

Escaping the holocaust

An account of Rolf Harding's childhood and
escape from Nazi Germany by Phil Harding

© Phil Harding 2008 Published in 2010 at <http://philharding.net/harding>

Version 14/02/08

Imagine this scenario. You are enjoying a relatively happy and carefree early childhood; your future is before you. Gradually you start to discover that the country you had always known as your own now regards you as so undesirable that you have no right to personal possessions, a home, or even a decent education, and is so ruthless in its contempt for you and members of your family that you begin to mistrust those around you. Eventually the hatred displayed by society at large is so hostile, merciless and ruthless that you live in fear of your life and know that you must escape as far from "home" as possible if you are to survive.

For Rolf Harding, originally Rolf Heudenfeld, this was the nightmare that was a reality as it was for so many others living in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. This is the true record of how he survived the trauma of growing up in an increasingly hostile society and how he escaped with his life on the Kindertransport. Several members of his family left behind in Nazi Germany were deported to concentration camps where they were killed.

This story does not seek to detail the many atrocities carried out by the Nazis against the Jews - these are already well documented - but shows how a young man's life was turned upside down and how he survived as his home country sought to exterminate him and many like him.

Growing up in Hamburg

Rolf Heudenfeld's early childhood in Hamburg was tinged with unhappiness when his parents had decided to live apart. Soon after the birth of his younger sister, Luise, when he was three, his parents separated; they divorced in 1930. His father, Henry Heudenfeld, owned a warehouse business near Hamburg's famous landmark, St Michael's Church. The business traded in raw materials and finished products from around the world, especially South America and England. His father was relatively wealthy for that period of German history. This was not the case for Rolf's mother, Luise Heudenfeld (maiden name Brinkmann) who had two children to raise.



Rolf (age 7) with his mother (26)
and sister (4), Hamburg, 1929

Germany was in a state of severe economic depression after the 1914-18 world war; the general population faced much hardship exacerbated by a high level of unemployment. His mother moved from the family home and was able to look after Rolf's sister in her small apartment whilst Rolf went to live with his maternal grandparents, Karl and Lina Brinkmann and his Uncle Fritz. The Brinkmann's flat was situated near Hamburg's main public park, Stadtpark. Rolf, whilst fond of his mother, got on particularly well with his grandparents and Uncle Fritz. He was happy to be living with them. Karl was a carpenter by trade and,



A Kindertransport train

Photo source : isurvived.org/TOC-VI.html



A queue of refugee children

Image source : <http://www.bbc.co.uk>

helped by the managerial skills of Lina, a former dressmaker, they had established a furniture retailing business.

The Brinkmann family prided themselves in their willingness to work hard and his mother would seek out any work she could get, however menial, to keep Rolf's sister fed and to contribute to the cost of raising Rolf.

In 1933 Rolf was an intelligent 10 year old boy who did well at school and had amongst the highest test marks in most subjects. Although of below average height for his age he was nevertheless of strong build with a shock of jet black hair. He had a competitive spirit and a personal drive that helped him to do well at school sports and games. He was popular with his classmates, well liked and, like most boys of his age, he was a bit of a lad, full of self confidence and had plenty of friends. He was a normal German boy. But now his world was about to turn against him.

The price of being a Jew in 1930s Germany

At the end of the 1914-18 war conditions in Germany favoured the growth of a fascist movement and under Hitler's leadership, the National Socialist (Nazi) party climbed to power. Hitler became Reich Chancellor in January 1933 and the campaign to ruthlessly destroy working class movements, in particular the communist party, socialists and the Jews was to begin.

It was early 1933 when Rolf, aged 10, and all other school children throughout Germany were asked by their schools to report back if they had parents who were Jews. Rolf attended Realgymnasium (secondary) school for boys in Barmbek and his Form (class) was asked by the Form Master if any of the children had Jewish parents.

Rolf was not particularly close to his father and did not even know what a Jew was, let alone that his father was of Jewish parentage. He therefore saw no need to question the motives behind this request for parental information. Over the evening meal that night, Rolf learned from his grandparents that his father was of Jewish origin and the following day he told his Form Master that yes, he had a Jewish father. Rolf did not notice any immediate reaction from the Form Master, who was also his English teacher, but Rolf's relatively stable life was about to change completely.

