

Rosa Marie Burger



Rosa Marie Burger's mother was an English citizen; her father was German. Her father was living in England when they met. They married and settled in England, where Rosa's older brother, John, was born. Shortly after World War I, the family moved to southern Germany.

I was born and raised in Gaukönigshofen, a small Bavarian village in southern Germany. Life in German villages was very traditional. Women and girls wore elaborate folk costumes on Sundays and special occasions. The women wore their long hair in the traditional style. Families lived together in large homes built of stone. All the different generations of the family shared the same house. They shared the household chores and the joys and troubles of everyday life.

In 1938, when I was 17 years old, I began studies at a trade school in Würzburg, a university town 25 miles away. I then got a job with the government doing clerical work in Ochsenfurt, the county seat. In the mornings I worked for the school board, and in the afternoons I worked for a lawyer who was the administrative head of police departments throughout the county.

Our village had many Jewish citizens who worked as tradesmen or as farmers. Most were prosperous. During the 1930s, as Hitler came to power, things gradually became more difficult for Jews. By 1933, the Jewish people in our village began to fear the changes that were happening. Jews were restricted from working and received fewer ration stamps than other people. Soon they did not have enough food to eat. Things grew worse and worse.

My mother had retained her English citizenship. Jewish people from the village approached her, asking her to teach them English in case they would have the opportunity to emigrate. People tried desperately to get out. Sometimes they would ask my mother to write letters for them, trying to find a sponsor in another country. But it was not easy to leave

Germany; it took money and a sponsor. Many of the Jews in our village were wealthy, and some did manage to emigrate. But it was very complicated and, for most people, it simply was not possible.

I remember Kristallnacht. A German embassy official in Paris had been assassinated by a Polish Jew whose parents had been expelled from Germany only days before. The Nazis were so angry, and the Jewish people were terrified.

I remember the Nazis coming in trucks to our village from other towns. They stormed the homes of the Jewish people in the night, using their axes to chop through the doors and break the windows. They took or destroyed all the lovely things in these homes: silver, featherbeds, beautiful quilts, even the food that had been so carefully preserved. Many Jewish men and boys were taken away in trucks. They were never seen again.

I remember a lady who fled out the back door with her youngest boy when she heard the Nazis breaking into her home. She hid in the bushes all night, wearing only her nightgown. She caught pneumonia and died.

Much later, the rest of the Jews were rounded up, the women and children. It was on a Saturday morning—the Jewish Sabbath, a day when their religion prohibits them from work or travel. They were told to bring their clothes in bundles and report to the train station. I hid with a friend behind an electric pole near the train station to watch. It was very dangerous. The Nazis were looking carefully for anyone who came to say good-bye.

I saw girls weeping—my friends, girls I had grown up with. Their bundles were placed in the last car and the people were herded onto the train. We lived not far from Dachau. I assume that was the destination. Before the train left the station, the last car was uncoupled and these people's possessions were left behind. The homes that had belonged to these Jews were taken over by the Nazis.

After I got a job and began earning money, I decided to buy my mother a radio as a gift. Radios were not illegal, but after the start of war on September 1, 1939, listening to any foreign radio stations was a criminal offense and German courts could sentence people to prison or even death if they passed on what they heard.

Despite this, my mother, being English, was very eager to listen to the British news reports. She would get up in the middle of the night and listen with her ear to the speaker. She would drape a big heavy cloth over her head to muffle any sounds. The news from the British was very different from the news the Germans were broadcasting. Despite the ban, my mother shared the news from the BBC with our Jewish neighbours and other people we trusted.

One day I noticed that the lawyer I worked for treated me a bit differently. He was dictating a letter but did not mention any names in his correspondence. This was unusual. It made me nervous and suspicious.

That evening, when he left to catch the train home, I returned to the office and retrieved the file. There I read a letter from the Gestapo—a Nazi from our village had reported hearing that my mother had been listening to the British broadcasts and telling the Jews what was said. The file also mentioned another woman in our village who had given food to the Jews.

I was terrified. I took the train back to the village that evening. First I tapped on the window of the woman who had been accused of providing food for the Jews. I asked her if she knew anything. She said she did not, but I could tell by her voice that she was afraid.

Next I went and tapped on the window of the butcher's house. He was an important man in the village, and I knew him well. I asked if he knew anything about the Gestapo. At first he denied knowing anything, but I could tell he was lying. Then he confessed that he heard the police chief say, "They should just leave that old lady alone."

So next I went to the police station. Once again, I tapped on the window pane. The police chief was also anti-Nazi. He, too, denied knowing anything, but finally he admitted knowing that my mother had been reported. The butcher was one of our circles, but it turned out he had a nephew in the Gestapo. He promised this nephew all the meat he needed for his family until the end of the war and offered to pass down his son's clothes to his family as well if he would promise to make the file disappear. Sure enough the file became lost.

