

# A Journey Revisited

by Nancy Sokoler Steiner, Contributing Writer

**M**y father, Allen Sokoler, never spoke about the first nine years of his life, when he lived in Germany. My two brothers and I knew instinctively not to ask, not to mention the country's name in his presence. We avoided bringing German-made goods into our home — not even German chocolate would cross our threshold.

My grandmother, however, wanted our family to know about the Nazi-inflicted terrors: How she had only one child because in the 1930s the political climate was just too hostile to risk bringing a new Jewish life into the world; how my grandfather was taken from their home on Kristallnacht; how she convinced the local police to release him from jail and admit him to the hospital for treatment of stomach problems; how after waiting years for a visa to Israel, she managed to get U.S. visas for herself, my grandfather, my father and her elderly parents mere months before it was too late. But for my father, those childhood memories were just too painful to revisit.

In 2007, my folks, who live in Woodland Hills, attended an Elderhostel at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute (now American Jewish University) in Simi Valley. The program included topics of Jewish interest, and drew attendees from around the country.

Sitting at a table with other participants, the topic of Germany came up, and a woman mentioned that she had been born



Ann Haas (formerly Hofmann), standing, far right and Allen Sokoler, seated farthest back (leaning forward) aboard the S.S. Washington in 1939.

there. My dad said he was, too.

Ann Haas, who lives in Camarillo, was born Anna Hofmann in Frankfurt in 1927. Her family left Germany for Switzerland

when she was 6 years old. Then they moved to Lake Como, Italy, living along with a handful of Jewish families in a town where they faced little animosity. The Hofmanns

stayed in Italy for five years, leaving only when Mussolini made it too difficult to remain.

When she was 12, Ann and her family

sailed from France to New York. They settled in Canton, Ohio, where Ann remained until moving to Los Angeles in 1949. She married, raised a son and volunteered at a local hospital for four decades.

My father was born in Dusseldorf in 1930, and grew up in the nearby town of Kamp-Lindfort. He remembers being bullied, and eventually being the only remaining Jewish child at his school.

His family also came to the United States in 1939, on one of the last ships to leave Germany. They made a home in New Jersey and in time, my dad earned an MBA, met my mom and had three children.

Our family moved to Los Angeles in 1973, where my dad worked as a government price analyst for the U.S. Air Force Base in El Segundo.

Dad asked Ann when she came to the United States.

Her family left Europe in 1939, she told him, mere months before Britain declared war on Germany.

My father was intrigued. That was the same year his family got out.

Ann said that her brother, sister and mother sailed from Le Havre, France to

decades earlier.

My dad and Ann marveled at discovering this common bond. After all, there aren't too many people still around who made that particular passage. Even an infant would be 70 years old by now. What's more, they'd met in California — across the country from where they disembarked from their voyage. And they both chose to attend the same Elderhostel program — Ann's first.

But perhaps just as miraculous was the fact that my father brought up the topic in the first place, so that this discovery would even be possible. Maybe time has tempered the intensity of his memories. Or perhaps he let down his guard when he found someone he knew could relate to what he experienced at that horrible time and place, someone whose childhood also was interrupted as his had been.

Dad and Ann were delighted to have this unexpected reunion and have kept in touch since meeting a year ago last December. They have shared fond memories of that long-ago journey that took them to freedom.

The funny thing is, my father's willing-



*Ann Haas and Allen Sokoler with a postcard of the ship that brought them from Europe to the United States in 1939.*

New York on the S.S. Washington, one of the last ships to leave Germany.

The S.S. Washington? My father couldn't believe what he was hearing. On Jan. 31, 1939, my father, his parents and grandparents boarded the S.S. Washington in Hamburg, Germany. It subsequently stopped in Le Havre.

Could it be that he and Ann had shared the journey from Europe to New York at one of history's darkest moments? And that they had reunited so many years later at a Jewish program in Simi Valley, California?

Ann told my parents that she had a photograph of the children on board the ship. My father had no recollection of such a photo being taken, but he also had a souvenir from the journey — a copy of the S.S. Washington's passenger manifest.

When he returned home, my dad checked the manifest. There he found the names Anna, Else, Hans and Recha Hofmann — Ann, her sister, brother and mother.

Meanwhile, Ann sent my father her photo of the children. She marked it with an arrow next to herself, and guessed at which might be my dad. She was right — there he was in the photograph, taken almost seven

ness to talk has broadened. He asked me to share his story. And, strangely, I'm the one who now dragged her feet — first in meeting with Ann, and then in writing this piece. Maybe my reluctance stems from years of being afraid to mention the word "Germany" in my father's presence. It feels almost traitorous to publicize his link to that country.

But Dad's ready to go public — at least about the story of his departure from Germany. I'm not sure that he'll ever want to share the memories of what preceded the leaving. There's a part of me that would like to know more — to hear Dad's version of the stories my grandmother told. But another part of me lacks the courage to broach the topic or the heart to re-traumatize the 9-year-old he once was.

I take comfort in knowing that my dad defied the fate Hitler intended for him, though he didn't escape unscathed. He's had to carry the burden of his secret memories for a lifetime, despite all his subsequent happiness and successes. Still, I'm grateful that his chance discovery of Ann has given him something positive to look back upon from that harrowing time in his life. ●