

CHAPTER 37

THE SAD END.

We come now to the last letter, written by the parents on October 10th, 1942, mailed on the same day by registered mail to Dr. Julius Ziegler in Vienna, who later mailed it to us in Cuba. He wrote on the envelope: "Farewell letter to the children."

First the part written by the mother:

"My most heartily loved children:

We are writing these lines to you in great uncertainty about our fate and we also don't know whether and when these lines will reach you! But we want to assert you that we are

facing our fate quietly. We are happy - it is paradox - that you are not here. God had helped me to know that you are that far away. I know that all of you will be very happy, because my whole life was a prayer for you. The thought of us should not burden you. We were well off up to the end. We were in high esteem by everybody, especially Papa. Your pictures and some things of remembrance are with our landlady for preservation for you, and there, where Julius has the address. We put our future destiny in God's hands. It is possible that we will have to leave tomorrow, on the 11th of October at 5 in the morning, can also take a few more days. It is also possible that we will still survive and will see each other again! Then our gladness will still be greater. So, fare well, my beloved children, let us always be among you, even if we are not alive anymore. That means, you should never be sad - I was so happy when I saw all of you merry. Love each other.

Your Mother."

To that letter father wrote a short addition, consisting of one long sentence:

"P.S. One has to know how to rip out of ones own heart ones own suffering like all anguish and worries about oneself and ones own people, in sympathy with and in the face of, with human beings necessarily connected and at certain times still more increased, often unutterable grief.

Papa."

These were their last words.

I wrote all that with a heavy heart. I went for weeks through all their letters, reading all of them, taking out the ones I have translated and brought here, and by doing that I

went with them through all the horrors they had gone through till the end, when they wrote the heart-rending fare-well letter.

As I said already before, during 1942 we had hardly any direct mail from the parents and as their letters were mailed to Julius, we did not know that they were in that terrible situation. These letters, written by them between August and October 1942, we received much later and we were unaware of all that had happened to them. We were unaware of Part 3 of that devilish plan, as mentioned before, hatched out by Hitler and his consorts in the Reichschancellery and executed by Adolf Eichmann. These $1\frac{1}{2}$ years of waiting in Poland, of reprieve, were part of that plan, necessary to give these beasts time to build the gas-chambers and the crematorium in Majdanek near Lublin. Then, when that was done, they continued the deportation by going with special detachments from village to village to levy their prey, which they did with special cruelty. The people had to run and those who couldn't were shot.

This is not a fairy-tale. I have the proof of it, black on white, 10 pages of a letter, written in Polish by a man from Poland, Zbygniew Choroziński, the son or grandson of our parents' landlady, who was an eye-witness to all that happened there. Starting in 1976, this man wrote us many letters, sent by registered mail, in Polish, which we had translated, and which we answered in Polish. Each letter contained inclusions like photos of Hedy and Lisa, also Xerox-copies of documents like birth certificates, marriage certificates, and letters from the American Consulate in Vienna, etc. In these letters the consulate asked the parents for detailed information, how the sponsors who had written the affidavits would take care of

them when they arrived in the U.S. At that time, Hedy and Johanna were already in Cuba, and now we found out that instead of mentioning it to us our parents had written to Marianne Erdstein in New York, to get in touch with that Dr. Runes and ask her to procure that information and send it to the consulate. Marianne must have done that, but as we found out and know, this Dr. Runes never reacted nor did she do anything, although it was obvious that our parents would never had accepted any help from them. Our parents wrote in their last letters from Poland that Dr. Runes has them on her conscience. Now we understood what we never knew before that the relatives of Dr. Runes had really sent an affidavit and that was at about the middle of 1940, but it was probably written in such a way that the American consulate could have had reasons to doubt their sincereness, and had to ask for detailed explanations. These were never sent, although Marianne intervened. It would have been so easy to save our parents lives. If they only would have written to us, instead of to Marianne, that there was an affidavit and that the consulate had asked for more information. But they kept it as a secret from us, didn't want us to know about it, as they explained later, because they thought that we would, by trying to do something on their behalf, diminish our efforts to save Lisa and Francis. That was in the summer of 1940, when Lisa and Francis were in the Bernerie on the Atlantic coast, when we had no contact at all with them and were not in a position to do anything for them. Hedy and Johanna arrived in Havana on the 1st of October 1940, and had we known anything, we would have made efforts of all kinds, would have written to Dr. Runes, would have tried to get permits for

the parents for Cuba. I mentioned already that I had offered them that, but they had declined, had said that they will stay behind till Lisa and Francis are saved. I think I am repeating here what I had already explained before. Of course, they did not know that they were in such great danger, at that time, and when they realized it, in February of 1941, it was too late and still to let us know they sent postcards, which arrived in Havana at about the 18th of March, when they were already detained. Repetitions? I can not help it, have to say it again and again.

