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AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A POLITICAL REFUGEE.

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The Weimar Republic has left an indelible mark on my life. The German Democracy of Weimar was born soon after the end of the First World War succeeding a Monarchy. In 1933 came Hitler's accession to power and the early death of the Weimar democracy. During the years 1918/19 there were various attempts in different parts of Germany to establish revolutionary Laender Governments. They were shortlived, nevertheless radical and revolutionary ideas pervaded the cultural life of the times.

My school education started in 1920 and ended in 1933 coinciding with the life span of the Weimar Republic.

When I was six years old I started at one of the experimental schools which had just been allowed in the general school system. I started at a so-called Community School whose goals were to develop the potentialities of the working-class child. The basis was an integrated schoolday with progressive methods aimed at unfolding the social, intellectual and emotional capacities of the child. At thirteen years old I continued my higher education in an 'Aufbau' school. Its task was to prepare working-class children for matriculation and thus enabling them to enter University. This school was situated in Berlin-Neukoelln - a working-class district - under the direction of Fritz Karsen, a notable school reformer. It changed its name from Kaiser Friedrich Real-Gymnasium to 'Karl Marx School' in 1930.

This type of school could only flourish in the Weimar Republic and was dissolved - like so many other progressive institutions - in 1933. It represented the aspirations of the working-class to break the educational privileges of the upper-class. The working-class expected a socialist education for its children so that they might be prepared to build a socialist society.

We lived in Neukoelln in a block of flats four stories high which was typical for Berlin. It had a smart front part with two- and three-roomed flats and a carpeted staircase. There was a courtyard at the back which usually was enclosed by three wings. We lived in the back part of the house and our flat consisted of one large room, kitchen and toilet. There was no bath. Fortunately the third wing had never been built and from our windows we could see open ground which provided allotments for the local people. Neighbours cultivated the ground

and built a more or less permanent little hut on it. They spent their free time and week-ends upon this plot. We children spent many an afternoon there, helping in the garden, feeding the chickens and rabbits as well as picking and eating the fruit which was plentiful. During the summer holidays these colonies of allotments organised festivals for the children. There was always a band to which we danced; there was a clown to amuse us and to organise different activities for us. Quite often we performed our own plays (on a little temporary stage), the best of which would be rewarded by a prize. When it grew dark and the stars were shining, we marched singing through the streets with lanterns whose candle-light made it the highlight of a Sunday's entertainment.

My parents gave me money for the ticket and a peppermint rock which was as popular then as icecream is today. We dressed up for the occasion in our Sunday-best: no apron such as we usually wore over our school dresses to keep them clean for a week. Shoes were expensive and only worn for school and special occasions like this one; during playtime we went barefoot.

When my father returned from the war, there was much unemployment; so he accepted any work he could get. Originally he had trained as a carpet designer (he had won a scholarship for a place in an art studio), but after the war no vacant place could be found. Instead he accepted a position as Security Officer in a bank. It was a secure position with pension rights and he continued working at the bank all his life.

Both my parents were industrious and economical. My mother took in homework and crocheted pullovers and hats. My father, in his free time, supplied a weaving firm with paper patterns for carpets. He loved this kind of work and was very painstaking and reliable. Whenever he delivered his patterns and was remunerated, I could expect a bag of sweets.

Our part of the house was occupied by working or temporarily unemployed people, as the rent was cheap. The front-part of the block was occupied by the 'better-off' and there was little contact between the two. But many young families with children lived in our part and when the organgrinder came and played his tunes in the back-yard, there were many couples of children dancing merrily.

During the first years after the war a community spirit developed amongst those young families. Several couples and their children went together on Sunday- or weekend-outings to the woods and lakes surrounding Berlin. We took tents, blankets and food and there was much fun and horseplay.

The workers had returned from the war, very war-tired but hoping for a better life for themselves and their children. Many were revolutionaries and had taken part in the streetfighting which occurred 1918/1919. When the Community School was opened in 1920, several children from our block of flats were enrolled there.

These schools were child- and not subject-centred. Many activities were organised and we learned our 3 Rs with building blocks of letters and numbers. We illustrated any written work and made our own little books. No hymns or patriotic songs were ever taught only folk or lyrical songs or those sung by the pre-war youth movement. We had music appreciation and went to several operas suitable for young people. Instead of physical exercises on hall apparatus, we had rhythmical gymnastics. There were weekly outings to the woods. News writing was central to our German lessons. In order to develop the ability to express ourselves, we wrote little essays daily describing our own experiences or feelings. A little essay I wrote when I was seven years old is included here. (see page 3A).

All these principles and methods were quite new at the time. The rest of the school system was old-fashioned, strictly disciplined, learning was by rote and highly patriotic.

There was a parent-teacher organisation which was very active. It was decided that parents who were working should help those out of work. For years I shared my sandwiches which I took to school with another girl. She also came home with me after school (school ended at 1 p.m. or 2 p.m.) to share our lunch. School journeys to the seaside or to other parts of the surrounding countryside were organised and there were always volunteers from amongst the mothers to help the teacher with the children.

Although the Monarchy had been abolished in 1918, no decisive legislation had been passed to change the distribution of wealth in the country. Nevertheless much of society was swarming with ideas for change in order to build a better world. The 'Association of Determined School Reformers' had been founded in 1919 with the aim of creating young democrats and socialists by educating them in schools. As pupils we were not taught Socialism we were to EXPERIENCE it.

This struck me most forcibly when I entered the 'Aufbau School' at the age of thirteen. My parents had wanted me to enter Middle School at the age of ten in order to prepare for a commercial secretarial career. But my Community School Teacher had persuaded my parents to leave me at the school until I was thirteen in order to enter the experimental Aufbau School (They only accepted children from thirteen onwards). "The girl must become a teacher" he said - and thus my future plans were laid.

My white mice.