The Form Master, Herr Studienrat Frese, was a strong supporter of Hitler's aims and objectives for raising Germany from the depths of economic depression and to rebuild its military might. He readily accepted the propaganda put out by the Nazi party.



An example of Jewish school children singled out in German schools for humiliation in front of their peers

Rolf had been top of the Form at English - a talent that was to prove of great relevance later in life. However his test results suddenly were marked down to bottom of the Form by Herr Frese. Frese turned completely hostile towards him. Rolf was isolated by Frese. He was the only boy with a Jewish parent in his Form. The other boys in the Form noticed that Herr Frese had taken a strong dislike to Rolf; they did not understand the reason why but Rolf had become aware of the intense hatred against the Jews that the Nazi movement was stirring up in the population.

It had become a common occurrence for Hitler's propaganda to be promoted in schools throughout Germany and later that term the whole school was assembled to listen to Hitler's speech on the radio. Hitler wanted the youth of Germany behind him. Rolf happened to whisper a brief comment to a classmate. This was noticed by Herr Frese who reported to the Head Teacher that "Rolf Heudenfeld had caused a serious disruption

during Hitler's speech". Rolf was caned and, weeks later at the end of the school summer term, was expelled.

Rolf's mother then set about trying to find a school that would accept her son in time for the autumn term. Schools were reluctant to accept Jews but the Head Teacher of a local school near to the Brinkmann flat and the Stadtpark was prepared to accept Rolf. The Head Teacher was a member of the Nazi party but he accepted Rolf because Rolf was "half Aryan" - his mother was not Jewish, only his father.

Karl Brinkmann was interested in politics and was a member of Germany's Socialist party. He had read Hitler's book "Mein Kampf" and was all too well aware from that and from the propaganda emerging from the Nazi party of Hitler's intention to crush all political opposition.

At this time it was becoming increasingly apparent to Rolf and the Brinkmann family that Hitler not only wanted to attain complete power in Germany but to build up Germany's military might to gain world dominance. Hitler wanted to make Germany great again and blamed the Jews, Communists and Socialists in addition to the First World War's victors for Germany's high unemployment and low national esteem.

Hitler became Germany's Fuhrer in 1934 and the persecution and murder of his opponents gained momentum. The Brinkmann family, like many other ordinary German folk, were becoming increasingly concerned at what was unfolding around them; at great personal risk they publicly spoke out against it.

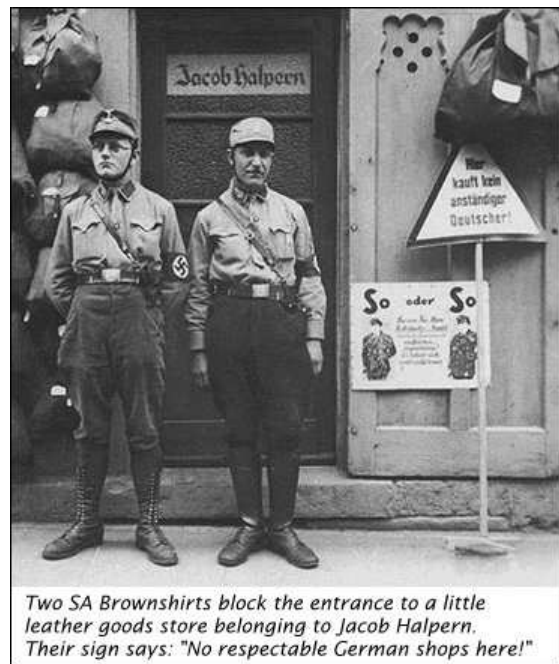
Increasing concerns

Rolf settled down quickly in his new school. His new English teacher could not understand why the report from his previous school gave him such low marks. Rolf was top of the Form at English again – he secretly listened to English radio broadcasts and gained an admiration for what was to become his new home country. He was even put in charge of the Physics Laboratory and the sports equipment. This was something of an honour and Rolf assumed he had returned to a more stable school life.

Rolf was now a young teenager and realised that Hitler's policy was to eliminate the Jewish race in Germany. Radio broadcasts of Hitler's speeches and newspaper articles vilified the Jews and other "undesirables" and sought the purification of the German nation. Nazi "Brown Shirts", Hitler's political henchmen who had helped him gain power, were to be seen more and more on German streets. Uniformed and armed with pistols, they were not to be crossed.

