

Michael Kornberg

Michael Kornberg, courtesy Kornberg family.



Lingering Hatred In Germany

By Michael Kornberg

Though I was born in Germany in 1936, the eve of the Hitler era, the Holocaust came to haunt me long after I had immigrated to America. Most notably, I found myself confronted with these atrocities while serving in the U.S. Army in the late 1950's.

I was drafted after college and stationed in Hanau, Germany, near Frankfurt. The war had been over for more than a decade, but for the Germans, it was always a heartbeat away. Old-timers would tell me, "*Du bist Jude*" ("You are a Jew"), whether I was in or out of uniform.

One night, at a *Bierstube* (pub), my Army buddies and I took turns making toasts and buying rounds of beer for all at the table, including some locals. One big blond kid raised his beer stein and said, in German of course, "Here's a toast to everybody, but I want you to know I hate Jews. I don't know why, but my father hated Jews, so I hate them too."

When it was my turn, I bought the round of beer and said, "Prosit von einem Juden" – "Cheers from a Jew." My buddies hustled me the hell out of there.

As a radio operator in the signal corps, my job was to send and receive Morse code messages. And since I spoke German, I also served as an interpreter for senior officers.

One assignment took us to Munich. From there I decided to take a few days' leave and go to Dachau, a suburb of Munich. I wanted to see the concentration camp where my grandfather had died, and where my father had been incarcerated.

Two Army buddies and I piled into my car, an Opel Kapitän, and we drove to Dachau. It's a small country town, but we had trouble finding the camp. It wasn't on German maps and the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site, now ironically a tourist draw, would not be open for some years.

We found ourselves in a neighborhood with rows of attached garden apartments. I went to one house and asked where the camp was. "Keine Ahnung" ("No idea") was, in essence, the reply. Same answer at the next house, and the ones after that. Finally, we drove around the corner... and there was the concentration camp, right behind the houses. "Invisible" to the town folk???

I toured the camp with my two non-Jewish buddies, and we saw the furnaces and cremation area. It was an eerie and sad feeling.

My family's story begins in Essen, Germany, where I was born. My father,

Erich Kornberg, and his father were wholesale representatives for women's clothing manufacturers and sold to department stores. My mother, Irma Baum Kornberg, was a Hausfrau. I was an only child, just 3½ when we left Germany, so I don't remember much of those years.



Michael Kornberg in his military uniform.

I do remember my Uncle Willie coming to our house in the middle of the night, fleeing the Nazis in his hometown, Dresden. He spent several days with us. One afternoon German soldiers and an SS officer came pounding on our door. They searched our home but didn't find him; he had crawled into the cabinet under our kitchen sink. I thought it was a game. "Was machts du, Onkel?" I asked. "What are you doing, Uncle?"

On that terrible Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938, my father and grandfather were among the thousands of Jewish men who were rounded up by the Nazis. They were sent to Dachau. By then the family had already met and decided to immigrate to America. But, we needed a sponsor.

My maternal grandmother, Martha Baum, a widow, had immigrated to America in 1922 and lived in New York with her son, Walter. He had immigrated several years earlier. On Yom Kippur, Oma Martha went to temple and met a distant relative, Dave Frank. He was connected to the Andrews Sisters, a well-known Jewish singing group. My grandmother approached Dave and asked if he would sponsor us. "It's Yom Kippur," he replied. "How can I say no?"

Armed with a visa, my father was released from Dachau, but his father, Sigmond Kornberg, died there of a heart attack. After we left Germany, the Nazi killing machine was in full swing, and my grandmother, Amanda Kornberg, was taken to Auschwitz, where she perished. Tragically, my parents could not get the documentation for her to immigrate.

>> Leaving Germany. In March 1939 my parents and I left Germany without incident – Hitler was happy to have Jews leave the Fatherland, just not with any valuables. We could only take \$12 for the whole family, along with the clothes we wore.

After staying with relatives in Holland, we boarded the MS Veendam out of Amsterdam. There were a lot of Jewish passengers so a *Purim* celebration was held by the ship's crew. It was my first

experience celebrating *Purim*, and the Krachmachers (noisemakers) scared me. I remember that I was also seasick the whole way over, so I was glad when the ship docked in Hoboken, New Jersey.

