

CHAPTER 11

THE PERSECUTION OF THE JEWS

Hitler blamed the Jews for Germany's problem in the years after World War I. He repeated his falsehoods so often that the German people believed them. As a result, anti-Semitism was rampant in the country. Germany, being a dictatorship now, many things were forbidden; for one, there was no longer freedom of speech. The harassment of the Jews and the persecutions began almost immediately after Hitler's seizure of power. They were gradually deprived of their civil rights. They were forced to wear the Star of David at all times. Signs were posted in front of Jewish stores not to shop there, therefore losing their means of livelihood. Most of the synagogues were destroyed. The Jews were being mistreated and told to leave the country. We said good-bye to Jewish friends who were forced to leave. My hope always was that they got out safely. We heard that most countries did not want the Jews and sent them back to Germany by ship loads. As I see it now, they most likely landed into camps thereafter. My mother was one who offered food to the ill-treated Jews, as did many other German Christians. I remember my kind-hearted mother making a specific effort to go out of her way to be friendly to the Jews whom she feared were being persecuted. We listened secretly to the news on an English Radio station but we didn't dare tell anyone what we heard because there was no longer any trust

among the people. You didn't know who would report you or what could happen. We heard rumors of people being "relocated" during the night without any warning and we never saw or heard from them again. The concentration camps were a well-kept secret. Many people were dumbfounded that we were unaware of such places of destruction. In 1972, I went twice to Bergen-Belsen, a concentration camp near Hamburg, to see with my own eyes what people were talking about. It's still incomprehensible to me that such camps and the purpose for which they were constructed actually existed. It was more and more evident that a government that started out to do so much good would become involved in a war and the annihilation of the Jewish people, resulting in the destruction of the entire country.

My father hated the dictates that were handed down day after day when Hitler came to power. For instance, when meeting people outside of our home we had to raise our right arm and proclaim "Heil Hitler." Heil translated is holy. That was against my Dad's better judgment and when he refused and instead greeted people with "Good Day" he was criticized and in one instance at a bakery store a Nazi officer overheard him and threatened to place him under arrest if he didn't comply with the Nazi greeting. These are just some of the things I recall from my teenage years in Nazi Germany.

engaged Edith and Herbert October 1942 >>



CHAPTER 12

MARRIAGE

When Herbert and I applied for a marriage license, we had to submit birth certificates of our parents and grandparents. A German soldier was strictly forbidden to marry anyone with a Jewish background.

We were married on July 17th 1943 in Konradshof. Since it was too far from the train station we decided to have the wedding in the barn. Only my uncle had a car. Trying to pick up over 100 people that were coming was too much for one car. With horse and wagon it would take so much longer from the 12 km train station.

We decorated the barn with birch branches. My piano was brought in. On the day before, the 16th, Erwin drove us in a beautiful covered carriage to the next village, to the justice of peace. In Germany the minister can't marry you.

It was a hot day. As the ceremony began, the 4 year old twin flower boys went ahead of Herbert and me dropping the flowers, my brothers rabbits came right behind

them. That was so funny. We could barely hold back from not laughing out loud. I was thinking, all we need to hear the chickens making noises after they lay their eggs. Some of the chickens did that in the barn. I do not remember what the minister said that day. All the food was made ahead of time. We did not have a refrigerator. The result was after the big dinner, one by one our guests started running to the *OUTHOUSE*. We had two, one outside and one in the barn. That wasn't enough as the line was getting bigger.

We all slept in the barn. The straw and hay barn was pretty big. At night my dad went around with glasses of his home made wine. Everybody was happy. You heard laughter as my uncle Willy was telling jokes. Slowly couples disappeared, you heard giggling coming from all directions. One of my cousins fell in love with a friend from our church, but he later was killed during the war.

My mother's parents slept in my bedroom. The morning after the wedding grandma came looking for us in the barn and said softly to Herbert and me, "Your bed is free now for a few hours". She did not have to repeat this.

I was about 5 months pregnant when I got a call from Erwin, he was in Berlin for a few days and wanted to see me. I went to Berlin to meet him at his sister's house. Erwin was a sweetheart and my best friend, I was craving for a pickle and Erwin went all over Berlin to find one. This was the last time we saw him. Erwin, at the age of 24, was killed in a battle in Russia. He never got to see his niece.

I continued to live with my parents on the farm at Konradshof while my husband was in the service.

CHAPTER 13

OUR ORDEAL BEGINS

My husband was stationed in Russia with the Germany Army. In his long-awaited but infrequent messages to me, he mentioned the 17th Army in Russia. In the fall of 1943, he suffered a wound in his arm which landed him in the hospital in Austria. This critical event probably saved his life as his entire regiment was destroyed in battle. His wound proved to be minor and he was released from the hospital after two weeks. A piece of shrapnel, the size of a bean, was lodged in his arm and could not be removed. After his release from the hospital, he was given a two week leave. After his furlough he was sent to a town not too far from us, training soldiers for the medical corp. He didn't care for that and asked to be sent back to the front. I was very disappointed and hurt. Why would he do this to me? The fighting could have been over for him. He was thinking of the wounded that needed help.

He went back to the Russian front. Being in the medical corps, he was assigned to work as doctor's assistant in hospitals behind the fighting line. Many times he assisted doctors in performing surgeries. He also helped deliver Russian babies. His dream was to become a doctor but his parents could not afford the tuition for medical school, so that never came true.

Our daughter Karin was born at the farm on March 31st 1944. Herbert did not see his daughter until she was 8 months old.

In the summer of 1944, air raids by the Russians were becoming more and more frequent. We were issued gas masks and were warned the Russians were going to drop gas bombs. Babies were not issued gas masks. We were told to put a wet towel over our baby's head. That seemed a flimsy means of protection. I was constantly anguishing about how I would protect my tiny baby. I tried not to think about what could happen if gas bombs were dropped. So far the air raids we had were caused by the Russians.

My father dug a shelter out in a hill next to our house. During one of the air raids, I was running to the shelter with Karin stuffed into a pillow holding her under my arm. When I reached the shelter, I discovered "no Karin." Panicked, I ran back: along the way I found her lying on the grass unhurt. She had slid out of the pillow in my frantic run to safety. I lost track of the number of times we raced to the shelter, collapsing there numb with fright until we heard the clear signal.

All the men, regardless of their ages who were still at home, were drafted in mid-summer of 1944. That left the women alone at harvest time. I had learned a lot about farming, having worked with a horse team next to my Dad for many years. This experience enabled me to help the farm women in our village. We did have two French prisoners of war working who came to help with the farm work. They were allowed to come alone in the morning and return to their camp at night. I've often wonder what happened to them.

The men who were drafted were not issued uniforms or guns. Many of them were mere teenagers and old men—some who had fought in World War I and were not fit for

combat. They were ordered to follow along behind the German troops and make lots of noise. My Dad and many others saw how ridiculous and useless this was. The Mighty Reich was not even able to supply the necessities of combat to these unfortunate men and boys. Why fight when it looked like the war was ending? So they came on home. They would surely have been executed for desertion if Germany had won the war.



Edith with Baby Karin 1944