

Excerpts from

THE TELLER IN THE TALE

A HALF-JEWISH CHILD IN NAZI GERMANY

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First there are always the spaces. As in a painting of a country scene or that of a city, in which almost as an afterthought the painter has placed a person, a child stands, painted very small and vague somewhere in the tableau, shadowy, edges blurred. Everything else is prominent and purposeful. The child is often alone, although sometimes in some of these memory paintings other human figures appear in the landscape: Mother, grandmother, aunt, other adults. Only rarely are there any other children. As the child grows, she begins to appear clearer, more prominent, better defined. Gradually her world expands to include others, gradually that world will shape the adult she will become.

I was born in Bremen, a medium-sized city in the north of Germany, and spent the first few weeks of my life there in the elegant old house of my mother's long-time friend Lili. I used to wonder why I wasn't born in Hamburg, the city where my mother lived together with my grandmother and her younger sister Bertha. I would have wanted to have spent the first days of my life at home instead of in a stranger's place. I don't know why I never asked for an explanation, only much later did I figure it out: the time-honored reason why a young woman used to give birth to her child away from home.

No one, except perhaps my family, thought that I was an adorable little girl. People found me neither pretty nor winsome, with my short straight mousy hair and a rather ordinary little face once I had lost the charm of babyhood. Strangers usually ignored me; now and then I would overhear someone say to my mother something to the effect that, even though I wasn't very pretty, at least I had a lively personality and seemed to be quite clever. Perhaps I didn't hear those words; perhaps there was only something in their behavior or in my mother's attitude that told me. In any case, that is how I came to

think of myself. Much later she told me that I had been a comical little toddler, who had enjoyed making funny faces and remarks to make her laugh and that I had laughed a lot myself. That came as a surprise to me, for I could not imagine myself like that. I thought of myself as serious, thoughtful and a little sad.

The apartment house at 43 Gneisenaustrasse in Hamburg in which I lived until I was ten years old is no longer standing. Allied bombs in World War II destroyed it, together with the rest of the buildings in the working class neighborhood in which it stood. Our apartment was on the third floor: a parlor with heavy dark furniture was almost never used, the narrow hallway led to three bedrooms, a small kitchen and a tiny bathroom. The room my mother, my 'Mutti', and I shared looked out on the street and had a small balcony. The icebox stood outside on the back balcony, and each room had its own tall "Kachelofen" a tiled coal stove. Once a week the boiler in the bathroom produced enough hot water for the four of us to take our bath; grandmother, Tante Bertha, my mother and I. It did not seem to be a tenement to me; I did not know that we were poor.

The white lace curtain covering the single window is billowing gently back and forth. Mutti likes the window open, in spite of the damp air outside. It is not often sunny where we live, and even though the apartment buildings on our street are no more than three or four stories high, the pale north European sun does not often penetrate into the narrow treeless street below.

It is not a large room in which the hand-me-down upright piano takes up the space where the old bookcase used to stand. Everything had to be pushed around for that new piano because I am taking piano lessons at last. How old am I? Perhaps seven. The small table with my mother's typewriter, covered now since she no longer types envelopes at home but works out of the house, stands against the wall, squeezed between my small bed and the bookcase with its glass doors behind which, along with Mutti's books, I keep my favorite reading: Anderson's Fairy Tales. My mother's bed, covered by a blue and red patterned throw, serves as a couch during the day. There is a straight chair, now pulled over to the piano and a small chest of drawers. The middle drawer is mine.

My favorite spot in the room is in front of the narrow glass door in the corner of the room which opens to the balcony which is just big enough for two chairs and a small round table. I often stand in front of that door, lean my head against the pane, and look out at the street below, daydreaming.

This Sunday is another one of the many days on which everyone is supposed to display the German Flag. The red flags with the white circle and black double hook in the center are waving from every apartment window and balcony. They come in all sizes, but I notice that there are very few small ones. From my place in front of the window it looks festive. Our balcony is the only one in the street without a flag. The law forbids it, Mutti told me. Besides we would not want to anyway. "We don't approve of what is going on; we don't approve of Hitler," she has told me. I don't ask her why and she doesn't

volunteer more. I think she doesn't want me to know more, but once in a while I've overheard them talk in worried tones. I know about Hitler; his picture is everywhere, in stores and on huge billboards in the streets, his voice can be heard blaring from loudspeakers and the neighbors' radios. Today I avoid going into the street to play. I don't want the kids to ask questions.

