

Rosi Lisbeth Mosbacher Baczewski

(1916 - 2009)

by Judy Vasos Baczewski



Rosi in the 1940s and in 2005
(photo: private)

I wish my mother-in-law Rosi were here to help me write the story of her life. Fortunately, she left behind many stories, letters, photos and documents to help me. Though it has been three years since her death, her letters to me and the stories she told me remain vivid in my mind.

Rosi, born on July 14, 1916, in Nuremberg (Germany) spent the first 23 years of her life in her birthplace, in the close-knit Orthodox Jewish world of her parents, Hugo and Clementine (Clemmy) Mosbacher, and an extended family who considered the Mosbacher home a center for family activities. Relatives joined them for dinner on many occasions and Rosi remembered having to *kiss so many relatives good night*. She was an only child and close to her many aunts, uncles and cousins. She felt safe and well cared for, especially by her father with whom she had a special connection. Everyone loved her father, she said, for his kindness,

willingness to listen, and wonderful sense of humor. She often remarked that he could be funny without being cruel. She described her parents as *such good people ... and utterly kind*.

Her father was born in Fürth but moved to Nuremberg when he married Clemy in 1911. He was a partner in an old metal firm and was very friendly, outgoing, and at home in Nuremberg. Clemy, on the other hand, was less at ease and a bit shy, having been raised in the small town of Mürzzuschlag in Austria.



Clemy with Rosi in Graz (Austria), 1918
(photo: private)

Despite the love and safety of her family and even before Hitler came to power, Rosi was exposed to anti-Semitism. She walked to school over the *Kettensteg*, a suspended footbridge which she described as *wobbly and scary*. Waiting for her by the bridge on most days was a Gentile boy who yelled *dirty Jew* and spit at her. As an adult, she wondered why she hadn't changed her route to school and why people, even young people, hated Jews so much.



**Rosi's (2nd from left) last year in school
in *Lyzeum Findelgasse*, 1933**
(photo: private)

Rosi's school years were disrupted by Hitler's ascension to power in 1933. She was 16 or 17 and enrolled in the *Lyzeum Findelgasse*. There were ten other girls in her class, but she was the only Jew. Her friends told her: *If we talk to you, shake your hand or invite you home, our fathers will lose their jobs*. A few days later, Rosi left school, gave private English lessons and *pondered her future*.

She became active in *Kameraden*, a somewhat political Jewish youth group that also

sponsored activities like hiking, camping, and swimming. She made close friends in the group and it must have helped fill the gap left by leaving school. Eventually she took business training courses and worked in a Jewish kindergarten for six months. Then she took a job as a bookkeeper which resulted in her receiving German social security payments some forty years later. Her gift for working with the young led to her next job in a home for difficult children. Later she enrolled in a Jewish teacher training school in Würzburg.



**Rosi (sitting in front row) with friends in
Jewish youth movement *Kameraden***
(photo: private)



Rosi in Würzburg, 1937
(photo: private)

Hugo also was confronted with increasingly violent anti-Semitism in 1933: On July 20, he and about 300 other men in Nuremberg were picked up by SA Storm Troopers and forced to cut grass with their teeth on a sports field. Rosi recalls that even during this time he kept his sense of humor and good nature and frequently said: *Well, at least our heads stay on or At least we still get mail.*

Rosi was at school in Würzburg on November 9, 1938, when her mother phoned to say that Hugo had been arrested during the pogrom against Jews in all parts of Germany that would come to be called *Kristallnacht*. She returned to the family home, a third floor apartment at Hallerstraße 27, bringing a Greek dessert wine as a gift for her mother, *Tante* (aunt) Frieda, and the maid, Lina. A mob had been to the apartment and cut the legs off all the tables and china cabinets. The women were scared and crying. They had been canning rose hip jam when the mob entered, and there was red jam on the carpets, walls, furniture and broken glassware everywhere. Rosi remembered looking at this scene of destruction and vowing never to become attached to material objects.

