



# Nathan

Name: Nathan • Born: 1926 • Location: Germany

## Early Years:

As I remember it, my childhood was content and full of happiness. My parents, two sisters and I lived in a beautiful apartment in West Berlin overlooking the landscape of the city. My father was a successful and well-respected family doctor who worked in a large hospital in Berlin. He had served as a physician during WW I and was, therefore, given special privileges. My father's work was rewarding and important; he treated all

kinds of people, ranging from the poorer working class to wealthy patients. We traveled often in the summers, spending our vacations in the beautiful mountains and beaches of Italy, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. My elementary school was academically vigorous. I had many friends there -- both Jewish and non-Jewish. After school, in the quiet of the afternoon I learned Hebrew language and religion with Mr. Fried in his study.

## 1933-1939

My first encounter with antisemitism was on January 30, 1933 – the day that Hitler came to power. I remember watching my father's reaction as he listened to the radio and whispered to himself in a way that I had never seen him do before, that this marked a turning point for Jewish people. I wasn't exactly sure what he meant since up until that moment I didn't really consider myself any different or distinct from my non-Jewish friends. Very soon, I understood the cause for his concern. In the next couple of years I noticed signs and billboards plastered around my city, displaying caricatures of Jews with hooknoses and ugly distorted faces. My non-Jewish friends joined the Hitler youth group and began calling those who had once been their friends "Rats" and "Filthy Jews."

I will never forget the time when one of my best friends, Heinrich, knocked on our apartment door, looked me in the eye and arrogantly announced, "Nathan, my father told me that I can no longer play or talk to you because you are Jew." At that moment I felt the flush on my face, my heart was racing and my hands trembling. I could not fathom the sudden transformation in Heinrich, whose friendship had been so dear to me.

When I began high school, on a daily basis, I

was harassed, pinched, pushed, cursed and jeered at. Even my teachers - who had once praised my efforts - became distant, apathetic and inattentive to me and all the Jewish students in the class. In 1935, I decided to transfer to a Jewish high school. At my mother's urging, I even joined a German Jewish youth group, Bund der Deutsch-Judischen Jugend, in order to raise my spirits, and enjoy the pleasure of sports and other extra-curricular activities. My parents made the difficult decision to send both of my sisters, Anna and Eva to live with our cousin in Manchester, England and attend school in London.

To our relief, my father was allowed to continue practicing medicine until 1938; after all, he had served Germany well during WW I and had the rows of accolades to show for it. By that time, several of my friends who had immigrated to Germany from Poland, were expelled from the place they had come to call home, because of their "inferiority" in the eyes of the Germans. We waved goodbye to each other and I never heard from them again. In 1939, an elderly member of the German police, Mr. Brecht, who my father had treated medically for decades, tipped off my parents that Jews, especially wealthy and prominent ones, would be arrested that night. Mr. Brecht revealed to us that my father was on this list. On Novem-

ber 9, 1938, the day that would become known as Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, my mother insisted that both my father and I spend the day hiding in a dark movie theatre. While we sat in fear, blind to the chaos that raged outside, hundreds of Jews were beaten, arrested or even killed. Synagogues were razed and destroyed; and Jewish stores were looted and wrecked in a riot endorsed and promoted by the governments of Germany and Austria. When the streets quieted, we emerged from the refuge of the dark theatre and walked home, gazing horrified and humiliated at the ruins of our synagogue, where I had prayed with my family during the Jewish holidays. My parents' faces were pale and drained. My father told us we had to leave Germany, his head hanging in disbelief.

### 1939-1945

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My father was able to obtain visas and work papers for the two of us to leave for England; from there he planned to find a sponsor in the United States who would agree to take care of us and vouch for us so that we could become working and productive citizens of the United States. Paperwork cost my father a year's salary. I had to leave all of my beloved things in Berlin – my books, my letters, my photographs and my artwork. Mother, however, did not have the documents to leave Germany but had to remain behind with the promise of reuniting with us, Eva and Anna in England. She held me tight during our good-bye. This would be the last time I held my mother. It was a warm August morning when we saw my sisters again.

On September 1, 1939 England declared war on Germany. We endured a year of living in bomb shelters and running for cover as bomber planes flew over England. At the same time, we prepared for our departure to the United States.

After the endless nights at sea on an overcrowded ship, we started the process of immigration. Finally safe on American soil, I thought about my mother and hoped that she would find all of the letters we sent from England. While we hoped and dreamed, we lived with my Aunt Elsa,

my mother's older sister and Uncle Jack, and I began to study engineering at City College. Just a few months after I began my studies, the United States Army drafted me to serve in the war against Germany. When my father heard that I could end up back on German soil, he suffered a minor stroke and never completely recovered. Luckily, however, I never saw the front lines. My fluency with the German language gave me the perfect opportunity to work undercover in translation and intelligence.

### After the War

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After the war ended, I went to my old home in Berlin to find out whatever I could from the Red Cross about my mother and our other relatives who were lost. After two weeks of persistent questions and queries, I finally received a letter that told the story of my mother's death. She had been sent to Theresienstadt concentration camp and then like so many other inmates, she contracted typhus and was deported by train to Auschwitz. There she was gassed upon arrival with other women and children. In a letter that I received a day later, I also discovered that my grandmother and grandfather had been sent to Auschwitz together, and murdered only a few days after arriving there.

I returned to the United States a different person. I continued my studies as an engineer and married an American Jewish woman. I didn't talk much about my experiences in Germany before the war. I had trouble trusting people around me, always wondering if suddenly someone would turn on me the way my good friends in Germany had turned on me. Something changed when my wife and I gave birth to our first daughter and named her Leah, after my dear mother. We chose to educate her in a Jewish school. As she grew, I slowly began to share my previous life with her. I felt it was important that she know what happened to her lost relatives and to understand the fears and lack of trust that I had, even as a grown man.