

Ilse M. Eden

Wartime Experience: Sent to England on a Kindertransport

I was born May 3, 1928, in Berlin, Germany. My parents were Richard Salomon, born 1884, in Berlin; my mother Edith was born in 1894 in a small tobacco industry town named Schwedt, on the river Oder. Both my parents' families were Jewish – my mother's family was more observant of Jewish holidays and belonged to a synagogue; I believe my father's family was non-observant. My father fought in World War I, and later became a lawyer; my mother was trained as a social worker and worked before her marriage.

My parents were married in 1924, and settled in Berlin. I think my mother was always overawed by my father's family whom she considered more intellectual, and did not give herself enough credit for her own intelligence and education. My father always remembered visiting my mother in her hometown, with his first sight of her family being there sitting on the balcony shelling peas – which his mother would not have been caught dead doing in Berlin. My mother often spoke of the wonderful cultural life in the Berlin of the twenties.

I do not remember much of my early childhood. I went to nursery school, had cousins, aunts, uncles, paternal grandparents in Berlin and my mother's mother, who was a lot of fun, and whom I adored. In 1933, we moved to a larger apartment and even had an interior decorator to help decorate the apartment. We moved in April 1933, and my mother later told me that she lost all her enthusiasm for the new apartment because Hitler had just been elected. She always believed that Hitler would carry out his threats – where as my father, who after all was a war veteran, did not want to believe that Hitler meant what he said. I do remember his confiding in me (at which I felt very honored) that Hitler had stopped him from working as an attorney because of being Jewish. However, later this edict was rescinded for war veterans. Of course, at the age of five, I had no knowledge of, nor concern, about the need to earn money.

In 1933, I began school. Like all children in Berlin, I went to my neighborhood school, which happened to be Catholic. I never encountered any anti-Semitism, but I was jealous of all the Catholic ritual, and asked to go to a Jewish school, which was also in my neighborhood. The school was not orthodox; the difference was that all children were Jewish and learned Hebrew and Jewish history. When I was in Berlin recently, I saw a history of the school, which was called the Joachimsthalershule, and noted that my teacher, Mr. Hirschberger, who really liked me, had perished in the Holocaust, as did some of my friends. When I was ten years old, I passed an exam to go to a more advanced school, the Goldschmidtschule, in the Grunewald, and went there by streetcar every day. I always enjoyed school, had friends, and did well. I knew that Hitler did not like Jews, and on one occasion asked my mother on the street "why does Hitler not like us Jews", and she said "sh, not here" I led a sheltered existence, but after 1936, my uncle committed suicide and my father was hospitalized with severe depression. My mother and a friend of my father's carried on his practice, and we began to rent out rooms. I began to feel different from my friends, and in retrospect, I believe I had psychosomatic symptoms such as eczema. Then in November 1938 Crystal Night happened, and I remember that vividly. There

were crowds of people in the streets, we hid my father's friend, our school was closed, as were Jewish department stores, and children began to talk about going to England once our school had reopened.

My father was still hospitalized and I asked my mother to promise that I would not be sent to England alone. She did promise. However, a few weeks later I was invited to meet a lady who had been designated to choose 12 children to go to England on a Children's Transport under the auspices of Bernard and Winifred Schlesinger, who were Jews of German-Jewish origin and wanted to help. Bernard was a pediatrician, and he and Winifred had five children. She was also a violinist and avid gardener. They rented a house for us in Highgate, which they decorated very colorfully, and hired young women to take care of us. So in March of 1939 five boys and seven girls, between the ages of eight and twelve, one of whom was I, left from Berlin by train through Holland, where we were met by Dutch ladies with cookies and hot chocolate, to Hoek van Holland, from where we sailed overnight to Harwich and from there to London, where we met by Mrs. Schlesinger and taken to this wonderful house and garden. Most of us twelve children had met before and I think none of us realized that we might not see our parents again. I think I felt I had no choice and just accepted what was happening to me. I waved goodbye to my mother and that was that.

As I remember, our stay in Highgate between March and September was very pleasant. We got along well, and liked the young women on the staff. There was also a young rabbi who visited frequently and we had Friday night services. The Schlesingers visited us and did things with us on weekends. We went to the London County Council School and learned English there. I also learned cooking and sewing, and actually made a little recipe book for my mother. In June of 1939, on a Friday night, I was asked to open the door when the doorbell rang, and there stood my mother. Adults could only come to England with a work permit, and she had received a permit from a Quaker family, which was noble of them since my mother had to make a choice between leaving to be with me or stay and face death. She had a hard time living with the choice she made. During the next few months I frequently visited my mother at the family where she worked (by the name of Blair-Fish), who were very kind to both of us. My mother and I looked at new houses which were being built and dreamed of buying them, and would look up at airplanes wondering if they were going to Germany.

Throughout my stay in England, and also at one period in Los Angeles, my mother was a "domestic". She took that as a challenge, especially when she was a cook for twelve boys. The English people for whom she worked accepted me, but the Viennese lady for whom my mother worked in Los Angeles told my mother that I would have to go to the back door when I visited her.