Image source

<http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/triumph/tr-boycott.htm>



Two SA Brownshirts block the entrance to a little leather goods store belonging to Jacob Halpern. Their sign says: "No respectable German shops here!"

Rolf did not live with a Jewish family or amongst Jews so he did not experience the full range of restrictions, racial hatred and discrimination that the Jews began to suffer. He heard rumours of concentration camps but the existence of such camps were publicly denied by Government officials. Jewish businesses and homes suffered attacks by Brown Shirts (Sturmabteilung – German for Storm Division or Storm Troopers, the SA). The premises of the Communist and Socialist Party also came under attack from Nazi supporters.

Rolf was aware of a local lady who had been sent to a concentration camp but sent home - she was not a Jew. She refused to talk about the camp to anyone. It was as if she was living under threat of death if she even mentioned the camp. People were becoming wary of those around them. The general population was increasingly living in fear. People dared not speak out against Hitler or the Nazis as to do so risked being reported to the authorities followed by arrest, imprisonment, persecution of one's family or even death.

Germany's severe unemployment problem eased as jobs were created in factories geared to weapon production and major infrastructure projects such as the building of roads and autobahns. This resulted in a rise in Hitler's popularity - people may not have agreed with all he said but Germany was working again and

regaining its self esteem. Behind this new promotion of the fatherland, Hitler's opponents were being crushed.

The Brinkmann's and their friends could see what was really happening but what could they do? It was far too dangerous to speak out against the Nazi party. Opposition to Hitler and the Nazi party was silenced through fear.

Life for Jews in Germany was becoming dangerous. They were singled out for attack - especially at night. They lived under constant threat of intimidation; Jewish businesses were daubed with the words "Get Out Jews" in white paint. Newspapers reported on the arrest of leading Communists and many Communist Party members joined the Nazi party and became its fervent supporters.



The Bravery of the Brinkmanns

Demonstrating great courage, during the height of the persecution of the Jews, Karl and Lina Brinkmann hid their son-in-law's brother, Max Heudenfeld in their Hamburg flat after he had escaped from Minsk Concentration Camp. Max was subsequently re-captured and deported to Theresienstadt concentration camp on 23rd February 1945 (where his mother had perished in 1943).

Against all odds Max survived and was liberated by the allies. Normally a heavily built man, he was in a near skeletal condition when he was freed.

Karl and Lina Brinkmann's flat in the historical district of Barbeck, Hamburg, on the corner of Jarresstrasse and Flurstrasse, where they hid their son-in-law's brother Max. Pictured in 1944.

(modern spelling of street and district names)

Rolf's contemporaries at school joined the Hitler Youth. The Hitler Youth carried sheath knives bearing a swastika emblem; rifle shooting was a regular feature of their activities in the evenings and weekends or at camps. As a part Jew, Rolf was excluded from this aspect of youth activity which, on the surface, appeared to be exciting and adventurous to any young German.



Hitler Youth Knife
etched with the motto
"Blut und Ehre!"
(blood and honour!)

In the summer of 1937, when Rolf was 15, his entire school had a river boat outing up the River Elbe to a leisure and sports facility. In addition to team games, one of the main events was a rifle shooting contest in which older school children and teaching staff could take part. The prize was a food hamper. The Hitler Youth members were keen to show their skills and scored close to the bull's-eye, only the Head Teacher was better. Rolf had never used a rifle and asked the Head how to hold and fire the rifle. The Head showed him and offered to let him have a go at hitting the target. To the Head's dismay, and that of the Hitler Youth, Rolf hit the bull's-eye first time; closer to dead centre than the Head had been and won the hamper! A moment of satisfaction for the son of a Jew.

It became increasingly evident that Hitler was bent on exterminating the Jewish population. Those that tried to leave Germany found it increasingly difficult. They were refused exit visas and their money was confiscated. They were accused of stealing Germany's wealth.

To purchase goods from a Jewish business was to risk hostile attention from the authorities or informers and Nazi party supporters in the general population. Increasingly nobody wanted to be seen publicly as being sympathetic or friendly to Jews for fear of the retribution that might follow.

Jews were driven out of their own businesses which were confiscated and taken over by "Aryans" with money siphoned off to the Nazi party. Stories of Jewish adults and children being sent to concentration camps were spreading. Rolf's family including his grandparents were becoming increasingly concerned for his safety and urged him to flee the country before it was too late.

