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Wartime Experience: Sent to the US on a Kindertransport

On September 23, 1934, my generous and often whimsical father was mildly disappointed because of my gender. And so I remained the only child of Friederich Ruthenburg and Martha Dessauer Ruthenburg. An only child, according to my parents, because Hitler was already in power, and so how could anyone have more children? And, indeed, many of my European contemporaries are without siblings, but to this day I wonder if Hitler and the war were my parents' only true reason for my singularity.

What comes to mind is four adults, five, including our maid, and the other two being my doting maternal grandparents, and absorbing the anxiety and insanity of events, resulting in my withdrawal into a fantasy life. By the time I was about four, almost all the Jews had left Bayreuth, Germany, my mothers' and my place of birth, and since many of the "Nuremberg Laws" were already in place, I was not allowed to play with Aryan children.

On November 9, 1938, the color of red and terror became a permanent part of my interior landscape. I awoke to an endless ringing of our doorbell and then the sound of broken glass. Kristal Nacht (Crystal Night) and I, at age four, clutched my courageous mother's nightgown and recall her saying in the German language, "She is only a small child." I never learned what prompted her to say this to the thugs and criminals and from the attic, heard my father's screams where several other of our countrymen were beating him. Then they descended the stairs and came back into the apartment blood was streaming down my father's face and body and he cried out, "Look, Martha, what they've done to me." From that night on I had nervous habits and asked the same obsessive questions of my mother each night before I could fall asleep while she sat beside me on the bed.

My father was taken away, but the train destined for Dachau was overcrowded, and so my gentle father was thrown into the local jail and then, miraculously, my mother went there the following day saying she was ill and needed him and he was released. That was the story I was told by my mother.

Because of many snags we were not able to leave Germany until September 1941. My mother sewed the yellow star on my navy-blue coat and sometimes sent me out with an aluminum pail to get milk. And I was almost seven by then and remember the stares of the people on the street and one remark in particular: "we didn't know she was one of them, too." There was also loyalty and kindness and some of our neighbors managed to bring us food in secret.

On the eve of Yom Kippur in 1941, we left for Berlin at night so we would be unobserved. From there a still legal, but locked train, took us over the Pyrenees and we stopped at San Sebastian overnight. My parents went to pray with other refugees staying at this hotel in gratitude for their escape and I awoke alone and terrified out of a nightmare - they still occur after many years of psychotherapy. We continued on to Barcelona, Spain, where my parents and I lived in

the hotel Navarro in one room for one and a half years. We had nothing left and were being supported by various organizations including the Joint Distribution Committee.

Like thousands of other Jews all throughout Europe, we were living in a port city waiting for passage on a ship. We tried to get entry into many countries, including Cuba. My father could not get a work permit but it was easier for my mother to find work illegally and she became the governess for the children of a wealthy Spanish family - the Moragas, who wanted Riki and Maria Luisa to learn German from Freulein, my mother, whom I yearned for because she was taking care of other children and not of me. My father tried his best, but much of the time I roamed with my only and beloved friend, Turi, the orphaned nephew of the patron and patrona of our hotel. Turi was an orphan and I felt like one. One of history's ironies is that in Franco's fascist Spain we had a safe haven and much kindness from people who had had almost no contact with Jews for hundreds of years.

My parents became increasingly concerned that Hitler might invade Spain and then what would Franco do with his Jews? Words like deported, gas, camps, and affidavit were not unfamiliar to me and after a year and a half my parents decided to send me to the United States with a Children's Transport. I left for Lisbon and a convent by the sea. The nuns were good to us, and I bonded with one especially. I loved her and after the week was up and we were to be put on the ship I did not want to go. The voyage was traumatic for reasons I do not choose to elaborate here and the Atlantic was heavily mined.

And so I arrived on Ellis Island where we were quarantined for a week. Again I formed a close relationship with one of our caretakers there and didn't want to leave when news arrived that I would be taken to Chicago by a social worker where my maternal grandparents were waiting for me. I was weary of leaving people and places.

Six months later my parents slipped through F.D.R.'s quota on Jewish refugees into the U.S. and I was re-united with them.

It has always been hard for me to identify as a survivor because I did not experience the torment of the death camps. English became my third language (Spanish was the second) and a love affair ensued - I teach it, write stories and poems in it, dream it, and also curse in it.

My Jewish identity is stronger than my parents was and I shunned the Reformed Judaism that most German Jews found acceptable and have always been drawn to observant Jews and Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, although, by nature and nurture, am not a "joiner" and have belonged to a synagogue only intermittently. After my second marriage I moved to California from Chicago with my husband, Walter Selig, from whom I am now divorced, and who is the father of my three children; David, Naomi, and Lisa.

My life has been difficult and I have lived through three serious depressions, but it as been a life richly textured; full of adventure, friendship, and love. And, perhaps, because of many strange and lonely early years, my inner life is very precious to me.

My three children are among my greatest joys, although my own experiences have left me a most inadequate parent, but a deeply committed and loving one. My middle child, a daughter, has a mental illness and truly taught me what patience, love, and humility embody. Sometimes, I feel that in some horrible scheme of things she is one of Hitler's victims too, for, after all, she is my daughter. My oldest daughter, Lisa, is waiting for her first child to be born and though I don't want to play the role of overly dramatic writer, I want to shout, "see, we have not been defeated, we've survived. To life!"

A month previous to committing these thoughts to paper, a friend asked me how my life would have differed had the Nazis not come to power. My immediate reply was, "I would have been the only daughter of wealthy parents, complacent, and expected to make a good marriage." But I have always had a rebellious nature, a restless and inquiring mind and an outrage at all injustice, so who will ever really know?