



Bits and pieces: a Jewish teenager's recollections of the pogrom of November 9/10, 1938 in Caputh and Nuremberg

by *Ann Gerzon-Berlin*

(born February 3, 1923 in Nuremberg, died February 21, 2001 in Haifa)



Anneliese (Ann) Berlin in 1938

(photo: private)

Caputh is a village a few kilometers from Potsdam, near Berlin, situated at the beautiful Schwielo See, amidst woods and fields.

Landschulheim Caputh was a boarding school for Jewish children, boys and girls, from 6 to 19 years old. Originally the school consisted of a single large building, a romantic and crazy-looking complicated structure, one of the first houses at the entrance to the village, perched on top of a hill at the edge of the forest, surrounded by a large garden. At my time, March till November 1938, when the school must have housed about 100 pupils, only the smaller children lived there, together with those of the staff who took care of them, the head of the school, Miss Gertrud Feiertag, a wonderful woman who did not survive the Holocaust [Ms. Feiertag was an outstanding educator. She died in May 1943 in Auschwitz, where she was taken with the remaining eleven children from the school. A page is dedicated to her on German Wikipedia] and some of the teachers. But it remained the heart of the school. The other children and staff were housed in three big villas in the village, one for the boys and two for the girls; we spent some of our leisure hours there, but all lessons were given in the main building, the whole school gathered there in the huge dining hall for all meals and the many social functions took place there as well.

The houses put at the disposal of the older children were all spacious and beautiful villas, standing in their own grounds. I was lucky enough to live in the most luxurious one, a large country house surrounded by lawns, flower beds, fruit trees, and bordering on the lake. We

had excellent weather during that last summer before the storm broke, and we spent most of our summer holidays near or in the water; altogether the atmosphere in the school was one of freedom and enjoyment. Untroubled by political thunderclouds and far removed from hostile influence we lived there happily and peacefully and I should say that a happy time was had by all. Though we had excellent teachers, I don't think that learning was exactly one of our aims, whatever our parents and the school authorities may have had in mind. My own memories are of a cheerful and carefree period, and whenever I met someone in later life who had been to this school, I find the same nostalgic memories of an unusually happy time; I do not remember any exams, pressure regarding lessons, or even homework, I only remember a time of fun and friendship, excursions, games, musical evenings, parties, and above all a lot of sport activities, athletics as well as swimming. We lead a perfectly normal and happy life, almost a miracle considering the times we lived in.

We were evicted from this paradise rather abruptly on the 10th of November 1938.

I find it very difficult to describe the events of the 10th of November, and the following days, for the simple reason that I have no clear recollection of that period. In fact, even this is an overstatement, as I remember practically nothing at all.

I am not sure whether we had heard what happened throughout Germany on the 9th of November 1938. Probably not, as I do not remember feeling troubled or anxious, it must have been a day like any other for me. On the morning of the 10th we had some lessons as usual and towards mid-morning I went with the girls of my age-group from the main building to our house, a few minutes away, to have a cooking lesson. I don't remember who was with me that day, but strangely enough, I remember exactly what clothes I wore, down to the last detail. I also remember very clearly that the door flew open violently, that one of our teachers stood there looking white and upset. And I can still hear her voice and exact words: *Quick children, the Nazis are destroying the school, we must leave immediately.* I must have been in a state of shock, as the following events have completely disappeared from my memory, except for some sentences and sounds I heard, and some small unimportant scenes which have remained in my mind like photographs, without coming to life. This inability to remember is not due to the time which has elapsed since; even during the days and weeks following the flight from Caputh, I have never been able to give an account of the happenings, nor do I remember ever having wanted or tried to, and I firmly believe that I never thought about that day till I tried to tell that story to my children one day, and found I couldn't.

I must still have gone to my room, as I wore my coat later on and had a small sum of money with me. I seem to have invited a friend to come with me to an aunt of mine in Berlin, I remember feeling worried about her as she had no relations at all in Germany. Someone described how schoolchildren had suddenly invaded the main building and directed by a teacher had started to demolish the dining room; that they had stormed into the kitchen and poured everything that was cooking on the stoves over the floor, and what a mess the soup had made. I still hear that voice to-day and can only marvel at it. It gave an amused account of something that had happened, with a rather surprised undertone, not how dreadful, how terrifying, but more in the line of can you believe this funny story, what will people think of next - naughty, naughty. I heard someone saying that taxis had been ordered by telephone so that the smaller children and those who were ill at the time would not have to walk, that the others should split up in groups and walk to Potsdam through the woods as it would be safer than the road. I have no recollection of leaving the school, of walking to Potsdam, of buying a ticket and taking the train to Berlin, except a second's impression of seeing a train pass ours in the opposite direction, making a fiendish noise. I had not been to my aunt's home before, I don't remember how I found out where she lived, how I managed to get to her, how we were received or what her home was like. The first recollection I have of my short stay with her is waking up at night, and hearing broken glass being swept up further down the street – no doubt the remains of a

Jewish shop. This seems to have been the only time I felt afraid, and whenever I heard this sound in London after a night's bombing I felt afraid and uneasy, and to this day it has remained for me one of the most unpleasant and eerie noises.

After this my recollections become at least clear enough to present a logical sequence of events, although here too I only remember bits and pieces.

