Revisiting "Home" Stirs Painful Memories of My Youth

By Ruth Alexander

with Julie Livingston



Ruth with her father, Simon Alexander, Konstanz, Germany, c. 1939

The old adage, "There's no place like home," resonates for many. But when I returned to my home town of Konstanz, Germany in 1971, more than twenty-five years after the end of WWII, and following the murders of my parents at Auschwitz when I was five years old, it was like opening Pandora's box.

Accompanying me on this milestone trip were my mother's maternal Aunt Elsie, age 62, and my three children, Nancy, 13, Sharon, 11 and Steven, 4. My husband, Jack, decided not to make the trip. I had tremendous trepidation about traveling back and setting foot again on German soil given the trauma that my family underwent. Yet, although memories of my early years are blurry or non-existent, I felt compelled to retrace my childhood and show my children where I was from. I was so young during all of the upheaval and have had to rely on surviving relatives and friends to help me to piece together my earliest years.

Setting out on our journey from New York City, we flew to Zurich and purposely stayed in Switzerland, not Germany, my home country. Our first stop was to see relatives my paternal aunt, Anne (Ah-nee) and her husband Ernst Yaari, who had fled from Germany to Palestine, and after the war returned to Wettingen, near Zurich; and Oma (Grandma) Lily Gruenbaum with her second husband Ernst. It was Lily who took me in and cared for me like a daughter from ages 5 to 10.

I forget now why or how it was arranged, but while in Switzerland, we also met with a Mr. Veit, who owned Korsettfabrik Schwartz, the lingerie factory in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland, where my father worked. The factory was less than one mile away from where we lived in Konstanz.

Somehow, he found out about my visit and asked to meet me, perhaps out of guilt, as he was of no help to my family during the war.

The trip was fraught with waves of emotion. I found myself at times overcome by feelings of anger, rage, and resentment, which I directed toward the German government, although such feelings could just as easily have been toward individuals who enabled the unfathomable treatment of Jews. We were, after all, a German family; how could they have let the Holocaust happen? How could they have been so cruel and destructive? And why did it have to happen to us? My kids felt the strain too and described parts of our visit as scary, which included going through extremely tight border control. When I was pulled aside for a bodycheck while going through airport security, the children were particularly unnerved.

Relatives told me that I was a happy, young girl of 2 or 3 when my life dramatically changed in 1938-39. Gaining power, Hitler was coming down on Jewish families, taking away material possessions, housing and businesses. My maternal grandparents were forced to cohabitate with my parents and me, at Schützenstraße 16, in Konstanz, a compact city that dates back to the first century A.D. and sits on Lake Constance in southern Germany. Its picturesque lakeside beauty was stunning. This only added to my feelings of resentment.



Ruth's parents, Simon and Nelly Alexander

According to official records, around the same time as Kristallnacht (November 9-10th, 1938), my father was arrested and sent to Dachau to work as a forced laborer for several weeks. When he returned, he described himself as extremely thin, anxious and jittery in letters he wrote to his first wife, Annie (Ah-née) who was English. She had relocated to London with their young son, Gerald, in 1931, prior to the Hitler regime. My father expressed both fear and paranoia about the

Gestapo coming into the family apartment and rummaging for things with the potential for further persecution. In his detailed letters to her, he expressed a yearning to get away from everything, to go somewhere in the countryside where he could have peace and quiet and the freedom to pick edelweiss, the delicate white flowers which are abundant in the alpine mountains.

As a separate matter, I only found out about my father's first wife and son Gerry late in my life, approximately 25 years ago. Gerry's daughter, Lesley, helped him locate and contact me. We were able to meet a few times before he passed away in 2011. While at first it was confusing and unsettling, it has proven to be a blessing in that I now have a wonderful niece in my life.

Apparently, my father was an extremely smart, ambitious, responsible and caring man. He spoke English, which he learned from Annie. Completely committed to his family, it's quite possible that he might have been able to negotiate our way out of Germany (as did his sister-in-law, Elsie), but he refused to leave behind his father-in-law, a tobacconist, who could not obtain a visa, ostensibly because he had cataracts. A rule follower, he continued to believe in the integrity of the German government and hoped that he could get family visas through traditional channels. He applied again and again for the three of us to leave but was denied due to set immigration quotas pertaining to Jews.