I am now bringing the sad letter, which the Polish man, Mr. Zbygniew Choroziński, wrote us, 10 pages:

"Dear Mrs. Hedy Mechner:

March 25, 1977

I returned from Lublin today and found your letter. In spite of the letter having been mailed by "special delivery", it arrived in poor shape. Until now not one letter arrived without being damaged. They were torn on their way here. I will contact the main post office and ask them to save letters in the future. I doubt the success of my attempt! I will enclose the envelope of the letter I received from you, with the stamps on it. Lately packages from U.S.A. don't arrive in Poland....the press here mentioned it.

(I was) sad about the death of Dr. Erich Ziegler. What did he die from? How long was he ill? Any children left? Thanks for the New Years card from you, and your sister. Thanks for the family photo, it tells us a lot! I would love to keep it forever. If you don't want me to keep it, I will send it back to you. Great changes can be seen in your face and your sisters face, from the years of your youth....What colossal changes!! This is human nature, no one can avoid his

destiny. About the dollars you sent to me, I did not receive them at all.

I wonder why you did not confirm the receipt of the letter, in which I wrote to you about your parents' visit in Kunow! Perhaps somebody did not like the details I described in the letter.

I will now describe the sad visit of Dr. and Mrs. Ziegler in my town. Kunow is a small town. Before the war, we had quite a number of Jews here. During the war, the Germans transported Jews from Vienna here, most of them older people, whose belongings had been taken away from them. Your parents lived in the house we live in now. The house was my grandfathers property. He worked in a factory, and as a carpenter did also other factory work. Your parents received packages from overseas. Your mother used to sell parts of the contents of the packages, to get food supplies. Jews were punished if they sold for business; they were often searched, it often happened that people were killed. They did not find out who did the killing. The killers were protected and not afraid of killing.

The doors of Jewish apartments were painted with red paint. We helped each other with food supplies. They used to sell items of clothing to get food. We used to buy meat secretly for your parents and other provisions not too easily to be gotten. Your father was a man of culture, good brain, and he had a good heart. He was patient and tolerant and divided his possessions. He was very honest and devoted. He knew the nature of human beings as a great doctor and was always honest. Lately packages did not arrive in Kunow anymore from abroad to your parents.

Grandfather had hidden cows, pigs, and chicken. He had enough bread, milk, potatoes, for all of us. Your father helped grandfather in his illness, a day before Jews from Kunow, Lagow, Rakow, etc. were sent away. We knew about it! We were shocked and knew their sad destiny.

To refuse to move was impossible. The resistance of Jews was nil - they knew their hopeless lot. Your parents were very shocked about their sad future, - father protested - of no avail. We wanted to hide your parents, but father would not consent to such a step. He was afraid. He hoped Jews will not perish. Mrs. Ziegler refused to be hidden by herself. She declared she wished to die with her husband, instead of leaving him. She was loyal to him till the end. Before leaving, she said she would love to see her children before her death once more.

A special group of Germans, Ukrainians, and Latvians arrived in Kunow. They planned their action with precision, those hated bandits.

Early in the morning, Jews from areas near Kunow were gathered in the market place. Kunow Jews were told to be in the market place at a certain hour. The latecomers were shot! A Viennese Jew was lead in pain - strangulated hernia - by his wife. They pushed her away from her husband, crying with pain; they hit him with bayonets. He bled, so they shot him in the head. The possessions of the Jews were taken away from everyone. They arranged the people, four in a line. The people were scared, with a deadly pallor on their faces. We were not allowed to talk. If anyone wanted to go to the bathroom without permission, he would be killed on the spot. The older men

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were not here anymore, they were victims before or worked in labor camps.

We were watching your mother saying good-bye to us and to the house she lived in. She was an intelligent, honest, and wise person. She left good memories! The Ukrainians, we heard, beat your father. Those who could not march they punished by beating them. At the station we saw trainloads of Jews in the waggons, ready to move on! They were thrown in forcefully and were being hit with bayonets and fists. A German would grab an infant, hit it and hit the mother who was hysterical.

People were packed in waggons without water or light, and no air. The farmers in the fields heard the screams, coming from the passing trains. Trains were going to Majdanek or, who knows, to Treblinka for killing of the victims by gas. Fate gave them unnatural death - Fascists killed and destroyed them. The world powers could not prevent these horrors.

Your last letter was in German; I tried to translate it. Write in German, but clearly, please. I dream about the city you live in. I wish I could see your city. I dream about your country in which you live now - U.S.A.

For a long time I kept documents of the family that your parents left with us. Did you receive my recent letter with some documents? I have great respect for your family, which suffered so much during the last war. I didn't know them all. Please write to me about them.

Best wishes (signature)."

