

Alice Calder

Photographed with her husband Roy

Wartime Experience: Fled to England

Following are my memoirs of the Hitler period in Germany as I personally experienced it. I am writing this in 1984, 45 years after I left Germany, and even though it all happened so many years ago, these memories, by the very nature of them, will never be forgotten.

I was born Alice Baruch on September 8, 1920 in Hamburg-Altona, Germany, two years after the end of World War I, during a terrible inflation and a very poor economy. My father, Siegfried Baruch, was a merchant and my mother, Betty Baruch, nee Kleve was a housewife. For us, it was a fairly middle-class existence and we were well respected among our gentile neighbors. We did not live in a Jewish neighborhood and all my friends were gentile. However, at age 6, I was enrolled in a Jewish girl's school, about half hours walk from our flat.

At that time, the Jews in Germany were respected citizens, very much assimilated into the German way of life, and both my father and my uncle Iwan (Billchen) Kleve served in the First World War with distinction. All went well until 1933, when the National Socialist Party was elected to power, headed by Adolf Hitler, who had promised the German people better economic times under his dictatorship. But Hitler was known to be a Jew hater which had been made clear by him in his book: Mein Kampf, which, translated, means: My Struggle. In it he laid out step-by-step how he was going to make the German nation "pure", a pure Aryan race and how he was going to get rid of all the Jews, including Jews who did not even practice Judaism, many of them did not even know of their Jewish ancestry. All were included in his annihilation program.

The German people, who badly needed a change at that time and who could only hear the promises of better times ringing in their ears, ignored the threat against the Jews. And who would have believed that in 20th century Germany anyone could carry out such atrocities, anyway. Even the Jews themselves did not believe those threats, if they had, most of them would have tried to leave the country while it was still possible. There were some who had the foresight to do just that, but they were mostly people who had either money or a business in another country. However, for the vast majority it was inconceivable to give up everything they had, their family and friends, their livelihood and their homes and go to some foreign country where they did not even speak the language. Besides, the German people would never permit Hitler to carry out his plans as far as the Jews were concerned. This was in January 1933. The first indication that Hitler meant what he said came on April 1, 1933, when the Nazis called for a general boycott of all Jewish-owned businesses for one whole week. Nazis in uniforms were placed outside each business, large or small, stopping anyone who wanted to enter and telling them not to buy from "dirty Jews."

This was the beginning – and the first big financial loss to shopkeepers. Some tried to emigrate then, and the few who succeeded had connections in the USA, but even that was very difficult since an affidavit was required during a time when there was a depression in this country. Their entry into many other countries was also refused, but not because they were Jews, but because they were potential immigrants who had no money and needed jobs, since the Germans did not permit any Jews to take money out of the country even in those early days.

By about 1935, signs appeared in all public places, such as restaurants, theaters, movies, clubs etc. saying “no Jews allowed”. Also around that time, all Jewish children were expelled from the public schools and were forced to attend the few Jewish schools that existed. Jews began losing their jobs, especially officials of any kind, teachers and many others. People were forbidden to work for Jews, weren’t allowed to go to Jewish doctors, dentists, lawyers. Everyone abided by these restrictions for fear of being found out because they were deathly afraid of the consequences. Even in those early days, the Gestapo (secret state police) would arrest Jews for no reason, force them to confess to crimes they never committed by torturing them and after weeks or months release them. Some never did get released, no one know what the criteria was and no one could do anything about it.

Our family was not very big. My father had one brother and four sisters, only one of who had children (my Aunt Anne had three, Samuel, Lea, and Gita.) My other aunts were Guste, who lived part of the time in Sonderburg, Denmark, Selli who used to live in Bad Segeberg and ran a Pension until the Nazis forced her to sell and move to Hamburg, and Paula who lived in Hamburg. My mother had only one brother, Iwan Kleve, who with his wife Henny and one son, Heinz. My mother’s father, my beloved grandfather Joseph Kleve, was still living. Of all those mentioned above, only my uncle Billchen with his wife and son, my cousin Sam with his wife and daughter and myself were able to escape from the Nazis. Sam went to the USA, Billchen went via Paraguay to Argentina and I was able to get to England.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

In approximately 1937 a command came from the Hitler government that every Jew had to hand over to a designated place all their jewelry, silver, gold or any other valuables or heirlooms. All we were allowed to keep was one set of silverware for each person and a wedding ring (not engagement ring). So, we went – I accompanied my mother – to hand over to strangers all our precious possessions. No one would dare withhold anything for fear of being found out. It was not worth the consequences. It was a terrible day. Silver and gold that had been handed down through the generations and had great sentimental value, was just taken away by force and for no compensation of any kind of course. Things were getting from bad to worse. In the early days, before 1936 approx. anti-Semitism was felt worse in the small towns that as I mentioned, a small town about a one-and-a-half-hour train ride from Hamburg. As I also mentioned, my aunt had to give up her well-respected kosher “Pension” since life became unbearable for her. Her neighbors, whom she had known all her life, were afraid to greet her in the street for fear of punishment. The house was forcibly sold and my family received next to no compensation for it.

