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**German Resistance  
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**German Resistance  
1933 – 1945**



**Ralph Neuman**

**Memories from My  
Early Life in Germany  
1926 – 1946**

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**Memories from My  
Early Life in Germany**

**1926-1946**

This autobiography covers the first 20 years of my life, mostly spent in Berlin. I have tried to report the events in chronological order. What I am describing, in my own words, is solely based on my direct personal experience, on what my Mom told me regarding my life and that of our family prior to my attaining memory. I originally wrote these memoirs for my children and grandchildren in 1994 to record what I went through during the Nazi period. Of course after 50 years I could not remember all the exact dates, names, and addresses, although I do vividly recall all the events to this day. Some of the more precise details had to be clarified with the help of various documents and in conversations with people I knew at that time. For the published work, some passages of a purely personal nature have been omitted.

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## **Childhood**

(Age 1-11, from 1926 until 1938)

I was born on May 22, 1926 in Berlin, as the youngest child in my family. My parents, Gertrud and Alexander Neumann, were of Jewish descent and faith.

My mother had given birth to five other children, three girls and two boys, but before I was born, one girl, Ursula, had died of a childhood disease. The oldest was my brother Gerhard, who was fifteen years my senior. My other siblings are Waltraut (\*1913), Fred (\*1915) and Rita (\*1919). Freddie, besides myself, is the only one still alive today.

We lived on Flensburger Straße in Berlin-Tiergarten. When I was one and a half years old in November 1927, our father passed away. He died of tuberculosis. At that time the disease was widespread, especially in the inner city where we lived. For many years following the end of World War I good nutrition or the money to pay for it was not available to us. As Mom told us, they lived on turnips or turnip products for years.

At a very young age, maybe two, I was diagnosed with tuberculosis. There are three types, and over the following years I had all three. The major one was bone TB in my left foot. As told me, the surgeons wanted to amputate the foot, but Mom begged the chief surgeon on her knees not to amputate. He did save my foot. This surgeon, a professor Sauerbruch at the Charité, had pioneered new orthopaedic surgical procedures, necessitated by First World War casualties, and I was one to benefit from his skill.

As a result of this surgery, I was unable to walk for quite some time. Not until age five did I learn to walk normally. I must have suffered a good deal of pain during these early years, because to this day I have a distinct aversion and distrust towards doctors and hospitals. My earliest memories are of feeling pain in my leg and also of sitting in a high baby carriage, trying to climb out of it. The surgery had stunted the growth of my left foot, so that I had two different sized feet.

When I was about six years old, my Grandma took me shopping along this wide street in the district of Moabit, which had a park running parallel to it. Walking along, we could hear singing and marching in the distance and the noise grew louder as they came closer. At the same time, marchers came from the opposite side. The street was crowded with pedestrians. Then all hell broke loose. They had guns and started shooting. Fearing for our lives, Grandma and I took cover behind a massive door facing the street. There it seemed we waited for hours, feeling very frightened. It was an armed clash between Communists and Nazis. After it quieted down, we started for home and saw many dead and wounded in the street. Meanwhile Mom was very worried, not knowing what had happened to us.

Considering my severe health problems during the past years, Mom decided that I should live away from the unhealthy city air. She found a Christian home for children, known as Kinderheim Bethesda, willing to admit me. It was located about 30 miles from Berlin in a rural area. There, in a village called Bornim near Potsdam, I spent the next four or five years. I was very unhappy in my new environment, felt forsaken and very homesick. It was such a drastic change for a six or seven year old to be taken from home to an institution. The institution had between 20 and 30 children, and was run by Deaconess Sisters of the Protestant church. They wore black gowns tied with a thick white rope around the waist and all their hair was covered by a white ruffled hood. Their presence was authoritative and a bit scary. The head sister was Hermine Brinck, a very devoted and resolute individual. Over the years I learned to like and appreciate her.

I have both good and bad memories of the time in this children's home. During the first two grades we were only taught gothic script writing and reading. Then by the third grade a radical change occurred. The national government mandated that the Latin alphabet be substituted for the gothic script. It was a major problem for me, and I struggled for a long time to make the switch and to get it right. Otherwise, I liked these early school years. I did things together with other boys. And we went on a lot of class outings, exploring the woods and fields. We learned about local history and to identify local mushrooms, trees and plants.

Every few weeks, my Mom or Grandma came visiting me at the home. They brought me a present or some food or sweets. It always made me homesick all over again. I would question Mom when I could go home. All she would say is "soon". Later I learned that Mom had a very limited income and struggled to raise her five children mostly by herself. Grandma Amanda, her mother, was a great help and support to her, until her death in 1935 at the age of 76. Grandma's passing was a severe loss to Mom.

Once my sister Waltraut - we called her Traute - paid me a memorable visit in Bornim. She looked lovely, had blond hair and was well-dressed. A large and handsome man accompanied her. He drove us to Potsdam where we did some shopping and sightseeing. He treated us to a fabulous dinner at an expensive restaurant. It was the first time I had eaten at a restaurant. They spent all day with me, bought things for me and showed me a good time. It was such a treat that I remember it to this day. For a day I felt like a prince. Obviously the two were in love. As I learned later, he was in upper management at a big circus. Also, he was a Gentile, which made marriage in Nazi Germany an impossibility.

When Mom enrolled me at the home, the head sister was the only one who knew that I was Jewish. To spare me any trouble, it was kept secret from me.

Everyone in the home was required to attend church on Sundays. Also, as part of the daily routine, prayers were said before and after meals and at bedtime. At times when Mom was visiting me, I would talk about church and Christian religion. She would not respond, and I could sense that something was wrong.

Most grown-ups in that era followed and embraced Hitler's ideas and dictates. A huge nationalistic revival was sweeping the country. We children could feel that, and became part of it. At school and at the home, Hitler was depicted as the great national hero. In the fourth or fifth grade we had to write an essay about Hitler. Mine was the best in the class. (What an irony.)

In 1936/37 my friends and classmates started to join the Hitler youth movement, and I felt left out. One day I asked the head sister why I couldn't join with the others. She said she would talk to my Mom.

Then one school day I had to leave class because Mom had come to the home unexpectedly. She told me that I was of Jewish descent, and could no longer remain at the home. I think the decision to oust me came from the institution's management, which could no longer tolerate a Jewish child in their midst. By the time I had to leave the home, I think it was early 1938, the hate campaign against the Jews was in full force. Anti-Semitism, with its absurd and terrible racial laws, was running rampant by then. It reached into every community in Germany, fanned by the Nazi propaganda. Also it seemed that people in rural areas were more fanatic supporters of Nazism than city dwellers. Besides the racial angle, the chief propaganda was that the Jews were to blame for all the ills that had befallen the country in the past.

We left for Berlin the same day without my having a chance to say goodbye to my friends. From that time on, I never had any more contact with these classmates and friends. After the war, I tried to find out what had happened to them. All those I could remember had been soldiers and killed in action.

### **School years and forced labor**

(Age 11-16, from 1938 until 1943)

I was looking forward with excitement to being home again reunited with my Mom. Rita was happy to see me and kept calling me "my little brother". Our apartment consisted of two bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom and a long corridor. It was situated on the bottom floor of a five-story building at the Holsteiner Ufer in Berlin-Tiergarten.

At that time I had no realization of what it meant to be Jewish. Until then I had only heard about it through the hateful propaganda directed against Jews,

but now I was on the receiving end. Mom told me that all Jews were being persecuted by the Nazis and lived in fear of their lives. Many had already been put in concentration camps because they were of Jewish faith. The fear of persecution made many pack up and leave Germany. The exodus had started years earlier and accelerated during 1938/1939. It caused families to be scattered all over the globe, while some family members stayed behind. Our family was no exception. My oldest brother Gerhard was on his way to Palestine (now Israel). Brother Freddie had left in 1936 for South Africa as a journeyman after completing a four-year apprenticeship. Sister Waltraut was in Italy working as a performer for a circus.

I enjoyed being at home. Mom prepared great meals including sweet-and-sour dishes and delicious meatballs from an East Prussian recipe. It might have been my Dad's favourite since he grew up in East Prussia in a town called Wormditt. There was a piano to bang on, an old sewing machine to play with and drawers full of wondrous things.

But life was getting serious again for me. One day Mom said, "It is time to get you back to school." We visited the principal of the nearest public school, who reluctantly agreed that I could attend his school knowing that I was of Jewish descent.

During the first few weeks everything was all right. Kids talked to me and after school walked the streets with me towards home. Then one day it all changed abruptly. Word was out that I was Jewish. During recess they called me dirty names and threatened to beat me up if I came back to school. It was impossible for me to stay there. The principal must have agreed with me, since he asked my Mom not to send me back to this school. He suggested instead that I attend a parochial (Jewish) school.

That was indeed what happened. I was enrolled at the private Jewish Josef Lehmann School on Joachimsthaler Straße close to the Berlin Zoo. To reach it from our apartment required a good deal of walking and a short train ride. I did not mind. It turned out to be a wonderful school with dedicated teachers. My big dilemma, however, was that I was ill equipped to attend a Jewish school. I could not read, write, or speak Hebrew. Additionally, I lacked any knowledge of Jewish history, religion and tradition. In spite of my shortcomings, everybody treated me with tolerance and in time I picked up enough to get by.

It was difficult for me to stay friends with boys my age in the neighborhood. As soon as their parents found out that I was Jewish, they forbade the kids to play with me. At the parochial school the children came from all over Berlin but nobody else in my age group lived in my neck of the woods. Consequently, I was without a friend and alone most of the time. But that did not discourage me and I made the most of what life had to offer.



Though for a short time I made friends with a river barge boy and we had a great time. After a while, he had to move on since his dad made a living ferrying goods to Berlin from outlying locations.

Berlin was an exciting city. Our street, Holsteiner Ufer, was on the banks of the river Spree where barges were moored. As I got older, I enjoyed riding my bike to different parts of the city. But I avoided venturing into heavy traffic areas like around the school. One of my favourite destinations was Uncle Leo's. Uncle Leo was my father's brother. He would usually treat me to ice cream whenever I showed up at his jewelry store. Under a pedestrian bridge, called Borsigsteg, I used to roller skate for hours and I loved to climb its concrete abutments. After the war, I was sad to find out that the street, Holsteiner Ufer, and bridge spanning the river no longer existed. During an air bombardment the five-story apartment buildings lining one side of the street and the bridge, were destroyed. Incidentally, the same fate befell the building where I was born on Flensburger Straße, which was located about ¼ mile from Holsteiner Ufer. As I look back, much of what was dear and meaningful to me in my early life, be it persons or places, no longer exist on the physical plane.

My sister Rita was a lovely girl. She had lots of charm, was vivacious and fun-loving. Towards me, she was very loving and caring and later on when Mom was no longer with us, she felt responsible for my well-being. As later events will reveal, she even put her life on the line for me. In 1938 or 1939 when Rita was 19 or 20 years of age, she had a boyfriend named Herbert. He had completed his training as a landscape gardener and had an offer to emigrate to Bogota, Columbia, in South America. They were in love, wanted to get married and together start a new life in South America. But Mom would not give her permission, which Rita needed as a minor, so he left without her.

