



GRANDDAD'S STORY

For Jeremy, Joshua and Ilana Leuchtag

H. Richard Leuchtag

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BIO:

H. Richard Leuchtag was born in Breslau, Germany, in 1927. Because of the Nazi persecution of Jews, he and his parents emigrated to Panama in 1938. There, he learned Spanish and went to school in Panama City until 1940, when he and his parents came to the United States, settling in Los Angeles.

Richard earned a BA in physics in 1950 from UCLA, served in the US Army for two years and worked as a physicist for US Naval Ordnance Test Station. He then returned to UCLA, where he received an MA in physics and met Alice Kesner, who became his wife in 1955. Richard did graduate study in biophysics at the UCLA Medical Center. Alice and Richard spent several years away from academia, during which they did migrant farm labor, he drove a city bus in Oakland and Los Angeles, and they visited revolutionary Cuba in 1960. He taught physics and chemistry at high school and college levels, and received a PhD in physics and biophysics in 1974 from Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. He held a postdoctoral position in electrical stimulation of bone growth at the New York University physics department.

While working as Associate Editor of the magazine *Physics Today*, he developed a system for nuclear waste storage, for which he obtained a US patent in 1982. Research under his mentor, Harvey M. Fishman, at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston and at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, was in the biophysical properties of nerve membranes. In 1982 he accepted a faculty position in biology at Texas Southern University, in Houston, retiring from a professorship in 1997.

Leuchtag's research focuses on the physics of biological membrane molecules that help transfer information in the brain, muscles and other organs. His two 1987 papers in the *Journal of Theoretical Biology* and later work demonstrated the close connection between these molecules and ferroelectricity. This led to collaborations with other biophysicists, including Vladimir Bystrov and Hervé Duclouhier. His book, *Voltage-Sensitive Ion Channels: Biophysics of Molecular Excitability*, was published by Springer in 2008.

Richard and Alice have a son, Clyde, three grandchildren, Jeremy, Joshua and Ilana, and two great-grandchildren, Jeremy Junior and Joseph. They have been living in the Texas Hill Country since 2002, and are members of the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship of Kerrville.

CHAPTER 1

CHILDHOOD IN GERMANY

This is granddad's story. I was born in the city of Breslau in the country of Germany. I never knew what it was like to have a brother or sister, but my parents had a child five years before I was born. It was a daughter, and her name was Ursula, which means "little bear." They called her Ursel for short. Little Ursel had a serious illness from the time she was born. After a few years she died from her illness.

My parents wanted to have another child, but they were afraid the next one would have the illness too. The doctor told them that the next one would probably be healthy, and they had me. I was born on June 2, 1927 and named Hans Richard Leuchtag. My father was Rudolf Wilhelm Leuchtag and my mother was Käthe Leuchtag; her maiden name was Wagner. To me they were *Vati* (dad) and *Mutti* (mom).

My native city of Breslau was an ancient city, full of old buildings. In the middle of it was a large stone building with tall towers and fancy windows. Its walls were decorated with carved stone figures of animals and people with strange faces. This building was the *Rathaus*, which

in English means council house. The *Rathaus* was on a large plaza, around which a street ran like a square ring. Naturally, it was called the Ring. My parents lived on Ring 14, and that was where I was born. We lived in an upstairs apartment, on the fourth floor.

My middle name, Richard, was in honor of my grandfather, Richard Guttmann Leuchtag. RGL, as he was called, had a large department store in Breslau. He and his wife, Erna, born Sieratzky, had a beautiful house on one of our main boulevards and had traveled to Africa on a safari. My father was the youngest of six children.

The only grandparent I knew was my mother's mother, Jenny Wagner. Her husband, Albert Wagner, had died before I was born.

When my mother could no longer breastfeed me, she hired a wet nurse, *Fräulein* (Miss) Kaiser, who was a Bible student. Miss Kaiser told my mother that I would live to be ninety and that I would be a great man someday. That must have impressed my mother, as she mentioned it to me (or to others in front of me) several times.

I remember playing on the wooden stairs in our building in the Ring, and being delighted when a neighbor came by and gave me a sheaf of colored papers to play with.

In my childhood I learned many beautiful songs. One of my favorites starts like this:

*Kam ein Vöglein geflogen,
Sass sich nieder auf mein Fuss,
Hatt ein Briefchen im Schnabel,
Von der Mutter ein Gruss.*

Translated into English, it goes something like this:

Flew a little bird over,
Perched itself upon my toe.
In its beak was a letter
Mother sends her hello.

Our own bird, a canary, did not fare as well. My mother told me that I once pushed its cage off the windowsill, and it crashed into the inner courtyard of the building.

My mother called me Hansi. She often took me shopping with her, to the *Markthalle*, the large public market, or the butcher shop for meat and sausages, or the bakery. While she shopped for bread and rolls, I stood at the window marveling at the dozens of flies battering their heads against the window, trying to get out to the street. They bounced back, fell a little, flew around in a loop and tried it again. The dead flies on the window sill showed me, but not them, the futility of their efforts. In the dairy shop, *Mutti* often treated me to a glass of buttermilk.

My mother enjoyed cooking and baking, and she often let me turn the crank when she put spinach or meat through the food grinder. When she baked, she made sweet rolls and cookies at the same time. Sometimes she baked a cake. I loved to help her with her baking; when she cracked the eggs and measured the flour into the bowl, I stirred with a wooden spoon. When she rolled the dough, I was ready with the cookie cutter. After the pastries were in the oven she let me lick the delicious raw dough from the wooden spoon.

When we had spinach, my father invariably made his joke. "How does the spinach get on the roof? The cow can't fly!" My mother tried to hush him up, but this vulgar joke didn't

spoil my enjoyment of the spinach, to which my mother had added sugar.

Once she took me with her to the cemetery at Kosel, where my sister Ursel was buried. It was winter, and ice had collected in the hollow tops of the stones alongside the gate. Patches of snow lay on the ground. My mother left flowers on Ursel's grave.

If someone brought a box of candy, my mother said that choosing one piece was a torture— "*Wer die Wahl hat, hat die Qual.*" When she had a foreboding of bad news, she said a "louse" ran over her "liver."

I loved walking with my father, especially when he told me interesting stories. On one side of the *Rathaus* was a tall pole with a cage on top, all made of stone, called the *Staupsäule*. He told me that in old times miscreants would be punished by being forced to stay in the cage, in full view of the townspeople. He also told me of the strange case of the child who spoke Portuguese, even though it had never come in contact with anyone who spoke that language. Eventually we moved away from the Ring, to a nicer apartment. I remember living in two apartments, one on Augustastrasse and one on Viktoriastrasse, away from the center of the city.

My father told me to bend my arms at the elbow and hold them stiff. Then he stood behind me and lifted me. When my cousin Peter Gerson visited from Berlin, he lifted me over his head.

Once, when my mother and I were alone at home, music drifted in through the windows. "It's the gypsies," she said. We looked down. There, in the middle of the street, men and women were playing instruments, singing and dancing. "Let's get some coins to throw down." She wrapped a few coins in paper and threw them into the street. A gypsy child ran and picked it up. I reached into my pocket and found a coin. "Wrap it in paper before you throw it," Mutti said. The gypsies looked up at our window and acknowledged the gifts. They played some more and then moved down the street.

When I misbehaved, my mother said "*so ein Bengel*" (such a rascal), but it was my father's job to punish me. My father had been raised to believe in duty—*Pflicht*—and discipline—*Disziplin*. In those days punishment meant a beating, and my father did not shirk his duty. However, he was proud that he was "*streng aber gerecht*," firm but just. The German language is rich in names for various spanking methods—the *Ohrfeige* (ear fig) and the *Backpfeife* (cheek whistle). I of course resented the spanking, since I was convinced of my own innocence. Most of all I resented being hit a second time because of his principle of symmetry: Once he hit me on the right, he would also have to hit me on the left. I carried that resentment for some time, but it did not overcome the love and respect I had for my father.

We had a white cat named Miene (*meaneh*). My mother told me that if I petted her she would purr. I did, and she did. I loved to hear Miene purr, and soon I was able to imitate the sound.

Breslau had many parks. In the fall I collected the shiny brown chestnuts that fell from the trees; each perfectly formed but with a pattern different from all the rest. A river, the Oder, flows through the city, and there was also a moat, the *Stadtgraben*, where one could walk along a pathway or sit on a bench. Sometimes my parents would walk with me there.

