



A Jewish childhood and youth in Landau (Palatinate) until *Kristallnacht*

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(graphics: *rijo*)

Introduction

These are the recollections of our late friend Mrs. Laure Metzger (November 3, 1920 - March 19, 2010) wife of the Nuremberg born rabbi Dr. Kurt L. Metzger about the years before she and her family had to leave Germany. We publish it to commemorate her and the untiring engagement of the Metzgers both in Landau and Nuremberg for reconciliation after the Holocaust, culminating in their contribution to restoring the *Frank-Loebisches Haus* in Landau as a place of encounter since 1987.

rijo

Landau and the Palatinate

I had the good fortune of being born into a well to do and highly respected family. We lived in the city Landau, which is located in the Palatinate region between the Rhine river and the French border. Both my parents and grandparents were born there as well.

Landau was built by the architect Vauban, who also built Quebec, Canada. It was a walled city so that the people could defend themselves against Napoleon's troops. Around the turn of the century the fortifications were torn down and large tree lined streets were created. There stood beautiful homes, separated from each other by well cared for gardens. We lived in such a house.

Early days

My dad was a merchant who sold leather for shoes. When I was an infant, my mom was busy with volunteer work. Unemployment was rampant after WW1. Therefore my mom founded a soup kitchen, where every morning people stood in line waiting to get a can of hot soup, laced with some meat and vegetables and a slice of bread. She also started a milk station, where every day formulas for needy babies were made and given out. Both my parents and grandparents were deeply involved in the social, cultural and financial life of Landau.

Since childhood my friends were girls who lived nearby. We played together, then attended kindergarten.

At school / the Landau synagogue

Afterwards we enrolled in a private girl school. We studied together and all together had a wonderful life.

Some of my friends were Catholic. On Wednesdays I often went with them to attend catechism lessons.

In my school it was customary once a year to climb up a narrow stair leading to the balcony around the steeple of the Protestant church. From there one had a beautiful view of the countryside.

As the height made me ill I was excused. Each year the teacher said to me you: *Just sit in a pew downstairs and pray*. Sometimes someone played the organ and I enjoyed listening to the beautiful music while reading the books which laid around.

At the turn of the century the Jewish congregation built a magnificent synagogue. It was all white sandstone and black marble columns and stairs. It was about three storeys high. The building was crowned by five golden domes. On the inside two huge chandeliers hung from the ceiling which was painted in blue and adorned with stars.

The ladies sat on two balconies while the men prayed downstairs. At the center wall was a large *aron hakodesh* shrine containing seven torah scrolls. Across on the second floor was the choir loft where in front of the beautiful organ a 40 voice choir sat. I was nine years old when

I started going all by myself to the temple. A year later a cantor founded a children's choir. I sat in the first row and I was ever so proud to be there and sing along.

In Germany schools offered religious instruction twice a week. The Protestant girls went to a classroom where they were taught by the pastor. The Catholic ones met with their priest and we Jews, numbering just a handful, were taught by the rabbi. Life indeed was idyllic.

After January 1933

All this changed however when in late January 1933 Hitler became chancellor. We got used to see brown or black shirted Nazi stormtroopers marching around. But soon they did more than marching.

Already by April 1st, Hitler decreed a boycott Saturday. This meant he forbade the population to buy from Jewish stores. All along main street and around the marketplace stood four storey department stores as well as smaller ones but all were in Jewish hands. Never will I forget that day: School was out at noon. In order to get home, I had to walk along the main street. Little was I prepared what I was forced to see. In front of each store stood stormtroopers carrying signs bearing such menacing messages as: *Don't buy from Jews, they are our misfortune*. The Nazis sang anti-Jewish songs. The store windows were soiled with terrible words and pictures. And the people stood there taking in the spectacle.

That I managed to get through and reach my home was tough. But I told myself they cannot hurt us, God will take care of us. At home my parents were shocked when I told them of the spectacle I had witnessed. Had they known, they would not let me go home by myself. But my deep faith in Judaism let me get over it.

Shortly thereafter one heard of broken windows in our beautiful temple and thrown over tombstones in the cemetery. There was a large café where Jewish men met to play cards. One day the Nazis stormed in arresting everybody, then selecting a group of men whom they took to the congregation's house. There they beat them mercilessly. One man died on the spot. My uncle, husband of my mom's youngest sister, was so badly beaten my mom was called in the middle of the night to tend to his wounds. Right then he told her that as soon as he regains his strength he would escape. Two days later he and his wife and their two months old baby, sleeping sedated in a knapsack, crossed the border into France and never returned.

