

Gabriella Mautner

Wartime Experience: Fled to Switzerland

I was born in Chemnitz, Germany, in 1922, my maiden name was Gabriele Kramer. My father, Norbert Kramer, came from the Rhineland, and my mother, née Charlotte Cohn, sprang from the Maas family, who had branches in France as well as England. I had one brother, Wilhelm, who left for the United States in 1937.

In the spring of 1933, soon after the Nazis came into power, my parents had planned a trip to Bavaria for our Easter vacation. My cousin Hannah and I were walking home on our last day from school, when three teen-age bullies, following the example of their elders, thrust broomsticks into our hands and told us "Dirty Jews," to sweep the street. In the middle of that night, my brother and I were awakened, hurriedly dressed, and put into a cab. Together with our parents we took a train to Switzerland from the next town, since Nazis were arresting Jews at the railway station in Chemnitz. After spending a few days with friends in Basel, we went on to Turin, Italy, where my father had loyal friends. He refused to return to Germany as a fourth-class citizen. Having read Hitler's Mein Kampf, he saw the handwriting on the wall.

Until the outbreak of the war my father was able to continue working for the factory he owned with my uncle in Chemnitz, Saxony. My uncle moved to Holland in 1933, and opened an office in The Hague. A few years later, illness no longer allowed him to work on a regular basis and he asked my father to join him in the Netherlands. So after five years in Italy, we landed in Holland in the spring of 1938. During the previous year my brother had left for the United States. My uncle died shortly before the German invasion; by then, the factory had been confiscated.

In the fall of 1940 my parents and I were ordered to leave the coast. We moved to Hilversum. In January 1942, we were among the first 137 German Jewish refugees to be deported from Holland. Within forty-eight hours we were to be at the railway station with hardly any baggage. Feigning illness, and with the support of a sympathetic Dutch doctor, my father was able to secure a short extension of time. It was then that I feverishly prepared our flight with the help of a German Jewish comrade, Fred Solinger. We got married (with one foot in the concentration camp), explored forbidden territory at the Dutch-Belgian border without success. We returned to Hilversum defeated and went briefly into hiding. After many hurdles, we finally managed to leave for Belgium, hoping to reach the yet unoccupied South of France.

After five months of hiding in Brussels my mother and I were caught in a trap set by the Gestapo in the home of a Dutch Jewish family. Thanks to false papers and our pretense to understand nothing but French, we were finally let go. Months later, we learned that the other seventeen people I had counted in that room had been deported. That very night we changed our hiding places and then prepared that fearful voyage to the south of France.

We experienced another miracle when, concealed in a locked merchandise train with sixteen other fugitives, we were almost caught when the Germans tried to pry open the doors as the train was stopped on the demarcation line.

“Free” at last, we had just settled in a small village outside Lyon, when we realized that the Vichy regime organized raids to arrest refugees, gathered them into camps, then delivered them back into the hands of the Germans. We prepared the next leg of our journey, and, armed with French false papers, took the train to the border near Geneva. Let down by the guide who had promised to walk us into Switzerland, we were arrested, interrogated and threatened with internment, but finally “mercifully” sent back where we came from – namely, the village near Lyon.

Our next attempt was to reach Lausanne with the help of a fisherman who promised to row us across the lake after dark. At the appointed hour we waited in vain for our guide in the pouring rain. Later, we heard that the previous night one of his colleagues had been shot by a Swiss guard while trying to disembark a family of refugees.

At last we reached the countryside near Geneva, then happily settled in that elegant city. Within the next few days I was accepted in its famous school for interpreters. My joy didn’t last, for the next day we were summoned to the railway station and taken to a camp near Zurich with hundreds of other refugees. This consisted of an empty factory where we slept on straw on the cement floor and were drilled and supervised by the Swiss military. Thanks to my father’s good friends who vouched for us, we were freed about two months later and soon afterwards found refuge in the mountains.

By the end of the war, and after eight years’ separation, I had a wonderful encounter with my long-lost brother. Now an American captain, Bill was back in Europe, fighting with the 45th Division under General Patton. He helped liberate Dachau and later sent us a letter on Hitler’s stationary from Hitler’s abandoned apartment in Munich.

My brother was to survive the war, but to die of cancer before he was 30. We briefly joined him in New York, where I gave birth to my son, Tom Solinger, and then moved to Denver. Four years later, divorced from my husband, I took my small son to southern Italy. Wishing to take care of my child and write, I happily lived on a shoestring in a southern village. (Many years later, in 1968, my first novel, *Out of a Season*, was published by Thomas Y. Crowell in the United States.)

Returning to this country and deciding to move to San Francisco, I arrived in the Bay Area in the summer of 1953, where I met and soon married Ervin Mautner, a concert violinist with the San Francisco Symphony. He died in 1987, after a long illness. Our daughters, Daria, and Eva, have become a jazz musician/voice coach, and artist – respectively.

While raising our children I went back to school, then started teaching creative writing as soon as I obtained a Master’s degree, first at San Francisco State University, and then at the Fromm Institute for Lifelong Learning. Writing continues to be my lifelong love affair.

Considering the horror of the past, and the painful memory of all those less fortunate than my immediate family, I am forever grateful for the gift of life. Among other things, it taught me never to take anything for granted.