



Remembering Migration

told by *Ruth Matsson*, Täby (Sweden)

written down by her daughter *Matilda Matsson* (<http://www.matildamatsson.com>)

corrected by *Vera Gulbrandsen* 2008



Ruth and her little sister in the late 1920s
(photo: private)

Germany: Lieberose, Cottbus, Berlin 1920 - 1939

I was born in 1920 in Germany at a hospital in Frankfurt / Oder. I was my mother's first child and delivered with tongs. Four years later I had a little sister.

Before I started school we lived in the countryside in Lieberose. My father owned a brick factory. My relatives lived in Upper Silesia and owned pubs in the cities of Hindenburg and Beuthen. In the city of Naumburg other relatives ran a shoe factory named "Kosterlitz". There were some relatives in Poland too, in the town Buk near Poznan. They had a mill and dealt with cattle. My mother grew up in Goczalkowice which was German at that time and her parents owned a spa hotel. Her brother died during First World War and was given the iron cross. My mother was the only one of her sisters who married out of love. The most common was that daughters were given away to what was called "good parties". A "good party" was for example a lawyer who lived in a bigger town. One of my aunts was married to a lawyer in Berlin. I called him Uncle Alfred and he meant a lot to me concerning my decision to leave Germany. My father wanted to go to Palestine but my grandmother was a German patriot. The

Germans had given her German citizenship, the right to vote and full civic freedoms and rights.

In my school years I lived in Cottbus at Jahrstraße. Our house had three floors and we lived on the second in a flat with 8 rooms. My grandmother who had become a widow lived with us. Some of our rooms were rented out to students who studied textile design. They appreciated the food and parties that my mother arranged for them.

In the backyard we had an extended garden with fruit trees and berry bushes. Our neighbour on the first floor was a “Landgerichtsrat”, a high ranking judge, and his daughter was my schoolmate and best friend. Her mother was the daughter of a cloths manufacturer who had a factory in Spremberg. On the third floor lived a Nazi family who hoisted the swastika flag. I don't know what they did for a living because we had no contact. They had a little baby and hung their laundry on our side of the garden. During election times you showed your political sympathies by displaying a flag at the façade of your house. The neighbours on the first floor were Social Democrats. We didn't hoist a flag at all but I believe that my grandmother supported the conservative Hindenburg and my dad supported a more socialist party.

At the end of our street, which was a cul-de-sac, was a synagogue where my grandmother used to go. The street where we lived was small, only five houses and hardly any cars so we could play ball in the street.

Vis-à-vis our house there was a boy school. The boys wore caps that looked like Swedish graduation hats but they were in different colours which showed what year they were in. I often played “Völkerball” (dodgeball) with them. The reason why they let a girl play with them was that I had so many nice balls and that I was a good catcher. My girlfriend on the first floor and I were a bit of tomboys and we were the first to wear long trousers. During the summer we walked together many miles to a swimming pool where we took swim lessons.

My mother was in a bowling club and sometimes I went with her.

My father took his life when I was 6 years old. He shot himself in the head and was buried in the Jewish cemetery. We didn't have much contact. One memory I have of him is going to a football game together. At home I overheard discussions about trouble at the brick factory, the city wanting to take over business, him being a field medic during World War 1, dreams about Palestine and his migraine.

For four years I went to a girls' grammar school that was called “Grundschule” and my uncle Alfred in Berlin paid my and my sister's tuition. I was given my neighbour friend's school books because she skipped one grade and became a year ahead of me in school. We walked

together to our school in Bahnhofstraße. On a few occasions we got a ride in a car with a schoolmate. We were 40 girls in our class.

When I was 10 I started the “Gymnasium” (high school) in “Augustaschule” where I went for two years. In 1933 we moved to Berlin and my mother remarried.

The family on the first floor had already moved to Berlin and lived in the district Friedenau. I received a letter from my friend. She wrote that we couldn’t see each other anymore because she had to do her duty. She had become an “Aryan” German and I a “Unerwünschte”, an undesired person.