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I would like to tell you the story of my dear little white mice. I was so happy when Edith gave me two white mice. When I got home I was still very happy. When I came to our yard I shouted 'Mutti' and wanted to know whether my mother could guess what I had in my cardboard box. But my mother was not in. Then I went to Mrs. Treysse. And I let her guess. But she said: "Just open the box". So I opened it and wanted to put one mouse on her hand. But she screamed: "Hugh, hugh". Then I played with my little mice. When I went down to see whether my mother was back, she was already home. Then I called: "Mama, dear Mama, please come to Mrs. Treysse and see my little white mice". My mother came and said to Mrs. Treysse: "These creatures with a long tail and red eyes - bah. You will have to take them back". At home I showed them to my father, but he does not like them either. Nobody wants them, only I do. So I pressed the little mice to me and cried. Then I put them back into their box.



The Aufbau School, <sup>was</sup> the only Grammar School in Berlin, run on co-educational lines. But there were few parents who entrusted their daughters to co-educational education and there were three boys to every girl. My form teacher for the next three years was Hedda Korsch: a very gifted teacher. I loved her very much and remained in contact with her all my life. It was her task to develop a community spirit in this group of forty boys and girls who had all come from single-sex schools. We studied largely in groups. Speakers were elected in the various subjects who were responsible for the organisation of the work. They fixed the dates for reporting back to the rest of the class the results of our studies. These reports and the ensuing discussion to clarify problems were the basis of our learning process. Minutes were kept of these lessons.

I did all my homework at the kitchen table. I envied a friend whose larder was big enough to hold a small table and gave him privacy. My study report was not always fully prepared, so I had to invent a throat infection in order to get the preparation ready in time for the fixed date. I suffered quite often from a throat infection.

We elected class speakers who in turn met as a group to discuss the administration of the school and the contents of education. This was pupil representation which met with the staff and director of the school.

The whole school met once a month for school assembly. The chairman of the assembly and a committee were elected by all. The committee decided upon the programme of the school assembly. I remember that in one of the first assemblies I attended, we heard from an outside speaker about the case of Sacco and Vancetti - the two Italian anarchists living in the United States who, found guilty in an American Court, were to die on the Electric Chair. We not only heard details of a probable frame-up and their probable innocence of the crime accused, but also discussed the cruelty of capital punishment. We all signed a petition to the American Embassy for mercy for these two people.

The yearly marks for each pupil, insisted upon by the educational establishment, were discussed in class and voted on - the teacher having one vote as we did. We not only judged the pupil's knowledge, but also his or her work for the community and the reliability in tasks undertaken.

The school opened an exciting life for me. The work in this community was stimulating and challenging to one's own development. In the centre of our work was the 'study trip' which was a yearly project. This was first discussed thoroughly to indicate the areas of study involved and then we divided into groups to tackle different aspects.

During our study trip these aspects were investigated on the spot.

In my first school year we travelled to the surrounding countryside for environmental and natural history studies. It was the first time that the class spent a fortnight together and could develop a group spirit. The second year took us to Thuringia and some mountainous districts with small or home industries (toy making, glass blowing and similar businesses). Apart from geological and natural history studies social and economic aspects were revealed to us. The third school year journey took us up the Rhine and down the Danube into Austria which showed us different kind of communities such as wine growing, and where we met the socialist workers and their achievements in Vienna. This trip introduced us to a foreign country; it also stimulated in us an interest in Art and Art History.

During our first school year the relations between boys and girls were strained, somehow hostile and, when friendly, rather clumsy and inexperienced. When we went on our first study trip - we were all about thirteen years old - the boys teased me and stuffed hay down my back. I told my parents about it and to my shame my mother promptly came to school and scolded the boys in class for treating her 'Ernchen' (little Erna) so roughly. As a result the boys called me 'Little Ernchen' and it took me a year to live that down. This taught me not to tell my parents everything. I had my second lesson in parent-child relations when my mother discovered my diary. In it I had written very enthusiastically about a male teacher (who little knew of my feelings) and my mother rushed to school to show this diary to the director. From then on I kept my own council and led a life of which my parents knew little.

The school became the centre of my life. Every year some pupils left school and when we came to the Fifth Form there were <sup>had</sup> only two forms with twenty-five scholars in each (we started with a three-class entry of a hundred-and-twenty pupils). These two forms represented two streams of education, one predominantly dealing with Art Subjects, the other with Science Subjects. (My year was the first year where this division was introduced). I decided to join the Science Stream and thus lost my beloved teacher, Hedda Korsch. She had always taken a very personal interest in the development of her pupils. After some crisis at home I ran away and ended up in Hedda Korsch's house. She did not send me home again immediately. She got in touch with my parents to ask whether it was possible for them to let me stay with her for a few days while her housekeeper was on holiday. My parents could hardly refuse. Then, after a few days, she returned home with me and we all talked over our problems together and as a result developed some understanding of each other.

Hedda Korsch also introduced me to literature, especially the writers illustrating social problems. We had come to love the books of Zola, Hauptmann, Zweig, Toller, Andersen-Nexoe, Tolstoi, Dostojewski and Gorki, Jack London and Upton Sinclair. Upton Sinclair's book 'Oil' was sold with a fig leaf, 'Everybody his own censor', to be used when coming across possibly offending passages in the book.

In our lessons we paid special attention to the oppressed groups in society throughout history. We interpreted the political and historic events from a Marxist point of view. Literature, Music and the Arts were also seen in their sociological context.

We refused to live by bourgeois morals - we were especially angered by the existing 'double standards', which made every allowance for the men but demanded purity until marriage from the women. As girls we wanted to be treated as equals. I discussed this with a friend when I was fifteen: she maintained that this attitude was right theoretically, but she wanted to keep her virginity until marriage. I was disgusted with her, as I strongly believed that our lives should change according to our theories. This was my view in the theoretical discussions at that time, but when this problem confronted me personally, in my relationship with an older boy, I ran away from it. He had arranged a week-end in the country and intended to stay overnight in a barn with me. At the last minute I refused to join him. He pressed me to change my mind with: "Rosa Luxemburg always showed courage". (Rosa Luxemburg was a revolutionary who, together with Karl Liebknecht, was murdered by reactionary forces in 1919). I was ashamed of being a bad revolutionary, but I did not go.