Without fail Mom upheld a Jewish tradition taught to her by her mother. Every Friday night, at the start of the Sabbath, after the lights were turned off, she would light candles and then say a long prayer from an old prayer book, written in both Hebrew and German. It was always a solemn and edifying event to watch her pray in the light of the candles. Afterwards, we often had rye bread with goose liver wurst, one of our favorites.

My Dad had two brothers and one sister. Both uncles, Julius and Leo, lived in Berlin. Aunt Eva lived in America. Julius was a dentist. The Nazis harassed him, as they did all the professionals, until his practice fell apart. Leo owned a jewelry store and lived in an apartment in the back of the store.

Under the cover of darkness, during the night of November 9, 1938, known as the Night of Broken Glass ("Crystal Night"), the Nazis smashed all Jewish-owned store windows, looted the stores and set fire to all the synagogues.

We could see the nearby synagogue, on Levetzowstraße, engulfed in flames. It was indeed a very scary sight, which carried with it a foreboding of worse things to come. From that time on and for the next six and a half years, life became a series of frightening and life-threatening experiences.

A few days later, we had to report to the local police station. There we were photographed and fingerprinted and were issued a special identification card with the letter "J" for "Jude" (Jew) written on the front. Also every Jew had to take on the middle name of "Israel" for males and "Sara" for females. The officer was a nasty individual filled with hatred who delighted in dressing down Jews. The three of us were overcome with the feeling that we were trapped and doomed.

Uncle Leo died suddenly of a heart attack. His sister, Eva Raven, was declared the sole heir. She sent her husband to Berlin to collect her inheritance. Since he spoke little German and needed a guide to get around in Berlin, Mom volunteered my services. He stayed in a plush hotel with elevators which I enjoyed riding up and down for kicks. To show his appreciation for my help, he would often buy me Jordan almonds and I was in heaven.

At school, attendance of students and teachers was dwindling as many families had decided to leave Germany. They packed up their belongings and headed to all parts of the world. Others had been arrested and put in concentration camps, sometimes only temporarily.

Amidst the escalating persecution, during the first half of the year 1939 my brother Gerhard, incredibly, returned to Germany from Palestine. He had tried to find work there but to no avail and in general found life in the emerging Jewish state unacceptable. He had witnessed deadly clashes between Arabs and Jews and feared for his life. Having no money to pay for his return to Germany, he had earned his passage by stoking coal on a freighter. Back in Germany, he married a woman with a young daughter. Tragically, returning to Germany cost him his life. On December 14, 1942 all three of them were deported to eastern camps and killed by the Nazis.

On September 1, 1939 Hitler's army attacked Poland. It was the start of the Second World War. I vividly remember the three of us at home listening to the radio report. It said that atrocities had been committed against German citizens near the Polish border and that the enemy had to be punished.

My brother Freddie had sent Mom an affidavit which would have allowed Mom and myself as a minor to emigrate to South Africa. But it did not include Rita. Mom decided that the three of us should stay together in Germany. She would say that hopefully the worst was over and that the Nazis would spare those Jews which had lived in Germany for generations, and fought and died

in the wars for the fatherland. But later events proved that this was wishful thinking. There was another reason for her decision. By leaving the country, Mom would have forfeited the pension she received, which was her only source of income. She did not want to become a burden to her children.

One day we were notified that Jews were no longer allowed to listen to the radio and if we owned one to turn it in to the police station. We did not comply. In those days the radio was the main source of getting news and we would listen to it at low volume so neighbors would not get suspicious. There seemed to be no end to the harassment and persecution.

In this dictatorship, even the “racially pure” German population was not allowed to listen to any foreign radio station. Anyone caught could face the death penalty.

Under the Nazi regime, Jews were stripped of most of their civil rights. The Nuremberg laws of 1935 were passed to legalize this gross injustice. Consequently, the state had the power to abuse, harm, and even murder the Jewish population. For somebody who has not lived under these conditions, it is unimaginable how inhumane, brutal and outright evil the Nazi regime was against those it labeled “undesirables”.

We were no longer allowed to go to a movie house, theater, and most restaurants. We were forbidden the use of public transportation and telephones. Public facilities were off limits to us. All electric appliances, cameras and jewelry had to be turned in. Our food ration cards were marked with a “J” and had the lowest priority when supplies were scarce. Shopping for us was allowed only for one hour in the late afternoon. The restrictions were too numerous to mention and I probably forgot many of them.

The ultimate in intimidation was when in September 1941 we were issued bright yellow patches in the shape of the six-pointed star of David with the word “Jew” in black in the center. They had to be worn in public on the left side of the chest.

It was the order of the day to hear that older people we knew were driven to committing suicide. They could no longer cope with the prohibitions, the chicaneries and the prospect of dying in a concentration camp. At one time, many had considered emigrating to a new country, but had dismissed the idea, because uprooting and trying to start a new life somewhere else seemed too difficult.

At my school things were in disarray for lack of teachers. Any meaningful learning was impossible. Then in the spring of 1940 I left the school. Today I’m not sure why. Maybe I had finished the highest grade and was due to leave school anyway.

This left me with lots of free time. Mom had some part-time work and Rita

worked full-time in a wire and cable factory. She had been drafted under the Nazis “forced labor laws”, which required everybody her age to have a full-time job at minimum wage.

Mom was having spells of extreme anxiety and fear and it was getting harder for her to cope with life. At those times, I would try to comfort her by minimizing her worries and by being optimistic. She would then light up with hope and pull out of her despair. In our family, she had to bear the responsibility for us. I was a child then, with a child’s lighthearted outlook on life, but for a mother living under those life-threatening circumstances, it must have been an awesome responsibility.

Mom was of slight build, had a wonderful face, and was very intelligent, warm-hearted and affectionate. As a young woman in Leipzig, she had studied to be a teacher. But before she had a chance to practice her profession, she met our father, was married and started a family. By now, the years of hardship and worry made her look somewhat haggard.

We enjoyed going for a walk or shopping together. Store owners knew her and treated her well, in spite of the Nazi propaganda and the imposed restrictions. They would set aside groceries for a later pickup, before the supplies ran out. Sometimes we would even sneak into a movie house or a store without wearing the star, which was of course strictly forbidden for us.

To avoid being recognized, I would ride my bike to other parts of the city without wearing the star. It gave me a good chance to explore the many suburbs with their numerous parks and lakes. I even ventured outside the city limits and saw how beautiful the countryside was.

My weeks of idling and loafing were coming to an end. In the autumn Mom enrolled me in one of the last operating private Jewish schools in the country. It was an agricultural and horticultural school located in Ahlem near Hanover, quite a few hours away from Berlin by train. The school was founded in 1893 for the purpose of training young Jews to become farmers. At that time only about 1.5% of the Jewish population in central Europe was engaged in farming.

I had a tough time getting used to the regimentation at the school, especially after enjoying so much freedom before. Our workday was about evenly divided between classroom learning and practical experience out in the fields or stables. I was the youngest and smallest among the pupils. The program was very structured and demanded hard physical labor in all kinds of weather. I vividly remember suffering with freezing hands during the winter. Gloves were a luxury. It was indeed hard for me to keep up with the work in the fields. I was just not that strong. In class, however, I had no trouble at all and excelled in remembering and reciting botanical names.

The school was self-sufficient, and run with strict discipline. In addition to the sizable farmlands, there were horses, cows, pigs and chickens. The pigs were raised for sale only, since pork was never served at the institution. The horses, which looked enormous to me, were needed for plowing the fields and pulling the wagons. Tractors were very expensive in Germany at that time and only big farms had them.

After several months, it was my turn at stable duty. This meant getting up at 3.30 A.M. to feed and water the animals at 4.00 A.M. After that the horses had to be groomed with a giant brush. To accomplish this, I had to stand on a high stool to reach the critter's back. I really was afraid of these big beasts, but I did what I was expected to do and felt proud after I'd done it. Another one of my duties was to hitch the horses to a field wagon. I definitely needed help to do that since I could barely reach their heads.

During the rainy winter months, we would spend entire days in the barn hulling beans and peas. They had been drying since harvest time, and would be used for both food and seeds. It was a perfect time to enjoy the company of others and also to reflect on one's own life. We would talk about events at school and of anything else that came to mind.

I had adjusted well to life at the school, when on November 18, 1941 the Gestapo ordered the place closed. All non-local students had to return to their hometowns. It was a sad and frightening ending not knowing what the future would hold in store for us.

Upon returning to Berlin, I found that in the meantime Mom and Rita had moved to a smaller one-bedroom apartment. This was not by choice. The government dictated where Jews may live and allowed us as little space as possible. Larger apartments were needed for the stream of bombed out families coming to Berlin from other cities. The bombing of Berlin took place much later. During the following year, we were compelled to move two more times. Our last apartment was at Levetzowstraße 19 b. Also, like Rita much earlier, Mom had been forced to work full-time in a light bulb factory (Osram).

I was assigned to work as a gardener at the Jewish cemetery in Weißensee. The job was somewhat depressing, as it consisted of planting and maintaining gravesites. The cemetery was very large and had served as a burial ground for at least 100 years. There was a large field of graves commemorating all those Jews who had died as soldiers fighting in World War I. It seemed incredible that the Third Reich would no longer honor their sacrifices.

For lack of business, my work at the cemetery was no longer needed and I was laid off in 1942. It was a privately funded operation and there were no relatives left to pay for gravesite care. The cemetery, once a well visited and

maintained place, became completely deserted. It was beautifully laid out, like a park, with large trees and shrubs lining the walks. It included quite a few mausoleums testifying to the earlier wealth and prominence of Berlin's Jewry.

The labor office told me to report for work at Osram on Helmholtzstraße as a shipping clerk. This was the same company and location where Mom was working. We were on the same shift and would walk to and from work together. I always felt close to Mom, and we would talk about our hope of a quick end to the war, before the "order to report for deportation" would reach us too.

Most of the Jewish people had already been collected and deported for so-called "resettlement" by 1942. The official word was that these transports were going to Theresienstadt, a city founded for Jews in the east of the country. But word reached us that in reality most individuals never arrived there and instead were sent to their deaths in an extermination camp. We were among the last from Berlin to be scheduled for deportation.

For those of us still remaining, living conditions had gone from bad to worse. We were issued fewer food stamps than before and coals for heating in winter were not available to us at all. Berlin can get real cold in the winter with low temperatures and icy winds. The way we survived the winter cold in 1942/43 was rather unusual. Our apartment was crammed with extra furniture, which, I believe, originally belonged to our deceased grandmother. They were massive and made of very solid wood. Rita and I suggested that we use these for fuel. At first Mom would not agree, but later on reluctantly changed her mind. We could feel how painful and heartbreaking this decision was for her. Subsequently, I spent many hours persistently sawing the furniture down to size with a handsaw for burning in a stove. It kept us from freezing and the name of the game was survival.

