

URSULA'S STORY



I grew up in Köln. It was a very happy childhood amongst a great deal of love, friends, my grandmother's music room with two concert Grands, on the steps a sculpture by Minne - the other side one by Meuvier. The fabulously leather bound books and all the paintings. None survived. The Nazis stole the lot. I would recognize some of them if I happened to see them somewhere. For although I was very young they left a lasting impression. Every weekend my father and his mother made music together. Also musicians were accompanied by my grandmother. I distinctly remember the great cellist, Feuermann; I recall the way he smiled.

My first awareness of the Nazis came when, on a walk with my mother, she suddenly stopped in front of a big poster. It had a caricature of a Jew on it. She tore it off the wall, which was a very courageous and mad, impulsive act. Thank God, no one saw her doing this.

Then came the carnival, a big yearly event in K61n which we would watch from my father's factory. At one point he pulled me hastily away from the balcony to protect me from seeing what I did however see: a wagon with large hideous figures, meant to be Jews. This of course was our last carnival. We children did not really know what it meant. We were not brought up in any religious way. I came home from my elementary school one day asking what "Yid" meant. Some kids had called me that and thrown stones at me. My parents tried to explain as best they could and I was taken out of school. They enrolled me in the one existing Jewish school where I spent one year immersed in Religion and Hebrew studies. After a rebellious beginning there, I became a little ardent Zionist and in love with Religion.

This ended with our departure for Holland. We left very late and by train. No belongings were allowed. But my little sister, who was very fond of money, smuggled her coin collection across the border. It scared my parents when they discovered it; for it could have been the end of our journey if the officials had seen it.

We had a few lovely years in Holland before the Germans invaded the country and forced us to leave our house within 24 hours. I learned to speak and write Dutch in school.

Dutch schools were much harder than German ones and I had a hard time following since I missed a lot before I understood the language and had mainly learnt Religion and Hebrew the previous year in Köln.

A very kind neighbor offered to store our furniture in his name when we had to leave our house. We had to move inland, away from the coast. This was the order for all foreigners and Jews. Before this we actually spent six months in England, fearing the German invasion. But returned to Holland because friends phoned us to tell us not to be silly - nothing was going to happen My father also had purchased passages to Chile in the "Simon Bolivar". We did not go because one of us children had a bad throat The ship sank on a mine and very few people survived. Mrs. Goeritz, a friend of my parents, lost her six children and husband. She was one of the few survivors.

We moved to Bussum - to a boarding house. One day during a walk my father rang the bell of a lovely cottage hidden on a quiet lane. The owner, on my father's question, said his cottage was not for rent. But he sensed we needed a shelter, called us the next day to offer us his house. He moved into a tiny garden shed. He, as well as our immediate neighbors risked their lives for us.

They warned us when Germans were to make "house calls" to search for Jews. They let us stay on the grounds of the Theosophical Society across the road. A professor of literature gave me private lessons, the children became my best friends. Although very dangerous collaborators lived in our street, we survived in semi-hiding. I remember the period as a very happy and enriching one, emotionally as well as intellectually. Many good conversations with many generations of wonderful people, deep into the nights.

Then Chris arrived in our house and promised to get us to Switzerland. There was talk of disguising us as workers and driving us by truck. My father questioned the validity of such a plan. How could two young girls and a woman pass as workers? But somehow Chris became a fixture in our house and fond of us, genuinely so. My father eventually paid him a fortune for false papers; and one day we walked to the train station. Neighbors who we knew were discreetly waving goodbye. Chris turned out to be a crook who actually delivered Jews to the Germans; but

he delivered us into the hands of a Belgian smuggler, who that night expected the usual cargo of butter or goods, but not people. He walked us for four hours through the silent moonlit night. My sister still remembers as the only sound the rubbing together of my fat thighs. We had no belongings; but I took my miniature wooden train. I still have it. The smuggler took us to his farm just inside Belgium.