My mother had a red birthmark on her shoulder, close to her neck. She was also slightly round-shouldered. When she noticed that my shoulders were also rounded, she took me to a place on Kaiser-Wilhelm Strasse. There I was strapped into a leather helmet that fit my head

snugly, and was attached at the top to a rope. Along with a few other children, I was hoisted up by a pulley on the ceiling, and hung with my feet above the floor. I had to return for this treatment several times. The idea was to straighten my back, but it didn't work: I still have round shoulders.

I attended Fräulein Brandt's school, where I learned English, starting in the first grade. As a homework assignment, I had to draw a circle by tracing around a pot on a piece of paper. Then my mother helped me cut out the circle with scissors. In school, the English teacher had us write numbers on the circle to make a clock face. She was going to teach us to read the clock—in English. But I didn't know how to read the clock in German yet. My father took me to Gartenstrasse (Garden Street), where there was a large clock high on the sidewalk in front of a jewelry store. The clock seemed far away, and the numbers didn't make any sense to me—they were Roman numerals! Eventually I learned to tell time on my father's gold pocket watch, which he had inherited from his father.

Life at home was not always peaceful. When things became hectic, my father would say, "You can't with one *Tochus* (behind) dance at two weddings at the same time." When my mother couldn't deal with all the demands made on her, she would say, "But I'm just one small horse!" Shouting matches erupted, in which my parents called each other names such as *Luder* (bastard), *Schuft* (scoundrel), *Schweinhund* (pigdog) and even *Stück Scheisse* (piece of shit). This was very disturbing to me and I tried to get them to stop. My father would say "Make Sabbath already" and things became quieter for a while.

There were times when people came to visit, friends or relatives. They would ask me whether I wash behind my ears, and other such silly things. Then they would ask me who I love more, *Vati* or *Mutti*. I said I love them both. They said, Of course, but who do you love more? I said I love them both the same.

Breslau had two synagogues. We went to the new synagogue for the Jewish holidays. My grandmother went to the old synagogue, but I never went there. In the new temple men and women sat together, but in the old temple men sat downstairs while the women sat in the balcony with the children.

We did not go to temple every week, but we went on the Jewish holidays. My mother wore a hat with a veil for special occasions. I could see her face behind the veil, but it was shadowy and mysterious. In my best suit and tie, with my *Käppl* (yarmulke) on, I sat down and stood up, reading the responsive prayers. When the Torah was carried down the aisle, across the back and back up, men sitting near the aisle touched it with the fringes of their prayer shawls. Some of the men, including my father, did not wear prayer shawls. I was serious about temple, but still was glad when the time came for the memorial prayer, when the children who were too young to have anyone to mourn were excused to go out into the courtyard. My parents fasted on Yom Kippur, the highest holiday of the year, the Day of Atonement, but my mother cooked for me. However, one year I told my mother I would fast too. It felt good to be able to go all day without food.

At Passover preparations, she got rid of all the bread in the house. When she was growing up, she recounted, they even had to burn the crumbs from the breadbox. For the duration of the week-long holiday, the only bread we ate was unleavened Matzoh.

I learned to swim in the *Schwimmhalle*, Breslau's indoor swimming pool. Once, my

mother used to relate, she took me to the dentist, who pulled four of my milk teeth. Then she asked me where I wanted to go. To the *Schwimmhalle*, I said to my mother's astonishment, amazed that I felt like swimming after having four teeth pulled.

We had a grand piano, a Bechstein, in the apartment. The name in German for a concert grand was "*der Flügel*," the wing, for its winglike shape, and that is what we called it. I was interested in the works inside: the great steel harp with strings of different widths arranged in rows at different angles; the wooden hammers, padded with felt and linked to the keys; the foot pedals. My father loved the piano music of Chopin, Liszt, Schumann and other composers, and the operas of Wagner. But as he had very little time to play, he used his time at the piano for his passion, which was to compose his own music. Composing appeared to be tedious, because he often played the same phrase over and over, as he groped for the way the music would have to go to get from here to there. After he had decided on a few notes, he would write them in ink on the ruled paper in the piano's music stand, and go on to the next phrase.

Once I thought I would help him compose. He was playing with both hands near the middle of the piano, so I hit a key on the right side, where I was standing, to hear how it would sound together with the notes he was playing. It only made a little tinkle, but it made him terribly angry, and I didn't do it again.

My father wrote a lot of compositions. My favorite was *Stiller Humor*, quiet humor. I can still sometimes recall bits of it. It had a rocking melody that made you want to sing or whistle along. He wrote a rousing military march. He also composed a serious *Ballade* in honor of his parents, Richard Guttman Leuchtag and Erna, who both had died shortly after my father came home from the army after World War I. They had been mourning the loss of their oldest son Martin, a lawyer, who had returned to the front after barely recovering from a previous wound.

On the lighter side, my father had composed a song for a couple of relatives, Georg and Frieda Sieratzky. The first line of the refrain went, "*Die Frieda, Die hat die Hosen an, der Jorg nur den Rock.*" It is a silly song, meaning Frieda is wearing the pants, meaning that she is the boss. The word *Rock* has two meanings; it can mean a man's formal jacket, but more commonly it means a skirt. That's what the song says Jorg (Georg) was wearing.

For my mother's birthday, my father changed the song to begin, "*Es war vor zirka fünfundzwanzig Jahren, da kam klein Käthchen angerollt.*" It was about twenty-five years ago that little Katie came rolling along. On my mother's birthdays, September 16, she was always "about twenty-five," at least for this song.

My father had served in the German army on the Eastern front. His job had been to lay telephone wires between the forward observers near the enemy lines and the big guns of the artillery, far behind the lines. That was so that the observers could tell the gunners where to aim. Laying the phone lines was a dangerous and lonely job, and my father received a medal called the Iron Cross.

My mother also had an important job in that war, which was fought from 1914 to 1918. She was a *Hilfsschwester*, an assistant nurse. When she showed me her Red Cross insignia and the photo of her in her white uniform, she also showed me her railroad pass, which had allowed her to travel free on any train in the country. Her nursing skills came in handy when I skinned a

knee. If I caught a cold, she could clear my nasal passages by having me inhale the damp air above a steaming pot. When I was very young, I once had a sudden attack of diarrhea when we were out; as she held me over the curb, she noticed I had pinworms. When I was ill she brewed chamomile tea for me. To keep me healthy she gave me spoonfuls of cod liver oil.

My father took me to his chess club, which was near Miss Brandt's school. He had a good sense of humor, and told this story on himself: "My chess friends say I am a good musician and my musical friends say I am an excellent chess player."

My father had his own business; he sold buttons to clothing manufacturers. His business was called a wholesale business, because he sold goods in large quantities. Once a year my father traveled to Italy and other countries to build up his *Kollektion*, his sample collection. He brought back with him the year's latest fashions in buttons. There were buttons for dresses, suits, shirts and coats (zippers were not common and Velcro had not been invented yet).

"You know, we're working on the winter season," he said.

"Winter? But it's summer now!"

"That's the way this business works. These buttons are for winter clothes. When I get the orders, I'll send for the buttons. They will be sewn on garments that go on sale in the fall. That's when people buy their winter clothes."

The samples had to be mounted on printed cardboards that had a margin around the edge and read *R. W. Leuchtag, Knopfgroßhandlung* (wholesale button dealer). At home in the evening, he used a pencil and ruler to lay out a board for each set of buttons. A set of buttons of one style but in different sizes were laid out on one card in a nice pattern. When a layout was done, my mother sewed the buttons onto the card.

The buttons came in different colors and materials. Some were of metal, with little wire hoops on the back. Others were made of wood, glass or seashells, with holes in them for the needle and thread. Some, my father explained to me, were made of a new material, *Kasein*, that came from cheese. Another material was called *Galalit*. He penciled the prices on the cards in code so that he would know them but the customer had to ask him. When his *Kollektion* was ready, he put it in his leather briefcase to take out in the morning.

My father's nickname was Rudi. His business sometimes took him to cafés, where he would sit with a group of men, smoking and playing cards. They played *Skat*, which was played with strange-looking cards. Business deals were concluded over cups of coffee.

Many years later, my cousin Peter told me that it was said of me that "of all of Rudi's buttons, Hans was the smallest."

One birthday I received a bag of marbles, so I went to a neighborhood park to play. I didn't know the rules of the game, but the boys in the park showed me. One of them offered to play me a game. We drew a square in the sand and started. It was fun, but I was inexperienced, and soon my marbles were on the other boy's pile. When the game was over, I asked him for my marbles back. He said that he won them, and he was going to keep them. That was a new experience for me. I had no idea that I could lose my property, just by playing a game.