I think back to two years ago, when I so much wanted us to have a flag too, and my Oma found her old flag, saved from the last war --black, white and red in three broad stripes-- and we tied it to the balcony railing. I felt really proud. I am bigger now and I understand that the old German flag no longer counts, and that we are different too.

In a way I don't mind so much being different, as long as it means being better; like being smart in school or having piano lessons. Yet I feel very bad to be told that I don't measure up, that therefore I am not entitled to the same things others have.

I haven't forgotten how at the end of first grade the teacher had written on my report card: "Elisabeth ist eine richtige Führernatur,"-she has the personality of a true leader. I thought that was something good; maybe I really had some special gifts? After all, didn't I help other girls with their work, and wasn't I the one who always finished her assignments first? Mutti, on the other hand, was puzzled and appalled. A Führernatur? Like our "Führer" Adolf Hitler? She showed my report card to her friends and told everyone the big joke that the teacher thought that the child was a true leader, just like Hitler. They shook their heads in disbelief and laughed. A joke about me? About Hitler? I was confused. Did she think it was bad to be a leader? Was she a little proud of me too? I had been eager to show my mother my report card. I had taken that remark as praise, as my teacher's report about my accomplishments in school. Now I no longer knew what to

think. In the end I had to agree with my mother that the teacher had made a mistake in judging me. And yet... maybe in some ways it was true?

When all the other girls wear their uniforms to school on special assembly days, I make sure that I wear my almost outgrown Berchtesgartner Jäckchen – the black sweater with red and green borders and silver buttons-- which is like a semi-official uniform if worn over a white blouse, so that in class at least, I can blend in. It's just that I am not allowed to attend the assembly without wearing the real Hitler Youth uniform. I have to stay in the classroom alone until the others return.

In class there are the twins, Kristina and Barbara. They arrived in the middle of the year and are almost as smart as I am. Their handwriting is always perfect and they are much praised. Their pictures are pretty: little girls wearing fancy dresses, houses with red roofs and many windows, fenced in gardens with graveled paths and colorful flowers, which everyone admires. They look exactly alike and are taller than I am. They have long blond braids with big ribbons and large blue eyes. I notice their expensive looking dresses. Even their uniforms seem to be made of finer materials. They are always together and don't seem to mind if some of the other girls are envious and whisper behind their backs. Hearing them being criticized like that makes me feel a kind of rare solidarity with the rest of the girls. Before they came I was the best in the class. I have decided that I don't like them.

Kristina asks me why I am not wearing my uniform the way I am supposed to.

"I forgot," I answer.

"Then you can't go to assembly," Barbara sneers.

“I know,” I snap back. I want to add, “I don’t care”, but I can’t say it, because I do care. At that moment I care very much; that lie doesn’t seem like a real lie to me, and I worry about what I can say next time and whether they’ll know I lied.

I sit alone in the classroom and hear the German anthem, “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles” and the “Horst Wessel Lied” being sung in the gymnasium. The melody of the anthem is so beautiful that it makes me feel all shivery inside and suddenly very lonely. Quietly I sing along. I don’t sing the other, new song. The melody is not as nice, and I can’t remember the words: something about the flag and dying for glory and the fatherland.

For some reason nobody asks me the next time why I don’t wear my uniform. The twins seem not to care, they dismiss me; I think they are glad they found me lacking in something. The other girls don’t seem to give it a thought and remain as before.

My mother believed in eugenics. She thought that the fact that I had a non-Jewish father had made me a healthier, if not a superior child in every way: mentally, emotionally as well as physically. I don't remember what the occasion was, except that I was still quite young, when looking at me proudly, she said, as much to her as to me, “You are a good mixture, being half German. We Jews are too sensitive, too neurotic. We are not very strong, not very healthy, but you, you have the advantage of also having good, strong, healthy German blood from your father.”

How could there be two kinds of blood in my body, one kind Jewish, and one kind German? I wondered about that for a while. Were the two kinds of blood also two

different shades of red? Did they mix; did they race each other as they coursed through my veins? Did they go through different parts of my body? Which one came out when I fell and skinned my knee? Maybe she is wrong I thought; maybe my blood is just like everyone else's blood, just one kind of red? Pretty confusing, that.

