

From Warsaw to Berlin

My mother Esther and father Sam were both born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1893, into divergent social and economic circumstances. My father was raised in the ghetto in a two-room apartment shared at different times by nine or ten people, with his parents' small section screened off. My father never spoke ill of his own father, but then he never spoke to me about him and only rarely on other matters. The facts as I've been able to unearth them indicate that my grandfather shirked work and used a respiratory impairment caused by smoking to spend the workday in shul, a synagogue. His grown sons helped to pay the family's bills and his wife occasionally bought and sold food items. From time to time, my grandfather was hired for temporary jobs as an ironmonger and junkyard overseer through the beneficence of my mother's brother, who owned the yard.

My mother was the daughter of an enterprising businessman, Hersz Szerman, who lived in an upscale part of town in an apartment with its own balcony, a sign of status. My father dropped out of school to go to work around age nine. My mother attended Gymnasium, where she received an education exceeding that of an American high school. My paternal grandmother wore a *sheitel*, the wig that Orthodox women donned for modesty's sake. My maternal grandmother was an elegant lady who wore no *sheitel* but bore seven children. Neither my sister Rachel nor I were ever told how our parents, who came from such different worlds, managed to meet and marry. They did share that their relationship began when they were quite young.

In a household where money was scarce, Szlama (or Solomon as my father was known in his youth) toiled as a tailor's appren-

tice until he was fourteen. He lived with the tailor's family and slept next to the stove under a table in the workroom. Following the apprenticeship, Solomon began to learn the furrier's trade at the business owned by his older brother Felix. At the age of seventeen, Solomon became a journeyman furrier, and he practiced this craft all his working days. Before he married he tried to smuggle himself into Germany, by placing himself in a barrel and rolling down a hill over the border from Poland. He was stopped by Polish border guards. Soon afterward he made it into Germany the legal way. For many Polish Jews, Germany was seen as the land of opportunity, a forward-looking nation compared to their backward homeland with its entrenched, religiously reinforced anti-Semitism that offered my father only a bleak future.

My parents married in Warsaw on March 24, 1918. My father was twenty-five, my mother twenty-four. During the German occupation of Warsaw in World War I, Solomon was recruited in August 1917 by one of Berlin's large fashion houses as a furrier. He returned briefly to Warsaw for his wedding. My mother was not allowed to join him in Berlin for nearly two years. She finally received the necessary papers from the German government in 1920. They lived in Germany until we emigrated in 1939.

My father's superior work at the fashion house paid off. Four years after arriving in Berlin he was able to open his own business, a grand salon. That same year, 1921, my sister Rosa Rachel, was born. I knew her first as Roeschen, then Resi, later in America as Ray. When already a grandmother, she discarded Ray in order to go by Rachel, her given middle name. By whatever name, she has been a caring and loving sister all her life, a resolute and spirited woman much in the image of our mother.

Even though business was good in Berlin, Daddy proposed moving our family to America as early as the 1920s. He wanted to join his sister and brothers who were already living in New York. But my mother talked him out of it, stressing how beautiful life in Berlin was, with its culture and entertainments that both enjoyed. Talk of leaving receded, and not long before Hitler came to power, my parents purchased a plot of land about an hour outside of Berlin where they planned to build a summer house.

I remember that my Uncle Felix visited frequently from Poland in those years. He was a wealthy man, who owned real estate in Poland and in Berlin in addition to his prosperous fur business.

He enjoyed staying at his younger brother's home in Berlin and was especially envious of my father's wardrobe, because he was an elegant dresser even as a young man living in that tiny ghetto apartment.

I was born on August 12, 1929, delivered by a doctor and a midwife in my parents' apartment. That was common practice at that time, with friends gathered for the birth. When my father went to the registry office to record my birth and name, it was supposed to be Hirsch (for my mother's deceased father) and Moritz (for my father's brother Moishe who died in combat while serving in the Tsar's army in World War I). What officially appears on the document was slightly different: it came out as Hirsch (Harry) Moritz. The explanation was that the registry clerk suggested that Hirsch would burden me in life. So Daddy compromised, but I was never called anything but Harry.