My father started to teach me chess. He shook the hand-carved wooden pieces from their bag onto the inlaid chessboard and told me what each one was called and how it moved.

We would play games in which he gave up his queen at start. At first I enjoyed the game, but he was not a patient teacher. He told me the importance of controlling the center, developing my men, castling and pushing pawns. He would tell me what was wrong with each of my moves, and I lost interest in the game. It seemed I was a lazy thinker (*denkfaul*).

My parents often received letters from relatives who had emigrated to foreign countries, with interesting-looking stamps on them, and with their encouragement I started collecting stamps. Sometimes I would go with my mother to a large department store downtown, Wertheim. She left me at the stamp department to look at stamps while she did her shopping; then she would buy me the stamp I had selected for my collection. My uncle Leo Leuchtag sent me stamps from South Africa, where he lived with his girlfriend after they left Germany. He was a professional gambler, spending money freely when on a winning streak but often broke.

One birthday I received a bicycle. I couldn't wait to try it out, so I carried it down the stairs to the street. "Be careful," my mother called out. "Ride on the sidewalk." On the sidewalk, a man called out, "Get off the sidewalk; ride on the street!" When I was riding on the street, someone called from a car, "You shouldn't be riding on the street. Get on the sidewalk." Confused, I carried my bike back up the stairs.

After that, I went on longer and longer trips out into the countryside surrounding Breslau. I cycled along canals, under tall trees and past great fields of grain, interrupted by patches of blue cornflowers. After a day among the woods, fields and barns, I managed to find my way home, arriving after dark, tired but exhilarated.

To get me up, Mutti would say, "*Die Morgenstunde hat Gold im Munde*" (The morning hour has golden power). My school, the Jewish Gymnasium, was within walking distance of my house, about 10 or 12 blocks. I only have a few memories of the school. An art teacher praised a small watercolor I had made of a roast duck.

Once, on my birthday, I came to class with a present my parents gave me, a comb in a case with a mirror, with which they hoped I would keep myself neat. During class I took it out to look at it, and an amazing thing happened: A spot of light appeared on the ceiling and moved as I moved the mirror. Soon I realized that a ray of sunlight that came in the window bounced off the mirror and made the spot on the ceiling. How that spot moved! A tiny turn of my wrist and it went skittering from one side of the room to the other. I became aware of the teacher only when he stood next to me. He held out his hand and I gave him the mirror case with the comb. I had had it only for a few hours and now it was gone! My father told me that evening that the teacher had the right to "confiscate" my property, and that he would probably give it back at the end of the semester. But I never got it back.

I was not much of an athlete, but one day I found myself on a soccer field. My awkwardness must have been pretty obvious, as one boy tripped me and I fell. Eventually I was chosen by a team, and I played, poorly. They made me the goalie, but I couldn't stop the ball from entering the goal.

The Gymnasium had a play yard outside, and one hot day a friend and I were standing in the shade of a large tree. An older boy came up and looked at the trunk of the tree, to which was nailed a thermometer. He told us that if the temperature went up to, I think it was 35, we would have "*Hitzeferien*," heat vacation. (Temperature in Germany is measured in Celsius

degrees, not Fahrenheit.) It was already pretty close. Soon the word came that we could go home.

CHAPTER 2

STRESSFUL TIMES

The German language has a word for which there is no English equivalent, only its negative. That word is *gönnen*. My mother lost a piece of food from her fork; it fell to the floor. "*Dass hat mir Einer nicht gegönnt*," she said. "Someone begrudged me that bite." And she would look at us. Was it me? I wondered, and I said, "It wasn't me. I wanted you to have it." And she would assure me, "Of course it wasn't you. It's only an expression when you lose something that you felt sure you had, you wanted, and would have enjoyed. People used to believe that whenever that happens, there is someone somewhere in the world who begrudges you the thing you lost. It's an old superstition."

But it wasn't all superstition. I didn't know about it because my parents didn't talk about it in front of me. But there was a group of people who begrudged us what we had; who begrudged us our lives. And they were becoming powerful.

"I am going to vote," my mother said. "Do you want to come with me?" "Yes." "Then you will have to be very quiet. Look but don't say anything."

In the polling booth she showed me the ballot. In the middle was a big circle with the words "Adolf Hitler" in large print. On the bottom was a little circle, with other words near it. But it was small and appeared insignificant; a person could easily miss it. I didn't see how my mother voted. She dropped her ballot in the box next to the uniformed man and we left. Adolf Hitler won the election.

One summer my parents sent me to Kolberg on the North Sea for my vacation. I rode on the train alone. My mother made sure I wouldn't go hungry; she packed sandwiches and fruit for me to eat on the way. I sat in my compartment and looked out the window, watching the trees and houses whiz by. After a while I got bored and started to eat. I put the rest of the food away. Then I began to worry that the food would be wasted if I got there and hadn't finished my lunch, so I started eating again. By the time I arrived in Kolberg I was really stuffed.

I was met at the train and taken to the place where I was to stay. After my things were in my room, I was told to come down for dinner. When I came down I was shown to a table set for three; the others were already there. They were a woman, one of the counselors, and a girl my age. I sat down in front of my plate. Suddenly, without warning, I threw up.

The rest of the vacation went by without a problem. We walked on the seawall. We learned about the battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, and about the North German Lloyd and their ships that went all over the world. We collected seashells, and I bought a box covered with seashells at a souvenir store to bring home to my parents. Best of all, we went swimming at the beach. Except for that first evening it was a great vacation.

Back home in Breslau, martial music began to be heard everywhere. One song that was played a lot was the "*Horst Wessel Lied*," which went, "*Die Fahne hoch ...*" (Raise high the flag ...). Kids sang a parody of it: "*Das Hemde hoch ...*" (Up with the shirt ...) –but first they looked to

see who was around.

When my parents talked, it was often behind closed doors. I knew there were secrets I wasn't supposed to know. If my father was talking when I walked into the room, my mother might say a few words in a language that might have been French, and the conversation would stop. They probably had good reason to be secretive. Children are not good at keeping secrets, and there were stories about parents who had been inadvertently betrayed by their children.

Some days there were parades, with many uniformed men marching in regular formations. There was a march down Kaiser-Wilhelm-Strasse, a wide street near our house. Tanks were rolling past the house that had been my grandparents' house, the former *Haus Leuchtag*. There were the SA in their tan uniforms, and the SS in black uniforms, accompanied by bands and carrying banners with the Nazi swastika symbol and slogans such as "*Deutschland erwache*" (Germany, awake). Then came the troops of the *Wehrmacht* (army) with their tanks and guns. As the bands played and the flags waved, the men marched, raising their legs high in the air.

On the radio, the shrill voice of Adolf Hitler was heard, saying things like "*Volksgenossen und Volksgenossinnen, die Juden sind unser Unglück*"—men and women of the German people, the Jews are our misfortune. Hitler was the head of the Nazi party and the head of the German government. His portrait was displayed in many store windows. It showed his square mustache, a lock of hair draped down over his forehead, shiny black boots up to his knees and a uniform with a leather strap over one shoulder crossing his chest diagonally to attach to a wide leather belt. Everywhere men and women were giving the "Heil Hitler" salute, and everywhere the red, white and black swastika flag could be seen.

At home I entertained my parents by combing a lock of my hair down, covering my upper lip with the end of my black comb, sticking out my hand and barking "Heil Hitler." My parents laughed—but they also warned me not to do it in public.

At the barbershop, getting a haircut, I saw a poster: "*Mein Name ist Haase, ich weiss von nichts.*" (My name is Haase, I know nothing.) At home, I asked my parents to explain, and they said the government is worried about spies. They don't want people talking about their jobs—they might give away secrets.

One day, passing through a park in our neighborhood, I noticed a bulletin board. On it, behind glass, was posted a newspaper. When I stepped up to look at it I couldn't believe my eyes. There were caricatures of Jews with enormous hooked noses, and there were horrible, disgusting stories about Jews. I asked my parents about this paper, which spread such terrible hate against our people. They said, "That is *Der Stürmer*, the SS newspaper. They are very anti-Semitic—they hate the Jews and tell vicious lies about us."

My parents hoped to escape Nazi Germany by emigrating to Palestine, the land of ancient Israel and Judea. Palestine at that time was a colony of Britain, and most of its inhabitants were Arabs. Many Jews thought that the answer to the widespread hatred against Jews was to build their own country, especially there, in the land of our biblical ancestors. This belief is called Zionism. Although my parents had registered to emigrate to Palestine and had been assigned a number, Zionism did not help us.