The matter of my birth was something that I didn't like to think about. I don't recall ever asking, "Where did I come from, Mutti?" It seemed to be her secret; it seemed to be something that did not really concern me, a story that I was not supposed to know. Whenever my mother told me that she had so much wanted to have me, that I represented the many children that she had wanted to have, I would always feel very uncomfortable. Perhaps she said this to reassure me, perhaps to reassure herself. She never elaborated and I didn't ask any questions. I didn't like having to be many children.

Every summer until I was seven my father would join my mother and me for two weeks at a resort on the North Sea or on an island in the Baltic. Later when I was eight and nine, we spent those two weeks at the house of my mother's friends, Hans and Elsie, in the town of Bad Godesberg on the river Rhein. Only much later did I realize that of course, under the Nazi anti-miscegenation laws it would not have been safe for an unmarried couple, my mother a Jew and my father a Gentile, to vacation together at a hotel, even if their child, the illegitimate Half-Jew, was with them.

Early one morning in November, long before the accustomed time, I hear voices in the kitchen next to my room. I get up and see my mother and Irmi talking in agitated tones about what they have just been told. A friend of Katie's had come to the apartment in a state

of collapse. Her husband had been taken away by the Gestapo in the middle of the night, and when she went outside she could see flames and heard yelling and the sound of glass breaking. It was the morning after KRISTALLNACHT, November 9, 1938.

I remember that my mother did not go out that day and the next, but Katie volunteered to find out what had happened. When she came back from downtown, she took her sister Irmi and my mother into her room and closed the door behind them. I heard them talking, but I couldn't really hear what they were saying. Only later did I find out what had happened, including that cousin Alfred had been arrested and sent to a 'KZ' a concentration camp together with many other Jewish men.

KRISTALLNACHT should have been a wake-up call for my mother, but again she seemed unable to pursue a way for us to leave Germany. I don't know to this day what her thoughts were, whether she truly felt that somehow she and I would not be in danger. Did she still feel so strongly more a German than a Jew, that she could not imagine living anywhere but Germany? I remember that once, many years later, I overheard her saying to someone who had asked her why she had waited so long to emigrate, "I think it was that I felt so alone, just the child and myself, so powerless to do anything, without money, without family. I just didn't know where to turn." And then she added in a softer voice, "Maybe I couldn't stand to be uprooted, maybe I was afraid to start again." Her voice trailed away... "starting over and over."

I know that from her early on she had loved the German landscape, the earth which she dug and planted in her garden, the German hills which she had hiked and the German folk songs she liked to sing and taught me to sing. She was attached to German literature

and art, the world of Goethe and Dürer, to its philosophers, Schopenhauer, Kant and Nietzsche, which she had read so avidly with her friends when I was little; she valued all that which to her was cultured and civilized and good in Germany. Jew or non-Jew, there was no difference for her. She knew little about Jewish history and culture and had not encountered any anti-Semitism in her personal life.

Perhaps I need to look no further as I search for an explanation of my mother's ostrich behavior during the Nazi-period. All the Nazi government's laws and the stridency of German anti-Semitism must have seemed just an aberration which would soon be corrected, a bad dream from which she would soon wake up. Her feeling of being helpless to do anything alone in the world with only me, the half-Jewish child to protect, must have placed a scrim before her eyes, which prevented her from seeing what was really going on in Germany. She had never read Hitler's MEIN KAMPF where the plans of the Nazi Party were clearly spelled out, nor had her friends. They considered the book too vulgar, too common, too un-German to pay attention to. They considered politics a dirty game which did not interest them. The life of the spirit, of friendships and beauty was their realm, that was what sustained life for them. For my mother, and thus for me, the increasingly enforced restrictions were conditions of life to which one just had to become accustomed.

Life went on. My mother did not share with me her thoughts and worries and I enfolded myself in the safety of my room and books her friends had in their library, books way beyond my eleven year old understanding: *War and Peace*, *The Brother Karamazof*, *The Magic Mountain*. I was so removed into my private life that little remains in my memory of the terror surrounding us.

Even though more and more my mother and her friends had long talks of what to do, she did nothing.

