

Losing a Homeland: Escaping Nazi Germany Warren Heilbronner, Esq

Warren Heilbronner was born Werner Heilbronner on November 7, 1932 in Stuttgart, Germany. His father was Helmut Stefan Heilbronner born September 14, 1900 in Stuttgart. He was in the textile business after majoring in textile engineering in college. Warren's mother was Dora Loeb Heilbronner born January 10, 1905 in Stuttgart. Before marriage she was a secretary after having attended business school in England.

Warren lived in a large house at 2 Wannenstrasse with his parents and older brother Ludwig, born in 1930. A live-in non-Jewish housekeeper, Marie Schied, was able to remain in the home caring for the family even as the Nuremberg laws restricting Jewish life were in effect because she was over 45 years of age. She was a true and loyal servant to the family, helping the grandparents get food when times became unbearable for Jews remaining in Germany after Kristallnacht and before their departure. The neighborhood in which the Heilbronners lived was a mixed one. Warren had many playmates who were not Jewish. Warren's young life in the early 1930's was comfortable. His mother would take the children hiking in the country. In 1937, Warren contracted whooping cough and was sent to live with Grandmother Heilbronner in Switzerland. It was there that Warren learned how to ski.



Warren at age 2



Family Home in Stuttgart



Warren's Passport

In the fall of 1938, his brother Ludwig could no longer attend school and Warren could not go to Kindergarten. Warren's father worked at this time at the Loeb Textile Company as a supervisor. It was owned by Grandfather Loeb. He was able to continue working there until January 1939.

Several years before Kristallnacht, Helmut happened to be on a streetcar on the way to visiting his father's grave, when he met a friend of his, a lawyer, who suggested that Helmut apply for a visa to the United States. He advised him to get his family on the list to exit Germany as soon as possible. Helmut heeded this advice and applied to the American Consulate to be put on the list for a visa of entry to the United States for the family. There were strict quota laws and the doors to America were closing fast. The United States was in the midst of the depression and didn't want refugees. Helmut also had to apply for an exit visa with the German government. It was required that he sign up with the police to get a certificate showing he had no warrants and he had to give an inventory of what the family would take and the value. All silver had to be turned in and moneys and bank funds were blocked.

In the summer of 1938, the United States issued a number to the Heilbronners for a visa into the U.S. The parents prepared to leave. They took inventory of everything as was required. All the while they were in communication with his uncle, Sigmund Weiss. He was his uncle who lived in New York City and was the American contact for making the travel arrangements and he had been in contact with Max Heilbronner, Helmut's uncle, in Memphis, Tennessee. Max was the family's sponsor. Sigmund made sure that Max sent the required affidavits and by October 1938, all the

paperwork was completed. However, there was a flaw in the paperwork and it was not accepted. It had to be redone. The second batch of affidavits did not arrive until November 12, 1938.

On November 9 and 10, 1938, Kristallnacht happened. Warren's neighborhood was fairly safe. He and his family lived in a rented home owned by a non-Jew. During this time, the government took some 20-30,000 Jewish men and sent them to concentration camps. The Gestapo came and arrested Grandfather Loeb and took him away. Helmut heard about this and so he thought he was on this list too. He spent the night with his mother-in-law at her house thinking that the Gestapo would not return there. At 5:30 a.m. the Gestapo came to Warren's house. Banging and talking loud, Warren and his brother Ludwig were awoken and looked through the railing to the downstairs hallway where the Nazis were. They heard the 2 men ask for their father. Their mother said that he was not there. They looked around the house and left. After this, Ludwig ran to his grandparents house where Helmut was hiding to warn him that the Nazis had just been looking for him.

