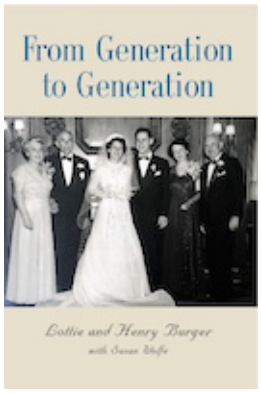
From Generation to Generation

Lottie and Henry Burger

with Susan Wolfe



Born in Nazi Germany at the dawn of the Third Reich, Henry Burger and Lottie Hirsch escaped the fate that took six million Jewish souls to build a new life together in America. "From Generation to Generation" spans six generations of family history, offering a story of love and hope for the future.

From Generation to Generation

FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

Lottie and Henry Burger
with Susan Wolfe

ISBN: 978-1-63491-489-5

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2016

First Edition

On the cover: *Albert and Herta Hirsch, Lottie Hirsch Burger, Henry Burger, Selma and Bernard Burger, June 30, 1951*

HENRY (HEINZ)

The story of my boyhood coincides with the rise of the Third Reich in Nuremberg, the seat of Nazi Germany known for treating its Jews worse than any other city in the country. It was here that the Nazis masterminded the destruction of the Six Million. Born in Nuremberg on March 23, 1926, I came of age as the Nazis were systematically stripping Jews of their civil liberties, thread by thread, until ultimately there was nothing left for the Jews but the cattle cars that carried our *landsmen* off to the concentration camps. And yet, I emerged from the horrors of the Holocaust positive and optimistic, committed to Jewish life, with hope for an auspicious future.

Until the age of seven, I remember delightful weekday outings to the park with my mother and older sister, Betti (who later Americanized the spelling of her name to Betty), where we met friends and relatives and spent pleasant afternoons. On Sundays the family went hiking, swimming, or to the sports center owned by the local Jewish community, where we enjoyed games and athletic competition. Even after Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, my father, Bernhard Burger (Bernard in America), born in 1893, continued to make a comfortable living as partner with Mr. Metzger, who was a shoe wholesaler. My father traveled twice a year to Northern Germany to call on retail clients, wrapped in blankets in the back of a chauffeur-driven

car: Even the fanciest private cars had no heaters or air conditioners in the 1930s.

Like many other Jews of Nuremberg, after 1933 we took our family vacation in September. My parents wanted to be far away when the Nazi Party held its annual national rally in our city – every September from 1927 to 1938 – but for me the vacations – to Czechoslovakia or Bavarian mountains, spas, and other enjoyable spots – seemed a normal, natural change of pace. On one such trip, on *Erev Rosh ha Shana* (the eve of the Jewish new year), my friends and I formed a human pyramid; I was situated precariously at its top. When the tower inevitably toppled, I fell to the ground and broke my arm, and our family was forced to welcome the new year in the local hospital emergency room.

Jews had lived in Nuremberg from the 12th century, and the Jewish community had known periods of prosperity and growth, as well as experiencing riots and expulsions. My mother, Selma, was born in Nuremberg to Hannchen and Martin Lamm in 1902, the same year that the Burger family came to Nuremberg from Sulzbürg, where my father was born in 1893. By the time I was born in 1926, Nuremberg's Jewish community was the second largest in Bavaria, with many of Nuremberg's Jews among the city's most affluent merchants, industrialists, bankers and professionals.

Figure 1: Henry enjoys happy times in Germany, picnicking with maternal grandparents Hannchen and Martin Lamm, circa 1934

The extended Burger family of aunts and uncles celebrated a festive *Shabbat* (Sabbath) dinner each Friday night at the home of my grandfather, Isaak Burger. The younger children, including me, were left at home, but on Saturday mornings after synagogue services my grandfather took me to his home for lunch. I remember learning the *Birkhat ha Mazon* (the grace after the meal) at my grandfather's knee at the tender age of three or four. My grandfather had a housekeeper named Getta who was like a member of the family. She prepared all the meals and did all the housekeeping, and she embroidered monogrammed fabric bags in which to keep my *tallit* (prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (phylacteries).

