

ROSENFELD/WOJNER FAMILY NARRATIVE
OF THE HOLOCAUST

*written and
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My mother, Ruth, was born in 1923 in Berlin, the youngest of three children, all about 1½ years apart. The oldest brother, Herman, was born in Hungry, whereas Ruth and Max were born in Berlin. Their parents, Celia ("Cilly") and Morris were born in Hungry and in Poland, respectively. They were a middle class blue-collar working family with Morris being a sheet metal worker at his own little shop with a few employees. He did all kinds of custom jobs. The mother, Celia, was a housewife but had some interest in gypsy activity; i.e., palm reading and card, and did this on the side for spare change.

By 1932-34 there were laws being passed against Jews owning property, against Jews marrying or having sex with gentiles to keep the Aryan race "pure". By 1936 there was a law stating that if a Jew has sex with a gentile it was punishable by imprisonment. Germany was a very civilized country at this time with a lot science and culture and no one had any idea what was coming down the pike. Even though these laws were occurring, most stable family units with businesses just thought this was a phase and it would blow over.

The family unit was not very tight. Celia would go off and do her own thing; i.e., she would go to Hungry to visit some of her relatives when she felt like it. She felt the kids did well being independent even though they were 9, 10, and 11. Morris was a bit of a philanderer and was a hard working man. The kids did a lot of their own things, going to the public schools in the working class neighborhood. At this same time, there were Hitler youth movements going on and Ruth reports going to school and the teacher would insult a German student next to her, saying "look, even a Jew knows the answer". As time went on it got worse and worse and the Jews were completely ostracized from any kind of school activities. All three of the kids eventually started playing hookey because they did not like the bad feeling going to school. They were also fearful of the nazi kids who would attack them and taunt them, etc.

Uncle Max relates a story (this was the last day he went to school) where he went to school and they were acting up, chanting "Jew, Jew, Jew" in German ("youden"). The teacher was fearful that the students would injure Max so he sent him out of the class and told him "get on the street car and go home". He gave Max 15 finning from his own pocket to take the street car home. He went out into the street to wait for the street car and the children came running after him, shouting "youden, youden". He got on the street car and the conductor helped him up, put him in the front, and started shouting at the children to try to disperse the angry crowd of vicious 10 and 12 year olds. Max never returned to public school from that point forward.

Meanwhile, they had a live-in maid that helped keep the house clean and feed and to the basic necessities which allowed Celia to go off and do the things she needed to do with her family in other parts of Europe. During one of these episodes, the maid became pregnant by Morris. Then, several months later, Morris went off to Poland for his father's unveiling. It was then discovered that Morris was accused of impregnating an Aryan woman and by then there was a new law passed saying that this was punishable by death. He was informed in Poland of the charges and that it was not safe for him to return to Germany because they knew the nazis were looking for him. Because of this, he went to Fuma which was the only country where you could go without a passport. It was already known at this time that some refugees were getting to Palestine, China, and other countries.

Meanwhile, the children had no father and the sheet metal shop was sold by Celia. The house belonged to Celia. Meanwhile, laws were passed saying that Jews could not own stores and other properties, and right before the law stating they could not even own homes, she sold the apartment complex that they owned. This was a 4 or 5 story building with a courtyard; the bottom floor and courtyard of which was used as the sheet metal shop. There were approximately 16 apartments in this working class neighborhood that were occupied by tenants. At this time, there was a "fire sale" with Jews losing the majority of the value of anything they had to sell because it was clear that the laws were moving in a way as to basically strip all wealth from Jews. Celia obtained about 1/10th of the value of this apartment complex.

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There was a gentleman named Heidacher and he was the bookkeeper and he was a German national, not Jewish. He worked for Morris and helped with the books of the business. When Morris did not come back from Poland, Celia needed help and Heidacher was very happy to help as he had a fairly close relationship. With the money from the sold apartment complex, Heidacher and Celia moved to Nuremburg, bought a tobacco store, and they were eking out a reasonable living but the times were clearly getting worse and worse. By now, it was 1937. At that time, laws were passed that Jews couldn't own property at all and Celia was very concerned that Heidacher could take advantage of the fact that the store had to be in his name. They were living as husband and wife using his name. Meanwhile, he had some kind of ailment and was getting sick. At this time, the children had already all managed to get to Fuma, where the father was. They all had gotten out of Germany. The older brother, Herman, had already left in 1935 when he was 15 years old and gotten to Palestine on one of those Jewish Agency sponsored smuggling trips from the Hashoma Hatsier.

