

CHAPTER SIX
JULIUS EWALD KARL
Our Escape to Freedom

by Frieda Karl, younger sister of Julius

Julius had already escaped to West Germany, and in June 29, 1947 the rest of our family escaped. Mother had planned our escape for the middle of July, but for that Sunday, unforeseen problems arose, and the plans had to be changed. She had discussed her plan earlier with the rest of the party. It included Mother, Erna, Gertud, me, aunt Emma and her children Erwin, and Gertrud.

My sister Gertrud worked for the police station in Aleksandrow some four kilometers (2.5 miles) away. She was only allowed to visit Mom every other Sunday. When Gertrud came to visit on one of her Sundays off, Mother told her that on her next visit we all would escape to Stettin (Szczecin). That would have been in the middle of July. Gertrud was alarmed, because she knew, that there were other German girls at that police station who planned to escape that Sunday. The police told them that if not all girls would come back, they would not get any free time off for a long time. Gertrud went back to the police station.

Now Mother had to change her plans. On this particular Sunday, Mother decided, then and there, that the day of escape would be earlier than planned. It would be this Sunday. She walked the 5 kilometers to where Gertrud was working and told her what to do and where to go. She asked her to put on a blue dress under her old one. That blue dress had no particular significance only that she probably did want not her to be noticeable. Now Mother walked back home and started packing. She did not have a lot of time – just a few hours. Mother quickly organized everything. We did not have many worldly possessions in the first place, so packing was not a problem. It amounted to the clothes we wore, and perhaps an extra blouse or skirt underneath. Now we needed some food for the journey. The packages that we would carry could not be big either so they would not evoke suspicion. Soon everything was arranged.

Mother gave Erna and Gertrud money for the train fare. Aunt Emma did that with Erwin too. Mother told all involved that if anyone should be caught the others would just go on and try to get away. Each one was on her own now. We would separate and walk in pairs, at different times, and take different routes, to the train station: Erwin and Gertrud, Mother and I, Aunt Emma, her daughter Gertrud, and Erna. I am convinced that Mother's faith in God helped her to make these difficult decisions. Dangerous situations require bold decisions, and a very brave person to carry out those actions. Mother was one of those brave women. She knew what would await those who would get caught. There would not be much mercy for the one who would be caught.

Our aim was the train station in Otloczyn, some two hours away walking. The train left at about 7 PM. Mother, Gertrud, Erwin and I left early. Erna, Aunt Emma and Gertrud were just ready to leave when a man from the City came to ask them to do some job for them. They could not refuse as they worked for the City. He wanted them to move a big scale from one place to the other. When they got to City Hall there were all kinds of people there and the gentlemen had all the time in the world. They would not move out of the way so our people

could do the job. At length, the job was done, but now it was too late for them to walk to Otloczyn. They quickly grabbed what little they had to carry and started to walk toward Aleksandrow to the train station, which was only one hour's walk.

It was a very sunny day, and there were a lot of people out walking, enjoying the good weather. This was a main road that they had to take. Some of the people recognized them and talked to them. It was not safe to keep walking on this road. After a while the road became a little emptier, and Erna decided to veer off, and walk through the fields. When they got to Aleksandrow, they purchased the ticket and then hid in the washroom until the train came. They could not take a chance to be recognized.

Mother and I walked between grain fields. I still remember Mother telling me not to hold my head too high so that we would not be seen. When we got to the train station Gertrud and Erwin were already there, but not Erna and the others. It had been decided before that no one would wait for the others. Someone purchased the tickets. I cannot remember who it was. Perhaps it was Gertrud or Erwin. It might have been Mother, but I am not certain. Her poor Polish would have given her away as a German. Mother was always aware of that. Mother was not gifted with languages. She spoke Polish, but with a strong accent. We all agreed that we would not talk to Mother so she would not have to answer. We were to act as if we did not know each other, and we were not to speak to any of the other passengers either.

When the train arrived it was packed solid. There was standing room only. We were standing like sardines in a can, thankful that we even had the chance to get on. At least there was no need to speak to the other passengers. As the train came into the Station, we looked at every window to see if the others would be inside but we could see no one. At the next stop I looked out the window and there was Erna looking out the window. What a relief that was to know that all had made it safely so far.

In time the train became quite empty. At one point, Mother and I were the only passengers in this compartment - or so I thought. When I looked up, I saw a Russian soldier sleeping on the luggage rack. I was so frightened my mouth became dry. He was quite young. The kid just wanted to have a little rest before he met his superior.

It was midnight when we arrived in Bromberg (Bydgoszcz). Here we waited several hours for our connection to Stettin. Even here we tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. We hid wherever we could. Even though there were not many other passengers who waited for connections, one never knew who was traveling and who might recognize us. We finally boarded the train to Stettin and arrived there in the morning.

