

# Reflections

by

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My mother, Bertha Bohnstedt, was the daughter of a Rabbi, Joseph Norden, last of Hamburg. My father, Werner Bohnstedt, was born a Lutheran, but had become an agnostic. They had known each other since they were children in Dusseldorf; the Orthodox side of her family declared her dead when she married a Gentile. My father was the editor of Soziale Praxis, a journal published in Berlin. We lived in Lichtenrade, a suburb of Berlin. My brother, born Wolfgang Hans, now John W., was born in 1927. I was born in 1930 as Marianne Dorothea, but have since changed my first name to Michal. My sister, Hanna Margareta, was born in January 1936.

I don't remember many unpleasant moments in Germany, caught up as I was in my child's world. But I do remember that my mother used to lock herself in her room with my older brother to talk to him about what was happening in Nazi Germany, and to deprogram him when he came home from school. Unfortunately, she did this while she was breastfeeding my new sister, so to me this was merely a case of being shut out, and I perceived it in this way instead of as a by-product of the Nazi regime.

I do remember that the children across the street used to yell "Dicke, Fatte Nudel" at my pregnant mother, but this may not have had anything to do with anti-Semitism; they may just have been impertinent enough to call a pregnant woman "Big Fat Noodle."

I vaguely remember that some improvements we had made on the lot my parents had purchased were vandalized. And I remember that my mother used to watch my father leave for work, and that he was always followed by a man who had been waiting in a doorway across the street; but I thought that all fathers had an escort on their way to work, and did not realize that this was a Gestapo agent assigned to follow mine.

I remember also that our telephone had to be covered with many pillows when we had company, but again, I thought of this as mere etiquette, not as a means of preventing the sounds in the room from being picked up by a bugged telephone.

My uncle, Albert Norden used to surprise us by coming to stay, often in the middle of the night. He always had some chocolates in his coat pocket for us children; I was hopelessly in love with this dashing, handsome, exciting man who appeared and disappeared without warning. I did not know that he was a hunted member of the Communist Party, that he had once been thrown from a fourth-story window of his office

at the Rote Fahne, the Communist paper which he edited, by Nazi agents. I knew him only as my beloved Uncle Bobbi.

My father began to realize that his position at the magazine was becoming untenable. All publications were coming under stricter control by the Nazis, and he did not have the politically correct leanings. He also found that his name had been removed from the list of registered voters. When he went to vote and found that he was not on the precinct register, he pursued the matter until he came face to face with the Chief Registrar of the Berlin region; this official informed him that all he would have to do to be re-registered would be to divorce the Jewess who was his wife.

My father tried instead to see if it would help to have us all baptized. Pastor Hans Schoenfeld, a family friend, agreed to perform the mass baptism, after which we all went back to our flat and I had my first cake with frosting, green, no less! Needless to say, the authorities were not fooled, and in their eyes my mother was still Jewish and my siblings and I were still Mischlinge. Pastor Schoenfeld, who had agreed to be my Godfather, went on to become a prominent member of the Resistance. He died after the end of the war, having suffered a nervous breakdown once the constant danger was over.

When the Nuremberg Laws were passed in 1935 forbidding the cohabitation of Jews and Gentiles even if they were married, my parents decided to show their defiance of that law by having a third child. When they decided to leave Germany that year and had secured exit permits and passage to Panama, they could not take the risk of requesting such documents for the illegal baby. So my father arranged for a permit to export a small domestic animal. Since her nickname was "Haeschen," or bunny, it was easy enough to impress on my brother and me the necessity of identifying her as such if we were asked at the border what was in the string bag my parents were carrying.

We had our household furnishings packed into a huge crate for shipment to Panama, and we were allowed to take the equivalent of five dollars per person. The building lot had to be abandoned. We made the rounds of relatives, saying our goodbyes. The hardest for me was parting with my grandfather Norden; I can only try to imagine what it was like for him to say goodbye to his daughter and son-in-law and three of his grandchildren. We never saw each other again.

