

MY EXODUS

THE STORY OF MY FLIGHT FROM
GERMANY TO U.S.A.

BY
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I was born in Breslau, Germany, (now Wroclaw, Poland) on September 19, 1929. The Nazis came to power in 1933. Shortly thereafter, all Jewish children were forced to attend parochial schools. My parents could see that my brother Frank, four years older than I, would not be able to attend a university when he became of age.

My mother's maternal uncle Emil Henczinski left Germany before World War I. My mother kept up the connection with his wife Bertha (now Henschel) after Uncle Emil died in 1925. In June 1938, she wrote to Aunt Bertha asking her to bring my brother to the U.S. so he could get a good education. She replied that she was an old lady and could not be responsible for an active 13 year old child and asked if we would consider coming to the U.S. as a family.

My mother wrote to Aunt Bertha that we all would be willing to emigrate to the U.S. Aunt Bertha's son Herbert wrote to us saying that he was happy we had decided to leave Germany and suggested since jobs were scarce in the U.S. we should consider living in a small city or on a farm. My mother promptly went to a dressmaking school to learn a trade which she could use in America. During the war she worked on Army uniforms.

In September, Aunt Bertha applied to the American Consul in Berlin stating that she would sponsor our family to emigrate to the U.S. She had to present an itemized list of her assets which exceeded \$100,000 and her annual income was \$9,000. This was quite a wealth for the year 1938! A short time later, we received a letter from the Consulate informing us that it would take many years to be admitted to the U.S. due to the long waiting list of the German quota.

On November 9th, the Kristallnacht (Crystal Night) occurred when the Nazis set fire to all synagogues in Germany and broke the shop

windows of stores owned by Jews and looted them. My father, a travelling salesman, was at this time near the Polish border and did not know what had happened. A short time later, the Nazis rounded up all Jewish men and sent them to Concentration Camps. This was a trial run for the later Exterminating Camps. A few days later, my father arrived home, heard what had happened and said, "They won't touch me, I fought in World War I." I remember the night the doorbell rang and two men in uniform asked my father to accompany them. Since my father had no idea of his fate, he put on his light winter coat and left the house. When he did not return that night, my mother went to the police station and was told that my father had been sent to the Concentration Camp.

A few weeks later, my father wrote a postcard from Camp Buchenwald in Thuringen writing, "I am fine, I am healthy". He wrote not to send any letter, only postcards. No doubt, everything received would be read by the authorities. I still have this "infamous" postcard. After repeated calls to the police station on when my father would come home, my mother was told the only way he could be released was if she had prove that he would leave the country in the near future.

Not knowing when we would receive our affidavit, my mother bought a steamship ticket for my father to go to Shanghai, the only country in the world that would take immigrants without an affidavit. By now, most of our savings had gone since my father had not gotten any raises for a long time working for a gentile company. The former Jewish owner was forced to sell the business to a non Jew. My mother rented out two rooms of our five room apartment making it necessary for my brother to sleep in the kitchen and I slept in my parent's room. When my mother

had the Shanghai tickets in her possession, she went to the police station and in the middle of January, my father, looking very gaunt, was reunited with us.

Since there would be a long wait for our affidavit to arrive, my mother managed to get a visa for us to go to Havana, Cuba, until we could enter the U.S. In order to squeeze as much money from the departing Jews, the Germans forced each person to buy round trip tickets, knowing very well that we would never make use of them. After the war, my parents got a little of the value of the ticket back, as well as restitution for property left behind. I received money from the German government for interruption of my education.

The Jews were forced to give up all their gold, silver and jewels to the Nazis and could only keep a wedding ring. Since we could not send our furniture out of the country as did the Jews who left before November 1938, in order to save money on coal, my parents burned most of the books in the apartment's stove.

More money had to be spent to buy large steamship trunks in which to ship our few necessities for future use. In order to make themselves understood when they arrived in Cuba and the U.S., my parents took English lessons as well as learning some Spanish. My brother was able to pick up the two languages with great ease.