Later I became very friendly with Heinz Lueschen who was the chairman of our school assembly and politically very active. His mother worked as a cook for the Russian Trade Delegation and his father had been an unemployed engineer for years. We were close friends for two years and were both active in the Socialist Students' Organisation. This organisation demanded reforms in secondary schools: Pupils participation in the administration of the schools and in the decision-making with regard to the curriculum; co-education; abolition of school exams and the yearly marks; abolition of school fees. We also discussed political, sexual and psycho-analytical subjects at our meetings. I remember a lecture by Dr. Wilhelm Reich who developed a synthesis of Marxism and Psychoanalysis. English readers will know Wilhelm Reich, who later emigrated to the States, from his writings: "The Discovery of the Orgone", and "The Function of the Orgasm".

We distributed our monthly magazine which was widely read in schools. Pupils from all over Germany contributed to it and illustrated in their articles how reactionary methods and opinions were still entrenched in the school system.  
widely

Heinz and I were very much in love and decided to become intimate. So we went to Dr. Hodann who was a socialist doctor, worked for a local District Council and ran a kind of Brooks Youth Advisory Service. "You are rather young", he said, "but as you have so decided, I had better advise you on contraception" (sheath and caps at the time).

We had only rare opportunities to stay together: sometimes when either parents had definitely gone out or when we went on week-end outings. In spite of contraceptive devices we were still worried about getting pregnant. We also felt that we could not talk about that to friends.

Theoretically we defended 'free love' loudly enough, but we were also conditioned by the more of our home environment. We never discussed such personal implications of 'free love' amongst ourselves - who did and did not sleep with her boyfriend. Shyly we examined each others breasts to see whether they gave us any clue to sexual experience.

We were impressed by modern Russian literature and films now widely available. We discussed the Russian film "Way to Life" by Makarenko which showed new ways of dealing with young criminals of the post-war years. We enthused over Alexandra Kollontai's books who dealt with the new role of women in socialist society. We considered feelings of jealousy typical of a capitalist society which was built on the possession of private property, the woman also being considered private property. Feelings of jealousy would wither away in a socialist society. We also maintained that it was the right of every woman to abort an unwanted child. We fought for the abolition of paragraph 218 (making abortion an illegal act) and supported the initially banned play 'Zyankali' which dealt with the fatal result of an illegal abortion.

My class at school had become a very closely knit group, we even spent summer holidays together. On one of these occasions I formed a new relationship which influenced my life considerably - though, at the time, it only lasted a few months.

It was a relationship with a teacher who was a married man with children. When I returned from holiday, Heinz was very unhappy that he had lost me and fought valiantly for me 'after he had put so much work and effort into our relationship'. But I was too enthralled with the other man.

One of my closest friends at school was Sibylle, the daughter of Hedda Korsch. One summer, when we were both free of love entanglements, we went on our first hitch-hiking holidays to the Lueneburg Heath. We were without worries and problems and enjoyed getting to know one another. The heath had a purple hue, slender birches waved with the wind and life seemed mysterious and beautiful. We talked completely



openly with one another keeping nothing secret - I felt that only with a girl could you be so honest. We met two socialist girls in the Youth Hostel who suggested we went to Hamburg - a town nearby - to meet their friends. This we did, which had consequences later on we did not foresee.

Plays were a regular feature of our school life some of which we wrote ourselves. We composed musical sketches (with the help of a very gifted music teacher), played in the orchestra (the school had a classical as well as a jazz orchestra), and spent many an art lesson painting the scenery and making costumes for our productions. The performances were open to the public and quite often got good reviews. These performances were not only part of our language and artistic education, but also helped finance our study trips. Brecht's 'Man is Man' was one of the plays performed.

When Bert Brecht had finished writing his school-opera "The Yes-Sayer" it was suggested to us that we should perform it. The problem which Brecht discusses in this originally Japanese fable is: should the individual sacrifice himself for the good of the community? Brecht thought 'Yes' hence the Yes-Sayer. In this case the individual was a young boy who was pressed to sacrifice himself because traditionally it was the right thing to do. We discussed this problem in great depth. We thought it was cruel to force the boy to a self-sacrifice because TRADITION dictated it. A group of pupils contacted Brecht who received them, heard their objections and then came to the school for further discussion. He then asked us to discuss the problem in every class, write minutes of the discussion and send them to him. On the basis of the minutes Brecht took up some of our criticism and rewrote the school opera which had its premiere at our school in 1931 - the actors, musicians and the chorus were supplied by us.

In order to help finances I accepted an afternoon job for the last two years at school looking after the young daughter of a Communist Member of Parliament until the mother came home. I earned 30RM per month from which my parents allowed me 5RM.

In the thirties the economic situation in Germany had become harder and harder. Not only in Germany. There was a world wide recession - a world crisis of the capitalist system. In Germany we had nine million unemployed. The government cut social benefits on a large scale and fascism came out into the open. Our socialdemocratic director of the school became a target on two fronts: he had to defend his school policy from attacks of the right and of the left. The communist left thought of him as a pseudo-reformer and a traitor to socialism. A communist students' paper even talked of the school as "The Karsen Barracks". At that time



it was the policy of the Communist Party to consider the Social Democrats as 'Social Fascists' and as more dangerous than the fascists. The relations between social democratic and the more communist inclined students also became strained.

Heinz Lueschen matriculated in 1931. As he was a brilliant scholar and of the right political hue, he was chosen by a Russian Delegation for a teachers' training course in the USSR. This was a decisive step for him to take. Although we were no longer lovers, I accompanied him to the railway station and bade him farewell. He said to me sadly: "Whatever is going to happen in the future, you will always be my first girl". After his training in the Wolga German Republic he worked at the International School in Moscow. He was arrested, like many others, in 1936 under Stalin and sent to a labour camp in the Polar Region of Russia. That is where he died - not yet thirty years old. Wolfgang Leonard mentions him in his book "The Revolution discharges Her Children".

