

Name - Lotte Strauss Meyerson

Birth Date - October 27, 1922

Place of Birth - Darmstadt, Germany

Parents' Names - Meier and Else David Strauss

Siblings - Walter

Children/Grandchildren - 2/1

Lotte enjoyed a happy and normal childhood with a loving family, lots of relatives who visited one another often, and a younger brother, by 18 months, Walter. Her parents operated a wholesale textile business with some 20 employees. They led a comfortable life.

There were two Jewish congregations in Darmstadt, Orthodox and Reform. Lotte's family were Orthodox (barely by observance). It was not unusual for the two congregations to not mix and, as Lotte said, many Orthodox would "not set foot in the other - it was like going to church". Her congregation was built in a beautiful, oriental style with the women in the balcony above and the men below. One of her favorite holidays was Simchas Torah when the girls were allowed to be on the floor below.

Before 1935, Lotte attended the girls' Lyceum in Darmstadt. With the passage of the Nuremberg Laws, Jewish students could no longer attend school with non-Jewish students, so the Jewish community from the larger area set up a Jewish Day School next to the Orthodox Congregation. They hired the Jewish teachers who had been fired with the passage of the Nuremberg laws. She received an excellent education and does not recall it as a painful transition.

Lotte recalls gangs of German youth hollering at her "Jew, dirty Jew". When she would see them coming, she would cross to the other side of the street and hold her head up. She says that she was never hit or accosted and thinks that was more the experience of Jewish boys. One day, her aunt and uncle from a distant town showed up at their door on Shabbat. This was serious, as they were a strictly observant Orthodox family who are forbidden, except to save life, from traveling on the Sabbath. They reported that they had had to flee their home because of threats on their lives. It was a terrible shock to her father, Meier, who then had a nervous breakdown. The aunt and her family stayed at Lotte's home for a while before emigrating to Palestine.

When her father recovered, he began making plans to leave Germany. Knowing they would not be able to take money out of Germany with them, they planned a vacation to Switzerland in 1935. For vacation purposes, families were allowed to take some money out of the country. They took the maximum they could and met a relative from Argentina who saved it for them. Other family members waited much longer to prepare to leave. They felt "We will be on the last boat

out - we are just as good Germans as any other Germans". Lotte's family was forced to sell the business to one of the employees (at a deep discount), as was required by the Nuremberg Laws.

Lotte became a member of Agudas Israel, an Orthodox Zionist youth organization. If she had been two years older, she says she would have emigrated to Palestine on her own.

While the family considered Uruguay and Argentina as possible places to which to emigrate, it was for the United States that they finally found a sponsor; meanwhile they were studying both Spanish and English. The family of her father's 2nd cousins were well-to-do with an apartment on 5th Ave. in New York. When Meier asked them to sponsor the family, they replied they would sponsor only him. He came to the US alone and worked to bring Else and the children later. Lotte recalls fear and tension in the household during the 6 months the family was apart. It was hard for Lotte to understand the response of the cousins.

Once in the US, Meier quickly determined NYC had too many refugees and he bought a bus ticket to Los Angeles where he had a cousin. He stopped off in Chicago to see a friend. He liked Chicago and decided to stay. He learned that many of the janitors there were earlier German immigrants. Speaking little English, he became a Fuller Brush salesman selling to the janitors. In six months, he was able to establish himself and the NYC cousins co-signed a sponsorship paper with him to bring over the family.

As they could still take their belongings but no money out of the country, they bought several Leica cameras with the intention of selling them in the US. They also had new clothes made so they wouldn't need new ones for a while. They arrived in New York City in October, 1937, where they were met by their father and HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and soon headed for Chicago (the same family that would not originally sponsor Else, Lotte, and Walter now wanted to adopt Lotte once they met her).

In Chicago, the adjustments were many. Lotte was 14 years old. The previous four years were not those of carefree youth but were lived under the Nazis. In Chicago, girls were more worried about what color lipstick to wear and whom to date. Lotte felt out of place and was still perfecting her English. The clothes they had had specially made she found to be out of style. Her father began a new company making ironing board covers. The first power machine was set up in the family dining room in Hyde Park and Lotte learned to operate it, and they had a boarder for several years.