On one terrifying occasion, the Kristallnacht of 9th November 1938 (see feature item), Jewish homes were entered at night by the Brown Shirts to arrest Jews. It was rumoured that the people arrested were sent to concentration camps and that those who went, did not come out. After that particular night, Rolf went to a telephone box to check that his father and father's brother, Max, were safe. He dared not use the Brinkmann's flat telephone such was the level of fear and intimidation instilled in the general population by the Nazis that people would not telephone Jewish homes or businesses. Rolf did not want to incriminate his Grandparents. Mercifully his father and Uncle had evaded capture.

Rolf felt increasingly vulnerable to attack. The fact that he lived with a non-Jewish family, his grandparents, helped him feel safer but the numerous stories emerging of the persecution and disappearance of Jews made him feel ill at ease. When would he be singled out?

Helga Heudenfeld, a Theatre Sister from Austria, was one of Rolf's Aunts. Married to Max, one of the brothers of Rolf's father, she was concerned for his safety and encouraged him to go to the Jerusalem-Kirche in Hamburg) for assistance in escaping from Germany. It was a Presbyterian Church run by baptized Jews, i.e. Jews that had become Christians.

Kristallnacht



The morning after Kristallnacht

Kristallnacht (Crystal Night or night of broken glass) took place on the night of 9th November 1938. This was the night of terror when Jewish homes and some 8,000 Jewish shops were ransacked in many German cities, towns and villages, as civilians and both the SA (Storm Division – the Brown Shirts) and the SS (Schutzstaffel – German for Protective Squadron - the Black Shirts) destroyed buildings with sledgehammers, leaving the streets covered in shards of glass from broken windows.



The SS insignia and SA seal

Jews were beaten to death; thousands of Jewish men were taken to concentration camps; and many synagogues ransacked, and set on fire.

It was through his attendance at youth meetings of the Jerusalem-Kirche that Rolf, who had been strongly opposed to the Christian religion at school, became a Christian. He was particularly influenced by Dr Moser, a pastor at the church who held meetings for the young people – many of whom were Jews who had become Christians but were living in fear for their lives. Dr Moser and the young people could answer all Rolf's questions and doubts about Christ's teaching and the New Testament's fulfilment of the Old Testament. At this time Rolf experienced his own personal calling that his future lay in the Ministry and that this would be in England. Dr Moser was subsequently arrested by the Gestapo and had to leave Germany.

The church's main mission was with converting Jews to the Christian faith. This led to the Gestapo banning "Friend of Zion" meetings; a notice was fixed to the door that meetings were not permitted. However, the youth members, including Rolf, continued to meet in secret. Helping each other to maintain a low profile, evade persecution and capture, they explored ways of escaping Germany. Rolf was the youngest and, at 16, eligible to apply for the Kindertransport.



Jerusalem-Kirche, Hamburg c.1925
Picture source www.bildarchiv-hamburg.de/AGB

Escape via the Kindertransport

Rolf's name was put down for the Kindertransport at the end of 1938 but his train was cancelled. In an attempt to deter families from putting their children on the Kindertransport trains, Nazis spread rumours that once the trains reached the German border, the children were ordered off and shot. Rolf's name went back on the Kindertransport list for 1939.

On a dry overcast winter's day in February 1939 his highly anxious mother and Lina his Grandmother put Rolf, aged 16, on the Kindertransport train at Hamburg's Altona station. They must have wondered if they would ever see Rolf again. His only possessions were a small brown suitcase containing spare clothes, a few papers and a bible, and the suit he was wearing.

Kindertransport

In response to rising fears for the safety of Jewish children heightened by Kristallnacht, a delegation of British Jewish leaders appealed in person to Britain's Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. Among other measures, they requested that the British government allow the temporary admission of Jewish children and teenagers who would later re-emigrate. The Jewish community promised to pay guarantees for the refugee children.



200 Jewish refugee children, members of the first Kindertransport from Germany, arrive in Harwich, England, 1938

The Kindertransport is the name of the rescue mission for the refugee children. The German government decreed that the evacuations must not block ports in Germany, so the trains crossed from German territory into Holland and arrived at port at the Hook of Holland. From there, the children traveled by ferry to the British ports of Harwich (as in Rolf's case) or Southampton.

