



Biography of Frank A. Harris, Fürth

(7.12.1922 in Fürth - 22.2.2017 in Ossining, NY, USA)



Franz Hess and his sister Bella in 1926/27

Life until 1938

Frank A. Harris was born as Franz Siegmund Hess in the Franconian town of Fürth on December 7th, 1922, the second child for his parents Martha and Jacob. Initially his mother was reluctant to share the happy news that she was pregnant again with her spouse, but ultimately she could no longer hide it. He reacted by saying: *So ein Blödsinn! Da denken die Leut', ich hab' nichts Besseres zu tun!* (Such a nonsense! People will think I have nothing better to do!). Thanks to his parents' *Blödsinn* Frank is around now for more than eight decades.

His mother came from a fairly well-to-do family in Nuremberg, while his father came from a rather poor family, having lost his parents at a very early age. Jacob was forced to work even before completing school in order to support his sister and younger brother. Before the Nazis

came to power, he owned a toy business, having worked his way up from apprentice to become the co-owner.

During World War I Jacob served in the German army, being decorated for bravery. For this reason he as so many decent, intelligent Jews did not heed early warnings to leave Germany even before the Nuremberg Laws against Jews were passed in 1935 and prior to *Kristallnacht*.



Class picture from elementary school, Franz Hess 2nd from left, front row (with folded arms)

After *Volksschule* (elementary school), Franz attended *Realschule* (public high school) until 1936. More and more, Jews were mistreated there by fellow students at the instigation of their Nazi teachers, who spurred them on, never on a one-to-one basis, but rather they were exposed to mass beatings by a bunch of cowards. In 1936 he and the other Jewish boys were transferred to *Jüdische Realschule* (Jewish high school). By Frank's own account, much of their later success is attributable to the influence of their teachers, to the friendships that they developed, and to the values that were instilled in them during this period.



Franz (left front) playing *Völkerball* with his classmates of *Jüdische Realschule*

Kristallnacht

November 9th, 1938, the Hess family expected some kind of action by the Nazis after the assassination of the German diplomat von Rath in Paris. 3:00 AM - A pounding on the door of their home - some SA-brownshirts forced their way into the apartment. Some were well known to the Hesses, one being Jacob's comrade in arms from World War I, another the owner of a delicatessen store whose business mushroomed because of his Jewish clientele. They screamed, they hollered, they cursed while the family quickly dressed and was rushed out of the house to a square. In this so-called *spontaneous action*, all the Jews were assembled, many beaten up, some thrown down the stairs, others' homes were demolished. The Nazi thugs inflicted injuries and death to people, old and young, even the sick. Franz and his family saw the red sky and realized that the synagogues were aflame. They were located in *Schulhof*, a courtyard, the center of many Jewish activities, religious and otherwise, and a place where local Jews had worshipped for hundreds of years. The head of the congregation, Rabbi Dr. Behrens, was singled out for special abuse, but as Frank witnessed, that night truly this 4 ft. 10" man grew into a giant of moral strength and dignity.

The Jews were marched through town in total darkness to the yelling, screaming, and heckling of the population. Finally, they were herded in the *Berolzheimerianum*, a huge auditorium, and lectured on the evils of Judaism and the purity of the Aryan race. After hours of humiliation all females were released, followed by all boys under 16 including Franz Hess

who missed further detention and concentration camp by less than one month. In a courageous effort to learn the whereabouts of their fathers, Franz and his little friend Eva visited the *Gestapo* headquarters. They found out that they were imprisoned in the jail reserved for major criminals at the Palace of Justice in Nuremberg, ironically the very court where justice prevailed after the war in the trial of Göring, Streicher, and other Nazi gangsters.

Jacob Hess along with all the men was taken to the infamous Dachau concentration camp, suffering both physical and psychological abuse. In the meantime, to gain his freedom, his wife Martha was *invited* to visit a Mr. Kandel, whose ultimatum forced her to turn over the family's business and car for a fee of 20 Marks, then about \$ 10.00. Any reluctance on her part, she was told, would mean her husband's certain death. On December 15th the Hesses got a phone call that Jacob was released - but he was a broken man when he returned from the camp. All of a sudden, not only his citizenship but his livelihood - everything he believed in was taken from him.

