

My Personal Brush
with History

KURT MAYER WITH JOE PETERSON

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CHAPTER ONE

Exodus

I constantly sensed my parent's desperation.
If they could get me to England, they would commit suicide.

Adolf Hitler's dreams nearly ended those of 10-year-old Kurt Mayer. Hitler sought a "Judenfrei" world (free of Jews) and gradually, over a seven-year period from 1933 to 1940, Kurt and his family became noncitizens, robbed of all material possessions and living in fear for their very lives.

My earliest recollection goes back to age six. My mother took me to my first day in school. We were no longer able to go to public school, so the rooms in the synagogue, which was two blocks from where we lived, were converted into classrooms. Our rabbi was head of the school. There were probably 10 or 12 children in my first and second grade classes. I only know of four including myself who survived.

Despite Hitler's ultimate defeat, by 1945 millions of Jews had been killed including one and a half million children. Nazi propaganda had portrayed a racial struggle between Aryans and Jews as the driving force in history. The murder of children was justified by calling them a kind of "germ cell," which had to be destroyed for this war to be won.

While unrelenting, the whole process of excluding Jews from German society was gradual and perhaps therefore more insidious. Between 1933 and 1939 the Nazi regime systematically enacted laws to define, segregate, and bankrupt German Jews. Before the Nazis, German Jews were proud citizens and patriots even though full German citizenship had existed for only the previous three generations. Their ancestors had been living in Germany since Roman times and while clearly religious persecution was pervasive, a state policy to kill all men, women, and children with a Jewish grandparent was unprecedented. Eventually, not even conversion to Christianity was a possibility. Nazis parroted existing simplistic racial theories that maintained "leopards cannot change their spots," while expanding them to include Jews. For the first time in history Jews would be persecuted not for their religious identity and practices but for their Jewish birth. Some, including Kurt's father, Joseph, could foresee even more trouble ahead.

At the end of second grade, sometime in late 1937 or early 1938, my dad was suspicious of some kind of government action against Jews. We were living in an apartment house in Mainz and after I had finished the second grade, my folks decided to move to Wiesbaden. My father had previously decided to apply for a quota number, which was the requirement for a visa to emigrate to the United States. He told us that since it took three or four years for your number to come up and because it didn't cost anything to get a quota number, it was a sort of insurance for all of us.

My father felt that Wiesbaden was a tourist destination that would be an easier and safer place to live because the Nazis would not want to attack Jews in public with so many foreign tourists present. He also wanted my mother to learn a trade so in the event we would emigrate, she would not be forced to do menial work. As a result, she attended the Emiquel School, where she eventually completed a course of study learning how to make cosmetics and received her diploma.

I started third grade in Wiesbaden at the only Jewish school. It was a long way by bus or streetcar. Suddenly, Jews were not allowed to use public transportation. Babysitters or domestic help working for Jews

had to be age 45 or older—the point being, there were to be no more Jewish babies mixed with Aryan women. When mother first enrolled in the Emiquel School, they could not find child care. Because it was a long way to go to school, they decided to enroll me in a boarding school at Bad Nauheim where I finished third grade. I did not like it very much, but my father kept telling me that my mother was learning a trade, that he was still working, and that I would learn discipline. To a German, discipline was the most important trait. Then on November 9, 1938, came Kristallnacht.

Young Kurt Mayer never met, 17-year-old Herschel Grynszpan, yet Herschel's desperate act one November morning in Paris would profoundly affect Kurt and his family. Nothing would be the same again.

In early November 1938 a Jewish teenager living and studying in Paris received a postcard from his sister explaining that his family had been stripped of their possessions and abruptly deported from Germany to a Polish refugee camp. Depressed by the news, Herschel Grynszpan became obsessed with thoughts of revenge against the German government. But how? He was a country away. While walking past a gunsmith's shop window the next evening he found his answer. He could buy a gun and shoot the German Ambassador to France, and the whole world would hear his protest.