By now (it was 1938), Heidacher was getting ill with some ailment and it was believed he had a wife somewhere. In the course of him getting sicker and delirious, he made comments about how maybe he should reconcile with his wife. Celia knew that one phone call could get her deported and he would be left with the entire property and estate. Meanwhile, Celia was taking care of him and administering his medicine. I do not know what ailment he had, however, he became very sick, disoriented, and Celia went out to summon a doctor. Celia clearly discussed this with Ruth, my mother, explaining that she went on a busy day and she was very worried about what would happen. When it was finally her turn, the doctor asked her about her problem and she asked if he could come see his patient, her husband, who was ill. The doctor said "well, certainly" but he would have to make the house call after he finished with the office. Unfortunately, it was many hours before he finished up and eventually came by the house and Heidacher was practically dead and died shortly thereafter. The doctor scolded her for not communicating the urgency of Heidacher's condition. At this time, she falsified some documents, signing Heidacher's name to it, and sold the whole property, store, merchandise, etc, as quickly as she could.

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Celia bought diamonds and jewels and hid them in her shoes and undergarments (as well as cash) and tried to cross the border. She was trying to go to Yugoslavia. All the people on this train were arrested and assumed to be Jewish. She denied being Jewish. The rest of them were taken to a concentration-camp. She claimed to be a German national from Hungary fleeing to Yugoslavia because she claimed she had committed a crime in Nuremburg. She was arrested in Yugoslavia. They sent most of the folks off to the concentration camp, but they sent Celia back to the town in Austria where the train originated. There, she was held in prison until she deported back to Nuremburg. Then, they questioned her about the crime and she stated that she felt that perhaps it was her fault that Heidacher died because she didn't get the doctor in time. She played the role of a guilty grieving wife. They exhumed the body and could not find any evidence of poisoning and she was basically released from prison.

Of utmost importance, is that most people already knew she was Jewish and they all went along with this charade because she was bribing people. She was good looking and she knew how to use her looks and was desperate to survive. She was able to use her seductive appearance and sex to survive. She also had to pay 1000 marks (a large fee) for the lawyer who got her out and one of her cellmates who was a grand larcenist. This thief, who was in the cell with her, told her very clearly that "you can be anything in the world; a liar, a thief, or a murderer, but not a Jew. If you are a Jew, you don't have a chance".

The story gets complicated, as you see, however she somehow got a job in this town in Austria. The mayor was interested in her and at one point he asked her if that was a real diamond she had and she said "Oh, you like it? You can have it as a gift". It was already clear that the mayor knew she was Jewish and nobody said anything. There was a lot of unspoken activity that went on but this was a bribe. She was given a job as a cook in a rehabilitation center for injured German and Austrian soldiers.

By now, it is 1940, and she was reading palms and cards on the side and made some money at this activity toward the end of the war when it was clear the nazis were losing. She lived through the bombings of this part of Austria from the British and the Allied Forces.

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During all this time, she had no communication with any of her family but did assume that everybody in her immediate family was safe in the US. Celia had a sister named Hermina who also survived the war living in Vienna in hiding. Hermina at one point had no food and had no way to continue living and came to visit Celia in this town in Austria. She had a more elegant lifestyle and it was clear to the peasants in the village that this was probably some Jewish woman. Someone informed the gestapo, who questioned Celia. She walked into the gestapo headquarters and they questioned her about this relationship, and was this not her sister, and she denied it, stating she had no sister but the reason they spoke in a similar way was because they came from the same part of Hungary. She urged her sister to take some food and hit the road. The gestapo could not get hold of Hermina because she was already back in Vienna. Immediately following the war, Celia had a lot of contacts with the peasants and gathered up large amounts of food, bread, wheat, and meat and sent it to Hermina, who then sold it at top dollar in Vienna and made a great deal of money on the black market. She then ended up marrying someone named Gross and moved to England.

Now we will get back to my mother, Ruth, uncle Max, and uncle Herman. Uncle Herman, as I said, was already in Palestine by 1935 when he was 15 years old and he was living on a kaboutz. He was getting some paramilitary training at that time, as well as completing some of his education.

Meanwhile, in December of 1935, Uncle Max managed to get to Fuma by going with his mother and was left to be with his father, Morris. Celia returned to Berlin because she had not sold the apartment yet and Ruth was still in school. The plan, meanwhile, was to sell the apartment complex, bring Ruth back to Fuma, and then the whole family was going to try to get to Palestine. Of note, the United States was turning back Jewish refugees at this time and would not accept any.

