

Speech for Pogromnacht – Berlin, Nov. 11th, 2019

Isidor Lewin and his wife Jenny, my great-grandparents, left the region of Posen after World War I with their eight children and settled in Berlin. My other great-grandfather, Isaak Gottfeld, originally from the Posen region too, took the same route with his four children. All five men who were at the appropriate age in both families, served in the Kaiser's army at that war. One of them, Simon Gottfeld, was killed. My grandfather Sally Gottfeld, was wounded.

The two extended families settled in the Moabit neighborhood. The next generation, my grandparents' generation, got married, found employment and had children of their own. They all struggled with the other German citizens during the difficult times of the 1920's, and their story could have been a very banal one, similar to millions of others, were it not for the dramatic changes that took place in Germany after Jan. 30th 1933.

My grandmother's three brothers and her three sisters as well as my grandfather's brother, their spouses and their children, experienced Pogromnacht here in Berlin.

It is hard for me to imagine how they felt or what they thought when they saw the Levetzow street synagogue in flames. It is likely that the hope they still had that the situation will somehow improve, dissipated with the smoke they saw from the burning synagogue. It is also likely that the hope turned into deep fear and despair. They most likely had second thoughts about the advice they gave my grandfather not to leave Germany, when he told them his plan to go to Palestine a few years earlier. Still, even under those dire circumstances, I am quite sure that in November 1938 none of them could predict the tragic fate that awaited them all in the next coming years.

But attempts to recreate their thoughts and feelings are merely speculations. The hard and cruel facts are that in the three years between October 1941 and October 1944 the fourteen uncles and aunts of my mother and her nine cousins, were deported to Lodz, Riga, Kaunas, Theresienstadt and Auschwitz in the East as well as Sachsenhausen in the North, where they were all killed. In many respects Kristallnacht was the introduction for the events to come, when the focus was at first to destroy the Jewish institutions and later to annihilating the Jewish people.

My grandfather Sally Gottfeld was able to spare that tragic fate for himself, his wife and his five children when he decided to leave Berlin and move to Palestine in December 1933, after being incarcerated and tortured by the SA, only 4 months after the Nazis came into power. I grew up in Haifa amidst a large extended family, which consisted, in addition to my parents, brother and grandparents, of four pairs of uncles and aunts and 10 cousins. We were a close-knit family and met very frequently as we all lived in or around Haifa. When I look back on the many family gatherings over the years, I do not recall even one case when the tragic fate of those relatives, who were unable to leave Germany on time, was mentioned.

It took me many years to start looking into my family's history and find out its tragic fate. Unfortunately, many of those who were able to tell me about it were no longer living. Nevertheless, with the help of the internet, I was able to document that history and we now have a pretty good picture of the story of my extended family – a story around which there was a strict silence when I grew up.

The process of uncovering the story of my family was full of surprises and unexpected events and meetings. I would like to share with you two of those meetings.

I found out by coincidence that my grandmother's youngest brother, Siegfried Lewin, who was blind, worked at the Otto Weidt Blindenwerkstatt for brushes and brooms on Rosenthaler Strasse. This led to my several meetings with Inge Deutschkron who was Otto Weidt's secretary. In those meetings she provided me with a lot of insights into the daily life in and around the workshop during those difficult years.

Another meeting was with Evelyn Grasse who was Ingeborg Silberberg's best friend. Ingeborg

was my mother's cousin. They both went to the Clara Schuman School in the Weissensee neighborhood when they were 8 years old. One day Ingeborg disappeared and Evelyn never saw her again. When she grew up and learned about the Holocaust, she only hoped that her friend Inge somehow survived. She asked her grandchildren Katja Stettin and Matthias Bergmann to search the internet in the hope of finding her. Instead she found my own website where she learned about Inge's tragic fate.

The meetings with Inge Deutschkron at Otto Weidt's former Blindenwerkstatt and Evelyn Grasse and her grandchildren in Weissensee, near Inge's home and school, was a very moving experience for me; it was as if I could somehow touch Siegfried Lewin and Ingeborg Silberberg and bring them greetings from their relatives in Israel who were spared their tragic fate.

This could have been the end of my story, similar to many others of my generation in Israel who grew up surrounded by silence about the tragic events that happened to relatives in Europe during the Second World War and belatedly discovered the fate of their family-members killed in the Holocaust. But actually, my story does not end there.

Two very important things happened since those discoveries:

The first was my meeting with a most exceptional group of current residents of the Moabit neighborhood, which call themselves "Sie Waren Nachbarn" and dedicate themselves to remember the former Jewish residents of that neighborhood. With their help we are now at the end of a major project putting Stolpersteine near the former residences of all my relatives killed or forced to leave Germany by the Nazis. This wonderful group of men and women became very close to me and my family members and when we come to Berlin, they make us feel as if we are their neighbors now. They will soon be visiting us in Israel.

The second thing that happened since I published my family history was the transfer of that story to the next generation – my children. In 2013 I took my wife and 4 children on a trip to Germany in the footsteps of my ancestors, which consisted of visits in the Frankfurt area (where my father's family stems from) and here in Berlin. My son Yuval, who is a movie-maker documented that trip and produced out of that documentation a very personal statement about his stance and own feelings regarding the encounter with the family history. The one-hour long movie came out in 2015 and was already shown several times here in Berlin as well as in other locations. Also, my daughter Hadas, who is an author, has written a children's book about Otto Weidt. The story imagines a day in the life of our relative Siegfried Lewin who goes to work at the Blindenwerkstatt accompanied by his daughter and highlights that scene from the child's perspective.

To close the circle, for me, Pogromnacht - the night when the violent attack on the Jews in Germany became legitimate, is an opportunity to look back at the long road my family and I took of learning about our own history and making sure its victims will not be forgotten.