In early 1938, my uncle Billchen and his family left Germany and went to Argentina, although even as late as 1938 people like his father, my grandfather, could not understand how anyone like my uncle could just leave everything and take a wife and baby (Heinz was 2 ½ years old) and move to a foreign country without money and without knowing the language. In other words, even in 1938 many of us did not believe Hitler would carry out all his threats.

But soon after that, on November 10, 1938, came what is now referred to as “Kristallnacht”. Until that day, I was able to work and at that time had a job with a furrier. I came to work that morning on the streetcar as I did every morning, only to find everything along the way in shambles. I had slept through a night that was to be the beginning of the end of the Jews in Germany. The synagogues had been set on fire, all Jewish-owned stores and department stores had been ransacked, merchandise thrown out of the windows, slashed, burned, kicked about in the streets. I got to work only to find the same thing had happened there. A few minutes later I found out that that very same night the Gestapo deported all Jews who were Polish born but had moved to Germany at the turn of the century because of pogroms and persecution in Poland. That included my boss and his wife.

In my own family, the only people who were affected by this, was my cousin Lea and her husband and daughter, Ruth, because my cousin’s husband was born in Poland. These people were forcibly removed from their homes and families and sent to an unknown destination, never to be heard from again. So here we were, about 10 employees of the fur shop, no boss, standing there wondering what to do. Within a very short time, two Gestapo men walked into the store (I should say stormed, rather than walked). I was in the back of the store trembling when I heard them as I had never trembled before or since, trying to hide between the fur coats (the few that were left) knowing, at that time they only came to arrest the men and cart them away, not the women. So after they marched out again, the few of us that were left just went home. But I also realized that I would never come back here to work.

The beautiful crystal ashtray, which I am holding in the picture, was standing on the table in the store, for use by our customers I decided to take it home, probably the only thing I ever stole in my life, as a reminder of that day. As if I needed a reminder! It has traveled with me first to England and then to the United States and 50 years later, I still have it. My oldest granddaughter already has a claim on it as an item of historical and sentimental value. Upon arrival at home, I found out that most Jewish males had been arrested that night, including my father, Siegfried Baruch, who at that time already lived in Berlin. They did not take old people at that time, so my grandfather was spared.

After that dreadful day, a day I shall not forget as long as I live, we all realized that Hitler meant every word in his book. At that time, we all tried to emigrate to anywhere in the world, but alas, the world was closed to us. Even Palestine, in those days under British Mandate, was closed to additional immigrants. A few people were able to get to Shanghai, a few children were able to get on a children’s transport to England, and a few young girls were able to go into domestic service in England, IF they had a job lined up. I was one of the lucky ones. A friend, Steffi Fabian, who had already gone to England, offered to try to find me a job if I was interested. She sent

me the name of a family. I started corresponding with them, and within a few months I had everything settled and was able to leave for England, without a penny and with just a few suitcases full of clothes and lines. I was 18 years old, had never been away from home more than a few weeks visiting relatives and was quite immature.

It was a tremendous sacrifice for my beloved mother and grandfather to let me go “out into the world”, but they knew there was no choice. And for me to leave, knowing I would probably never see them again, well I don't have to spell out how I felt. So, on June 13, 1939, I left on a ship to Southampton, England, then by train to London where I was met by the family for whom I was to work. I spoke very little English at that time. From then on, until the war broke out on September 3, 1939, I wrote to my mother every single day, and she to me. Her letters, and those of my aunts and my father, being strictly censored by the Germans, never revealed what their life was really like after I left. They talked about what they had to eat that day (not very much) and what they did. In other words, they were not allowed to mention the situation in Germany for the Jews, or else the letter would never reach me.

I omitted to say earlier that the men, including my father, who were arrested on November 10, 1938, were released again the following year. In fact, my father came from Berlin to Hamburg shortly before I left, in order to say goodbye. Once war broke out, there was no more direct communication between England and Germany, so all letters ceased. Twice a year, the Red Cross was able to get a message through, containing no more than 25 words, and that took many months. The third, and last, such a message I received was from my grandfather, stating that he was now all alone. My beloved mother, my aunts and all the family “had gone on vacation”, meaning they had been arrested from their homes and taken to an unknown destination, one of the many “concentration camps” under unthinkable conditions, being treated worse than animals. My mother, Betty Baruch, was deported to Riga on December 6, 1941.

My father, Siegfried Baruch was deported to Auschwitz with the 28th Transport on February 3, 1943. Neither was ever heard from again. My grandfather then moved to an old-age home where, I later found out, he died on September 4, 1942. My wedding day. Such irony.

What took place in the concentration camps is well documented, starvation, torture and finally the Gas Chamber. Their crime? THEY WERE JEWS.