

Senta Cann



The first thing I remember is when I was a little girl. We lived in Germany in a good sized town. We had a big family. We were always together with my mother's family: uncles, aunts, cousins. My grandfather lived in the same town. We spent all our time together.

When I was a little girl I thought that all grownups, all Jewish people were fat. My mother was heavy, my dad was heavy, my mother's sisters (all my aunts) were heavy. I thought that's the way it had to be until I started school. Then I noticed that other children's parents weren't fat. They were skinny.

We lived in Bochum, in Westphalia. We had a good life. We were well to do. We had a couple of maids. We had a wonderful life when we were kids.

Then, in 1933 Hitler came to power. I was in my first year of high school, at the Lyceum. I was 10 years old at the time. I had some gentile girlfriends and they wouldn't talk to me anymore. I was 10 years old and I didn't know why these girls ran away from me. Then one time I asked one of my good friends "why don't you want to play with me anymore?"

And she said "I can't. They tell me you're Jewish and I'm not allowed to even talk to you."

When you're a child that hurts very much. It hurts when you're older, but its worse when you are 10. It was a big shock.

There were 5 Jewish girls in my class. So we stuck together. The teachers were nice; but when we got into our home room, in the morning, they came in and said "Heil Hitler." They raised their hand, and we had to do the same thing. It felt terrible to do these things. Still, when you are a child you don't realize what's going on.

Things got worse and worse. We couldn't go to the movies. We couldn't do any after school activities, because, being Jewish, we were out.

It got to the point where my father said we'd better leave the country. We got a waiting number from the American Consulate. Our waiting number was 16,000. That meant we would have had to wait 4 years. It was impossible to wait 4 years.

Then, on November 9th, 1938 Kristallnacht came. Two Gestapo men came to our house. My father wasn't there. They said to my mother "It's best if your husband comes to the police station for his own safety, because people are going wild. They will do him bodily harm if he doesn't come."

My father came home. I think he was hiding somewhere. (I don't remember). He decided it would be best if he went to the police.

We didn't hear from him anymore, but the rumors went around that he was sent to a concentration camp (Oranianburg, by Berlin).

We got one postcard from him. He wrote: everything is fine. Don't worry. Later on we found out that he had to write this.

Rumors went around town. We had a good sized Jewish community and all the men were taken, even young boys.



HANNAH MAX SENTA FRED





Above -- Nazi SA (Sturmabteilung) guards oversee prisoners who are carrying a tub near the entrance to the **Oranienburg** concentration camp in 1933. The SA was eventually replaced by Himmler's SS as the concentration camp system expanded to house an ever increasing number of political opponents and Jews, arrested and imprisoned without a trial or any right of appeal. The first camps included; Dachau in southern Germany near Munich, Buchenwald in central Germany near Weimar, and Sachsenhausen near Berlin in the north.



Four weeks after my father was taken he called from Berlin and said that he was freed. He was a fat, big man. When he came home he had lost about 30 lbs. His head was shaven. He looked terrible. He came home and he said "This is it. We can't stay here anymore. We have to leave

the country one way or another.

We couldn't come to the states. Our waiting number was high. They had people taking people max over the border, to Belgium, at night time. My dad and mother made arrangements for us to go to Cologne. From there people smuggled you over the border for money. So we went to Cologne. We didn't tell anybody. I was 16 years old. It was, in the spring of 1939, in April.

So we went to Cologne: Me, my sister Helga. my dad, mother, and my cousin Heinz. My aunt and uncle wanted Heinz to cross the border. He was 5 or 6 years older, and he was



a little slow ...not really retarded.

Heinz Inga

My father made contact with one of the smugglers. It costs so much money. You deposit your money somewhere. If it didn't work out you get your money back.

We met the smuggler at 11 o'clock at night. He drove us across the border. We had no visa or anything. After 2 hours of driving we weren't in Belgium yet. The police intercepted us, caught us, and sent us back. They told my dad if they catch him again they're going to put him in a concentration camp.

Belgium - Map Showing Cities and Rail Lines



My sister and I went back to Bochum, to my grandfather's house. My mother and dad stayed in Cologne and made another contact with somebody else, this time only for my dad and my cousin Heinz.

This time it worked out all right, and they called us the next day from Brussels and told us that everything was alright.

My mother found another contact. She called us at my grandfather's house and said come to Cologne again. We have someone else. That was a group of 20 people. We tried to cross the border. Our leader told us before hand "If I stop and I say jump you should all jump into the woods." We didn't even get as far as the woods before we were caught again. They sent us back again.