The fur business, like most other businesses during the late 1920s and early '30s, was impacted by the worldwide Depression. My father was in debt and his creditors wanted him to declare bankruptcy. He refused, and tirelessly worked to meet his financial obligations, though his suppliers did not treat him kindly. Even during these hard times my family retained two members of their house staff, a maid and a governess for me. They stayed with us because they had no other job or any other place to live. They were not paid a salary because we had no money, but they lived in the apartment and ate with our family—out of the same pot, as the saying goes.

My family's fur business emerged out of hard times, until the Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses in 1934 impacted it once more. To save on overhead, my parents that year downsized, moving the business to Ansbacherstrasse 56. My family lived behind the salon and workshop. The location was off the Wittenbergplatz, the site of the world-famous Kaufhaus des Westens (KaDeWe), and the elegant Tauentzienstrasse and Kurfuerstendamm—an upscale part of town. The store faced the Ansbacherstrasse, while the rest of the apartment windows looked into the courtyard. At the rear of the apartment there was an entrance that connected to the courtyard.

Except for one or two fragments of memory from my earliest days, what I remember most clearly about my childhood relates to Ansbacherstrasse, where we resided until we left Germany. My sister Resi, who helped raise me, recalled that I showed an early talent for making up stories. She said I regularly told tales that, temporarily at

least, convinced my parents of their authenticity. One of these had me saying that a man had come into our apartment when my parents were out. Upset by my story, my parents searched the rooms before I finally confessed that I had made it up.

My mother kept me in long hair long after the common age for shearing boys had passed. Before I was sent off to school, my hair was finally cut. My parents had a record collection, but the classics were not what attracted me. The song I cherished was in Yiddish and called *Ich Vill nit gehn in Cheder* (I don't want to go school). It was sung by a young boy, whose voice broke into sobs as he sang. The song captured my attitude toward school, which I viewed not so much as an opportunity to learn as something that had to be put up with.

Along with other keepsakes, some of my school records, kept in a binder, accompanied us to America. The first page is from the 8b class, in the summer of 1936, in the No.164 State School. It was issued on October 6, 1936, when I was seven. It notes that my behavior was "very good," my attentiveness was "good," and my diligence was rated "good" too. I received a "satisfactory" in German speech and in writing, Nature Studies, penmanship, drawing, music, and Physical Training. My highest mark was in arithmetic, a "good."

I made it as far as 7b class in the public school with slightly improving marks, scoring more "goods" but never attaining a "very good." My last report card from the Volksschule is dated March 20, 1937, when Jews were excluded. I don't recall being particularly ragged by my schoolmates in public school because I was Jewish. The main difference from them, as far as I was aware, was that I was excused and left school during religious instruction. I don't remember if there were other Jewish kids in my class or that school, although there might have been some.

With the expulsion of Jews from public schools, my sister's education at the Auguste Viktoria Lyceum came to an end. I was moved to a school set up by the Jewish Community in the Fasanenstrasse Temple. In this new setting, my grades, which had been on a gradual upswing, began to decline. My final report card is dated March 27, 1939. My teacher, who up until that final report had signed herself only as K. Hirsch, now wrote Kaette Sara Hirsch. This usage followed a government decree that all Jewish women had to add Sara to their name and all Jewish men Israel. This was ordered so that non-Jews who might come into contact with Jews through means of

a document would not be confused about who they were. My final report card in Berlin, a very poor one, was not returned to the school signed by my father, because we were ready to depart for America.

In Berlin, our religious observances were minimal. On High Holidays we attended a synagogue on the Kleiststrasse. We worshipped alongside other East European Jews in an unadorned hall with temporary chairs, rented for the occasion. The German Jews worshipped in the main sanctuary, with their rabbi and cantor attired all in white. Their prayer shawls were neatly folded and draped around their necks, and their heads covered not by a hat or ordinary yarmulke, but by a white high hat, almost resembling a bishop's mitre. The East European Jews wore their everyday hats or standard yarmulkes and many wrapped themselves in their tallesim, prayer shawls, as if they were sheets. These different forms of observances of Judaism were striking even to a young boy like me.

