



Our Family

by

Heinz and Thea Ruth Skyte, née Ephraim

THEA'S STORY: FROM BERLIN TO LEEDS

THEA RUTH SKYTE NÉE EPHRAIM

Great-Great-Great-Granddaughter of:

Samuel of Neustadt/Pinne

Meyer of Birnbaum/Warthe

Michael (Wolf) Joseph and Braeunchen Pinchus of Schwerin/Warthe

Hessel Michael and Golde Aron of Schwerin/Warthe

Great-Great-Granddaughter of:

Fraum and Rachel Ephraim of Neustadt/Pinne

Joseph Meyer and Sara Levy of Birnbaum/Warthe

Wolf Michael and Sara Alterthum of Schwerin/Warthe

Great-Granddaughter of:

David Ephraim and Hannchen née Levy of Neustadt/Pinne

Meyer Joseph Levy and Bertha née Alterthum of Birnbaum/Warthe

Karl Koenig and Christine née Brukmann of Gross Wersmeninken East Prussia

Johann Wildies and Marie née Grigat of Klein Bubainen East Prussia

Granddaughter of:

Julius and Rosalie Ephraim of Berlin

Albert and Johanna Koenig of Berlin

and only child of:

Martha and Alfred Ephraim of Berlin

was born in Berlin on 21 April 1923.



Thea in October 1924

(photo: Heinz & Thea Skyte)

After their marriage in 1921 Martha and Alfred set up home with Martha's parents, Albert and Johanna Koenig, in a second floor apartment at Gartenstrasse 9. In the corner between two large windows was a table and cane arm chairs. The earphones of the radio with its accumulator, which had to be charged regularly, hung on a wall close to the table.

Grandparents Johanna and Albert occupied the other larger rooms, where by one of the large side windows Opa Albert had his "workshop". He was a saddler by trade and worked then from home making leather school satchels and briefcases for a wholesale warehouse. Leather pieces were delivered ready cut. After soaking the leather to make it pliable and scoring the sides to turn them up, it was put onto an "Esel", a three legged combined wooden stool and workbench. Opa sat astride on this. On front of him were two wooden planks, one on each side. The leather pieces to be sewn were put between these and held in place by screwing the wooden sides together. Stitching could then begin. The strong thread was first waxed and threaded with a needle at both ends. After poking a small hole with an awl, a sharp pointed instrument, into the leather the needles were passed through these one from each side. I can still smell the wet leather and the sweetish smell of the wax.

The small third room was a small sewing workshop Martha had set up in 1913, long before her marriage. This room also had a balcony with some chairs. To get out to sit on it and to see the world go by, one had to sit on the window sill and swing the legs over. In the summer it had lovely window boxes and grandpa's oleander tree, which in the winter lived by a corner window in their room.

There was no electricity in the apartment and I remember the gas lamps being lit in the kitchen every night. Oma Johanna Koenig, who was very old fashioned and always wore a big black alpaca apron tied in a beautiful large bow at the back over her long dark dresses, would then fill the oil lamp with fuel, light it and carry it in to their room. I also remember electricity being installed possibly around 1925, probably one of my earliest memories.

I never knew my paternal grandparents Julius and Rosalie Ephraim, who after marrying in 1873 had moved from Schwerin an der Warthe to Berlin. They respectively died in Berlin in 1904 and 1914 and are both buried on the Jewish Cemetery in Berlin Weissensee.

After leaving his employment with the "*Zentralnachweiseamt fuer Kriegsverluste und Kriegsgraeber*" (Central Commission for War Casualties and War Graves) in 1924 my father, who had served in the German army during the 1st World War and received the "Iron Cross"(a wartime medal), took over the workshop and gradually expanded it by adding several specialities, such as pleating, buttonholing, button making, interlocking etc.

Around 1926/1927 my parents took shop premises at Gartenstrasse 26 where, apart from the work-room, they also established a retail business selling linen, underwear, haberdashery and drapery. The family also moved to an apartment at Blankenfelderstrasse 27, not far from the well-known "Alexanderplatz". It was a very nice 3 roomed apartment, where I had my own room with a large brass bed. This meant a twice daily 30 - 40 minutes walk between home and shop premises, for me between home, school, shop and home again. Although there was public transport between the two locations the journeys were always done on foot.