On September 1, 1939, all the London schools were evacuated. We were given a label with our name on it, and a paper bag with food rations, put on trains and got off when the train stopped, to go to a village hall where we were assigned to families who were like foster parents. Our teachers came to the same village and we had classes in the village school in the afternoons,

after the village children had completed theirs. My foster family was not very friendly and did not understand the difference between Germans and Jews.

In January of 1940 the Schlesingers arranged for us to go to boarding schools and turned over responsibility for us to the Jewish refugee organization, the Bloomsbury House, since Bernard was joining the service as a physician. They always maintained contact with us for the rest of their lives, met our children, remembered their birthdays, participated in reunions, and now we have had reunions with their children. Most of us "twelve children" have also stayed in touch and some of us are good friends. All of us have had careers, and most of us have married and had children.

My boarding school, Kingsley School, was evacuated to Tintagel, Cornwall. I think it was a great leveler since everyone was away from home. I did well in school, made friends, and even was "head girl". I wanted to be a physician but that was impossible and after I graduated with a higher school certificate I was at a loss as to what to do, and for lack of anything better, went to the University of London for one and a half years until my mother and I came to Los Angeles.

During the war my father recovered and lived in Berlin. We received letters from him, via the Red Cross and relatives in Switzerland, until he was deported to what I now understand was Riga. We never heard from him again. One of my grandmothers committed suicide; the other one was able to come to Los Angeles via Cuba. Therefore, in 1947 my mother and I joined our remaining family in Los Angeles, where we had a great deal of difficulty settling. There was a housing shortage, it was hard to find work, and we did not get good advice as to what to do job wise. My mother and I at first lived in a room, and then found an apartment. I became a secretary, went to night school and finally received a scholarship to go to school of social work in Berkeley where I have resided, except for brief periods, since 1954.

I have worked since going to England. First, I helped my mother with her domestic work when I visited her in vacations. Then I helped earn my boarding school tuition by helping with younger children. Later, I tutored, baby-sat, waited on tables, and worked in the summers doing clerical work in London. Although I came to the U.S at age 19, the work I did do, currently earns me an English social security pension of approximately \$30. Per month.

I have worked as a social worker, except for a period when I stayed home with my children, since 1956. I do clinical work, but also like to do advocacy, and I am known as one who speaks out on issues. I have worked in many different settings: in hospitals as a medical social worker, in psychiatric clinics, as a consultant, in private practice, and now in a substance abuse clinic for veterans. I have also done supervision and teaching. My paternal aunt and my mother were also social workers, and I enjoy the variety of skills this profession requires.

I did not marry until I was thirty-six years old. I met my husband at the Sierra Club. His name was Phil. He had three teenage children by a prior marriage, who are now all married and living in Israel, Vermont and Michigan. I am a step-grandmother. Phil was a renaissance man – he could do anything he set his mind to, and was interested in economics, literature, art,

architecture, music, hiking, and folk dancing. In the photograph I am standing in front of the door he designed – with two redwood burls he cut, finished and attached to the door. Our house is full of beautiful wooden works of art – much of the wood we bought on trips to the redwoods – some are pieces we found on beaches –and some we purchased in other countries. When I met him he was working for the ILWU, and supplemented his income by making jewelry. Then we both became unemployed, and he developed the field of forensic economics in the field of evaluating economic damages. We had a very interesting life together, until he died very suddenly in 1990. We have two children, Jonathan and Jennifer, who are a great joy to me, and were to him.

Jonathan is an ardent photographer, and loves the romance of history. Jennifer is the first scientist in the family, and is interested in environmental physics. Jonathan played the drum and Jennifer the flute. Jennifer is married to a Jewish physician, and they love dogs and skiing.

I have had an eventful life. I am trying to develop a life of my own, and there are still many places I want to visit, and things I want to explore. I enjoy hiking and traveling – I have good friends. I realize now when I travel and visit family and friends, that the reason I have to travel so much is that we are all over the world. I wish we were all in the same country, or even in the same area, as we were when I was a child. On special holidays I miss having a large family, and when I go back to Germany, I am aware of what I have lost - but most of the time I do not dwell on that.

In the photograph accompanying the biography, I hold a photograph of Bernard and Winifred Schlesinger, sent to me by their family after Mrs. Schlesinger's death. The Schlesingers were a very unusual couple, with a love of life, a great sense of fun, and hard work, and a complete lack of prejudice. For example, after World War II ended, they invited German prisoners of war who were in a camp in their neighborhood, to their house for Christmas (which they celebrated).

My main reason for wanting to be involved in this project is so that there would be a record of what the Schlesingers did to save twelve children and of course the descendants of those children. I tried to have their names entered at Vad Yashem, but Jews cannot be listed among the righteous. Ten thousand children were saved by the British – from November 1938 to September 1939 – and I am eternally grateful for that.