Kindertransport: The Netherlands and England

After these traumatic experiences there was only one aim left for the Hesses: To leave Germany as soon as possible. Before doing so, Franz took an apprenticeship in cooking and baking in Munich in order to prepare him for a worthwhile profession since the Jewish school in Fürth was permanently closed. He departed in the middle of the night on March 9th, 1939, with a children's transport headed for Holland. His father took him to the railroad station alone because his mother was so upset she could not go. As the train pulled out the children saw their parents standing on the platform and waving goodbye - many of them for the last time ever.

Once he and the other children arrived in Holland they were interned, the Dutch considering them to be Germans rather than refugees. They were held first in a camp outside of Rotterdam and then in a monastery run by Catholic nuns in that harbor city.

Franz had a cousin who lived in Holland. He was about ten years his senior and got him out of the monastery. He lived with him until his parents were able to get out of Germany in July of 1939. They went to England but his entry visa for the UK had expired. He was told that he would be sent back to Germany when he arrived there, so his cousin bribed the captain of a ship and the boy sailed from Holland to Dover. The crossing of the Channel was extremely rough. True to his word, upon the ship's arrival in England the captain took him by the hand, put a navy cap on his head and put him on a train to his parents in London. From there the

Hesses moved to a town called West Bronwich in Staffordshire where Jacob had a business friend, and earned a modest living by making and selling toys from his basement home.

In September 1939, Germany invaded Poland and World War II broke out. The British government immediately interned many of the Germans living in England, including Franz and his father. They were no longer considered Jewish refugees but Germans, and consequently interned with Nazis, who had been arrested. Meanwhile the family had learned of the quota system that allowed a certain number of Jews to travel to the United States. When an aunt in the U.S.A. agreed to sponsor the family's immigration, Jacob and Martha decided to go.

While being in the internment camp, a racetrack in London, a friend tipped Franz off that soon a transport would be leaving to take all of the young boys to Australia. He and his father had been separated - his sister and mother had not been interned - and he was afraid that he also would be shipped off to Australia. So he slipped away and went to the camp where his father was being held. Later they were moved again, this time to an installation in Hoyden near Liverpool. There they waited until their quota number came up. Before their departure they were taken by guards to the American consulate in London, and a few weeks later to a hotel in Liverpool, where they stayed one night. That night the hotel was bombed but father and son made it, and got on the *S.S. Samaria* the next day along with Franz' mother and sister. The ship traveled in a convoy across the Atlantic, guarded by destroyers on the lookout for German submarines. It had a run-in with a mine but luckily it was equipped with a device which caught the mine before exploding.

In the USA

The British convoy arrived on Rosh Hashanah (October 2nd) 1940 in New York City, just in time for the Hesses to attend services, to thank God for the family's narrow escape. To their dismay, they could not enter Temple *Beth Hillel*, a synagogue founded by many of the Jewish refugees who had come from Fürth as well as the neighboring city of Nuremberg and Munich, because they had not purchased tickets. Luckily Eric, the son of the former Nuremberg Rabbi Dr. Heilbronn, came to their rescue and provided safe passage into the synagogue.

In New York Franz attended high school. Then he entered a hotel management institute for vocational training. In 1942 his father died, so he became the head of the family at the ripe age of 20, and was exempt from military service.

WW2

In 1943 Franz joined the U.S. Army voluntarily and received basic training at Fort Bragg, N.C., where he also went to cooks and bakers school. From Fort Bragg, he was sent to Fort Patrick Henry in Baltimore, where he became a U.S. citizen and had his name legally changed. He was then shipped to northern Africa and found himself in Casablanca and consequently in Oran. The soldiers went in boxcars, they called *forty and eights*, referring to the numbers on them indicating they could accommodate 40 men and eight horses.



Frank in the Army, 1943

From Oran they went to Italy where Frank was in a replacement depot in Naples when he received a letter from his old friend Pauli Harris telling him that Eric Heilbronn had been killed in action at Monte Casino, a monastery that gave its name to the battle that raged there for more than five months. Initially being with military intelligence, Eric was put in the infantry after returning from his father's funeral, sent overseas and killed the first day in combat. Basically his father's death was his death.



Frank at the grave of his friend Eric Heilbronn near Monte Casino, Italy.