Returning to the shop the next morning, Herschel had the gunsmith select a small caliber pistol and show him how to load it. Herschel was a complete novice when it came to guns. When he arrived at the German Embassy he told the staff he had an important document to deliver to the Ambassador. Only the Third Secretary, Ernst von Rath, was available, and so Herschel was ushered in to deliver his document. Reaching into his jacket pocket he produced the newly acquired pistol and at near point blank range fired five shots, hitting von Rath twice. Herschel made no attempt to escape and was immediately seized. Two days later von Rath would die of his wounds, and Hitler himself would sit in the front row at his funeral.

Ernst von Rath's death set in motion what the Nazi government labeled a "spontaneous" outrage against "World Jewry" throughout

Germany and Austria. Later it would be called Kristallnacht, "Night of Crystal," or the "Night of Broken Glass" because of the countless smashed windows of synagogues and Jewish-owned stores and homes. Kristallnacht, however, was anything but spontaneous and was not limited to breaking windows. Instigated by Nazi officials and aided by storm troopers and Gestapo, von Rath's assassination became the rationale for the implementation of a preplanned attack on German Jews. Initially, most thought the attack was singular to their community.

It was not known during the following intense two-day rampage that synagogues throughout Germany were being looted and set afire while firemen hosed down surrounding non-Jewish structures to protect them from damage. Shop windows were shattered and merchandise looted. Jewish cemeteries were desecrated. Storm troopers attacked Jews in the streets, beating anyone in sight and killing almost 100 of their victims. Additionally, nearly 30,000 Jewish males were arrested, sent to concentration camps, beaten, and returned if they agreed to emigrate. The "Final Solution" of gas chambers did not yet exist.

Kristallnacht also resulted in a further barrage of anti-Jewish laws, including restrictions on everything from earning a living to attending public entertainment. Perhaps the most outrageous government acts required German Jews to pay for the damages of Kristallnacht through a huge special tax called Juden Abgabe or "Jewish Dispossession." Incredibly, the government mandated they turn over all insurance payments that had been paid for damage to their businesses and homes.

Kristallnacht, and all it came to represent, was a turning point—complete isolation of German Jews was now national policy. Caught in this web of events were eight-year-old Kurt and his parents.

November 9 and 10, 1938, is a time and date that shall be forever embedded in my mind. The Kristallnacht events were the preliminary events that led to our coming to America and to the Holocaust. Since I was only eight years old at the time of this incident, my generation will be the last to remember these events personally.

At about 6:30 a.m. the morning of November 9, 1938, I was on the top floor of the boarding school in Bad Nauheim. As we were about to

get up, we heard a lot of noise and we were told to go out on the street. We packed some clothes in suitcases, but we still had our nightshirts on and no shoes. It was cold and we were marched barefoot in a line of two or three by civilians with revolvers exposed and pointing at us. Cars driving adjacent to the sidewalk accompanied us for about one mile to the police station.

We were held in the outside yard for several hours and I developed frostbite on my toes. Our male teachers were gone. That night we learned they had been taken to concentration camps. After what seemed an eternity, we children went back to the boarding school by ourselves. When we got back, the same men who had taken us to the police station were there and herded us around the school yard. We watched from the perimeter of the school yard as these same men gathered the prayer books and the Torah, poured gasoline on them, and burned them in the center of the school yard. All the kids were confused and crying. "Psst, psst." I heard a noise behind a bush going, "Psst, psst" several times. I turned around, and behind the bush was my father! He told me not to look at him. He had just managed to escape the clutches of the Gestapo (he had been a race car driver as a young man) by eluding them on the autobahn. He also told me Jews were being sent to German concentration camps and he might be the only one who had not been picked up. He knew the Gestapo was looking for him. I wanted him to take me with him, but he said it was too dangerous and told me my mother would come and get me soon. We went back into the school to find something to eat, but the Nazis had destroyed the boiler and flooded the kitchen. All of the bread was floating on top of the water, but we were so hungry we pulled the bread out of the water and ate it.