About the time that I started attending the Jewish Community school I began to go to Friday night temple services, almost always by myself, as odd as that may seem for that time and place. Although I probably was in synagogue more often than anyone else in my family, one situation arose that led my parents to think I was in danger of not adhering to Jewish traditions. It was Christmastime, and I must have asked my parents about what Saint Nicholas would bring me. In Germany, it was customary for children to shine their shoes in anticipation that Saint Nicholas would stuff them with goodies based on the quality of the polishing job. Whatever my provocation, I was swiftly dragooned into attending a Chanukah party at the home of family friends. We children received small presents, purportedly in a context to provide a Jewish alternative to the Christian holiday.

Yet the person who handed out the gifts asked questions about each kid's behavior before forking over a present, aping the Christian custom supposedly being displaced. The gift giver went further, showing up with a fake white beard and a red stocking cap, with a white puffy ball at its point, just like Saint Nicholas.

There were not many Jews living in our immediate neighborhood. The only other Jew on our block that I knew was a physician. Doctors displayed their medical specialty on a rectangular plaque affixed to the apartment building facade at street level. The background was white, with the doctor's name, specialty, telephone number, and office hours printed in black. Eventually, the German government decreed that Jewish practitioners replace the white

plaques with signs with a light blue background, still with black lettering and including a blue Star of David within a yellow circle. The purpose was to warn Aryans from seeking treatment from Jews.

Another memory from childhood was collecting money from Jews for the Jewish National Fund. According to the amounts I managed to solicit, a number of stamps were pasted on a page. When the page was filled, the rows of stamps revealed a Palestinian scene. The doctor was a generous contributor and rapidly filled up a page or more in my book with his donations.

My childhood was spent entirely within an encompassing anti-Semitism that was a natural part of my world. Its absence would have seemed strange. Even as a child, I was buffeted by the overpowering racial stereotyping of Jews as disloyal, unscrupulous, obese, thick-lipped, and greedy. Although I could with a child's insight see the lies of these racist caricatures, they overwhelmed me and inculcated a sense of inferiority in me. This feeling never wholly disappeared, as in later life I disdained going into business because the Nazis proclaimed that vocation the sole talent of the Jews.

I had direct experience of that stereotyping when I was quite young. I was playing doctor with several young boys and two young girls of like ages from our apartment house. When we were discovered, there was a brouhaha. Not long afterward, as I played with one of the kids in his apartment, the mother pointedly spoke of that incident as *Juedische schweinerei*—Jewish filth. I fully understood that she was heaping all the blame for the doctor affair on my shoulders, and I was too intimidated to protest.

The closest friend I had who was not Jewish was a boy named Haenschen, who lived across the street. I recall him as a Catholic. Among the youngsters on my block with whom I played, the typical childhood games sometimes gave way to anti-Jewish outbursts, with incidents of bullying, pushing, and shoving along with lots of name calling, all of which I channeled into the background accommodating to the world I lived in. In between these anti-Semitic incidents our group of friends occasionally went off to a movie together. During the 1936 Olympics, we collected the signatures of foreign visitors, who were rather easy to spot. We also copied license plate numbers of automobiles with great enthusiasm. I can't remember the point of it, but we amassed long columns of plate numbers in notebooks. How I adjusted to the prevailing winds is illustrated by the fact that one time I joined my buddies to collect money for the Hitler Jugend.

One day I walked with friends to a wide boulevard where it had been announced Adolf Hitler was going to pass. As the crowd along the route was thick, I climbed a tree, and caught a glimpse of Hitler speeding by in his open touring car.

At one point, the Nazi Party opened a playroom for kids in an empty store on our block. A lot of young boys gathered there, and I joined without a second thought that somehow I might not belong. Shortly after I arrived, however, the pretty young woman who was in charge politely told me I had to leave. I did not make anything out of this because I was used to being dismissed from my public school room when the class received religious instruction. A few days later I returned to the neighborhood playroom and was immediately confronted again by the young woman, who firmly explained that I was not welcome there at any time. The acts that separated a Jewish child from his German playmates, although unpleasant at the time, didn't seem very important—except that cumulatively they demonstrated even to a child the increasing isolation being imposed on Jews.

