

Yom Hashoah - My Family's Story

Pam Schachter

After being asked to speak tonight, and agreeing to do so, I had a few moments of panic. What in the world should I say? Why was I being asked to speak? What is the point I am supposed to be making? Don't we already know about never forgetting? Isn't this preaching to the choir? Thinking these thoughts, led me to having these discussions with my older daughters, my husband and a few friends, asking them, what is it about my family's Holocaust experience that would be helpful to people to know? What does it mean to be a survivor? And I realized that the experience of having those conversations with my kids (and any of you who have, or have had teenagers know how special it is to have them actually talk to you), husband and friends, well for me, it would have been enough- Dayenu! But since I am still on the program for tonight, I will share my family's story, for maybe that is really the point, that we hear each others' stories and have a collective memory that is richer for our story sharing.

A year ago this week I was in Hamburg, Germany, with my 84 year old father and my sister, Karen. We were invited back by the city of Hamburg, at the city's expense, to visit, to see the city and to discover Germany in 2007. We were part of a small group of invitees, whom my husband, only half jokingly, refers to as "people that they tried to kill and didn't." He too is the child of a German Jew, his mom escaping from Berlin in the late 1930's. We have a somewhat warped sense of humor about such things. As the departure date for the trip approached, my sister and I confessed to each other that we could only imagine Germany in black and white, that the images of Holocaust movies we had viewed endlessly in religious school played in our heads when we pictured ourselves there. But visits to the hotel website were in color and showed a luxury hotel. Could this possibly be? Not knowing what to expect, but that this would surely be an adventure – and, quite likely, our only chance to see our father's childhood through his eyes – we all met at Newark airport and flew to Hamburg together, Karen coming from Tampa, my father from West Palm Beach and me making only the short trip from Summit.

My dad, Harold, born Heinz Leopold, is the first born son of my grandfather Max and grandmother Herta Haag. They were wealthy, proud, German citizens. Max was a decorated WWI soldier who believed that this Nazi stuff would eventually blow over. He commissioned a rabbi in the early 30's to do a family tree so that we could show that we had been good Germans for a very long time. Apparently, though, tracing ourselves back to the 1600's didn't outweigh being Jews. Max's siblings packed up their belongings and children and had mostly left the country when it became too late.

Max was arrested on November 9, 1938, the night of Kristallnacht. He was taken to Sachsenhausen, one of the first prisoner camps built by the Nazis. In those days he was in the company of other Jews, homosexuals and those who dared to speak out against Adolf Hitler.

Herta was able to broker a deal, which apparently involved large sums of cash and signing over their 2 homes and successful family department store, Der Wagner, to the Nazis in exchange for Max's release. The other condition of his release was that the family leave the country.

On December 24, 1938, they were driven to the port of Hamburg by their chauffeur, in their Mercedes Benz, which they also turned over to the government, and they set sail to London on a luxury liner. At dinner that night a chocolate Santa was delivered to their table. My grandmother didn't let the children open it, wisely waiting till later to reveal the cash inside the hollow figure that had been sent to them by their loyal chauffeur.

Penniless in London, Heinz and his brother Fritz walked behind horses in the streets and sold the dung they collected for fuel. Later, during the blitz of London, my father and grandfather were imprisoned because they were German citizens and considered a risk.

Eventually obtaining visas for America they secured passage on a leaky Greek freighter that was so ailing it had not been conscripted by the British Navy. 12 miles off the Canadian coast, on February 14, 1942, their ship was sunk by a German torpedo. They sat in lifeboats in the north Atlantic, wondering how they could have come so far, only to face the choice of being shot by Nazi machine guns from the surfacing submarine or dying by their own act of jumping into the freezing waters. But their fate was to change again as the Canadian Coast Guard arrived in time to rescue them. And it was to change once more as they were jailed in Nova Scotia, again for being Germans. Seems they couldn't win anywhere they went, either being a German or a Jew! In jail for 2 weeks in Nova Scotia, their release was negotiated with the help of an aunt's congressman in Cincinnati and they proceeded into the US on my father's 18th birthday, March 4, 1942.

The happy ending to this story is that they survived, that they eventually moved from Cincinnati to Chicago where my father met my mother and that they had me! My grandfather died shortly after their arrival in the US and my grandmother went back to live in England and sue the German government for war reparations. On another happy note she married her lawyer and he became my stepgrandfather!

My dad and uncle, now Harold and Fred, from Heinz and Fritz, went on to become successful businessmen, though neither had a high school diploma. They put their

younger sister Liese Lee through college and graduate school and she became a social worker, eventually becoming the director of JFCS of Chicago and herself spending a great deal of her career helping other refugees settle into life in the US.