Lesley shared with me letters that my father wrote to her grandmother, Annie, and her father, Gerry, in March 1933, which showed his frame of mind and how dire the situation was. "I was born in this country (Germany), but I hate it from the bottom of my heart. What I have seen and heard these last six weeks are enough to spit over these people of swines. Now I do not wonder and I understand why [in] 1914 the whole world was against us." He clearly advised Annie not to come to visit Germany. In fact, very few Jewish people saw the signs and understood the level of imminent danger as early as 1933.

In 1937 — the year I was born — my mother's sister, Elsie, came to the US where she worked as a nanny in New York City. Her mother, my grandmother, Ida Schatz, came to live with her in 1939. My mother's father, Louis Schatz, followed in 1946 after being in a concentration camp in France that was designated for the elderly. This was after having survived in different internment camps in southern France (Gurs, Rivesaltes, Les Milles, Nexon, and in the last months, a home for the elderly, Rabes, in Cornil). My grandfather was saved by his age. In France, only Jews up to age 60 were deported. Aunt Elsie met her husband Hugo Bach here in the US sometime before 1947. He too, was a Holocaust survivor. At some point Aunt Elsie, Uncle Hugo and my grandparents ended up living in Flushing, Queens.

Inevitably, in 1940, German authorities rounded up about 6,500 Jews in southwestern Germany, including my parents and me, and my grandfather, Louis Schatz, along with my cousins, Paula

and Leo Goldlust and their mother, and forced us into trains which transported us to a camp in Gurs, France, along with many Konstanz friends and neighbors. On October 22, 1940, 112 Jewish men, women and children were deported to Gurs from Konstanz. I was the youngest at three-and-a-half years old. The Gurs Camp, about 1200 kilometers from Konstanz, was one of the first and largest camps established in prewar France, located at the foot of the Pyrenees. Here, conditions were quite primitive. It was overcrowded and there was a constant shortage of water, food, and clothing. One in four of the deportees died in Gurs of dysentery or typhoid; and about 40 percent were transported to Auschwitz after July 1942.

While we were at Gurs, my mother's aunt Lore, my mother, and I lived in the female barracks. Specific imagery remains hazy, but I've retained some visual and sensory memories of the surrounding barbed wire fences and awful stench due to the unsanitary conditions there were no toilets, only ditches and the omnipresent feelings of fear, anxiety and hunger. Food was extremely scarce and I recall seeing rats and mice running in the barracks where we slept on piles of straw.

At some point, I must have been granted visitation rights to my father, as I have a vague memory of carrying a small can with a few morsels of food to him. I also recall being treated for a childhood illness and sleeping in the infirmary barrack where I met my friend Ronnie, with whom I would reunite later in Flushing, New York. Frightened and feverish, I could only get a glimpse of my mother through a dirty window. More recently, during the pandemic, the feeling of being cut off from my loved ones, as I was in the infirmary, has haunted me.

In about 1942, my mother and I were moved from Gurs to a rundown hotel in Marseilles, France, the location for some of the earliest resistance activities.

After a short stay, we were transferred to Rivesaltes in the south of France, to where we learned my father had also been reassigned. And we discovered that our family had also been sent to Les Milles where my father was on a list of forced laborers.

Later, in 1942, my parents were sent to the Drancy internment camp. It was around mid-September when we were separated for good as both my mother and father were transported by cattle car to Auschwitz. According to transportation lists, they were taken on the 33rd transport from France, on September 16th, 1942, from Drancy to Auschwitz. When the transport arrived on September 18, my parents were murdered upon arrival. I only learned the date of their death (September 18, 1942) in recent years. The fall, when we celebrate the holiest of Jewish holidays, has always been particularly difficult and emotional for me. It's only fitting that during these holy days, we light candles to honor family members who are no longer with us.

From Rivesaltes, I was told that a nonprofit organization — perhaps the OSE (Oeuvre de

Secours aux Enfants), Swiss Red Cross, or the Quaker relief organization, the American Service Committee (AFSC) — arranged to find and hide me. AFSC created a Refugee Division which helped more than 22,000 individuals and families before, during, and after World War II. The group worked in French internment camps, and hid Jewish children. I may have been one of them, although this is unconfirmed.