In the middle of February 1943 the dreaded summons from the Gestapo "to report for deportation" arrived. It specified that we were to appear at a collection site with some baggage. Without ever discussing it much in advance, the three of us decided not to comply with the order. Knowing the fate of those who had complied, it was too frightful not to opt for an alternative, a way out. The alternative was simply to disappear, to live underground. This was easier said than done. We had no real plan on how to accomplish this, except that fear drove us on.

The evening of the transport date, February 17, we packed a suitcase and some bags and left the apartment under cover of darkness to become fugitives and homeless.

## **Living underground**

(Age 16-19, from 1943 until 1945)

Our first destination was the home of a “mixed marriage couple”, meaning one spouse was Jewish the other one Gentile. Jews married to Gentiles were classified as privileged. They were tolerated by the Nazis and spared from deportation, although the Nazis’ real aim was, for these marriages to be dissolved. I understand that over the years, the Nazis succeeded in pressuring thousands of Christians to divorce their Jewish partners.

It was a very cold night when we fled, and at this late hour, the trains were running infrequently. My suitcase was quite heavy and I remember struggling under its weight. When we rang the couple’s doorbell, they were very frightened thinking it was a raid by the Gestapo. They put us up for the night, but insisted that we could not stay with them longer. As it turned out, their beds were infested with bedbugs, which drove us crazy. The following night we stayed with another couple, who showed the same fears about harboring us. By morning we were out in the street again with no place to go.

That night, in desperation, we decided to return to our apartment, if only for a few hours to get some sleep. We found a paper seal covering the keyhole, which we carefully removed and opened the door. We moved around the apartment very quietly. Before dawn broke, we left like thieves in the night, so nobody would see us. During the day, we looked up people we knew in other neighborhoods, in the hope of finding help. But nobody was willing to take the risk of sheltering us and by night we would return to our old apartment. This went on for maybe a week or longer. Then we had a break and our homelessness temporarily ended.

At Osram, I met Leo Fraines, another forced laborer, who later on played a crucial role in saving my life. He was a businessman by profession, and a bachelor by choice. He had a sunny disposition and a realistic outlook on life.

Through him, we were referred to a landlord who had a vacant one-bedroom furnished apartment. For twice or thrice the normal rent, he would let us have it. Mom agreed, and we had a place to live and hide in. It was a great relief after the risky and tense experience of sneaking in and out of our old apartment by night and wandering the streets by day. We felt very thankful to have found this place. Although it was located in the Tiergarten quarter westerly Levetzowstraße, in a part of the city where nobody knew us, we would only leave the place after dark, to be on the safe side.

Needing supplies and articles from our old apartment, we decided to go back for them. Late at night, as usual, we removed the keyhole seal and went inside. A short time later, we left carrying the things we came for. We did

this a second night. At that time, Rita and I felt that somebody either saw or observed us. Afterwards, we talked about our misgivings to Mom and about the great danger of ever going back to the old apartment. We all agreed not to take that chance again.

One evening, Rita and I left to do an errand and it was quite late before we returned. To our surprise, Mom was not at our new place. Instead, we found a note telling us that she had gone back to the old apartment to get more things. We waited but she did not return. One of us went after Mom to the old apartment but to no avail. Mom was not there and we never saw her again.

The next day, Rita and I visited Leo at his hideout and told him of Mom's disappearance. He thought, as we did, that she might have been arrested in the old apartment and strongly advised us not to return to the place we were living at. His fear was that the Gestapo might try to get Mom to reveal our whereabouts. We took his advice, picked up our most important belongings and left our otherwise perfect hiding place. The big question was where to go, where to sleep at night. The weeks, which followed, proved to be the most difficult and desperate in our struggle for survival.

Because it was very unlikely, if not impossible, that anybody would harbor two fugitives, Rita and I had to separate to find overnight hiding places. Rita found shelter with a very scared Gentile seamstress she had known for many years.

Leo had planned well in advance for the time when he needed to hide out, to live underground. He had negotiated an arrangement with a single working woman that he would pay her rent and other expenses, do all the cooking and housework, in exchange for letting him stay in her small one-bedroom apartment near Alexanderplatz. There was a sofa bed in the living room on which he slept. The name of the woman was Hedwig Höppner and she lived at Neue Königstraße 39. He had to promise never to have visitors in her apartment, but broke that promise when he helped me. The apartment had a small shallow balcony with a washing line running across its length. A white handkerchief hanging from the washing line would signal if it was ok to come up. Since this landlady went to work during the day, I could frequently spend some time there.

Leo was my only support and mainstay in the weeks which followed. Without his help, I could not have survived at that time. Although he could not give me shelter, he kept supplying me with money, food and encouragement. He had a cheerful disposition, was optimistic in his outlook, and generous by nature. He nearly belonged to my father's generation being 28 years my senior. He confided in me that he had stashed away enough money and other resources to see him through years of bad times. He had many connections to the outside world, and knew his way around the flourishing black market. His network of



contacts was amazing, and turned out to be of crucial help to me later on. Through him I had the prospect of staying at a man's apartment. Before we separated, Rita assumed that this was going to work out for me. I did not see her for many weeks thereafter, but through Leo I was always somehow informed of her whereabouts.

When I arrived at the man's address, I found a police notice on the door, proclaiming that the premises had been seized by the courts. A woman noticed me looking at the door and volunteered to tell me that the occupant had been arrested for black market activities. This left me out in the cold with no other place to go.

By day I walked the streets and rode the city trains, and by night I slept in public restrooms in train stations. It was the most miserable feeling trying to sleep in a sitting position on a hard surface with no support for my head. The lights added to the misery. During the night I felt sick, cold, and dizzy, and my body would ache from the slouching position. And yet by morning, in the light of a new day, renewed hope and strength would return. I had survived another gloomy night.

At one time, while in the restroom, an attendant turned off the lights and locked the door. I was trapped inside in the pitch dark. In one way that was scary; in another way it meant added safety from military patrols.

About every other day, but never on weekends when his landlady was home, I could visit Leo at his hideout. I was always dog-tired when I arrived and yearned to stretch out and sleep, which I did without delay. It felt heavenly to be off the street and to be spending a few hours in the safety and peacefulness of the apartment. Without Leo's life-saving help and support, I seriously doubt that I could have survived those despairing weeks. After I slept, Leo would serve me food, and give me some money and ration coupons, if he had any. Then he would wish me good luck, and I was on my way again, roaming the streets and blending in with the crowds.

At one time, Leo had word from Rita. She had found a new place to stay and was on her way there. An out-of-town couple, living in a town called Salzwedel, had hired her as a housekeeper. They knew that she was Jewish and were willing to hide her. In exchange for her services, they would provide her with bed and board. We were elated with this news.

Every time I left Leo, I was fearful of what lay ahead of me, especially the endless nights in restrooms, but I had also gained renewed stamina to carry on.

Leo had given me the address of a pub, which was owned by a widow he knew. In case I ran out of food coupons, I could go there for a meal. She would sit me down in the kitchen, and serve me delicious beefsteaks. Afterwards I commented on how tasty the beef was. She laughed and confessed that it was horsemeat. It tasted great.

Most military patrols paid little attention to me. I was sixteen years old, on the small side physically, with blond hair, looking like a typical German kid. But for a minute or two, it looked like my luck had run out. While riding a train, a military patrol stopped in front of me demanding to see my ID. I still had my Osram work card, which had my name and birthday on it, but no photo. When I worked at Osram, we were issued a work card for entering the plant. Unlike our official ID, which had a big "J" printed on it, the Osram ID did not identify me as being Jewish, only as being an employee. I was afraid that without a photo, it may not be an acceptable ID to them. They looked at me, then questioned me about what I do at Osram. I described my job duties to them, trying to be especially convincing. I had actually performed these duties as a forced laborer, which of course they did not know. I felt great relief when they handed me back my card and moved on. The work card saved my life that day in the train.

I don't know how long after her disappearance we learned that Mom had been arrested that night in the old apartment, just as we thought. She had been taken to a Gestapo collection center on the Große Hamburger Straße in Berlin, where the notorious transports to the eastern camps were assembled. Only after the war did we learn that Mom had died while in Gestapo custody in Berlin on June 26, 1943 and that she was buried at Weißensee cemetery. There were no details of the circumstances of her death available from the records. She was 58 years old.

After the war, it took Rita and me a long time to find the gravesite. It was overgrown with weeds and the wooden marker was barely legible. With Freddie's financial help and what we all chipped in, a tombstone was erected and long-term gravesite care paid for.

Leo kept up his search to find a place for me to stay, but nothing seemed to develop for quite some time. By now, I must have endured about three weeks without having shelter at night and I began to worry about how long I could go on like this. Then came my big break. As usual, I was dragging myself up the four flights to Leo's hideout, when he greeted me excitedly. He announced that he had found a place for me to stay. It would be outside the city in a village named Melchow, in a rural area near Eberswalde. I would be working for a farmer called Fleischer. He needed help badly with his farm and animals since he was running it all by himself. Leo explained that Mr. Fleischer sometimes supplied the black market with meat from his farm, for which he was paid handsomely. To avoid suspicion, he would transport the meat in suitcases to Berlin by train.

Without delay I was on my way to the Fleischers'. The prospect of getting off the street and having a bed to sleep in at night made me anxious to get there. The Fleischers had a well-kept old house with a flower garden along its front and a backyard complete with barn and outhouse. The barn housed his only

horse. Cows and sheep were kept on grazing land at that time of year.

The couple was glad to see me, had a room ready for me and was looking forward to my help. However, they were very concerned about what their neighbors and people in the village would think about my presence. He suggested that a plausible explanation would be that I was disabled and therefore exempted from military service. To make it more believable, I proposed that I should walk with a strong limp. For the next three months that is what I did, pulling my left leg along the ground when I walked. Also, we decided that I would be a visiting nephew of the family.

I must have slept for 12 hours that night. When I woke up the next day he took me on a tour of his pastures, which were scattered around the outskirts of the village. The cows and sheep were grazing peacefully and he explained my duties to me. About once a week we had to move the animals to a different pasture; then the cows had to be milked daily (by hand) and hay cut for the horse. I had to learn how to use a scythe to mow the fresh hay. It took me a while to get the hang of it without running the tip of the blade into the ground. It is quite a skill to get an even cut with the very long blade.

I enjoyed taking care of the animals, even though the cows at milking time would sometimes whack me hard with their tails. The horse and I became good friends. He liked to pull the little wagon I hitched him up to for the hay run. I loved the feeling of being moved through space, powered by a living creature. He was my main mode of transportation for reaching the cows and the sheep. The other mode was a bicycle.

Being in the countryside was a welcome change for me. No longer did I have to wander aimlessly through the city. Instead, life took on a new purpose. But most of all, I was no longer homeless.

