

Christine Roth Schurtman, New York
**From Munich to New York City:
I Live My Life in Widening Circles....**

In May 2004 I was invited by a friend at the Munich City Archives to participate in a symposium on the Aryanization of Munich from 1933 - 1945. This symposium was part of an extensive 6-week project. I was to appear as "Zeitzeuge," a contemporaneous witness, since I had lived in Munich during the Holocaust. I felt very honored to be asked to return to my home town to bear witness to that most horrible of times. It seemed like a circle was closing...

I was born in Munich in 1927 to a Jewish father and a Catholic mother. My two younger sisters and I were baptized and brought up as devout Catholics. We attended the local elementary school, went to mass every morning under the strict eye of my maternal grandmother, who lived with us in our large apartment. Also living with us, whenever she wasn't working as a live-in governess, was my Tante Hanna, my father's sister. I think I loved her more than any other relative, except perhaps my mother, because she surrounded us with a kind of unquestioning, unconditional, gentle love. There were no agendas with her, ever.

My father was away on business trips at times, since he was a sales representative for textile firms and had to visit his clients. He was a rather typical German father, who loved his family, but was strict, serious, quite rigid, not to be questioned. He was a completely assimilated German Jew, who had formally resigned from the Jewish community in 1923 (according to a notice in the Jüdische Echo of Munich). As a child I was not aware of his Jewishness, other than that he did not attend mass with us on Sunday, which made me unhappy. Politics was never a topic of conversation in our house - certainly not in front of the children. My childhood was ordinary, normal, protected, happy, even after 1933. We went on family outings, on vacations in the Bavarian mountains, we celebrated Christmas (with my father trimming the tree in his super-precise fashion - behind locked doors), and had first communions with formal dinners and presents.

The Nazi reality was brought home to me personally for the first time during Crystal Night in November 1938, when my father had suddenly disappeared and I found my very pale mother in our kitchen burning letters and photographs over the gas stove. She explained that she needed to get rid of some things in case of a search. Suddenly the doorbell rang and my frightened mother sent me to answer it. There was Herr Lehner, the proprietor of our local stationery store, wearing some kind of uniform. He very kindly told me and my mother who had joined me at the door, not to worry, that nothing would happen to my father. My father was one of only two Jewish men from Munich for whom no one ever came that night to take them to Dachau like all the others. We never found out why. My father had fled into the mountains on his light-weight motorcycle and made several attempts to cross the border into Switzerland - each one unsuccessful. He found refuge overnight in monasteries during his 10-day journey.

Since my father's Aryan employers were not allowed to employ Jews any more, my father gradually lost all his work. He became a free-lance photographer, sold photos privately, either to individuals, or to the Catholic newspaper of Munich, since he loved taking pictures of churches and Catholic ceremonies. He finally seriously pursued his emigration, managed to find a sponsor in the U.S. to give him an affidavit of support, and was lucky to have his American immigration quota number called earlier than expected. With his big overseas trunk- every item in it had to be approved by the authorities - and the equivalent of \$10 in his pocket, he left Munich in August 1939 and arrived in New York on September 1, the day Hitler invaded Poland. The plan was for the rest of the family to follow him a year later. This became impossible with the war's expansion and Hitler's ever-growing grip on every detail of

life.

Things were not easy for us then. There were financial worries, though faithful Catholic relatives supported us. There were great insecurities, a move to a tiny apartment after my grandmother had died, bombing raids, and little communication with my father after the US entered the war in December 1941.

In November 1941, our remaining Jewish relatives (my father's sister Hanna, his 69-year old Aunt Regina, her two daughters Marianne and Johanna and the latter's 4 1/2-year old child Ilse,) together with several of our Jewish friends, were deported "to the East", part of a group of 1000 Jewish Munich residents. We helped them pack their little suitcases with great care, fully believing that they would be back "after the war". We received postcards from them from the Munich transit camp where they were held for a few days, promising more mail "when they arrived". We never heard from them again.