Hitler came to power on 30th January 1933 and persecutions of Jews soon started. Further expansion planned for the family business in larger premises in Invalidenstrasse, the main street opposite the busy *Stettiner Bahnhof* (a Railway Station, now Nord Bahnhof) became impossible. The family eventually also had to give up their apartment and moved into one room behind the shop in Gartenstrasse. Unlike all the other apartments and rooms in the four story building, which had to share one toilet situated on the staircase on the ground floor, the shop had its own toilet across the house corridor.

From 1929 I attended the 124. Volksschule (Elementary School) in Gartenstrasse just opposite the house Gartenstrasse 9, in which we used to live. My grandparents were still living there and I visited them almost daily.

In 1933 I was awarded a scholarship and started to attend the "Luisenschule - Lyzeum und Oberlyzeum", a very old-established girls' grammar school in Ziegelstrasse, not far from Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse, one of the stations on the Berlin S-Bahn (Stadtbahn), the electric railway going round and across Berlin.

Some of the classrooms, amongst them the chemistry and physics laboratories, faced directly onto the river Spree, the river which flows through the centre of Berlin. In the summer, when the windows were open, pupils were able to feed the seagulls flying over the water with parts of their lunch time sandwiches and often secretly did so.



Luisenschule, Berlin

(photo: Heinz & Thea Skyte)

Very soon, however, scholarships were withdrawn from Jewish pupils and my parents struggled to raise the fees for me to continue my education.

Discrimination against Jews increased further and further after 1933. Soon Jews were no longer allowed to attend concerts, visit theatres or use public libraries. The use of public sports facilities was restricted more and more. The Jewish Swimming Club, to which I belonged, moved from one indoor pool to another and was eventually forbidden the use of any indoor pool in Berlin. After this the club held weekly outdoor swimming sessions from April to October, at times in near freezing conditions, in the Halensee, a lake in the western suburbs of Berlin and the only stretch of water the club was still allowed to use.

My parents and I were active members of the *Reformgemeinde* (Reform Congregation) in Johannisstrasse and attended the synagogue services there. For many years I attended their weekly religious instruction and Hebrew classes. The Community also had very active and thriving youth groups. Many cultural, social and welfare activities were also arranged by the congregation. There was a very close relationship between members of the congregation and also between them and the clergy. As almost all others the synagogue was burnt down on 9/10 November 1938.

In 1935, after many Jewish pupils had to leave their former schools, the *Reformgemeinde* opened the *Joseph Lehmann Schule*, a private elementary school named after one of their fairly recently deceased Rabbis, in a former Jewish Lodge building, located at the back of Joachimstaler Strasse 13.

As part of the *Jewish Winterhilfe* (Jewish Winter Relief) the *Reformgemeinde* organised Sunday lunches to be served at the *Joseph Lehmann Schule* during the winter months. These were cooked by volunteers, assisted by members of the youth groups, in the kitchens in the cellar of the school, and served in the beautiful gymnasium on the ground floor, which had formerly been a large assembly hall of the Lodge and, in post-war times, became the orthodox synagogue of the Jewish Community of Berlin.

In April 1937 the "*Mitteilungsblatt der Juedischen Reformgemeinde zu Berlin*" (Journal of the Jewish Reform Congregation of Berlin) reported:

"This year again the serving of meals was arranged in such a way that not a single paid help was required. All the arrangements, kitchen duties, supervision, setting out of rooms, serving of meals, cloakroom duties, as well as all preparations and the cooking of the meals were done entirely by volunteers. Altogether there were about 100 volunteers, 1-2 men, 10 women and 15 juniors took regular turns. We were fortunate that, at the request of the Jewish Winterhilfe (Jewish Winter Relief), we were able to increase the number of lunches by 30 - 40 compared with last year. Altogether about 4000 meals were served on 24 Sundays."

I was one of the regular helpers.

The *Aula*, the school assembly hall, on the upper floor of the school was used as a synagogue, where I attended Friday evening services. The Reform Synagogue annually held a communal "*Einsegnung*", Bar - Bat Mitzvah for all boys and girls of the relevant age. Weekly preparation classes were held in the school. They were taken by the Rabbi, who was to officiate at the ceremony, so that a further close contact developed between Rabbi and pupils. I, together with some twenty other teenagers, attended the classes during 1936/37.

