

John F. Glass: Autobiography

A Child Refugee Tale: Berlin to Los Angeles

Remember the day you went out of Egypt all the days of your life.

(Deuteronomy 16:3)

I was born Joachim Glass at the Frauenklinik in Berlin, January 15, 1936, a descendent of German Jews I can trace back to the 16th Century. My brother Thomas was born at home in December 1937; by that time my parents felt unsafe going to a hospital. We lived at 21 Aneas Strasse in Mariendorf on the outskirts of Berlin, thus avoiding the direct devastation and horror of Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, November 9, 1938. I was almost three years old when we left Germany in January 1939.

My parents, Paul Glass (1905-1979) and Anni Hoff Glass (1909-1991) were both born in Breslau (now Wroclaw), the part of Germany given to Poland after the war. My grandfather Sally Glass had an import-export business and my great grandfather Julius Glass owned a shoe factory in Breslau. Grandfather Hoff owned a specialty paper company. Both my grandfathers had served in the Kaiser's army in World War One.

My father was an electrical engineer. My mother studied photography in Vienna. My parents had known each other since childhood but had lost touch. They later reunited in Berlin and married in 1933, the year Hitler came to power.

My father phoned my mother every day before leaving work to make sure it was safe to come home. His last employment was at Telefunken, developing sound film; I still have swastika-bedecked patents the Germans gave him for his creative work! He was let go early in 1938 solely because he was a Jew.

My father spent the rest of 1938 traveling to surrounding countries to seek refuge. None would let our family in. We were finally able to go to England in 1939 thanks to the Quakers. American, British, and German Quakers acted heroically before and all through the war doing relief work with victims of Nazism.

I am forever grateful to the Quakers for saving our lives.

We were extremely lucky to be able to emigrate safely so late as an intact nuclear family. My grandparents came from Breslau to Berlin to see us off, but missed us because we caught an earlier train. This was particularly poignant and painful for my mother for the rest of her life -- she would never see her parents again. My mother's two sisters, Lore and Ilse, together with my grandparents Hoff, went to South Africa. Three cousins of my mother went on the Kindertransport to England. After the war, two of them, Hartmut and Wolfgang Colden (changed from Cohen), both idealist Communists, returned to Germany, one to the East and one to the West. Both were dedicated to ensuring that Germany would never be fascist again.

Other relatives were not so lucky. Some of my father's first cousins died in Buchenwald, Dachau, and Auschwitz. Robert Jan van Pelt, also a relative, dedicated his definitive book *Auschwitz* to my father's cousin Bob Hanf, who died there in 1944.

The Quakers gave us passage to England. On the way, we stopped in Amsterdam to visit my father's cousin Fritz Hanf (brother of Bob) and his family. Fritz knew Otto Frank through business and their oldest daughters went to school together. After the war Otto once asked Fritz for his advice about what to do with Anne's diary!

The Quakers also provided a house for us in Loughborough. While waiting for our U.S. quota number to come up, my father volunteered on a local farm, and my mother looked after other refugees who lived with us. My earliest memories include being fitted for a gas mask, probably in England. I also remember that my brother was punished for walking over the garden my father planted to cover the bomb shelter he had dug in the back yard. My mother later told me that whenever we met strangers, I would ask her whether they spoke German, indicating that I still felt more comfortable with my first language.

In April of 1940, we sailed to New York from Liverpool on likely the last passenger voyage of the Cunard liner *Lancastria*. The journey took extra days so the ship could zigzag to lessen the risk of being torpedoed. Two months later, almost 5000 British soldiers lost their lives when the Germans sank the *Lancastria*.

After a year in New York, we moved in 1941 to Chicago where an old school friend from Breslau offered my father a position as an electrical engineer. We lived in Uptown, a few blocks from Lake Michigan, on the North Side, where there was a large Jewish refugee community, which provided friends, our doctors, and companions for my Oma (grandmother) Glass, who lived with us. My parents fit into American life very well. My mother was active in the PTA, and a Cub Scout den mother. My father was active in my Boy Scout troop at Temple Sholom, where I was confirmed in 1950.

Despite our apparent assimilation, a nagging anxiety sometimes surfaced. For example, my father always kept the car filled with gas. Also I would take a little leather box filled with survival supplies to school with me every day. I do not recall anyone noticing or my feelings about it at the time, but it must have given me a sense of security—the proverbial “packed suitcase” that Diaspora Jews keep wherever they are, perhaps expressed as a boy scout's response to the Cold War.