The United Kingdom took in nearly 10,000 predominantly Jewish children from Germany, and other occupied territories including Austria and Czechoslovakia. The children were placed in British foster homes, hostels, and farms.

The Kindertransport rescue operation, a direct and almost immediate outcome of Kristallnacht, was a success as most of the children, including Rolf, survived the war. Conversely, more than 1.5 million Jewish children were murdered in the ghettos and death camps of Nazi-occupied Europe.

A small number of Kindertransport children were reunited with parents who had either spent the war in hiding or survived the concentration camps. Sadly most children never saw their parents again.

Rolf and the other children travelled from Altona to the German-Dutch border. When the train stopped at a Dutch border station the children were terrified as to what would happen next. They knew they were near the border, not sure if they had passed into Holland and many had heard the rumours of what would happen there.

Dutch people wearing red cross armbands – different from the swastika armbands normally seen in Germany – got on the train. One of them, a tall gentleman, said to Rolf “You must be glad you’re out of Germany”. Fearing this could be a trap, Rolf said nothing. He and the other children kept quiet in case the train was still in Germany and this was a trick to reveal the identity of the fleeing children.

The train continued to the Dutch coast. The children gradually realised that their escape had been a success and they were safely out of Germany.

Safely in England, but for how long?

The children got off the train and onto a channel ferry which took them across the channel to Harwich on the East Anglian coast. From Harwich the children were put on a train and taken to the town of Dovercourt, south of Harwich. There the children were placed in a holiday camp used as temporary accommodation.

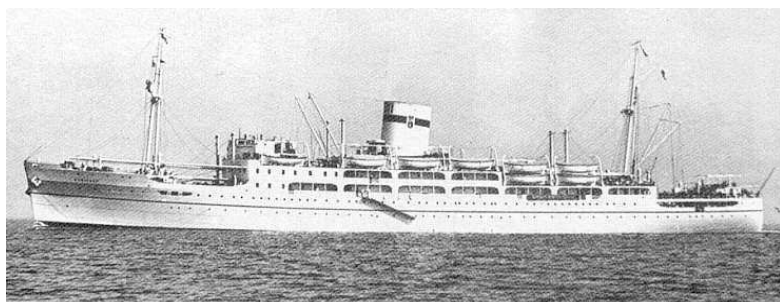
Several weeks later, the camp was visited by a lady from a local church. She invited the children to attend her church. Its denomination was Church of England; Rolf attended and a Ministry in the Church of England was his chosen career path after the war.

Colfe’s Grammar School in Lewisham offered the camp two pupil places for those that had attended grammar school in Germany so that they could continue their education. Rolf and Kurtheinz Matzdorf were chosen. Rolf was provided with accommodation by parents of one of the boys at the school.

Due to growing concerns that Britain was about to go to war with Germany and that London could be subjected to bombing raids, the school children were evacuated to Skinners School in Tunbridge Wells, Kent. Rolf lived initially in Tunbridge Wells with a policeman’s family. However the policeman’s senior officers ordered him not to look after any Jewish refugees in case they had been infiltrated by Nazi spies.

Rolf moved on to live with another family before he was taken in by Mr and Mrs Walter Jones. They already had three sons and a daughter but treated Rolf as if he was their own son. Their kindness at his time of need has been something Rolf has always appreciated. He regarded them as his English parents.

Once war broke out in September 1939, the authorities were naturally concerned to ensure that none of the German refugees were spies for Hitler’s Nazi Germany. To his great dismay, Rolf was arrested for internment. He was taken to Huyton near Liverpool, then to the Isle of Man where he was put aboard a Polish ship, the Merchant Ship (M/S) Sobieski, for Canada.



M/S Sobieski participated in many convoys as a troop-cargo ship. One famous voyage was the trip, along with M/S Batory from England to Canada carrying the huge load of British Gold Reserves. In 1950, she was sold to USSR and renamed M/S Gruzija. M/S Gruzija was scrapped in La Spezia Scrapyard, Italy in April 1975. Picture and information source: stefanbatoryoceanliner.homestead.com

Off to Canada

On board the Sobieski were captured Nazi prisoners. Fights broke out between the Jewish refugees and the Nazis. The guards separated the two groups and kept them apart with looped barbed wire.