The communal service took place in the Synagogue in Johannisstrasse. It was, for the most part, conducted by the Bar-Bat Mitzvah boys and girls themselves, every child participating and contributing in some way or other.

On 28th March 1937, at my Bat Mitzvah, I stood on the dais of the Synagogue and gave a small speech on the theme 'Love thy neighbour as thyself' as maxim of the Jewish religion".

My father had for many years been a volunteer of the *Juedisches Wohlfahrt und Jugendamt*, the Jewish Welfare Board of Berlin. I joined the *Jugendpflege* (Youth Welfare Work), the junior branch at Auguststrasse 17 as a volunteer. Under the supervision of some older members, youngsters helped in many ways. Amongst other things they provided a shopping and friendly visiting service for lonely and house bound people. There were many older people living on their own, whose children and grandchildren had emigrated and who welcomed the company of a youngster. The *Jugendpflege* (Youth Welfare Work) also ran Youth clubs, arranged communal celebrations of the Jewish Festivals and had a first class lending library (Jews no longer being allowed to use public libraries). I eventually took charge of looking after the library until its dissolution was ordered by the Nazi regime at the end of 1938.

In spite of all the problems life had been very happy. The Ephraims and Koenigs were very close knit families. I saw my grandparents almost daily on my way home from school. Grandma Johanna was, after a fall, an invalid for many years and practically bedridden. Grandpa looked after her, lifting her in and out of bed, dressing her, as well as doing the housework and cooking. He was an excellent cook and I remembers the cucumbers and gherkins he used to pickle at the end of the summer. Grandma must have suffered from osteoporosis as lifting her out of bed one morning in 1937 one of her thigh bones broke. She was admitted to a hospital on the outskirts of Berlin, where she died suddenly two days later at the age of around 79 years. She was cremated and her ashes were interred on a cemetery in Reinickendorf. Some time after her death Grandpa Albert gave up the apartment in Gartenstrasse and moved into a small basement flat in Bergstrasse 34, just around the corner from the shops of my parents and also his son Max.

I often called in to see uncle and aunt Max and Trude Koenig, brother and sister-in-law of my mother, who had a saddler's workshop a few doors away. They also sold and delivered coal briquettes. I sometimes helped to load these briquettes, which were sold by numbers, packed into wooden back packs, which Max then fastened to his back and delivered. Max and Trude had a paddle boat which they kept in a boathouse on the out outskirts of Berlin near *Koenigswusterhausen*.

Occasionally I spent Sundays with them canoeing on the river and lakes there, or even spent odd weekends with them in their tent in a wood by the river. Camping was very primitive then. There were no facilities and getting washed in the morning meant getting into the river. People must have been very hardy.

I also spent a few holidays with my mother's eldest brother Albert Koenig and his wife Olga. Albert had a small farm in Schoenermark, a small village near Gransee, some way north of Berlin, where

he kept sheep, goats and also geese, ducks and chickens. There were also vegetable beds and fruit trees. I loved helping to look after the animals in the fields and also in the kitchen, where Tante Olga was busy preserving the fresh produce for the winter. Fruit was bottled, but vegetables and some surplus meat were put into tins and taken to a canning factory in the village, where the contents were sterilised and the tins then sealed.

Very many happy hours at week-ends were spent with Tante Betty Ephraim, sister of my father. During the summer female family members and friends met one afternoon a week in one of the numerous garden cafés on the lovely outskirts of Berlin. The family, of course, always were together on all birthdays and holidays.

Most of my summer holidays I spent in Frankfurt an der Oder with my aunt and uncle, Anna and Fritz Schenk, and cousins Brigitte (Gitta), who was only a few months younger, and Christa, eleven years my junior. They were happy times, many warm summer days were spent on one of the swimming establishment on the banks of the Oder and swimming in the river. The Schenk and Ephraims usually spent Easter together usually in Frankfurt. On Easter Saturday Easter eggs were prepared for the traditional Easter eggs hunt on Sunday morning. After eggs were hard boiled they were decorated with colours or wrapped in coloured picture transfer paper. If the weather was fine they, together with small chocolate eggs and very small sugar ones nestling in shredded green tissue paper nests, were hidden amongst the grass on the meadows by the river Oder, very exciting. As we got older Gitta and I also went for bicycle rides around the countryside.