Soon thereafter, Frank was able to travel to the battle site. By the time he got to Monte Casino, his friend Pauli Harris was also killed. He looked for the graves, and the first one he

came across was Eric's. After the war, Frank made sure that his friends' bodies were returned to the States where they are now buried in Beth Hillel Cemetery in Oradell, N.J.

He himself was assigned to the 2759th Combat Engineers whose mess sergeant he became in 1944. The company first went to Livorno, near Pisa, and then into southern France. They arrived in Arles on Christmas Eve in 1944 and made their way through France into Alsace-Lorraine and then into Germany. In April 1945, the unit eventually found itself in the town of Marktheidenfeld, approximately 30 miles from Frank's hometown of Fürth. The company commander, who knew where he came from, gave him his Jeep and his driver with the remark: *I'll let you go, but don't do anything you would regret for the rest of your life.*



April 1945 near Fürth: A truck was hit on the road and is burning pretty badly.

So Frank and the commander's driver set off for Fürth. As they got there, they saw an American lieutenant, and stopped to ask if the town had been taken. He said: *No, you can go three more blocks and you'll meet Assault Company A.* Frank went four blocks because he wanted to have the personal satisfaction to be the first American soldier to get into Fürth. However, the fighting was going on and the driver was less enthusiastic about that dash. He said to Frank: *Let's get the hell out of here! You might have a reason you want to get in there, but I don't.* They returned to the company's headquarters and on Thanksgiving Day, 1945, Frank was back home, exactly two years after he had shipped out to North Africa.

Professional Career since 1945

Frank returned to the U.S. with skills that were readily transferable to the job market. He became cook at a midtown N.Y.C. hotel, then Garde-Manger at the famous Waldorf Astoria, and eventually chef at the Navy Officers' Club in Bethesda, Maryland. Throughout these years he continued his education at night, attending college courses in hotel and food management, nutrition, etc. In 1963 he was appointed Cafeteria Manager of Sperry Gyroscope in Long Island.

In 1967 he was called upon to head the Food Services Department of the Norwalk Public Schools in Connecticut and gained early recognition as a leader in school food service. He proposed and succeeded in 1973 in building the first Central Kitchen in the State of Connecticut and the northeast United States.

Frank also became increasingly active in the Connecticut School Food Service Association (C.S.F.S.A.). He served as Chairman of the following committees: Nominating, Scholarship, Constitution and By-Laws, Directors and Supervisors, Public Relations, Convention, President-Elect and President. However, his greatest success was in the area of legislation, serving as Legislative Chairman for a total of fifteen years.

His active participation on a state level gained him great recognition throughout the country as a leader and proponent of Child Nutrition Programs. He has attended ten American School Food Service Association (A.S.F.S.A.) Conventions and twenty Legislative Conferences along with industry seminars, regional conferences, etc.

His Legislative Reports following each Conference are informative and shared throughout Connecticut by Food Service Directors, superintendents, mayors, etc. He has found wide recognition with his billboard exhibits, promoting Child Nutrition Programs, Truck-naming Contests with student participation, Special Menus, wide publicity in the American School Food Service Journal, Institution and Food Management magazines, etc. He also received a special award by Market Forge and is listed in Who's Who Business Officials and International Who's Who.

Frank is a member of ASBO (Association of School Business Organizations), CASBO (Connecticut Association of School Business Organizations). He serves as President, Vice President and member of Boards of Directors with numerous charitable organizations (see below). Frank initiated Grandparents' Day in Norwalk in 1977 at one school with 65 participants. By 1987 Grandparents' Day had become a state-wide Day of Recognition for all grandparents with Proclamations by the Governor of Connecticut and the mayor of his city. Norwalk's participation has grown to better than 3,000 by 1997.

In 1990 Frank was presented with the Thomas P. O'Hearn Award, the highest national legislative prize awarded yearly by A.S.F.S.A. to the one person that has made outstanding contributions to legislation at the state and national level.

In recognition of all his accomplishments, he was made an Honorary Citizen of Norwalk in 1991, and was named Northeast Director of the Year in 1998. The United States flag was flown in Frank's honor over the U.S. Capitol on February 21, 2002.