I have clouded memories of being on a train alone as a child of four or five years old, confused, feeling abandoned and terrified of being separated from my mother, not knowing where I was being taken. Eventually, I found myself living on a French farm run by a mother and daughter who, although caring for a number of young children, also instilled great fear among us. I lived in a single room with approximately eight other girls and was told to remain quiet at all times and to only speak in French or else "bad men would come and hurt us." As an extremely young, German-speaking child, I was forced by fear to quickly acquire a new language, which, fortunately, I was able to do. Food was scarce and we ate onions almost exclusively for all meals. I remember holding on tight to a torn handkerchief which had belonged to my father, and I believe, a soft stuffed animal. These were my only possessions. I was probably there for a year when a brusque Polish woman took a few girls, including me, to the Swiss border. I was terrified that I would die as we crossed a river or lake to arrive at our final destination. To this day, I cannot put my head under water.

In November, 2021, I learned that a woman, Faiga Banach, pretended to adopt me and with the help of OSE, CIMADE (Comité Inter-Mouvements Auprès des Évacués), EIF (Éclaireuses et Éclaireuses Israélites de France), MJS (Mouvement de Jeunesse Sioniste), and unknown persons helped smuggle me to Switzerland on September 20, 1943, approximately one year after the death of my parents.

Once in Switzerland, I was taken to a Home for Jewish Children, which may have been in St. Gallen. I had been through so much that I completely lost track of my life between ages 5 and 6, I don't quite know how many months transpired when Melanie (Mela) Picard, one of our Konstanz neighbors, came upon the Home, recognized me and asked her cousin, Lily Gruenbaum if she'd take me in since she had always hoped for a daughter. Mela had also been transported to Gurs with my family from the same apartment house in Konstanz and lived on our floor. Records show that Mela arrived in Marseilles at the Hotel Bompard in August 1941. This was the same hotel where my family was. However, unlike us, she was allowed to stay and on August 28, 1942 was granted the ability to immigrate to Switzerland.

Once with the Gruenbaums Lily and her first husband, Siegfried, a warm, loving, well-to-do couple, my life finally began to stabilize. Over the next approximately 5 years, the Gruenbaums essentially treated me like their biological daughter and I enjoyed living in their sprawling house surrounded by endless acres of fields where I could run and play without worry. Their

successful cigarette factory was adjacent. I was never formally adopted by them, possibly due to Swiss regulations which made it impossible. Even so, my biological parents were never far from my mind; tucked under my pillow, I kept the remnants of my father's handkerchief, my most treasured possession, until it literally disintegrated. It was at the Gruenbaums' house that I met my childhood friend and playmate, Peter, who provided me with endless hours of innocent fun and adventure. I remember starting school with Peter in Switzerland. There, I was taught to sew and was given my very own child-sized sewing box.



Ruth prior to her immigration to the U.S., in 1947

In 1947, when I was ten years old, Lily received a letter from a tracing services agency set up by the International Committee of the Red Cross, notifying her that my aunt Elsie and my maternal grandparents were alive, well, and living in Flushing, New York. Lily and her husband knew they had to let me go to reunite with my lost family members, but it wasn't easy for them, or for me. Eventually, Lily traveled with me from Basel to Cannes for the MS Sobieski, the Polish passenger ship bound for the US (on March 14, 1947) where I'd make the voyage alone with other European orphans, of which I was the youngest. It was a very painful and difficult goodbye, another traumatic separation for me from the woman with whom I had formed a deep emotional attachment.



Newspaper clipping of Jewish orphans' arrival to the US on the M.S. Sobieski, a Polish passenger ship. Ruth Alexander is the youngest on the left. March 1947.

After a long journey, I arrived with a small suitcase of my meager belongings and only blurry memories of my childhood. Reuniting with my aunt Elsie and my maternal grandparents, and processing our inimitable resemblance was emotional. Although I was so young when I lost my parents, I could sense our familial bond. We all lived together in a small apartment in Flushing, New York — close quarters for five people, especially since I had grown used to living in the Gruenbaums' spacious home. Soon after my arrival, my aunt Elsie shared with me a tiny photo album, about 3 inches square, that she put together with black and white photographs of me that my father had sent over time to the family in the US. Each photo had his handwritten notes on the back to explain what I was doing in the photo or where it was taken. I still have the photo book with me and each time I pick it up, its pages brown with age, the photos now faded, I can sense my father and how much he loved me.