Their lives were intertwined with other German refugee families. At social gatherings, she recalls their conversations about how easy life had been in Germany compared to their new circumstances. But not her parents. They never longed for what was gone and were grateful to be safe and able to begin a new life in America. When Meier finally made enough money to pay taxes to the American Government, he was proud to be able in a small way to pay a debt he felt he owed.

When she was 16, she attended a gathering for immigrant young people and someone invited her to the Hyde Park Co-Op Youth League meetings which took place each Saturday night. The format began with a serious discussion topic and ended with International Folk Dancing*. Most

of the participants were college students. Having a place where she could meet others who were thinking of serious matters made all the difference in Lotte's life. Lotte's intellectual life and her commitment to social justice were formed during the years of persecution in Germany and informed by the experience of the Co-Op Youth League.

Meanwhile, her parents were working to bring over other family members. There was constant letter exchange that kept them in touch with Germany and Darmstadt, through which they learned that the two synagogues were burned to the ground during Krystalnacht. They successfully brought her grandmother and some other family members to the US. But her mother's inability to bring out her sister left her with a sense of guilt for her entire life. Lotte also tried to bring over friends. In the late 1930's, she went to a Rabbi asking if he could help her bring over a particular friend. Painfully, she recalls, he kept her at the door and replied "Nothing can be done".

The Co-Op movement was a growing part of Lotte's life, including in the summer where she went to a cooperative family camp. In the Youth League, she met Seymour, whom she married in 1943, just before he went into the army and later officer candidate school. He was sent to Germany just as the war ended and sent home reports of Darmstadt which was 80% destroyed. On his return, living in Chicago and Gary, Indiana, they focused on raising two daughters. Lotte received compensation of \$1,000.00 from the German government for "lost schooling" and her parents received payment as well for what would have been their social security funds had they remained in Germany. Lotte became very involved in a host of social change organizations.

In 1961, Lotte followed Seymour, who is a chemist, on a European lecture tour that included a visit to Germany. She recalls thinking to herself about everyone she passed "Where were you? What did you do?" When they got to Darmstadt, they knocked on the door of their former apartment and had a brief conversation. In Alsbach, the home of her grandparents, she was standing in front of her mother's home pointing things out to Seymour. A crowd of neighbors drew around them. When they learned this was Else's daughter, their response was overwhelming:

- They were so sorry for what happened
- They often thought of the David family and wondered how everyone was
- They never thought things would go to the place they did
- During the war they suffered a great deal too
- They had written to Else but she never wrote back - why?

In 1999, Lotte again returned to Darmstadt. In a phone conversation with a childhood friend she learned that the friend was going to Darmstadt the following week for a reunion sponsored by the City Government for former Jewish residents. Quickly, Lotte mobilized her family. She, her daughters Sheella and Elana, and her brother Walter and his wife managed to be there, too. It was the 10th anniversary of the rebuilding of a synagogue in Darmstadt by the city government

that marked the occasion. Lotte was one of 19 former Darmstadt citizens and their families who attended the gathering. And this experience felt very different than the one in 1961 - "the culprits were dead or in nursing homes". The Social Democrats in charge of the city government had also been persecuted by the Nazis. She was impressed by the lengths to which the citizens had gone to support the Jewish community and rebuild it including Russian émigrés who received a year of services (from the national government).

In the early 1990's, Lotte and Seymour were instrumental, with their daughter Elana, in founding Westwood Cohousing Community, an intentional community of 24 houses in Asheville, NC, which brought them here in 1997. Lotte is now serving two years as President. She is also the chair of the Social Justice Committee at (Reform) Congregation Beth Ha Tephila and a speaker on the Holocaust to classrooms of students. She is active in the ACLU and World Federalist Association.

*In those days, International Dance was more often the ethnic dances of individual immigrant groups that generally were unknown out of those communities. Seymour Meyerson, dance leader, and Frank Johnson, musician, would learn of these various groups throughout the Chicago area and attend their social events. The two of them and sometimes other friends jotted down notes on the dance routines and borrowed and copied sheet music. Later they published a collection of the dance instructions and music in a booklet that helped them both pay their way through college. These two led dances at the Youth League meetings and many other places in Chicago.