

Secret Survivor



BY ROCHELLE CHERNIAWSKI

From 1938 to 1940, a rescue mission known as Kindertransport helped remove nearly 10,000 Jewish children from Nazi-occupied areas of Europe and relocated them to Great Britain and other countries. Separated from their families, many of the children were placed in foster homes, hostels, and schools. As a result of the unimaginable experiences they endured, many remained silent about their rescue and the related events of World War II. Lila Williamson (King's Crown) was one of those children.

Lila had a sheltered upbringing in Mainz, Germany. She was just

five years old when her mother passed away and she and her younger sister, Ruth, were sent to live with their maternal grandparents in Gross-Gerau, Germany. The sisters traveled to Alzey on occasion to visit with their father. They lived a safe and comfortable life until November 9, 1938 – historically known as Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass. That night, the paramilitary wing of the Nazi party raided the streets of Germany and Austria, carrying out a series of coordinated attacks against Jews. Lila's grandmother was injured during the assault, and the family was so scared that they locked themselves in a bathroom without windows. Lila was 15 years old.

Lila's father had been arrested because he was Jewish. Because of that, the family escaped to Frankfurt. Lila later learned that her father died in a concentration camp.

From Frankfurt, the family managed to get Lila and Ruth transported to England with Kindertransport through a rescue organization known as HIAS. "They tried to get the children out of Germany as fast as possible to keep us out of concentration camps," recalled Lila.

Her sister went first, and was young enough to be adopted by a family in Coventry. About six months later, Lila was sent to a family in Manchester who was supposed to send her to school. "As it turned out, I was their maid," she said. "It wasn't good. It was a young couple with a baby. They had me taking care of the baby, making the beds, laying the fire. I didn't know how to do any of that. I didn't even know how to handle money. That didn't work out. They shoved me off to another family."

The next family she went to live with had two young girls, ages 9 and 11. Between the chores of scrubbing floors, doing dishes, and taking care of the house, Lila learned English from the girls while they did their homework.

During that time, she was able to communicate with her sister through HIAS. "We kept in touch, dropped a note every once in a while. She was treated well, like one of their other kids. But, eventually, Coventry was bombed, the family lost their house, and Ruth moved to Leeds."



Because of her role as a maid, Lila was oblivious to what was going on during the war. "All we knew was that we were in danger when we had to run for shelter during air raids."

In 1941, Lila received a travel visa from a family member in Chicago. "My grandfather had money. He distributed it in America and in Switzerland. He sent money to a cousin in Chicago, and she arranged for me to stay with her."

With that, Lila boarded a travel ship, a minesweeper, headed for the United States. She recalled seeing the Statue of Liberty as the ship pulled into the New York Harbor. A week later, she boarded a train bound for her relative's home in Chicago.

Living with Aunt Jenny proved to be a much more suitable situation for Lila, as she quickly secured a job wrapping packages in the basement of the local Carson Pirie Scott & Co. department store. "I was thrilled," shared Lila. "After that I got a good job working for a lady who made hats. I became the errand girl. That was a good job."

While she embraced her new life in Chicago, she turned away from her past. "I just didn't want to be reminded. I didn't want to let it come up every day. I just sort of swept it under the carpet."

But, a part of her past that she wasn't will-

ing to forget was her family. First, she brought her grandmother who survived the concentration camp over to the United States and got her set up in a Jewish Elderly Home. Then, after Lila married a law student who lived across the street from Aunt Jenny's house, she brought her sister to the United States. "I worked and saved enough money to buy my sister's plane ticket. She came, but didn't live with me."

After six years of marriage, the couple welcomed their first child, a daughter. They later went on to have two more children, a boy and a girl.

While her children were learning about World War II in school, Lila chose not to divulge too much information about her personal experience. In fact, she didn't even share the details of her story with her husband. "We didn't talk about



A group of Jewish refugees arrive in London in February 1939. Credit: Image provided by German Federal Archive as part of a cooperation project.

my past – at all. My grandmother talked about it a little and shared some with my husband."

The only people who were granted a glimpse of Lila's history were her closest friends who had similar pasts. Even then, she knew it was impossible for others to relate. "People just can't comprehend."

Tragedy came rushing back into Lila's life when her oldest daughter was killed in a car crash on Thanksgiving. She was 21 years old. "I've been dealt some hard knocks," she said.

Lila kept herself busy, and got involved with a business that made money from selling used bricks. "When a wrecking company would demolish a building, they would leave the bricks on the ground. In Chicago, people would clean the bricks, stack them, and load them in a rail car. It was up to me to sell them.

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My first customer was a Holiday Inn, but I mostly sold to people in the building business. I ran the brick selling business until 1971.”

Unfortunately, her marriage ended in divorce. She later got remarried to a man that she met through her daughter’s Girl Scout leader. “He was a widower who was retired from the Air Force. He was my happily ever after.”

Lila and her husband lived in Memphis for a few years before building a home in Lehigh Acres, Florida in 1979. It

was around that time that Lila’s private history began to fade into the distance. “By the time I came to Lehigh, most of my friends had died, including my husband’s sister, who was my good friend. So, whatever I told them died with them.”

Her husband, who also knew a portion of her story, passed away during a cruise vacation.

After a neighbor moved to Shell Point, Lila began visiting each month to help with errands. “I saw what Shell Point was and how it grew. Eventually, I put a deposit down. I moved into Periwinkle in 2000.”

Lila quickly got involved in volunteering at the Gift Shop. She also started the Mahjong group, and continues to play in the Sabal Room every Monday. “After 25 years of doing Meals on Wheels in Lehigh, I knew I wanted to volunteer at Shell Point!” she said.



Left: A Kindertransport monument at Liverpool Street Station pays tribute to those who aided the rescue of thousands of Jewish children from the Nazi persecution. Credit: Image provided to Wikimedia Commons by lifeinmegapixels.com.

Below: Lila’s German ID. The red “J” noted on the government document signified that she was Jewish.

She maintained her silence about her painful past until 2012, when she was asked to share her experience for a documentary video that was being made for the Holocaust Museum in Naples. “Somebody came to me and said they wanted to make a sort of small movie because too many of the people impacted by the Holocaust have died. I was ready then. I am at an age where I realize that there are not many of us left.”

Although she felt a sense of responsibility when it came to sharing her story, it didn’t ease the pain of the process. “There are traumatic experiences that you just want to forget. I swept a lot under the carpet. It takes guts to tell this story.”