The family was Conservative; we kept kosher homes and attended the liberal *Hauptsynagoge*, a beautiful Gothic structure where worship services included an organ and choir, and where men and women sat separately. (Nuremberg's other synagogue was the Orthodox *Adas Israel.)* On High Holy Days, the men in our synagogue wore high hats; the vestibule was furnished with large drawers in which members could keep their hats, their *tefillin* (phylacteries), their *tallitot* (prayer shawls), their *siddurim* (prayer books), and whatever else they wished to store there.

Back in Sulzbürg, my grandfather Isaak had held the respected, volunteer position of *gabbai* – distributing *aliyot*, or honors, to the congregation's members, and ensuring that services ran smoothly. When he passed away in 1934, my family moved into his four-unit apartment house in Nuremberg along with my Aunt Matilde – my father's sister, affectionately known

as Tilde, who occupied the apartment on the floor above our family's. I never knew my grandmother, Babette. She passed away in 1921, five years before I was born.

Tilde was widowed far too young, after twenty-five years of marriage to Albert Mayer, an architect. According to Jewish tradition, if a brother of the deceased was single, he was obligated to marry the widow and care for her. Tilde's second husband was Heinrich Mayer, her late husband's brother.

On Friday mornings, family members would scour the apartment house top to bottom, conducting a thorough cleaning in anticipation of *Shabbat.* We would prepare bags of coins and plates of food for "our" *Shabbat* beggar, a man known to us as "Pollack," who came around every Friday to collect his *Shabbat* blessings.

After my grandfather's death, our family's *Shabbat* dinner moved to the home of my father's other sister – my Aunt Frieda and her husband, my Uncle Max Landenberger. Max and Frieda were my favorite part of the family – physically attractive, quite wealthy, owning an elevator apartment in the 1930s. Max, who owned the Medicus shoe factory (similar to Red Cross Shoes, in America) had the wonderful ability to befriend people. Physically, he was a small, round man, and I have a fond recollection of Uncle Max, much later, visiting America, *schluffing* (sleeping) on the couch, his round mound of a belly rising and falling with each breath. Among my favorite memories of Uncle Max, I remember that he allowed me to ride along with his chauffeur to go pick up cooked fish in the market,

a rare and exciting limousine ride for a nine-year-old child! Max also took me on wild, fast car rides to Schesslitz, a picturesque small town that was a popular destination for people from Bamberg, Nuremberg and Coburg, where Max's father and other members of his family owned a home and traded in the cattle market. There I was permitted to ride oxen and cows – I was a city boy with no idea about country customs. Max and Frieda's two children, my cousins Kurt and Lotte, left Germany for England in 1933. Like so many who did not get out of Germany in time, my Uncle Max was arrested by the Nazis in 1939. Thank God, he was released. He and Frieda went to England, and after the war ended, to South Africa.

LITTLE BY LITTLE

In fact, The Dachau Concentration camp, which opened on March 22, 1933, in an abandoned munitions factory east of the town of Dachau, was initially established as a detention camp for those opposed to the Nazi regime. New barracks were constructed in 1938, and the Nazis used Dachau as a public relations tool demonstrating how well prisoners, including Jews, were treated. Until the outbreak of war in 1939, the situation regarding food, accommodations, and treatment of detainees was essentially the same as in any other prison or penitentiary in the Reich. Food was not withheld, prison uniforms were not required, prisoners had access to a canteen, to mail, and to cultural activities. In the early days, many of the detainees at Dachau, including Uncle Max, were released when they could demonstrate that they had the proper papers to leave Germany. Initially, the Nazi plan was to make life so unpleasant for the Jews that they would choose to flee. It was only after this tactic failed to rid the country of its Jews that Hitler's Final Solution to exterminate world Jewry was implemented. In the end, the Holocaust took the lives of two-thirds of European Jewry – roughly six million Jewish men, women, and children.