The Nuremberg Laws and its consequences

In 1935 the Nazis proclaimed the Nuremberg Laws. From that day on we were known as *non-Aryans*, while my classmates were *Aryans*. We could no longer come in contact with them nor

even talk to them. At school our desks were put into a corner of the classroom. This corner was known as *the Jew corner*. During recreation time, when everybody could walk around in the schoolyard eating a snack, we were assigned to stand in a special corner, also called *the Jew corner*. There we were bombarded with terrible words as well as half eaten apples or other refuse. And the teachers said nothing.

Our desks had removable ink wells. Often enough one of them came flying in my direction and I was covered with blue ink from top to bottom and this was not washable ink.

More and more families left Landau. My parents wanted me to continue schooling in Switzerland but I refused. I wanted to graduate from the same school my mom, her three sisters and my grandmother had graduated years ago. And because of this I had to deal with the consequences.

The sudden separation from my former friends, their marching around in brown uniforms, singing, awakened in me a special feeling. I told myself: *Let them sing, I can go to my beautiful temple and sing there*. I felt so special, so privileged, being a Jew. And I was proud of it.

When graduation came I was the only Jew left in the school. The parents of my classmates applauded them as they made their way up to the stage to get their final report cards (we did not get diplomas). As I had the best marks, I was called up first but there was no one to applaud me for at the entrance of the auditorium there was a large sign saying: *Jews are not permitted to enter here*. These signs were now at all the entrances of parks, the zoo, theaters and restaurants.

Preparing for emigration

One week after graduation I continued my schooling in Switzerland. But not only was I homesick, I was worried about the safety of my parents and brother in Germany.

In early October 1938 my mom called me to come home at once. We had received an invitation to the American Consulate to get our visa. She instructed me to pack my clothes and books in a large steamer trunk which was to be stored in the school's basement. I was then a nurse in training at the *Hôpital Centennial* in Geneva.

I was to wear my nurse's uniform only and a knapsack on my back. That would make it safe to cross the border from Switzerland back to Germany because I would be under the protection of the International Red Cross.

When I got home, my parents told me that they hesitated for the longest time to make plans to leave. The American Consulate would not issue visas to anyone older than 70 years which meant that my grandfather had to be left alone. In addition, my father was troubled at the

thought how he could support his family without the knowledge of English or any financial help.

At this time the German government still allowed Jews to take along anything they wanted to, provided they paid the value of every piece as a special tax. Carefully my mom selected what was to be shipped and marked it with red stickers. Then Nazi officials came and added up the value to decide on the amount of tax my father had to pay. They noticed my mother's paintings on the walls and as they too were hobby artists, they became sympathetic. This would be of great importance to us when we finally emigrated.

In these gray fog shrouded days the grim mood of mother nature matched that of my parents. Their sad eyes showed their feelings.

Kristallnacht

We were so occupied with preparations for the great move that we did not pay attention to a news item which would be so devastating for us: In France an employee of the German Embassy was shot and killed by a Polish Jew, because he was upset that his parents were deported out of Germany back to their native Poland. Hitler used this event to decree a concerted pogrom starting at the night of November 9 all over Germany.

On the morning of the 10th, one of our servants woke me whispering: *Honey, if you want to see the temple get up quickly because it is burning.* At once I was out of bed and put on some clothes. Without stopping for a coat I left our house in the direction of the temple. The air, heavy with fog and smoke, almost choked me. I stopped running about a block away from my beloved temple. As I stood there like glued to the sidewalk, I heard a noise as flames burst of the central cupola and the large stain-glassed window.

I don't remember how long I stood there. In tears I ran back to my home and wanted to tell my parents about the horror I just had seen, when loud voices could be heard in the hall. At once the door opened up and about ten men stormed in. One took the table cloth into both hands and pulled on it, so that all the dishes, the coffee and milk came tumbling to the floor. Another man took my father by his arm and told him: *You are under arrest.* To his question why, he was told: *Because you are a Jew and today we get all the Jews.*

My dad told me to get his hat and coat. When I took them out of his room my eyes noticed the open door of my bedroom. There on my desk laid my prayer book and three candy bars. Quickly I put everything in his coat pocket. And so my dad was taken away, brought to the local prison, which the day before was emptied of the real criminals. All Jewish men above 18

years of age were taken there. The next morning they were shipped by train to Dachau concentration camp.

After his return my dad often told me that at the prison they only received water, but he and the three other men in his cell lived on my candy bars.

Another raid and fleeing home

We had little time to get over my dad's arrest when again men stormed into the house. This time they carried knives, crowbars, axes and one of them even a revolver. For the next two hours they pushed my mother, brother and me always with the butt of the revolver from one room to the other while we had to watch as they systematically destroyed the furniture, broke every dish they could lay hands on, cut open pillows and comforters etc.

Just when one of those bandits swung himself back and forth from the dining room's chandelier, my mother cried out: *What do you want from us?! We have served Germany faithfully in war and peace!* With that she pointed to the china closet where on a black velvet pillow laid the decorations my parents had earned for their services in WW1 and my grandfather in the 1870/71 German-French war. When the men saw this, one of them gave the command to stop. As fast as these beasts of prey had arrived, as fast they made their getaway, but behind them they not only left broken furniture, but also three broken human beings.