Hitler took over the German Government on January 30th., 1933. Our class hastened to sit for matriculation (in case the Nazis would interfere) as early as 21. February. The next day our director was refused entry to the Karl Marx School. We students could not believe it, assembled outside the school in protest, but Storm Troopers beat us and drove us away. On April 30th. a Nazi Commissioner took over the school, changed its name to Kaiser Friedrich Real-Gymnasium, and the Karl Marx School was no more.

There were many discussions at street corners and rumours were flying around of some kind of resistance. I heard that communist fighters with weapons were awaiting the call for action. There were still protest meetings in which thousands took part. Then happened the burning of the Reichstag (the Parliament building) on 28th. February 1933, and the Nazis maintained that the communists had started the fire. Nobody believed it, but many communists were arrested. One more general election took place in March in which the Nazis obtained 44% of the votes cast. This was not yet an absolute majority and Hitler was still dependant on the support of the German National Party. Empowered by an Emergency Law he declared as illegal the Communist Party and thus removed the Communist Members of Parliament. He now no longer needed the support of any other party and brought in legislation to dissolve them all except for the Nazi Party. That is how Hitler managed to dissolve Parliament and become the leader of a one-party state in Germany.

We experienced it as an incredible nightmare. We had lived in a world in which a socialist society seemed realisable in the near future. We were all waiting for some action, an uprising - but in vain. I had even imagined that the Russians would actively help the German Communists - rather naively perhaps. I went underground and typed leaflets in a backroom which called for strike action; but there were no more big strikes. Illegal

literature still passed from hand to hand. These were in small print very much like our microfilms are today. I always hid them in our kitchen cupboard until I had the opportunity to pass them on.

Our socialist ideals, our aims, our whole conception of the world was cruelly destroyed - but how complete this destruction was going to be we did not at the time realise.

We could no longer achieve any of our ambitions and tried to find a place of work or training. This was not easy as our matriculation certificate had the name "Karl Marx School" printed on it. Sibille Korsch and I managed to be accepted at the Pestalozzi-Froebel House for training as Nursery School teachers. This was still under the same headship as in pre-Hitler days but was taken over by a Nazi Commissioner half a year later. His first demand of us although we had no prior religious education whatsoever, was to become baptised. Nobody without church affiliation would be permitted to enter the final examination. This measure was directed not primarily against atheists but against Jews.

Many of our teachers were expelled from the teaching profession. My class teacher became a travelling salesman in coffee, others emigrated. Our gifted music teacher was sent to a village school. The Jewish father of a class mate was beaten to death by the Storm Troopers during the first few weeks of Hitler's accession. Terrorreigned. There was still an illegal organisation and an illegal press. To be a member of an illegal organisation constituted High Treason. The people with whom I was in contact were arrested and sentenced to hard labour.\* (My contact was Heinz Brandt who miraculously survived prison and the extermination camp of Auschwitz although he was both a Communist and a Jew). Heinz Lueschen's father was also arrested and released two years later with his kidneys destroyed. He died later of kidney failure.

The Gestapo came in 1934 to arrest Sibylle Korsch who at the time was ill in bed with a high temperature. The Gestapo left without arresting her because of her illness. Her mother happened to be illegally in Berlin and the house-keeper sought her out to warn her of her daughter's imminent arrest. It was decided that both would leave the country at once. They would travel by train to Copenhagen - but travel in separate compartments hoping that at least one of the family might slip through the net of the Gestapo. Sibylle was dressed in a coat over her nightdress in case the house was under observation and when stopped would be able to say she was going to visit the doctor. She managed to get to the station and found a seat in the train. The train was crowded and when the mother arrived at the last minute, a kindly attendant helped to find her a seat. And where was the seat? Right next to her daughter. They did not blink an eyelid and exchanged no word with one another until the train had passed the last German frontier town. Then they embraced each other with joy - much to the surprise of the other occupants of the carriage.

I myself was called to the Gestapo in the autumn of 1934. This demand was in connection with Sibylle's attempted arrest and our visit to Hamburg two years ago. These friends in Hamburg had been arrested and a letter from us to them had been found with Sibylle's address on it. It took them months to find out who 'Erna' was who had also signed the letter. They fired questions at me, told me not to warn Sibylle for whom they were still waiting. Then they took me to prison in order to confront me with a heavily manacled prisoner (We assumed at the time that he was in reality a spy working amongst illegal groups). Fortunately we were unknown to each other and the Gestapo let me go again with the remark: "It is impossible for you to continue work as 'teacher of the folk'".

That was the end of my nursery school career. Then followed a very lonely time for me. I did not dare to meet old friends in case the Gestapo kept me under observation. I looked for work, became a shorthand typist and tried to live as quiet a life as possible, to escape official notice. I did not dare to make new friends as one could not trust anyone. Sometimes, when I sat alone in a café, someone started a conversation, perhaps even told a joke about the Nazis - perhaps he was not a Nazi - but I never risked meeting strangers a second time. After months I took up some old contacts again, but most of my friends were either arrested or had emigrated - I spent many a lonely hour during these years.

By chance I ran across an old love of mine - the teacher who had given me such heartbreak. He was now working as a clerk. The old spark lit up again and we entered a passionate relationship. But he was still married and who was I to interfere in a relationship during these hard times. I met his wife and promised her to give up her husband. But he would not hear of it and implored me to continue; I was unable to keep my promise and learned to cope with my guilt feelings.

My parents discovered this friendship by accident. They asked the man to come to our home and demanded of him either a divorce from his wife or a separation from their daughter. We could not let my parents solve our problems for us and did not promise anything. My parents thereafter decided to put me under 'house arrest' - I was not allowed to leave the house in the evenings for four weeks. So I decided to leave home and took a furnished room.

But my lover was afraid that my parents would denounce him to the Gestapo (which I considered impossible). As he was working illegally he could not take any risks. As a result I had the freedom of a room without being able to take advantage of it. I could only dream.