No one understood that the violence was originating from the government. My Dad went to Frankfurt where he saw a large crowd gathered around the parade ground. He asked a woman what was going on. She told him: "Today, they are going to kill all the Jews." My father acted very approvingly because he did not want to be caught. As he looked into the parade ground, he saw his two cousins, Arthur and

Sali Floersheimer, being forced to do calisthenics with a lot of other Jews who had been rounded up in Frankfurt. His two cousins were sent to Buchenwald, the infamous concentration camp. They were released shortly after in 1939 and emigrated to the United States with their families.

My father returned to Wiesbaden from Frankfurt since it was evident he could not hide with his cousins, but my Mom told him he could not stay because the Gestapo was looking for him. We had no Christian friends in Wiesbaden since we had not lived there very long, and in any event, people were afraid to harbor Jews because it would have been like harboring a criminal.

An elderly couple named Bach owned a delicatessen. Their business and apartment were two doors up the street from Taunus Strasse 23, our rented flat. Mr. Bach had been an officer in World War I. Mrs. Bach told my Dad that she would hide him in the cellar, and although food was rationed, he would have plenty to eat and my mother could come to the store and get verbal signals on any changes in conditions. So my Dad went into hiding in the basement of the deli.

Mr. and Mrs. Lux operated a pastry shop on the ground floor of our building. Their young son, in his early 20s, was always singing opera and classical pieces, which would flow from the bakery to our first floor flat. The Luxes were very nice people and apologized for having to put out the sign "Jews not wanted" on their bakery and pastry shop.

Our flat was on the first floor, and adjacent to ours was one rented by Mrs. Lohr and Mrs. Biraux. These elderly sisters had married brothers who were Americans, moved to Miami, and later returned to Germany after they were widowed. They told my mother and father all about America, which made it easier for them in the transition, and they also taught my mother some English.

On the floor above us was a Jewish family named Kahn who left a few months before we did. After they left, I went into their flat and was fascinated with the things they had left behind. I picked up the young son's guitar and stamp collection, which we later traded for a partial payment on my bicycle so I could ride to school.

An S.S. man lived in the attic. The downstairs door was locked after dark, and only the people who lived in the house could get in at night. The S.S. man used to get drunk and ring our doorbell at 3 or 4 a.m. My father would look down from the balcony and the S.S. man would shout obscenities at him. My father was afraid to go down and open the door for him, so he sent my mother, thinking correctly that the guy would not beat up on a woman.

Down the street from us was a radio store where my father bought a big radio with short wave. He often listened to foreign broadcasts, which was illegal, but he had my mother stand on the balcony and watch to make sure that if a radio car came by monitoring anyone listening to foreign broadcasts, he could shut it off in time. Not long after my father bought the radio though, the Nazis came and picked it up. I looked out the window that day and saw an entire truckload of radios.

All in all, we were not bothered much except by the authorities, seldom by anyone else. People just went along with what was happening because the government decreed it, which reflects a German penchant for law and order. We had ration cards and were allowed to shop once each week. It turned out that the man whose grocery store where we were to make our purchases was someone my Dad had known in World War I. Although he was a Nazi, he treated us very fairly. We had very little contact with the outside world though, because of the restrictions imposed as to where we could go and for what purpose. We were not allowed to go to places of entertainment or ride public transportation. The synagogue in Wiesbaden had been destroyed, so anyone who wanted to talk to us generally had to come to our flat late at night. It was a confusing time because of the destruction of synagogues. Jewish stores had been smashed. Most of the Jewish men from ages 17 to 60 were taken to concentration camps. From the stories we heard, they were beaten and mistreated, and one man we knew, Meier Weil, died shortly after returning from the concentration camp. He had been poisoned.