Mr. Fleischer would tell me about his experiences as a soldier at the beginning of the war in 1939. He took part in the initial campaign in Poland, where he witnessed terrible atrocities against the Polish people. It affected him psychologically to the extent that the military discharged him. His age, about 45, might also have been a factor. Judging by his state of mind, I suspect that he might have been a participant in the atrocities of which he spoke.

I had very little direct contact with other villagers. They would see me go by driving the wagon or on my bicycle and wave to me. The exception was the local gendarme, who was a friend of the Fleischers. He would stop by to get some extra milk and we would chat about the daily going-ons. He had accepted the story that I was Fleischer's nephew and that I had some training in agriculture. Indeed, the knowledge I had gained in Ahlem proved to be invaluable.

It was almost summertime and the air was heavy with fragrances from nature's blossoms. One day – it must have been late summer – I was in the pasture milking the cows when I saw a figure in the distance coming my way. I could

tell that it was not Mr. Fleischer, who often would join me at milking time. All of a sudden, I realized who it was. It was my sister Rita, who I thought was in Salzwedel, a long way from there. I jumped up to meet her. We were happy to see each other and Rita took a long drink of milk right from the bucket. She then recounted what had happened to her.

The couple she was working for had treated her well. They gave her a room for herself, took care of all her needs and even paid her a salary. The arrangement was ideal for both parties. The couple had an extensive circle of friends and acquaintances whom they often entertained. Unfortunately, the hostess confided to one of her closest friends that Rita was Jewish. This woman could not keep a secret and eventually word reached a Nazi sympathizer, who notified the police. Rita was arrested and held for the Gestapo at the police station in an upstairs room with no bars on the windows. When everybody had left the room, she climbed out of the second-story window, slid down a pipe and escaped. Luckily, nobody saw her and she hid out in an alley until darkness. She managed to get on a train to Berlin without being spotted. From Leo, she learned of my whereabouts, and there she was.

The Fleischers agreed to let her stay for a few days, but no longer. I felt very sad when she left, because she had no definite place where she could stay. She made her way back to Berlin and found shelter through a contact of the Christian church. At the time, I was not aware of the existence of a small network of Christian clergy who helped Jews who had gone underground.

Mr. Fleischer would make trips to Berlin carrying heavy suitcases. On one trip, I accompanied him and had a chance to see Rita and Leo. They were overjoyed to see me and very happy that I had found what appeared to be a permanent home. Once in Berlin, Mr. Fleischer and I separated on the understanding that each of us would return to Eberswalde on his own.

I missed the last train leaving Bernau, a distant suburb of Berlin, for Eberswalde and decided to walk the around nine miles. It was a moonlit, balmy night with exceptional visibility. The frogs and crickets were giving a concert and the night sky was glistening with the stars. There was not a soul on or off the highway, except for an occasional rabbit dashing about. While walking, I reflected on my visit to see Rita and Leo. Everything was going well for the three of us, and I felt grateful. Rita had been very upbeat and confident, a quality she had always possessed. She had found a circle of church-connected individuals who would take turns in providing her with shelter and food. It meant moving around a lot to avoid suspicion, since the law required that for any stay longer than a few days, a person had to register with the local police. The danger of neighbors watching and reporting suspicious people to the police was very real.

It was a very long walk and my thoughts also turned to Mom's fate. I was

overcome with great sadness and cried for a long time. In the wee hours of the morning, I reached my destination and had to wake up the Fleischers to let me in.

One day, Mr. Fleischer returned from a trip to Berlin and brought with him an elderly gentleman. He explained that the man, also a Jew, would be staying at his house temporarily. There was an extra bedroom in the house, which had recently been vacated by one of his daughters. The man, a lawyer by profession, hardly talked, and his eyes expressed fear. I think he had serious psychological problems. Like many of his generation, they were driven to insanity by the actions of the Nazis.

As usual, Mr. Fleischer's friend the gendarme stopped by for some milk. The three of us were standing in the backyard talking when the guest came out of the outhouse. Seeing the uniformed gendarme caused him to panic and he shouted "I am only a poor Jew; please don't hurt me". I thought I had been struck by lightning and that the end was near.

Mr. Fleischer quickly took the man's arm, walked him into the house and promptly reappeared. My first impulse was to run, but that would have been a dead giveaway. Instead I tended to my chores, while Fleischer talked to his friend.

After his friend left, we talked the situation over. He explained that he had made a mistake in agreeing to hide this man and that he would posthaste take him back to Berlin. As regards his friend the gendarme, he felt that once the man was gone, he would not report him. But I saw a worried look on his face and asked what else was being said. It turned out that his friend had become suspicious about my identity and was questioning him about me. I did not like the sound of this, but decided to wait until the following day for my next move.

The Fleischers did not want to lose me, and I had greatly hoped to stay with them for a long time. But that had all changed suddenly. We had to face reality and deal with the new circumstances.

Reluctantly, we agreed that I should leave, since staying would be too risky for both of us. While Mrs. Fleischer was crying, he gave me some money and food. I packed my belongings and headed back to Berlin, whence I had come three months earlier.

Unlike when I had first arrived at Fleischer's, my situation was not desperate. Because of Rita's contacts, I found shelter in Berlin right away. Actually, I was able to stay with Rita, but after a few days we had to move. There was a vicar Wiesinger in Potsdam willing to put us up in his parish house. He was extremely cautious and would not allow us to go out in the street. It was the closest feeling to being in prison.

After Potsdam, we went back to Berlin. It was much easier to blend in and get lost in the big city than in a smaller place. Leo meanwhile had contacted an old

Gentile friend in the hope of securing shelter for me. He was successful, and his friend agreed that I could stay at his apartment as long as it was safe to do so. The man - I forgot his name and address - worked nightshifts, and since the apartment had only one bed, this worked out very well. Leo kept supplying me with food and money, so that his friend did not have to share his food rations with me. Rita's present hosts could not accommodate two people, so that Leo's success with his friend came in the nick of time for me.

As was usually the case, to be staying at one address too long would arouse the curiosity and suspicion of neighbors. The government openly encouraged spying on others with the intent of trapping those it considered enemies of state, be it for political, ideological, or racial reasons. To minimize exposure of being seen and discovered, I would stay mostly inside, and only venture outside after dark.

I was lonely and restless and time seemed to stand still. Being cooped up inside with nothing to do was such a contrast to the active life on the farm. I needed to be busy and doing something constructive, but what? Then, thinking back to the desperate time a few months earlier when I had no place to stay, I realized how fortunate I was to be in a safe hiding place. To pass the time, I would read anything I could get hold of, but my mind was not really on what I read.

Then I suffered a major set-back. After hiding several weeks in the man's apartment, he asked me to leave. It gave me quite a shock. I have forgotten the reason why I had to leave, but the result was frightening. It meant roaming the streets again and spending the nights in restrooms. I tried to suppress the oncoming feelings of fear and hopelessness that I had known before. However, I again found refuge with Leo for a few hours a day, which was of enormous help and comfort to me.

After a few homeless nights, Rita's connections came to my rescue. She had met the Wendland family, for whom she did housecleaning. Walter Wendland was the pastor of the large Gethsemane congregation in the Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg. His wife Agnes, addressed as "Frau Pfarrer", and their two daughters, Ruth and Angelika, belonged to the circle of Christians willing to help and in our case hide Jews living underground. They actively resisted and opposed the Nazi dictates.

When Rita told them of my plight, they offered to invite me into their home and provide me with shelter and food. Rita lost no time tracking me down, and introduced me to the Wendlands. They welcomed me with open arms. Here were courageous, wonderful people willing to risk their lives in order to save mine. Frau Pfarrer, however, explained that her husband must be shielded from knowing that we were illegal Jews. As the minister of a large congregation, knowing our true identity could have jeopardized his position in the community.

The pastor was informed by the family that we were bombed-out refugees and that we had lost our parents. It was perfectly believable. He did not question us or demand any details about our life at first. Later on, especially at mealtimes, he would venture a question. Usually, the quick-witted Frau Pfarrer would answer it to his satisfaction before we had a chance to respond. She knew how to handle her husband. Herr Pfarrer (pastor) was completely absorbed in his pastoral duties and his writings. When at home, he would spend almost all the time in his study. In addition to being the shepherd of his congregation, he held a professorship in church history at the Berlin University and would lecture there. He also wrote a voluminous book on the subject. He was a warm-hearted individual who loved humor and was interested in many topics. But history and philosophy were his real love.

Tragically, in 1942 the Wendlands had lost their only son in the war. He was a soldier and was killed in action. Their hope had been that he would study theology and become a minister like his father. There was a long tradition of pastors in the Wendland family spanning many generations. Also their daughter, Ruth Wendland, who had passed the school leaving examination in 1933, decided in 1935 to study theology to become a minister. In October 1943, when the god-sent help of the Wendlands began, Ruth had completed her studies and was working as a vicar in a parish in Berlin-Zehlendorf. Angelika was married to Günter Rutenborn and the couple lived in a parish house in Senzke, where he was pastor of the local congregation.

Frau Pfarrer was the pivotal person in the family and took charge of the handling of all their affairs. In spite of the loss of her son, she retained an admirable cheerfulness and a zest for life. She had the ability to rise above the petty everyday problems and gravitated towards that which is positive and right in life. When faced with trouble or danger, her quick mind could conjure up a plausible explanation or course of action, thereby averting a potential crisis. Always in good spirits, she was loving, caring and unselfish. In many ways, she was like a mother to me and her memory is dear.

At the Wendlands', at Gethsemanestraße 9, I had my own small room next to the rear stairwell off a long corridor. At first, I would stay in my room during air raids instead of going down to the cellar, which served as a shelter. Later on, when the bombardments were more frequent and intense, Frau Pfarrer insisted that I join them in the shelter. Somehow, I was not afraid. On the contrary, I welcomed the air raids as a sign that the Nazis were getting beaten.

To give the appearance of going to work, it was imperative that I leave the house every morning and return by late afternoon. Fortunately, there were a number of people I could spend time with during the day. Also, Frau Pfarrer would arrange for me to do odd jobs for those who belonged to the same circle of helpers as the Wendlands. Frau Pfarrer made sure that I had breakfast

before I left for the day. Since I had no ration cards of my own, she shared her family's food with me. She took such good care of me, and always had something cheerful and encouraging to say. It was a real home environment for me.

The reason I did not turn out to be dull-witted and uneducated is partly due to efforts of Frau Dr. Elisabeth Abegg. She allowed me to go to her home twice a week for private tutoring. She had been a teacher all her life, had earned a doctoral degree in education, and was thoroughly opposed to the Nazi regime and what it stood for. As a Quaker and a Social Democrat she vehemently disagreed with the Nazi's approach to education. Ultimately, she was forced out of her teaching position and had to accept early retirement when she was in her fifties.