One day I had a message from a former school mate that he had mentioned my name whilst in Gestapo custody. He had been one of the few selected to go to the Soviet Union just like Heinz Lueschen had been. When the purges under Stalin began in 1936, he was expelled from the Soviet Union. When he arrived in Germany he was arrested by the Gestapo. Under pressure he had promised to work for them amongst former Karl Marx pupils. But he sent me a warning through Heinz Lueschen's mother. He committed suicide very soon after so as not to become a traitor.

Once again my name had arrived at the Gestapo. Danger had become closer. I had in any case made contact with the Society of Friends in Berlin and was in touch with my friends from the Karl Marx School who had emigrated to England. I decided to leave Germany. My friends found a position for me in a private boarding school as a teacher for German and French. Declaring that I was going to England to improve my English I was miraculously issued a passport. Clutching it to me as my most precious possession and with 10 Sperrmark in my pocket, I boarded the train and set off on my journey. I sat quietly and trembling with bated breath until we had passed the German boarder, then I breathed a sigh of relief. I was out of Germany: a new chapter in my life was beginning.

I shall never forget the deep impression made on me by the first demonstration I saw in England. There were red flags flying in the wind and I looked anxiously around for the police to come and beat up the demonstrators, but the demonstration continued peacefully. It is unimaginable for anyone who has never lived under a dictatorship, to feel the joy of liberation from all fear. To speak freely without guarding your words, to make new friends, to read any books and newspapers you wish.

I stayed for a week with my friends in London and then travelled to my place of work. Although I had to give very few lessons at school and spent most of my time as an assistant to Matron darning socks and making beds I enjoyed my life at school. It was a progressive school and its head was a friend of A.S.Neill, Summerhill. I was happy to practice some of the ideas which I had experienced myself during my schooldays. We played board games in our German lessons, organised a play and painted posters for it so the parents would understand what the play was about. We sang German nursery rhymes at bath times. The much hated regimentation of Nazi education I had left safely behind me.



There was little remuneration, but my material expectations were modest. Some of the free week-ends I had I spent with friends in London (hitch-hiking all the way), where I met Rosa -Levine-Meyer (who wrote: "Levine, the Life of a Revolutionary) and her son Genia. I also met Wolf Nelki there who later became my husband. His family had left Berlin on 1st April 1933 (Anti-Jewish Boycott Day)

There were some things in England which surprised me: nobody in England had heard of the Karl Marx School; progressive schools in England were experimental in method but without political content; English people knew very little about what was going on in Germany. The only newspapers which sometimes wrote about concentration camps were "The News Chronicle" and the "Manchester Guardian".

These were the times of the Chamberlain Government when people were ready to compromise with Hitler. In fact, there were influential circles who made friends with Hitler. My colleagues could never understand why I was horrified when Hitler was allowed to get away with annexing yet another country. He sent his aeroplanes to Spain and helped to win the civil war for the Fascists. He invaded Austria and occupied the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. Hitler had a meeting with Daladier from France and Chamberlain from England in Munich 1938 and the western world was under the illusion that "Peace in our time" was firmly cemented.

Peace lasted for another year. My parents wrote express letters for me to come home. "You must not be in enemy country during a war", they wrote. But I remained in England - come what may.

And it came: War broke out in September 1939. I had changed my job and was now employed in London. General evacuation of school children from London was arranged as an airraid precaution in the beginning of the war and I had been evacuated to Kent. The police called that night to take me to Holloway prison. I was calm as I expected all foreigners to be interned. I had a shock when I discovered that none of my German friends were in Holloway. As I heard later, English newspapers announced that all German Agents had been arrested in the beginning of the war. Apparently I was one of them!

In solitary confinement for six weeks with no letters, newspapers or solicitor we remained isolated from the rest of the world. We were taken for a walk around the prison yard every morning from 7.30 to 8 a.m. (before the criminal prisoners); for the rest of the day the cells remained closed except for receiving food and water or emptying the bucket in the morning. We



were neither allowed shoelaces nor a belt and lights were turned off centrally at 8 p.m. every night. I spent the long nights on a straw mattress worrying. During the day I could read the Bible (the first time in my life); later we could borrow two books from the mobile library. Pencil or paper were not allowed. With me were forty-five German servant girls as well as one German who had become British just before the war through marriage (to a Fascist) and the divorced wife of an SS leader from Berlin, Gula Pfeffer. The latter had received her alimony through the German Embassy - she was intelligent, knew many languages and was undoubtedly a politically suspicious figure.

Prison mentality is strange and unavoidable due to an enforced foreign routine and complete dependence, no way of occupying yourself except for reading and re-reading books and complete isolation from all people who are near and dear to you. Added to that - in my case - was the insecurity of my position. I had no legal standing and was afraid to be deported to Germany against my will.

One day a visitor called on me in my cell. She brought greetings from Wolf and introduced herself as official prison visitor. She enquired after my health and any special wishes I might have. I asked for nothing. Then she mentioned the purpose of her visit: as a pregnant woman I could ask for special treatment. But I was not pregnant and told her so. Sadly she made her farewell. Later I heard from Wolf that for months he had been trying to find out where I was. When he accidentally discovered a "Commission for Prison Visitors", he called and asked for a visitor to see me. The address: Holloway Prison was pure guesswork as no official announcement of our whereabouts was ever made. This visit raised my spirits. Wolf was in England and worrying about me: so I was no longer quite alone.

The only opportunity to speak to other prisoners was during the morning walk. The wardens were understanding and even let us smoke a cigarette and lit it for us. But only the Fascist woman had money for cigarettes. Later on we got permission to write one letter a week and even receive food parcels.

Everyday more German women were sent to Holloway. Tribunals had been established in the outside world to investigate all German refugees. Although my Jewish friends were not amongst them, many Jewish women entered Holloway. Those who for one reason or another seemed suspicious to the English Judges presiding over the Tribunal.

There was the eighteen-year old girl who was the mistress of a leading industrialist; another girl was married to a confidence trickster who was in the hands of the police. There was a Jewish doctor who worked as a hospital nurse. She was falsely denounced of giving signals with her torch to German earoplanes. A bizarre

medley of people found themselves together at Holloway Prison. We envied those Irish girls who had been arrested for firebomb throwing in London. We heard them sing their revolutionary songs as their wing was next to ours. They knew why they had been sent to prison!

