for believing for such a long time that Hitler could not last. My elder sister had come back from college in Hamburg, where she had experienced none of the things we had experienced. She and I were to leave for England as soon as possible. We had to get passports. These were

stamped with a large red "J" on the first page. Our parents' papers were not ready, but they hoped to follow later. It was just a few days before Christmas 1938, when we left with the two young sons of friends of my parents.

The Oppenheimer sisters before Susan's (centre) confirmation in 1938
(Photo: Mrs. S.E. Sinclair)

On the way to England

I had mixed feelings. I was very excited at the prospect of going to England, glad to leave Germany and sad to leave my parents behind. The boys' father travelled with us as far as the German/Dutch border. He too had to get his papers together before he could join his sons. Before leaving us, he talked to an Englishman on the train, who promised to keep an eye on the four of us, as soon as we had left Germany and were on our own. We were, however, well into Holland before he came into our compartment. He explained to us, that in view of the "J"s that were printed in our passports, he did not want to be seen in our company until we were truly clear of all German border controls. He was a businessman returning home from Vienna. In Vienna he had many Jewish friends, and he was carrying their jewellery and valuables to safety in England. As all of us were only allowed to bring 10 *Reichsmark* each with us, he wanted his friends to have something of value in England when they arrived. He said: "It is alright for a man to have a gold watch, maybe even two. But ten would really look suspicious!"

From then on, "our" Englishman came to see us at regular intervals, and made sure we had all we needed. We crossed overnight from Hoek van Holland to Harwich. He saw us onto and off the boat and we all travelled together on the train to London. He was also with us at immigration. I was anxious to be allowed to bring in my beloved piano-accordion. This was much more important to me than the rest of my luggage. Our friend said some magic words to the customs officer, and the accordion case was marked as having been checked.

In London he did not leave us until he had handed us over to the friends and relatives who had come to meet us. For me, he did much more than help and look after us. He made me feel really good about coming to England. I wish that in all the excitement of our arrival in London, I had remembered to ask that man's name and to get his address. I think that none of us thanked him enough.

A new life

I went to stay with wonderful friends of my parents, who had left Germany some years before. Young people under 17 had to have a guarantor, as they could not apply for a work permit. Our friends had guaranteed for my upkeep, and they made me part of their family.

Theirs was a happy home, and they made me feel welcome. They were kind, and yet firm in their insistence that I had to try to shake off the nightmare of the previous month. I had brought with me the night-dress which had been ripped off me. They gently persuaded me to get rid of it and it was ceremoniously discarded. They sent me to a college to learn English. I took my studies very seriously. I wanted to understand what people were saying, I wanted to show my appreciation for what was being done for me, and I wanted to be able to write to my parents and to be able to tell them of good results.

At first I had a lot of problems and misunderstandings learning English. The difficulties and endless variations of pronouncing "ough", and expressions like "R. is rather inclined to pull people's legs" (Strange habit I thought, how did she do it? Crawl under the table?). But after a few weeks I could speak and understand English and was ready for my new life. My parents were able to join us in May 1939, and my younger sister arrived from Switzerland a week before the outbreak of war. We were fortunate, to be together, and to be in England. After the war we all became British citizens.

Afterthoughts

I have intentionally written this only from my own point of view. Each train of thought could produce another paragraph, describe another experience and in the end this brief account would become a book. Nevertheless, the Golden Jubilee of my arrival here on the 23rd December 1938 deserved at least this much.

My family were so fortunate to be able to be together. After the war we found out that many of my school friends with their families and many of our relatives and of my parents' friends were murdered in the Holocaust.

August 2002

Susan E. Sinclair

How life continued: Mr. H. Peter Sinclair and Ms. Susan E. Oppenheimer in Epping Forest (1947) ...
(Photo: Mrs. S.E. Sinclair)

... and the same loving couple, now Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair, on vacation in Switzerland (2000)
(Photo: Mrs. S.E. Sinclair)

Susan died peacefully, aged 83, on 24th September 2006 in hospital without regaining consciousness, following major open heart surgery.

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