As the Nuremberg Laws of the Nazi Party unfolded, my parents became much more protective of Betti and me. Betti was the apple of our father's eye. During summer vacation our family traveled out of town to visit cousins in Würzburg, strengthening extended family ties. My aunt Else – my mother's

sister – had married a Würzburg pharmacist, Max Mandelbaum (who later changed the family's surname to Manders, in America). Their children, Fritz (later Fred) and Lotte, were close in age with Betti and me – Lotte was just six weeks older than I was and shared her birthday with our grandfather, Martin Lamm. Their home was a child's paradise – extensive acreage on which to run and play, a beautiful swimming pool, and all the comforts the extended family might wish. My Uncle Max had one of the finest stamp collections in Germany, which was confiscated by the Nazis. Eventually, the Germans would claim the grand manor, too, and later still, the U.S. Army would take over the estate. But in those early years of the Nazi ascent, the Mandelbaums' Würzburg home was a safe and fun-filled respite for my sister and me, and secured close family ties that would last long into the future.

In 1932, at the age of six, I was enrolled in public school, eager to learn and grow among my German schoolmates. But just one year later, Hitler came to power and the local Nazi party commenced an immediate program of anti-Semitism.

Local party leader Julius Streicher had founded the weekly tabloid newspaper *Der Stürmer* (literally, "The Attacker") in 1923. *Der Stürmer* regularly published anti-Semitic illustrations of Jews and accusations of blood libel – the myth dating back to the Middle Ages that Jews killed Christian children and used their blood to make *matzo* (unleavened bread eaten during the Passover festival each spring) and other ritual foods. As early as 1933, editor Streicher was calling for the extermination of the

Jews; articles regularly demanded the annihilation and extermination of the Jewish race. *Der Stürmer* was best known for its depictions of Jews as ugly characters with exaggerated facial features and misshapen bodies. The bottom of each issue's title page carried the motto, *"Die Juden sind unser Unglück!"* ("The Jews are our misfortune!"), coined by Heinrich von Treitschke in the 1880s. Through the adaptation and amalgamation of almost every existing anti-Semitic stereotype, myth and tradition, *Der Stürmer*'s virulent attacks aimed predominantly at the demonization and dehumanization of Jews.

Nonetheless, most of my Jewish friends' fathers, who had served the German military in the Great War (later known as World War I), assumed that with time the anti-Semitic spree would blow over. Moreover, they trusted that as veterans who had fought for Germany, they would surely be exempt from any general Nazi sanctions against the Jews. But my parents were quietly and acutely aware of the possibilities: When their best friends Irma and Fred Fleischer fled Germany for Holland, my father visited them often. The Fleischers would move to the United States in 1937; there their friendship with my parents was eventually renewed, lasting for the rest of their lives.

In a horrifying turn of events, my maternal grandfather Martin Lamm – the kindest man I ever knew – was taken by the Nazis in May of 1933. No one knew where he went, when or if he would return, or what had become of him. The family was frantic and afraid. An excruciating two weeks passed, when, as suddenly as he disappeared, Martin Lamm was returned home,

thin, drawn, and uncommunicative. Under threat of death, he refused to say a word about where he had been, what he had been made to do, or what had been done to him. But the experience clearly had changed him. It would take sixty-five years and a trip back to Germany before the Burger family uncovered the truth about what happened to my grandfather Martin during his mysterious disappearance.

Decades later, in 1998, at the behest of our children, our family made a pilgrimage back to Germany to visit our childhood stomping grounds in Nuremberg, Bretten, Horb am Neckar, and Stuttgart. It was on that trip that we finally learned what had befallen Martin Lamm: Along with other Jewish senior citizens, my grandfather was among a group of business executives rounded up, carted off, handed toothbrushes, and forced down on all fours to scrub clean the cobblestone streets. On hands and knees for two weeks, Martin had no way of knowing when or if this hard labor would ever come to an end. Minutes turned to hours; hours to days; days to weeks. My grandfather was 63 years old. Think about doing this for two weeks, with armed Nazi officers looming over you to make sure you were working hard enough. For the first time, I could understand how my grandfather's generous spirit was crushed. This was the kind of life we lived in Nuremberg from 1933 to 1938.