Because of my age and presumed naïveté, my parents spoke discreetly in front of me about current events. When I burst into one of my parents' conversations, my mother immediately said what a fine man Hitler was, careful to repeat it several times. I quickly realized she wanted to make sure that if I recounted anything to my playmates it would be an appreciation of Der Fuehrer. Even at my young age, I detected the disingenuous nature of the Hitler compliments and noted the thin smile as she spoke of Herr Hitler. I understood why she was keeping up this pretense and knew not to say anything about my parents' true views about Hitler to my playmates.

On weekends, my family occasionally went to a kind of Jewish country club on one of Berlin's many lakes. One afternoon my family sat at a table with friends and I went to play at the dock where sailboats were moored. I wasn't watching myself as I tried to snag a rolling soda bottle, became careless, and fell off the dock. The water was over my head and I did not know how to swim. I thrashed about in a panic, bobbing up and then going under several times. I felt I was about to drown when someone pulled me out and set me down on the dock.

The man who dove in to save me injured himself, and my grateful parents paid his medical bills. I met him again when he visited our fur store. I remember solemnly shaking his hand and expressing

my thanks. For a couple of weeks afterward, my mother disappeared in the middle of the day. She was very secretive and did not tell anyone where she was going. Each time, she carried a wrapped tube-like parcel. My sister later speculated our mother went to church on those occasions to light tapers in gratitude for my survival, there being no available Jewish ceremonial equivalent.

During my childhood in Berlin my parents welcomed many strangers into our home, and the visitors slept on a spare couch. They would spend a night or maybe two with us before moving on in search of safety abroad. My family traveled as well, not only to visit friends and relatives in England, France, and Poland. They had an additional reason for these trips. Mother and sometimes Resi would wear a fur coat and pack a few more in their luggage. When they arrived abroad, the coats would be sold and the earnings deposited by our English relatives in a British bank. Those deposits were substantially increased through an arrangement with diplomats connected to the American and French embassies in Berlin. Through an intermediary, cash was transported by a courier traveling on official business to London where it was handed over to our relatives minus the middleman's reasonable fee. My parents never knew who these couriers were, only that they were punctilious carrying out what they promised.

Occasionally, my mother took me with her to Warsaw, London, or Paris. On the trip to France in 1936, we changed trains when we reached the border. One strange but lasting memory of that trip is that the French train reeked of urine; Hitler's trains smelled better. When we were crossing the Channel heading to England, we were on the ship's deck when there was a sudden commotion. Mother asked a deckhand what was going on. He replied, "Madam, civil war has just broken out in Spain."

Before the Nazis took power, and even after they began targeting Jews, my parents went out on the town. My sister recalled that they kept up an active social life, apparently unbowed by the New Order. They loved opera, for one thing, and their photo album showed them in earlier times attending elegant costume parties. One Christmas Eve I remember watching Daddy getting dressed in white tie and tails, and off they went. Resi was out. So I decided to wander across the street to my friend's apartment where people dressed in party attire were gathering. Observing from the sidelines, sadness overcame me because as hospitable as my friend's family was, I felt

out of place at their celebration. Disconsolate, I returned across the street to our apartment and the company of our maid.

Bit by bit, the life of Jews in Germany became constricted. After Jews were prohibited from attending public theater, we dressed up to attend special theatrical events where all the performers and the audience were Jews. I remember a uniformed SS officer rambled through the crowd before one entertainment began, his very presence a menace. He may have been Adolf Eichmann himself, who shipped countless Jews to their deaths. Books and other accounts recounted that he did that sort of thing in his effort to become the Reich's top expert on Jewry. Then, again, it may have been someone else.

Over time, the anti-Semitic incidents became more frightening. I had a teenaged acquaintance, a friend of a friend, who lived around the corner. He had a collection of nude photos, which he liked to show off. To me, much younger, the photos were more of a curiosity than an attraction.

