

## Lori Shearn

Wartime Experience: Sent to England, evacuated and immigrated to the US

My real life began when, through the mist of New York Harbor, I first glimpsed the Statue of Liberty and my tear-filled eyes told me that I was free. It was Nov. 1940.

I was born Lori Belier on June 27, 1925, into a loving family in Vienna. My parents, Irma and Paul Belier, my brother Eduard, and I lived comfortably, surrounded by friends, many relatives, and the Vienna woods. The annexation of Austria by Hitler and his hordes in March of 1938 began a difficult saga of immigration, scattering us to the four corners of the globe. As conditions in Vienna became unbearable, there was nowhere for us to go. Because of my Jewish faith, I had been forced to leave school, and my friends were forbidden to play with me. Our apartment was very beautiful, a fact not lost on a Nazi official who coveted it. My father was forced to sell him the building for a pittance so the Nazi could take the apartment.

Every day was filled with incidents of terror and aggressive behavior towards us by the youngsters who roamed the streets attacking without intervention by the police. My father and a group of other shopkeepers were picked up, marched to a side street and forced to get down on their hands and knees to scrub the street. When November brought Kristallnacht, the horrible destruction of synagogues and Jewish stores, as well as the arrest of most Jewish men, it was my mother who was strong enough to plan for a future. My father had been born in Poland, so because of the quota system, immigration to the United States as a family was not possible. My mother placed a classified ad in a London newspaper pleading for someone to take care of her "blue eyed little girl". She received one reply and I, age 13, travelled alone to London. At first, I considered the idea of going somewhere by myself an adventure, but the trip was a frightening, confusing experience.

When the train pulled out of the station with my parents on the platform, I dissolved in tears. My father had given me a solid gold Mogen David to wear around my neck. The two men in the carriage were kind and tried to console me. But then they noticed my locket and reminded me that we would be stopped at the border by the Nazis and they would surely take my star away. What to do? There was a young woman in the carriage as well, and she spoke up at this point. "I'm not Jewish," she said, and "I'll take it across the border for you." At the border we were required to step into an office and my luggage and I were rudely examined. It took a long time and the train left without me. There was no other train for many hours, by which time I was terrified that I would never make contact with my new family. I knew their name and I wore a large sign with the number 61 around my neck, the number of their house. But by the time I arrived in London eight hours later, I was miserably tired and sick from the Channel crossing. Fortunately the Steinbergs were there to claim me, asked few questions, and took over my care. I spoke no English. Then, as we made our way along the platform, someone called my name. It was the young woman whose name I never knew, who had waited for me to return my precious Mogen David.

For two years I lived with this kind family. I was evacuated when war broke out. Stella, the daughter of the Steinbergs who was my age, was happy to have a sister at first. We went to school together and she introduced me to her friends. But her jealousy tainted the family peace and made life very difficult for me. We spent our nights in air raid shelters and survived the Blitz.

In the meantime, my brother had made his way to Rotterdam to work on a farm. My father went to Shanghai, the only place in the world where Jews could go with only boat fare to get them there. My mother stayed in Vienna long enough to tie up their affairs, and then she came to New York, rented a furnished room, and went to work in a hat factory.

By obtaining an official affidavit, a guarantee that we would not be a burden to the United States government, she was successful in bringing each of us over just in time before it was too late.

Except for me. In London I was fairly safe so she had decided to spare me the worst difficulties of resettlement in New York. When the bombing of London became a daily occurrence, many months of planning finally resulted in their obtaining space for me on a merchant marine vessel for a dangerous, scary sea voyage across the mine-infested Atlantic to an eventual reunion with my family.

Life in America was different. We lived in a tiny, fifth floor walkup apartment. My brother and I slept in the living room. We washed the clothes in the bathtub and hung them to dry on the roof. We didn't complain. We felt so fortunate to be safe and together again. After a long absence I returned to school unenthusiastically. High school was an unfriendly place for a newcomer, with 2,000 students, none of whom was anxious to include me. My English accent sounded foreign. I kept house, shopped and cooked while the others in the family went to work. I often felt lonely. I quickly attempted to speak like an American. I didn't realize that I was a good student, but at the end of the two years, I was asked to give the valedictory address. I had only two ambitions: to get a telephone and to make it possible for my mother to quit her job. So I went to work in various office jobs, without plans for further education. For a while....

Then I was urged by friends and teachers to enroll in college at night. The days were long between work, school, and studying. I graduated from Hunter College eight years later Phi Beta Kappa. I had become a US citizen as early as possible. I'll never forget the great thrill of that ceremony.

My working career included management positions with a major labor union, and in medicine, scientific research, the Oakland Symphony, the Optometric Society, as well as many volunteer positions of interest. I've counseled teens for Planned Parenthood, guided children through the world of science as a docent, and taught classes in a variety of subjects.

My husband Martin and I met at a summer resort when he was a medical student and I allowed myself my first vacation. We swam, played tennis, laughed and talked about everything. We

continued to do that for the next four years, and then we got married. We had three children and moved to California. We spent a year with the hospital ship Hope in Brazil, teaching medicine in an underdeveloped area. I've worked with my husband on his many medical articles, journals, and books, and I've had numerous articles published. Our three children are productive, admirable individuals and we are exceedingly proud of their achievements. They live near us and we see them and our five grandchildren often. My parents lived into their nineties and never returned to Vienna. They always appreciated America the Beautiful.

Martin and I are enjoying our retirement. We are amazed at the fortunes that brought us together in a life that continues to be fulfilling and delightful.