Eventually, my grandfather was returned to us, but he had lost his zest for life. The gleam in his eye was replaced with a

glazed, empty stare. He was a broken man, never to recover. He died in 1936.

My grandmother Hannchen was a very kind and quiet person who brought out goodies from her cookie jar every time we visited her house.

Soon, the Nazis turned up the heat.

1934: Jewish students were banned from Nuremberg's public schools – a ban that was expanded across all of Germany in 1938. I was sent to the Orthodox Jewish *Realschule* in the town of Furth, a thirty-five-minute streetcar ride each way to and from school. My primary recollection of the Jewish curriculum was being made to translate the first book of the *Torah -- Genesis*, beginning *B'reisheet* (in the beginning.) Children who misbehaved or did not answer correctly were rapped on the head by a zealous rabbi. We were required to jump to attention when the teacher entered the room. Among the other students at the Furth *Realschule* was a boy three years my senior named Henry Kissinger, who would one day become U.S. Secretary of State. Kissinger's father was one of my teachers.

My sister Betti's move from an elite girls' school to the Jewish school proved challenging, too. Betti found it difficult to behave properly (by Orthodox school standards), and the headmaster recorded her inappropriate actions in a disciplinary journal. Betti was not alone in acting out in response to the mandated change in school: She and I were neck-and-neck with regard to which of us amassed the most demerits in the disciplinary ledger.

Figure 2: Henry's maternal grandparents, Martin and Hannchen Lamm

1935: Non-Jewish teachers were banned from teaching in Jewish schools. This effectively crippled the Jewish education system. Banning Jewish students from public schools increased the student body of the Jewish school tenfold overnight, from 400 to 4,000 students; the prohibition against non-Jewish teachers working in Jewish schools slashed the teaching staff in half and severely hampered the ability of the general studies departments to serve the enormous student body. Jewish teachers filled the void.

1936: Jews were forced to sell their businesses at a fraction of their value.

DESPERATELY SEEKING

With anti-Semitic billboards and publications ubiquitous, and Jews barred from public swimming pools, athletic fields, and from employing domestic help, my father saw the writing on the wall. In 1935, he and my mother left Betti and me in the care of trusted friends and made an exploratory trip to Palestine to determine whether it could be a hospitable place for our family to relocate. In the holy land that would one day become Israel, they found an agricultural outpost so alien to cultured urban Europeans that they ruled it out almost at once. We were not farmers.

My father's second exploratory trip was to America in 1937, accompanied by his friend Albert Hirsch, also in the wholesale shoe business, and also looking for a safe haven for himself, his wife, and his young daughter Lotte (later Lottie). America was beautiful, and full of the type of business opportunity that appealed to industrialists in the manufacturing business. New York was sufficiently sophisticated that both my father and Albert Hirsch concluded their families could be happy in America.

My father's next undertaking was to find a sponsor – an American citizen willing to vouch for an immigrant's integrity and guarantee his financial obligations would be met.

Ultimately, it was a Lamm family relative who sponsored our immigration. Hannah Falk Hofheimer was a distant cousin of my mother, Selma (nee Lamm). My father contacted Hannah's

mother, Emma Falk, who welcomed him and helped make arrangements. Hannah's husband, Henry, was a reasonably well-off estate and trust attorney. They lived on West End Avenue with their three children: Henry, Jr., who would grow up to be an attorney like his father and grandfather before him; Joe, and Babette. Henry Hofheimer was active in Jewish affairs and belonged to the synagogue *Rodef Shalom*. He and Hannah ultimately provided twenty-five of their relatives, no matter how distant, with affidavits to come to America. One wonders what might have happened had all twenty-five defaulted on financial obligations, leaving the sponsors to cover their debts. Neither our family nor any of the twenty-four others that the Hofheimers sponsored ever needed to take advantage of their generosity.