That morning, Helmut went to the factory around 8 a.m. and walked into the office. The Gestapo was waiting for him and took him to the police station. Helmut said to them that his wife did not know that he was there and could she come down to the station to see him and say good bye. They agreed. He was shipped to Dachau and placed in one of the sections of the camp. He stayed there with other professional men as well as businessmen and religious leaders. Helmut was there for 5 weeks. At that time, Dachau and some of the other camps were "harassment" camps not death camps. Helmut was in a barrack with old and young men. They were not subject to hard labor. There was a roll call 3 times a day. The food was poor, they slept on wooden boards with straw for blankets and there was no medicine for sickness. One of the men became sick and Helmut helped to take him down to the infirmary. It was at the infirmary that Helmut saw dead bodies stacked up like cord wood. Dora's father was also at Dachau but in another area. Helmut was not allowed to see him. However, Helmut snuck out to the area at night to see if Grandfather Loeb was alright. He was.

Helmut wrote to Dora from the camp on a postcard which was furnished by the Nazis. On the front of the postcard is a list of rules of the camp as well as the cell block number. Helmut wrote, "Greetings to Ludwig, Werner, the Loeb's and to 'Uncle Max' which was a signal to Dora to get in touch with Sigmund to get Uncle Max to send the 2nd affidavit as soon as possible.

The day after the arrest the affidavit came to the post office. Dora went to pick it up but because it wasn't addressed to her but to Helmut she could not retrieve it. She begged the postal authorities for 3 days and still they would not give it to her. She then wired Uncle Sigmund to have Max send another affidavit addressed to her. She said that "Helmut was traveling." When she did not hear back she sent another wire saying that Helmut was in custody.

Helmut's aunt Frieda lived in Switzerland for many years and father had visited her. He was able to take some of the family jewels which were hidden in the hubcaps of the car. This was in planning for eventual escape from Germany.

Uncle Sigmund wrote a letter to the Postmaster requesting that he ask the post office in Stuttgart to release the letter to Dora Heilbronner. They did not, but eventually a new affidavit was sent to Dora in mid December. Once she had the papers she took them to the police in Stuttgart. The police then informed the officials at Dachau and Helmut was finally released.

After accumulating all the papers, the Heilbronners made arrangements to have the family's belongings packed and shipped to the United States. They also needed to have an interview with the U.S. attaché in Stuttgart. Unfortunately, Uncle Max, who was the family's sponsor had died. If the U.S. government found out about this, the family's immigration might be stopped and they would not be able to leave Germany. At the interview, the attaché asked where they were going. Warren said "Tennessee Memphis." The attaché said that he had just come from Memphis. Helmut was very worried because his uncle Max was well known in Memphis realty. He was afraid that the agent would remember this but he did not. The family passed!

In late January, 1939 Helmut's mother died. She had been in poor health. She had a silver chest filled with broken silverware. It was this silver that Helmut handed over to the German officials who demanded that Jews hand over their silver before leaving Germany. The movers did all the packing to monitor for the Nazis to monitor what was going out of the country but Helmut's and Dora's silver was smuggled out in the packing crates.

An exit permit from the German government was needed. When Helmut went to get it, the official present said that it would cost 10,000 marks extra. Helmut did not have that kind of money since he had given up most of it to the government. He then remembered a life insurance policy for 10,000 marks. He went to the company but they would not cash it in because he was a Jew. When he returned to the permit office, the official called the insurance company and told him to release the cash. Helmut was then given 2 hours to complete the transaction and return with the money. Finally the family got the exit papers.

They left on March 3, 1939. Brother Ludwig, as luck would have it, developed a cold. So, Dora tried to make him look as healthy as possible by rouging his cheeks.

The family traveled through Switzerland, France and finally Holland where they boarded the Holland American line and sailed on March 18, 1939. They arrived in New York on Sunday, March 26. Since there was no unloading of ships on Sunday, the ship stayed in the Narrows until the next day when they were unloaded in Hoboken New Jersey.

The family eventually settled in Perry, New York where Helmut found work at the Perry Knitting Mill. There, Helmut changed his name to Harry and the boys' names to Leslie and Warren. He didn't want anyone in the family to have German names in a small American town while the war was still going on. Warren finished high school, college and went on to law school. He is a lawyer and he and his wife, Joyce have 3 sons and 6 grandchildren.