Elisabeth Abegg grew up in Strasbourg/Alsace, where it is customary for most inhabitants to speak French and German. Consequently, she was fluent in both, and in her teaching career she specialized in languages, literature and history. Like the Wendlands, she was part of a network of individuals who helped illegal Jews to survive. With her older sister Julie, she lived in an apartment at Berliner Straße 24 (today it is Tempelhofer Damm 56) near Tempelhof airport. The Wendlands had referred me to this outstanding teacher, and for almost two years she instructed me on a variety of school subjects.

Ruth Wendland was like an older sister to me. Although reserved in her outward manner, she possessed inner strength and a spirit of adventure. She was self-assured, already evident by her energetic walk, and she had lots of spunk. When faced with danger, she would not shun from it, but deal with it courageously.

When a crisis developed in Gethsemanestraße so that I had to leave quickly, Ruth took me with her to Zehlendorf-West. There in a house she was minding for friends, she hid me for several weeks until the danger had passed. I don't remember exactly the reason for the crisis, but I have a vague recollection that somebody had reported suspicious activities to the Gestapo, who then staked out the house. Fortunately, the family had advanced warning, allowing us to take evasive action. Incidentally, the same happened another time to Frau Dr. Abegg and for a while I had to suspend my visits to her place, because the Gestapo had staked out her house.

The house in Zehlendorf had a nice garden, but during the 1 day I did not dare to go outside for fear of being seen. After dark Ruth and I would be out in the garden watching the anti-aircraft guns shooting at the bombers. Visibility was usually very good because of the enforced blackout. It was a tremendous spectacle, with tracers lighting up the sky and occasionally we saw a flaming aircraft plummeting to earth. I would cringe at the thought



that human beings were trapped in that burning plane. Then one day, Ruth reported that people had been seriously hurt from falling shrapnel. For want of helmets, we decided to put cooking pots on our heads for protection. As fate had it, as soon as I stepped outside that night, a piece of shrapnel hit the side of the pot denting it. This was the end of our fearless viewing of the sky during an air raid. It seems, like a cat, I had several lives.

Back on Gethsemanestraße, I resumed my previous routine of leaving for work in the morning. One of my destinations was Dr. Aub in Friedrichshain. He was the father of a friend of Wendland's deceased son. He had a medical practice at Frankfurter Allee 336 and let me stay in his private study while he saw his patients. Having ample time and being surrounded by a library of books, I started reading medical literature. I found the information fascinating. Around noon, Dr. Aub would spend some time with me while we ate. I would pounce on him with lots of medical questions from texts I had just read. Sometimes he would smile and say that after the war maybe I should try to study medicine.

If the distances were not too long, I would ride a bicycle to get me to where I was going. It was safer than taking the trains, because it minimized the likelihood of being stopped by a military patrol, something I had experienced about a year earlier. The only ID in my possession still was my Osram work card.

One day Frau Pfarrer asked me to help her sister - whom I had never met - get some work done moving furniture. The arrangement was made that I would leave in the afternoon and stay there overnight to do most of the work the following day. On the agreed day, the relative phoned that she was not quite ready to proceed and I should instead come a few days later. That night during an air raid, a blockbuster bomb hit the building, killing everybody in it including those who had sought shelter in the basement.

By the summer of 1944, the air raids were a daily occurrence and seemed to last even longer. Sometimes the bombings took place during the day and again at night. Reports had it that a thousand bombers at a time were converging on the city.

When the sirens went off for one particular daytime air raid, I was about to change trains at the major subway hub at Alexanderplatz. This station had a three-tier system, with platforms on each level. The shelter signs pointed to the lowest level where it seemed a thousand people had already assembled by the time I arrived. I must have been there about ten minutes, when the noise of explosions could be heard overhead. A few minutes later there were more explosions. This time the station support columns were moving and it felt like a major earthquake. I noticed some people jumping down onto the track and disappearing under the platform. I figured this might be a safe place to be and joined them. Indeed, there was about a four foot recess under the platform which offered a lot of protection in case of falling debris. No sooner

had I taken cover under this platform than more explosions occurred above, sending masses of debris cascading down the stairs and covering these completely. The air was filled with a heavy dust and visibility was like that in a dense fog. Breathing became difficult and a sense of choking prevailed. It was very scary. People were panic-stricken and screaming. The fear of being trapped and buried alive was very real at that moment. I stayed under the platform until the action stopped. Eventually the dust began to settle and some visibility returned. Then I saw people climbing on all fours up the debris-covered stairs and joined them to make my way back up to the surface.

The air outside was filled with dust, cinders and smoke. Before the air raid, the sun was bright in the sky, but now it was completely obliterated by the clouds of heavy dust and smoke. Bomb craters dotted the surface of the square and the city was burning in all directions. I walked for a long time through the burning and devastated city, before reaching my destination. I thanked God for coming out of this alive. The clothing I wore that day, even after numerous washings, still smelled as if they just come out of a smokehouse.

A few days prior to becoming fugitives, Mom, Rita and I had visited the cemetery in Weißensee. There, on my father's grave, we buried a thick-walled metal strongbox containing our Jewish ID cards, money, and other personal records and information. The idea was to have proof of our identity, should we come out of this alive. Also, if one of us should be in need of money, we would have a source to get some.

Since living underground, Rita and I had been to the cemetery once or twice, each time in trepidation for our safety. After all, it was a Jewish cemetery which might be under Gestapo surveillance. For the purpose of finding and tracking down escaped Jews, the Gestapo employed so-called "catchers". They were Jews or offspring from mixed marriages. Hoping to be spared deportation they worked for the Gestapo and against their own kind by trying to find and arrest Jews who were living underground.

On this bright summer day in 1944, Rita and I decided to again visit our father's gravesite to get some money from the strongbox. We had carefully surveyed the scene before walking through the cemetery gate and it was uneventful. It occurred to us that many visitors were Gentiles, who had a Jewish spouse buried at the cemetery. Anyway, that day the place was deserted, except for a caretaker, who would open and close the main gate daily.

When we arrived at the cemetery, we had a double surprise. Bombs had fallen on some of the fields, making large craters and exposing the gravesites. It was shocking to see bones lying in the dirt. But also, to our delight, there were hundreds of sheets of ration cards everywhere we looked. They came in different colors for meat, bread and dairy products and looked perfectly authentic. We had struck a bonanza and excitedly picked up a large quantity of these to take with us. Obviously, Allied planes had dropped these to confound the German food rationing system.

Frau Pfarrer was as delighted as we were with this find and we started making plans immediately on how best to redeem the ration coupons. We would go shopping in other neighborhoods and purchase only modest quantities of the items at one time. This way it would not arouse suspicion and minimize the risk of being discovered. It was a very successful plan but not entirely without anxiety. The sudden abundance of food was a welcome change which all of us enjoyed. Even Herr Pfarrer, who was not privy to our good fortune, noticed the ample supply of food and questioned his wife about it. As usual, she had a plausible, but fictional, explanation.

On one of my lesson days at Frau Dr. Abegg's, she asked me to accompany her on a visit to a friend. While we were in the friend's apartment the air-raid sirens went off and we headed for the shelter in the cellar of the building. When the all-clear sounded, we could hear a lot of commotion outside in the street. Looking up, I could see smoke rising from the attic of the building. An older man appeared dressed in protective clothing and helmet carrying an ax. I believe he was the block air-raid warden. He stood there saying "What do I do, I can't go up there". I asked if I could be of help and he handed me this equipment. Once in the attic, I saw where the floor and roof timbers were burning and smoldering. In a short time, I was able to douse the hot spots with water and sand which had been conveniently placed near the walk-up to the attic. Meanwhile, others came to help carrying buckets of water and sand. The building's tenants were very grateful for my help and especially for my taking the initiative in extinguishing the fire. They wanted to know my name, address and Hitler youth unit to nominate me for a commendation or medal. At this point Frau Dr. Abegg intervened in telling them that I was from out of town and would be leaving the next day. She gave me a fictitious name and we left in a hurry.

In the late summer of 1944, Rita and Frau Dr. Abegg conceived a daring plan, which would result in the legitimization of Rita's existence in Nazi Germany. To accomplish this, records were needed to establish her as a Gentile citizen. Rita, at the time, was without any kind of ID papers, which posed a real threat to her in case she was challenged to show her ID.

Many German cities and towns had suffered serious damage under intense Allied bombardments. In some cities, the city halls, which contained all the personal records of its inhabitants, were destroyed. This provided an ideal opening for claiming to hail from such a city. I believe Frau Dr. Abegg did the research and selected a city in which all records had been destroyed and which had sent a great number of their bombed-out victims to Berlin.

A special government agency was handling cases of bombed-out victims who had lost everything. With great courage and fortitude, the two went to the appropriate office where Frau Dr. Abegg explained that Rita was her bombed-out niece from such and such a city. She further stated that all her

possessions, including her purse which contained her ID papers, were burnt during that terrible bombardment. She had given Rita a fictitious name and address, knowing that it could not be traced.

Rita was promptly issued an ID card, was given food ration coupons and an address for finding lodging. She was told to report to the employment office for job placement in a few days. The plan was a triumphant success and she had instantly become a legitimate German citizen. She was safe now with her new identity. All of us were elated with this outcome. It gave us a tremendous boost in our confidence that we could survive these perilous and trying times.

When Rita went to the employment office, they had openings for entry level clerks, and she was assigned to work for a group of staff personnel in the Speer ministry of "Supply and Distribution of War Materials". For work at the ministry, she was issued a photo ID with a low level security clearance. It was a fantastic change, allowing her to begin a new life.

In the weeks following the Normandy invasion, it became evident that Germany had lost the war. By late summer 1944 the Russians had reached eastern Poland, and the Allies had liberated Paris. It made us feel reassured that the end was in sight.

To fill my daytime hours away from Gethsemanestraße, I kept busy doing odd jobs for a number of people. During that time, I was fortunate to meet many interesting and courageous individuals. One was Pastor Grüber, a prominent theologian in the Protestant church. I recall taking a long walk with him during which he told me about the gruesome life in the concentration camp. I also remember that he asked me what I would do if I got caught. It left me feeling downhearted and fearful. Quite recently I found out that between 1940 and 1943 he had spent two and a half years in concentration camps for helping Christians of Jewish descent to escape Nazi Germany. At the Eichmann trial in Israel in 1961 he was a principal witness for the prosecution. His testimony included some of Rita's and my experiences as illegals (escapees) and became part of the court records. We would not have been aware of this if it had not been for Eva Fruchtman, a good friend of ours from Long Island, N.Y. She sent us a telegram with the words: "Dear Neumans, on May 16 Pastor Grüber mentioned Ralph and Rita and details of your rescue in the indictment." Her husband, Milton Fruchtman had exclusive filming rights at the trial. He heard Pastor Grüber describe some of our experiences and hardships as well as details of our rescue. I find his testimony regarding us inaccurate in some of the details, but not in the essential facts.

Another person I met was Pfarrer Poelchau. I did errands for him on my bicycle. He had told me that if I ever needed help, I could count on him.

Pfarrer Poelchau was the prison pastor in Plötzensee and Tegel. He was the last person to see those who were condemned to die for plotting Hitler's assassination on July 20, 1944.