It was impossible to stay in the apartment that night. They slept at a Jewish Home for the Aged and returned home the next day to clean up. As a further harassment and humiliation, they were given only one garbage bag to hold all their damaged possessions. A neighbor, an

officer in the German army, saw them cleaning and offered to help - a kind and courageous act that left a deep impression on Rosi.

Hugo was taken to Dachau concentration camp outside Munich. Hundreds of other men who had been dragged from their homes or arrested on the streets during *Kristallnacht* were also imprisoned there. He was kept in Dachau for 45 days and released on December 19, 1938. Jews were ordered to pay for the destruction of their homes, businesses and synagogues during *Kristallnacht*. Rosi also remembered having to deliver the family's silverware and other valuables to a municipal office which seized them on behalf of the Reich.

Hugo returned from Dachau to find that the *Adas Israel* Orthodox synagogue on *Essenweinstraße*, the family's congregation for almost 30 years, had been destroyed. He was dismissed from his 27-year job as a junior partner in the metal firm because of a Nazi decree prohibiting Jews from employment.

Kristallnacht marked a major turning point for Jews in Germany. Many of them left Germany for other countries. Rosi had already applied for an American visa three months earlier. Hugo's cousin, Pauline Reubens from Chicago, was her sponsor, promising to provide for Rosi so she would not be a financial burden on the United States. On the affidavit, the reason given by Mrs. Reubens for bringing Rosi to the United States was *the discrimination by the German government against non-Aryans*.

Rosi's teacher training program in Würzburg ended when Nazis closed the school in January 1939. In her later life she was never able to make a career of being a children's social worker partly because the Nazis had twice terminated her schooling. She returned to Nuremberg to live with her parents and *Tante Frieda Röderer née Mosbacher* on *Hallerstraße* and await her quota number for emigration to the United States.



**Frieda, Clemy & Rosi walking
in the environs of Nuremberg**
(photo: private)

On April 1, 1939, the Nazis forced the family to leave their apartment and move to Fürther Straße 16 as subtenants of a Schmitt family. According to the May 17, 1939, census, there were eight people listed in the Mosbacher household: Rosi, her parents, *Tante Frieda*, Lina the maid, and three unrelated Jews. These crowded conditions were an enormous pressure on the family.

The Nazi persecution of the Jews also increased in other ways: Males were forced to add *Israel* and females *Sara* to their names. Jewish passports were each stamped with a large *J*. More and more places and activities - such as schools and jobs - were forbidden to Jews. As the persecution escalated, Jews continued to leave Germany however they could, including, eventually, the Mosbachers.

In June 1939, Rosi was able to leave Nuremberg for England to work as a maid for the Heron family in Welwyn Garden City, Herts, near London. She was 23, young enough to work, and the Herons, a liberal-minded family who took in refugees, offered her a job. War broke out on September 1, 1939, and, with fears of a German attack on London, the Heron family made arrangements for Rosi to seek safety in the home of their relatives in Penzance in the south of England. Rosi stayed in Penzance for several months and returned to the London area in early 1940 to work for the Sudweeks family in Ealing. She took care of the Sudweeks' baby, Anthony. Her plan was to continue working for them until she received her visa for the United States, and then she would go to New York and reunite with her parents who expected to be there soon.

However, conditions in Nuremberg worsened. Hugo and Clemy felt unable to wait any longer for their quota number and visas to the United States. It was widely believed that there would be a German invasion of the west and all exit routes from Germany would be closed. Rosi said it was not like her parents to enter Holland illegally and thought that someone must have talked them into doing it. Hugo wrote in a letter from Amsterdam: *When your house is on fire - you jump*.