Ruth and her sister in the 1930s
(photo: private)

We lived in the district of Charlottenburg and I went to “Fürstin-Bismarck-Schule”. In my class we were 30 girls, 15 Christian gentile Germans and 15 Jewish girls. During morning roll call the 15 gentiles stood up and greeted a portrait of Hitler with their arms up while the other 15 were supposed to stand up silently with our arms down. We were not allowed to become members of “Bund Deutscher Mädchen” (Association of German Girls) and to wear brown uniforms as the others.

Once our class went for a week to a school in the countryside near Potsdam and we got through it without any conflicts. We had a good teacher named König. He played classical music in a trio where one of the members who played cello was Jewish.

I quitted school earlier than the others because I didn’t keep up with the work and because of the racial laws. All higher education was closed for me. In my secret dreams I had wanted to study to become a physician but I realised that it was impossible. I entered Jewish “Mittelschule” (junior high school) nearby the synagogue in Oranienburger Straße. I went there until I was 15.

Since the age of 13 I wanted to become a nurse and later that has been my profession. I looked after my grandmother, helped her doctor when he came to us and learned to give injections. My mother was not pleased with my choice to become a nurse but she supported me anyhow.

My first job was housekeeping and I replaced a gentile German housekeeper who due to the new racial laws wasn't allowed to work for Jewish families anymore. I got half her salary. Once a week I went to a housekeeping school in Wilmersdorf. We were only 2 Jewish girls in the class. We were educated in "Gemeinschaftskunde", a sort of civic knowledge, about the latest in German politics as flag laws, about how and when one should hoist the swastika and about new racial laws. Once our teacher asked if we knew about the Nuremberg laws and no one in the class said anything until my Jewish classmate raised her hand and answered that "it was the law to keep German blood pure."

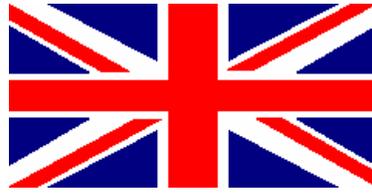
My next job was at the Jewish hospital which was situated in northern Berlin. I was a nurse trainee and my training was paid for by the Jewish community. It was the first time I saw a dead person. The hospital had a secret department which I wasn't allowed to enter. There they kept the patients who came from concentration camps. People with diabetes had become very ill without treatment in the camps. We had no antibiotics so patients with pneumonia or other infections were in a very bad condition. Sometimes I had to look after patients who had tried to commit suicide.

A graduate physician who worked as a medical aid said to me the day before November 9th, the "Kristallnacht": "If I'm not here tomorrow, I have left Germany." That was one of the things that contributed to my thoughts about leaving Germany. I saw the consequences of the pogroms through a tram window on my way home.

More and more I felt the urgency to move to another country. I listened to an American rabbi who encouraged his audience to leave Germany. My uncle Alfred showed me Hitler's political program in "Mein Kampf". My uncle helped young men to leave Germany.

My Jewish classmate at housekeeping school moved to England and became a nurse trainee at Chelmsford and Essex Hospital. She had heard from a friend who was a physiotherapist that Quakers helped young women. They especially helped those who could do housekeeping and work in hospitals. Their organisation in London was at Bloomsbury House and I contacted them.

England: Chelmsford, London 1939 - 1949



In April 1939 I moved to England. My mother wanted me to wait until my birthday had passed but I was afraid of what Hitler might do on his birthday (April 20th). I just wanted to get out of Germany before the racial laws became even harder. My mother had a sewing machine and was making a wedding dress for a lodger who was going to marry. In other times it could have been my own wedding but as things were I said farewell to my mother and we never saw each other again.



Ruth in England
(photo: private)

I got a job at the same hospital as my friend from housekeeping school, Chelmsford and Essex Hospital. During my time in England I studied to be a nurse and worked in a sanatorium at Burks and Bucks near Redding. In Preston and Lancashire I took my midwife training and in London I worked at Paddington Hospital and Hammersmith Hospital.

In 1946 Scandinavian nurses came to visit us. The reason for their visit was to improve their English. One of the Swedish nurses invited me to come and visit Swedish hospitals. She was shocked about the conditions at our child division where many children were dying from tuberculosis meningitis. The original plan of the Swedish nurse was to go to Canada in order to marry but she changed her mind and went back to Sweden to look after her old parents.