Accompanied by a French destroyer, the ship steamed to the east coast of Canada. The 'prisoners' were taken on a train to a prisoner of war (POW) camp in a large forest clearing. It was bitterly cold; Rolf and the other refugees wore POW uniforms to keep warm. The POW camp held German prisoners taken from all over Britain.

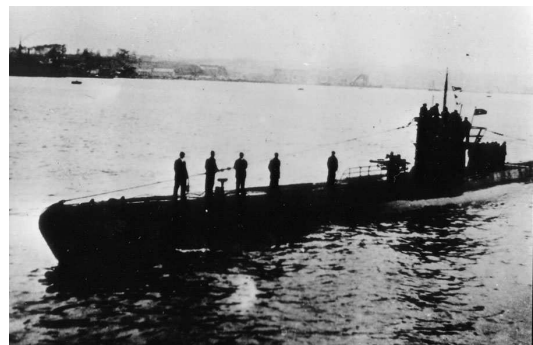
Rolf was kept at this camp for about a year. It was not like the normal perception held of POW camps. The refugees were allowed to clear trees from the surrounding area and were even trusted with axes for this purpose. Rolf made the most of this experience and, surprisingly, enjoyed his detention there. He made many friends and benefited from mixing with some of the leading (Jewish) brains from Germany. He attended many lectures given by the inmates on subjects ranging from psychology to theology.

Meanwhile, back in England, many people, including Rolf's headmaster, made representations to the government that it was wrong to intern those who had fled Nazi persecution. A Home Office official was despatched to Canada to interview the internees. Rolf was offered the choice of returning to England or emigrating to America. Some refugees chose America, but Rolf chose England, a country he had long admired from those radio broadcasts he had secretly listened to when he was growing up in Hamburg.

Journey back to England

Rolf was returned to England in a convoy of ships. Rolf's ship was a flat bottomed ship – suitable for river work, not crossing the North Atlantic. They were accompanied by a merchant cruiser as escort to protect them from the German U boats. Soon after leaving Canada the merchant cruiser was torpedoed and sunk by a U boat.

With this protection lost, the convoy was a sitting target for the U boats. The ships also feared attack from German bomber planes.



A German U boat.

Picture source: www.uboatarchive.net

Rolf was chosen to help man the ship's one and only machine gun. At one point the crew thought a squadron of German fighter bombers was coming towards the ship. Fortunately this turned out to be a flock of seagulls, so Rolf's marksmanship, already proven against the Hitler Youth back in the summer of 1937, was not tested again.

A fierce storm blew up and, whilst it made for an uncomfortable journey in the flat bottomed ship, this provided cover for the convoy to make safe passage to Liverpool. The U boats could not attack during heavy storms.

Settled in England

Rolf returned to Tunbridge Wells to continue his education. From there he attended Oakhill Theological College, Southgate, North London. But the college had to be closed as many were called up for military service.

Rolf had been provided with basic military training (through the Pioneer Corps) but a combination of his German origins and young age meant he could not be enlisted for military service. He offered to go into service as a spy for the allies but this offer was not taken up.

For his contribution to the war effort, Rolf took up a teaching post at Prestfield Prep School in Shrewsbury where he was a Form Master and taught Latin, History and PE. Rolf then left Shrewsbury and taught at St Michael's CMS, Lympsfield, where he met his future wife, a pupil there, Elizabeth Ashton (they married in 1951).

Rolf had managed to maintain postal contact with his mother and grandmother before and after the war. In June 1947 Rolf received his Certificate of Naturalization, number AZ 26723 (2.6.1947).

Rolf's mother, Luise, came over to visit him in England in December 1948. In 1949 Rolf changed his surname to Harding by deed poll (choosing the name from a telephone directory). In July 1950 (28), Rolf and Elizabeth (21) visited Hamburg for the first time after the war had ended. They visited Germany several times thereafter.