The third time my mother, sister, and I went to the border in a truck. He said, "Get out there and walk."

On one side was the German border. There were 2 blocks of nothing that you called the no man's land. And then there was the Belgium border. We were already in the no man's land. There were 2 guards. We were walking. And the German's said "Halt! Come back!"

We said "We are only women. We have no money. Please let us go."

They said "Go on."

The 2 Belgium guards didn't let us in because we didn't have any visas. One of the guards said "If I were here alone I would let you in. But 2 is one to many. If he knows it he's going to tell on me."



So we walked back to the German border. A big shot came in a fancy convertible; he picked us up and brought us to a jail in a small border town.

We were all in one little cell. (There was one little bed. We didn't sleep much. There was a toilet in the room. They gave us something to eat.) There was a window high up. My mother stood on the bed and looked out the window the whole time.

The next morning they said "Go ahead. You are free to go. But don't do it again."

The next morning the Nazi big shot took us back to Cologne. He said "If I ever catch you again, I'll put you into a concentration camp."

We were desperate. We had to get to Belgium. My mother made contacts again. We had to pay a lot, like \$100 a person.

The last time we were with a large group. We got into a truck again. It was the same story. He said: When I stop you jump out and walk and walk and walk until you see another truck with people. And it will take you into Belgium.

We just had a few things with us. We walked and walked. My sister was only 10 years old. There were some younger kids and some older people. And we ran and walked for 2 hours. We walked in the woods. Everybody was desperate.

And we finally saw the other truck there. We climbed into the truck and he said "You are safe now." And we went into Belgium.

My father had rented a couple of rooms for us. We were happy to see him. He was happy to see us. We lived in Brussels for almost a year. During the year my mother's older sister, Tanta Rosa, and her husband Willy Hartwich, joined us.



We lived in a terrible neighborhood. We lived in a rooming house run by an Arab woman who had a French boy friend. There were about 30 rooms in that house. Just individual rooms. They had a bed, a little table, and a little gas flame. The people who lived there were mainly Jews, refugees. There were Italian Jews, a Swiss Jewish family, German Jews. There were Arabs, some black people. But everybody got

along well. **ROSA**

It took a long time to get a visa. We had to go to Antwerp to get one. And after you had your visa you could get an identity card, in order to leave Belgium. They had Razzias on the street. Razzias were plain clothed policemen who checked identity cards. There were so many refugees in Belgium, because that was the only place you could get into without a passport. The Razzias caught refugees without visas and they put them into camps. Not concentration camps. But camps. They didn't send you back.

Fortunately no one asked us for our identity cards until the day after we got them. The day after we got our cards we came down from the building and a plain clothed policeman was standing there. He said "I have to check your identity cards." And it seemed as though God was with us.

We got our Visas, and we got our bookings. We were supposed to sail on May 13, 1940. The war wasn't on for us yet.

One morning we woke up and heard a terrible noise. The Germans had invaded Belgium.

World War II: NAZI Invasion of Belgium

Figure 1.--Here three British soldiers pass a Belgian boy at the French-Belgian border (May 17, 1940). At this time the Germans had broken through in the Ardennes and driving toward the Channel. The bulk of the BEF had rushed north to help the Dutch and thus was not in place to resist the Germans in force when they struck through the Ardennes.



Belgium remained strictly neutral, but was invaded by the Germans (on May 10, 1940). The Germans struck at both the Netherlands and Belgium at the same time. It was the start of the long anticipated German offensive in the West. After a few months of

the "Phony War", it was the turn of the Low Lands and France. The German initiated their long awaited western campaign on a wide front against the neutral Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxemburg. The Luftwaffe played a key role in the German success in the west. King Leopold before the War had promoted the construction of important

defensive fortifications from Antwerp to Namur in front of the German border. These defenses were quickly taken by the Germans. The British Expeditionary Force rushed north to assist the Dutch. This meant that they were not present in force to oppose the Germans when they broke through in the Ardennes. Leopold, with the bulk of the Belgian Army, was surrounded by the Germans, and capitulated.



It was 2 weeks before we were supposed to leave. They had big air raid shelters. And there were signs everywhere that said, when you hear the alarm, go to the air raid shelter. It was a block and a half away from us. So every night, in the middle of the night, they would come and bomb. The air raid would start.

The first couple of times we ran to the air raid shelter. But by the time we got there the raid was over. We went back to the house. So after that we decided: what the heck. We aren't going to run there anymore. They had posters on all the walls that said: All German men have to report to a certain stadium for their self protection. So my father and uncle Willy went. We thought they would come back.