One day a Zionist speaker came to Breslau. "We do not need you merchants," he said.

"What we need are people who can work with their hands—carpenters, farmers." My parents' dream of Palestine crashed, and other plans had to be made. There was a sense that time was running out. Soon my father traveled to Berlin, making the rounds of consulates and embassies. What country was still accepting Jewish refugees from Germany? It was a discouraging business.

I was walking with my father down Gartenstrasse. Here stood the jewelers' clock on which my father had tried to teach me to tell time. There was the cinema where I had seen many movies. And now there was a crowd on the sidewalk, all men, standing silently in a circle, looking grimly at something within.

We moved to the edge of the crowd and then I saw it: a large pool of red fluid. A thin vapor was rising from it. I looked at my father and could see he did not want me to talk. The men were solemn, as if at Temple. I knew it had to be blood. Incredible as it seemed, someone had bled to death at this place. I was a witness to something I could not understand. Silently, my father took me by the hand and led me away. Perhaps he assumed I couldn't see through the crowd, but my father never mentioned this occurrence. And I never asked.

One snowy winter morning some friends came by to pick me up to go sledding. We walked through the snow, pulling the sled, until we came to Zopten, Breslau's only hill. At the top, we got on the sled. I was at the back end of the sled and barely got seated when we took off. Down the hill we went, speeding up—but then there was a commotion. Boys were yelling, trying to avoid a collision with another sled. Where I was I couldn't see anything until I was suddenly thrown off the sled. Something hit me in the face, hard. The boys looked at me as I was lying in the snow and said my nose was broken.

We went down the hill, the boys pulling me on the sled. We found a doctor's office, and the people inside said, "Take him to the Jewish Hospital." This happened a couple of times more. Finally we arrived at the Jewish Hospital, where I was examined. My mother was called; they told her I might have a concussion. Soon my mother arrived and I was given a bed in a room.

Next day they took me into the operating room, and when I came out I had a bandage on my face and a cast on my nose. Two straws stuck out, which allowed me to breathe through my nostrils. My mother visited me and brought a lady she called Aunt Hedwig, whom I had never met before. "Aunt" Hedwig came by every day and brought me crossword puzzles. Soon the doctors were helping me with the more difficult words. My broken nose soon healed, but my fondness for crossword puzzles still remains.

My best friends were Horst Myslowitzer and Werner Löwenthal. At Horst's birthday party, his parents gave him a special present: a conductor's baton. Another friend was a girl named Inge. When I visited Inge for her birthday party she lent me four books to take home.

As I walked down the street, carrying the package of books, a boy suddenly appeared in front of me. He asked me what I was carrying. I noticed that we were standing in front of the steps that led down to the basement headquarters of the neighborhood Hitler Youth. "Books," I said. Other boys came out. I tried to walk around him but he blocked my way.

"Let me see them," he said, and they were yanked out of my hand from behind. The boys looked at the books and passed them around and then began a game of keep-away with

me. A boy would offer me back one of my books, but when I reached for it he would toss it over my head to another boy behind me. There were four of them, and I realized that I couldn't deal with them by myself. I decided to go home without the books and let my father talk to the adults in charge, or perhaps call the police. After all, they were not my books and I had to return them to Inge.

My father, however, did not go. He told me to forget about the books. It is not worth making a bad situation worse. He quoted a proverb: "*Der Klügere gibt nach.*" (The smarter person gives in.) He said that Inge and her parents would understand. I was glad my father didn't go to that place—I didn't want him to get into trouble. Still, I felt it was wrong that those bullies should get away with what they had done.

One day I met a Jewish boy who was different from the other boys I knew. He, Daniel, seemed tougher, more at home on the streets. He did not go to the Jewish Gymnasium as I did. He was concerned about making money. He offered to take me to the tennis courts and show me how to make tips by retrieving balls for tennis players. I was familiar with the tennis courts; in the winter, when they were flooded for ice skating, I used to go skating there.

But I didn't know anything about the game of tennis, and I was not good at catching or throwing balls. Daniel said not to worry; he would show me what to do. All I had to do was do what he did. The ball hit the net; he neatly picked it up and tossed it back to the player. When it was my turn, I ran after the ball but it got away from me. When I finally had the ball I wondered which player to throw it to; when I threw it, it went wild and he had to chase after it. It went that way all afternoon, but the players were good sports and gave us both generous tips. I went everywhere with my friend Daniel, but our time together was short.

One morning when I was eleven I left our apartment to go to school. I walked down Hohenzollern Allee to a park, and crossed over to the street that goes to the Jewish Gymnasium. I was stopped by older boys from the school, a thing that had never happened before. One of them told me there was trouble. Last night the Nazis had desecrated and burned the synagogues. It was not safe to be out. I was not to go to school but to go home and stay there.

When I got home, my father was ready with his briefcase to go out. I told my parents what happened. As I started my unexpected holiday, I heard my parents arguing. Despite my mother's entreaties for him to stay home, my father went out. He said he had a long list of things to do. He did not return that night.

A few days later, a man came to our apartment to call on my mother. He carried my father's briefcase. What they talked about I did not hear until later. After that my mother was gone every day, and she did not take me with her. I was not to leave the house, so I got on the wooden back steps of the apartment house and started jumping down. Two steps at a time, then three, then four, maybe five or even six. I imagined I was flying, but I came down hard on my feet.

Then, one evening, two weeks after he had disappeared, my father came home. He was in a shocking state. It was not just that he was disheveled, wearing the clothes he had left in; it was that his usually upbeat, self-reliant manner was gone. He came in and broke down in tears.

It was not until later that I heard the story of what happened. When I came home that

morning my mother guessed that the Nazis were running rampant. It was the morning after what is now known as *Kristallnacht* (crystal night, an allusion to the glassware that was thrown out of windows), when the Nazis attacked Jewish homes, stores and synagogues. Many temples were desecrated and burned down in the anti-Semitic frenzy. Of course, my mother did not know this then, but my being sent home from school was enough warning for her. She had asked my father to stay home. He had been adamant, saying that the preparations for our *Auswanderung*—emigration—had to be continued. Arriving downtown on the streetcar, his first stop was to be a tailor shop, to be fitted for a new suit. Once he stepped on the sidewalk, however, he was stopped by SS troopers, who asked him if he was a Jew.

He was loaded into the back of an open truck with others, and driven out of town to a place surrounded by barbed wire. It was the concentration camp Buchenwald, which had been opened by the SS the previous year. There were no beds but rough wooden sleeping arrangements like shelves on the walls, three high. That night my father used his briefcase as a pillow. During the day, the prisoners were herded out into an open area and made to stand all day in the sun and the cold wind.

What would happen if he disobeyed the guards' orders was made clear: One man was taken out and beaten to death, in full view of the others.

But one of the guards was a friendly fellow Breslauer, and my father trusted him. Without his help my mother and I would probably never have seen my father again, and we all would most likely have ended our lives in a Nazi concentration camp. My father gave him his briefcase with a letter for my mother and our address in Breslau. In the briefcase were those precious documents, our visas for travel to Panama. Without them we could not leave Germany. The man came to our apartment and gave my mother the briefcase. He told her where my father was.

My mother had no intention to leave Germany with only me; she was determined to rescue my father. Courageously, she went to the Gestapo headquarters to present her case. The Gestapo was the secret state police. We had visas to leave the country, she told the officials; my father should be released so that we could leave Germany, she insisted. Day after day she went, facing the indifference and the hostility of the men in the black uniforms. Somehow her endurance and her earnest efforts prevailed, and my father was released.

Buchenwald, the concentration camp where inhuman atrocities were committed daily, was only a short distance from Weimar, a city known for its culture and the seat of the republican government that had preceded the Nazi regime. My father found his way to Weimar, and from there took the train to Breslau.

Certainly it was foolish of my father to have gone out that morning in spite of the news I had brought and my mother's warnings. But throughout his ordeal he had kept his head. He knew the visas in his briefcase were the key to our survival, and he found a way to get them to my mother. His judgment was sound, and now we were all together again. That night my parents planned our departure—escape, really—from Nazi Germany.

My parents put me on a train to Berlin, to spend a couple of weeks with an uncle and aunt there. Then they packed. The Germans did not permit money and valuables such as jewelry to leave the country, so everything else had to be packed: furniture, bedding, pots and pans, the Bechstein piano. They bought a lift, a wooden container the size of a large truck

body, to hold it all.