Rolf, at 19 or 20 (c.1942)

Rolf completed his theological training at St John's College, Highbury, in North London (since renamed the London College of Divinity) and entered full-time Ministry with the Church of England. His first posting was to establish a new church in Harold Hill, Romford, Essex. At the time Harold Hill, a new town built to accommodate post war residential overspill from the East End of London and consisting almost entirely of council estate housing, had the highest crime rate in Europe (according to advice from the local police to Rolf). Rolf rose to this new challenge and with his support team of young local converts built up a thriving congregation at St Paul's Church, a church 'plant' from St Peter's Harold Wood, Essex. In 1952 Rolf named the newly built church "St Paul's" after his New Testament hero, the apostle Paul. In 1961 Rolf became the vicar of Coopersale, Epping, Essex, until he retired to Weston, near Bath, in 1991, aged 69.

Rolf and Elizabeth raised three children, Vicki (a physiotherapist), Catherine (a nurse) and Philip (a civil servant). They have four grandchildren; from Philip, Sarah and James Harding and from Catherine, Sam and George Miller.



Rolf and Elizabeth Harding
on their wedding day
15 September 1951



Rolf's mother with Walter and Laurie Jones
(Rolf's 'adoptive parents') at the wedding
15 September 1951



(Left to Right) Adolf, Elise, Max, Markus, Henry and Siegmund Heidenfeld. c.1900.

The two brothers of Rolf's father who were alive at the outset of the war were **Max** (b. 11.6.1888) and **Siegmund** (b.18.10.1886). Their other brother, **Adolf** (b. 22.1.1891), had been killed in action in World War I.

Siegmund and his wife **Margarethe** (née Wolff) were shot in front of Max on arrival at the ghetto in Minsk (Belarus) on 8.11.1941. **Max** managed to escape from Minsk, got back to Hamburg and hid in the flat of Karl and Lina Brinkmann. However, according to www.yadvashem.org (Dec 2004) Max was deported to Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia on 23.2.1945 (prisoner no. 37 on transport V1/10 from Hamburg to Terezin). He survived the war and rarely talked of his experiences to other members of the family.

Rolf's paternal grandmother, **Elise Heidenfeld** (née Simonsohn b.14.6.1861, Hambergen), was deported on 24th February 1943 at the age of 81 from her home in Rutschbahn Strasse in Hamburg to Theresienstadt concentration camp (on transport VI/3 from Hamburg to Terezin) where she died on 20.3.1943.

Elise's husband, **Markus Ezryel Heidenfeld** (b.3.1.1854, Krakow, Poland), had passed away in 1938 in Hamburg. His surname changed from Heidenfeld to Heudenfeld on moving from Krakow before their marriage in Hamburg on 12.5.1884.

The ancestors of Markus Ezryel Heudenfeld were:

Parents: Abraham Hirszt Heidenfeld (b.circa 1818) & Simcha (née Hochwald)

Paternal Grandparents: Markus Heidenfeld (b. between 1790-1795) & Rachel (maiden name not known)

Rolf's father, **Henry Josua Heudenfeld**, had a successful exporting business in Hamburg; this was confiscated by the Nazis. To avoid capture and deportation to the concentration camps he escaped Germany intending to travel to America via Spain with his second wife. However his wife died in Spain and he remained there (Calle Valencia 304, Barcelona) until after World War II. He then returned to Hamburg and lived there until he passed away, aged 99, on 22 July 1997.



Henry Josua Heudenfeld
24.10.1894 – 22.7.1994
at age 56 (1950)

Max Heudenfeld's wife **Helga Heudenfeld** (maiden name not known), was a Theatre Sister from Austria. It was Helga who, highly concerned for his safety as the situation worsened, encouraged her nephew Rolf to go to the Jerusalem-Kirche in Hamburg (a Presbyterian Church) for assistance in escaping from Germany. The decision to go to the Jerusalem-Kirche almost certainly saved his life. Max and Helga had a son, **Helmut**, who survived the war and settled in Venezuela.

Siegmund and Margarethe were survived by their daughter **Ilse Heudenfeld** (b. 25.8.1919 d.25.4.2005) who escaped from Hamburg in 1938 or 1939. The method of her escape is not known. She settled in the USA and married **Arthur Himmelweit** in New York on 22.7.1948.



Lina and Karl Brinkmann on their wedding day 12th May 1884, Hamburg.
Lina is wearing a black dress as her mother had recently died.