Before the war, Stettin was a German city. It had wide avenues and beautiful buildings – those that were not bombed out – that is. It was totally different from any city that I had seen so far. It always was my wish to return some day, in happier times, and just walk those avenues without being afraid, and not feel hunted. So far it has not happened, and I doubt that it ever will happen.

In his letter to Mother, Julius gave good information as to which streetcar number we should take, and where we should get off. We rode the streetcar to the outskirts of Stettin, close to the river Oder. There was a big building which apparently was once a paper factory. It had shattered windows and no doors. This is where we finally settled. Other German women and children were already there. They, just like we, had also escaped. We slept on the floor

without blankets or cushions. We did not miss that luxury. It was already a luxury to be this far on the way to freedom.

Every day, a Polish man came to get some of the older girls to work in the camp where Julius had worked. So Erna, Gertrud, and I think, Erwin, went to work there. They did not get paid, but they could take food home for the rest of the family. This was a big help not only for us, but also for some of the other women with small children who had even less than our family had. Some of the Polish bosses in that camp purposely left food in the containers so that the German girls could take it with them. This was a camp where the Polish people, who were sent to Germany during the war to work, came back home. This extra food sustained us for the four weeks that we were in Stettin.

Sometimes the man would come and get us to work in some other places, such as hospitals and public buildings. Sometimes we would get paid for that. This small pay would go toward purchasing bread, and other absolute necessities. Mother would save as much of the money as she could because we would need provisions for the week-long train ride once we would be transported out to Germany.

One day a Polish man brought a German woman with a two-day old infant to this place where we stayed. She had absolutely nothing except her little baby in her arms. She had no food, no money, no diapers to change her baby, no powder, no soap or anything that a mother needs for a baby. Apparently, this woman was in very great danger where she was. Someone had alerted her to that, and she had to leave, by night, immediately. I remember Mother going around looking for some old rags for diapers for the baby. Mother also gave her food from the cans that the girls brought home. Erna thinks that later, the same Pole brought her husband, too. Apparently, he had to hide for his life until it was safer, and then the Pole brought him too.

We met all kinds of German people in this place. There was a German Mother with her seventeen or eighteen-year-old daughter, from Koenigsberg, East Prussia. The daughter was an avid swimmer, and since this place was not far from the river Oder she went each evening to practice her swimming there. However, swimming was not all she did there. She also observed the Russian sentries patrolling the river on both sides of the Oder. She took note of their habits, when they changed guard, how many there might be, and how well it was guarded. The Oder River, of course, is the border between Poland and Germany. Germany was just the breadth of the river away. One evening she said adieu to her Mother and swam across the Oder. When we later arrived in Loebau, Germany, she stood there waiting to welcome her Mother to Germany.

At last, at the end of July 1947, we were going to be sent to Germany. On the day of departure we had to go through a medical examination. Not that anyone cared if we were in good health, oh no, it was just to see if they could keep some of us back for no good reason at all. Although our little family group passed handily, not all were so lucky.

There was a family with four little children. The youngest was about two years old. He seemed to have a health problem. He could not walk nor could he stand on his feet, and the Mother was in her last stages of pregnancy. When they came to the gate to be examined, they were not allowed to proceed. Mother and I were just in front of them, and I cannot describe the sadness that overcame me when I saw what had happened. They were so close and, yet, not allowed to go through.

We finally boarded the train. It definitely was not the luxurious “Orient Express,” lest someone might get the notion that we were shipped out of Poland in grand style. Oh no, it was a train of old freight cars that, in better days, carried dry goods. There were no seats or benches, and the doors had to be left open while the train was in motion during the day. At night the doors were closed from the outside. Why? We did not know. Perhaps it was feared that some of us might have the grandiose idea to jump from the train when no one was looking, and run back to the fear and maltreatment they had in store for us.

Even now, it could happen that anyone could be pulled off the train and kept back. When the train was in motion, we stayed well back of the door, out of sight, as much as we could. Unfortunately, the train was equipped with only one speed and that was the snail's pace. However, when it went through small towns, it slowed down even more. So, pulling someone off the train was not very hard at all.

This journey was not designed to be a pleasure trip, nor was it designed to get us to Germany in the fastest way possible. Often, when there was a regular train behind, or before us, we were pushed onto a dead track. There it would sit sometimes for hours. When this happened we were allowed to get off the train and look for water. Sometime there would be a water pump at the station and the women were allowed get water there. There were no toilets in the boxcars. When their train stopped, we attended to our body's needs under some shrub or a tree, or if there was no time to search for a shrub, right beside the tracks. At this point we weren't inhibited. Many of us had forgotten what it was like to be treated with respect and dignity, so to attend to your body's need in the open was a normal thing to do.