Along with my parents I became a U.S citizen in 1945. I was given "Franklin" as a middle name to honor FDR, my parents' hero. That summer, my parents sent me to Circle Pines Center, a cooperatively owned 286-acre interracial children's and family camp in Michigan. CPC's mission was to teach and promote cooperation as a way of life. Beginning as a nine year old, I felt a sense of community and belonging there that I have never found anywhere else. My liberal, social justice and environmental consciousness was born and nurtured at Circle Pines. I treasure the life-long friendships I've made there and still return several times a year.

In 1951 we moved to suburban Skokie, which was then sparsely settled and had only a handful of Jews. I did not like it, but was close enough to Chicago to keep my friends. After graduating from Niles Township High School in 1953, I got a Bachelor degree in Industrial Administration at the University of Illinois. I had started out in engineering, mainly to please my dad, but I did not do well and still regret missing out on a liberal arts education. After two years in the Army (there still was a draft), I returned to the U of I for an MA in Industrial Relations.

In 1960 my brother Tom married and moved to Honolulu, and my parents moved to Los Angeles. Having no more relatives in Chicago, and still not sure what I wanted to do, I enrolled in a Ph.D. program in sociology at UCLA. I had a research assistantship at the Institute of Industrial Relations, where I met my wife, Judith Chanin, who had moved to LA from Brooklyn to get a Ph.D. in labor economics. Her parents had come to the U.S. from Russia at the turn of the century to escape the pogroms.

We married in 1966 and have a son, Aaron, an anthropologist who works with Northwest Coast Native people. I am very pleased that he feels connected to and is interested in our family history. In 2004 we went with Aaron to Wroclaw/Breslau for the first time to see the city where my parents were born and raised. It was both a historically and emotionally satisfying experience, yet it is hard to forget the cruelty of the Nazi time that deprived so many of life and limb, not just of culture. I sometimes wonder what my life would have been like if Hitler had not come along. I've never had a geographically close family in America like the one my parents experienced in pre-war Germany; I miss seeing my German relatives more often.

I know that my life experiences have motivated me to make a difference in the world. I often see what other people don't see, a function perhaps of being bi-cultural. Both Judy and I have been very involved in peace and justice activities and progressive politics since the 1960s. We became founding members of the Progressive Jewish Alliance. After a career teaching sociology, promoting and practicing clinical sociology, and working with alternative sentencing, I am now retired and spend much of my time actively advocating universal single payer health insurance for California.

I often reflect on how my upbringing in a refugee family has affected me. I've faced depression and anxiety, difficulties with decision-making, and an inordinate need to please others. I have a compulsive need to stay in touch with lots of people—I am a consummate networker and resource for others. Perhaps some of this is related to my early childhood years and the fact that our survival was the direct result of contacts that we had.

I was a member of the German-Jewish Dialogue in Los Angeles for a number of years. This experience highlighted my awareness of some identity issues since I am both German and Jewish. My attachment to my German-Jewish heritage is strong, fueled by finding the graves of relatives in the Weissensee Jewish cemetery in Berlin. I have some very prominent Jewish ancestors, and became the custodian of a magnificent Torah curtain, dedicated in 1785 to my great great grandparents Romberg, which is now at the Skirball Museum in Los Angeles.

We've returned a number of times to Germany to visit my family and friends and I feel very comfortable in Berlin. Hearing German spoken recreates the feelings associated with my nurturing family during those difficult early years, not the oppressing enemy. My comfort with Germany and the German language may be attributed to the fact that I was so young when I left and that I cannot personally remember any frightful experiences. My mother once told me of the terror they felt when a uniformed official stopped at our seats on the train out of Germany. He merely smiled, patted me on the head, and walked on, to my parents' great relief. But I knew nothing of this at the time.

I don't recall experiencing any anti-Semitism while living in the U.S. Perhaps I was lucky or just not attuned to it. Not having a Jewish-sounding name meant I could easily "pass." I grew up in a family that was very cautious in revealing that they were Jewish, especially to strangers. I, too, often hid this part of my identity. Now, however, in the company of our many Jewish friends and acquaintances, I sometimes go out of my way to reveal being Jewish, to show I am a member of the tribe!

I have always felt somewhat marginal to both the Child Survivors of the Holocaust and the Second Generation groups. Most of the members of the former spent the war years in Europe, under the most difficult circumstances, while I was safe in America; the 2G members were born after the war to Holocaust survivors. I consider myself a child survivor, although I am also a child refugee. Perhaps the labels don't really matter that much. I am a survivor of the Holocaust. I miss having my relatives closer; they are scattered across the USA and Europe. But I look ahead, and don't spend much time despairing about the past. Any despair about the Nazi era is eclipsed by my concern and anxiety over the state of our country and the world. Working toward Tikkun Olam is what I can do to help insure that those terrible 12 years of the Third Reich never happen again.