Mrs. Bach told my Dad (who was 42 at the time) that she knew a Catholic doctor who might be able to help him. Dr. Trinborn suggested

that Dad come out of hiding and go home. He would prescribe heart medicine for him and give him a statement that he was too ill to be moved. So my Mom bought a lot of heart medicine, dumped half of it in the toilet to make it look like he was using the medication, and he went to bed. In the meantime, my mother (who was 31 years old) came to the boarding school in Bad Nauheim to pick me up. I remember going to the train station with our suitcase and feather bed. The uniformed Nazis stared and laughed at us for dragging our featherbed through the train station. My Mom called them dirty names without fear. I was happy that I was going home, but amazed at my mother's courage.

The evening of my return to Wiesbaden is one of the most memorable of my early childhood. My paternal grandfather, Bernhard Mayer, had come to see us from Mainz and so had my maternal grandmother, Clementine Strauss. We were all together exchanging stories of what had happened. It was that evening I learned that the synagogue on the Hindenburg Strasse where I had lived and gone to first and second grade had been blown up. My grandfather's orthodox synagogue had been burned to the ground. My grandmother talked about having been forced to sell her meat market and house, located at 8 Betzels-gasse, to a Nazi who had secured favorable government financing. My father said we must emigrate but my grandmother said she wanted to die in Germany and my grandfather said he was too old to emigrate. It was a tense time but also a good time. It was one of the few times in my life that I can remember when our entire family was together.

A few days later, the Gestapo came to our house. My mother opened the front door and immediately locked herself in the bathroom. I was almost nine, but I keenly felt the peril under which we lived. The Gestapo came in, looked at the medicine and the slip from Dr. Trinborn. They wanted the key and location of our automobile. My Dad started to get up and get it, but I said, "Don't get up. You might have another heart attack." They believed a child, and for many years, my Dad praised me for grasping the right words at the right time.

After Kristallnacht, Jews attempted to flee en masse from Nazi rule but found both legal and bureaucratic obstacles blocking their path.

Between 1933 and 1938 Nazi officials had encouraged Jews to emigrate, resulting in about 30 percent of German Jews leaving. However, by 1940 escape routes were rapidly closing and those fortunate enough to get out would be some of the last. Ironically, only the Japanese-controlled city of Shanghai, China, did not require visas or certificates, resulting in about 15,000 Jews seeking refuge there.

From the time men were returning from concentration camps in 1939 until February 1940, my Dad spent all of his time writing letters to lost relatives trying to get us out of Germany. You needed a sponsor in America to vouch that you would never go on public assistance. My mother's brother, Moritz, agreed to vouch for us, but he was poor. Dad contacted a distant cousin who was a vice president of Celanese Corporation of America as well as a distant cousin of my grandmother. We were getting no responses from American authorities on when our number would be called. We knew by all that was happening around us that time was running short. Jewish taxes had been imposed to pay for the damages that occurred during Kristallnacht. Our money was running out. My father's income had stopped and we were living on savings. I remember many times my Dad would come in to repair the wallpaper in my room, which I could never understand. Years later, he told me he had hidden money behind the wallpaper and that was what we used to live on.

Although numerous appeals were made to the international community to expand the number of Jewish immigrants they would allow, only Britain took in a significantly larger influx of Jews. The United States, for example, could have absorbed far more immigrants but neither the President nor Congress moved to increase quotas. American public opinion polls clearly did not support a change in immigration policy.

Similar appeals were made on behalf of Jewish children but again only Britain admitted significant numbers through a program called Kindertransport. After arriving in the British Isles, these rescued children were dispersed among foster homes, farms, and orphanages, most never to see their families again and often being converted to the faith of their adopted parents. The Wagner-Rogers bill, an emergency measure that

would have allowed 20,000 Jewish refugee children to enter the United States, died in the Senate in 1939.