Lina and Karl Brinkmann on their 60th wedding anniversary, 1962



Lina, Karl, Luise and Fritz Brinkman, early 1930s

Rolf's younger sister, **Luise Heudenfeld** (b. 17.9.25, Hamburg), initially hid on Erich Meyer's farm in Baden, central Germany, to escape capture for deportation. Whilst searching for employment she was advised to leave the area without delay and go into hiding. She found a position as a trainee cook working for the Countess Natalie Gräfin von Bothmer in Lauenbrück (between Hamburg and Bremen) who saved Luise from being taken away to a concentration camp by the SS. The Countess looked after Luise from 1944 to 1945. Luise emigrated to England in 1949 and, like her brother Rolf, changed her surname to Harding. She became a State Registered Nurse.

Rolf's maternal grandparents, **Karl and Lina Brinkman**, were both originally from Bad Salzuflen (between Hannover and Dortmund).

Karl was a carpenter and Lina a dressmaker and they both established a furniture retailing business. During World War II with great courage and at enormous personal risk to themselves they hid their son-in-law's brother **Max Heudenfeld** in their Hamburg flat after he had escaped from Minsk Concentration Camp.

Luise, Rolf and Lina with cousin Helmut (cousin of Rolf and Luise – son of their mother's sister, Henni) c.1934



Rolf's mother, **Luise**, survived the bombing of Bremen during the war and later returned to live in Hamburg. She subsequently re-married.



Luise Schulz (née Brinkmann)
(16.11.1902 – 31.3.1997)
at age 48, 1951

Fritz Brinkman, like his parents Karl and Lina, was opposed to the Nazi regime.



Fritz Brinkman
c.1934

Fritz served as a civilian legal adviser to the military during the war but used his cunning and legal brain to save a number of junior soldiers from being killed by senior officers whose brutality meant they would have soldiers shot for the merest hint of subordination. Fritz and his wife Henni's home was in Bremen during the war.



Rolf (in his 40s) on 'Midnight' outside
Coopersale Vicarage, near Epping, Essex (1960s)



Rolf (66) & Elizabeth Harding (59), 1988



The above plaque was unveiled by Betty Boothroyd, Speaker of the House of Commons, in the Palace of Westminster on 14th June 1999

Minsk and Theresienstadt

Minsk, where Siegmund Heudenfeld and his wife Margarethe were executed on 8 November 1941, was a Jewish ghetto in Belarus (under Russian control before WWII) used by the Nazis from the autumn of 1941 to hold, enslave and exterminate Jews.

Before gas vans were introduced at Minsk to speed up the executions, Jews were lined up and shot in front of specially dug pits outside the city. Jews were used for forced slave labour and housed in overcrowded living quarters until they were killed.

Over 200,000 Jews, POWs and civilians perished at Minsk.

The Jews at Minsk formed a resistance movement to assist escape via the surrounding forests. It is not known how Max Heudenfeld escaped from Minsk, or how he managed to get back to Hamburg.

Theresienstadt (or Terezin) **concentration camp**, where Elise Heudenfeld died on 20th March 1943, was located in what is now the Czech Republic. It was originally an 18th Century fortress.

Approximately 150,000 Jews were sent there from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. Over 30,000 of the inmates died there, mostly from the deadly conditions (hunger, stress, and disease). It is not known how Elise died.

Established by the Gestapo in 1940, it was used as a front for the genocide by the Nazis, as a pretence to the outside world that Jews were being re-settled and not exterminated. In June 1944 they permitted the Red Cross to make a propaganda visit to the camp in order to try and dispel rumours about the extermination camps. Those that were transferred to Auschwitz did not survive. The Russian Red Army liberated Theresienstadt in May 1945.

Footnote

During his early years of living in England, Rolf Harding did not speak openly to his children and those around him about his German origins and the appalling experiences that he and his family had endured. This was perfectly understandable in view of three factors:

- (i) the post-war anti-German sentiments in many quarters,
- (ii) his own personal and his family's experience of racial hatred and prejudice in Germany, and
- (iii) his wish to make unhindered progress with his Ministry in the Church of England, providing pastoral care to all sections of the local community.

It is only in his later years that Rolf has felt more able to speak in some detail about this traumatic chapter in his life. Unfortunately many elements of the story are now lost in time.

I consider myself privileged to be Rolf Harding's son and to have met Karl and Lina Brinkmann in their Hamburg flat when I was a young boy. The stories of those that survived or were lost to the holocaust and of those that risked everything to save them should be told.

Phil Harding MBE, 2008
philharding.net/harding