Meanwhile, in Berlin, my Aunt Lotte and Uncle Herbert Wagner were too busy to spend much time with me. I was given a deck of cards and taught how to play solitaire; that is how I spent the days in their apartment.

One night they drove me through the center of Berlin. It was December 1938, and the streets were decked out in cheerful holiday lights and Christmas decorations. Crowds of people were out shopping, dressed in furs. So this was how it was! People were out celebrating in anticipation of the Christian holiday while in the concentration camps Jews, Gypsies, communists and others were being horribly mistreated and even beaten to death. Didn't the people know what was happening, or didn't they care? November was always a bad month for my father after that, and I have never been comfortable at Christmas time.

My parents came for me, and we said goodbye to my uncle and aunt. They took us to their warehouse and told me to find a toy I liked. I found a tiny pencil, but they wanted me to have something more, so I got a mechanical jazz band. My parents received some battery-operated electric fans to stay cool in the tropics.

We took the train to Hamburg, spending the night in a hotel. Word came that the port was frozen, so we took another train to Bremerhaven to board the ship for America. Our ocean liner was the *Hamburg*, a ship belonging to the *Hamburg-Amerika Linie*.

We boarded and went, with a few suitcases, to a little cabin with a round porthole. I was delighted with my upper berth. The ship's whistle blew and we left the dock. We were leaving Germany! As I write this, 57 years later, I marvel at the thin thread by which our lives were spared. Millions of Jews, including my Aunt Martha and my grandmother, Jenny Wagner, and certainly many of my friends, schoolmates and teachers were to die in the systematic destruction of the Jews of Germany and the countries it conquered.

As our ship entered the English Channel, we stood on the deck. My mother pointed out Dover on the other side, but it was already evening and too dark for me to see the white cliffs. My parents were not hungry, so I, eleven years old, ate alone at the table in the ship's dining room. Then I wandered along the decks, saw the people in the bar, and watched the waves breaking against the ship's bow. Music came from the loudspeakers and I heard what I thought was the most lovely tune I had ever heard. When I came back to the cabin it was dark, and my parents were seasick. I told my father about the beautiful song I had heard. He must have heard it too, because he said it was *Ave Maria* by Franz Schubert.

The thought of those days brings back to me the words of the psalm, "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

CHAPTER 3 PANAMA

After the ship left the English Channel, its movements became less disturbing and my parents ventured out of the cabin a little but their seasickness persisted throughout the trip, which lasted about a week. Just as our voyage began with Christmas celebrations, it ended on a New Year's Eve theme: We arrived in New York about December 31, 1938.

There was much of interest on the ocean liner. The meals in the dining room, which I, unlike my parents, never missed, were delicious. The decks provided an ever-changing panorama of ocean and sky, with occasionally another ship on the horizon. Steel steps, bulkheads and gangways led to interesting places to explore, such as the door to the engine room. There sat the enormous, gleaming power plant that, with its incessant throbbing, thrust the ship through the waves.

I swam in the ship's indoor pool, lounged with my parents on deck chairs, and breathed the sea air. One evening I found my father in the bar talking with an American, who had treated him to a whiskey. My father offered me a sip, but the bourbon tasted horrible to me. Then, one morning, the seagulls came to announce our arrival in New York. As we approached, the land grew from a dark line on the horizon. Passengers crowded the deck as the cluster of skyscrapers and bridges became visible beyond the waves. We sailed past the magnificent Statue of Liberty, thinking of the future, daring once again to hope for better times.

The steady movement of the ship now took us to Ellis Island, where my parents and I, with our trunks and suitcases, got off. We could not land in New York harbor, because our destination was Panama; we had to wait on Ellis Island for another ship to take us there. We walked to a large brick building, noticing that it felt funny to walk on solid ground after being used to the ship's rocking decks. Much of the building consisted of an open space with benches, on which people sat and waited. While our parents were taking care of official business, the other children and I were given soda crackers and cold milk—a pleasant surprise. At night we slept in dormitories behind closed doors.

During our week or so on Ellis Island, my father was not idle. He found a Manhattan phone book, looked under "Leuchtag," and sure enough found one. It was Albert Leuchtag, an architect and distant relative, who came out to see us. On leaving, he gave me two boxes of chewing gum and a twenty-dollar bill. I gave my parents the twenty and started chewing. The gum was of two kinds, flat sticks and rounded white stones called Chiclets. The Chiclets were sweet and crunchy but didn't have much gum. The flat sticks came in two flavors, Doublemint and Juicy Fruit. The best part of chewing was starting, when you got the sweetness and the flavor; but if you chewed too long it could make you gag.

Another nice thing that happened to me at Ellis Island was being given two books—it seems that all the children were being given gifts of books and toys. One of the books was in English; it was *Tarzan and the Pit of Peril*, a small but thick book with hard covers. The other was in Spanish: *El Faro de la Isla de las Gaviotas* (The Lighthouse of Seagull Island).

Then came our ship, the *Santa Clara*, to take us to Panama. The ship, belonging to the Grace Line, was smaller than the *Hamburg*, but it had one feature the *Hamburg* didn't have: a tiny outdoor pool, situated on a small high deck. As we sailed southward, the skies became blue and the weather got hotter and hotter, and I soon spent less time reading Tarzan and more time in the pool. We made a brief stop in Havana harbor, and in hardly any time we entered that great engineering marvel, the Panama Canal.

"One of the Wonders of the World" was what my father called it, and I could see that that was exactly what it was. Our ship entered a narrow basin and was pulled by locomotives to a high wall. The locomotives were running on tracks alongside the canal. From my high perch at the pool, still chewing my gum, I could see that we were at the bottom of a narrow concrete

canyon. Behind the ship two great walls slowly swung around and closed shut. Now that our basin was closed in on all sides, water came gushing in, and the ship slowly, imperceptively, rose. When the water in our basin came level with the water beyond the wall in front of us, the wall slowly split open with a powerful splashing of water. The halves swung aside, and we were towed into a new, higher, basin. Then the process was repeated.

After going through several such locks, and rising higher each time, our ship came out onto a lake surrounded by mountains, Gatun Lake. We sailed through a narrow pass that had been cut through mountains, the Culebra Cut. Now we entered another series of locks, only this time the ship was lowered each time. My father came to get me out of the pool. It was time to go into the cabin and get dressed. My parents had already packed. I chewed the last stick of gum as the ship pulled up to a dock, and we disembarked with our suitcases and trunks.

We were in the port of Balboa, near Panama City. The place looked empty and desolate, as we stood on the dirt ground with our belongings around us. It was hot and dusty; the sunshine was intense. My mother sat down on a trunk and cried.

A taxi drove us to the middle of Panama City, to a wide, busy avenue, Avenida Central. We got out at a store owned by a Mr. Wetterschneider, the only person who had gone from Germany to Panama that my father had heard about. Neither he nor his wife made much of a fuss over us as we descended, bag and baggage, on their little downtown store. While the grownups were talking, I looked around. The store was crammed with clothing—uniform shirts, bell-bottom trousers, caps. In the glass counter before which my parents and I stood were brass insignia, patches, jewelry and assorted knickknacks. In the window was a card with a cartoon character. Under a wide, oval face and an open mouth with a tooth missing was the printed legend, "ME WORRY?"

Suddenly, Mr. Wetterschneider hurried out to the sidewalk, calling out, "Listen, sailor, come in, look around, what do you need?" to a group of U.S. Navy personnel walking down the street in uniform. Avenida Central was a lively place, full of bars and restaurants. From the open door of each one, popular songs blared out from jukeboxes onto the street. The sailors kept coming by in little groups, and Mr. Wetterschneider went on and on with his "Listen, sailor" pitch. My mother was clearly tired of standing on the tile floor and, after some time, Mrs. Wetterschneider brought out a tall stool for her to sit on. The stream of sailors walking down the sidewalk eventually thinned out, and Mr. Wetterschneider called a taxi to take us to a *pension* he knew, further down Avenida Central.

The lady who ran the place had a daughter about my age, and soon I was sitting at the kitchen table with her, eating banana halves that had been frozen in milk, and answering her questions. I didn't know much Spanish and she didn't know any German, so she spoke to me in English.