They didn't come back so we went there. And they said the men were taken to the south of France for their own protection.

Heinz had been taken before. All the young fellows had to go to a camp.

We didn't hear from my dad. They had posters all over the city that said that anyone who wanted could go to the south of France for their own protection. They had free trains running. So Tanta Rosa, Helga, my sister, my mother, and I decided to go to France. We decided that if the Germans occupied Belgium they would put us back into a camp.

Tanta Rosa had silver, twenty four place settings, in a big bag. She didn't

want to leave it. It weighed a ton.

And I had to carry it.

We got onto a train. The train went and went. They didn't give us any food. Every so often they would stop and the Red Cross would come and give us food. My mother and Tanta Rosa didn't speak any French. They only spoke German. They both were a little hard of hearing so they talked quite loud to each other.



We got to a little town and 2 policemen arrested Tanta Rosa. They took her off the train with her sterling.. We didn't know why. We didn't

know what happened to her.

After we were on the train for a week, we arrived in Toulouse. There they took us off the train and put us up in private homes in nearby towns. We were placed with a woman who lived in the town of Miramonte.

THE PYRENEES MOUNTAINS SEPARATE FRANCE FROM SPAIN.
THE NEXT MONTHS WERE SPENT IN THE FRENCH PYRENEES



My mother, Helga. and I went into one room. Another family got the other room. In France they had out houses. The lady who owned the house where we were staying didn't want us to use her outhouse. So there was a public outhouse in the middle of town. We had to go there all the time; or we did our business on the highway (someone stood guard.) They had a market place. They had a big sign that said: All German people must register in Toulouse (20 minutes away.) So we took the bus to Toulouse. We went to the Hippodrome. They told us that I had to stay there, and my mother and Helga could go back. While my mother and Helga were leaving,

Tanta Rosa came in. We were happy to see her. She went back with my mother and Helga.



The next day they took me to Gurs.



(**Camp Gurs** was an [internment and refugee camp](#) constructed by the [French government](#) in 1939. The camp was originally set up in southwestern France after the fall of [Catalonia](#) at the end of the [Spanish Civil War](#) to control those who fled [Spain](#) out of fear of retaliation from [Francisco Franco's](#) regime. At the start of the [World War II](#), the French government interned [Germans](#) and citizens of other [Axis Powers](#), as well as French nationals who were considered to have dangerous political ideas or who were imprisoned for ordinary crimes. At the start of World War II, the French government decided to also use the camp to house ordinary prisoners and citizens of enemy countries. The first contingent of these arrived at Gurs [May 21, 1940](#), eleven days after the German government initiated its western campaign with the invasion of [the Netherlands](#). To the Spaniards and Brigadists who still remained in the camp, were added:)

It was a camp. We were behind barbed wire. We didn't get too much to eat. Every morning they gave you one loaf of French bread for every 5 people. People got so crazy. They measured the bread with tape. No one got half an inch more than the other one. And if they did they would fight over it. The only thing we got

to eat was this thick French pea soup. It tasted horrible.

But if you're hungry, after a while you'll eat anything. At the time the French didn't differentiate between German Jews and Germans.

1940 German Armies Invade Netherlands, Belgium & Luxembourg-

In a flanking move that made the the French Maginot Line irrelevant, the Germans attacked the Low Countries. The Netherlands surrendered in four days, after massive German attacks on Rotterdam.

The Germans quickly drove into Northern France, dividing the French and British forces into two.



1940 Dunkirk Evacuated - The British successfully extricated 200,000 British and 100,000 French troops from the beaches of Dunkirk. The troops were stranded in Northern France, cut off by the sweeping German victories. The British and French troops were forced to abandon their equipment, but their soldiers were available to fight another day.

1940 Paris Falls, France Surrenders- On June 13, Paris was evacuated by French forces, in the face of advancing German forces. On the 23rd of June, France surrendered. Terms of the surrender included the disarmament of French forces and the occupation of two-thirds of France by the Germans.

In July, the war between Germany and France was over.

I was released in the morning with the girls who were younger than 18. There was a little French village not too far away. We ran there and bought white bread. I bought a loaf and I ate it. Nothing has ever tasted as good as that white bread did.

Another girl and I tried to hitchhike to the next town. She was Jewish. She had lived in Belgium for a long time. She was very fluent in French. She told me to keep my mouth shut, to just nod or say no. "I don't want them to know that we are refugees."