During my first vacation I visited her family in Karlstad and I went sailing with them. The second time in Sweden she showed me “Karolinska sjukhuset” and other hospitals. I made contact with “svenska sjuksköterskeföreningen”, the Swedish nurses’ society, and they helped me to a transfer and to try working in a Swedish hospital. I came to “Kristianstads lasarett” and was very well received.

My mother was deported with the 6th transport to the east from Berlin on 17th November 1941 to Kaunas in Lithuania. At Fort Number 9 there is a memorial plaque for those who were shot at that time but I hope that she died during the train transport.

My sister married and had a family in London. She was also a nurse.

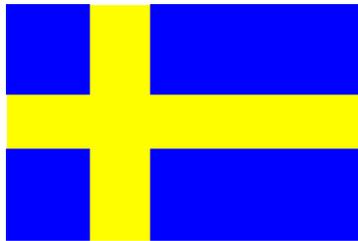
Uncle Alfred and my aunt in Berlin were hidden by gentile Germans for two years and after the war they moved to Israel.

The relatives with the shoe factory moved to the USA and the rest of my relatives were deported to ghettos and died there or in camps.



Ruth shortly before leaving for Sweden, ca. 1948
(photo: private)

Sweden: Kristianstad, Stockholm 1949 - 2008

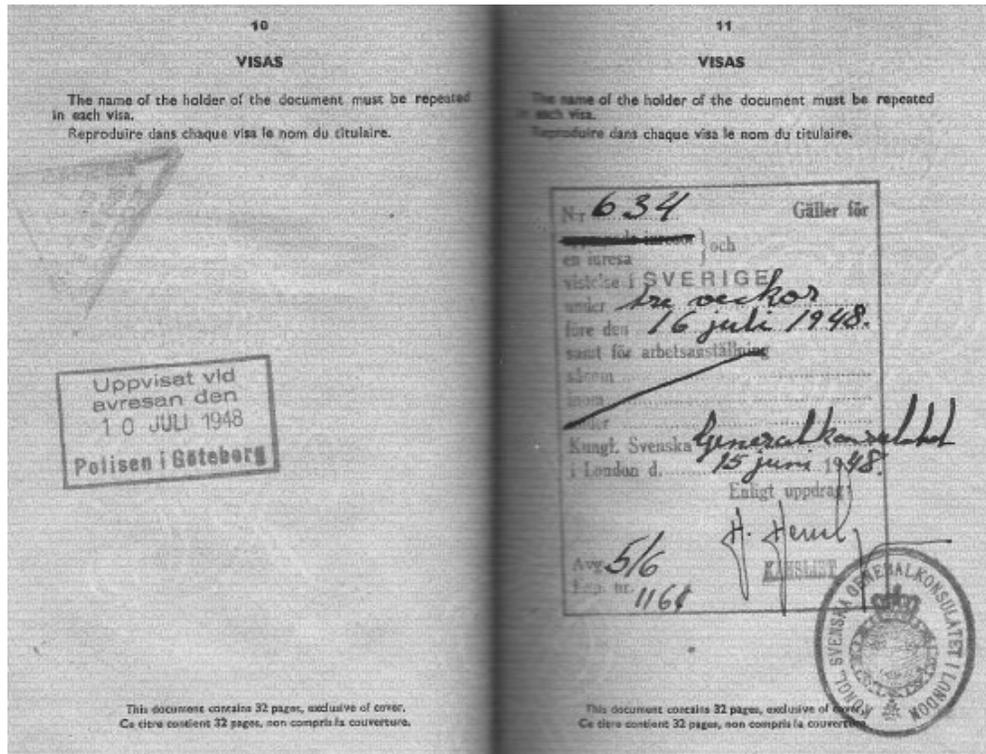


I took a few Swedish lessons in London but I knew very little Swedish when I arrived. I learned Swedish at work and had an informal agreement with the ward sister who said: "If you teach me English, I will teach you Swedish." I learned Swedish by writing reports on my work and my colleagues always helped me. Only once I was allowed to write a report in English about a complicated case, the birth of a severely deformed new-born baby that died.

