

## Alfred Batzdorff

Wartime Experience – Sent to England on the first Kindertransport, Immigrated to the US with his family

Photographed with his wife Suzanne.

I was born February 19, 1922 in Breslau, Germany. Breslau was the capital of Silesia, with 600,000 inhabitants, of whom about 30,000 were Jewish. Breslau had a vibrant Jewish community, a renowned Jewish Theological Seminary, two large synagogues, an orthodox and a “liberal” one, as well as several small shuls.

My father Erwin Batzdorff was a surgeon, my mother a gifted painter, singer and seamstress. I attended a private elementary school and a public secondary school until 1934, when life became too difficult in the new anti-Semitic atmosphere and I transferred to a Jewish high school, where I remained until the fall of 1938, when I entered a vocational training program under the auspices of the Jewish Community, in order to prepare for emigration. My training continued until November 10, 1938, the morning after the infamous “Kristallnacht”, the pogrom in which synagogues were burned and vandalized, homes and businesses destroyed, and thousands of Jewish men taken to concentration camps. It was the beginning of the violent phase of the anti-Semitic program. That morning I bicycled to the shop, but the school was closed. On the way home, I passed shops and homes that had been ransacked and vandalized.

Upon arrival at home, I informed my mother of what had occurred, and we joined forces with the Biberstein family, who lived one flight below ours. The sound of police sirens as well as of hooligans destroying Jewish club rooms next door were most upsetting. When the doorbell rang insistently, we knew that it could only be the storm troopers on their yet incomplete roundup of Jewish men. Since Dr. Biberstein was already in America and my own father was in Berlin that day, I felt that I had to be the strong man in the family. I opened the door and was immediately arrested and whisked away in an open Mercedes, with six armed guards surrounding me.

My captivity in the courtyard and later in the air raid shelter of the Police Headquarters brought me together with many Breslau fellow-Jews, some of whom I knew well. The mood was extremely depressed. Toward evening, we were assembled in marching columns and taken to the nearby *Hauptbahnhof*, the central railway station, whence the trip to Buchenwald would begin. However, as the column left the police headquarters, a command was given for people over 70 and wounded veterans to fall out of line. The remainder continued toward the train station. To this day I don't know the reason, but I quickly decided to take a chance and mingle with those remaining behind. Once the train had left and I was discovered among them, it was too late. I spent the night with the elders in the cellar of the police station, doing chores, helping, and comforting. The next evening my fellow-prisoners were released, and a kindly policeman advised me to just get out and disappear. “Once they discover the mistake, they'll come looking for you. And they'd better not find you.”

I was reunited with my family for just a few days. We quickly made plans for me to stay with my grandmother in Berlin, so that I would not be found next time the bell rang. As a matter of fact, only a few days later, I was on my way to England, as part of the very first *Kindertransport*.

I was sixteen years old and on my own. While I quickly found work, I also had one major task before me: To get my parents and my brother to safety. It was crystal clear to me that time was of the essence, and I was concerned that my somewhat "unorthodox" departure from Germany might have put my parents in special danger. As luck would have it, I was able to find kind people who would guarantee the upkeep of my parents and my ten-year-old brother for the duration of their stay in England. My two grandmothers and several other relatives perished in the Shoah.

My family arrived in England in June 1939, and we stayed there until the following June when our quota-number was called, and we left for the United States. In England I had worked as a waiter because that was the only trade which admitted non-citizens. In America I was able to complete an apprenticeship program as a tool and diemaker. In 1944, after several occupational deferments from military service, I entered the U.S. Navy, five weeks after my marriage to Susanne Biberstein, whom I had met at age 11. I served in the "Seabees", first in California and then in Okinawa. After my return to civilian life, I worked as a tool and diemaker and started my education at City College in New York to become a mechanical engineer.

I worked as a product design engineer for various companies in Delaware, Pennsylvania, and California. We raised a family of three sons and live in Santa Rosa, CA.

My father was able to establish himself again as a practicing surgeon in New York, where he died, six months after my mother, in 1958. My brother became a neurosurgeon and lives in Santa Monica, CA.