Those women who had some money would try to purchase some food, or if they still had a good item of clothing, they would offer that for food. None of our little group had any decent items of clothing. What we had was, more or less, on our bodies. We could not part with anything. Mother and Aunt Emma had a little money saved and before we boarded the train they had bought bread *and* other items to get us through.

One day our train sat on a dead track in a huge train station. We were never told how long the stop would be or when we would move again. It was time to get some water. The water pump was a fair distance away from the train. Aunt Emma was just at the water pump when the train started to move. I still see the picture. Aunt Emma started to run as fast as she could, on her bare feet, and the train started to move faster and faster. At least this time, it was a blessing that the train had more or less one slow speed. When she reached the train someone grabbed her hands and pulled her in. We were very thankful that we did not have to leave her behind.

It took six days to finally reach Loebau/Sachsen, (Saxony) East Germany – in those days it was *the* East Zone. Under normal conditions it would have taken only one day. Here, right across the train station, a huge banner was spanned, and in big letters, it said WILLKOMMEN! DIE FREIE WELT GRUESST EUCH - WELCOME! THE FREE WORLD GREETES YOU. We all know how “FREE” East Germany later became, but it was good propaganda. At least at this time in 1947 it was still possible to move about somewhat freely.

When we arrived in Loebau we were housed in a camp that was used for the German refugees coming from the Eastern European countries. During the war it had been an army base. Now it was called the Quarantine Camp. Our family had one room and Aunt Emma's family had the adjacent room. Upon arrival all had to go through a medical examination. Then

we were sent to be deloused. It was followed by a steam bath. Here all food portions were rationed. So we did not gain pounds upon pounds here. It was 1947, and the food shortage was as great in the East Zone as it was in the West Zone, or maybe even worse. There just was not much to be had.

After two weeks at this camp we were given what they called apartments. Our “apartment” was a big hall in an empty factory. And we were not alone here. We shared this hall with several other families – women and children only. It at least had windows and doors, but no beds or chairs. In the big hallway was one big table, and above that hung a bare electric light bulb. To our surprise, it even emitted some light. I cannot remember that there was a switch to turn it off because it shone all night. When one lives in such close quarters with other people, one goes through many different experiences - some are very sad but some also lift your spirits.

There was a mother with her three small children. The youngest might have been age four, and the oldest aged ten. She occupied the corner of the room, close to the window. Every day in the morning she would disrobe down to the waist, to wash herself, then she would make the children do the same. Every evening she gathered her children and recited with them, aloud, the Lord's Prayer. This made a deep impression on me. The Lord's Prayer became more valuable to me than it had ever been before. This woman came from Koenigsberg, East Prussia. We all know how very hard it was for the German people, especially women, in East Prussia, when the Soviet Army marched in and occupied it. I asked myself, if God, in whom she obviously believed, had protected her from the worst dangers and misuse? He must have been her protector because her actions showed a definite trust in a higher power. Even now that all the dangers were over, she still thought it important to have a quiet hour with her children, and her God.

It was never Mother's intention to stay in East Germany. She wanted to get far away from all that had any connection with the Soviet Union, or with communism.

After about four weeks in Loebau, we took the train—this time it was a passenger train—and traveled to Zernitz/*Brandenburg* where some of our relatives lived. One of them was my Aunt Olga, Mother of my cousin Olga (Schroeder) whom we had to carry in January 1945 because she had leaky shoes. Cousin Olga was reunited with her Mother in the spring of 1946 when the Polish government sent Aunt Klara with the four children to Germany.

It was a huge privilege to be united with some of our relatives. Mother was very happy to see her brother Julius and sisters Hulda and Olga with family, also our Uncle Eduard Karl and family. We only lingered here a very short time. Mother wanted to get to the Western Zone as soon as possible. Erna and Gertrud had already left with some people we got to know in the camp.

In those days it was still fairly easy to leave the East Zone/East Germany. You just had to know the right place and the habits of the East German border guards—which was the Russian army. Uncle Julius knew the best spot where we could cross the border without much difficulty. He would take us there and show us where to go once we arrived at the border.

On the day of our leaving Zernitz, we got up very early. It was still dark when Uncle Julius, Mother, and I boarded the train. Unfortunately, I do not remember the name of the city where we got off, but it was the last station on the East German side. Hundreds of passengers got off the train there, and all seemed to walk toward the official border crossing. Here the East

German police (German) checked all the people who wanted to cross the border. On good days they would let some people go. On bad days they would take most of their meager belongings and turn them away. Uncle Julius would not let that happen to us. He took us to an unofficial crossing.