A few fortuitous twists of fate permitted our family passage. One was the death of my mother's parents, Hannchen and Martin Lamm, in 1935 and 1936, respectively. Neither my mother nor my father, whose father died in 1934, would ever have considered leaving aging parents behind in Germany, and the older generation was not prepared to flee.

Our family experienced one particular kindness on the part of a Nazi as my parents packed our belongings under party scrutiny. When the Nazi officer discovered that he and my father both hailed from Sulzbürg, he became far more accommodating, asking, "Don't you have something more you'd like to take?" Although we had to limit the items we took out of Germany, the generosity of this officer gave my parents a bit of a head start on a new life in America.

In the weeks leading up to our immigration application appointment with the United States Embassy, I was sent to camp, where, as is the case with many children who play in the woods, I got a lot of mosquito bites. I returned to my family riddled with bug bites, and my parents feared the U.S. Embassy would decline our family's application for fear that I carried some sort of disease. Fortunately, the U.S. Embassy officials were quite understanding – no doubt they had children of their own who played in the woods – and our immigration application was approved in June of 1938.

My father left for Holland en route to America immediately. My mother, Betti and I followed three months later, traveling through the border at Aachen. To our utter surprise and horror, mothers and their children were separated at the border crossing. My mother was strip-searched, while Betti and I were grilled by Gestapo officers who demanded to know, "Where is the money? Where is the jewelry?" They rummaged through our belongings, looking everywhere for items of value.

I was twelve; Betti was fourteen. We were not grown-ups. We were children, alone, and terrified.

COMING TO AMERICA

My father's friend Albert Hirsch was at the pier when our family landed in Hoboken, New Jersey, on October 30, 1938, a week before *Kristallnacht*, the infamous night of broken glass in which violent Nazi rioters looted Jewish business districts throughout Germany, annexed Austria, and Czechoslovakia. Our sponsor, Henry Hofheimer, was there, too, in a limousine with a driver to collect us and deliver us to a hotel on 70th Street – quite an experience for me and my sister. On the ride to the hotel, I asked many questions. Having been stripped of so many rights and privileges by the Nazi Party, I wanted to know, for example, can you buy this or that in America? Can you attend public school in America? Can you go to the movies in America?

Hofheimer told us, "In America you can do anything. All you need is money."

The whole idea that you could say what you want and do what you want and nobody was going to stop you on the street and call you a dirty Jew – that was truly amazing to me. Every experience in America was new and different – the environment, the culture, and even the food. When the Hofheimers invited our family to their home for Thanksgiving dinner just a few weeks after our arrival in America, the invitation was for 3:30 p.m. Promptly at 4 p.m. everything stopped as the assembled guests gathered around the radio to listen to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Fireside Chat. The fireside chats were a series of