In spite of the sadness at bidding farewell to friends and relatives, I felt great exuberance at the prospect of a trip across the ocean. I could feel that my parents were very tense and seemed to have tears in their eyes all the time, but I was too young to understand fully why this was so. I myself felt some of that tension only on our train trip out of Germany and into Belgium. My brother and I had been instructed to keep still at all cost at the border crossing, and I can remember the stomach-ache I had on the train and especially when the German border guards checked out the four of us and the "small domestic animal." As it happened, it was Whitsunday, and the guards were annoyed because they had to work on a holiday. So they waved us on with a snarl or two, but did not check closely enough to cause any tragic problems. My tummy felt much better once my parents' spirits lifted when we were past the danger. It felt horrible once more when we were on the Danish freighter, the "Annie Johnsen," going through the English Channel from Antwerp out to the Atlantic Ocean, because I was desperately seasick. But once we were out on the open ocean, I felt better and enjoyed the three-week trip. The sailors were extremely kind to us all, and seemed to sense how much we needed tender loving care.

In Panama for the first couple of years, the situation in Germany did not intrude on my consciousness. I was too busy learning Spanish and exploring the jungles with my brother. But beginning in late 1938, we were besieged with refugees, who in some cases walked the several miles in the blazing sun to our house outside Panama City. These people had heard that there was a well-established refugee family there who might be of some help to them. These people had left Germany hastily after the Kristallnacht of Nov. 9, and had practically nothing in the way of personal possessions. One couple with whom my parents felt rapport stayed with us for some time; they had both been judges in Berlin.

I remember that my parents talked a great deal about convincing my grandfather, the Rabbi, to come to us, but he would not leave Germany just when he felt that his congregation needed him the most. His other daughter, Frieda Meinrath, had emigrated to Israel by this time; her husband was killed soon after their arrival by a British plane strafing the streets of Tel Aviv in reprisal for Jewish terrorist activities. She brought up their son Walter, later Jochanan, alone.

His other daughter, Hanna, had left Germany for China under dramatic circumstances. A member of my grandfather's congregation, Josef Hochfeld, had been arrested for resistance activities in Hamburg, and had been sent to a concentration camp. He was told by his captors that he could get out if he could emigrate within a month; by this time most countries were no longer accepting Jewish refugees, so it was an empty promise of hope. But Josef managed to get in touch with his rabbi, and said that he had learned that China was still accepting refugees, but only married couples or families. He asked if he could marry Hanna, whom he had seen at services, but whom he didn't really know; he pointed out that this move would save Hanna from the Nazi horrors as well. My grandfather was willing to consider this match, and my aunt agreed. They were married and my uncle left immediately on the first available vessel to China. My aunt, all of twenty years of age, followed alone shortly, on one of the last ships to leave Hamburg before World War II began.

My grandfather learned that an older woman in his congregation also had a daughter living in Panama. This was Nonie Fenton, who was married to an baker in the American Army in the Panama Canal Zone. My parents became friends with the couple. Sadly, Henry Fenton died soon after that of a kidney disease, but Nonie remained a friend of the family's for many years. For me she was a mother figure as well as a wonderful friend, and until her death in 1983, she was the only non-relative who had known me since I was a child, which made her a special link to my past.

A family who had been friends of ours in Germany came to Panama in 1939. This should have been a happy occasion for us, but even my brother and I were shocked when we first saw the father. He had been youthful when last we had seen him, like our father perhaps in his late thirties; but when we saw him this time, he was an old man, with snow-white hair, all bent over and wrinkled. It was because he had been in a concentration camp for his Socialist labor activities. Seeing this man created an indelible impression on me; and though we were not allowed to listen to his experiences, I determined to find out what could happen to age a man so. He did not live long after this, and his wife and young twin sons made their way to the U.S.

In 1940 my father secured a special scholar's quota number for us to

enter the United States. I was sent to an American school in Panama City to learn English, but this lasted for only a few weeks, because we had to leave Panama in June, instead of as in August, as had been planned. There had been a revolution there, and the new president, in order to "prove" that he was not a Fascist, turned out all the German refugees from Fascism; my father lost his position at the University of Panama overnight. So our departure was precipitous. My father was able to secure passage for us on a Chilean vessel, but our family could not be together for the voyage. My mother and sister were in first class, in one bed; my brother and father were in the hold in bunks; and I was alone in a tourist class cabin with three strangers. But we were so happy to be going to the U.S. that it really didn't matter.

During that spring of 1940 when we were getting to leave Panama, I remember the almost daily litany of countries which had fallen to the Nazis; and I knew that this was bad because my father always reported the news in such a sad voice. And my parents were very upset because now it was much too late for my grandfather to leave Germany, even if he had consented to do so.