Frau Pfarrer's daughter Angelika invited me to spend some time at their parish house in Senzke, about 40 miles to the west of Berlin. Her husband, Günter Rutenborn, was the local pastor. Besides being a pastor, he was an accomplished pianist and playwright. Angelika requested that I help them with their landscaping and their vegetable garden. I laid out an oval flower bed in front of the house. To get it perfectly oval required some fancy geometry and it turned out great. For the vegetable garden, among other produce I planted asparagus, a culture that requires three years of dormancy before the harvest is ready. I liked doing these projects and I think the couple enjoyed the results for many years to come.

Rita was doing well in her new role as a dutiful "Aryan". She enjoyed the new freedom of being able to move about without fear. At work, she had befriended some people, among them an influential Nazi who had an elevated position in the party. Rita figured that he might be of help to me in obtaining ID papers. I still only had my Osram ID. She must have confided in him, because next thing I knew, we were on our way to his office close to Kurfürstendamm in the darkness of the evening. The building we entered had a sign on it, proclaiming that it houses the offices of the regional SA. (SA stands for Sturmabteilung.) We climbed one flight and found the Nazi's office. He was alone behind an enormous desk. The room was decorated with an assortment of Nazi flags and the walls were covered with pictures of his buddies dressed in Nazi uniforms either in brown or grey. The largest pictures showed Hitler at various functions. We had entered a Nazi shrine and for a minute I thought that Rita had lost her sanity by taking us there. When the man started to talk, I began feeling at ease. He explained that he was indeed willing to help me get an ID paper. Also, that as commander of the outfit, he had the authority to issue IDs. What he suggested was that he use my real name on the document, but with Danzig as my birthplace. That way, he said, it would be difficult to make inquiries. The ID further stated that I was an SA man with a low rank and that I was exempt from regular military service. He had neatly typed all this information on a sheet of paper bearing the letterhead of the SA unit. Finally, he placed the official seal at the bottom of the page. I gave a sigh of relief when we were back out in the street.

Very early in 1945, the war was being fought deep inside German territory. In spite of decisive and major defeats suffered by the German army, the Nazi propaganda machine insisted that the Allied advances constituted only a temporary set-back. The retreat, they said, was planned to allow the German forces an all out offensive later on. In the newsreels they shouted about victory

being close at hand. The age limits for military service were expanded at both ends. Younger as well as older men were drafted to beef up the armed forces. Even at this point in time, many Germans idolized Hitler and were blinded by his extreme fanaticism. They did not realize that he was willing to sacrifice the entire population if he could. And they still believed in his pernicious lies.

Large numbers of troops were mobilized and could be seen assembling in the streets, in train stations and around public buildings. They were on their way to the fighting fronts or were deployed for the defense of Berlin and its environs. Soldiers in uniform were everywhere. The atmosphere was charged with activity and anticipation. Also, there was no let-up in the air bombardments, which added to the city's homeless problem. The end of the war was three or four months away.

Throughout the war, prisoners of war were forced to work as laborers in the German factories. They were mostly Russian soldiers. Often, they were paraded through the streets of Berlin. They looked pitiful with torn clothing, worn shoes or no shoes at all. Undernourished and weak, many looked quite sick; and it was wintertime with snow and cold winds.

One day in mid-February 1945, Frau Pfarrer asked me to escort the niece of the sexton who had been staying with them to the train station. She had some heavy luggage to take along and was ready to go home. Her train originated from a long distance terminal Lehrter Bahnhof. I accompanied her to the terminal and then made a very careless and terribly grave mistake. I boarded the train with her to help her with the luggage. While in the train, a military patrol stopped me and asked for my ID. I showed them my SA ID. Their reaction was devastating. They said that people like me were nothing but draft dodgers and that being part of the SA was no longer a reason to be exempted from regular military service. Along with their explanation, they uttered a few juicy curses against the SA. I was taken into custody and walked over to their guard station. By now I was terrified and my mind kept searching for a way to escape. But that was impossible since military police were everywhere around the terminal.

My situation was especially difficult because I had a small pistol with me. I had got it from Frau Wendland's brother-in-law about two weeks earlier. His name was Fritz Linke and as a pastor he had fled from the Oderbruch region to Berlin as the Soviet troops advanced. He had been a soldier in the armed forces, but had already been discharged a long time before. I don't know where he got the pistol from. It might have been a Wehrmacht pistol. In any case he wanted to get rid of it. Without knowing who I really was and for the simple reason that he thought a young man would be thrilled to have a pistol, he gave it to me, and I pocketed it. It was, of course, immediately confiscated on my arrest.

At the guard station, the officer in charge looked at my SA ID and asked where I was employed. I told him at Osram and showed him my Osram ID card. He

said that he would have to make some phone calls. It took what seemed an eternity before he returned, and in disbelief looked at me and said: "You are a wanted Jew, who has escaped arrest for two years; that is incredible." He then informed me that the Gestapo was on its way to pick me up. Barely an hour before, I had had great confidence in my survival. Now my chances of coming out of this alive had been reduced to zero. I was quite scared of what would happen to me next.

Sandwiched between two Gestapo agents in back of a limousine, I was driven to their headquarters in Oranienburger Straße. I was told to undress down to my shorts. My clothing and shoes were searched. In one shoe I had stashed some emergency money, which they discovered. That was when the first beating started with what looked like a short whip. Then the interrogation began. First, they wanted to know how I had obtained the SA ID. When I told them the truth, without mentioning Rita, the agent with the whip went into a tirade. He shouted that no SA leader would issue such an ID to a Jew and that I must have stolen the stationery and seal, all the while beating me. Questions were asked about my whereabouts while living underground. At one point he yelled "How many German girls did you screw and make pregnant". When he kept up his beatings, the second agent interfered and said something to the effect that I was a wanted Jew not a criminal. The beatings stopped.

I was taken to the building's cellar which served as a dungeon. At the bottom of the stairs was a locked enclosure leading to a large open area which looked like a big cage. Within the big cage was a smaller one. I was put in the smaller cage, which was locked after me. It was packed with prisoners. There was hardly enough floor space for all the men to stretch out on. Nobody talked and most did not even move. Only one person was sitting up and I tried to talk to him. He was Russian and spoke some German. Below the ceiling on the outside wall were small barred windows. He told me that this side faced a courtyard where prisoners were executed by a firing squad regularly. What seemed to be the next day, although I had completely lost track of time, we could hear shots coming from the courtyard. The people around me looked half dead with not enough energy to talk or sit up. A strong stench pervaded the air. Every few hours, the cages were unlocked and we were allowed to use the latrine and drink water from the only faucet available. When it was my turn to drink, I took too long for the guards liking and he started beating me with something made of metal. I was suffering from a hellish thirst and wanted to drink more. I had nothing to drink or eat for about 12-16 hours. In this horrible situation, if I could have found a way to end my life, I would have done so.

I don't know how long I was kept in the dungeon. My guess is one to two days. Then I was taken back upstairs to the room of the Gestapo agents. On the

way up, I passed a mirror in a hall and had a quick look at my face. It looked frightful, almost insane, with huge eyes. When we entered the room, I saw Rita and Frau Pfarrer sitting there. Rita took one look at me, jumped up and gave off a blood curdling yell. To reassure her that I had not gone over the brink, I quickly said: "I am alright, I am not insane." But I was shocked to find Rita present. I had hoped that with her new identity, she was safe and out of reach of the Gestapo. In the hope of being able to help me and against the advice of everybody, she decided to give herself up and accompany Frau Pfarrer to Gestapo headquarters. She felt responsible for me and had promised our Mom to look after me. She took this very seriously. From a calculated point of view, it was a suicidal move and at an earlier time in our underground existence could have cost her her life. The fact that by this time the war was in its end phase greatly favored our survival.

The agent who had beaten me earlier now asked me politely to sit down. He then explained that Rita and I would be transferred to a collection site at another location. There we would be processed for deportation to an eastern camp. This did not make much sense, since most of eastern Germany was already in Russian hands. While talking to us, he noticed my swollen right arm. Indeed, it was hurting me quite a bit. The veins were visible and had taken on a dark blue color which was creeping up my arm. As I found out later, I had blood poisoning from a wound on my lower arm inflicted by the mistreatment. He said that the collection site had a hospital where my injury would be treated.

While we were walking downstairs to a waiting car, Rita and I had a chance to talk. At that moment she was very frightened, the way I was a day or two earlier when I was caught and interrogated. By now, after all the punishment I had taken and enduring life in the dungeon, I felt that dying may not be the worst of it. I told her that they can do no more than kill us. Rita was aghast at the brutality I had experienced at the hands of the Gestapo and was worried about my injury.

Frau Pfarrer had to remain in Gestapo custody and was placed in a labor rehabilitation camp at Große Hamburger Straße 26 for the next three weeks (from February 20 until March 14, 1945). During her confinement she took ill and it was arranged that her daughter Ruth take her place at the camp. Ruth was kept there for three days and then released. As she told me later, she was treated well during her confinement. Apparently, since the end of the war was in sight (about seven weeks away) the Gestapo did not pursue the prosecution against the Wendlands any further. I felt so bad that their courageous effort to save my life had caused them all this trouble and distress. Before parting at Gestapo headquarters we tearfully embraced and kissed Frau Pfarrer with a feeling of both apprehension and hope.



We were taken to the Jewish hospital in the district of Wedding which was under the control of the Gestapo. There was a prison and a collection point for arrested Jews at the corner of Iranische Straße and Schulstraße. I was admitted to the prison hospital, while Rita was taken to an adjacent building which housed the staging camp for the transports to the east. First they cleaned and disinfected me, then put me in a bed. I was given sulpha drugs to fight the infection in my arm. Penicillin and other antibiotics were unknown at that time. It felt heavenly to rest in a bed, even though I was in pain for at least another week.

To my great surprise, Ruth Wendland visited me at the prison hospital. She brought me a sheet cake which was dripping with fat. It tasted scrumptious and I could not stop eating it. Although it agreed with me, I broke out in hives, probably as a result of all the rich ingredients. A nurse smuggled some of the cake to Rita. Rita was allowed only once to visit me during my hospital stay.

Although we were destined for an extermination camp, the Nazi authorities wanted me to be healthy when I arrived there. This was utterly paradoxical. It had to do with their devilish pretense to appear humane and law-abiding towards the outside world. This way the general population was kept in the dark about their true intentions. Another example of this paradoxical conduct had to do with legalizing our own deportation. The evening before the transport was to leave, everyone was given a legal document to sign, stating that the individual assigns all his possessions to the Third Reich and agrees to be “resettled”. We were each given a copy, which I still have, because that night Rita and I were able to escape.

After I was well enough, I was transferred to the camp area where Rita was. It was a very large room, like a ward, with mattresses side by side covering the floor along the walls. There were 40 to 50 people of all nationalities in the group. I remember one group of Hungarian Jews which included three very pretty girls. I befriended one of the girls which made the time pass much more pleasantly. Another, whose name was Olga, later married a “catcher” by the name of “Fips”. They lived in New York after the war and we visited each other for a while.