There are no landmarks in my memory for those years that I can now point to as having been traumatic enough for me to make me aware of the danger we were in. It seems strange to me now, that in my eleven-year-old mind there was little connection between KRISTALLNACHT or the Gestapo looking for Helge's husband, or the many new restrictions imposed on Jews and the possibility that my mother and I were in danger as well. Since no one explained things to me, undoubtedly out of wanting to keep me from worrying, my perspective remained that of a child who didn't think about why none of my mother's non-Jewish friends came to visit us, nor why we never went to see them. Nevertheless, I felt something desperate in the atmosphere in the apartment, and so on weekends I looked forward to Monday and school. The school routines, the new things I learned, the girls in my class with whom I talked about the teachers we liked and didn't like, and the gossip about other girls, all that was a relief from the tense atmosphere at home. I knew of course that I could not share anything that went on at home with my classmates, nor did I have any friends outside of school. At home the adults were becoming increasingly silent with each other, as if there was little that was worth talking about. Now and then I overheard a brief conversation about a new outrage perpetrated out there in the world, but I paid little attention to the details. I lived inside a menacing cloud so dense that there was no vision beyond it.

Mutti still thinks that the fact that I am only half- Jewish, will continue to bring me safety. There are separate laws for Germans of "mixed blood", depending on the number of Jewish grandparents one has. She also thinks that since she is the mother of such a child, she might have special status as well. Therefore, to emphasize my non-Jewish half, Mother decides that I should be baptized. I am eleven years old.

She makes arrangements with the minister of a Lutheran church far from our neighborhood. She alters an old white dress of hers to fit me; white for a traditional baptism. I hate the way the material feels, the way I look in it and the way the little stand-up collar scratches my neck. I hate it and I shed many tears of protest, but I have to wear it none the less. She and I stand in front of the minister, I in my white dress and she in her Sunday best. He sprinkles the customary drops of water on my forehead, and says some words which I decide not to listen to. I am terribly embarrassed to be treated just like the baby girl who, lying in her mother's arms is next. Friend Lili, designated as my godmother, sends a little gold ring, inscribed with the first words of the Lord's Prayer, but she doesn't come for the occasion. Mother says something about how my father would have been happy to know of my baptism.

In the streetcar on the way home, I suddenly hate her. I hate my father, my godmother, my baptized self. Today I hate everybody.

That was more than 60 years ago. Today I know that she was concerned to save me, even though she must have realized finally that she might not survive herself. After her death 30 years ago, I found among her papers a package of documents tracing back the Aryan blood of my father down to his great grandparents, as required by the authorities: birth certificates, baptismal documents, marriage licenses, and a statement claiming paternity for me. She had collected some of these documents while my father was alive, and others later on. Just in case.

One Sunday morning, as we two are just getting up she says, "What do you think about taking English lessons before we go to America?"

I have no recollection of how I felt leaving our little apartment under the roof for the last time, nor do I remember boarding the train to Berlin. But I remember that once we arrived there we gathered in a large dimly lit basement room in the station. There were already about two hundred people sitting on the concrete floor with their suitcases gathered around them, waiting. We were almost the last ones to arrive. A few men were nervously milling about. It was very quiet. Most people sat in silence, and when they spoke it was in whispers. Even the small children were quiet. Their mothers held them close as they sat leaning against the cold concrete walls of the large somber room. I was very tired, but I couldn't sleep sitting on the hard floor waiting. Only in recurring nightmares about railway stations and train rides that have haunted my nights for many years did the memory of that room stay alive within me. Those dreams are gone now, but with it is the memory of what I felt then.

Someone came to tell us that the train would take us to the Spanish border and that arrangements had been made for our voyage to America on a Spanish ship, which was to leave in a few days from the port in Barcelona. I remember vaguely that everyone was given a ticket with the name of the ship and the date of departure. The spirit in that basement room rose considerably at the news, and in spite of everyone's exhaustion there were now excited discussions, albeit in low voices. We Jews were after all still in Germany.

I now wonder whether Mother was afraid as we were waiting in that cold damp basement for the train that promised to take us west to safety, that maybe it would take us instead east to annihilation in a camp. She knew that deportations were already taking place from several German cities; even I had heard of the emptying out of all Jews from the

eastern city Stettin. That place had seemed far away and I had put it out of my mind. But Mother? Did she know of the extermination of Jews in Poland and other countries to the east overrun by the German army? What had the messenger said to her? Had she believed him? Did she have doubts? What did she think now in that dark basement room? I never asked her.

Only very gradually, and only after many years, was I willing to think about the miraculous nature of our eleventh hour rescue. Whenever someone would ask me how we managed to leave Germany so late, in the fall of 1941 in the middle of the war, I would hide behind my answer, “Well, it’s a long story”. For me there is no answer to the other question which haunts me to this day, “Why me?”