After six weeks of solitary confinement the establishment tried to relieve our conditions as we were no criminal prisoners. The cells remained open during the day. We had a kind of day room at one end of the prison wing which now held tables and chairs; even a little kitchen with a gas burner was provided so that we could make coffee or tea.

There were five women who comprised our little group of friends. There was the aforementioned Jewish doctor, very sweet but awkward with people; a young jolly German woman who was married to a Czech, a former democratic member of parliament; the unhappy woman linked to the con-man. There was a young non-Jewish woman who had run away from home and had lived in great poverty abroad, never accepting money from her parents. In her deepest moments of despair, she met a retired English Captain who had engaged her as housekeeper. She was devoted to him. When war broke out, he was recalled to the War Ministry - and she was promptly interned. And then there was I - a political refugee. We all became very close, shared our food and our secrets. We helped each other considerably and without such close relationships prison life would have been unbearable.

We had the idea of making and dressing up dolls to be given away at Christmas. One large cell was given over to us and we sewed, talked and sang songs accompanied by the guitar which friends had sent me.

We all shared hopes of an early release and each one of us had somebody working for this end - either a private individual or the Jewish Committee. Even the old Captain tried to get his housekeeper back.

Wolf was still in England as he happened to have a visitor's permit when war broke out. He was not deported but given permission to stay. One day I got a letter from him proposing marriage. This was exhilarating and consoling, as I was very much in love. But would I ever be released?

After Christmas we were informed that a special Tribunal would renew its investigation of people in Holloway. I was called to attend in January to have my credibility as a political refugee examined. Wolf was called as a witness. I told of the events in my life which had made me a political refugee and at the end of the examination one of the ladies sitting on the

Tribunal (Violet Markham - a liberal MP) said that she hoped that my school would soon be called Karl Marx School again. I was greatly encouraged by this remark.

Weeks of waiting ensued and time went slowly. My friends sympathised and tried to cheer me up. Then, in the middle of February, I was called to the Governor: "Fetch your things from the cellar and wait for your fiancée to collect you". The next hour was the longest of my life, but it came to an end - after four and a half months in prison - when Wolf appeared.

Wolf lived with his brother Henry and his parents in the house of his brother Otto which also held a surgery (52, Nightingale, Balham). Where could I go? I had no home, no job and no money. Comrades from the Independent Labour Party came forward to help and offered me a room until I could find my bearings again.

Wolf had established contact with the ILP (Independent Labour Party), as he knew Fenner Brockway, its Secretary.

When I was released I was introduced to Fenner in the flat he occupied which used to be Keir Hardies. "Hallo, Brother" he greeted me and made me welcome. This started a life-long friendship.

A few weeks later Wolf and I got married, although he had no permit to work and was living with his family. We had no money, but I was hoping to find employment soon. We were both young and adventurous and <sup>on</sup> March 2nd. we took this decisive step. The Registry Official took a personal interest in us, as Wolf had put the banns up while I was still in prison. The official paid our registration fee himself and also insisted that my place of residence on the marriage certificate should not be marred by 'Holloway Prison', but changed to 'X Parkhurst Road'. There was one more obstacle during the ceremony when Wolf was asked for the ring - but there was no ring as Wolf could not afford one. But it did not stop the proceedings and we became man and wife.

Wolf's family was not told until shortly before the ceremony. They considered us quite mad, as Wolf had no means of supporting a wife. Our witnesses were Fenner Brockway and - strangely enough - Wolf's sister Alice who had not heard of the family worries.

We got married, shared a lunch with some friends, spent a week-end together in my room, and then I departed to Buckinghamshire to start a job as a nursery school teacher in a private school. Wolf stayed with his family.

During the Easter holidays I returned. All the friends clubbed together and gave us a party to celebrate our wedding. A friend (Polly Reif's husband) made dough-nuts from four in the afternoon until two the next morning and we never ran out of coffee. We were all very happy.

The following fortnight, Wolf and I played at keeping house, then I had to return to my school. Little did I know then that I would not see Wolf again for a whole year.

What had happened? Fighting on the battlefield had gone badly for England. Holland, Belgium and - quickly following - France had all been invaded and conquered by Hitler. The danger of invasion was imminent. The British Government had changed, Chamberlain was replaced by Churchill. As a result in May 1940 15,000 men and 3,000 women were interned as 'enemy aliens' and sent to the Isle of Man, in separate camps. Wolf and I were amongst the internees.

I have written a separate report of the internment of women; not wishing to repeat myself I will only add a few personal details. I met some of my Jewish friends on the Isle and made new friends. During the summer of 1940 altogether about 4,500 women and 30,000 men were interned, about 85% of them were Jewish refugees. They had hoped to find a new home and country in England, and their hopes were shattered. Some were quite unable to cope with, as yet, another outcast existence. There was deep insecurity, fear, hysteria and great suffering. Because of a complete lack of organisation and understanding, the camp authorities had not separated Anti-Nazis from Nazis. They had to share the same house and sometimes even the same doublebed. It took months before this problem was sorted out. Moreover, the war situation was critical and we all feared a possible invasion of England by Hitler. As we were not allowed newspapers, or radio, rumours flourished and added to hysteria.

On the mainland the Blitz rained bombs on London and other cities and our English friends wrote that we were well out of it. But this was no consolation as we wanted to share in the fight against Hitler.

I remained interned for a year. Right at the beginning I was assigned to a little boardinghouse together with twenty other women. I shared my room and doublebed with a young Jewish girl of nineteen. She had worked as a domestic in England, her family was still in Germany. She was very friendly and generous and when she went down to the village she always brought back chocolates and cigarettes which she shared with us. I noticed after a few weeks that I had less money left than I thought I should have. But one day another woman (a Czech refugee with two young children) missed a pound note; only Vera had had access to it. We confronted her and she admitted that she had stolen little sums of money all the time. She felt so lonely and lost that she stole money in order to buy friendship. We were greatly troubled. In the end we persuaded her to work in the garden in order to pay some of it back.



