

BECOMING GERMAN

On 21st April 2021, at the age of seventy, I became a German citizen with dual British / German nationality. This was part of a remarkable move by the German government to offer citizenship to those who had been forced to leave Germany during the Nazi era – mostly, but not exclusively, those of Jewish background. And not only to them but to their descendants – of which I am one. My mother, Margot Susannah Wallach, left Germany on a maid's work permit (a device created to get young people to safety who were too old for the *kinder transport* option) in June 1939 – just a few months before the start of the second world war.

MY MOTHER'S CHILDHOOD

Margot, was eighteen years old when she left Germany – a handsome and talented young woman who, until the arrival of the Nazis in 1933, was a vivacious, popular and sunny personality with many friends – none of whom were Jewish as hers was the only Jewish family in the village where she lived. She took with her a suitcase which was full of of beautifully hand sewn clothes provided by her mother as a trousseau, in anticipation of Margot soon finding a husband. As well as what strikes me as quite unsuitable clothes, she took a very heavy Pfaff foot pedal sewing machine (I have never been able to work out how she managed to do this since she could not possibly have carried it). The sewing machine was because she had been trained as a professional dressmaker after being forced to leave school at the age of fifteen. She also had ten British pounds in cash, the most she was allowed to take out of Germany.

Her mother (Johanna) was too distressed to see her off at the station and her father (Otto) wept uncontrollably as the train pulled out taking his daughter to freedom. She was very close to her father and had never seen him cry before so it made a huge and lasting impression on her. This was the last time she saw her parents and the last memory from her childhood.

"I was a child of the post-war period¹ when food was still extremely scarce in the Rhineland. I suffered from rickets and was a very late walker. Both my parents were very kind, caring and loving people and I don't recall even a moment of insecurity in my family, nor did I ever hear a word of anger.

We lived in a very large flat above our clothing business. There were a good many outhouses and a good sized garden and courtyard. The house had both a large cellar and a large loft – the loft consisted of about half a dozen rooms. One of these was used entirely for preserved and bottled fruit. We always made enough to last the year round... My parents were liberal Jews and we kept the Jewish holidays. On Friday evenings we welcomed the Sabbath with candles on the table, special bread with wine and particularly good fare to eat"²

For most of my life I knew relatively little about my mother's childhood or of her experiences in Nazi Germany – her way of coping was to put it all firmly behind her and to focus on what the future might hold. Whilst this enabled her to establish herself in England and to adopt all things English, it undoubtedly meant repressing her deep shock at the sudden loss of a

¹ She is referring to the first world war

² It was good to re-read Margot's autobiography entitled: *The Inner and Outer Become One*. This was self-published in 1992 and focuses on the various journeys (including her journey to the UK in 1939) that helped shape her later life when she had largely overcome her struggles with mental illness and had a leading role in creating an inter-faith movement on behalf of the Society of Friends – Quakers. The text in italics are direct quotes from this publication and are the closest I can get to hearing her speak since she died in 1999 with so many of my questions unasked.

carefree and happy childhood (at the age of twelve) and of the disappearance of her loving parents as well as many much-loved aunts, uncles and cousins (at the age of eighteen). This almost destroyed her later on when she suffered for several decades from debilitating mental illness – then called ‘manic depression’ and now called ‘bi-polar disorder’. She was, at a later stage, also identified as suffering from ‘survivor syndrome’ – depression that emanates from a deep sense of guilt and unworthiness at surviving a tragedy where others have died. Her mental illness became a huge part of my childhood and adolescence as well as putting great pressure on my parent’s relationship³ and our life as a family.⁴

“It was not until 1933 that I became aware that I was the only Jewish girl in my class. Before then it had not mattered whether I was Jewish or Christian since we all worked and played together harmoniously. It was all the more of a shock when I began to understand that another dimension was entering our lives. The first important upset was that I could no longer go swimming as Jews were barred from public swimming pools. No-one wanted to be the one to tell me as I was such a regular and keen swimmer – but it had to be done and I was really upset. Then gradually the awful experiences for us under the Fascist regime began to escalate.