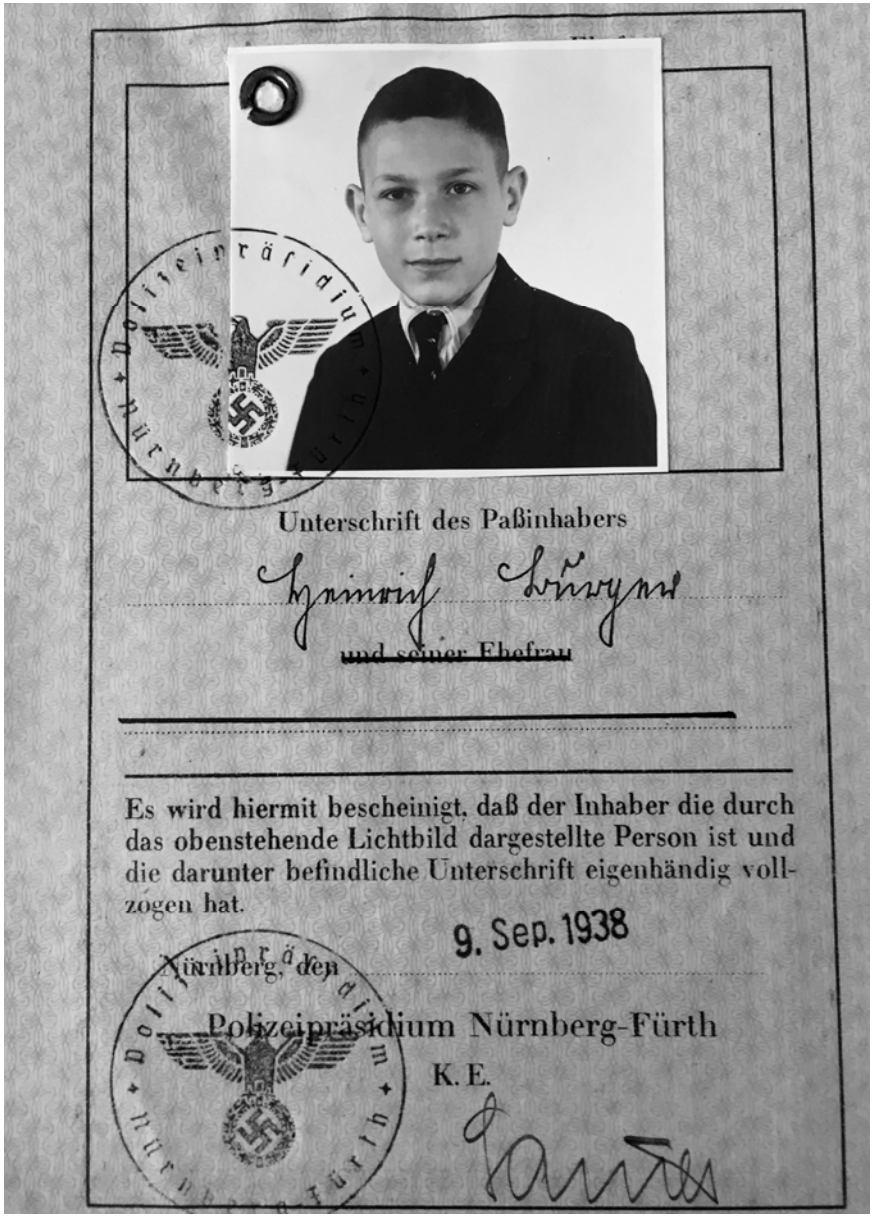


Figure 3: Henry's German passport permitting passage to America, issued September 9, 1938

thirty evening radio addresses which President Roosevelt delivered between 1933 and 1944 – the first time in history that a U.S. president communicated directly with the citizens. President Roosevelt's style was folksy and familiar as he spoke with millions of Americans on subjects ranging from the banking crisis to the recession, New Deal initiatives, and the progress of World War II. His tone and demeanor conveyed a sense of confidence during times of despair and uncertainty.

At the conclusion of the President's address, the Hofheimers served Thanksgiving dinner. Back in Germany, such family celebrations were *ein topf* or "one pot" meals. The contrast with a traditional Thanksgiving meal's many side dishes and accompaniments was surprising and frankly, strange.

So much about the food here was different. Here, we ate turkey. In Germany, we ate chickens, ducks and geese. Here we were served corn on the cob. There, corn was used only to force-feed geese and ducks; it was never consumed by people. Betty and I used to laugh when we were sent to the bakery in New York to buy a "sour rye" – the German words for "pig sty" sound very much the same as the bread our parents sent us to get.

In school in America, I was paired with a student who was supposed to help me make my way in my adopted country. I ended up doing the boy's math homework in exchange for English lessons. Because I came to America at the age of twelve, I successfully shed my German accent. (Linguists believe that

after the age of fourteen, it is nearly impossible to lose the vestiges of one's native tongue.)

