

This article was written in 1988 by Wally Hammerschlag (nee Moritz). It was originally printed in *Telfed*, the journal of the Southern African community in Israel.

In remembrance of Krystal-Nacht

Childhood in Frankfurt

By Wally Hammerschlag

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, a little girl was born in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. She was the first born and thus quite a sensation to her doting parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. Life was a bed of roses, tranquility reigned and the early childhood was normal, secure and happy. My parents were very orthodox but modern, and Judaism and religion was our way of life and engulfed us totally. Life centered very much around the synagogue, the Jewish festivals and of course Shabbat. We lived in a nice part of the city surrounded by other Jews who had the same faith and convictions. Looking back on it now, I cannot recollect any Gentiles in my life except for our maid and nanny.

Frankfurt had a large and strong Jewish Community and indeed was to Germany what Warsaw was to Polish Jewry. The family had lived in Germany for generations and we could trace our presence there to the Middle Ages. We felt that we were an integral part of the German civilization and Jews played a prominent role in the arts, business and financial world. The famous Rothschild banking family originates from Frankfurt and I well remember visiting Amsell Rothschild's birthplace in the old city.

I started at the famous Jewish Day school of Samson Raphael Hirsch, named after the great Jewish scholar, philosopher and Rabbi. The emphasis at the school was on the religion, Jewish history and our prayers. Unfortunately we did not learn Hebrew as a spoken language. Perhaps if we had, I would be writing in Hebrew today.

Hitler came into power in 1933 and, although I was only a little girl, I remember that election very well. Little could I have realized then what an impact he would have on my life, and on the lives of so many others. After Hitler's rise to power, things deteriorated rapidly. We became frightened, nervous and felt very insecure and unwelcome. Signs appeared in all the big stores saying that Jews are not welcome in the shops. But still life carried on and unfortunately the general consensus of opinion was that Hitler would not last. The German Jews were convinced that the German nation would not allow his policy toward the Jews and even if they did, there would be intervention from the outside world. How wrong they were!

Hitler asked and indeed warned the Jews to leave Germany and terrible antisemitism broke loose. By about 1935 we realized the seriousness of these threats and were ready to leave, but where to? Not a single country would allow us entry. Palestine was under the British Mandate with very limited Jewish immigration. The U.S.A. had a quota system, we applied for visas but our turn would have come in 1943 by which time we would have surely been in the gas chambers. Great Britain took a small number of Jews but would not allow them to work in England. The situation was ghastly and hopeless. If one could apportion blame for the Holocaust, it is my firm belief that a large percentage of the blame would rest with the world at large.

On the 9th November 1938 the situation took a very violent turn. This is a day that, try I may, I will never be able to erase from my memory. That morning I walked to school with two friends as

usual. Being November it was still dark outside and very cold. As we happily turned the corner to the school we saw huge flames leaping from the building and realized that the whole school was on fire. The reaction was mixed. Some were happy there would be no school for some time, but all of us were very frightened and realized that something terrible had happened.

We went back home and on the way, near our apartment, I met my father walking between two men. I stopped, greeted him and naturally told him about the fire at the school, and asked him where he was going. He told me not to worry, to go home to my mother and he would soon be home. I found my mother in tears. She told me that the Gestapo had arrested my father and that a decree had been issued to arrest all Jewish men in Germany. All the men from our building and the whole street were gone and the women and children did not know what to do and where to turn.

Then the noise started. Crowds and mobs appeared in the street, cheering and screaming and waving flags. They had come to loot and destroy our homes. All the women and children ran to the attic and this ghastly fear and gloom fell over us. Then we heard the sound of glass shattering and we knew that they had arrived in our building. There was a piercing scream and then an uneasy silence.

We waited a while and then went to our apartment on the ground floor to see what had happened. The front door had been smashed and all the windows were broken. A glass 100-day clock standing in the entrance hall had broken into a million pieces. Obviously someone had got cut, hence the piercing screams, but they left our building. Since that awful day, I have always had a soft spot for these clocks, as I firmly believe that it saved all our lives. These are my own childhood recollections of “Krystal-Nacht.”

After that dreadful day our main occupation was to get my father released from Buchenwald. My mother had a sister living in Cape Town and we sent urgent cables and called, asking them to get us a visa. South Africa had closed its doors to German Jews in 1937. Fortunately my family got us papers for Rhodesia and once we had the permit, my father was released from the camp on condition that we left Germany within a certain time. He had spent four gruesome weeks in Buchenwald, which left a mark on him till his dying day.

We sailed from Hamburg on the 21st April 1939, on a boat called “Pretoria.” It was indeed a journey to the unknown. No one had ever heard of Rhodesia, let alone Bulawayo. We had very mixed feelings, were happy to be out of Germany, but still considered the German boat as German soil and were very frightened and full of misgivings.

The beginning in Rhodesia was hard, as all beginnings usually are. However the country was good to us and slowly we prospered. I spent forty glorious years in Bulawayo and think that it was a great privilege to have lived here. I shall always be grateful for the shelter and security that we found in Rhodesia and for the many happy and treasured memories.

We came to Israel in 1979 and once again a different continent, a different culture and a strange language. The biggest problem was probably that I was forty years older! However, we made it. Perhaps the second time around one is already more conditioned to the hassles and traumas of moving.

Now, I am here to stay and what I value is the freedom from fear, peace of mind and the democratic way of life.