

Jerry G. H. Lissner's Autobiography

“All the world's a stage,” wrote Shakespeare,
“And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.....”

My entrance on the stage took place on the 21st of February 1925, in Berlin, Germany. My birth was celebrated rather lavishly because I turned out to be a boy. The relatives of my father either did not have children, or their children were of the female sex. One can therefore understand that my father's family was overjoyed and celebrated the event with a certain amount of extravagance.

I began to visit the VOLKSSCHULE (grammar school) in 1931 and while attending that school was never considered a good student.

My public high school career was rather short due to the racial discrimination which was exercised in Germany at that time. In 1935, my parents sent me to one of the best public high schools in Berlin, the HOHENZOLLERN OBERREALSCHULE. But after less than a year my presence there was made impossible. I left that school and entered a private high school, the Private Waldschule Kaliski.

During my stay at the private school, I was never better scholastically than the average student there. The only fields which interested me were mathematics and the athletic activities; and on the 8th of September 1938, when my school had its first and last field day, I was able to win two of the events: the running, broadjump and the 110 yard dash. A few days later, when the Jewish schools in Germany had their annual field day in

Berlin, I was able to get the 4th place in these two events, although I had to compete against fellows who were a year older.

During all this time I had lived a rather pleasant life. My parents were members of the so called upper class and we had no financial worries whatsoever. I shall always remember how I looked forward to the weekends which my parents and I spent in the country. On rainy nights my mother used to play the piano and I still see my father standing next to her and taking great pleasure in watching her and listening to the music. Every year I spent my summer vacation at a different spot in Germany and I shall never forget the summer of 1938 when my parents and I made a trip by car through Central Germany and along the Rhine.

The religious persecution in Germany in the meanwhile had grown from bad to worse and though I did not dream of it at the time my departure from Germany was imminent. On the 30th of January 1939 I left Germany on the S.S. Washington, which at the time was taken Jewish refugees from Hamburg, Germany to the U.S. as well as to England. My destination was England.

My parents were not quite as lucky as I was. On the night of the ninth of November 1938, the night of the burning of the synagogues, two Gestapo men came to our home to arrest my father. Fortunately, a good friend of ours had warned us by phone about the impending arrest and my father left the house about one hour before the Gestapo men arrived. From that day on until the first of September 1939, when he and my mother were finally able to leave Germany, he stayed with some Christian friends of ours.

Upon my arrival in England, I was sent to Chislehurst, which is about 25 miles southeast of London. A number of rich people, who resided in Chislehurst had donated a large sum of money and had offered to take care of 12 young Jewish boys from Germany. I was selected to be one of them. They had rented a house and engaged a couple who was to look after us. All of us

were approximately the same age and because we were too young to grasp the significance of the predicament which we were in, I am sure that I speak for all of us when I say that the year and a half which we spent in Chislehurst was the most enjoyable, the most carefree period of all our lives.

During my stay in Chislehurst, I became a member of the British Boy Scouts and became closely acquainted with many of them during the various activities in which I participated.

On the 30th of June 1940, my parents and I, once again united, left England for New York. On the 8th of July 1940, the Statue of Liberty welcomed us to the New World. The first night in New York we spent in one of the downtown hotels and I remember looking out of the window before going to bed and wondering if it were not all a dream from which I should awaken. "Is it possible that I am really here in America at last?"

After eliminating all other professions and trades, I decided to enter the Food Trades Vocational High School and did so in September 1940, to learn how to cook and bake. During the first few weeks in school, it began to dawn on me that I was not only attending school for the sake of the teachers. But it was not until the second term that I was among the best students in the class. When I finally graduated from that school, I received the "Related Subjects Award". During the last three terms I was G.O. representative of my class and during the last term was appointed Art Editor of our yearbook.

On the 14th of August 1943, shortly after graduating from high school, I became a member of the Armed Forces, and was sent to cooks and baker school. While attending that school one of the most important events of my life occurred. On the third of February 1944 I became a citizen of the United States. This was something I had been looking forward to for a long time because to me this meant liberty, equality, the end of persecution, and above all it meant a new home.

I was sent to Europe in June 1944 and remember distinctly that tears came into my eyes when I waved farewell to the Statue of Liberty. “Was I ever going to see her again?”

Upon arrival in Europe, I was assigned to the Military Intelligence Service and placed on duty with the XX Corps of the Third Army. My job there consisted of searching for, finding, and subsequently arresting and interrogating Nazi. “Big Shots”, war criminals, German spies and after the war was over to help combat corruption and uncover black market activities. I remember writing home about it and explaining my work by comparing it with a game of chess. I was always on the attack, always trying to break through the defense of my opponent; eventually beating him. I am proud to say that I never lost a battle and every one of my opponents is behind barbed wire today.

On the 10th of April, the infantry of the XX Corps liberated the inmates of the concentration camp Buchenwald and I was one of the first of the intelligence personnel to get there. The camp was located about 5 miles from Weimar, the birthplace of the postwar German Republic and the home of Schiller and Goethe. When we got there, we found about 21000 prisoners, including anti-Nazis, Jews, slave laborers, and a few Allied soldiers. More dead than alive, they were all that remained from the 82000 who were on the camp roster in March. The rest had been removed or slain. Many of the rescued prisoners, who were bare skin and bones, continued to die daily after we got there simply because they were too far gone for food or medicine to help. For a long time, I was unable to sleep well at night and kept dreaming about the camp and its inmates, but above all about the lamp shades and pocketbooks that had been made from human skin.

In retrospect of my Army career, it can be said that it was extremely strenuous but interesting and if one considers that I had the opportunity to interrogate such persons as “Pastor” Nie-

moller and Hans Albers and was able to arrest among others Oskar Henschel, one of the greatest industrialists in Germany and an early follower of Herr Hitler, one will be able to understand that I would not have wanted to miss this for anything in the world. Because of the type of work which I did overseas I was unwilling to return to the baking field upon my return to the States and I began to strive for a better position in life.

In closing, it might be fitting to quote the last sentence of the letter of recommendation which my Scout Master in Chislehurst gave me before I left:

“I am sure if he is given the opportunities he merits he will become a splendid citizen of the country of his choice.