As the war went on, life became very difficult in Germany. Everything was rationed. Each month I was told to help the mayor of our village organize the ration cards for each family. It was a very dangerous time. Everyone—including Christians—was very afraid of the Nazis and dissension of any kind was severely punished with harsh prison terms or death.

In those days many foreigners were assigned to work on the farms. They worked for the farmers and ate their meals with them but then returned to camps at night. Some were POWs, French and English soldiers, and there were also many Polish civilians who were forced to work for the Germans in this way.

I remember one incident in particular. One of the Polish workers got into an argument with a farmer and threatened him with a pitchfork. The farmer was not hurt, but he reported the occurrence to the authorities. The man was sentenced to death and was hanged in the center of town. The lawyer I worked for was required to witness the execution. When he returned to the office, his face was white; he was sick to his stomach.

Still, some people were quite brave. The woman who worked at the post office sometimes received mail and packages for the Jewish people who no longer lived in our village. She forwarded these packages on and tried to smear the return addresses to protect the senders from the Nazis.

As the war progressed, the bombing became more severe. I remember once looking up at the brilliant blue sky and seeing the bombers emerge from behind clouds.

I watched as the bomb doors opened and the bombs rained down from the sky. Our village was not damaged in the bombing raids. However, the Allies bombed a neighboring village about two miles away. Many bridges were destroyed, most of them by the Germans themselves as they fell back retreating from the Allies.

The Americans entered our village on Easter Sunday 1945. On the previous day, there had been a lot of shooting. That evening, the last of the German troops had pulled out. They told us they would not be back.

During the night we took refuge along with 20 or 25 other people in the cellar of a neighboring farmer. In the morning, the farmer knocked on the cellar door and told us the Americans were arriving. We took pieces of white cloth and hung them everywhere. Since I spoke English, it was decided I should approach the soldiers and ask them if they wanted anything.

I remember clearly walking up to a tank. The hatch at the top of the tank opened and a soldier emerged, with his gun pointed directly at me. I asked him if he wanted anything. He didn't seem to understand. I explained again that the farmer's wife wondered if they needed anything. After talking to the other soldier in the tank, he said they would like fresh eggs.

The farmer's wife filled a large basket with eggs, and I handed them up to the soldier in the tank. As he lowered the basket through the opening, I explained that the farmer's wife would want her basket back. He understood, and in a few moments he reappeared with the basket. In the basket were several bars of chocolate, something we had not seen in six years since the war began.

These soldiers moved on, but they were replaced by other soldiers who took up residence in the village. The soldiers were kind for the most part (especially the black soldiers), but they took what they wanted. The beautiful furnishings of the lawyer's office quickly disappeared—the rugs and tapestries were rolled up and taken. It happened in the village, too, though on a smaller scale.

Not long after the Americans came, a lieutenant came looking for me. He knew my name. Someone must have told him that I spoke English. He told me that he had a job for me and that I was to report to work on Monday morning.

The Americans had set up headquarters in the lower floor of a bank in the town. One of my first assignments was to accompany a soldier to find office furniture for the headquarters. His name was Freddie. He was a small, wiry man, always chewing gum.

I knew that some government furniture was stored in a barn. As we approached, a woman came out and spoke to me in German, begging me to take her elsewhere. The furniture stored there was very valuable, and she had wanted to keep it for herself. The American soldier I was with was a German Jew and understood what she was saying. We went ahead and took the furniture.

I worked for the American lieutenant for some time. Among his other duties, he was responsible for settling disputes and civil matters in this town.

At one point there were rumours that the Americans would be leaving, and we would be occupied instead by the Russians. We were terrified because we had heard about the Red Army's brutality toward the Germans. Who knew what would happen to the women and children, with no one to protect us? I remember weeping and one of the American soldiers tried to comfort me. He promised to take me with them if the Russians came. But I had my mother, and I would not have been able to leave even if this was a promise he could have kept.

The Americans were not what we had expected, and I'm sure we were not what they had expected either. The Americans were informal and direct. They didn't show respect for the people they dealt with. We, on the other hand, were used to a more formal, structured society. It all changed after the war. Hitler and his war—it was his fault. Germany changed, and the traditional way of life in the small villages was lost forever.

I left Germany in 1948. I had married an American soldier who was stationed in Germany, and when he was transferred back to the United States, I went with him. We settled first in Battle Creek, Michigan, and then moved as he was transferred to other posts.

In some ways life in America was much easier. I was amazed the first time I saw a big store, fully stocked with aluminium pots and pans and all kinds of other merchandise. In other ways, though, it was difficult. I found it hard to fit in. I missed my mother, and I missed the village I had known all my life. Life in America was very different.