Ruth, meanwhile, was still in school and it was getting near the end because it was becoming very unpleasant in Berlin. Celia returned to Berlin and, at this point in the telling of the story, both Ruth and Max remember a song they used to sing in school. Every morning, the class was singing a nazi song in school that went like this:

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Max: This is one of the most offensive nazi propaganda songs. It is the one we remember quite clearly.

Max & Ruth: Song in German.... which means the intention of murdering Jews...

Larry: Let's translate it literally:

Max & Ruth: When the Jew's blood squirts from the knife, then it is twice as good.

Yes, and that's the song that all the school kids would sing before most classes. Interestingly enough, the propaganda was so intense, that both Ruth and Max remember many songs. They can just sing them at random, one after another, and they are actually defensive of the kids that sang them, saying that everybody sang those songs. There were some teachers, however, that Ruth remembers who were somewhat sensitive and suggested the kids not sing the song when Ruth was in the class and so she has some fond memories of some of the teachers. Ruth's last day of school was sometime in 1936 when her regular teacher wasn't there and a new teacher appeared who was a man wearing a nazi uniform. He chastised the student sitting next to her for confiding in Ruth to check to see if she had the right answer. He screamed in front of the class, pointing and ranting and raving, saying "You shouldn't expect an answer from a Jew. You should be ashamed of yourself". Ruth decided in the sixth grade that she was not going back.

In 1936, right before she moved to Nuremburg, Celia went to live with Heidacher.

Ruth: When my mother left our apartment in Berlin, she moved to the suburbs with her friend, Heidacher, and she left me with my grandparents in a small apartment in the same building that we lived before. I was very unhappy and I went on a hunger strike for one day, but by the end of the evening I decided that I had to do something about it so I called up my uncle (Uncle Leo) who lived in West Berlin who had a jewelry store. I told him that I was

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very unhappy, that my mother had left, and that I was alone with my grandparents and I wanted to join my father and brother in Italy. My uncle told me that if I wanted to go to Italy, he would buy the train ticket; however, I needed a passport.

Because my father never gave up his Polish citizenship, I went to the Polish consulate. At that time, I was 13 years old. When I arrived at the consulate, the man said that I was too young to have a passport. He said I had to go with my mother or my father. I explained to him that my father was Jewish and he was in Italy now, and my mother is not Jewish and she doesn't want to join him and she left me. The man was very shocked and thought for a moment and then he told me to go to the local police station where I lived and get some papers of identity. I surprised when I went to the police station that they knew exactly who I was and they asked me how my father was in Italy and I said he was fine. They gave me a form which they filled out with me. That form stated my date of birth and that I was born in Berlin and where I had lived.

With that form I went back to the Polish consulate and he made out a passport for me valid for six months that had my picture on it. With that passport, I then went to my uncle in West Berlin who gave me the money for a ticket and I went on a train but I didn't know about visas, so when we came to the border with Austria, I had to leave the train and, since I didn't have a visa, I thought that I wouldn't be able to go to Italy; but, some people helped me to pay a certain fee (I don't remember how much it was) but I got a visa at the border and went on to Trieste, Italy, where my father picked me up.

We spent the night in Trieste and the very next day we went to Fuma and that is when I saw my brother, Max, again.

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I left Berlin on 08/13/36. I learned later that my grandmother, the following year, was sick with diabetes and when she was taken to the hospital she was put to sleep. I don't know who took care of her remains but I do know that my Aunt Hermina, who also lived in Berlin at the time (I think this is 1938 or 1939), took her father back to Hungary where he died of natural causes at the age of 84. My grandmother, who was killed in the hospital, was 70 years old at the time. My maternal grandparents' name was Dowman, my grandmother's name was Hannah.

My father's parents lived in Poland. My grandfather had died in '35 but my grandmother was alive when in 1939 the nazis marched into Poland and they deported her and her daughter and her grandchildren to Auschwitz; however, my grandmother was able to escape from the train and went back to the place where they had resided (the name is Denbetza and it is not far from Crachau). She was picked up again by the nazis and she died on the transport to Auschwitz. My Aunt Bella and her three children were killed. The husband, named Goldberg, he survived the concentration camp and went to Palestine at the end of the war.