One day a girl approached me whom I had not seen since the days of the Karl Marx School. She had emigrated as she was Jewish, but her non-Jewish boyfriend had to stay behind. By the outbreak of war he was drafted as a radio-operator into the German Merchant Navy. He took the first opportunity which presented itself to make his escape. When the ship landed in Shanghai he fled, went to the English Consul and offered them the German Secret Code as proof of his credibility. The English brought him to England and put him into prison. Though separated, these two lovers were now at least in the same country. Later on she was released like most of us, but he remained in prison. She became impatient waiting for him and wanted to marry another man. On hearing this he broke down and tried to commit suicide.

During the course of the year political refugees of different hues made contact. All of us found some like minded people and made friends and helped each other to bear internment.

Our internment did not escape notice in the outside world and there was a public outcry in newspapers and Parliament why refugees from Hitler were held on the Isle of Man.

Due to public agitation and the lessening of the impact of the Blitz, the English Government decided to re-examine the people they had interned. There were categories of groups who might be released. When an additional category dealing with political refugees was added, we were hopeful to be released as well. The first few releases started in September 1940 and by the summer of 1941 great numbers of internees were freed again. Wolf was released in January 1941 and I in May of the same year. That was a happy moment when I could embrace Wolf on Euston Station.

Hitler attacked Russia in June 1941 and marched East and the immediate possibility of an invasion was averted. London's Blitzkrieg was over but it had left traces everywhere especially in the dockarea and the City. The war continued for another four years, but we were now part of the British population fighting for survival and defeat of Hitler. Wolf was drafted into munition work and trained as a mechanic; I worked as shorthand-typist (I had taught myself English shorthand in the internment camp). For the first time since our marriage we shared a place together: two furnished rooms with two gas rings, in a basement in Paddington.

For the next two years I worked for Mrs. Eva M. Hubback. She was Principal of Morley College for Working Men and Women and active in various women's association. She also was the Honorary Secretary for the Family Endowment Society (President: Eleanor Rathbone, MP) in which capacity she



agitated for<sup>a</sup> Child Allowance to be paid to the mother. This became legislation after the end of the war and was mostly due to the efforts of this society. Furthermore she<sup>was</sup> Honorary Secretary of the Association for Education in Citizenship and active in adult education in H.M. Forces for which we supplied discussion material. All this was also part of my work and was of great interest to me helping me gain insight into British problems as well as stimulating my reading.

Mrs. Hubback rescued us from the basement rooms. She recommended us as guardians of a house in Hampstead Garden Suburb while the owners were evacuated.

During the time of war London was an international centre for all forces actively engaged in fighting Hitler: the seat for all exile governments of the various countries conquered by Hitler. The German Trade Unions and anti-fascist parties and clubs were also permitted and we belonged to the German Trade Unions to which the left parties and splinter groups belonged. I was a member of the Education Committee which discussed guide lines for the re-education in post-war Germany after the defeat of Hitler.

Our house in Hampstead Garden Suburb became a centre for all those groups which stood between the communist and social democratic parties. Our communist ideals had been deeply shaken over the years, especially since the trials in Moscow 1936-1938. We considered it incredible that the old Bolschewists, who together with Lenin had organised the revolution, had now become traitors and were working for the foreign enemy. We also doubted the truth of 'voluntary confessions' of which we had read in the newspapers. We were also horrified when we heard of the Stalin-Hitler Non-Agression Pact one week before war broke out. How would that effect the illegal resistance workers in Germany? We discussed the fact that the English Communist Party considered the war as 'imperialist' only as long as the Soviet Union was not attacked. Then it became a 'war of liberation'. Further we argued over problems of imperialism and, together with the Independent Labour Party, we heard George Padmore of Ghana and representatives of French Socialists. As our rooms were large they were very suitable for such meetings.

We also organised a Jewish Youth Group for those who had arrived in a children's transport without their parents. Wolf, as a former law student, wrote a leaflet setting out the laws as they affected aliens to advise many a youngster. His wise council has been gratefully acknowledged by them in later life.

For two years Wolf and I had a nice home together and political interests which we shared - but our personalities often clashed. Wolf, more than anything loved to be surrounded by people; I wanted more privacy and time for each other. Wolf had loved France more than England; I was deeply impressed by the English way of life and wanted to put down roots in England. Wolf was emotionally involved with his family; I did not feel accepted by them. I wanted

a child; Wolf did not want to accept responsibility for a child. In the end I did persuade Wolf and Michael was born in March 1944.

In Spring 1944 Hitler sent his secret weapon the V 1 over England thinking it would subdue and destroy the English. Together with three friends (one with a child and two still pregnant), I was evacuated to a cottage in Wales - a holiday cottage which belonged to Mrs. Hubback.

After a short time at the cottage Wolf's letters came rarely and quite clearly indicated that he considered our marriage had broken down over irreconcilable differences in our character. "You now have the child you so much wanted - build up your own life without me".

I was in no position to fight or to build up a new life. I felt that I needed a man more than ever, so I wrote and pleaded - but to no avail. There was nothing for me to do but to learn to accept it. Other fathers spent some week-ends with us but Wolf never came.

Fortunately I had my baby who made me very happy. We shared a room together and he slept through every night waking up in the morning gurgling happily. There was very little physical work to do, as all the housework and cooking was shared between us; so we had time to enjoy our children. Once a month we went in all weathers to the baby clinic which was four miles away. This was the great outing of the month. We knitted, we read and talked. Two babies were born in Wales. One mother (Erica Stein) started labour during a thunderstorm. We had to get her - in spite of the rain and thunder - across the fields to the village to rouse the midwife who would accompany her to hospital. Every two minutes we had to stop because of labour pains. However, she arrived safely in hospital where she had her baby almost immediately.