By now, my family had moved from the hotel on 70th Street to Kew Gardens, an apartment house right next door to the one that was home to my father's friend Albert Hirsch, his wife Herta, his mother-in-law Rosalie, and his daughter Lottie. In subsequent years, both my father and Albert Hirsch would help found the Kew Forest Lodge of B'nai B'rith. After my father's death, I became a trustee, and later vice president of B'nai B'rith's Kew Forest Lodge.

Initially, my father wanted to remain in the shoe business in America, so once we were settled, he went on a road trip to see whether he could replicate the career he enjoyed back in Germany. Unfortunately, it seemed he could not. So he joined a family friend, Fred Small, on the commodities exchange for a brief period, but ultimately determined that was not for him, either. All the while, his friend Albert Hirsch was encouraging my father to join him in the business opportunity he had found for himself – the embroidery business. Eventually, that is exactly what my father did, purchasing two *schifflii* embroidery machines – one ten-yard machine and one fifteen-yard apparatus. Based on principles introduced by the newly invented sewing machine, the *schifflii* machine utilized the combination of a continuously threaded needle and shuttle containing a bobbin of thread. The shuttle itself looked similar to the hull of a sailboat, which led to the name *schifflii*, meaning "little boat" in Swiss. My father and Albert became "friendly

competitors," calling on one another for help when work orders stacked up and delivery times grew too long, and conferring and even collaborating when bidding opportunities arose. Both enjoyed successful second careers in embroidery, in America.

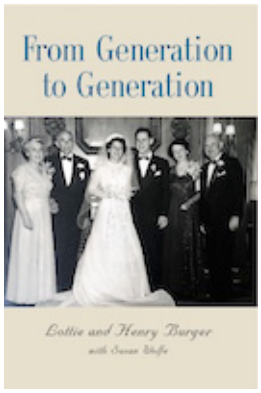
Six months after our arrival in America, our family celebrated my *bar mitzvah* on April 1, 1939. There were many Jewish refugees living in Kew Gardens, and all took this rite of passage as a very joyful occasion. I learned my *Torah* portion and wrote a speech, and we had a simple *kiddush* reception of cookies and wine after the service. Herta Hirsch (Lottie's mother) helped prepare the food for the family dinner at home. Years later, when our daughter Rita became *bat mitzvah*, she read from the same *Torah* portion as I did, on *Shabbat Hagadol* (the big Sabbath) – the Sabbath that falls just before Passover.

As more family members found their way to America with nowhere to stay, many wound up residing with our family – some for months at a time! The Mandelbaums, of Würzburg, were one such family. I was close with all of my cousins, and especially with Fred. Eventually, the Mandelbaums were persuaded by HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, to go to Vineland, New Jersey, where they bought a chicken farm and raised chickens for a living. The work was arduous and all hands were needed. Fred wanted badly to go to college and medical school, but his father refused to permit him to go, saying he was needed on the farm. Although he ultimately undertook post-secondary education by attending night school in Philadelphia when he was in his 60s, Fred never forgave his father for

denying him an education. Other family members who stayed with us included my first cousin Grete Burger (Blidner) and Sophie Landecker (Prager).

In the 1930s and 1940s, New York seemed to be organized by ethnic neighborhoods. The Lower East Side was home to the Jews from Eastern Europe, and Corona, Queens, was the Italian ghetto. Washington Heights was home to many German Jews; among ourselves it became known as the Fourth Reich. Some estimate Northern Manhattan, from 160th to 200th Streets, was forty percent Jewish. Many new synagogues opened, headed by rabbis newly arrived from Europe. The neighborhood children attended George Washington High School. The next wave of migration would take German Jews from Washington Heights to the Bronx, or Queens, and still later to Westchester County, Great Neck, and Long Island.

Even as our new life was unfolding in America, I never forgot my roots in Germany and the grandparents who helped shape my youth, who remain buried in German soil.



Born in Nazi Germany at the dawn of the Third Reich, Henry Burger and Lottie Hirsch escaped the fate that took six million Jewish souls to build a new life together in America. "From Generation to Generation" spans six generations of family history, offering a story of love and hope for the future.

From Generation to Generation