It was in Flushing that miraculously, I also reunited with my friend Ronnie, with whom I had been so sick in the Gurs infirmary. We are still friends today. I attended PS 20 in Flushing for grades 4 to 8, and later went to Flushing High School. I was initially placed in the 4th grade because I didn't speak English, although I should have been in the 5th grade. Later, I would not

only catch up to the others, but would skip a grade. I attended Queens College for my Bachelor's degree in sociology. And, I took several speech classes to help eliminate my Swiss-German accent. This was important since I aspired to become a teacher and at that time educators were not permitted to sound foreign. I would later finish my undergraduate work at night, when my daughters were young and I was pregnant with my son. Later, I continued my education and received my Masters in Social Work at Adelphi University in Garden City, NY.

Although I came to love my newfound relatives, I yearned for the maternal closeness I had obtained from Lily. She must have felt similarly, and having the financial resources, she moved to New York City in 1950. It was wonderful to have her close by as she filled in so many of the blank spaces in my life; I visited her often. She attended my 1957 wedding to Jack whom I had met at 17 years old, at a Jewish dance at the Rego Park Jewish Center. I was 20 years old when I married, 21 when I had Nancy, 22 when I gave birth to Sharon and 30 when I had Steven. Nancy was named after my mother, Nelly; Sharon and Steven after my father.



Standing, left to right: Ernst Bloch (Oma Lily's second husband), Elsie Bach, Ruth Alexander, Hugo Bach (Elsie's husband). Seated, left to right: Oma Lily Gruenbaum Bloch, Ida Schatz and Louis Schatz at Ruth's wedding in 1957.

After Jack and I married, we lived briefly in Rego Park where Jack had an apartment and then we returned to Flushing where we lived around the corner from my Aunt Elsie.

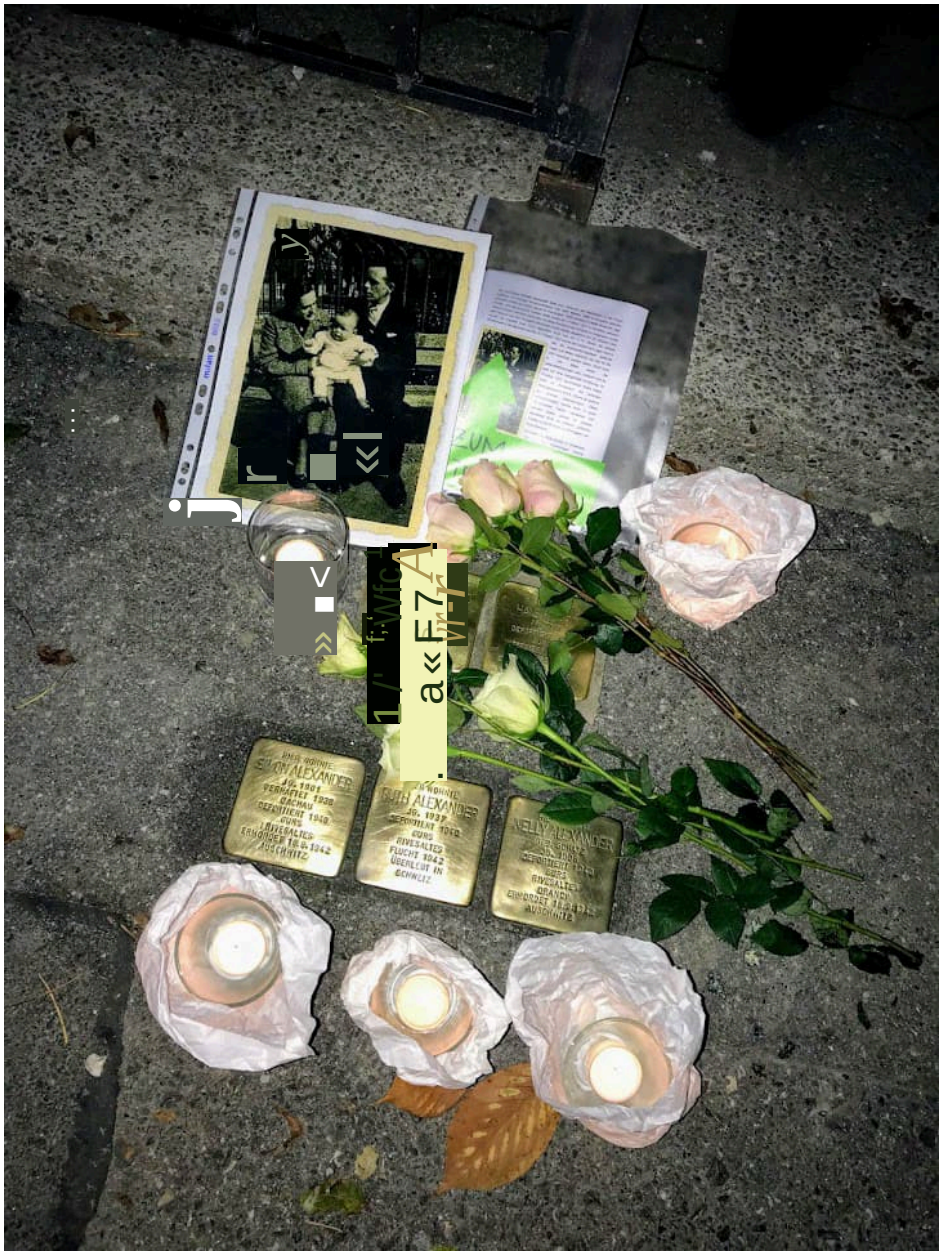
When she passed away at age 72 in 1981 after a horrific battle with cancer, it was yet another devastating loss for me.