Sometime between 1935 and 1938 the large glass windows of our shop were smashed and anti-Jewish slogans and swastikas were daubed in red paint all over the walls. It is my belief that these acts were not done by people who knew us but by storm-troopers. My father was away overnight and my mother and I were very frightened. We had a large photograph of my father and his two brothers in army uniform taken during the 1914-18 war.⁵ I took this photograph and put it in the shop window near the shattered glass. I can still feel how my whole body was shaking and how terribly afraid I was as I wondered what would happen to me. Yet I had to do it...it was my first act of passive resistance”

Of course, Margot was a product as well as a victim of Nazism. This is well illustrated by the fact that she brought over a copy of her childhood book *Struebel Peter* (usually translated as *Straw-headed Peter* but actually meaning something closer to *Slovenly Peter*) alongside her trousseau in the limited space in her single suitcase. This is a truly horrible book – made required reading for children by the Nazis in 1933 when other children’s books, especially those giving animals human characteristics, were withdrawn. Each little moral tale is illustrated with lurid drawings. The boy who refused to eat his lunch getting thinner and thinner with the last picture being a gravestone with his name on it. Or the boy who sucked his thumb and is standing in a pool of blood that drips from his thumb-less hands after his thumbs have been cut off by a man eagerly wielding large garden shears. Why did she bring this book with her? And, even more surprisingly, why did she keep it when she discovered the delight of the warm and engaging children’s books my brother and I read (or had read to us) such as *Winnie the Pooh* or *The Wind in the Willows*?

There was a side to my mother that was quite moralistic, judgmental and severe which I believe came from her Nazi-influenced education. And, of course, it is important to remember

³ They were divorced in 1971 when I was 21 and my brother was 16

⁴ This is an example of secondary impact from trauma that is not uncommon in the families of refugees.

⁵ Otto, Margot’s father, was decorated for bravery at the end of the first world war thereby contradicting the later propaganda from the Nazis that Jews were not loyal to Germany. In fact, as Margot records in her autobiography, he believed throughout the 1930’s that fascism would be short-lived and that all would soon be well which explains why he and his wife did not try to leave Germany when they could have done.

that the Nazi's came to power as a result of the economic devastation in Germany following the first world war – so things had been grim for people in Germany long before 1933.

Most of what I learned about Margot's childhood was in my twenties when I developed a strong relationship with her older sister (Edith) who had escaped from Germany in 1933 thereby avoiding most of the early indignities and all of the later traumas of life under Nazism. She lived first in Sweden and then in Holland and had a somewhat simpler, if blunt, relationship to her past. She steadfastly refused to accept any gestures of reconciliation from the German government, declared she would never forgive the Poles for their part in the 'final solution' and brusquely cut off all attempts by my mother to encourage her towards any form of forgiveness. Though, always with an eye to a bargain and as a good 'hausfrau', she did deign to cross the German border on a weekly basis from her home in Holland to shop in nearby German supermarkets because they were cheaper than their Dutch counterparts! Married twice, both times to Jewish men, she stayed within the liberal Jewish world that my mother completely moved away from when she married my father and became a British citizen and a Quaker (in 1946).

MY CHILDHOOD

Whilst I have always completely accepted the fact that I am 50% Jewish and German, I have spent most of my life feeling 95% agnostic and British. Thinking about it now, with the benefit of hindsight and more than twenty years after my mother's death, I find I do have more layered and complex responses to that part of my DNA. These are a strange collection of small episodes alongside vivid and recurring dreams, but when collected together they do suggest a stronger identification with my German / Jewish heritage than I was conscious of at the time.

My parents considered naming me Jessica (after Shylock's Jewish daughter in Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*). I think my father was keen to acknowledge my Jewish heritage – he was always moved by my mother's courage as a young refugee who had lost family, language and culture yet was able to throw herself wholeheartedly into her new world. But in the end they called me Rosalind and I quickly became known as Ros. They did, however, add a further name, Joanna, which is the English version of my maternal grandmother's name so at least one of my names does make a link to my German roots.

From early childhood onwards, I was aware of my mother's German accent, which remained strong throughout her life. She came to speak English well and claimed that from soon after her arrival she always thought and dreamt in English. However, she did struggle with written English and, despite my father's best endeavours, she spelt 'there' as 'their' to her dying day.

At the age of fourteen, I was one of only 5 children in my school year of nearly 60 who chose to study German rather than Latin. None of the other four had any German connections, they made their choice because they wanted to study modern languages at university and at that time Spanish was not an available option.⁶ We had a middle-aged German Jewish refugee as our teacher who delighted in catching us out. For example, in an early lesson, she let us chatter on in our halting German using the key word 'freund' which we, wrongly, assumed simply meant 'friend' as it does in gender-neutral English. Only after some time did she fall about with laughter as she explained that we had been talking about our boyfriends and not

⁶ All school children learnt French from the age of 11

our girlfriends as we had intended. It has stayed in my memory because she seemed to take such pleasure in embarrassing us.