When we got off the train, he led us through some side streets to the edge of town. Soon he stopped and pointed toward a meadow and said, "There is the border. It is just a small creek and once you wade through it you are in the West Zone." He would not come with us any farther. We walked the last short distance alone. By now, the dawn had broken and it was very light outside. Mother and I started walking toward that little creek. All the while looking over our shoulders to see if any Russian guard was coming after us. We finally came to the little creek. Mercifully, the water was only about a foot deep. As we stepped into the water Mother hung on to my hand just to be sure that we get across together, and wouldn't stumble. It did not take more than a minute to cross, but we both were shaking. We did not rest on the other side.

In time we boarded the train to Lübeck. Here we were reunited with my brother Julius, sister Erna, Uncle Gustav, Aunt Eugenia and their family.

Although, we were now in West Germany, we did not trust the Russian. It was so easy to just come after us and take us back. There were no guards on the West side, which surprised us. After having lived under guard for so long, we thought that something was missing. However, it did not take very long to realize that being free means to be responsible for ourselves. Mother was perfectly able to make responsible decisions for herself and us.

We walked for about half an hour to the next train station. There were no guards there either. We now realized that perhaps this is where at last we would be free. I don't think we were overwhelmed by the thought of freedom. We were too tired from all the moving, and we still did not have a home where we could be together as a family. Nevertheless, we knew now that no one would come and take us back to Poland. Mother purchased a ticket to Lübeck where Uncle Gustav now lived. It took us many hours to reach Lübeck. We had to change trains in Hamburg. There we also saw the terrible devastation of a once beautiful city.

In Hamburg, close to the train station, the Red Cross had put up temporary shacks where the walls were full of lists of thousands of names of people who searched for their missing loved ones. We were invited to go through these shacks to see if we would recognize any names on these lists. No, there were no names that we recognized. Still, it was a sad experience to see how devastating the war was. Children searched for their parents. Parents searched for their children. Wives searched for their husbands; husbands searched for their wives. Many would not ever find each other. And then, here and there, a name would be crossed out. How fortunate, someone had found the person he was looking for.

NOTES

***Zernitz** is now known as Brandenburg, Germany. Before the fall of the wall in 1989 it was in East Germany.

***East Prussia** - From 1815 the name East Prussia was given to the easternmost province of the kingdom of Prussia. The boundaries of this province remained unchanged until World War I. Its area was then 14,284 square miles (36,995 square km), and its population in 1910 was 2,064,175 and largely Lutheran. It had long since become a stronghold of Prussian Junkers, a military aristocracy who had vast estates there. As a result of the Treaty of Versailles (1919), the Memel (Klaipėda) territory was taken from Germany (in 1924 it was incorporated into

Lithuania); the district of Soldau (Dzialdowo) was given to Poland, while the regency of Marienwerder (Kwidzyn), which was formerly part of the province of West Prussia, joined East Prussia, now territorially separated from the rest of Germany by the Polish Corridor and Danzig. After World War II, East Prussia was partitioned between Poland (the southern part) and the Soviet Union (the northern part), the frontier running north of Goldap, Bartenstein (Bartoszyce), and Braunsberg (Braniewo). With the exception of the Klaipėda territory, which was reincorporated into Lithuania, the northern part was incorporated into the Russian federation and colonized by Russians. Königsberg became Kaliningrad, Insterburg became Chernyakhovsk, and Tilsit became Sovetsk. In the southern part about 400,000 indigenous Poles remained, and immigrants from pre-1939 Poland replaced the Germans, who either had fled in 1944 or were expelled after the war ended. Königsberg was the capital of East Prussia.

Lübeck is the largest German port on the Baltic Sea. During World War II, Lübeck was the first German city to be attacked in substantial numbers by the Royal Air Force. The attack on 28 March 1942 created a firestorm, that caused severe damage to the historic center and the Bombing of Lübeck in World War II destroyed three of the main churches and greater parts of the built-up area. A POW camp for officers, Oflag X-C, was located near the city from 1940 until April 1945. Lübeck was occupied without resistance by the British Second Army on 2 May 1945. On 3 May 1945, one of the biggest disasters in naval history happened in the Bay of Lübeck when RAF bombers sank three ships which, unknown to them, were packed with concentration-camp inmates. About 7,000 people were killed. Lübeck's population grew considerably from about 150,000 in 1939 to more than 220,000 after the war, owing to an influx of refugees expelled from the former Eastern provinces of Germany.

Below left: L to R – Frieda, Gertrud, Julius, Erna at Julius' 65th Birthday -Michigan 1996.

Below right: Back Row L to R – Frieda, Erna, Julius, Gertrud; front row: Karoline and her sister Hulda, Germany 1950..



Below left: Front row – Karoline with Erna's sons, Norbert & Rainer; back row: and Erna, husband Willi, Frieda, and Erna's daughter Karin. Hamilton, Ontario.

Below right: Karoline with her three children on her 90th birthday, 1987.