We settled in New York, where my father got a job at Klein's department store, living with my family in rented rooms. Space was tight and expensive, and we had little money. So, my grandmother and uncle took over my care; I lived with them in their Cabrini Boulevard apartment along the Hudson River.

Later, with several immigrant friends from Germany, my father opened a dress store – what they called a “*schmatta* shop” – on Pitkin Avenue in Brooklyn. The store was called Popular Cottons. Eventually they had six or seven other shops in the metro New York area.

Uncle Walter married, and the newlyweds moved with Oma Martha and me to Teaneck, New Jersey. I learned English in school there. Today Teaneck is known as “Little Jerusalem,” as it is home to mostly Orthodox Jews. In contrast, back then there were only three other Jewish families in the town. In school, I was one of only three Jewish students. However, it was a great place to live.

Eventually I moved back with my parents, graduating from Erasmus High School in Brooklyn, then working and attending Fairleigh Dickinson University at night. I graduated with a degree in industrial engineering. Some time later, I was drafted into the U.S. Army. We still had a draft at the time.

One of my engineering jobs after the military took me to Los Angeles, where

I met my wife, Susan Levitt. We got engaged three days later!

It's a small world for refugee families, and that became evident at our wedding. One of our guests was Lotte Samson, a family friend who had immigrated from Germany to Australia and lived in Melbourne. She sat at a table with some of our American German cousins. One cousin bemoaned losing touch with her brother, who had also immigrated to Australia. What is his name? Lotte asked. My cousin told her. Lotte's response: “He's my next-door neighbor!” Brother and sister were later reunited after 40 years.

Eventually my work took us to Rochester, New York, and northern Virginia. When I retired in 2000, we moved to Newport News, Virginia, to be near our son Mark, who was attending

Christopher Newport University. Of course, he then moved to Virginia Beach. Our other son, Erich, lives in Fairfax, Virginia. Today, at 85, I work part-time at Lowe's to keep busy and mix with people. We are one of 10 founding members of Congregation Emet V'Or in Yorktown.

Like most German-Jewish families, many of our relatives and friends – those who survived the Nazis – are dispersed around the globe. I have cousins in Sweden, France, England, Holland, Brazil and Argentina. Even Uncle Willie, the one who hid under our kitchen sink, managed to escape Germany; he lived a long life in England and later in Holland.

As for me, I am grateful to be alive and an American. Although our history has a lot of tragedies, my father was able to transplant his family to a great, free country.



The Alte Synagogue in Essen Germany.

Schloss & Jaffe

Shipshape Chance Encounter

*Among other uses,
the SS Manhattan
carried Olympians and
Kindertransport refugees
during the 1930s.*



Contemporary postcard by United States Line, NYC, of luxusliner “S.S. Manhattan” for the Northern Atlantic route to Europe.

For two small boys traveling with their family in 1938, the decks of the SS *Manhattan* must have been a vast playground. The SS *Manhattan* was one of the largest luxury liners built in the U.S., and it was able to carry 1,100 passengers. It also had a celebrity pedigree. In 1936, it took the U.S. team to the Olympic Games in Berlin. In April 1938, members of the Kennedy family traveled on the *Manhattan* to join Joseph P. Kennedy Sr., appointed U.S. ambassador to England.¹

More importantly, the Manhattan provided an escape from Nazi Germany for some Jewish passengers, like the 88 children brought to England as part of the *Kindertransport*. The *Manhattan* was full of passengers like Max Japha and the Schloss family, who boarded the liner on January 15, 1938, in Hamburg. You can find all their names on the ship's manifest.

Max was 36 years old, traveling alone, heading for his brother's home in New York. And he remembers seeing those

two little boys running around the ship decks. By a twist of fate, he would see them again – with their parents, Henry and Regina Schloss. But not aboard the *Manhattan* or in the teeming immigrant city of New York. Somehow, these German-Jewish refugees, after crossing the Atlantic on the same ship, would cross paths for the first time in a much smaller, more unlikely American city.

This is the story of how Max Japha and Henry Schloss built new lives in Norfolk, Virginia, and came to be lifelong friends.