With valid passports to leave Germany, they deregistered as residents of Nuremberg. On February 18, 1940, they left for Holland where they intended to stay briefly with family members and make arrangements to sail from Rotterdam to the United States. Neither Rosi nor any other family member knew of Hugo and Clemy's plan until they learned of their arrest at Oldenzaal, a Dutch border town known to be helpful to refugees fleeing persecution. They had crossed the border on foot and without visas and entered Holland illegally. Many Jews from Germany had fled to Holland, a neutral country. The Dutch government was unable to

accommodate all the refugees. Their official policy was to send them back to Germany, but actually they allowed them to stay in Holland under detention.

Hugo and Clemy were separated and detained in Amsterdam, Hugo in a police station and Clemy in a women's shelter. They corresponded with Rosi during their two months of detention. When they were released on April 21, 1940, they booked passage on the *S.S. Veendam* to sail from Rotterdam to the United States on May 11, 1940. The day before their scheduled departure, the German army invaded the Netherlands, took control of the country and canceled all exit visas.

Hugo and Clemy were trapped in Amsterdam. They lived in a room with kitchen privileges in the River District of Amsterdam, a neighborhood where many Jews lived. During their three years in Amsterdam they wrote over one hundred letters to Rosi. The letters were censored by the German authorities so Rosi was never clear what her parents were actually experiencing and feeling. From historical records we know that the Jews in Holland eventually suffered the same restrictions and oppression they had to endure under the Nazis in Germany.

Rosi received her long-awaited immigration visa in London on July 26, 1940. She left from Liverpool and arrived in New York on the *SS Synthia* on August 12, 1940. Hugo and Clemy were very happy to learn she had arrived safely in New York and wrote of their hopes to join her.

She was very much on her own in New York. Her father's cousin, Ludwig Mosbacher (also from Nuremberg), who lived in New York, was the only family member who could help her. Most of her relatives were still trapped in German-occupied countries, and Rosi would not see them again until the end of the war, if ever. She found work, a place to live, and, soon after, while waiting in a cafeteria to meet a date, she met her future husband, Alexander Baczewski, who was also waiting for his date.

Neither date showed up. Rosi and Alexander spent the evening getting to know one another. Alexander was a refugee from Vienna and had been imprisoned in Dachau and Buchenwald after the *Anschluss*. They dated for two years. Alexander, although Jewish, was not observant, but the Orthodox Hugo wrote to Rosi that what mattered was what kind of a man he was, giving his blessing to their marriage. Rosi wanted to wait for her parents' arrival before marrying, but they wrote her to go ahead with their plans without them. They were married in New York on July 26, 1942, with no family members at the wedding; they hired someone to be their witness.

Rosi and Alexander wrote letters to her parents but lost touch in December 1942. Communication became much more difficult after Germany declared war on the United States and mail between those two countries was prohibited. Letters were sent to friends and relatives in neutral countries such as Switzerland who would try to forward them. Moreover, transports from Westerbork, a transit camp north of Amsterdam, to Auschwitz began in July of 1942, and the increased jeopardy probably contributed to the problems with correspondence.

Rosi was pregnant with her first child, Anthony, named for Anthony Sudweeks, the child she had cared for in England in 1940. Hugo and Clemy would never know of Tony's birth in August 1943, nor the birth of their second grandchild, Steven, born in October 1945. In January 1943, Hugo and Clemy were arrested and taken to Westerbork. Two weeks later they were deported to Auschwitz where they were gassed upon arrival on February 3, 1943. Rosi learned that her parents were no longer in Westerbork in early 1943 through Clara Mosbacher, a cousin in Switzerland. She did not learn of their deaths until after the war.

Rosi and Alexander settled in Kew Gardens, Queens, New York, where many other Jewish refugees lived. Emigrated family members came to New York after the war and Rosi was devoted to them. She used to say she was so good to her relatives because she had no parents. The Baczewski home became a center of family activity, much as her parents' home in Nuremberg had been.