One day, while two of us were visiting him, the teenager's mother hurriedly packed a small suitcase and made her son and husband flee their apartment immediately. They must have had a warning that the Gestapo were coming for them. As they rushed out, the mother paused to give me and my friend a half a Mark each, and asked us to pray for them. I never found out what happened to them. It is unlikely that they ever returned to their Berlin apartment.

My childhood memories come back to me in fragments that I've tried to piece together. I remember accompanying Resi and some of her Gentile girlfriends on a walk in the countryside. We passed through an area where there were military barracks, crowded with young men hanging out of the windows on a warm day. It may have been a Hitler Youth encampment, or soldiers' barracks, or more likely a youth labor facility. The teenagers and young men hooted and hollered at the young girls. I was frightened by their rowdy behavior. I pleaded with my sister to get out of there, but the girls seemed not to be bothered by the boisterous attention.

In hindsight, these incidents might appear mundane, but they stuck in my memory as reminders of our life in Germany. They are snapshots of the reality that pervaded my Berlin boyhood, and they only hint at the oppressiveness, because I was a child and sheltered by my family from the worst humiliations. The terrifying reality of life in Hitler's Germany impacted our family with an insistent knocking on the door at the rear of our apartment about five or six in the

morning on October 28, 1938. The loud knocks roused the household, which besides our family included a maid, who as a Gentile working for Jews had to be forty-five or older, past childbearing age.

Two police officers, dressed in civilian clothes, were at the apartment door. They told my father that they were taking him to the police station nearby. They were courteous and said that they were only doing their job. They would not explain why Daddy was being taken into custody. I watched my father dress and heard him discuss with my mother in a low voice what his arrest could possibly be about. He speculated that it might be a complaint by a dissatisfied customer or a disgruntled former employee. After Daddy was taken away, Resi and I, silent and frightened throughout the ordeal, loudly wept in each other's arms. The Nazis had afflicted us personally as never before. Mother told Resi, then seventeen years old, to follow Daddy to the police station to try to learn why he had been arrested. It was not unusual for Resi to be called upon to undertake responsibilities far beyond her years, including smuggling a document for a family friend when she returned from a visit to Warsaw. Had she been detected, my sister could have been sent to prison or even executed.

When Resi reached the police station, she briefly glimpsed Daddy among a crowd of men. She was not allowed to speak with him in the confused situation. A police officer refused to tell her about what was unfolding. Instead, the officer advised Resi to go home and pack a small suitcase with a change of clothes for our father and bring it back to the station. As the suitcase was being packed, mother at the last minute put in a large loaf of bread. Resi returned to the police station just in time to see Daddy on the back of an open truck, along with a lot of other men, none of whom she recognized. As they were driven off, Resi ran along the side of the truck and managed to hand him the suitcase.

For the next three days we did not know what had happened to father; we had no idea if he was hurt or even alive. On the fourth day, he telephoned. He told us he was staying in the home of mother's eldest sister in Warsaw and that he was all right. He had been placed aboard a train along with other Polish Jews living in Germany who were being expelled to their motherland. The Poles, after some delay at the border, permitted the train he was on to enter the country, as they did for two other trainloads of expelled Polish Jews. Once those trains had crossed the border, the Poles hardened in their initial

hesitancy and decided they did not want any more Jews, mirroring the actions of the Germans. Trapped at the border in no-man's land, with little food or shelter, in time most of the Jews perished from gunfire and other punishments inflicted by both German and Polish soldiers. Daddy had been very lucky to survive.

Later on, my father shared some details of his train ordeal. Two anecdotes stand out in my mind. Crammed into a railcar and unable to find a comfortable spot, Father opened the suitcase Resi had handed him hoping to find his slippers to change into. He saw no slippers, but he did come upon the loaf of bread. With it, he managed to sustain himself and other men during those three arduous days. Father also told us that as an SS man hovered over the prone Jews on the floor of the train, he looked up and it struck him that on the belt buckle of the Nazi guard the words *Gott Mitt Uns* (God is with Us) was embossed.