I had entered high school in 1939 - initially a convent school, which was later taken away from the nuns and turned over to secular teachers. In 1943 I was forced to leave this school, since I was "half-Aryan". I took a job as an apprentice in a hospital lab which a maternal uncle had secured for me. I quite happily worked there until the hospital was bombed out in 1944. After that I had occasional baby-sitting jobs, helped out in friends' bomb-damaged apartments, tried to keep house with my middle sister who also had had to leave high school. My mother had a part-time job.

In spite of this horrendous turmoil, with almost daily (and sometimes twice daily) air raids, I had an active social life, with my high school classmates, all of whom remained unquestioningly loyal to me, as well as with a wonderful Catholic youth group, which was led by P. Alfred Delp, a Jesuit, who was executed by the Nazis in February 1945 in connection with the plot on Hitler's life of July 29, 1944. We had discussion groups, went hiking into the mountains, sang folk songs, - on the surface not all that different from what the Hitler youth were doing, though of course with a very different slant. My friends and I still kept in touch, even after most of them were drafted into the Labor Service, mostly outside of Munich.

The war was over for me on April 29, 1945, when the Americans rolled into Munich on their big tanks - in the middle of a snow storm. There was total chaos then, no food, no schools, no transportation, no infrastructure of any kind. Food warehouses were plundered. We lived mostly on potatoes and occasional cabbage and carrots.

Of course there was no word from our deported relatives. When we heard the stories of the concentration camps, we knew there was no hope. But we could not talk about Tante Hanna and the others - ever. We finally made contact with my father - who didn't even know if we were still alive - through an American soldier stationed in Munich, and started receiving "care" packages from him.

After many complicated formalities, and two stays in D.P. (Displaced Persons) camps (one in Munich, one in Bremerhaven where we were detained for four months because of a maritime strike - no boats!), my mother, my sisters and I arrived in New York on a troop transport on December 22, 1946. My father had not been notified of our arrival. After a very bewildering train journey at night from New York to Hartford, Connecticut, where my father lived, we were reunited very early the next morning in a snow storm.

As it turned out, it was not easy living together again after our long separation - not for my mother, who still loved her relatives and friends in Germany, not for my father, who understandably was totally embittered over the murder of his beloved relatives, not for me and my sisters, who had turned into young women from the children we had been in 1939. All of us, except my youngest sister, had to go to work within two weeks of our arrival, since my father had not become financially successful in the United States.

We never discussed the fate of our Jewish family. No one even tried. In retrospect I can imagine how hurtful it must have been for my father not to receive any expressions of sympathy from us, no condolences. Information about what happened to the people on this first Jewish transport from Munich was slow to emerge, and false for many years. It was thought that they had been taken to Riga and murdered there on arrival. It was not until 1999 that their true story was discovered through newly found archival material. The train had indeed been taken to Riga. There was no room there for its occupants. So it continued on to Kovno (Kaunas) in Lithuania. Again no room could be found there for 1000 people. They were put up in decaying old Russian fortresses, and after 2 or 3 days they were ordered to go on a "morning run." As they reached ditches which had been dug earlier, they were all shot down into these ditches, layer upon layer. All this is recorded in cold bureaucratese in SS records now available.

At the symposium in Munich I spoke of my father's - and some of my relatives' - loss of jobs and professions, all results of Hitler's "Aryanization". I spoke of my own loss of schooling. And I spoke of the ultimate Aryanization of Munich - making Munich, like the rest of Germany, "judenrein" - Jew-free, accomplished by forced emigration, and by murder. It was a challenge for me to dig up old facts again, to refresh my memory about these long-past times, and then to speak and answer questions from the moderator and the audience. My emotions were in turmoil, my body tense. But I needed to do this for the memory of my murdered relatives. I needed to do this for my father. I needed to do this for the new generation of young people, who had so carefully and, yes, passionately, worked on this tremendous project. And for the many serious young people in the audience.

In the end, I decided that I had not so much come "full circle", but that I rather wanted to say with Rainer Maria Rilke:

Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen
die sich über die Dinge ziehn.
Den letzten werd ich vielleicht nicht vollbringen,
aber versuchen will ich ihn.

(I live my life in widening circles
Which spread over all things.
I may not accomplish the last one,
but I'll make the attempt.)

Translation: C.S.

© Christine Schurtmann

www.oralhistory-productions.org