



Our Family

by

Heinz and Thea Ruth Skyte, née Ephraim

THEA'S STORY: POSTWAR YEARS 2

Shortly after the end of the war came the wonderful news that my parents had survived. They were still at their old address in Gartenstrasse in Berlin. As all Jews Martha and Alfred had a very hard time but at least they were alive. Alfred as all Jews had to wear the yellow Star of David. As a Jewish household they held ration cards marked with a big "J" or the word "Jude"(Jew) written all over them and five of the eight fields stamped "ungültig" (invalid). Shopping hours for Jews were restricted to one hour from 4 - 5 o'clock in the afternoon. Apart from one brother and his wife, Martha's non-Jewish family tried to support them and helped, whenever possible, by bringing extra vegetables.

Tante Betty, my father's sister, however, was not so lucky and, as we later learned, was finally deported on 3 March 1943 on the 33rd transport from Berlin to Auschwitz. As she was not "admitted" there, i.e her name does not appear on the registers, we know her fate.

Had my mother been able to leave Germany at the time she got her visa in August 1939, it is almost certain, that my father would not have survived. From 1941 onwards Jews started being deported from Berlin, but partners of mixed marriages were for some time excluded from deportation. Great pressure was put on the non-Jewish partners to separate and apply for divorce. Any such action was a certain death sentence for the Jewish partners. My mother, a Protestant by birth, kept steadfastly to her Jewish faith, which she had adopted before her marriage in 1921. On 27 February 1943 the so-called "Fabrikaktion" took place in Berlin. Most Jews then still remaining in Berlin, practically all doing forced labour in armament factories, were collected from their places of work, and deported to Auschwitz. For some reason or other partners of mixed marriages, my father amongst them, were, however, taken to a collection camp set up at Rosenstrasse 2/4, formerly one of the administration buildings of the Social Services of the Jewish Community of Berlin. Spontaneous demonstrations started the following morning, when wives had discovered their husbands whereabouts. Several hundred wives, including my mother, constantly protested outside for over a week, shouting "Gebt unsere Männer frei!" (Release our husbands), until the men were finally released. My father was released on 8th March 1943. These demonstrations by the so-called "Aryan" partners of mixed marriages extending for over a week must rank as one of the few public acts of resistance against the Nazis in Germany, which moreover appears to have been successful, in that it achieved the release of most of those arrested.

The question if we should go back to Germany posed a terrible dilemma though, after careful consideration regarding the past, we felt unable to face the future there. The next thing to be considered

was to try and bring my parents to England. After the end of the war Germany had also been divided into four zones, each of the Allies, Britain, France, USA and Russia, controlling one of these. Berlin in the very centre of the Russian controlled part of Germany was equally divided. My parents lived in the Russian sector of the city. In 1946 my father and later also my mother were recognised as "Opfer des Faschismus" (Victims of Fascism).

As such they were entitled to certain advantages and some compensation. They were given workshop premises in Lothringerstrasse 80, later Wilhelm Pieckstrasse 62 and the machines of a similar trade to that they had carried out before the Nazis forcefully closed the business in November 1938. Some time after the closure my parents had taken their own machines to Frankfurt an der Oder and carefully buried them in the garden belonging to the Schenks, my mother's sister and brother-in-law, hoping to retrieve them after the end of the Hitler regime thus enabling them to restart their workshop. This part of Frankfurt was situated east of the river Oder, which became part of Poland after the war, the Oder being the new frontier. This meant that they were unable to retrieve the buried machinery from there. Owing to having been a very active member of the NSDAP (the Nazi Party) and holding some superior position in the Party the former owner of the premises had been dispossessed of his business, which was now allocated to my parents. They were also given a comfortable apartment on the second floor in the same house and started to try and rebuild their lives. The question of them coming to England was still open and in 1948 my father came to England to visit us and possibly to explore the position further. My parents did not wish to have to rely on us for support and would have wanted to set up some sort of a business here. This, however, proved impossible and they decided to remain in Germany and extend their business there. They took a second shop in the same house in which they again set up a retail linen and haberdashery business.

Soon political problems developed when the Russians tried to bring the whole of Berlin under Russian control and closed the borders between East and West Germany. The western sectors of Berlin were now completely isolated and there was a terrible shortage of food, coal etc. in those parts. The western Allies set up the "Luftbruecke" (Air bridge) in 1949, planes flying day and night bringing urgent supplies from the west to Berlin. On the return journey the planes took passengers to the West, mostly East Germans, who were fleeing the communist regime to resettle in the more prosperous West Germany. On one of these flights my parents flew to West Germany and from there by cargo boat from Hamburg to Hull in England to visit us in the summer of 1949.

When my mother suffered a stroke in the autumn of 1950 I, with six months old Peter, flew to Germany to be with her. The flight went to Hamburg and from there to a Royal Air Force base in Berlin. By the time we got there my mother had partly recovered and was again able to carry out some of her business tasks. She employed her sister-in-law to help in the household.

Berlin was at that time still a very dilapidated city after the aftermath of the war. Ruins of bombed buildings were still everywhere and large hills had appeared in various areas, where rubble from bomb sites was stored. The difference between the western and eastern sectors of Berlin was already tremendous. Going from one sector of Berlin to the other posed little problem at that time, only identity cards or, in my case, passports had to be shown at the sector crossings, however, the sectors had different currency: East- and Westmark. The black market was rife. Although there was an official rate of exchange men stood at practically all sector crossings exchanging fairly openly one West Mark to four East Marks. Beautiful cut glass utensils and china from Czechoslovakia could be bought very cheaply indeed in some new small department stores established on the Alexanderplatz in the eastern sector, by people with access to West German currency. Food Ration Cards were also fairly widely sold in house corridors etc. Certain essentials though were in very short supply or completely unobtainable in the "East". My father managed to obtain many articles by visiting a wholesale warehouse in the western sector only a short walk away and thus stocking

his shop with many articles such as sewing cottons and much else. I helped with these purchases, pricing the goods and stocking the shelves, as well as doing some of the work on the machines in the workshop, as I had done before leaving Berlin in 1939.

West Berlin in comparison appeared much more prosperous. Shops were much better stocked and even many goods not yet available in Britain could be seen. On the once very elegant and beautiful Kurfürstendamm in the district of Charlottenburg some shop fronts had been rebuilt, whilst the back of the street and side streets lay still partly in ruins. The famous pre-war KDW "Kaufhaus des Westens" (Department store of the West), one the best known and elegant in Berlin, had survived and in the café "Bohnenkaffee" (real coffee from coffee beans), though it was very expensive, was served, to the great delight of Tante Anna with whom I went there, compared to the "Ersatz" (substitute) available in East Berlin.