Cousin Ruth White, Rosi, Alexander and the Greek judge who officiated at Tony's and my marriage, Oct 3, 1982
(photo: private)

Rosi loved New York, her family and her work as office manager and German translator for *Jordan & Hamburg*, patent attorneys. She was filled with gratitude that she had made it safely to the United States and said she never wanted to return to Germany. When my husband Tony and I visited Germany in 1989, however, she gave us a long list of places she wanted us to visit in Nuremberg: each place she had lived (Maxfeldstraße 16a, her favorite in Großweidenmühlstraße 2 and Hallerstraße 27), *Labenwolf-Lyzeum*



Rosi in Manhattan
(photo: private)

(her first high school), the old castle in whose passageways she and her friends played, and the cemetery in nearby Fürth where Hugo's parents, Sigmund and Karoline Mosbacher, were buried. We visited these sites, took photographs, and tried to imagine Rosi's life in Nuremberg, the center of Nazi rallies and activities, the city where Julius Streicher published his fiercely anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Stürmer*, the city she had been forced to flee.



From Rosi's photo book of the 1930s. Großweidenmühlstraße 2 was her favorite home. She could see Nuremberg's river, the Pegnitz, from her room. She lived there 1927 - 1936

(photo: private)



Hugo & Rosi on the balcony of their Nuremberg apartment in Großweidenmühlstraße 2

(photo: private)

Rosi and Alexander were married for over 40 years and Rosi always said that each year together was better than the last. After his death in January 1983, she took trips to China, Russia, Czechoslovakia, and every year went to a spa in Ixtapan, Mexico, where she befriended a group of women her age, Gentiles originally from Germany. Tony saw her openness to these women as a sign of his mother's ability to recognize that not all Germans were the same.

In 2004, at age 88, she reluctantly retired from her job with *Jordan & Hamburg*. A few years later she left New York where she had lived for 64 years and moved to San Francisco to be near her sons. She moved into the *Rhoda Goldman Center*, a Jewish assisted living center where her cousin, Anna White née Röderer, lived. Her fax machine, typewriter, and computer came with her and she continued to do German translations for *Jordan & Hamburg*. She missed New York a great deal, but was comforted by the company and support of her sons

and daughters-in-law. And she discovered the nearby *Murano* cafe where she enjoyed three of her favorite things: a cup of espresso, a sweet, and a cigarette.



**Rosi in January 2005 shortly after her move
to San Francisco's *Rhoda Goldman Center***
(photo: private)

She lived at the *Rhoda Goldman Center* for five years and died there, peacefully, in her sleep, on December 1, 2009. Tony and I and several other relatives had visited Rosi two days before she died. We brought her two of the over one hundred letters her parents had written her from Amsterdam, letters she had saved for almost 70 years. She beamed when she saw them and said: *It's too bad you never met my parents. They were such good people.* She read the letters to herself in German and then to us in English. At the end of our visit she said: *Don't throw the letters away.* We told her of our plans to have the letters translated and published, and she was pleased.



**From left: Steve, Judy, Rosi, Maureen (Steve's wife) and Tony
on Rosi's 90th birthday at our home in Oakland, California**
(photo: private)

Rosi's wish was to be buried in New York next to Alexander. We made the arrangements she wanted: Her body was sent as *precious cargo* to New York, met by a rabbi at the airport, and taken to the *Vaad* of Queens where the traditional *Taharah* was performed by women of the community. Her body was washed and purified, prayers and psalms were recited, and then she was wrapped in a shroud. The women stayed with her body and continued to say prayers until time for the graveside services. At the cemetery, Rabbi Chaim Schwartz led us through a traditional Jewish burial service. *Jordan & Hamburg* closed for the day and the entire office staff was at the service for Rosi. Her long-time Kew Gardens neighbors were there along with members of her family.



Rosi, Judy and Rosi's cousin, Ruth Schottman, two days before Rosi died
(photo: private)

She lived to be 93. She survived the Nazis, exile and great loss and rebuilt her life in a new country. We miss her and will always admire her courage and her ability to focus on positive things such as the goodness of her parents or the deepening joys of her marriage. She was able to see that not all Germans were alike and much appreciated New York, her job and particularly her family.

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Judy Vasos Baczewski

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