I constantly sensed my parent's desperation. Our dentist, Dr. Kant, committed suicide. My mother and father wanted to at least save me. My father would spend all day typing letters and hired women to translate them into English. He wrote letters to a Miss Smith, a Quaker lady in Birmingham, England, asking her to try and get me adopted and out of Germany. They tried to get me on a children's transport. Nothing was working, and the feeling of desperation was with us all the time. My mother told her seamstress, Fraulein Staade, that if she could get me to England, she and my Dad would commit suicide. I was horrified and felt like I was being abandoned. I didn't understand that political events were the cause—I just thought my parents didn't want me.

On May 5, 1939, my Mom booked three tickets to Shanghai, China, but my father refused to go. He was holding out for America. At one time we talked about going to Capetown, South Africa, or Montevideo, Uruguay, or a farm in Argentina, but my Dad continued to focus on America.

Fortunately Miss Staade, who appreciated the family's desperation, had important connections. Kurt's mother was introduced to a somewhat mysterious elderly Baron with a decidedly aristocratic, worldly demeanor. Baron Paul von Neiendorf seemed to know everyone from President Roosevelt to Adolf Hitler, but most important, he was willing to help. Kurt's mother gave him an envelope containing 1000 marks and the Baron ambled off to implement a plan.

Baron von Neiendorf called us a few days later and told us to meet him at the American Consulate in Stuttgart. I remember my father thinking he would not come and his concern that we had made the trip for nothing at a time when our resources were dwindling. My folks knew that if they did not get out they would die. We waited some time for the Baron to arrive. He was late.

I vividly remember walking into the American Consulate. A U.S. foreign service officer looked at the Baron's calling card, got up and

gave the Nazi salute by saying “Heil Hitler, Herr Baron.” We were ushered to a special seating area that faced all of the people waiting to be processed. The desperation and depression on their faces still haunt me today. We were told that one person had committed suicide a few days earlier after he was turned down because of frostbite. My Dad was worried because I was deaf in my right ear and had flat feet. I was worried that they would leave for America and I would not get to go with them. After a secretary ushered us into the Consul’s office the Baron introduced us to the Consul, Mr. King, as his friends. We signed some papers and went through a very superficial physical. My father had told me not to mention my hearing problem so I didn’t cover my left ear during the hearing test so was able to fake the fact that I could not hear out of both ears. They looked at my teeth and thought they were beautiful. I told them that I was very healthy. I do not think we were at the Consulate for more than one hour, and we left with our visa for the United States. We were stunned. We had watched my Dad work so long writing letters to get a visa and now it was a reality.

Warning that wide-scale war was imminent, the Baron urged the Mayers to pack lightly, not tell anyone but immediate family, and leave at once. They were to depart from Genoa, Italy, where further instructions would await them at the Columbus Hotel.

We returned to Wiesbaden and packed whatever we could—clothes, 78-speed phonograph records of songs from my parent’s hometown, the Rhineland, and popular German tunes of the times, personal photographs, World War I medals, automobile club awards, china and crystal from wedding days, a picture of grandmother Clementine’s house and business, and one small still-life painting. Nothing had any monetary value. The radio and jewelry had already been taken by the Nazis and most of our money confiscated by special Jewish taxes. We left the remainder of our money to my grandfather and the furniture to my grandmother.

As I remember, we were in Stuttgart the first week in April 1940 and departed for Italy about April 13th. My grandfather did not want

to come to the train station to say goodbye. The experience was too painful. He had already seen his other son and three grandchildren leave for America. My grandmother and Aunt Hermine saw us off. They looked so sad when we left. We were leaving a lifetime of friends and 99 percent of our material possessions.

My father was worried that he might have more money than he was allowed to carry across the border, so before the train pulled out he went to the dining car, ordered a lavish meal, paid for it in advance, and then handed the remaining money to my grandmother and aunt. Soon, the German customs agents came. They were friendly and polite, never opening our bags or asking how much money we were carrying. Afterward, we went to the dining car where my mother and father toasted their departure with wine. They were extremely happy to be leaving while I, however, started crying. I loved Germany and I did not want to leave my grandfather, my grandmother, my aunt, my friends, or my country. In a little over a year I had moved from Mainz to Wiesbaden to Bad Nauheim, back to Wiesbaden and now to Genoa and then to New York. Whatever my world was, it was gone, and I knew it would never be the same.

