

CHAPTER 5

HELGA'S EARLY YEARS

As a result of the Nazi regime in Germany, Helga's parents' lifespan was cut short, that is, 41 years for her father, Fritz Wolff, and 37 years for her mother, Herta Wolff. They both died in Auschwitz. Their official death certificates show - "Died on or before December 31, 1942". When Helga's parents married in 1931, her father was 30 years old and her mother was 26. Helga was born in Berlin on May 10, 1933. When conditions under the Nazis deteriorated, Helga's mother begged her husband to follow her brother Guenther, who had earlier immigrated to Lima, Peru, but Fritz was one of the German Jews who hoped that the fate of the Jews would eventually change for the better. However, when the situation did not improve, the family decided to leave Berlin for Brussels, Belgium sometime in 1939. Helga recalls having gone to kindergarten there. Because he had a German passport, her father was picked up by the Belgian police on May 10, 1940 when the Germans invaded Belgium. After a few weeks, her mother found out where he had been taken and was able to trace his movement. Eventually (date unknown) her father was moved to Paris, and Helga and her mother followed him and were likewise picked up by the French police and placed in a concentration camp where Dutch, Belgian and French Jews were rounded up. We were unable to find out the names of two or three additional camps where Helga's father and Helga and her mother were being held before all three of them arrived at Rivesaltes in March 1941. We also do not know whether or when Helga and her mother were reunited with her father before they arrived at Rivesaltes. Rivesaltes, located just a few miles north of Perpignan, close to the Spanish border, was a small military compound next to which the concentration camp for mainly Jewish people was built after France was taken over by the Germans. The men and women were kept in separate buildings but were able to arrange mutual visits. The last letter from Helga's mother received by Helga's uncle, Guenther Perl in Lima, the only brother of Helga's mother, was dated April 18, 1941 and spoke of deteriorating conditions in the camp. Helga and her father included their good wishes, which tell us that she was still with her parents on April 18, 1941. We know from official documents received from the German government that Helga's parents were shipped out from Rivesaltes with destination Auschwitz on September 9, 1942 in Convoy 30, and their death certificates show that they died on or before December 31, 1942.

As was learned after the war, during the period of Helga's and her parents' stay at Rivesaltes, American Friends Service Committee (a Quaker organization) approached the camp and offered to take any and all children and place them in children's colonies under their supervision if the parents were agreeable to turning their children over to them. Helga's mother decided to give up her only child of eight or nine years to the Quakers because she must have felt or perhaps even must have known that wherever they were going to be shipped next would be worse than what they had experienced until that time. From Rivesaltes, Helga was taken by the Quakers to a safe home in Bandol, France which overlooked the Mediterranean. From there she was moved to Palavas near Montpellier where she stayed for a few weeks, and

then was moved to San Rafael located on the French Riviera, southwest of Nice. In the summer of 1942, the Quakers moved her to Codom, north of the Pyrenees, where they placed her in the children's colony at the Chateau Monteleone. There is no way for us to find out the exact date when Helga left her parents in Rivesaltes, but it was after April 18, 1941 (the date on the letter written by Helga's mother) and before the summer of 1942 when she was officially registered at Chateau de Montéléone. Approximately 37 children including Helga and four other Jewish children, were placed there.

Helga was only eight years old when she was separated from her mother. All she remembers about that day is that she was very sad and cried. Helga has buried these memories for they were too painful for her to deal with. We had, over the years, two occasions when we could have visited Auschwitz, but she did not want to go. She was simply not ready to face that tragic reality of what had happened to her parents.

Being parents ourselves, Helga and I can only imagine the agony and pain the mothers of young children must have felt when asked to give up their child or children to completely unknown people. On the other hand, having been moved around to several camps and hearing stories of eventually being sent to worse unknown places somewhere in Eastern Europe, the women must have felt that their children would have a better chance of staying alive if they gave them up. What moral strength Helga's mother must have had in order to turn over her only child. In retrospect, considering the tragic events which befell people of Jewish faith and other innocent victims until the end of the Second World War, when six million Jews and five million non-Jews were killed in a most horrible manner by the Nazis, it was a wise decision.