One of Ursula's Water Colors painted during one of her European trips

Two days later we were joined by friends. We, the four children, slept in the hay. The oldest boy was allowed to help milk the cows. I don't remember what the younger ones did (if anything). The two fathers found a hiding place. We went to 33 Rue Legrand in Brussels. M & Mme Geudevert, owners of this boarding house, took us in at great danger to themselves. Regular house guests never let on that they knew who we were, never questioned us, and helped us with our meager knowledge of French. I helped in the kitchen with a lot of baking and delicious home grown food. When I had a period, I was not allowed to touch certain foods. Those were the rules at the time.

Monsieur Geudevert grew tobacco and we were allowed to help with the harvest. Another family of four arrived. My father and the man had a very serious conversation. It was much too dangerous to have us all in one hiding place. They left since we had been there first. They were discovered soon after moving into their own house and were never heard of again. Only one of their small boys came running to us after finding his house sealed. I do not remember what happened to him. We ate our meals with the other guests. Only when members of the Italian family came to lunch, would we stay in our rooms.

But once one of the Italians went up the steps. He asked Mme Geudevert if I was Italian. It scared me very much. My mother went out on a regular basis. She looked totally un-Jewish. My father was restless; he used to visit friends to play bridge or chess. My sister was just an ordinary little girl. I was the suspicious-looking one and it was an additional burden to carry. Because of my looks I was a potential danger to my family.

One day my father was arrested in the street. His deep scar across one cheek made every German address him as "Herr Doktor" - because it looked exactly like a scar German dueling students inflicted upon each other. In fact it was the result of a 1st World War wound: a bullet had traversed his cheek. He was the youngest cavalry officer in the German army then. The various medals he received as a result actually saved his life since one day he was called off a truck ready to deliver Jews to the concentration camp. It was a miracle due to my mother's meeting with a former school friend from Trier. He had connection to the temporary SS replacement chief. The medals were used to free him. This was after three nights in the cellar of the Gestapo where one cellar was used

to empty buckets of excrement. Meanwhile we had moved to different shelters after he was set free. We all moved for a while to No.33, then to a friend's house. My sister somewhere else. I was taken in by a lawyer whose Jewish mistress was upstairs. Their life was supremely well organized. There was no trace of her existence. One napkin, one plate setting. They slept in one half of the bed, her dressing gown's pockets were stuffed with underwear and essentials. When the door bell rang, she climbed to the roof in this garment. Only his 12-year old daughter from a previous marriage and the housekeeper knew of her existence. They were the happiest couple I ever met in their restricted quarters in these strange and dangerous circumstances. It was after the war, when freedom came, that their relationship fell apart. They tried to save it by having a child. Upon arrival I immediately got a very high fever. I was an additional danger, and could not escape to the roof with her in case of an emergency; they had to nurse me instead.

I never told my parents of the hidden person in the lawyer's house until after the Liberation. This was when I learned keep a secret - for ever if need be.

A group of Dutch students from the underground would lunch in our dining room at times. They transported British pilots, who had been shot down over Holland, to Spain.

I fell deeply in love with a medical student called Willy. He managed to escape when the group was discovered. Some of the students committed suicide, he got away, back to Holland. The very first flying bomb hit his parents' home and he lost one eye. We heard this via the underground connection. Years after war, swimming in the sea in Holland, a man followed me with a horribly staring eye. At the very last second did I realize who he was. I heard he married an English girl and became a doctor, but of course had to abandon his dream of becoming a surgeon.

The Liberation

The madness of it! Those who were there will never forget it. The city went crazy with joy. The Germans were still departing - on wheels without tires, disheveled, torn uniforms - starved bodies. They still tried to shoot people and still shouted but the Allied tanks appeared and in no time these were covered with jubilating people, embracing the Liberators, opening long hidden bottles of champagne. It was crazy, mad, wonderful!

Suddenly everyone seemed to speak English. People wore white badges to show that they did. Many just wanted to, but really did not and the craziest misunderstandings arose as a result. Flags and banners of welcome flooded the city. Trams were about the only means of transportation the Germans could not confiscate. They overflowed with bodies. People hanging on, people squatting on roofs, on buffers. Elbows were used a lot to get on and off, but all in

good spirit. The driver's vision was marginal, since people were all around him. The trams had no straps - but no one could possibly fall.