I made the decision to take German at 'O' level in part because I knew mine would not be an academic path so, unlike many of my peers, I would not be an Oxbridge candidate where Latin was a requirement. But, more positively, I also made the choice because I wanted to be able to communicate with my aunt who spoke limited English and to better understand my mother who at this point was often either too manic to talk or too depressed to listen. Over the two years I was learning German, my mother never once helped me with my homework nor did she speak German with me to improve my conversational skills. It is possible, though I didn't recognise it at the time, that she wished I had not made a decision which reminded her of the life she had worked so hard to forget – even though I had made it, at least in part, to be able to understand and relate to her better.

Another memory comes from when I was eleven and staying overnight for the first time at a schoolfriend's home. I am sitting at the dining table eating supper. Being quite a shy child, I did not like being away from home so I was already unsettled and nervous. My friend's father was serving up the main course. He had been a pilot in the Royal Air Force during the war and was an imposing man who clearly dominated his family. Suddenly for no apparent reason, he flew into a rage and started railing at all things German. I remember being both scared and shocked and just keeping my eyes firmly on my plate of half eaten food until with a fast-beating heart I looked straight at him and said "*I am half German so when you say you hate Germans that also means you hate me*". I don't know whether he knew of my German background and was directing his fury at me, or whether he just regularly spoke this way to his family and I was simply an unexpected casualty. But he stopped and we finished the meal in silence – although by this time, I could hardly swallow. I was not invited again – but whether this was because I was German or because I had challenged him is not clear.

This is a tiny incident but it obviously had a big impact – not least because it showed me I could defend values that mattered to me (reminiscent of my mother and the way she put her father's picture in the shattered glass of their shop window).

Far more significant (and at the time very confusing) is the dream I had repeatedly over several years. In it I am a guest of the Nazi's being taken on a conducted tour of a concentration camp. I am dressed in a formal dark suit and have my long dark hair neatly coiled and pinned to the back of my head. I am almost indistinguishable from the men and women in uniform who are showing me round. We are walking down an outdoor corridor fenced by wire through which can be seen hundreds of Jewish people, men on one side and women on the other. They all have crudely shaved heads and are wearing striped clothing which hangs loosely off them because they are all painfully underweight.

The strangest part of the dream (in addition to my apparent role as some kind of Nazi sympathiser, which is strange enough) is that, as I walk past, the prisoners as far as my eyes can see are all smiling and waving at me – as if they are welcoming me as one of them or are trying to tell me they are OK and that I do not need to worry about them anymore.

I am sure there are many possible interpretations of this dream and that a psychoanalyst would have a field day helping me to understand it... but, to date, it just stands vividly in my memory both because it is so strange and because I dreamed it so often.

Over time I have visited Dachau, Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration / extermination camps and I have never seen a corridor like the one in my dream. These visits were hard but felt absolutely necessary – although it is interesting that I didn't ever tell my mother that I had been to Dachau and I delayed going to Auschwitz (where her parents had been held for some time) and Birkenau until after her death even though I had opportunities to visit many times because I was working in Krakow between 1993 and 1999.

As a teenager I used to dwell on the fact that, as a Jewess, it could have been me sent to a concentration camp. In imagining this scenario, I was pretty sure that whilst I would not denounce others, I would be highly likely to become a Nazi whore to ensure my survival. In other words, I was facing up to my assumption that in such dreadful circumstances, I would not necessarily be courageous. I wonder whether other descendants of survivors make similar assumptions and whether this is also a minor form of 'survivor syndrome' even when you have not been the survivor.

Shortly after my mother died (in 1999) I decided to watch the film *Schindler's List* again, this time with my children so that they could understand something of what life for their grandmother and her relatives had been like. I had forgotten that one of the opening shots is of Jews in the Krakow ghetto passing through a checkpoint where their passes are stamped with a motif of the double-headed eagle with a swastika at its centre. I stopped the video and ran upstairs to find my mother's birth certificate re-issued in 1939 identifying her as Jewish with the addition of 'Sara' as a third name. This document, which doubled as her exit permit, was stamped with the exact same image. The fact that they could see a real document had a powerful impact on my children and meant they watched the rest of the film with a new and more deeply personal perspective.

