



Identity Cards

CARD 12

Ellen

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Name: Ellen • Born: 1929 • Hometown: Germany

Early Years:

I grew up in a tiny farming village in Eastern Germany. My father worked as a grain merchant and had a good relationship with his customers, despite the fact that

we were Jewish. My entire life, I dreamt of becoming a nurse. My parents took great pride in knowing that their daughter was educated and invested their entire savings in sending me to school in Berlin.

1933-1939

When Hitler became chancellor in Germany, everything began to change. My father's business suffered because people were directed to boycott Jewish stores. After a while, I was forced to drop out of school; Jews were banned from institutions of higher education by law. I decided to remain in Berlin at my uncle's house and encouraged my parents to move there, as the neighbors in our hometown were growing suspicious of our family. My mother did end up joining me, but only after my father's death forced her to sell our home and my father's business to the Germans.

While in Berlin in 1939, I met the man who would later become my husband, Heinrich. I was 20, and he was 21. We began dreaming of better lives that we could have living as a married couple in America. Heinrich's family suffered heavily from antisemitism. He was a top student, planning to attend medical school but, like me, he was forced to drop out of school. Heinrich's father was a respected and beloved physician. He was known by Jews and non-Jews and would often see patients who could not afford to pay for treatment. Yet, when it became illegal for Jewish physicians to treat Gentiles, he found himself with very few patients and a much-reduced income.

When the war broke out in September of 1939, it was obvious that my mother's attempt at obtaining visas to England, and Heinrich's father's

plans to escape to America, would never come to fruition. I had mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, I feared the fury that I heard in Hitler's speeches on the radio. On the other hand, I wanted to remain close and connected to Heinrich.

1939-1940

The Germans saw a way to make use of German Jews in the form of slave labor. Both Heinrich and I were drafted to work in munitions factories. I worked in a factory making parts for German airplanes. Heinrich worked twelve-hour shifts in a huge factory located two hours away from his family's small apartment. The pittance we were paid amounted to half of the salary that an Aryan worker would receive for working a normal eight-hour shift. Still, we were thankful to have our work and to obtain food rations with our ration cards. Deportations of German Jews to concentration camps had already begun. By 1942, rumors of raids on factories began and both Heinrich and I knew that we would no longer be considered protected as workers.

By this point, my mother and Heinrich's parents had become weak and frail because there was not enough food available for proper nutrition. Our parents developed a very close relationship during those terrifying months. Heinrich's father called us all together one evening and in a very soft whispered voice revealed the plan that had

the potential to save us from deportation. Years earlier, a farmer and his wife from the countryside in Eastern Germany had been visiting Berlin when his wife went into early labor with their first child. Heinrich's father had been visiting another patient in the hospital when he heard their story. He delivered their baby boy and brought him to life when he failed to breathe on his own. The couple gratefully thanked the doctor, acknowledging that if they had delivered the baby at home in the countryside, he surely would have died. But they had no money to pay for the service. Heinrich's father told them not to worry about payment; if he ever needed a favor while visiting the countryside, he would let them know.

This family, the Schullers, had agreed to hide our families on their farm. I still remember the bitter winter evening as we began our travels to the countryside. We traveled in groups of three and took only the bare necessities in order not to attract attention to our move. Only a few weeks after our escape, the factories where we had worked were raided. It was February of 1943, and the Gestapo had decided that it was time to round up whatever Jews were left in Berlin. Close to 7,000 Jews were arrested. We would have been among them if it had not been for the heroic choice of the Schuller family.

The Schullers were sympathetic Catholics who risked their lives to hide us. Every German knew the danger of being arrested and killed for aiding a Jew. We lived in a tiny annex of their small farmhouse attic. We were 11 people in total, and they took care of all of our needs. They were fortunate to have a small garden and some livestock that enabled them to provide food and drink for us without drawing attention to the large quantity they would have had to purchase from a store.

Life in hiding was far from easy. The tin roof on the house made conditions in the attic extreme. We suffered from freezing temperature in the winter months and stifling heat from the sun reflecting off the tin roof in the summer. We hardly moved around during the day. We had read whatever books the Schullers had, and pa-

tiently waited for the news from the newspaper that they brought home on Sundays from Church.

After the War

Both my mother and Heinrich's parents insisted that we immediately return to Berlin at the end of the war. Upon hearing the fate of the rest of our extended families, friends and neighbors, Heinrich and I tried to persuade our parents to join us in the American Zone DP camps in order to prepare for immigration. Heinrich's parents were set on getting their apartment back from the German civilian who had moved into it during the war. My mother insisted that she did not have the strength for another trip. Heinrich and I were married in a newly restored synagogue in Berlin in 1946. Very few survivors wanted to remain in Germany. Although the Jewish Community Council worked to reestablish Jewish institutions, cultural and spiritual life was nothing compared to what it had been. There was not much interest in rebuilding a Jewish life in Germany.

When I was only a few months into my pregnancy with our first child, Heinrich and I decided to immigrate to Israel. As immigration was not yet legal, we joined the illegal immigration of Jews into Palestine. As difficult as it was, we said our good-byes to our families and boarded trucks that would take us near the Italian border in the Alps. We had to remain silent and walked for hours over the snow-covered mountains of Italy. My feet and my back ached. Heinrich carried our few belongings. Surprisingly, the guards at the border were friendly to us as we passed over into Italy. We traveled to the home of a staunch Zionist in the countryside, near Rome. We remained near Rome until 1948 when we were finally able to travel by ship across the Mediterranean to Palestine.

Heinrich and I never returned to Germany except to attend the funerals of his parents. My mother died very soon after our arrival in Palestine when we were unable to afford a trip back. We mourned the loss of my mother and our past lives in Germany, just as we celebrated and welcomed the birth of our first child in Palestine.