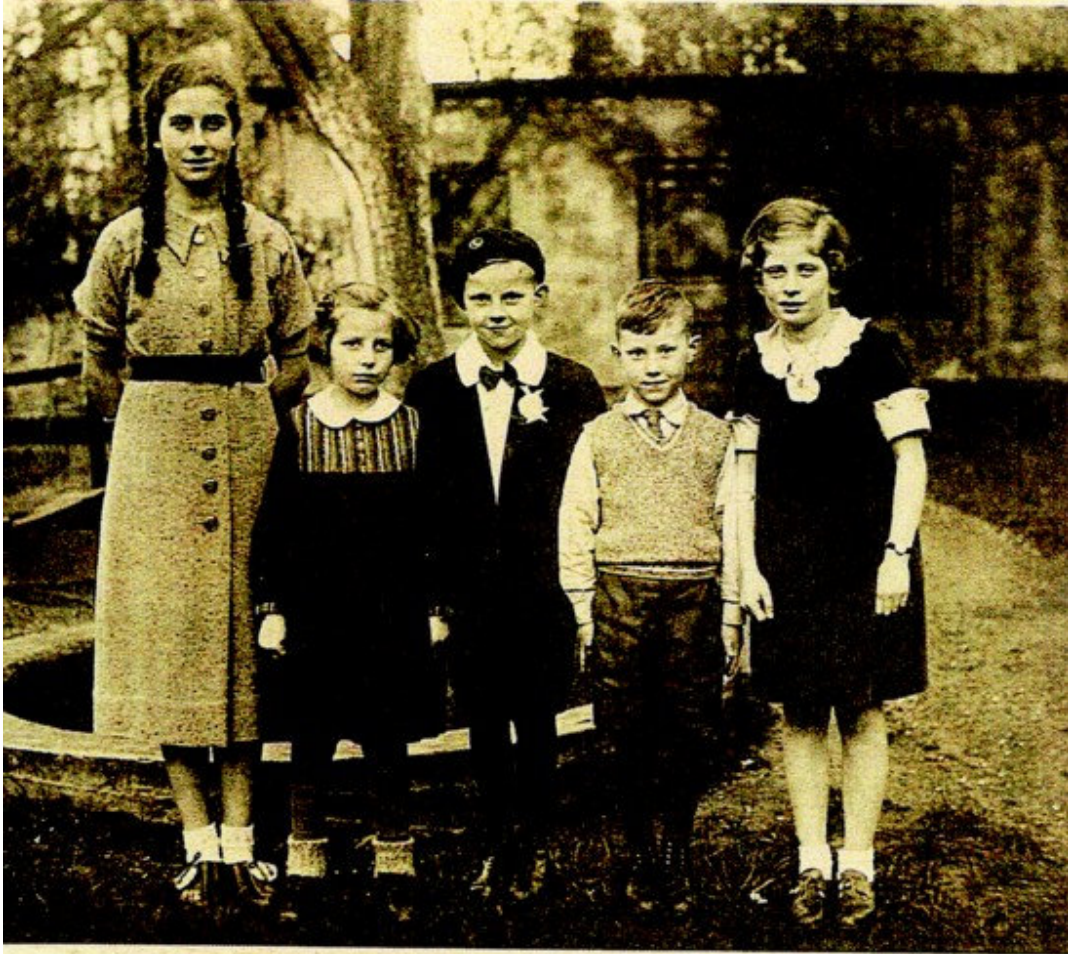
A car came by with 2 German soldiers. They drove us to the next town,

Oloron St. Marie. (Oloron-Sainte-Marie - Important old town close to the Pyrénées on the junction of two rivers.)

They had set up a big refugee kitchen there.

They put us up in private houses. We had to stay there because the trains weren't *running* and no one had gas for their cars. We stayed there for about 2 weeks before the trains started running again. And we had a wonderful time. There were so many refugees, boys, girls.

When the trains started running we went to Toulouse. My friend, Traute Hershtitt, also lived in another little town there.



**SENTA GOVERNESS DAUGHTER FRAU NIEWALDS SON
WOLFGANG BUBI HUMAN, HIS AUNT WORKED FOR MAX IN THE
OFFICE AND HELGA**

We got to Toulouse at night. We had to wait until the next morning for the busses to take us to the nearby towns.

We didn't have enough money for a hotel. We didn't even have enough money to eat. So we went to this one hotel and we asked if we could sleep in the lobby. And they were very nice. They said yes. And they said come into the dining

room. There were a lot of people eating there. Each one sent something to our table. We were really treated wonderfully.

The next morning I went to my little town and Traute went to her little town. (I never heard from her anymore. I later heard that she was married and she lived in the states.)