In 1952, after Helga and I were married and we spent nine months in Europe waiting for our American immigration visa to be granted, we visited the places where she stayed after she was rescued by the Quakers. We started by visiting Rivesaltes. The concentration camp still exists and occasionally is being used by French and foreign film makers. Helga pointed out to me the barracks reserved for the women and children and the ones for the men. Barbed wire surrounded the camp. When we left Perpignan for Rivesaltes, we had sunny weather, and as we approached Rivesaltes, the sky suddenly changed and rain fell, and while we were driving through the campgrounds, the wind blew open several doors to the barracks. I took a whole roll of photos of the various buildings. Because of the intensity of the storm, we decided to leave. Ten minutes later, the weather changed and the sun appeared. On that particular trip, I took over twelve rolls of film, consisting of 36 pictures each, and when I had them developed, eleven rolls came out well but the roll I took at Rivesaltes was blank. I never understood what happened, but it appears that we were not meant to have taken pictures of the camp. Obviously, something must have gone awry when I put the film into the camera, because otherwise there is no logical explanation.

We also visited the Chateau Montéléone in Condom. We rang the doorbell of the house and told the young couple who came to the door the reason for our visit. They were kind enough to invite us in. Helga took us up the stairs and we went into a closet where she had engraved her name when she first arrived. We could not find it. I was probably painted over a few times.

During the visit, Helga recalled an incident that she will always remember. One day she went over to the neighboring farm. She picked cherries from the trees and watched the cows. The owners of the farm came to talk to her and asked her if she was hungry. When she told them she was, they gave her some food. She also remembers that around Montéléone, there were fields of daisies where she and the other children would run and play and climb trees.

Out of the 37 children who lived in Chateau de Montéléone, five were Jewish refugees, including Helga. The 32 non-Jewish children were visited frequently by members of their families. Gabriel and Maria Louise Lanoux, who were parents of two small girls, were among those gentile people who visited on weekends and brought small gifts for the children. They took a special liking to the five Jewish children who did not receive visits from their families. A Spanish maid who worked at Chateau de Montéléone was known to Gabriel and Maria Louise Lanoux, and they mentioned to her that if ever she became aware that the lives of the five Jewish children were in danger, she should notify them immediately. One day the Spanish maid overheard the administrator of Chateau de Montéléone speaking with the Gestapo, informing them that there were five Jewish children under her care. The maid further heard that the children would be picked up in the next few days, and I can only assume that they would be sent to a concentration camp. The maid immediately notified Mr. Lanoux of what she had heard, and Mr. Lanoux, with the help of the French underground, was able to remove the five Jewish children during the night and to place them with several French families who were glad to take in these children. Mr. and Mrs. Lanoux chose to keep Helga for themselves. This rescue took place prior to July 14, 1944 because on that date, the Chateau Montéléone closed due to lack of finances. We do not know how long Helga stayed with the Lanoux family, but eventually they decided to place Helga with their very close friends, Mr. and Mrs. Acard, who were living in a small house outside of Hyeres near Toulon, where they chose to retire after having lived most of their life in Paris. The Acards never had children of their own and were very pleased to get Helga. Neither the Lanoux nor the Acards ever attempted to adopt Helga or convert her to their religion, and during all the time she lived and went to school in South France she lived under her own name. One must remember that South France was Vichy territory and therefore it was not occupied by the Nazis as Northern France was. Helga remembers going to school in Condom when she was staying with the Lanoux family and also in Hyeres while she was with the Acard family.

On Helga's and my visit in 1952 to Mr. Lanoux and Mr. and Mrs. Acard, I was at a great disadvantage because my knowledge of French was very limited. I could make myself understood in the most basic things, but when it came to understanding people who only spoke French, it was quite difficult. They only spoke French and their stories had to be translated to me by Helga. This was not a real good way to communicate and a great deal of the substance of what they told us got lost due to my inability to speak the language. I also at that time was young and somewhat immature. Today I would know to ask the right questions and write down the answers, with the dates and facts. I was not up to the task then and I regret it very much.