"Have you seen Santa Claus?" This I didn't understand, and I went into the front room to ask my parents. When they explained she was referring to Sankt Nikolaus, I told her no, I hadn't seen him. Her next question was, "Have you seen Hitler?" No, I answered, sorry to disappoint her again, but "I heard him on the radio," I volunteered and brought out my Hitler routine. Combing a lock over my forehead and making a Hitler mustache by holding the end of my pocket comb over my upper lip, I screeched out an imitation: "*Volksgenossen und Volksgenossinnen, die Juden sind unser Unglück!*" (Fellow men and women of the people, the

Jews are our misfortune.) She was delighted, and took me back into the kitchen where I had to repeat the imitation of Hitler again and again.

We were in Panama.

* * *

We didn't stay in the *pension* many days, but moved into a furnished apartment near Avenida Cuatro de Julio (Fourth of July Avenue), the street that separated Panama from the Canal Zone, a wide strip of land on both sides of the Canal held by the United States since the building of the Canal. Our apartment was in a ramshackle wood-frame building that had not been painted for some time. It was on the second floor, which had an inner balcony running around it.

The apartment windows and doors all opened out onto the balcony. Because of the heat we kept our windows open, as did everyone else. Thus we constantly heard the voices of our neighbors and especially their radios. There were sad romantic songs—one was called *Perfidia*, perfidy—that seemed appropriate to the hot, humid tropical nights. In addition to the blare of several radios with different programs playing simultaneously, we could hear people yelling and arguing and children crying—a colorful panorama of life in a working-class community.

One evening we went to the neighborhood *farmacia* on Avenida Cuatro de Julio to purchase some needed items, and the druggist presented me with a game, printed on cardboard in color, of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. I had never heard of this story, nor did I expect to receive presents from stores, even shortly after Christmas. My mother recognized it, and said, "Oh, that is *Schneewittchen*." It was fun to pop out the figures from the cardboard, especially the dwarves, who had names like Sleepy and Sneezzy.

On the weekend we went for a walk and discovered a park on the Canal Zone side of the avenue. It was neatly laid out, with grass, trees and benches, and we sat down under a shade tree. I was impressed by the size and beauty of the great palm trees in the park. I asked my mother for pencil and paper, which she always carried in her purse, and drew these beautiful trees, trees such as I had never seen in Germany.

It was clear that we would need a larger and more secure apartment to receive the large number of belongings we had brought from Germany, and we soon moved out of Cuatro de Julio. Our new apartment was in a large apartment building in the heart of Panama City, on Avenida Central. Its name was *La Pollera*, after the beautiful dress that was the Panamanian national costume, which means "the chicken girl." We lived on the fifth floor and used the elevator to go up and down.

My father and I were riding on the elevator, which was operated by a young man. "The first elevators," my father said, "did not stop at any floor. They just kept moving."

"How were you supposed to get on it, then?" I asked.

"There was no door on the elevator. When the floor of the cage was about even with the floor you were on, you had to jump."

"That's scary," I said.

"Right. They called those elevators *Paternosters* for the prayer (in Latin) 'Our Father ...'

that many people uttered before they jumped on the elevator." I tried to imagine jumping on and off a moving elevator and wondered if I would have the nerve to do it. "Of course," my father added, "those elevators were moving much slower than elevators do today."

On the day the lift containing our things was delivered to *La Pollera*, we moved into our new apartment. From the porch we could look down on Avenida Central. The movers carried our furniture and boxes to the elevator, and then from the upstairs elevator to the apartment, where my parents told them into which room to place each item. Meanwhile we were opening boxes and putting things on shelves, into closets and into drawers. By the time the men left it was evening, the apartment was cluttered full, and we were dead tired. Nevertheless, my parents wanted to make a bed for me. Putting up the beds was out of the question, so my parents put bedding into a large linen drawer that was supposed to go under a sofa. I lay down, ready to sleep, when my father made a thoughtless remark.

"Looks like he's already in his coffin," he said.

Having already had one child die, my mother could not tolerate that image. They made me get out of my comfortable bed and, tired as they were, turned the drawer over and put the bedding on top.

* * *

One of the first items of everyday use we bought at a little store downstairs was a roll of toilet paper. A riddle arose when we wanted to install it in the toilet-paper dispenser. Unlike the simple wooden roll we were familiar with in Germany, this dispenser was built into the tile wall. My parents, who had more pressing things to do, left this riddle to me. I noticed that the cardboard cylinder in the wall resembled the one inside the new roll of toilet paper. After asking to make sure it would be all right, I tore it along its spiral seam and pulled it out. That left a solid-looking metal rod inside. On closer inspection it turned out not to be solid, but made of two cylinders, one inside the other. I discovered that it took only a little sideways push to squeeze the pieces together enough so that they could be slipped out of the recess in the wall. Solving this little riddle made me feel good, and my parents praised me for it. Soon my father came in and said, with his characteristic humor, "Now that you've installed the toilet paper, I'll come in and plant a cactus." So I left the bathroom, leaving him to "plant" his "cactus."

The next morning we set up the beds and opened more of the boxes. My father had to go out, so my mother and I unpacked things and tried to find the right place for each item. Unpacking all our things brought back memories of our life in Breslau. The dishes had been wrapped, one by one, in newspaper. We took them out of the box, washed, dried and put them on a kitchen shelf. Here is a beer stein of glazed porcelain with a hinged lid. The inscription in old German lettering said:

Mein Herze brennet lichterloh

Komm, mein Scherz, machs ebenso

This can be translated into English as

My heart burns brightly as a flame,

Come, my treasure, do the same.

We were making steady progress when my mother left the kitchen. Some time later she came back and said she needed something from the store. I said I didn't know how to speak Spanish or buy things in Panama. Couldn't she do it herself? She said, mysteriously, that she couldn't leave the house. Apparently in some consternation, she told me there is a Woolworth store a few doors to the right as you leave La Pollera.

She gave me some money and asked me to go down there and buy her a box of Kotex.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Never mind," she said, "just ask for it and they'll know." So I took the money and took the elevator down.

"This boy wants to buy Kotex—what do you think?" asked one of the salesgirls of the other. She looked at me and said, "What do you want with this Kotex?"

I said, "My mother wants it." They seemed to be enjoying my discomfort.

"What is she going to do with it?"

"I don't know. She didn't tell me." After a little more teasing and joking among themselves, they sold me the Kotex. My mother wondered what had taken me so long.

Hidden in a bag of clothespins was my stamp collection. My father was shocked that my mother had risked our lives by packing these valuables, banned from export by Nazi laws.

* * *

A trip to the open-air market was a memorable experience. Huge piles of papayas, mangos, bananas, coconuts, oranges and other fruits and vegetables were displayed on tables and on the ground. Many varieties of fish and shellfish were on ice. Whole sides of beef and pork hung on the other side of the aisle. At the news stand we saw newspapers, magazines, lottery tickets, cigarettes and cigars. Busy men with machetes on their belts and women in shawls went past us, buying, loading, pushing carts and greeting each other. The smells were pungent and unrecognizable. As usual, radios blared music and announcements in a rapid stream of Spanish. Live parrots in beautiful colors squawked, and live fish leisurely swam in tanks. Chickens and roosters were cackling and crowing in cages, and we bought one, slaughtered and with the feathers pulled out. We bought bread and cakes at a bakery, and vegetables and a pineapple, loaded for the walk home. Then we saw the eggs, and got a dozen. Each egg was examined with a flashlight and individually wrapped.

* * *

The unpacking went on for days. One day I found the brass plaque from the door of our Breslau apartment, engraved **R. W. Leuchtag**, in one of the boxes. "Can we put it up?" I asked my mother. "It's not the most urgent job right now, but if you think you can put it up, go ahead." I found some nails and a hammer and went to work. Holding the plaque up over my head, I lined up a nail and hit it with the hammer. Plaque and nail went flying, and I felt something sharp hit the top of my head. My mother took a look at the blood in my hair and came up with an ingenious plan. "You know where we went walking last night, down to the left on Avenida Central?"

"Yes," I said, "Where all the big bank buildings are."

"Go down there. You'll see some doors with names followed by the letters MD. Go in and tell them you have a hole in your head. They should help you."

I did as I was told. "*Tengo un agujero en mi cabeza*," I said. Someone looked at my head and put a Band-Aid on it. Then I went home. That night my father showed me how to stand on a chair to do a job that was over my head, and we got the plaque up.

* * *

Why had my mother cried when we landed in the port of Balboa? Was it the barrenness of the scene—luggage on dirt ground, a bare open space under the harsh sun, with few buildings, occupied by busy people who did not look like us and who spoke a language we could not understand? Was it relief at our deliverance from Germany? Or was it the prospect of having to build a new life from these meager beginnings? Now that the immediate problems of finding a place to live and moving in with our belongings had been solved, the reality of our situation emerged. At least it did to my parents, and I received glimmers of it from fragments of their conversation.