In June 1944 the Second Front opened and the Allies fought the German Army on the continent. We had been waiting for it impatiently. The Anti-Aircraft guns with the help of radar had learned to shoot down the V 1 weapons over the Channel, but the V 2 rockets were still bombarding London. All along the coast of France and Belgium the rocket sites were seized one by one and then the slow process of driving the Hitler Army yard for yard back over the Rhine proceeded. The Russians in the meantime were advancing from the East through

East Prussia and Silesia towards Berlin. It took almost a year before the German Army surrendered after Hitler and Goebbels had committed suicide in their Bunker in Berlin. At last, however, on 7th. May 1945, the war in Europe was over and peace was declared. It was a most wonderful day with jubilations, celebrations and street parties.

My own problems did not go away though. I had to consider plans of how and where to earn a living. I did not want schoolwork as I did not want my child to grow up in a large establishment. So when the opportunity came to work as a governess to a professional woman with two children in London, I accepted gladly.

For the next year and a half I tried to build up a life for me and my boy. My work was quite pleasant but very hard as altogether I had to look after three children under five years old. I also had to cook our lunches and some dinners. I remember carrying two children on my arms wherever I went as the little one in my care was the same age as Michael. The grandmother who also lived in the house did not like me at all: I was not the kind of nanny she wanted for her grandchildren. She lived very frugally and resented my appetite. "Germans were too indulgent". However, I had two rooms for myself and Michael, earned a salary and was together with my child. At first Michael resented sharing me with two other children, but later he grew very fond of his two playmates.

As I was tied to the house so much I started a Social Science Course at an evening institute. After four years this would lead to a Social Science Diploma. Twenty-four lessons during the winter months with sixteen written essays were necessary for admittance to the Interim Examination. This course helped me considerably, as it stimulated me intellectually, acquainted me with other people and compensated for a lot of heart-ache. Although I found it difficult to make the time to prepare for my written work, it gave me joy to learn about 'social and economic conditions of England in the 19th. and 20th. century'. I was successful in my examination.

I sometimes went to socials of the Fabian Society, but it is difficult to maintain a friendship when you are living in; moreover, free Sundays were the exception. I remember those Sunday afternoons when I went walking with three children across Hampstead Heath as some of the loneliest times.

After a year's work a <sup>woman</sup> friend and I decided to accept the opportunity of a flat in Blackheath in the house of Mrs. Hubback's daughter, Mrs. Hopkinson.

We furnished it and I took on the care of Mr. and Mrs. Hopkinson's children, Thomas and Tinka (now Andrea) in the afternoons. Many artistic and progressive people were living in Blackheath; it was also a beautiful part of London with a little Georgian village bordering on the heath next door to Greenwich Park. By chance I met a woman who was interested in opening a nursery. She provided rooms and a garden and I was going to be the teacher. We co-operated in this venture very fruitfully for two and a half years. This not only provided an economic base for our existence, but also a nursery school for Michael as well as opening up a new circle of friends.

England was rather an exciting country to live in after the war had ended. The population had overwhelmingly voted in the General Election of 1945 for the Attlee Labour Government on a programme of maintenance of full employment and social security, nationalisation of basic industries and colonial independence. I joined the British Labour Party and was active promoting their programme. One day, the Queen, then Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip were paying a visit to Greenwich Town Hall. My Labour Party friends invited me to it and could not understand why I refused this honour. It had many reasons one of which was the fact that I had no decent dress to wear.

What had happened to Wolf in the meantime? We still kept in touch. After the war, as early as 1946, he had the opportunity to accompany Fenner Brockway on his visit to Germany. This provided the first link with post-war Germany and Berlin and Wolf had the chance to look for former comrades, friends and relations; he also visited my parents.

I shall never forget how distressed and shocked he was on his return from this journey. He had never realised, or quite believed, the extent of the extermination camps, the almost complete destruction of the Jews. He was also disturbed by the destruction of the cities he visited and the near famine of the people.

Fenner Brockway and Wolf were in Hanover when the Social Democratic Party of Germany was newly founded and Fenner was the first foreign delegate who, as Secretary of the Independent Labour Party, brought greetings from the English socialists to German comrades. The applause he got was terrific. At that time the official policy of the Allies was that of non-fraternisation.

After his return <sup>Wolf</sup> organised the 'Food and Clothing for Germany' campaign to support our comrades who had survived. Independent Labour Party comrades in the occupation army helped us by distributing any parcels we sent to them. Postal links were not



possible with German civilians at that time. We collected food (still rationed in England) and clothing which were gratefully received. My parents told me later that we had helped them to survive.

Wolf and I were once again co-operating in a common task; we both had grown older and more mature, but the original attraction we had for one another, was still there. We decided to continue our marriage which had been interrupted but not dissolved. What a wise decision it turned out to be!

In the following years we discussed our future: should we return to Germany or remain in England? It was not an easy decision to make, some refugees, especially political ones, had returned. But where should we return to? Germany was divided into East and West and we felt we did not belong to either, We could neither settle nor have a chance of survival in East Berlin. I, personally, was impressed by the way the English maintain their individuality and refuse doctrinaire and pre-empted conclusions. There is less dogma and more reasonable discussion possible in England. Both of us had started to take roots in England. We applied for British Nationality in 1950.

This is the end of my story as a political refugee. We became British subjects and endeavoured to build up our life in England. I had the opportunity to enter a Teachers' Training College in 1951 and became an Infant School Teacher. So at last the prophesy of my school teacher had become true that "the girl must become a teacher". Julia was born in 1953 and I took a year's leave of absence to look after her. With the help of a motherly woman, and later a nursery school, Julia was looked after and I continued teaching.

With one regular salary coming in we could discuss Wolf's professional future. When the German Government compensated Wolf for his interrupted studies in Germany, he risked to embark on a study course for dentistry. We both have worked in our professions ever since. Wolf is still active in his profession, I retired when I was sixty-five and have enjoyed more time for deliberation and leisure.

Looking back on my life - it was a life of struggle. But life was a struggle for everyone who lived under fascism inside or outside of Germany. We survived which seems a miracle in itself, as many of our friends lost their lives in camps of one country or another. None of those who survived escaped without scars. We have shed the illusions of our youth.