Now I will tell how my brother, Max, and I came to the United States. My brother, Max, and my father both worked doing reparations on houses and other kinds of sheet metal work while I kept house for the two of them. I shopped and cooked and cleaned. My father met an American woman who married him, Her parents lived in Fuma. The woman who my father married which enabled him to come to the United States was named Bertha Largo. She came from New York to Fuma to visit her parents and that is where she met my father. They got married and shortly after my father came to New York and my brother, Max, and I lived with her parents.

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This was in 1938 when Mussolini at that time issued the racial laws and those laws prohibited any Italian to work for Jews. Since Fuma was next door to Sushak, which was in Yugoslavia, they were able to get a Yugoslavian woman to be helpful because the parents were quite old, they were already in their 80s.

They had a daughter named Lanka Schuldenfry who was married and had a big store.

My brother and I had a problem because my passport had expired and my brother never had a passport because he had come with my mother and he was too young at the time to have a passport. Now that we were getting ready to go to the United States, we needed valid passports. My father had requested our presence in New York and, because we were minors (my brother was 17 and I was 16 years old), we were eligible to come to the United States provided we had proper documentation and could pass the physical exam that is required by the United States government.

My brother and I went to the Polish consulate in Trieste so that my passport could be extended and my brother could get a new passport because of the requirements to go to the states. The consul in Trieste was very nasty. He looked at both of us and told us that Hitler was right, we weren't Poles, we were vasapolaken (that means that we were the kind of Poles that are like the water, who don't stay in one place). We just left Trieste and decided to go Rome where the Polish Embassy was.

There were thousands of people who were looking for papers to go anywhere in the world because as soon as Mussolini had passed the racial laws, all the Jews who had come to Italy after 1920 had to leave Italy by March of the following year and everybody was scrambling to get some kind of documentation to be able to leave.

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In that atmosphere it was very difficult to even get an audience. Finally, we got to see the ambassador, or somebody who interviewed us. I remember distinctly it was a young man with brown hair; a very friendly young man who told us immediately that he was not able,--it was illegal, for him to issue us any papers at all. So, I said to him "but don't you understand, here we have our papers to go to the United States, all I need is an extension of my passport and my brother needs a piece of paper to say that he is a Polish citizen that is valid". Well, he was terribly torn. He finally looked at my 17-year-old brother with flaming red hair and at me (I was 16) and he looked at me, then he looked at him, and he looked at me, and he looked at him, and finally he heaved a big sigh and told us that we were not allowed to say a word about this. We had to swear that we would keep it absolutely secret and then he went ahead and extended my passport for three months and gave my brother a valid passport also for three months. We didn't think anything about it. We didn't even realize how close we were to not being able to go to the states because of a piece of paper.

Following our receiving these documents, we proceeded to Naples where the American Embassy was and there were greeted in a very friendly manner and we passed the physical and mental examination. All the papers were in order and then, one month later, we were on our way to the United States. We came on the SS Atonia. It took 15 days. We had a wonderful time and we got to the United States on April 13, 1939.

I want to remark that the people that we stayed with in Italy were all deported and the old people were gassed in Auschwitz, including the daughter, Lanka. The children were hidden by the nuns in Italy and the father in an insane asylum. After the war, they were able to come to

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the United States where they changed their name from Schuldenfry to Sheldon. The father died shortly after but the two girls are still living together. They never married. They are still living in the city of New York.

In 1941, my brother, Herman, who had been in Palestine since 1935, communicated that he wanted to fight against the Germans and so he wanted to come to the United States to learn how to be a soldier. He came to the United States at the end of 1941, just around the time of Pearl Harbor; it may have been after Pearl Harbor in 1942. Within six months he was drafted and became a citizen of the United States shortly after he joined the Armed Forces. My brother, Max, was also drafted and he also fought overseas. Both of them fought in Europe.

As soon as the war was over, there were numerous ads from people who had lost contact with families all over the world. There was one newspaper called The Alfbau (meaning reconstruction in German) where German Jewish people searched for family in the United States. We had not heard from our mother since 1938 and now it was 1945, but my father, who was remarried and living in New York, found an ad in The Alfbau which read "Morris [that is my father's name], Herman, Max, Ruth- I am looking for contact with you". It was signed Cecelia Warner. That is how we realized that she was still alive. My brother, Herman, was working for the Armed Forces. It was after the war and he was working for the Armed Forces in Europe, in Frankfort, Germany. He contacted her and went to visit her and got papers ready for her to come to the United States. She arrived in New York in 1947. At the time of her arrival she was about 51-years-old.

Because I was a college student and could not afford to support her, I helped her to go to Detroit, Michigan where my brother, Max, was living with a wife and children. She moved in with them in 1947.