The name Fidanque began to be heard more and more at home, with undertones of worry, fear and resentment. It appeared we were not in Panama with papers allowing us to stay forever. Actually, the visas my father had received from the Panamanian consulate in Berlin were visitors' visas, good for only six months. Without some act of generosity on the part of the Panamanian officials, we would have to sail back to the land of the swastikas and concentration camps. It seemed the Panamanian officials, particularly this Señor Fidanque, were not in a generous mood. What a bind we were in! It was unthinkable to return to Germany; but we did not have the legal papers to remain in Panama.

I was surprised when two Japanese men in suits and ties appeared at our door to buy our furniture. It had not occurred to me that my parents would sell the beautiful old hardwood table, credenza, buffet, sofa, chairs, rugs, beds, my father's precious Bechstein piano, and the oil paintings that hung on the wall. But the Japanese men liked what they saw, and offered my parents a price that was agreeable to them, and soon our heavy German furniture went back down the elevator. Our apartment was bare except for the icebox and some cots that my parents bought for us to sleep in. My mother thought the Japanese men were spies.

Eventually we received those precious documents we needed to stay in Panama, our *cédulas*, little pocket-sized booklets with yellow covers. Printed on the front was the word *EXTRANJERO*, foreigner.

* * *

It wasn't long before cockroaches began to appear in the cupboards under the counter where we kept the pots and pans. But my parents were ready for them. Out came the sprayer and the can of Flit. When a cockroach ran across the floor we pumped the sprayer, aiming its mist at the roach. The roach got wet, struggled to run, got sprayed again, slowed to a walk, dragged itself and came to a stop. When we picked it up in the dustpan it moved its

legs again, trying to get away. It ended its life in the toilet, being flushed down. Sometimes, one got away.

"What the cockroaches are to us, we are to God," my father said. He had a great admiration for cockroaches. There was a lesson to be learned in their refusal to give up struggling, something we might crudely call their gamesmanship. Of course my father went after the roaches in all seriousness, just as my mother and I did, but if one did manage to get away, something within him cheered.

"Some religions have a belief that when we die, our soul goes into an animal," he said. "If that happens to me, perhaps I will come back as a cockroach." As I think about it now, I believe my father had an analogy in mind that he himself was perhaps unwilling to verbalize. When the Nazis caught him and imprisoned him behind barbed wire, under the guns of the SS guards, he had not stopped struggling. Nor had my mother. It was this unwillingness to give up (along with luck and the kindness of others) that had landed us in Panama, while many of my father's fellow prisoners and their families faced a dismal and tragic future.

The struggling did not stop. The struggles to obtain the *cédula*, learn the Spanish language and make a living all had to be fought. That didn't mean we couldn't occasionally take a few hours off to relax and unwind. Some of these hours were spent in the plaza diagonally across Avenida Central from La Pollera. Some evenings we walked around the park, sat on a bench and watched the birds wheel and dive gracefully around the park. "They are doing a quadrille," my father said, explaining that this was an old-fashioned dance men and women did in the royal courts with stylized and prescribed movements—very much like the dance the birds were performing over our heads.

My mother was more interested in the people. She noticed that the young women were walking around the park in one direction, accompanied by their chaperones, while the young men walked in groups in the opposite direction. "That helps them get a good look at each other," she said.

* * *

The Panamanian currency was the Balboa, worth the same as a U. S. dollar. There was one peculiar coin, the *medio* (half), which was worth $2\frac{1}{2}$ *centavos* (cents). That meant that something could cost, say, $17\frac{1}{2}$ cents. On Avenida Central, next door to La Pollera, was a small grocery store owned by a Chinese man. There were foods and drinks in boxes, bottles and cans. Beans, rice, cornmeal, raisins and other items could be bought in bulk, from barrels. The groceryman wrapped these purchases in a piece of paper that he folded over and twisted tightly so that it would hold. After I bought and paid for a few things that we needed, he asked me, "Pesuña?" I didn't know what *pesuña* was, so he twisted some raisins into a triangle of brown paper and gave them to me, with a nod to indicate it was a present. After a few trips I learned that I could ask for raisins, peanuts, ice or other goodies as my *pesuña*. The quantities were always generous, and the chunks of ice he gave me when I asked for "*pesuña hielo*" were enough to keep our things in the icebox cool for a day if we kept it wrapped in newspaper.

Now that our legal stay in Panama was assured, my parents had to turn their full attention

to earning a living. My father was a businessman; beyond that, he had no specialized skills that would qualify him for a job. But even if he had, he would not have been able to obtain a steady job. Panamanian law gave preference to Panamanians, and foreigners could only work on a job for a short time before it had to be given to a Panamanian citizen.

My parents met a fellow refugee named Mr. Freund, who bottled and sold his own brand of cosmetics. He agreed to let my parents work for him as salespersons for as long as the law permitted. My parents learned enough Spanish and soon were selling Mr. Freund's lotions and compacts from door to door.

My father had been trained as an apprentice in his father's retail business, R. G. Leuchtag. He had hoped to take over the business some day, as his brothers and sisters were not interested in working in it. Events turned out differently. After my father returned from the war and his parents died, which happened shortly thereafter, the other brothers and sisters (except for Martin, who died in the war) decided they wanted to sell the business and divide the money. My father fought them in the courts, but lost. He bought a motorcycle and later a car. He rented himself and his car out to traveling salesmen. Later he went into the button wholesale business, supplying clothing manufacturers with the latest styles in buttons from Italy and elsewhere. So, as soon as Mr. Freund was forced by Panamanian law to ask my father to leave, he was ready to start his own business together with my mother.

Like Mr. Freund, my parents sold cosmetics. However, their emphasis was different. They obtained the bottled cosmetics from a manufacturer and had their own labels printed: *Flor de Hollywood*, Flower of Hollywood. They sold compacts, lipsticks, perfumes and lotions. However, their most popular product was a bottle of green liquid, *Aceite de Aguacate*, avocado oil, which was used as a hair oil. Later they expanded their line and sold famous French perfumes with names like *Veinte Quilates* (Twenty Carats) and *Chanel No. 5*. They sold their cosmetics from door to door, receiving typically 50 cents down and 25 cents a week. The usual pattern was to sell in a new area in the morning and collect from the old customers in the afternoon.

My parents were of course concerned about my education, which had been interrupted since that November day I had been diverted from my walk to the Jewish gymnasium and sent home. They consulted the rector of the University of Panama, a native of Germany. The rector told them that there was no chance for me to be admitted to a school in the Canal Zone; those were only for children of United States citizens who worked in the Zone. His advice was for them to keep me out of school for six weeks to learn Spanish, and then to enroll me in the *Escuela República de Chile*, the best public school in Panama City.

Six weeks later I had learned enough Spanish from talking to people, reading the newspaper *El Panamá Americano* (which conveniently was printed in both Spanish and English, *The Panama American*), and using the dictionary. One morning my parents took me to the school. The principal was a dignified gray-haired lady whom I liked immediately. I was enrolled, and the next morning I started as a student in the school named after one of Panama's sister republics to the south, Chile.

In school I learned a lot, especially about my new homeland, as I considered it, Panama. I loved the Panamanian flag, with its blue star and red star on white fields in opposite squares, with red and blue fields in the other squares; so comforting after the harsh black, white and red

swastika flag we had escaped. The people of Panama are a mixture of the Indians who were the original dwellers on the land, the Spaniards who came to conquer the land in search of gold to bring home and souls to save for their Catholic religion, and the (mainly black) workers who were brought here to dig the canal.

The Italian explorer, Cristóbal Colón (Christopher Columbus) discovered the American continent for his adopted country, Spain. The adventurer Vasco Nuñez de Balboa crossed the American continent at its narrowest place, the isthmus of Panamá, and discovered the Pacific Ocean on the shores of Darién. Fernando Magallanes (Ferdinand Magellan) travelled around the horn of South America to discover, claim and map the shores and islands of the Pacific. Later, as ships plied the newly discovered lands, lawless pirates preyed on them, killing or recruiting their crews and stealing their cargoes. One pirate, Morgan, made Panama his headquarters, and burned the old city of Panama, Panamá Viejo, to the ground.