That family tree that had done nothing to prevent us from being expelled from Germany nonetheless proved to be fateful. In the 1980's my Uncle Fred used it to track to down the descendants of his 12 aunts and uncles who had all fled the Nazis as well. Fred's research led to an amazing gathering of over 100 Haag family members in August 1986, 49 years after the last time the family had one last gathering in Germany to celebrate my father's Bar Mitzvah. We arrived from all over the US, from London, from Israel, from Sao Paolo and Australia and even from Germany itself. Seems one branch of the family had remained in Germany through the war and passed as Christians. Half siblings, two of whom had been placed on the Kindertransport and raised by Christian families in London, met their father's second family whom he fathered after running off to Brazil. To say it was emotional is the understatement of all time.

I grew up in a home where there were few sins greater than to buy something made in Germany, and heaven help you if you pined for a VW. I should add that I was raised in Skokie, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago that was home to many Holocaust survivors. I grew up with friends whose parents had tattooed arms and had survived horrors in concentration camps that were only spoken of in hushed tones. I never thought of my father as a "survivor" since he hadn't been to a concentration camp; perhaps I thought of him as a lucky refugee??

Going back to Germany proved to be an opportunity to understand a bit of what my family, and so many others, lost to the Holocaust, in addition to the lives of the 12 million people who perished at the hands of the Nazis. Though I knew about his surviving the torpedo, I knew few details about my father's life in Germany and their years before coming to the US. The trip to Germany opened up my father's memories and made my questions more specific and sharp.

We visited the former Jewish schools, had dinner with the present day Jews of Hamburg (most are Iranian and from the former Soviet Union) and listened from the hallway as children in the newly built Lauder Jewish preschool sang motzi before their snack. Our hotel was eerily only a few block from the former Gestapo headquarters where my grandmother had gone to negotiate my grandfather's release from Sachsenhausen. I spent a week with my head spinning as I saw these sites that were for me personally, and for the Jewish community, of such historical importance, and watched modern German citizens live their daily lives in the presence of these sites. We toured a city filled with bronze squares with the name and date that Jews were deported from that address laid into sidewalks throughout the city. And we toured the former Jewish girls' school which has become a Holocaust Memorial with a group of Hamburg 9th graders, who later interviewed each of us about our family's escape from Germany. These children eerily reminded me of my own daughters, especially as we struggled to communicate with their English and my non-existent German.

Seeing my father's childhood home, and most of Hamburg, built of red brick, I suddenly understood the importance of my childhood home in Skokie that my father had built of red brick. Seeing his house on the banks of the Elbe river I had a new sense of why my father has always had a deep love of the water and has instilled it in me as well. And he was inspired to share stories of his childhood under the growing oppression of the Nazis. I learned that he had grown up in a kosher home until Hitler outlawed kosher butchery. I saw the river my beloved Tante Liese had ice skated to school on, in direct defiance of her parents and the yard where my uncle Fred is said to have washed the family's bunnies and hung them to dry by their ears on the clothesline.

Our group of survivors were hosted by employees of the city and also by graduate history students from the Univ of Hamburg. I savored every minute of my conversations with them, as they talked about the Nazis and the horrible things they did to all of Germany. I grappled with being able to understand their separation of themselves from those people and that time. We were guests of honor at a luncheon given by the elected officials of the city and welcomed back. Another idea for my head to try to understand.

And finally, leaving my father in Hamburg for a day of rest, Karen and I headed off to Berlin on the train. The Hamburg train station is very old and I eerily felt the presence of mothers, fathers and children saying goodbye to each other as the kinderstransports left the station. En route to Berlin, Karen and I agreed that rather than spend the day as tourists in this modern city, we would find a way to Orianenborg, the town in the former East German Republic where Sachsenhausen is located. As we walked the 3 km from the train station to the camp we met some other Americans. We told them that our grandfather had been a prisoner there for 6 weeks and we were on our way to see that place. Their response? How lucky that he had been released....

Neither Karen nor I knew how to respond. Of course, we are grateful that Max was released and our family was able to flee the Nazis with their lives and bodies intact. But it also felt impossible to describe anything about this as "lucky".

Unthinkable evil drove the Nazis to commit unspeakable acts. And unthinkable evil continues to exist in our world and to create new "survivors", from ethnic genocides in familiar sounding places like Darfur, Rwanda, Bosnia and Cambodia. I don't think of any of them as lucky, but definitely deserving of the very profound title of

“survivor”. Thank you for this opportunity to share my family’s story of survival, from Hamburg to Sachsenhausen to London to the frigid North Atlantic, to prison in Canada and finally to freedom in the US.