Rumor had it that the transport had been delayed several times - due to advancing Russian troops. This was a lucky development for us; otherwise Rita might have been gone before I was released from the hospital. We stayed another two to three weeks together in the camp, before the scheduled day of deportation was announced. Two nights prior to that day in March 1945, a blockbuster bomb hit near the building, ripping out windows and the bars in front of the windows. We were in the basement shelter at the time. The noise of the explosions was deafening and the lights went out. We had to remain in

the shelter long after the all-clear sounded, because a crew had to secure our camp. After returning to our quarters, I noticed the severe damage to doors and windows; that was when the idea struck me that it might be possible to escape. The building had very high ceilings with the camp on the second floor. By late afternoon the following day, we had to sign the deportation document mentioned above. The transport was to leave the next morning. This meant that time was running out for an escape.

The floor above us accommodated the sleeping quarters for the guards and other camp personnel. When the sirens went off that evening, Rita and I managed to walk upstairs undetected. Reaching the third floor, we immediately ducked into the closest room to hide. It was filled with bunk beds and nobody was in it. Knowing that a sweep would be made of all rooms in the building, we each crawled under a bed to hide. Then the door opened and somebody checked the room. I could see the person's legs and my heart stopped for a second. The door closed and we could hear voices out in the hall which faded away as they made their way down the stairs. Then I made a crucial discovery. Tied to the bed's bottom springs, I saw a heavy duty washing line. I untied it and we headed to the front of the building which faced the street.

Normally, guards were posted in front of the building, even during air raids. But, because of the previous night's near hit, no guards were patrolling the street below. This was a tremendous break for us. We tied the washing line to a heavy desk near a window and threw it down. It did not reach the ground, which worried me a little. Looking down, Rita had second thoughts about attempting the escape. I was 100% in favor and told her that I would go first. It was a fast ride sliding down and my hands felt quite hot. The end of the rope stopped about seven feet above the ground, but it was an easy jump from there. I looked up and Rita was still scared to come down. All during this time, bombs were falling near-by, so that the ground and building shook and the noise was frightening. Also, the sky lit up to almost daytime brightness, illuminating the street and surrounding area. I kept signaling Rita to slide down. After some hesitation, she mustered her courage and slid down.

On the ground, we were afraid that somebody might have seen us and reported it. But quickly our fears evaporated. Rita and I had decided to make use of the offer of help made by Pfarrer Poelchau several months ago. As we were heading towards his apartment, we tried to walk in the shadows of the buildings to minimize the risk of being seen. However, the street was completely deserted. Pastor Poelchau's place was in another part of the district of Wedding. But I knew my way around Berlin quite well, having traveled its streets extensively on my bicycle. Suddenly we realized that our hands were hurting and were bloody. The rope had cut deeply into the flesh of our fingers. That is why it felt hot sliding down. But we had no time to pay attention to this problem. Our minds were on getting to pastor

Poelchau's place and off the street. Walking along, we could hear the drone of airplanes overhead and the rapid-fire detonations from innumerable anti-aircraft guns. As we were passing a cemetery, we saw some soldiers in the distance coming our way. To avoid being seen, we decided to take cover in the cemetery. Luckily we found an opening in the tall wrought-iron fence and slipped through it. Actually, crossing the large cemetery was a shortcut to where we were going. Rita did not like the idea of being in a cemetery at night, which scared her. To me it seemed a safe place to be in our situation.

We had walked for at least two hours when we reached pastor Poelchau's apartment house at Afrikanische Straße 140 b. The all-clear had sounded shortly before we arrived there. The main door into the building was unlocked and looked damaged. People were still making their way from the shelter to their apartments when we spotted pastor Poelchau. He was very surprised to see us, but welcomed us with open arms. He insisted that we tell him every detail of our escape. In the bright light of a lamp, we had a good look at our hands. The rope had cut deep, right down to the bones of almost every finger. It looked bad.

Early the next morning, Pfarrer Poelchau contacted a doctor who belonged to the underground network. His name was Dr. Seitz. He bandaged our hands and left sulfa drugs for us to take. The healing process was painful for a while. But it was a small price to pay for having escaped the clutches of the Gestapo. We felt very grateful to be alive and to receive this caring help. Besides pastor Poelchau, his neighbor, Dr. Hans Brombach, a jurist, helped us with food and anything else we needed, since the pastor was gone most of the time. Hans brought us a radio to pass the time and often we would have lively discussions with him and his girlfriend about current events.

Our escape had made history at the camp on Schulstraße. Everybody at the Gestapo was in an uproar about it. We were told this after the war by "Flips", who was part of the mission to try and find us. The Gestapo had dispatched agents to the Wendlands searching for us. Since they did not find us, they staked out the house for several days hoping we show up. Puzzled about where we were hiding, they eventually gave up.

It was the end March and spring was in the air. During the next few weeks, while our hands were healing, I had something of a wonderful revelation. I experienced an inner gratitude and joyfulness at being alive which I had never known before. I felt close to God and his creation and had the conscious realization that a spiritual world exists behind our physical world. Also, that life is a very precious gift of God. And from that time on I knew that there is much more to human life than mere physical existence and what is revealed to us by our ordinary senses. It was an unforgettable religious experience.

Dr. Seitz kept visiting us every few days to renew our bandages. By the middle of April, our wounds had almost healed and we felt well enough to leave the apartment. Neighbors had become suspicious and it was necessary that we move on. Dr. Seitz offered us shelter at the underground hideout in the Berlin district of Steglitz. Rita and I walked the better part of a day to get from the district of Wedding to Steglitz, which is at the opposite end of the city from north to south. We arrived there in the evening. It was too risky to take public transportation because military patrols were hunting for able-bodied men not in uniform.

We were introduced to the underground group by Dr. Seitz. It went by the name of "Uncle Emil" and had quite a few professionals as its members. One of the leaders was Ruth Andreas-Friedrich, a journalist and writer. We stayed in her apartment at Hünensteig 6 in Steglitz for several days, sleeping on make-shift mattresses on the floor. During our stay, the group was planning a political action and wanted us to be part of it.

The Nazis had for weeks appealed to the general population to offer utmost resistance to the advancing enemy troops even to the point of sacrificing their lives. To this demand, the underground wanted to say "NO".

Our involvement consisted of writing the word "NEIN" (NO), in huge letters, near train stations and on buildings in areas of dense traffic. Late at night on April 18, 1945, Ruth Wendland, Rita and I set out to cover a pre-assigned territory. While two of us watched in all directions, the third one did the writing with chalk or paint. It was a scary undertaking and I felt great relief when we decided it was time to quit and to head for home. In retrospect, I think it was far too risky an action, with only about two weeks remaining of the war. Had we been detected, they would have shot us on the spot.

One of the underground members was skilled in producing forgeries. They called him "Wald". Later I learned that he was a Jewish master typographer named Ludwig Lichtwitz, living underground as well. He took a photo of me and attached it to an ID card. I took on the name Wilhelmus Theodorus Johanson, a musician from Holland. I forgot what Rita ended up with, but he also faked an ID for her on authentic stock complete with an official seal.

Towards the end of the war, Rita and I had separate hiding places in different parts of the city. While I stayed with Dr. Seitz in a suburb called Zehlendorf-West, Rita had moved closer to the inner city with one of the underground members. The Russian forces were advancing and closing in on the city. Artillery fire could be heard day and night. To protect ourselves from the incessant shelling, we were living in the cellar all the time. One evening, a German military patrol showed up, looking for deserters and any male of fighting age. Thanks to Dr. Seitz's secretary, Ruth Hohmann, who warned me of the approaching MPs, I was able to hide behind some luggage and boxes in the rear of the cellar. They left without spotting me.

Then one day we could hear the powerful roar of tanks rolling down the street. At the same time, there was small-arms fire from adjacent buildings where German soldiers were holed up. Suddenly Russian soldiers surrounded our building, then burst into the place. They made us walk upstairs at gun point, to be interrogated by an officer. I explained to him that I was a Jewish fugitive living underground. He immediately understood, and told me to say the word “jewrej” if questioned by any other Russian soldier. Then he said something in Russian to a soldier, who took me by the arm and walked me outside. For a minute, I thought he might not have believed me, and I was going to be shot. But he took me where a kitchen had been set up in the midst of a circle of tanks. The tanks looked formidable and so did the soldiers. I was given soup and a huge slice of the darkest bread I had ever seen. It tasted marvelous. Later that day, I realized that I was actually liberated after close to two and a half years on the run.

Many of the Russian officers were quite fluent in German. They treated me well, were warm-hearted, and wanted me to stay with them on their final push to the center of the city. That seemed too dangerous to me, because they expected to encounter German resistance, and I decided not to take the chance of getting killed this near the end. They kept feeding me and gave me extra bread, which I shared with those in the house. When the heavy tanks left, rolling along the cobblestones paved streets, they ripped up the cobblestones and sent them flying through the air. It was an unusual sight.

I was getting restless, and decided to make my way to where Rita was staying. There was, of course, no public transportation available, and people were on the move, on foot by the thousands. I left early in the day, knowing that I had quite a distance to cover. Only days before, the Russian army had swept through this same area on its way to the center of the city. I thought that by now it was safe to follow along with thousands of other civilians. This was not quite so.

I was crossing a large square in the town center when rapid-fire shooting started. Everybody instinctively flattened themselves onto the ground and waited. When the shooting stopped, I noticed that the woman who had been walking next to me lay motionless about five feet away. She had been hit by a bullet, and we tried to revive her but failed. The shooting resumed from the opposite side of the square. I ran into the bank building and took cover in the basement. There were already lots of people and the doors to the vault were open. Money was all over the place, both notes and coins. Somebody said that the Russians had earlier blown open the vault and taken everything but money. The money was Reichsmarks, which everybody expected to be worthless once the conflict was over. That is why nobody bothered to take any. As it turned out, the Reichsmark remained valid and in circulation for a few more years.

It was evening when I reached Rita on May 1, 1945. The next day the war was declared over. Our struggle for survival was also over. No more Nazis; no more Gestapo; no more hiding. We were overjoyed and overcome with great emotion, wanting to shout to the world that we were again free. We hugged and kissed and danced around. It was an unbelievable feeling of relief and triumph, as if dark night suddenly turned into bright daylight. And we now had a future to look forward to. We left for Gethsemanestraße to share our liberation with the Wendlands.

### **Post-war time until immigration to the U.S.A.**

(Age 19-20, from 1945 until 1946)

We were issued certificates declaring us to be “Victims of Fascism”. This entitled us to specific benefits such as double ration cards, a pass for free rides on public transportation, and a monthly monetary allowance. There may have been others that I have forgotten. The ration cards were not much help in the beginning, since no food was available in the stores. Word on the street was that the Russians were making vodka from the large supplies of potatoes which had been set aside for the population. We started stripping young leaves off trees and cooked these like spinach. People were even cooking grass clippings to fill their stomachs. Cats and dogs disappeared from the streets and ended up in a pot or roasting pan. Leo, who had survived without being arrested, came to our rescue. He still had black market connections and was able to supply us with food.

