

Gunther Stent

Wartime Experience: Immigrated to the US

I was born on March 28, 1924 in Berlin-Treptow, an unfashionable suburb, home to the petty-bourgeoisie. Its conservative tastes and politics had little in common with the liberal, modernist, what-the-hell spirit for which Berlin was known during the Weimar Republic. My father Georg Stensch, a native Berlin Jew of lower-middle-class origins, owned one of the largest bronze statuary and lighting fitting factories in Germany, while my mother, Elli, née Karfunkelstein, came from a family of well-to-do, Germanified Breslau Jews.

What little religious upbringing I had took place in the context of the ultra-reformed, quasi-Christianized Judaic rite of Berlin's Reformgemeinde, founded in 1846 to promote the assimilation into the German nation of Prussian subjects of the Hebrew faith. Sabbath services were held on Sunday; prayers were said in German rather than Hebrew, with all references to an eventual return to Israel struck from the prayer book. In the temple, women sat together with the men, who did not cover their heads or wear prayer shawls. We preferred the Latin "temple" over the Greek "synagogue," because the latter implies a Jewish house of worship. Few other Jewish congregations would ever follow this out-of-Berlin radical Christianization of the Judaic rite all the way. Yet the Reformgemeinde pioneered many of the practices that now differentiate liberal from orthodox Judaism world-wide, including cremating the dead and extending the confirmation rite to girls. The Reformgemeinde was unpopular with Prussian anti-Semites, who preferred their Jews orthodox, so that no one would be taken in by a Jew masquerading as "a real German."

Soon after the Nazis came to power and barely nine years old, I began to hate myself for being a Jew. I had been aware as long as I could remember that the Goyim hated us, but this had merely instilled in me the fear of being maimed or killed by them. I had not yet worked out the rational inference that there must be something terribly wrong with us Jews to evoke so much ill-will. But after I became an avid reader of Julius Streicher's antisemitic weekly, *Der Stürmer*, whose current issues with their grotesque and obscene cartoons of my coreligionists were posted in glass-enclosed display boxes on the street for outreach to any benighted Jew-lovers, I saw my oppressors' point: Jews really are awful people. I tried to conceal my involuntary membership in the Children of Israel, and pass as an ordinary anti-Semite.

Self-hatred was my most pernicious emotional legacy of growing up in Nazi Berlin. I ardently wished that I could join the Hitlerjugend's junior division, the Jungvolk, whose members' ages ranged from eight to fourteen. I despaired that, as a Jew they would not let me join. But I came close to having my wish, when, thanks to my elder brother's help, I joined a newly found German-Jewish Ersatz Jungvolk, the Schwarze Fähnlein, or Black Squad. The uniform of the Black Squad was similar to the Jungvolk's, except that we wore navy-blue forage caps and Jack-tar sailor's blouses instead of their brown caps and shirts.

I wore my Black Squad togs to a special showing of the Nazi propaganda movie, Hitlerjunge Quex. Attendance was obligatory for all students of my primary school, although, as a Jew, I could have been let off from going. But I would have sooner died than ask my father to write a note requesting my being excused from the golden opportunity to masquerade as a Nazi. The entire school marched in formation up the broad avenue leading to the cinema, with the party-member teachers in their Nazi uniforms and the students mostly in Jungvolk outfits. The navy-blue of my Black Squad outfit stood out in the sea of brown shirts and caused great interest among my fellow-marchers, who wondered whether I happened to belong to an elite marine division of the Hitlerjugend. The movie's objective was to fanaticize the young, instilling in them a sense of responsibility for fighting the nefarious Jew-Bolshevik enemies of the New Germany. It certainly inspired nine-year-old me, who would have marched to the front then and there, as it inspired those countless Aryan contemporaries of mine whose turn to die on behalf of the Third Reich would come in ten years' time.

I was twelve when I had my first positive contacts with Judaism: I entered the Waldschule Kaliski, a private Jewish day school in Berlin-Dahlem. The Kaliski School's aims were to abate the self-hatred of its students by instilling in them a proud awareness of what it means to be a Jew, and to have them measure their own goals against those criteria felt to be meritorious by Jews of the past and present. The three years I studied at the Kaliski School were the least unhappy of my Berlin childhood. Within its precincts I felt sheltered from the cruel, Jew-baiting Nazi world on the outside.

