

## Gerda Levy

Wartime Experience: Fled to South America

I was born Gerda Dorothea Bielski in Breslau, Germany in 1925, the only child of Georg and Gertrud Bielski. My father was a well-established businessman and my mother a caring wife. When I was five my parents enrolled me in a prestigious private, Catholic girls' school. I thrived in this environment, making many friends and excelling in my classes.

While Germany was beginning to degenerate into a totalitarian state, my family sheltered me from the chaos. My father, who fought for the German army in World War I, claimed that he was a German first and a Jew second. Therefore, according to his reasoning, we had nothing to worry about. In 1934, one year after Hitler came to power, I first encountered the tumultuous political and social situation. School officials asked me and the several other Jewish children to leave my school. Only nine years old, I was lost and confused.

My parents, still optimistic, quickly registered me in a Jewish school, where I once again assimilated well. For four years, school was a refuge, removed from the escalating nationalism outside. That is, until November 9, 1938, the last day of my formal education. I was thirteen years old, in the eighth grade, enjoying a stimulating lesson from my favorite teacher. Without warning, a contingent of SS troops burst into the classroom. They shouted, ransacked the room, and then brutally murdered my teacher in front of the class. I was terrified. I darted out of the school, only to find the synagogue next door ablaze.

Anxious to tell my parents what happened, I ran home as fast as I could. I approached my house out of breath, but relieved to be close to the comfort of my parents' arms. As I walked through the front door, I saw more SS soldiers. They were just as wrathful as the ones at school. My mother embraced me. My father was not there. He had hidden in a neighbor's house when the soldiers approached, as Jewish men were being detained. My mother and I watched as the SS men threw my piano out the window, and then, piece-by-piece, all of our furniture followed. Our home was destroyed.

My parents attempted to get a visa for us to leave Germany, but it was too late. No visas were being issued. Finally, my father made contact to buy a counterfeit visa to Bolivia, but the broker wanted a small fortune. Our money had been confiscated, so my father asked his sister in Switzerland for assistance. She sent the money, my father bought the visa, and we booked passage on a ship scheduled to leave Europe in November of 1939.

World War II began. The ship company canceled the voyage. A severe winter set in, and the Nazis enforced a strict curfew for Jews. We had no food stamps, no coal. The situation was beginning to look hopeless. In March of 1940, we discovered that one last ship was leaving for South America. With the help of a Jewish aid organization, we reserved a cabin on board. But the night before we were scheduled to embark, we received a telegram notifying us that the

ship was overbooked and our reservation had been canceled. My mother had a nervous breakdown and we had to take her to the hospital.

One week later, the same Jewish organization notified us that the ship we were supposed to be on had burned at sea. Many of the passengers had lost their lives. Meanwhile, in Germany, hungry, cold, and running out of ideas, we too were slowly losing our lives. Two weeks later, the Jewish organization contacted us again. A big ship was leaving from Italy, but only first-class tickets were available. Once again, my aunt in Switzerland sent money and we left for Italy by train.

We stood for the entire ride from Breslau, Germany to Genoa, Italy. Troops had to be transported to the border and they took the seats. When we arrived, we were told to wait to board the ship. For two days, with no food or water, we waited, and waited, and waited, but we were looking forward to relaxing in the first-class cabins.

Finally, we boarded the ship. We found that our "first class" accommodations were sailors' bunk beds crammed into a large cabin with about fifty other people. But at least we were leaving Germany. Our hope was that we would pass into international waters without hitting a mine or being torpedoed. For our first meal on the ship, we were herded into the sailor's eating quarters and seated at long tables. On each table there was a large bowl of olives. We could eat as many as we wanted and I was so hungry that I stuffed myself with olives. There was little else to eat. For three meals a day for almost three weeks, we ate olives. Since that experience, I have never eaten another olive. Just seeing olives brings back memories of that horrible voyage.