On March 24th, we left our apartment still fully furnished and boarded a train to Hamburg, stopping in Berlin to say goodbye to my mother's brother Charles whose life was spared when he went to Haiti until the end of the war. Arriving in Hamburg we stayed at a hotel until our boat left and I remember seeing a sign on the door of a salon, "Jews are not permitted". On March 28th, we took our farewell

of our native country, and left on the Hamburg - Amerika Line, M.S. Grinoco. Since it was a German boat, my parents told my brother and me to behave very well as we could be sent back any time. Since we were not the "ideal tourists" but poor refugees fleeing their country, we were forced to sleep in steerage in large separate rooms for men and women. Needless to say, it was very noisy and most of us got sea sick. When we arrived in Havana, we stayed in a good hotel for a few days, but since my father was not permitted to work in Cuba and our American relative send us money for food and lodging, we were forced to look for an inexpensive room which consisted of two double beds, a table, two chairs (two had to sit on the bed at mealtimes) and a wardrobe. The bath was down the hall.

After our arrival, only one more refugee laden boat was permitted to land. One month later the infamous "St.Louis" boat with hundreds of German refugees tried to land. The Cubans did not allow the passengers to disembark. The Germans sent the boat out of Hamburg knowing that they could not land anywhere. The U.S. would not permit them to land either. The Germans tried to show the world that nobody wanted the Jews. My father had a childhood friend on the St. Louis. We boarded a ferry boat that took us right up to the big boat. My father could not see his friend, but I remember seeing the passengers waving to us. The boat was forced to go back to Europe. Some of the passengers went to France or the Netherlands where they perished at the hands of the Germans. My father's friends were lucky enough to choose England as their destination. Many years later, I had the pleasure of meeting their offsprings.

The corrupt Cubans thought of a good way of making money and arrested all German Jewish men walking on streets. When word about my father's arrest came, my mother sent my brother to the police station to find out what had happened because he spoke Spanish very well. He too was arrested. My father and brother joined hundreds of other Jewish "guests" at the fortress where they waited for their release. My mother wrote to her relative in America and asked for money to get the two men released. They were treated well and spent most of their time playing cards.

While in Havana, I attended the American Jewish school in Vidado, a suburb of Havana, and learned English. At the end of June 1940, after a 13 month "visit" in Cuba, we left on the boat Aconcaqua, this time in a private cabin. On July 6th, we arrived in New York. We were met by our relatives Aunt Bertha and her son Herbert and wife Viola. They had made arrangements for us to stay at a house run by the American Jewish Congress located on 68th Street in New York next door to the Stephen Wise Synagogue.

As my parents had promised the Henschels not to ask for any more money, we were able to find a small furnished room with a kitchenette (and mice) in a brownstone house on 70th Street and Broadway. Herbert offered to care for my 15 year old brother in his big house in New Rochelle. There he attended high school until his graduation and became the babysitter for the two sons Edward and Lawrence. Shortly after we arrived, my father got a bad infection on his foot and not having money to go to a private hospital, he was forced to go to the hospital on Welfare Island.

Aunt Viola had arranged for me to spend the summer with some rich people and their daughter in their summer house in New Jersey. For many years there after they sent me clothes in very good condition which their daughter did not wear anymore.

In September I started elementary school at P.S. 87 and was placed in a foreigners class where there were many pupils from different parts of the world. At the at the age of 11, I became a Latchkey Child since my mother too had to go to work. When my parents had saved up money, we moved "uptown" to Washington Heights and I attended P.S. 189. During the summer, the Henschels arranged for me to attend free of charge "as an underprivileged child" the Jane Elkus Camp in Oakhurst, N. J.

I attended George Washington High School from which I graduated in 1948. In 1953, I married Kenneth and moved to Westbury, N. Y.

At this writing March 28, 1988, 49 years after I left Germany, I am the proud mother of Deborah, David and Kevin and the grandmother of Deborah's children Michael and Daniel.

We were very fortunate that Aunt Bertha chose to save her husband's family from perishing in Germany. She died quietly in her sleep in 1950 while on vacation at the age of 80.