

Susanne M. Batzdorff

Wartime Experience: Left Germany and Immigrated to the United States

Photographed with her husband Alfred.

I was born in Breslau, Germany, in 1921. 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, Hans Biberstein, was a dermatologist and a professor on the medical faculty of the University of Breslau. My mother Erna was a gynecologist and obstetrician. When the Nazis came to power in January 1933, life changed for the Jewish community. Anti-Semitism was a cornerstone of the new regime and, gradually, increasingly stringent anti-Semitic laws were passed, making life in Germany first difficult and eventually impossible. My younger brother and I attended public schools until the summer of 1938, when we prepared for emigration. An afternoon religious school course lasting eight years gave us a solid foundation in Judaic knowledge and liturgical Hebrew.

In September 1933, we moved from the large house which belonged to my maternal grandmother to an apartment in the south of Breslau, so that my mother could take over the practice of a colleague who was moving to Palestine. The apartment above ours was occupied by the Batzdorff family, and that is how I first met my future husband Alfred. We were 11 years old, and my brother and I became playmates of Alfred and his younger brother Ulrich.

As anti-Semitic laws gradually restricted our lives more and more, we became increasingly self-sufficient in creating our own entertainments. In our teen years, we formed a social club which met weekly to read plays, publish a small newspaper and put on one-act plays for the entertainment of our parents. Our tight-knit circle, consisting of the Bibersteins, the Batzdorffs, and our cousin, Gerhard Biberstein, broke up when its members went into exile. Alfred, having escaped from his arrest during the November 1938 pogrom, was the first to leave - - to England via Kindertransport. My brother and I left for America in February 1939, and the others somewhat later that year. Alfred and I corresponded regularly, and when he and his family arrived in New York in June 1940, we renewed our friendship and began dating. We were married on March 12, 1944, 5 weeks before he was inducted into the U.S. Navy.

Getting back to the fall of 1938 and our move from my grandmother’s house to the apartment in the south of Breslau, I must mention another significant event. My aunt Edith Stein, my mother’s younger sister, a prominent scholar and philosopher, took leave of the family to become a Carmelite nun. She had converted to Catholicism in 1922 and, to the grief and consternation of the entire family, but especially my grandmother, she entered this strictly cloistered community. [Edith Stein was canonized by Pope John Paul II in 1998.]

As Jews became socially increasingly isolated, they created their own social and cultural institutions. The *Kulturbund* sponsored lectures, concerts, theatre and opera performances of excellent caliber, by Jewish artists who had been dismissed from their jobs. When our gentile friends would no longer associate with us, we joined a Jewish youth club. When Jews were excluded from public sports arenas and swimming pools, they formed their own. Life went on with an amazing appearance of normalcy which was part determination to carry on as best we could and part self-deception about reality.

If my parents had not lost their medical licenses in the summer of 1938 and thus their livelihood, we might never have taken steps to leave Germany and would almost certainly have perished ultimately in Hitler's death camps. My grandmothers both died of natural causes, one in 1934, the other in 1936. My mother was one of seven siblings. Of these, four became victims of the Shoah. Two were gassed in Auschwitz, and two died in Theresienstadt, as did a cousin of mine who was refused entry into the United States because she was retarded.

My father left for America in August 1938. We suffered through the devastating experience of "Kristallnacht" the pogrom of November 9-10, 1938 but were lucky. Father eventually obtained a teaching position at Columbia University which enabled him to send for his family, my mother, brother, and myself outside the "quota", so we could get our American visas and leave Germany in February 1939.

In America, both my parents managed to pass the English language and medical State Board exams and to practice medicine in New York. My brother and I went to college. My brother became a veterinarian and a professor at the University of California at Davis. I became a librarian and author, writing both poetry and prose and translating from the German.

Alfred Batzdorff and I have been married happily since 1944. We have three sons, five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.