Finally, the ship arrived in Chile, but it was not allowed to dock. Instead, the Chilean authorities boarded the ship to check the visas of all the passengers. They discovered our counterfeit visa and we, and many other passengers were not allowed to disembark. The authorities notified us that the ship was going to return to Italy. There was panic on board. Again, a Jewish organization intervened and negotiated our release. A small boat carried us to Arica, Chile, where we awaited a train to Bolivia.

When we arrived in La Paz, Bolivia, my parents became very ill due to the tremendous altitude. I was only thirteen years old, so I was very lucky to find a job. A dentist hired me as his assistant. Four months later, the government announced that too many immigrants were living in La Paz, so we had to move to the "interior."

We ended up in a little native village, where only Quechua was spoken. Being young, I learned the local language very quickly. We introduced ourselves to the local "mayor," who said the village needed a hotel. We rented a small adobe hut and opened our hotel. My father used the wood from crates and boxes to make tables, chairs, and beds. Using a troublesome kerosene stove, my mother baked cakes and cooked other regional dishes to sell to our customers. I sold chichi, a local beverage.

Soon I began to make trips to the city to buy beer so we could sell it in our hotel. On each trip, I brought back more and more supplies and eventually I was buying goods for several small businesses in the village, including the food market.

In Germany we had lived in a beautiful home. My father had driven a new car. My mother had cooked excellent meals. We had enjoyed a comfortable life in a modern city. Now we were living in a dusty village in the middle of the jungle in Bolivia. After three miserable years, I rebelled and insisted on leaving the jungle. I wanted to move to a city. I was sixteen years old.

In Cochabamba, I learned Spanish and I worked in a candy shop during the day and a restaurant in the evening. When I was seventeen I married a highly educated man twenty years older than I. My formal education had ended when I was thirteen years old so my husband contributed greatly to my development. He was a photographer, an actor and a poet. We worked together. He took photographs and I sold them. We opened a photography studio and six months later a second location.

After four years, we decided to go to Argentina, which promised a better economic environment. My husband obtained a visa and settled in Buenos Aires. Two months later I followed, crossing the border illegally and jumping on a train to Buenos Aires. I found a job in a busy photography studio but I was underpaid because I did not have proper papers. At night I took photographs in nightclubs to supplement my income, but we still did not have enough money to survive. Since we rented a house with extra bedrooms, we took in boarders. I cooked and washed for them for some additional pesos. Soon after, my daughter was born, but I continued the same demanding work routine.

In the meantime, my parents had moved to the United States and after two years in Argentina I was ready to follow them. They sent an affidavit and we booked passage on a freighter headed for Los Angeles. The ship stopped at every port to load and unload so we arrived in Los Angeles six weeks later.

I started to work immediately taking baby and family photographs in homes. A month later, I got a job in a studio with ten branches. Because my English was not good enough for me to communicate with customers, I worked in the darkroom. However, three months later I was promoted to manager of the studio, and another four months later I was named supervisor of the entire chain of studios.

I became a successful businesswoman, while my husband struggled to continue his writing and acting in a country with an unfamiliar language. With dissimilar goals and interests and the difference in our ages, we divorced. Soon after, I remarried and had my second daughter. After ten years as a supervisor for the chain of studios, I decided to move to San Francisco and open my own photography studio. One year later, I had five employees. After another three years of hard work, I had over one hundred employees. My company had eight photography studios in California, Oregon, and Florida. I ran this large business for twenty-three years and then sold it to simplify my life.

I kept one studio in the financial district in San Francisco, and I have run this business for the past twelve years. With three loyal employees and a wide network of business contacts, I pursued the goal I established after many entrepreneurial experiences: "Make each year more successful than the previous year, both in revenues and profits."

I feel I have accomplished my life goals. My daughters are successful and happily married to prominent Jewish men. Although my husband has passed away, five loving grandchildren bring me daily joy.

After being driven from Germany solely because of my religion, I am grateful to the country that accepted me for who I am. As a proud citizen of the United States of America, I have had the freedom to be a businesswoman, a wife, a mother and a Jew.

Through persistence and determination, I have established a comfortable lifestyle, much like the one my parents and I enjoyed in pre-Nazi Germany.

I have survived.