Berlin, by agreement among the Allies, was divided up into four sectors. Initially, the Russians were the only military presence in Berlin after the war. Then, a few months later, in July 1945 the other three occupying powers moved in. Since I lived in the American sector, I happened to watch the American army march into Berlin, and it was an impressive sight. During their administration the food supply stabilized somewhat and other services became available. It was a great improvement over the previous few months.

Frau Pfarrer took ill and required medical help. It was difficult to find a doctor willing to come to the house. They were in short supply and badly needed in the overcrowded hospitals. But a physician did come and concluded that she must be admitted and treated in the hospital. He assured us that if we could get her to the hospital, she would be treated. The big problem was how to get her there. Motor vehicles were not running for lack of gasoline, and that included ambulances. Herr Pfarrer was very worried and looked helpless. Then I remembered how as boys we had pulled a large flatbed wagon filled with chestnuts to the animal park in Potsdam. Why not do the same in this

predicament? Ruth and I went to the local coal supplier and told him about our plan. He lent us the wagon and we proceeded loading a bed on it. Frau Pfarrer was made comfortable in the bed on top of the wagon, and we pulled her all the way to the hospital about a mile away. It was a strange sight, but we were glad to have found a way to help her, for which she was very grateful. The hospital was very crowded, with beds standing out in the halls. But because she was well known, she received the necessary attention. Her condition did not appear good and she was quite weak. I believe she was suffering from typhoid fever. I felt sorry to leave her in the crowded hospital, but she needed the help.

With the struggle for survival over came a time to reflect. Our new-found freedom was emotionally overwhelming; but joy was also mixed with great sadness. The reality of the loss of our mother, brother, and other relatives came to the forefront. The report that millions were killed in the holocaust was devastating news. The suffering and sorrow inflicted on humanity by this war was incomprehensible. It is assumed that at least 55 million people lost their lives in this immense struggle during the Second World War.

We had made inquiries about our missing family members through the local Jewish community office as well as the International Red Cross. All reports were bad news. Our Mom had died in June 1943 in Gestapo custody in Berlin, Gerhard was killed in a concentration camp, and our sister Waltraut, whom we thought was safe, was killed 1941 in Tunis, Algiers, in North Africa.

Emotionally, I hit bottom. Feelings of grief, anger and injustice came over me, and I became quite depressed. Nothing really made any sense. I started blaming myself for maybe not having done enough to save my Mother's life. In a sense, I felt guilty to be alive.

Rita had met and was dating Sam Rosenstock, a captain in the American army. They were seeing each other often, were in love and probably had plans to get married. By late spring in 1946, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee extended an offer to so-called "displaced persons" to immigrate to the U.S. The agency would pay for passage and also provide initial help in getting settled in America. Both of us could qualify for this offer. Rita decided to apply, which I am sure had a lot to do with Sam. In the meantime, he was in the process of being returned to the States. Her application was granted and she left on the first ship carrying foreign civilians across the Atlantic in late May 1946.

Just prior to her departure for America, Rita gave me a memorable birthday party. That day on May 22, 1946 I was 20 years old. It took place at her apartment in Wannsee, where she lived with a former fellow student of Ruth Wendland, and all our friends from the past and the present were invited.

Ruth occupied a unique apartment in a large villa, in one of the finest neighborhoods in Berlin. The building had three floors plus a square tower with windows on three sides. Ruth lived in the tower, which had its own private walkup. There were quite a few other tenants in the villa.

I was visiting Ruth, and after ringing the doorbell several times, figured that she was not home. Just as I decided to leave and return later, the door opened and there stood a beautiful young woman, telling me that Ruth was not at home. Since I knew that she was on her way, I told her that I would like to wait near the tower walkup. As we walked together upstairs, I noticed that besides being beautiful, she had a wonderful figure. I loved the tone of her voice and the way she communicated. I was instantly smitten with her.

Her name was Gretel Kirch. She was born and raised in Wuppertal, Germany, in the Protestant faith. Her assignment as a teletypist had taken her to Berlin. The first time I asked her out, we attended an outdoor concert given by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in the Haus am Waldsee. After the concert, we took a long walk around the scenic lake and park. We talked and shared our thoughts on many topics. There was so much we had in common and we liked each other's company. It was a marvelous feeling for me to be near her and the beginning of a new and exciting phase in my life. I was in love and my depression vanished.

My brother Freddie had made contact with us through the Red Cross. He had offered to make it possible for me to join him in South Africa, if that was what I wanted. That was a very considerate gesture. But in the meanwhile, both Rita and I had someone special in our lives, and at that time, I did not want to leave Germany.

Although we had enough to eat, the problem during this first post-war winter was the lack of heat. Gretel had a fireplace and I was determined to get wood for it. Since none could be purchased, I figured I'd get some on my own. There was a cluster of trees nearby on city property, and during a moonless evening, Leo and I cut down an aspen tree. We then sawed it into smaller segments and transported these on a cart to Gretel's place. The streets were very quiet and we did not see a soul. Luck was with us and our timing was perfect.

I was taking courses at a private school, compliments of the city of Berlin. They required lots of homework, as my main subjects were Latin and Mathematics. I did reasonably well, but would get restless after many hours studying. Gretel worked for an American officers' club as a waitress and sometimes was given delicious leftovers to take home with her, which both of us enjoyed.

Clashes between American and Russian soldiers became a daily occurrence, ever since they started occupying their sectors in Berlin. At times, these



involved casualties on both sides. It was a frightening scenario, and pointed towards the danger of a wider conflict between the U.S. and Russia. Everybody felt uneasy, and the possibility of another shooting war loomed large. Against this background and Rita's encouraging letters from America, I decided to accept the offer to emigrate to the U.S.

Gretel and I were contemplating getting married, and starting a new life together in America. But several factors held us back. For one, Gretel had not been home in two years. Her Mom missed her, and was looking forward to having her home again, if only for a while. She was her only daughter, and felt obligated to spend some time with her Mom before joining me in a far away land.

It was definitely the right decision, because her Mom needed her, and it was the last time they were together. Seven years later, her Mom died.

Another factor was the uncertainty as to whether I could make a living for us since I had not completed my education. This would give me time to do so, and also to get established. The separation would be a test of our love. If, after being separated, we still felt the same for each other, we would get married. We did get engaged before I left Germany, and have been wearing our solid gold rings ever since.

About three weeks before I left on my journey to America, Gretel had an opportunity to travel back to her hometown. She decided to go for it. A transport was being assembled, sponsored by the church, which returned refugees to West Germany. This did not often happen, as special permission by the Russians was needed to cross their zone, which separated Berlin from West Germany. In spite of the permit, they encountered trouble when the Russians wanted to board the train. They had been known to pull people off the trains to be used as laborers.

The last thing I did before leaving on my overseas trip was to see Frau Pfarrer once more. She was hospitalized, and her condition was not good. Yet, she was still cheerful, and must have accepted her illness as part of God's will. I think her Christian faith gave her the inner strength to face the inevitable. Two months later, I received word that she had passed away on August 31, 1946.

My trip took me from Berlin to Bremerhaven, the embarkation harbor. Like Gretel's train, we also encountered trouble with the Russians while crossing into their zone. Our train was guarded by American MPs, and had clearance to go though without any search. But the Russians insisted on boarding, and a shouting match followed. Suddenly, we were told to get down on the floor, and the train started to pull out. Then shots rang out, hitting a couple of windows. Without the windows, the night air got quite chilly, and we bundled up to stay warm. Nobody was hurt.

It took a few days in Bremen to be processed for entry into the U.S. Gretel had traveled to Bremen to be with me during this time. Frau Dr. Abegg had given us the address of a friend in Bremen, where Gretel could stay. I was free most of the days, and spent the time with Gretel. I missed her already, and wished she could go with me.

The ship was the “Marine Flasher”, a liberty ship built as a troop transporter. We pulled out in the evening of July 4, 1946 and by morning we noticed how slowly we were moving. We were following another vessel. Then word got out that we were following a minesweeper, which first cleared the waters of mines as we moved through the English Channel and along the coast of France. This gave everybody a real scare. We then docked at Le Havre to take on passengers. Getting into the harbor required a special pilot to guide us in. I will never forget the scene of the many sunken ships lying on the bottom of the harbor. Some were sticking up vertically, while others were lying there horizontally, looking as if they were intact. It was a big cemetery of large ships, and a frightful sight. I could not help but think of the terrible battle and human tragedy that must have taken place there.

The minesweeper stayed with us another day. Then we were on our own crossing the open Atlantic. It was an adventurous voyage, which took us through a big storm. We had porpoises accompanying the ship for days, and giant sea turtles bobbing on the surface. The trip resulted in friendships which lasted a lifetime. After ten days on the water, we arrived in New York. Rita and Sam were at the pier to pick me up.

We had arrived in America, feeling great excitement and anticipation.

We had thought that it may take about a year before Gretel could join me. But it took three years because she had to qualify under the regular German immigration quota, which did not open up until late spring in 1949. She arrived in America in June 1949, and we were married a week later.

## Afterword

My survival and that of many others like me is testimony of the humaneness and courage of those who risked their lives helping others to survive. With their actions and sacrifices, they fought against the tyranny of the Nazi regime. The Talmud says that those who save one life save the world. The inscription applies to no one better than those who saved my sister and me from a planned death. They will never be forgotten.

Those individuals to whom I owe my life are:

Leo Fraines

The Fleischers in Melchow

Agnes Wendland (Frau Pfarrer)

Pastor Walter Wendland

Pastor Ruth Wendland

Angelika Rutenborn, née Wendland

Pastor Günter Rutenborn

Dr. Elisabeth Abegg

Pastor Harald Poelchau

Dr. Walter Seitz

Ruth Andreas-Friedrich

and others.

25 years after I left Germany, I went back to Berlin for the first time to see the people who had saved my life. It was in 1971, and I had a chance to visit with Leo, Ruth, Angelika, and Dr. Abegg. We had always stayed in touch and corresponded all these years, and during the post-war years, when food supplies were still meager in Germany, I had sent packages to them from America. By now, all but Angelika Rutenborn have passed away.

### **A short vita of the author in the U.S.A.**

A few years later emigrating Ralph Neuman became a citizen of the U.S.A. He pursued a career in engineering and worked in a variety of disciplines over 34 years. These included aircraft instrumentation, the nuclear field and semiconductor electronics.

Gretel and Ralph Neuman raised two sons and have four grandchildren. They have lived in Long Island, N.Y., Albuquerque and Los Alamos, New Mexico and Northern California. In retirement they moved to Oregon.

Gretel Neuman passed away in early 1995. They had been married for 46 years. Four years later Ralph Neuman got married to his present wife, Nora.

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