

My Father's Exodus Story  
As told by my father and my aunt  
By Tamar Hoffmann

My father was born in December 1921, the first son of a young orthodox Jewish couple in Kassel, Germany. He had a blissful childhood, living with his parents, two younger siblings and paternal grandparents in a spacious apartment on Train Station Street (Bahnhof Strasse), Kassel, a town in the center of Germany. My grandfather owned a successful business of religious items and books and traveled frequently to distribute the books in Germany and neighboring European states.

The kids went to a Hebrew school. My great-grandfather taught them Hebrew even before they started school so they could read and recite the prayers. After school they studied and played music, which had a very important role in their lives. My father told me they had a music room in their apartment, which was his favorite room. My aunt had dance lessons as well. My grandmother devoted her time to the care of the children, supervising their school homework, music practice and read to them stories from the bible. She had a maid assisting her with the household chores. On Sundays the whole family went on one-day trips.

The orthodox Jewish community felt well integrated into the secular German community, and considered themselves Germans who practiced "Moses Jewish Faith". They felt proud to belong to the German nation and serve their "homeland". Many volunteered to serve in the German army in the First World War. My grandfather served as well, my father's uncle was killed in this war.

This sense of belonging and comfortable blissful life changed drastically in 1933, when Hitler rose to power. My father was 11 years old, my aunt was 9, my younger uncle 5 years old. My aunt told me she didn't understand much about the political changes. Their parents protected the children from the threatening reality, but she knew something was very wrong when she heard the Nazis' supporters marching in the streets at night carrying torches and shouting anti-Jewish slogans.

The danger came closer to home one day, in the summer of 1933, when my father was playing piano, and my aunt was listening in the beloved music room. An SS officer came to the apartment, conducted a search, and arrested my grandfather. He was beaten, released one week later, and determined to leave Germany. There was no question in his mind, that the only place for them was Palestine, the Holy Land: the Jews' true Homeland.

My grandmother disagreed, because of the "primitive nature of the Orient", and wanted to immigrate to Holland.

My grandfather took her on a trip to Palestine so she could see for herself what it was like. He had been there only a few months earlier, and was very impressed by the beauty of the land and the Jewish immigrants building themselves a new homeland. The children were sent to their maternal grandparents in another town (Prenzlau). During the time the family was away, the SS officers returned looking for my grandfather, my great-grandfather wired my grandfather telling him not to return. They sent a message reporting a visit from "Mr. Police officer and his wife Danger" using Hebrew words for "police officer" and "danger." My grandfather understood conditions in Germany had gotten worse, and that it was dangerous to return to Germany. The problem was how to get the children out of Germany. The children did not have their own passports as they were listed in my grandmother's passport.

My grandparents traveled back from Israel to Europe, to Switzerland, and requested assistance from the Jewish community in getting the children across the border from Germany to Switzerland. My aunt told me my father sent a Mrs. Schwab to pick up the children from the their grandparents' home in Germany, they traveled by train to Berlin, and from there to Basel, a border town. The train stopped in their home town, Kassel, where the maid stood on the platform waiting and gave the kids a shopping bag full of toys. The trip took 24 hours, the kids tried to sleep on hard wooden benches. When they arrived in Basel, they met with Mrs. Schwab, who escorted them through the passport control in the train station to the Swiss side of the border pretending to be their mother, presenting her passport. My aunt told me the Schwab couple was paid handsomely by my grandfather for their service.

When my father and his 2 younger siblings left the train station, they were met by my grandfather, who was waiting on the other side of a big circle outside the train station. I remember very well my father's story about that emotional meeting in the train station. My grandfather's plan had succeeded, the children were saved! My aunt told me more details about their arrival in Basel. They stayed with a Jewish family for a few days, then traveled to Milano, Italy. During this trip my grandfather surprised my Dad and his siblings by cooking for them, something they didn't know he could do. He also introduced them to topical fruits like watermelon which they have never tasted. On other days he fed them sardines, telling them it was a Milano specialty food. From Milano they traveled east to Merano, where my grandmother waited. They were also joined by my great-grandparents, great

aunt and great cousin. All were planning to continue their travels to Palestine together. The family was finally united, after several challenging weeks, when they hadn't known if they would ever meet again.

In Merano the family initially lived in a hotel, waiting for their "Certificat", the special visa from the British Mandate Government to immigrate to Palestine. When the Certificat didn't come, the whole family moved to an apartment where my grandmother and great aunt took care of the household. The children had a great time enjoying the beautiful town nestled on the slope of Tapeinerweg mountain, enjoyed fruits like grapes and peaches, which they had tasted only on rare occasions in cold Germany. My aunt told me that the kids hiked daily along trails around the town, climbing through vineyards to the top of the mountain, enjoying a great view of the town below. On these hikes my Dad told them made up stories, a chapter a day. When she asked about the end of the story, he admitted he didn't know himself.

While the kids were happy and carefree, their parents were anxiously waiting for the certificate, spending the money they hoped to use for their new beginning in Palestine. As the time passed and the certificate failed to arrive, my grandparents decided to leave Merano on their way to Palestine using their tourist visas before they expired. They packed all their belongings in eleven suitcases and embarked on the next chapter of their journey. They traveled by train to Trieste on the Adriatic Sea, the port from which ships sailed to Palestine. Their cabin didn't have enough room for their many suitcases, and my grandfather improvised again. He found room for the suitcases in a large bathroom. Everything went well, until the conductor spotted the suitcases. Luckily this was just before they reached their destination.

One day, after arriving in Trieste, they boarded the "Martha Washington". My aunt remembers the ship very well. To her child's eyes it looked wonderful and magical, but now as an adult, the impression is much less glamorous. My aunt told me that their voyage was one of the ship's last, and I have read and discovered that indeed the ship had transported troops from the US to Europe during the first World War, and then was berthed in America at the end of the war. Thereafter, it was sold back to its original Austrian owner. Interestingly, later on the steamship's name was changed to the Tel Aviv. It was scrapped in 1934. In 1933, it carried my dad and his family to their new homeland. The immediate family settled in a cabin with 3 double beds, one of the beds was used for the suitcases. The rest of the family stayed in another cabin with two double beds.

The trip took 5 days, and was very enjoyable for the kids. When the ship reached the port of Haifa, the family was presented with a new challenge. All the other passengers were allowed to disembark, but the British Government did not accept my dad's family tourist visas stating the family hadn't come for merely a visit, but rather intended to immigrate. My grandfather explained that the family was fleeing the Nazi persecution, and that he had applied for and paid the proper immigrant certificate, which had failed to arrive. His arguments fell on deaf ears, and the family spent an extra night on the ship. They were allowed to disembark the next morning, after my grandfather and a relative living in Palestine, paid the officials a handsome bribe. The family spent the first three days in a hotel in downtown Haifa, and then moved to another hotel in the beautiful Carmel mountains, where my grandparents lived for the rest of their lives.

The dramatic chapter of my father's family journey to life and freedom, their escape of Nazi Germany ended, opening the door to the next chapter of their story, the difficult adjustment to life in Palestine, the Promised Land. My father, who entertained his younger siblings by telling them made-up stories, couldn't have imagined a tale as rich and dramatic as his own. He also couldn't have imagined the terrible fate of those who stayed behind in Europe. Most of my grandmothers' family, except for one brother, who fled to the US, were killed by the Nazis.

My father passed away. My aunt, who is will turn 87 this year and I feel the story should be told for the benefit of the younger generations.

God bless the memory of my father, grandparents, and the six million Jews who perished during the Second World War.

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