Because of the imminent arrest of my father in the roundup of Jewish men after the November '38 Kristallnacht pogrom, we decided to flee from Germany illegally. The various possibilities of illegal flight were widely discussed within the community of Berlin Jews, and there were periodic bulletins about who had made it, and who had not by this route or that route. The most promising way was then held to be crossing the "Green Frontier" between Germany and Holland or Belgium i.e., sneaking across the border in open country. To succeed in this undertaking, it was essential to avoid not only the German but also the Dutch or Belgian frontier patrols, who were handing over to the Germans all Jewish refugees they intercepted. Anyone who managed to get beyond the border zone was free to report to the local police in the interior of Holland or Belgium, in pursuit of a temporary residence permit. To cut down the risk of getting caught on either side of the border, it was advisable to engage the services of a guide familiar with the territory. For this, one needed contacts and cash.

We were put in touch with a miner who lived on the German-Dutch border, which ran right behind his house. He was going to meet us at Aachen Station and, in the dead of night, take us for a little stroll through his garden across the border into his Dutch neighbor's house. The miner came to Berlin, to pick up his fee and the valuables he was to smuggle out for us. It seemed like a perfect setup but when we got to Aachen Station, there was no miner: he had been arrested on the previous day. Since he probably revealed his customers' identities to the police, we did not dare go home.

We went into hiding in a Cologne hotel, where through the Jewish grapevine, we located another seller of "guided tours" across the Green Frontier. This new "package deal" was to consist of our being driven by taxi from Cologne to a lonely spot in the Ardennes Forest, close to the German-Belgian frontier. A guide would meet our taxi on the German side, take us for a short walk across the frontier to the Belgian side, and put us on another taxi that would take us to Antwerp.

This deal did not work out quite as "advertised." Instead of driving us to a lonely spot in the forest, the first taxi took us straight to a German frontier police post. There we were interrogated, strip-searched, and locked into a room, presumably to wait for the paddy wagon that would take us to prison. After a while, however, the post's chief officer came to tell us that he would let us cross the border. In fact, our guide was already waiting outside. He warned us not to get caught by the Belgian patrols: if they brought us back, he would have to send us to Aachen headquarters, where we would be dealt with severely. The "short walk" to the Belgian taxi turned out to be a three-hour hike through the snow-covered Ardennes Forest, during which our guide made us lie down in the snow whenever he thought he heard the voices or saw the lights of a patrol. At long last we reached the second taxi, which took us to Antwerp.

Our strange experience at the German frontier police post did not seem to make any sense at first. How come the officer, who hardly gave the impression of "Mr. Nice Guy," let us go? Eventually it dawned on me that he must have been expecting us. Otherwise, he would have surely arrested, or at least questioned, the German taxi driver who had brought us to the frontier. Our Belgian guide would have hardly gone to the German police post and said to the officer "Hello. I'm here to pick up some Jews who are trying to sneak across the 'Green Frontier'." (In addition to a part of the "tour fee" we paid our tour operator, the deal would have provided them with a chance to earn merit points with headquarters if they arrested a Jew who happened to be listed on their all-points bulletin of wanted persons.)

From Antwerp, I eventually emigrated via London to Chicago, where I arrived in February '40, to join my elder, married sister, who had been living there since '37. My secondary education was completed at Hyde Park High on the South Side. After graduating in '42, I entered the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, where I remained a student until receiving my PhD in Physical Chemistry on '48. During my doctoral studies, in '46-'47, I returned to Berlin on an eight-months' tour of duty with the Interallied Technical Field Information Agency (FIAT).

A freshly baked "Herr Doktor" I switched my research interest to biology and moved to Pasadena, to become Max Delbrück's first postdoctoral student at the California Institute of Technology. He initiated me into his "Phage Group," which was the precursor of the discipline that we came to style "molecular biology" in the late fifties and that would dominate all modern life science by the late eighties. After working with him for two years, Delbrück sent me for two more years of postdoctoral research to the Danish State Serum Institute in Copenhagen and the Pasteur Institute in Paris. During my stay in Paris, I married my late wife, Inga Loftsdottir, an Icelandic pianist from Reykjavik, with whom I have one son, Stefan Loftur.

My Wanderjahre ended in the fall of '52, when I joined the staff of Wendell Stanley's newly organized Virus Laboratory on the Berkeley Campus of the University of California. I spent my entire academic career as a member of the Berkeley faculty, rising through the ranks to become Chairman of the Department of Molecular and Cell Biology and Director of the Virus Laboratory. I retired as Professor Emeritus in July '94.

Over the years, my professional interests ranged from virology, through neurobiology, to developmental biology. In addition to carrying out experimental research on these subjects, I have done work on the philosophy and history of science. I am a member of the United States National Academy of Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Max Planck Gesellschaft.