Since the Nazis were teaching what they called "race science" in schools, showing that the skulls of Jews looked different than those of Aryans, there was a need to clearly identify Jews who might not fit the stereotype. Consequently, all Jews had their names changed on documents. Males were required to add "Israel" to their name and females "Sarah." Therefore, Kurt's emigration card carried the name "Kurt Gerhard Israel Mayer" while his father was identified as "Joseph Israel Mayer" and his mother as "Emma Johanna Sarah Mayer." Even with a visa now in hand though, escape was not certain with Europe in the initial stages of world war, a sophisticated German spy network in place, and ship passage not without peril.

When we arrived in Genoa my Dad went to the Columbus Hotel and found money in an envelope from the Baron with a note indicating that when we got to New York, another envelope would be waiting for us at the Lincoln Hotel. The first boat scheduled to leave for the U.S.

was the SS Washington. The next was the Italian ship, Rex, which my mother wanted to go on because it was the most beautiful ship afloat at the time. My father wanted to go on the Washington because he didn't want to give any more money to Fascists. We went on the Washington, one of the last ships to cross the Atlantic with Jewish refugees.

During our week in Genoa, my Dad took a walk one day. A man following him spoke in German, telling him he was with the American intelligence service and wanted my Dad to participate in propaganda broadcasts against the Germans in America. My Dad replied that he would not betray his country. The man then identified himself as a member of the German intelligence. My Dad was badly shaken, but it was his last encounter with the Nazis on the European continent. He knew them well and always gave the right answer. In the true sense, he was a survivor.

We sailed from Genoa on April 20, 1940. As we passed through the Straits of Gibraltar we were halted by the British who searched the ship. I remember thinking the British were our enemies because we were Germans. I couldn't understand why, as a Jew, it was different for us than for other Germans. My Dad classified the passengers aboard as Americans and Jews leaving Europe before all-out war broke out and German spies on a mission to keep America out of the war. Everyone mingled with their own except for my folks who made friends easily and looked on the voyage as a vacation. My Dad even won a pie-eating contest. He was the fastest pie eater on the boat.

A few days after we left the Straits of Gibraltar, we sighted a German submarine. It didn't bother us and everyone was relieved. After we passed the Azores practically everyone on board ship was seasick because of a big storm except for my Dad. He claimed he was tough like all good Germans, but years later, he told me he had taken seasick medicine before we went aboard. He wanted the German Nazis on the boat to know he was tougher than they were. That was the German mentality in those days.

Nine days after leaving Genoa we saw the Statue of Liberty and the skyline of New York. My folks were excited but I was still sad. As

we walked down the gangplank we were greeted by familiar faces. I saw my mother's brother and my Uncle Moritz (whose name had now been changed to Jim), my Aunt Rosa Florsheimer, my Dad's cousin Sali and his wife, and Max Wohl, who had issued an affidavit for us and was a distant relative of my father. Soon the feeling of home came over me.

Having little money left, my folks went immediately to the Lincoln Hotel to pick up the envelope from Baron von Neiendorf. It contained about \$100. We rented a room near Harlem in an old brownstone mansion. The toilet was in the kitchen with a curtain around it, which seemed strange to me. It was a difficult transition with a climate hostile to foreigners because America had undergone the Great Depression in the 1930s. I had to deal with the loss of family, friends, classmates, and my country and learn to adapt to a new country and a new language.

The fate of Baron von Neiendorf remains an intriguing mystery even today. Was he one of those principled Germans, a "Righteous Gentile," who risked and paid with his life to save Jews, or was he part of the elaborate German spy network using the Mayers as his cover as Kurt's mother was told after they had been safely settled in America?