My brother cried pitifully. We tried to console him. Then one of our servants came to give us more bad news: She had just been told that during the coming night all Jewish houses would be doused with kerosene and set on fire. She wanted to take my brother and me and hide us in the woods. With tears in her eyes my mom sent her away - alone - as she did not want to jeopardize the life of that great lady.

After that my mother told us to dress very warmly. I can still hear her say: *Double layers of everything*, as we would go for a walk. A walk I thought absurd. A walk on this day and it was already getting dark outside! But we did as told and a short time later the three of us, all bundled up, left the house and walked through the park across the street to the Jewish cemetery. There we spent the night, alternately walking or sitting on my grandparents' tombstone. That we did not freeze or get sick is one of the miracles of that time.

At dawn we went back to the park, where through the leafless trees we had a perfect view of our house. It was untouched. Just at that moment a large car pulled up. Two Nazis came out and went into the house. *Let's get back to the cemetery*, I begged my mother. *No*, she said, *we have to go over. Maybe the men have news from your dad.* Crying and shaking I went.

Just as we entered the front hall we heard the men voicing their disgust at the sight of the destruction. When they saw us coming they told my mom: *Don't worry, we will see to it that everything is going to be fixed so you can take it to America. After all you have paid the tax for it.* We could not have cared less. We did not want anything to drink or eat. My mom told us to go to our rooms and go to sleep while she would take her bicycle to see how my grandfather was doing.

The expulsion from Landau

I believe I was asleep. I thought that I dreamed that the phone was ringing and ringing until I realized it really did ring. Gingerly I made my way over the debris on the floor to the den. When passing the grandfather's clock still working I saw that it was just a quarter past nine. I had been asleep for two minutes only!

After picking up the phone, I heard a harsh male voice asking for my mother. I told the man that she was on her way to my grandfather. He said: *Call her there and tell her to come home, pack three suitcases and be at the railroad station before noon.* Quickly I dialed my grandfather's number. The housekeeper answered and told me that my mother was just coming in. I gave her the sad message. Calmly she told me to start packing and to let my brother sleep. She would be back in 15 minutes.

Shortly before 11 we left our house carrying the heavy suitcases. It was not the weight of the luggage which was difficult, but to have to pass the still burning temple and houses of friends where the destruction of the previous day could be seen on the street. In one house pieces of cut up oriental rugs dangled from the windows. In front of another house pieces of a grand piano laid on the sidewalk. But worst of all were the hateful stares of the people of Landau, people who knew us well and whom we knew. One man forced us off the sidewalk, and made us walk in the busy street.

Just before noon we arrived at the plaza in front of the station. Light rain was falling. Desperate and crying women and children sat on their luggage, scared because they did not know where their husbands and fathers were or where they should go to. My mom consoled them all, even walked up to two Nazis and told them that she wanted to be the last person to leave as she wanted to make sure that everybody was well and would get on a train of their own choosing.

Slowly one family after another was taken into a room of the station where Nazi women examined them and took their jewelry and money except wedding bands. After that they were

free to choose any train which would take them across the Rhine River. This was the first phase of the infamous Holocaust.

Near 7 o'clock that night we boarded a train for Mannheim where we had a distant relative. On the train we shared a compartment with six other people, non-Jews. Nobody spoke. Suddenly the door opened and a waiter from the dining car stood there holding a huge basket full of sandwiches and a pot of steaming coffee. My mom was just taking off her wedding band to give it to him in exchange for a sandwich for my brother and me when he pushed back her hand saying: *Stop, we no longer serve Jewish pigs!*

In safety

After we arrived in Mannheim my mom went to a newspaper kiosk to ask whether she could borrow money to make a phone call. It was given to her without hesitation.

My brother and I stood in front of the phone booth and heard her say: *Thank you and God bless you.* Smilingly she came out and told us that we were cordially invited. In no time a driver appeared carrying an umbrella and a money bag. At once my mom went over to the newspaper seller to pay him back. Smiling sadly he refused to take it and said: *God bless you, madam, and your children.*

In the taxi we were afraid to talk. I thought that the driver might find out that we are Jews and drop us some place in the dark night in the pouring rain. But he delivered us safely to the home of the relative where we were cordially welcomed and asked to come in. I could not believe my eyes when I saw unbroken furniture in a well heated room and that a little table has been made ready for us to have supper. But above all the most beautiful sight were two burning Sabbath candles. It was Friday night, Sabbath had begun. The warmth of the glowing tapers went thought me like a heat wave. Once more I thanked God for keeping us safe and I felt that very special pride *to be a Jew.*

March 1999
Laure Metzger



[Index*](#)

[Home*](#)