On our journey, when we came in sight of the Statue of Liberty, there was great rejoicing, but in short order, the situation became tense again. The Immigration Service wanted to see my father before we could disembark. It seems that because he had been expelled by Arnulfo Arias, the "non-Fascist" president of Panama, the U.S. authorities suspected that he must be Fascist himself. Fortunately my father knew someone in the State Department who vouched for him, and we were allowed to land. I still remember putting my foot on American soil for the first time.

The first few months in the U.S. still seem like an idyllic dream. The tension in our family seemed to ebb, and my brother and I had wonderful days of exploring the Massachusetts countryside. We were living in the house belonging to Walter Kotschnig, the State Department friend, in Northampton, until it was time to go on to Alliance, Ohio, in the fall for my father to begin teaching at Mount Union college. In the meantime, we all reveled in long-forgotten treats such as strawberries, and discovered new wonders such as peanut butter.

Once we were settled in school, life was almost routine, and learning English was not all that hard. But one day when I came

home for lunch in 1941, I took a look at the new Life magazine, which had come that day. I noticed that several pages had been cut out, and somehow I knew that I should not mention this fact to my parents. After school I went to the public library to look at those pages. They contained a condensation of Jean Valtin's book, "Out of the Night," and there were drawings of scenes of horrible torture in a concentration camp. I was possessed by this article, all the more because I knew that I could not tell my parents that I had read it. The pictures haunted me day and night. Shortly after this, I had a bad case of measles, and while I was delirious, I saw the pictures come to life in the leaves of the big maple tree outside my window. I was terrified, and still I remembered that I could not tell my mother what I was seeing. I was not quite eleven years old.

Not long after the measles episode, I had a dream in which a starving old man dressed in rags came to our door; when I opened the door, I realized that the old man was my grandfather. Again, I could not tell my parents, because I knew that they were trying to protect me by keeping me from knowing what was happening in Germany.

From then on, every week when Life magazine arrived, I checked first for missing pages, and then went off to the library. I managed also to see all the movies we were not allowed to attend; I would arrange to stay overnight with a friend, and go off to the movie with her. Most of all I remember "The Moon is Down,"; I can still see the Nazi kicking the old man down the stairs. Of course in my mind this was my grandfather.

Shortly before Christmas 1942, my mother received a telegram from the International Red Cross, stating that her father was going to leave Hamburg, destination unknown. She spent days crying, and since my parents firmly believed that we children should not know what horrors were occurring in the world, we thought that we must have done something terribly bad to make her cry so, and at Christmastime, at that. Finally my father decided that it would be better to tell my brother and me what had happened, and for those few short moments I felt released from all the secrecy that had been crushing me. But my father kept it short, and I did not dare tell him how much I knew about what was going on, and about the ghastly implications of a trip to destination unknown. My father instructed us not to speak of what we knew to my mother. So the silence continued.

My uncle Albert Norden came to stay with us for a while in the early 1940s, along with his new wife Hertha and their baby son Hans. Uncle Bobbi and his Communist comrade Hertha had managed to escape to Paris before the war began; but when the Nazis invaded France, they were incarcerated as enemy aliens because they were German. They were placed in a detention camp with a barbed-wire fence separating the men and women. They used to meet at the fence under cover of darkness and plot their escape: if the camp were ever strafed or bombed, they would run off while the guards were taking cover. And that's just what they did; they then hitchhiked to Marseilles and managed to ship out on a boat headed for Mexico. When they arrived at their destination, the Mexicans would not let them land: they were stateless, with no papers, with Communist affiliations, penniless, Jewish, hardly what the Mexicans considered fit immigrants. After some frantic communications with my parents and the American authorities, it was decided that my parents would sponsor them as American visitors, but only for the duration of the war. So they came to Ohio first, and later moved to New York, where he worked with other left-wingers to plan for the future of a Communist postwar Germany. He later became a member of the East German Politburo in charge of propaganda and later of the agitation committee.

