

Helga Strauss Mendel  
Childhood Memories from Germany

I was born in 1928 in Munich, Germany. Hitler became very powerful by 1933. My parents, and your grandparents, were William Strauss who was born in Heinsheim, Germany, and went to the University of Heidelberg. He spoke German, French and English. He had blue eyes, dark hair, and was about six feet tall. Fanny Steifeneder Strauss was born in Landau, Germany. She had brown hair and brown eyes and was rather short.

As I continue I want you to understand that I was only ten years old when we left Germany, so I didn't fully understand at the time what was happening to the Jews and the reason that the Jews were being punished and killed.

We lived in a beautiful apartment. My dad owned three large shoe stores located in different sections of Munich. I guess we were well off financially at that time.

We knew that Hitler was gaining in power, but, to the best of my knowledge, the beginning for us was when my dad came home and said that his three shoe stores were broken into and the shoes were stolen or ruined with water. Of course, dirty Jew was written all around, and he was warned never to open the stores again. A big swastika was put across the door so no one could enter.

I never went to school or Sunday school. All schools were being bombed. I did not have any friends. The children in our apartment were afraid to play with a Jewish girl. I watched them play and often they would spit toward me and call me a dirty Jew. One little girl named Heidi would sometimes sneak into my apartment so no one would see her play with me. I remember being very lonely.

I also remember so well when I was about eight years old, my appendix burst. The doctor, who was also Jewish, recommended that I be taken to the hospital in an

ambulance. We drove to three or four hospitals, but none of them would admit me because I was a Jew and my doctor was also a Jew. Finally, a Catholic hospital let me stay provided one of their doctors, not mine, would operate. Of course, we agreed. I remember being very scared of the nuns and the way they dressed. They wore brown robes with hoods, and you could hardly see their faces.

Jewish doctors and lawyers could not practice any more, and Jewish employees lost their jobs.

My dad had two sisters in Mississippi. They wanted us to leave Germany when the Nazi's first became powerful, but my parents and many other Jews never believed that Hitler and the Nazi party would become so strong.

Munich was one of Hitler's headquarters. Every time you passed one of his men in uniform, you raised your right hand and said, "Heil Hitler." The German radio, no television at that time, made the situation sound much better than things actually were for the Jews.

Our relatives in America heard over the American radio all the plans Hitler had for the Jews – how horrible things would become before too long. They wrote us over and over again to leave immediately, but the letters that came from the United States were opened and read by a Nazi committee. The committee would cut out parts of the letter that would inform the Jews of what would really happen to them. They only sent the part of the letter that did not mention any politics. Some letters they just burned. Finally, we were lucky – one came through without being opened, and we knew the truth and not the propaganda, the spreading of Hitler's ideas.

Food was hard to get because storekeepers were afraid to sell to Jews. And, we were told to move out of our apartment. We had nowhere to go. My dad finally decided that now it was time to leave.

My relatives sent us the passport[s] and promised the American government that we would never be a burden to the United States. Jews who were not as lucky as we were and had no one in America were later taken to the gas chambers and killed.

We left everything behind that we owned. I remember having to leave all my toys, however I did bring one doll. From the time we had to leave our apartment until we could actually leave Germany was a frightening time. Every day Christian friends hid us in their homes. And, at night we would wander to another friend. And, while we were walking the streets, we were praying that no Nazis would see us.

The last night that we were in Munich, Germany, we stayed with a Jewish family. I remember the doorbell rang. Two Nazi soldiers were standing on the outside and shot our friend. His wife was in a wheelchair. The Nazis pushed her down two flights of stairs. They both died. I didn't understand everything, but I do remember how very scared I was.

We left Munich and went by train to Hamburg, Germany. We had to hide every night in a different hotel. We left from there on an American ship, the Manhattan. We were the last group of Jews that could leave Germany before the six million Jews were killed and taken to concentration camps.

It was difficult, even for a ten-year-old Jewish girl who understood very little and believed that her parents would make everything right. Now, I realize that that would have been impossible. I'm so lucky that we had a chance to get out when we did.