Ruth visits her childhood home in Konstanz, Germany.
(Rear left) cousin Michael Blue; (right), son-in-law, Marc Benowitz.
May 2009.

In 2009, I returned to Konstanz for the second time with my daughter Nancy, her husband, Marc and their children, my beloved grandchildren Brett and Jackie, as well as my cousin Paula and her son, Michael and my niece, Lesley. We were asked to participate in a town ceremony for the laying of Stolpersteine for my family in Konstanz. Walking the neighborhood, Paula pointed out where various family members lived as well as other familiar places that we frequented.

This gave me an eerie feeling. Seeing the more than a dozen names of my family members with the surnames Alexander, Schatz and Tannhäuser (founders of the eponymous Konstanz dry goods store) made me feel the depth of their loss all over again. I couldn't help but think about what was and what could have been for our family.



Stolpersteine at no. 16 Schützenstraße, Konstanz, Germany.
Photo shows Nelly and Simon Alexander holding baby Ruth.

It was during this trip that we were introduced to Petra Quintini, a volunteer researcher and biologist, who has dedicated her life to reconciling our family history as well as that of several other Konstanz families stricken by the Holocaust. She is one of the most kind and generous people I have ever met.



Stained-glass window and window seat where Ruth awaited her father after each workday.
Konstanz, Germany. 2009.

Petra had also prearranged a visit to my family's apartment with the current tenants. I was so young when I was last there, yet as we walked inside, I sensed the familiarity of the light-filled stained-glass window and window seat where I'd peer out onto the quiet, tree lined street, waiting for my dear father to come home from work every night.

In 2018 I was invited to return again to Konstanz to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht. This time I chose to decline as the thought of going back was just too painful. Instead, my daughter Nancy went with two friends as well as Paula's son Michael and her grandson. This provided me with a sense of closure because they will continue to keep our family's story alive.

At some point after 1947, the German government, as a means of making amends, began to allow Jews to reclaim their German citizenship. At the urging of my daughters, I decided to re-apply because I realized that, as I approached the last chapter of my life, I wanted to reclaim my citizenship as a means of honoring my beloved parents and our shared heritage.

In the fall of 2021, my daughters Sharon and Nancy, my granddaughters Laura and Jackie, and I received our German citizenship.

My life's journey has had immense challenges, yet I have persevered, rebounded and flourished. Generally, I've had a good life with many riches. Now approaching my 85th birthday, I have come to realize the depth of my inner strength and resilience. After all that happened to me, I came to the United States, enjoyed 64 years of marriage, gave birth to three exceptional kids, have eight grandchildren and now three great grandchildren. I had a satisfying career as a social worker where I helped others. Sharing my story of being a hidden child has been difficult but also cathartic.

Although the Germans caused immeasurable harm, sorrow and pain, and sought to destroy the Jewish people, we survived. They simply could not extinguish our faith and spirit. By sharing and retelling the stories of what happened to me and the thousands of other hidden children, we acknowledge the horrors inflicted upon us by the Nazis and hold them accountable for their acts. Importantly, we empower and prepare future generations of Jews and all people to stand up so such a tragedy never happens again.

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