Both the Lanoux and the Acards were middle class people. Mr. Lanoux had three small clothing stores in Condom and the surrounding area. Neither couple had ever traveled

beyond their own country. However, they were good, solid citizens with big hearts and concerned about their fellow human beings. They not only visited the children's colony, but were also engaged in other charity work. As a point of interest, both families belonged to the Bahai faith. Since both couples took care of Helga with exceptional love, we felt a parent/child relationship with them and therefore in our minds we adopted them as surrogate parents.

Our daughter, Patricia, lived in Paris, for two years in the late 1970's. She learned to speak; French and went to visit Mrs. Acard in the south of France, where she lived in a retirement home. Mr. Acard had already passed away. Mrs. Acard was delighted to meet her and introduced her to everyone as her "American Granddaughter". Since the Acards never had children of their own, they always remembered Helga as their daughter.

Of the two couples, Mr. and Mrs. Lanoux were better off financially than the Acards, who retired to a small modest house on the outskirts of Hyeres. Mrs. Lanoux passed away at a relatively young age as a result of an illness in late 1950. Mr. Lanoux died in the early 1970's. Whereas Mr. and Mrs. Acard were somewhat older than Mr. and Mrs. Lanoux, both outlived Mr. Lanoux by close to 15 years. Mr. Acard passed away in the early 1970's and Mrs. Acard in 1990.

During the following years, Helga and I continued to visit our adopted families in France, and after the death of Mr. and Mrs. Lanoux, their two adopted daughters, Marie Therese (known as Mathe) Lanoux and Marie Louise (known as Malou) Pinel, became our European family. As our own children grew up and visited Europe on several occasions, we always made it a point for them to visit Mrs. Acard as well as Mathe and Malou. Helga and I made it a tradition to visit Mathe and Malou and their families every two or three years.

In 1992, we invited Malou and her family as well as Mathe to spend two weeks with us in Dallas. Mathe's children are considerably older than Malou's, and they already had their own families at that time whom they could not leave. None of the six of them had ever left France or traveled on a plane. All of our family shared the joy and amazement expressed by them when they got off the plane in Dallas. They spent a week in Dallas, and during the second week, Helga and Patricia, both of whom speak fluent French, took their adopted family on a car trip through parts of Texas. They visited Austin, San Antonio, the LBJ Ranch and the surrounding area, and they were of course impressed by the different lifestyle practiced in this area of the world, versus that in a small town in France.

Both Mathe and Malou live in Blateiras, Anduz, in South France. They each have a home in a small valley where only a total of 28 homes have been built, with a beautiful view of the countryside. Malou, who is a nurse, was active for many years in the Salvation Army, and her husband worked for the government in the administration of prisons. Malou's oldest daughter, Laticia, is married and is insurance specialist. Malou's second daughter, Estelle, is a math teacher. Malou's son, Ian, is the youngest of the three children. Mathe, a divorcee, has a son and a daughter. Her son Jacques, who is married, is active in the business world in Paris. Mathe's daughter, Sylvie, is married to a French marine officer and lives in the same village as her mother. They have two children.

After the war, Helga's uncle and aunt, Guenther and Thea Perl, found out through several Jewish organizations that Helga was alive and living with a French family. Since South France was never occupied by the Germans, the Jewish underground was able to find out about Jewish children having been placed with French families, and they were trying to get them moved to Palestine. Guenther and Thea Perl were able to arrange through the Jewish organizations that Helga would come to Lima to live with them. In the fall of 1946, Helga sailed from France to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with final destination Lima by plane. When the ship arrived in Rio, representatives of the Jewish organizations in Brazil welcomed the Jewish refugees, and a lady by the name of Mrs. Goldsmith, who happened to be the niece of Helena Rubinstein, the cosmetics giant, and who was part of the welcoming committee, saw Helga, a young girl of 13 traveling alone among more than 500 refugees. She immediately invited Helga to stay at her home, and being obviously a lady of means, she promptly purchased new clothes for Helga and was ready to adopt her since she was childless. She was able to delay Helga's trip to Lima for almost two months, to the despair of Guenther and Thea Perl who were expecting her to arrive by plane shortly after her arrival in Rio. Helga and I visited Mr. and Mrs. Goldsmith in Rio in 1952 where we made a stop-over on our way back from Holland to Lima to pick up our immigration visa and officially immigrate to the United States. Our meeting with them was a very pleasant experience for all of us.