It was always clear to everyone that I was very much my mother's child – both physically and in terms of my interests and characteristics – unlike my brother who is far more like our father. My enjoyment of the visual arts, intuitive rather than academic intelligence, quick thinking and organising ability are all qualities that I attribute to her and for which I am very grateful. However, it is also true that during much of my adolescence and early adulthood I was really quite terrified I would suffer from mental illness in the way that she had. Regular bouts of pre-menstrual tension felt like a rehearsal of what was to come. Somehow, being so like her, led me to believe that I would inevitably become her.⁷

This fear was exacerbated by what I saw of the various treatments she was given to try and overcome her mental illness. In the 1960's many new approaches were being tested and Margot became a kind of guinea-pig for each new experiment by far the worst of which was electric shock treatment. It was hard for my father and I⁸ to hear her pleading with the medics not to take her away as they more or less forced her into the ambulance and perhaps even harder to see her return on a stretcher in a zombie-like state from which it took her days to recover. It felt as if this was a kind of torture reminiscent of the Mengele experiments – using Jews (often children) in the concentration camps for scientific experimentation.

⁷ I nearly didn't marry because I was so convinced that becoming mentally ill and having a negative impact on my partner and any children we might have was inevitable.

⁸ My brother is five years younger than I am and was at boarding school for much of this period

GOING TO GERMANY IN 1988

It is a fact that I have never been to a synagogue (except as a tourist in Prague and Krakow) or participated in a Jewish festival or religious service (except on the occasion of attending my aunt's funeral with my brother in my mid 50's). But I was always curious about my Jewish heritage and was very touched that my Aunt left me a number of Jewish artefacts in her will – including an exotic silver platter with an engraved fish at its centre used for serving food at the Passover festival, silver candlesticks for the dining table on Friday evenings in celebration of the sabbath as well as a Hanukah lamp where tiny candles would have been lit each evening during the eight-day Jewish religious festival.

The most intense exposure to my German / Jewish heritage came in 1988, on a trip described as 'a visit of Jewish people who had previously lived in Munchen Gladbach'. This was at the invitation of the Mayor and city council as a gesture of reconciliation and commemoration on the 50th anniversary of Krystallnacht. Nearly 200 former inhabitants of the town, now elderly people and mostly women, arrived by plane in Dusseldorf. They were all dressed in clothes that reflected where they now lived. Women from Argentina in flamboyant colours, ruffles, exotic hairstyles alongside the more conventional, subtle colours and neatly trimmed hair of those from Sweden. It was a living example of a group of people who (as Bertolt Brecht said in his poem *'To Those Born Later'*) had changed their country more often than their shoes.

Poignantly, many had faded black and white photographs of themselves as young children hung on pieces of string around their necks. A sad reminder of how they had left Germany so many years ago and an indication of their eagerness to connect to people who might have known them as children. Many, as I found out during our stay, had changed their names to integrate more easily in their new countries and, perhaps, in the hope that this would ensure they would never be discriminated against again.

The whole visit made a deep impression on me and I was glad to connect with many in the group – perhaps especially those who were, like me, second generation refugees there to accompany their parent.

"When we arrived in our hotel rooms we were greeted by flowers from the local florists, welcoming cards painted by the children of local schools and a bag containing 2 large volumes outlining the history of the Jews in Munchen Gladbach and surrounding villages. The second volume had a detailed account of what happened to individual Jews during the Fascist regime. It did not take me long to find the details of when and where my parents were killed.⁹ There was also a record of the date I left Germany for England, which I had forgotten, as well as a photograph of me on my first day at school. Naturally I was deeply moved by all this. It made for sad reading, but it also gave a certain dignity to have every person's life acknowledged and sorrow expressed for what had happened."

Of the 638 Jews who were deported to concentration camps from the town, the book revealed that only 28 had survived.

Margot wrote at some length about this visit in her autobiography – most notably of being reconnected to her schoolfriend Lotte who, on the morning after their shop windows had been smashed and the walls daubed with anti-Jewish slogans had the courage to come to the

⁹ in a small Polish concentration camp after surviving a stint at Auschwitz

front door to call for Margot so they could walk to school together. How much trouble had been taken by the visit organisers to locate this woman, now a retired doctor, having been given nothing more than her name in advance of our visit.