The rule of Spain became oppressive, and brave people fought for independence. Simón Bolívar, the greatest of these, fought in many of the countries of Latin America, helping them gain their freedom from the Spanish yoke. Nevertheless, Spain—and Portugal in Brazil—had left its cultural imprint on Latin America, its language, its religion, its laws and its customs. I read parts of the beautiful book, *Don Quijote de la Mancha* by Miguel Cervantes, a tale of fantasy, adventure, and misadventures, relating the travels and deeds of a man determined to live the life of a knight at a time when knighthood was no more.

Panama's fate was determined by its geography. Situated on the narrowest strip of land separating the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, it lent itself to dreams of a transoceanic canal. After Ferdinand De Lesseps had built the Suez Canal in the Middle East, France decided to build a canal through the Isthmus of Panama. But there were differences: Although its length was less, Panama's canal would have to cross mountains, unlike the flat terrain of Suez. But when the French had brought in their equipment and begun to dig, they were faced with an even bigger problem: disease. The Panamanian swamps harbored malaria and yellow fever, and many workers died of these diseases. Eventually France gave up the project, leaving their equipment in place to rust.

The United States was beginning to feel its "manifest destiny" as an imperial power, and considered plans to build a canal, either in Nicaragua or Panama. Scientists had discovered the role of mosquitoes in transmitting malaria and yellow fever, and an American physician, William Gorgas, had succeeded in conquering yellow fever in Cuba. But the United States wanted political control of the canal, something that Colombia (Columbia), the country in which Panama was located, would not readily grant.

A group of *Panameños* saw the opportunity to declare Panama an independent country, while a U.S. warship lay in the harbor to protect them in case the Colombians disagreed. A treaty was signed in Paris, giving the U.S. rights over a wide strip of territory on both side of the proposed canal, the Canal Zone.

When our teacher asked if anyone had passed through the canal, I raised my hand. I was the only one in that class of Panamanian students to have had that unique experience.

Engineers designed a series of locks to bring ships up in steps to the top of the mountain, where a lake, Gatun Lake, was made by damming a river, and then, by steps, down again on the other side. Black people from Africa and the Caribbean were imported as laborers, Gorgas

fought the mosquitoes, and the enormous project was under way. Soon after the beginning of the twentieth century, the canal was completed. Panama's role in the world was memorialized by its national motto, *Pro Mundi Beneficio*, Latin for "For the world's benefit."

On Fridays, a priest came to class. Although I understood my other teachers, the priest's agitated rantings were unintelligible to me. When I asked a fellow student about it, he said, "Don't worry. In this class you don't get a grade. It's *catequismo*." A few weeks later, my parents asked how school was. I said, we had *catequismo* today. I don't get it." They were aghast. "You have a catechism class? They're teaching Catholic religion in a public school?" They came to school and talked to the principal, a kind, gray-haired woman. After that I was excused from *catequismo*.

* * *

On Saturday or Sunday afternoons, exhausted from the week's work, we sometimes walked to the Canal Zone. Crossing the Avenida Cuatro de Julio, we escaped the hustle and bustle of Panama City as we entered the green park. "The Canal Zone is four degrees cooler than the city," my father said. My mother agreed, "It certainly feels cooler. What a relief."

While my parents sat on a bench, I explored the park: lawns, flowering shrubs and, best of all, the towering, magnificent royal palms. Knowing my love of drawing, my mother had brought paper and pencil. As I sketched the graceful trunks, surmounted with a crown of foliage and on some trees great bunches of hanging coconuts, I could imagine myself barefoot, climbing high up the curving trunks to dislodge the coconuts, letting them fall to the ground.

Now my parents were discussing the events of the week and the challenges to come, and I left my drawings to explore the large building in the park, its United States flag blowing in the intensely blue sky. Curiously, the building had two entrances, one marked "Gold," the other, "Silver." My parents had begun a conversation with another bench sitter, who explained the answer to this mystery. The building was the American Commissary, where the Canal Zone workers did their shopping for U. S. goods. The "Gold" door was for white Americans; the "Silver" was for U. S. blacks and Panamanians. The segregation of the Commissary mirrored the segregation practiced in the Southern states of the U. S. at that time.

Recalling the charming scene of the park downtown, my father composed a song, "Birds in the Night."

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My mother made soft-boiled eggs for breakfast, which we ate out of porcelain egg cups. Finishing, I turned my empty eggshell over in its cup, saying, "Look, I've still got a whole egg to eat." I didn't expect to fool my parents, since this was an old game we had played in Germany, but it reminded us of the first time my parents had fooled me into cracking open an upside-down shell.

One day my mother brought home a white kitten a customer had given her. We named it "Miene" in honor of the white cat by that name we'd had in Breslau. My mother thought Miene would be helpful in keeping the cockroaches down. We caught a cockroach and put it

in front of Miene. She played with it for a while, but lost interest and let the cockroach go. Perhaps she was not hungry.

Another time my mother came home from shopping at the outdoor market. This time she brought home a baby duck she had bought. At that time all the jukeboxes were blaring out, "Oh, Johnny, Oh, Johnny, how you can love," so the duckling was named Johnny. Despite the care and attention we gave him, Johnny didn't live long. I came home from school and he was gone—my mother had flushed the little body down the toilet.

One day a woman came to our door and said she would take care of our cooking and cleaning, so that my mother would have more time to work selling cosmetics. From then on, Julia became a regular member of our household.

When my father was working door to door near a fire station, the firemen offered to sell him a car, which they would repair for him in their spare time if it needed it. With the car, we were able to make trips to places like San Francisco beach.

On my thirteenth birthday, my father told me that they were making arrangements for my Bar Mitzvah. The ceremony was to be at a Jewish community in the Canal Zone. My father drove me to the bungalow that served as a synagogue and introduced me to the rabbi. It had been over two years since I had been in a synagogue and I was sure I had forgotten all my Hebrew.

"Well, let's see what you can do," he said, unrolling the Torah. "You'll be reading from this sentence on." As I struggled with the words, he helped me. "You'll be fine," he said.

On the big day, I wore a new suit and tie. After I read the passage I thought I was finished, but the rabbi asked me to hold up the Torah roll while he slipped an embroidered cover over it. Then he motioned me to follow him as he stepped off the stage. I hadn't expected to carry the Torah around the Temple and became worried. If I tripped and fell, what would happen to the Torah? As I picked my steps carefully, another surprise came. Men reached into the aisle and touched the Torah with their prayer shawls, as I then recalled seeing in the Temple in Breslau. As the rabbi and I crossed to the other aisle and walked back, I began to get a feeling of relief and growing confidence. The rabbi said a prayer, opened the sliding door of the Holy of Holies, placed his Torah on the rack and reached for mine.

After the service, everyone went to the back of the room to enjoy refreshments that had been brought by my mother and others. Many members of the congregation congratulated me and wished me well. My parents were beaming with pride and told me I had done very well. As we drove back to Panama City, my parents told me that now I am a man.

We seldom if ever talked about the relatives and friends we had left behind in Germany. Perhaps my parents did when I was not around to hear; as usual, they sought to shield me from negative things. It wasn't until much later, in Los Angeles, that I learned about the death camps in which Jews were deliberately, systematically put to death by the millions. I asked my mother, did we have anyone who was left behind in Germany? Well, of course, she said. What about your aunt Martha and your grandmother? But that came later. Here in Panama, our everyday lives fully occupied our thoughts. Looking back on it now, my life has been a gift. It felt as though God had asked me, "Pesuña?" and I had said, "Life." And that is how life was granted to me.

Then, one day the beautiful dream that was our life in Panama was over. My parents were very excited at the news: Two of my cousins in the United States, Stefanie Feiler and Leonie Sachs, had put their resources together—hard as they were working to survive—and had made an affidavit to allow us to come to the United States. My father explained that Steffie and Lonnie were the daughters of Elizabeth Feiler, his sister, whom he called Lisbeth. The affidavit is a paper guaranteeing that they would support us if necessary, so that we would not become a burden on the government. And now our application had been accepted.

“Do we have to go?” I asked. “Well, of course, we are free to decide. But you will have much greater chances in the U.S. You will get a better education; we are doing this for you even more than for ourselves.” There was also the endless heat, which my mother couldn’t stand. So I reconciled myself to a second uprooting.

I said goodbye to my Escuela Republica de Chile, to Avenida Central and to the royal palms at the commissary on Cuatro de Julio, and we left Panama. We took the train from Panama to Colón, and from its harbor, Cristóbal, sailed on the *Copiapó*, a Chilean ship, north to New York.