Some other short holidays were spent with uncle Paul Ephraim, my father's brother, and Lotte Ephraim in Brandenburg an der Havel, where Paul was the General Manager of a big colour printing factory (*Berlin-Neuroder Kunstanstalten*) which, amongst many other things, produced beautiful coloured children's picture books. It was a great thrill, as I was allowed to roam around the many departments of the factory watching these being produced and there was always a plentiful supply of misprints. I was also allowed to visit the offices and "use" the typewriters and especially remember the early adding machines in the offices.

School days were very happy. I loved school and was eventually the only remaining Jewish pupil in school, the few other Jewish girls at the school having emigrated. I, however, never encountered any anti-Semitism or antagonism and was fully accepted by teachers and fellow pupils, most of whom had gradually joined, or for family reasons been forced to join, the Hitler Youth.

In March 1938 Thea gained her "*Zeugnis der mittleren Reife*", the equivalent of the former English Matriculation or the "O" level School Certificate. I stayed on at school with a view of taken "*Abitur*" (Higher School Certificate), which, under normal circumstances, would have given me the qualifications to enter university.

On the morning of the 10th November 1938 (*Kristallnacht*) or perhaps the following day, I was tactfully approached by my form teacher and informed that the Headmaster had received instructions to expel me from school. A letter to that effect to my father was in the post. The teacher felt that she was unable to let me go home without telling me personally of this fact and how very much she regretted that this had been forced upon them, probably a very brave thing for the teacher to do at that time. The short letter addressed to my father arrived the next morning:

"On the instruction of my superior authority I ask you herewith to withdraw your daughter Thea from the Luisenschule".

My final School Report gave the reason for leaving school as "*um einen Beruf zu ergreifen*" (in order to take up employment), which was farcical, as employment by that time was no longer open to Jews.

During "*Reichskristallnacht*" my parents' shop had been daubed with "Jew" painted all over the shutters. My father went into hiding for a few days, but luckily nobody came to arrest him.

Uncle Paul Ephraim had been arrested in Brandenburg and taken to the concentration camp Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg. He was released on the condition that he would emigrate immediately and sometime in December managed to leave for London.

To help to keep me occupied I went to stay with aunt Betty Ephraim. Betty, a first class dressmaker, was extremely busy at the time producing wardrobes for her many customers in preparation for their emigration. I was skilfully instructed in some of the simpler dressmaking tasks, such as hemming skirts, dresses and sleeves etc. and so helped with the finishing of the garments. It was certainly a useful, though very short apprenticeship.

My mother and I always carried a document that we were members of the Jewish Community of Berlin to prevent my father being arrested for "Rassenschande" (association with so-called "Ary-ans").

After the closing of my parent's shop and my expulsion from school, emigration for the family became imperative. I was very unwilling to try and leave Germany without my parents, but after careful discussion it was thought that this may only be the first step and might lead to my parents being able to follow. Frantic letters were written all over the world to try to find a job somewhere as a domestic servant, as these were the only positions for which work permits were still issued. I was very lucky when a letter finally arrived that I had been accepted by the Jewish Refugee Committee in Leeds, England, where a family offered me a home not as a domestic, but as a member of their family. Being not yet 16 years of age she could enter Britain without a work permit.

Once I knew I would be going to England frantic preparations for this got into full swing. Clothes were prepared, I put some of my school lessons to good use by making myself blouses from odd pieces of materials, patterns of fabrics given by a relative, who had been a commercial traveller in materials. A wooden crate was packed with clothes, books and my stamp collection to be sent ahead. However, the custom officers examining the crate before it was sealed at the railway depot removed the stamps collection as an item of value not allowed to be taken out of Germany.

On the early morning of the 16th January 1939 I, aged fifteen year, joined a *Kindertransport* (Children's transport), on the first stage of my way to start a new life in England leaving behind my parents, family, home and Germany.