A universal Free Lunch Program throughout the U.S. is Frank's ultimate goal. He is acknowledged by his peers as the profession's foremost advocate for Universal Feeding.

As a first step, Frank was instrumental in working with Congressman Christopher Shays to introduce in 2004 *The School Nutrition Enhancement Act*, which calls for the elimination of the Reduced-price category in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, qualifying more students to participate nationwide in these programs.

While Frank has qualified for a well-deserved retirement, effective February 28, 2006, he is determined to stay active in SNACT (School Nutrition Association of Connecticut) until he realizes his dream of feeding every child in every school throughout the United States following his credo: *The children are the future of our country, of every country. To be the nation we want to be, it starts with doing what's right for the children.*

On his retirement he was honored again in many ways, such as the proclamation of a Frank A. Harris Day on January 14, 2006, by Norwalk's mayor Richard A. Moccia.

Nürnberg-Fürth Survivors Group and Blue Card, Inc.

In 1977, at the instigation of Lee Daniel-Fichtelberger, a longtime friend from Fürth and former classmate, Frank began contacting those Jewish citizens of Fürth and Nuremberg who had survived the Holocaust. Starting with two individuals known to him, he recruited from one and all names and addresses of other former family, friends and classmates. So the numbers began to grow. The first reunion titled *Grand Reunion* took place at Grossinger's in July, 1978, attended by better than 200 people from around the world. To Frank, of all eight reunions to date, the first was the most emotional one, meeting after 30 - 40 years for the first time again.

The success of the first reunion encouraged him to publish a yearly *Nürnberg-Fürth Newsletter* since 1977, realizing the importance of including the follow up generations into the project, in spite of advice by some, that the younger generations are not sufficiently interested in the history of their families. This assumption has been proven wrong by Frank and his Second Generation Committee, who was involved in the seven follow up reunions and the publication

of the newsletter. From 60 - 80 in 1977, today the number of newsletter recipients exceeds 1,200 of five generations on all five continents. With the co-operation of all generations the people from Nuremberg and Fürth have succeeded like no other group from a German city in reuniting Jewish families from around the world. But in all his activities related to the common history of *his people*, Frank draws a clear cut line between their traditions and bonds and the land of their origin, in his own words: *I do not believe that our roots still rest in Germany. Those, who were not killed were driven out - scattered around the globe. Personally I can never return to my birth country with the excuse to let bygone be bygone. Surely young Germans cannot be made responsible for the crimes committed by their parents and grandparents. But as long as I am alive - so are Germans of my generation responsible for the crimes of the Nazi regime.*

Besides his continuing activities with the *Nürnberg-Fürth Survivors Group* - editing the annual newsletter with participation of the 2nd and 3rd generation and the reunions at regular three years intervals - Frank also is serving in various capacities Blue Card, Inc., a charitable organization for needy Holocaust survivors, for over 40 years now. His achievements had been acknowledged on November 2, 2005, in a celebration which took place during Blue Card's annual benefit concert at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City.

Private Life and Family

Frank and his wife Beri are together now for 33 years in a second marriage for both of them. Frank has one son and two grandchildren. Beri has one daughter, one son and three grandchildren.

Perspectives

What he has learned from the past and is expecting from the future, Frank resumes as follows: *We live in the present while we learn from the past and dream of the future. The strongest lesson I have learned is that we must never allow our neighbors to be driven to their deaths, if only through our silence. We must speak out against injustices wherever they occur. We must learn to judge people not by the color of their skin, their religious affiliation, or their material wealth, but by their contribution, small or large, to a better world and a greater understanding among all people.*

Human beings must at long last become human and humane to endure.

Mankind needs to build bridges, not walls.

Bridges between man and man.

Bridges between faith and faith.

Bridges between race and race.

Bridges between nation and nation.

And finally, bridges between the creature and his creator, the father of us all.



Frank in Nuremberg, 2013
(photo: Susanne Rieger)

The last Nuremberg-Fürth Reunion took place in Ellenville (NY) June 29 to July 1, 2012. On July 17, 2013 Frank was bestowed with the *Goldenes Kleeblatt* (Golden Cloverleaf) by his birthplace Fürth for his achievements. He deceased on February 22, 2017.

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All photos but the last were kindly provided by Frank A. Harris.

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