Swedish reminded me of my mother tongue but sometimes it became too formal when I translated directly. For example I could begin a letter with: "Highly honoured Miss XX."

When I had a family we spoke Swedish all the time. I have always spoken Swedish to Swedish people and I still do.

”At Christmas you will be off for five days and at Easter I will be off for five days and then you will work and be responsible for our division,” said the ward sister and that made me very happy and proud because it meant that she appreciated my work and I got fine reports from Kristianstad. A patient gave me a book about Swedish etiquette that he had written using the pseudonym Wingård and that I read to learn about Swedish manners and outfits.



Ruth's Swedish entrance visa

(photo: private)

In Stockholm I worked at “Karolinska sjukhuset”. I took my Swedish legitimisation at “Sophiahemmets” nursing school despite that their prospect said that they only accepted pupils of evangetic confession. ”Do you mind joining our vespers?”, one of the managers who was from a well-known bishop’s family asked me and I said that I didn’t mind. The head accepted the agreement and I started the course.

It has been interesting to be part of Swedish nursing at a time when it developed at lot. For example the development of Heparin and new fertility and cancer therapies.

I studied to be a nurse teacher for laboratory assistants and worked at “Laborantskolan” until I retired. I have had personal annual contact with the former head until she recently died. Now I keep in touch with younger colleagues.

I married a Swedish widower who had a teenage daughter. His wife died of tuberculosis when his daughter was 4 years old. My husband was a teacher and he also became senior lecturer in literature and a textbook writer. He came from a working class family and made his way to

middle class by studying. We had a daughter who is a teacher as well. She has portrayed the family's story in a trilogy.

My sister and I used to meet in England or in Sweden until she died and now her children and their families visit me.

I resumed contact with my childhood friend from Cottbus in the sixties and we have been together every year on holidays, swimming in different pools, lakes and seas. I travel less nowadays because I suffer from vascular spasm, claudicatio intermittens and my old friend from Alzheimer's.

I have lived at a nursery home, in a cottage, a flat and a villa. I had savings so I bought the flat. My husband had stored furniture and household utensils for 12 years after his wife's death and with them we furnished the flat.

The first years with a small child were hard. I had night watch and went to work on my moped to "Karolinska sjukhuset". My husband had no permanent teaching position and we had very little money.

During our free time we often made day trips to the countryside and my husband's home district. I prepared picnic food and in summer we had the canoe on the roof of the car. In winter we were out too and I learned to ski and skate.

Having a radio has always been important for me. I had a little Ferguson receiver in England and the first thing I bought in Kristianstad in 1949 was a radio that cost 400 kronor. Later on newspapers were important. On TV I like to watch British series, French cultural programs and I would like to have the channels "Axess" and "Mezzo". I have read many novels and got to know Swedish history and culture through authors. My appetite for music and concerts is without limits. I listen to music every day and night and I could go to a concert every day. I just love music and ballet.

I have cherished my husband's traditions. Christmas was important for him and he enjoyed being able to give away a lot of presents. When my grandchildren were small I was invited to paint Easter eggs and dance around midsummer poles.

My husband liked to eat everyday fares and I made it for him though it was too rich in calories when you had a job at which one mostly sits without moving.

Peoples' practical actions is what matters. The important thing is what people do to help each other. I think of all the people that have helped me and that makes me want to help others.

Every month I went to the police station to renew my residence permit. The policemen encouraged me to extend my application to up to 6 months. "It's the same price," they kindly informed me.

My German citizenship was taken away and I became stateless, a displaced person. In England I was classified as a “friendly alien”. After the war I became a British citizen and in 1958 a Swedish citizen. I never regretted moving to Sweden and I think that I was unwillingly blessed. I will be happy as long as I can take care of myself, read, listen to music, play chess, make crosswords and visit friends, family, social clubs and study circles.

Bearing in mind the future of my children and grandchildren I hope that there won't be another war.

Edited by Gerhard Jochem

[Index*](#)

[Home*](#)