Girls all fell madly in love with the soldiers. The Americans were particularly attractive with their tight little behinds in nicely cut pants. Of course I fell in love too - with an English officer who ordered his men to leave their site the way they would like their own gardens back home to look. His name was Lt. Pooley. He came to our apartment several times. We always had offices and soldiers for tea or a drink or a meal, when there was enough. Often they supplied the food. Also American friends sent us care parcels. They contained spam, corned beef - all sorts of canned foods and Hershey chocolates. I must confess that the latter were hard to swallow even when we had no chocolate at all.

Lt. Pooley and I corresponded for a while until one day I received a letter from his mother, Lady Pooley, asking me to stop writing to her son, who had spoken to her about me. To stop because he was engaged to be married. I suppose I was sad for a littler while. But how could anything really be terrible after what we had lived through?

My very first outing, first walk alone as a free girl was - and still is - the best walk I have ever taken. For I still sense the intoxication, the all invasive sensation of SAFETY; the joy of LIVING - of having hope and a future. Of not having to look over my shoulder, of being able to BREATHE, of just BEING, of being FREE, and free of fear, of being young and being alive.

The handkerchief period

My beloved mother -
I am sending you greetings
from Brussels
your faithful brother

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My father had nothing but severe debts after the war. He lost his fortune in Germany. Thereafter he had to pay for false identity papers, shelter for his mother in Holland, care for his parents, and our survival on black market food. He somehow had managed to borrow money via Switzerland. The underground messengers brought it to him. But now he had to pay his debts to his kind,



*Her Picture Book
describing this story:
"Growing Up in Occupied
Europe"*

generous friends and somehow make-a living again. Before the war he was a very successful business man. He lost the factory in Germany, but managed to rebuild a business in Holland. He was a resourceful man. He was a great man. He never felt superior to anyone and no task, if well performed, was below him. Thus he invented the "easy to send-home-for-soldiers gift": the handkerchief. He purchased the fabric. My mother cut and stitched the

handkerchief. I, the artistic daughter, decorated and wrote the text. Art students helped and since many spoke no English, the funniest mixed up texts occurred. Some of these got into the shops. There were few returns.

Soldiers were so glad to find a present to send home. They just looked at the title, such as "to my beloved mother, or sister, or girlfriend or maybe grandmother, niece etc. . ."; they never checked the rest. Just slipped in their photo and signed on the dotted line.

Eventually the military force dwindled. Also we had many copiers - Anyhow my father decided to build up his old business again. I still admire his patience. He would stay for ever in line in all the little haberdasheries, waiting until customers were served, before presenting his collection. Once he had to do this when he was unwell. I sold nothing at all and ended up crying my eyes

out sitting on a little step in the streets. Admittedly it was towards the end but I could not take the rejection dished out by these "Mesdames".

Soon life returned to 'normal'. A few survivors of concentration camps returned. Even they, when they recovered their health, reassumed their old personality - picked up their lives, at least outwardly. In a way we were luckier than most. Only my favorite grandmother died of starvation and despair in a hiding place in Holland; the part that was liberated much after Belgium was. She gave up hope when she heard that Belgium was free. My father got to her the moment there was transport. She died the day before. She lives in my heart forever.

Ursula Sternberg, a self-taught artist, passed away in Chestnut Hill, PA in September 2000. Her 46yr long marriage to renowned conductor Jonathan Sternberg brought her to fantastic locales...timeless villages in southern France, the summer place of Pablo Casals...From Beijing to Venice. The small byways and major cities of the world figured lucidly into her ink sketches and more formal pieces.

The Victoria and Albert Museum holds a work of Ursula Sternberg in its permanent collection, as does the Rade Museum in Hamburg, Germany, Duke University and the New York Public Library.

More at:

http://www.galleriesaintmartin.com/code/artist_pages/ursulasternberg.html

We are grateful to Maestro Jonathan Sternberg for supplying us his wife's story.