Unfortunately, their meeting was not a success. At an early stage, Margot thanked Lotte for her courage in standing by her when others had turned their backs. She was quite taken aback when Lotte said she couldn't remember this event at all. As the conversation progressed, Lotte spent some time trying to explain to Margot why she had joined the BDM (Bund Deutsche Maedchen – the girls branch of the Hitler Youth movement). She said how she had valued the camaraderie, the healthy outdoor expeditions and how much she liked to be led. Whilst it is understandable that she wanted to explain herself, what my mother found difficult was that she didn't seem in any way ashamed or sorry. In fact, when Lotte asked after my mother's parents (whom she had known well) and my mother told her they had been deported and died in a concentration camp, Lotte simply changed the subject without expressing any sympathy. Of course, it must have been difficult for Lotte to face Margot, but then why had she made the decision to come to the meeting?

The thing I remember most about the visit, which Margot barely refers to in her book, was an extraordinary 'concert of reconciliation' that took place in a modern church. It started with four young choristers, scrubbed and shining with golden hair that looked almost like halos dressed in their robes of white and red. They stood absolutely still whilst they sang a selection of church choral pieces in perfect harmony and in voices that were so sharp, clear and transcendent they pierced the air offering a kind of spiritual purification.

They were closely followed by a middle-aged Jewish Kantor – who had wild curly dark hair falling to his shoulders and clothes that were crumpled and quite worn. He sang a sequence of psalms in Hebrew in a voice of such depth, richness and passion it tore at my heart strings and made me feel as if his very being was being pulled down into the earth. The experience of utter grief conveyed by the Kantor seemed to me to encapsulate what everyone had been feeling since they arrived but had been avoiding acknowledging until this moment.

Suddenly, the utter stillness and silence that followed his singing was brutally disrupted with a cacophonous sound from the organ – a modern piece written specially for this event that comprised a barrage of almost deafening industrial noises battling their way into our ears and jangling our senses. The sequencing and power of these three musical episodes seemed a perfect embodiment of how our wilfulness as human beings can destroy both the ascending spirit and the passionate soul.

I have always assumed that it was because we were so alike that my mother found it very hard to relate to me as I grew up – especially once I reached the age (around 12) at which she had begun to suffer from discrimination on a daily basis. As a child of the 60's, I was a (relatively) carefree spirit living my life as I wanted to and making my own rules. Whether she knew it or not, I believe she was envious of my independence, my confidence, my early successes as a child singer and later achievements in the world of international development. We had a fractured and fractious relationship for most of her life and I experienced time and again her clear disapproval of many of my life choices.

Whilst I understood what caused her to be this way and didn't really blame her, it doesn't mean that it was easy to live with or that I was not repeatedly hurt by it.

In accompanying her on the 1988 trip Germany and sharing the sorrow of all that she was reminded of, something changed between us and she finally found it possible to be more generous in her view of me.

"I have no doubt that this visit has been very healing. I feel deeply indebted to Ros for coming with me: she was sensitive to my feelings and she knew the exact moments when support was needed. Actually I found her a wonderful travelling companion. It was like travelling with a honeypot with people swarming around her which she managed with great ease thereby releasing me from having to make too much social effort of a superficial nature for which I was not in the mood – the challenge of the situation was too great and went too deep"

APPLYING FOR GERMAN CITIZENSHIP

So why did I apply for German citizenship? I can think of at least seven reasons! As a protest against Brexit. To acquire an EU passport making it easier to travel in Europe once Britain had left the EU. As an important gesture for my own and my brother's children. As a mark of solidarity with my brother (who took this step some time before me). To connect more explicitly with my German/Jewish heritage. To make amends for my difficult relationship with my mother. To honour my mother and what she (and so many others) suffered.

In some ways I have been confused all my life about what was 'German' and what was 'Jewish' about my maternal inheritance. Perhaps this piece is less about Becoming German and more about Becoming Jewish. Or rather, that the process of becoming German has provided an opportunity to open up and explore my Jewishness.

Whatever the motivation (or combination of motivations) behind my decision to apply for German citizenship, and despite the fact that I am now highly unlikely to apply for a German passport or to visit Germany, it is undoubtedly a decision that matters to me. I am pleased to have done it and am moved as well as grateful to the German government for working so hard to make amends for the horrors of their Nazi past. Perhaps my 8th reason for becoming German was to make a small gesture towards helping them to feel better. In any event, I applaud their efforts and am quietly proud to now count myself one of them.

Ros Tennyson
10.5.21