Our family had a few difficulties as enemy aliens during World War II; no exemptions from that status were granted to refugees! We were not allowed to have a car or a short-wave radio, and our neighbors reported that we drew our draperies after dark, so we must be conferring with subversive elements. The neighborhood store never had butter, sugar or meat for our ration stamps, but we were able to get these scarce items at the downtown supermarket without difficulty. The children in school were quite accepting of us until December 8, 1941, the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed, when the U.S. declared war on Japan and Germany. For a few days after that, we were taunted as "Nazis," but that soon subsided. All in all, I think we were treated quite decently by the community, small and provincial as it was.

My parents' plan to protect us from the horrors occurring in Europe fell apart in May of 1945. I had taken my sister, who was nine by this time, to see an "approved" movie, "Our Hearts Were Young and Gay." What an ironic title for what happened. The newsreels before the movie

showed the liberation of the concentration camps by the Allied troops. And no matter how much I had thought I knew about what was going on, I was as unprepared for the incredible scenes as the rest of the world. I got hysterical, and my sister had to take me out of the theatre. It was necessary to explain to my parents why we were home so early, and again there was a short respite from the shroud of secrecy. But mostly they just apologized for having exposed me to this unwittingly.

Throughout my college years I read whatever I could about the Holocaust; then and now I cannot read about it without having nightmares, but I feel a terrible compulsion to read everything I can find, no matter how much it bothers me. I went through the common experience of wondering why I had escaped and survived; and since I had, I must suffer as much as possible by filling my brain with all the horrible details. Seeing "Judgment at Nuremberg," first on Playhouse 90 on TV and then in the movie theatre was one of the worst experiences, followed closely by Andre Schwarz-Bart's "Last of the Just." I still cannot be in a tiled room without remembering that book. I cannot look at a freight train or a boxcar without imagining it packed full of people. When I think of going to Europe, I see the map with only the concentration camps marked on it. If I see someone with a tattooed number on his arm, I am haunted by it for days. When my children would say that school was just like a concentration camp, I would either brood or become angry. I was amazed at the terrible rage which overcame me when a friend of Dorn's was taunting him by saying that it was great that Hitler killed the Jews; I screamed at this boy as I never have at anyone else and told him never, never, ever to come on our property again.

Though I have no accent at all, and am a perfectly assimilated American, I feel myself to be different, because of what's in my brain. I know I view the world differently from others. No matter how hard they might try to see it as I do, they did not have a beloved grandfather hauled off in a cattle-car to starve to death. And I am grateful that they did not, but it still leaves me alone.

I know that my nightmares are different from and more frequent than others'. I know that I have zero tolerance for religious prejudice; I feel that I have suffered enough from that not to have to listen to even one stupid remark.

I spent years in politics, always concerned with justice and fairness;

I was told that my opponent's camp referred to me as "Mike the Kike."

I participated in peace marches, and I always did it for my grandfather, in some mystic way which I still don't quite understand.

When my parents' lawyer in Berlin secured a small reparation payment for me in 1965, I did not want to accept German "blood money." But then I thought of all the nightmares and twisted perceptions I have suffered; I went to the library and reread small parts of that first of many horror books in my life, "Out of the Night." And then, for the sake of the almost eleven-year old girl who had had such terrifying hallucinations twenty-five years before, I accepted the money and gave it to Dave to buy himself a car!

In 1961 I suffered a miscarriage with tremendous hemorrhaging; as I was going into shock, I imagined that this was what it was like to be in a gas chamber and feel one's life draining away.

The powerful documentary "Shoah" has a scene in the last segment in which the fate of the Theresienstadt Jews is described by a prisoner who worked in the "shower" anteroom at Auschwitz. Among these Jews were my great-uncles Carl, Manfred and Alex Norden, with their wives and children. Fortunately, my grandfather had died of starvation in Theresienstadt a year earlier and did not have to endure the unspeakable savagery of the others' last moments. It is a sad commentary that death by starvation should be considered kinder and gentler.

When Lang was born, I think that part of the great tidal wave of emotion that engulfed me had to do with the fact that with him we were rebuilding the generations. I know that the tears I wept each time I had to part from Lang had to do with the fear that we would never see each other again, as had happened to me when I said goodbye to my grandfather. Now I was the grandparent, and I understood the pain he must have felt.

I have always known that to be free is the most important thing by such a large margin that nothing else really matters, except love. And I treasure each special occasion because I'm so lucky that life is so good, and that I have been allowed to experience it. Being a survivor has been hard in many ways, but my life is more beautiful and precious because of it.