My mother and Tanta Rosa were happy to see me again. And I was happy to be there. Meanwhile they had contacted some Jewish organization and they had found out that my father was in St. Soupien, which was also a camp. It was beautifully located near the Mediterranean, right by the Spanish border in the old Pyrenees.

Saint-Sulpice-la-Pointe. Located near Toulouse, this transit camp was set up after the beginning of the **Phony War**. It was to house "individuals representing a danger to national security" - mostly militant communists. In June 1940, with the first German attacks on the Soviet Union, people with Russian citizenship were interned there. Later, foreign Jews who had been living in hiding in the South of France and were rounded up in the summer of 1942 were also sent to the camp. The inmates, especially the communists, organized many cultural activities, a

"little university," in which each one contributed their knowledge for the collective good. From the summer of 1942 to the closing of the camp in August 1944, most of its inmates were deported to the East, to Auschwitz and Buchenwald

We decided somebody should go there and see what they can



My dad out.M
HELGA AND SENTA

My mother didn't want to go. Tanta Rosa didn't want to go.

So they sent me. I took the train from Toulouse. It was crowded. I had to push my way in. I went to St. Soupien which was near the beautiful town of Papillon.

I saw my father. He was on one side of the barbed wire. I was on the other side. He said the only way I can get out is with a false release, and that costs a lot of money.

I went back. My mother and Tanta Rosa went down there with the money and they got my father out.

When we returned to Toulouse, the elders decided we should go to Marseilles, to a port, so we could have better access to a boat. We went to Marseilles. We were in a refugee camp. They were barracks. You could come and go. The food was free. We wrote to our landlady in Brussels and she sent us several suitcases of our clothes. In Marseilles we went to the American consulate. Our American Visa had expired. We needed a new visa. They were very nice. They gave us a new Visa. The following year, May 10, 1941 we left, going first to Martinique. And from Martinique we were going to take a ship to America.



Marseille 1941

We were on a small boat, full of refugees. But it didn't matter. We were happy to be on our way. We stopped in Casablanca. We left again. And suddenly the ship went back. Everyone was very upset, excited. "What happened?"

The Germans didn't want us to go any further than Casablanca. So we stayed on the boat for about 10 days. There wasn't any food. It was terrible. But the Moroccans came to the ship and sold us food for high money.

After 2 weeks they took us off the ship and put us in a camp again. This time we went up to the mountains, to the Casbah Tala, an old foreign legion camp, the last outpost before the desert. It was beautiful but hot. You were



allowed to leave the camp, but unless you had a car you couldn't get anywhere. We were isolated. The barracks were very nice and modern with showers and a nice dining room. It was nice and clean, but you-couldn't go anywhere.

There were a lot of Spanish refugees against Franco. When he came to power they had to flee Spain. They were running the kitchen. The young people such as I had to help in the kitchen.

We stayed there for about 2 weeks. A Portuguese ship called the Niasa came into port. The Portuguese weren't in the war. HIAS, or some Jewish agency arranged for our passage. They took us back to Casablanca and we were happy. They arranged dormitories on the ship, 50 beds for the women, 50 beds for the men. We were all happy to be there.

We landed in New York at 5 in the morning. Everyone got up at 4 to see the Statue of Liberty. My mother's cousin, Pauline Fishbein and her brothers picked us up. They had sent us the affidavit and they (and my brother Fred) picked us up. Max Morris lived in Brooklyn.



Pauline lived in Newark New Jersey. (Edward Seideman's sister married someone by the name of Morris. She had 3 sons and one daughter.)

Helga and I stayed with Max Morris. My mother stayed with Pauline.

Two days after we arrived Helga got sick. They rushed her to the hospital. They took out her appendix. The temperature didn't go down. She was still very sick. They did tests and found out she had typhoid fever. They put her in infectious



disease. A week later I got a terrible high temperature. I was very sick too. We were in separate rooms, isolated. My parents could only see us through glass. Helga was in the hospital 2 months. I was in the hospital for 3 months. I lost my hair. When I came out I



was very weak.

Fred was in St. Louis. He kept saying come to St. Louis. During the war they didn't want refugees to travel. We decided not to pay any attention to anyone. We got on the train, and January second, 1942 we came to St. Louis. I met Henry in July '43.

I was working in a factory, sewing in a factory, on an assembly line. At first I sewed fur army caps for the boys in Alaska. It was disgustingly hot. They didn't have fans or air conditioning. There was a lot of fur. It got into my nose. I had a terrible allergy. I would sneeze, sneeze, sneeze. My eyes would water.

But I was happy I had a job. I was happy we were here. The minute I quit it went away.