My friend left the next day, having been invited by the family of a former school-friend, who were better able to look after her for a longer period. She stayed with them till beginning of September 1939, when the family intended to emigrate, and joined the former headmistress of *Landschulheim Caputh*. Neither she nor Miss Feiertag, nor apparently the family of her friend survived the war.

My aunt tried to contact my parents, to let them know that I was with her, and it was upsetting and nerve-wracking that no one answered the telephone. My father was out of town at the time, and my mother had gone to him to inform him that the Gestapo were looking for him. When my aunt failed to receive a reply from my home she phoned my mother's sister, who put her at ease about my parents. In the meantime, my brother, who was then in Hamburg, had also tried to contact our parents, and he too phoned our aunt when he failed to get a reply from home. It was arranged that he should come from Hamburg to Berlin to pick me up before traveling home together. Somehow we were joined by a cousin, but I don't remember how, when or where, nor do I remember anything about my brother's arrival, or our departure, or even for how many days I stayed with my aunt.



The Berlin family in 1938 (from left to right): son Ludwig, mother Rose, father Walter, daughter Anneliese
(photo: private)

Of the train journey only a few impressions remained in my memory, but those are very much alive. Firstly I was cold and uncomfortable, and deeply embarrassed about my unsuitable clothes and the fact that I wore no stockings. I was very hungry, as we did not dare to go to the dining car. But the worst was the feeling of fear and even terror that something would happen to prevent us from getting home, or that my brother would be fetched out of the compartment by one of the many people who kept on passing along the corridor and looked into our compartment, the way people always do in trains. As we neared our destination I began to relax, to my childish mind arrival at my home town meant no doubt arriving at a safe place. This proved of course to be wrong.

My mother was at the station to meet us, making a gloomy and depressing impression on me in her unrelieved black clothing. She did not even wear the string of pearls to which I was accustomed, as they had been stolen by the gang who entered and destroyed our home. While I was at school my parents had sold the house in which I had grown up. This was rather fortunate under the circumstances, as in that particular district the mob which entered Jewish homes was particularly vicious and many people were wounded during the pogrom. They had rented a house from friends who had already left Germany, and although I knew the house I returned to a home with which I had no emotional ties. I am sure that I was lucky in this respect, as the sight that met me was unimaginable. I don't remember any feeling of unease or fear once I was at home, only a feeling of unreality, but even though my memories are limited, at least they are clear.

The people destroying this house must have had a wonderful time, and let themselves go thoroughly in the joy of willful destruction. In the living room or library the books had been swept from shelves and cupboards and littered the floor. The bottles of alcohol had been taken out of the cabinet and their contents been poured over the heaps of books and odds and ends - a strong smell of good Schnapps hung over the house like a fog. Ink had been splashed over everything, including the walls. Pictures had been pulled from the walls and were torn and tattered, and all the upholstered chairs and the canapé were slashed and disemboweled. It looked as if an avalanche had passed through the room, not one item remaining in the place where it belonged. I don't remember any of the other rooms, except that everything was covered with feathers from the big German feather-beds, they danced around like happy light snowflakes, and moved around us wherever we walked. I seem to remember that the only room which had remained entirely intact was the room intended for me, a charming young girl's room in which I would dearly have liked to install myself. It must have been overlooked as apparently an open door from a cupboard or another room hid the door leading to it. I don't remember how long I stayed at home, but as I left Germany for France on the 15th of November, these recollections cover only 5 days.

Notes from Ann Gerzon-Berlin's daughter Navina Clemerson: My mother spent almost a year in Paris where she stayed with friends of the family. Her brother Ludwig was placed with relatives elsewhere in the city and they could not afford to see each other very often because of the distance to travel. She managed to get herself to Britain at the eleventh hour, with the help of the Red Cross. She was 16 years old at the time. She often told us how when she passed through customs, seemingly the only passenger to have alighted from the boat in which she had crossed the Channel, a portly gentleman in the uniform of a British colonel welcomed her with a warm hug and said in flawless German: "Welcome to Britain. I hope you will be very happy here." She said that it was a wonderful welcome.

In London, she rejoined her parents, living there until 1953. By this time, she was married to Joop Gerzon, a Dutch Jew who had fought with the Dutch Free Forces during the war. She was also a mother. The subsequent part of her life was spent in the Alsace in France and after that in Haifa, Israel.

Further documentation about Gertrud Feiertag and *Landschulheim Caputh*

- Das Jüdische Kinder- und Landschulheim Caputh (1931 - 1938): Ein verlorenes Paradies (2008), Hildegard Feidel-Mertz und Andreas Paetz, Reformpädagogik im Exil, Neue Folge der Schriftenreihe *Pädagogische Beispiele*, Verlag Julius Klinkhardt.
- On November 10, 1994, an exhibition was opened in Potsdam about the Caputh Home which was put together by the *Fachhochschule* of Potsdam and based upon the collection of Sophie Friedlaender and the investigations of Hildegard Feidel-Mertz and Andreas Paetz.
- Ein verlorenes Paradies: Das Jüdische Kinder- und Landschulheim Caputh (1931 - 1938). Ein Film von Hans-Dieter Rutsch, im Auftrag des Landeszentrale für politische Bildung des Landes Brandenburg, Havel-Film, Babelsberg.

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