After the war, a court in Nueremberg sat in accusation of the most important criminals, who were caught, but some had

committed suicide, like Hitler, Goebbels, Himmler, and Goering. Many important ones had escaped and live somewhere under false names, mostly in Argentina or Brazil, and were never found, like Bormann. But one very important and perhaps the cruellest, Adolf Eichmann, was found, thanks to Simon Wiesenthal, who had an office in Vienna and discovered many criminals, no matter how far away they lived. Adolf Eichmann was one day caught by special Jewish detectives in Argentina, brought to an airport and from there by airplane to Israel, an enormous undertaking and success that brought protests and denunciation by the Argentinian government, furious comments by many other countries, which called it piracy, on the other hand admiration and favorable comments by other governments. Adolf Eichmann was brought before a court in Israel, where witnesses from the whole world, also delegates and observers from the whole world were participating and watching. Adolf Eichmann was there in a glass cage and had to defend himself. Nothing could help and save him. He was adjudged as guilty for committing the most heinous crimes and was finally put to death by hanging.

I am now leaving the story of our parents. They have died as martyrs, innocent victims of abominable hate and despicable baseness of men or rather beasts, who were adored by almost all the Germans, who were participating wherever possible in great crimes, disregarding love of humanity and moral doctrines, assuming thereby the guilt of their leaders.

For us, our parents are not dead. They live on as shining examples of all that is good in men; and with them the great many other members of our family, who were the victims of the Germans and had the same fate. May they all rest in peace.

A page of glory is due to the many relatives in Vienna and Tchechoslovakia, who were so helpful to our parents by frequently sending them packages with food. In the first place were Julius and Antoinette, who were constantly in contact with them and sent lots of things. The parents wrote that they were their 'good angels'. Again and again they wrote it. From Tchechoslovakia they got very frequently food parcels, from the Landlers and their two daughters Grete and Minnie and the husbands of these two, Karl Neustatl and Erwin Feldmann, and from Terry and others, as long as these relatives were free. But that came to an end, when they themselves were deported and sent to extermination camps, together with their little ones. There were friends in Vienna, Mr. and Mrs. Welzl, who helped also by sending packages with food and other things like cloths, handbags, gloves etc., which they could sell and thereby lighten their misery. Hugo Huserl, who was still in Germany and in danger kept contact with them. He later escaped to Switzerland and ended up in Australia with the help of our Erich and Lisl, the same as Walter Ziegler. They all deserve/praise and our thankfulness.

Antoinette, the only survivor, has reason to be proud of all the good things she had done for our poor parents, the only one who will perhaps read these lines.

A special page of praise is due to our beloved Lisa, who took care of our Francis in a most admirable way, when he was left in Paris under her wings. She was like a mother to him, protecting him in dangerous situations in the warzone as well as from some of our relatives, who wanted her to give up Francis, to deliver him to a kind of orphanage. She threatened them with committing suicide and only then they gave up. The most heroic step she made, when she took a train to Paris with Francis and succeeded in getting a permission to cross the border from the occupied zone

of France to the un-occupied zone, the permission given to her by a Gestapo-Officer, a most daring step under the prevalent circumstances. It turned out that this undertaking saved their lives. This comes to light by reading the chapter "Reminiscing" on page 632. This is one of the great achievements in her life, of which she can be very proud, but her whole life is filled with many more great achievements for which a song of glory is due. She is a great person and that is why everybody who ever came in contact with her loves her.

(More details in interview with Lisa on pages 344-J and K).

(Brief von Frau Janina Choroszynska, Kunow, Ulice Warszawska 7, Voj. Kieleckie, Poland an Erich):

(Uebersetzung aus dem Polnischen)

Dear Dr. Erich!

I received your letter today, and as you see, I answer straight away. I will write you now all you want to know, because your mother asked me always to tell her children all I know about them, i.e. your parents. Every day she talked about her children and said, her only wish was to see her children before she dies.

I am not Jewish, we had three rooms and as you know perhaps, the Jews were not allowed to live where they liked, they had to live in the ghetto. One day I find out that a doctor from Vienna and his wife are living in a house together with many other families. I went to your mother, and proposed to her to come and live with us. Your mother came to our house, and said she liked it, because she wanted quietness on account of her sick husband. And so has our friendship started. I helped your parents as much as I could, because I as a Polish woman could go out more than the Jews, and get more things.

Your mother liked me very much, and she always said that when the war will be over, she will take me over to her children. I helped your mother to get food, and also for her friends. The Germans found out that I helped Jews, and they wanted to kill me one day, and I was that scared of the Germans that I got yellow marks on my face, and I still have them, and can't get rid of them.

Your mother gave me all her important papers and photos to look after. I still have them, and will send them to you one day. I have your photo when you were single. I still have your father's diploma, your father was always very sick. And so we lived together, until one day the Germans came and asked all Jews to go out on the "Rynek". They went to all Jewish houses, and locked them up. Everybody, old and young, had to go, and also your parents. The Germans took everything from the people, they were not allowed to take anything. I will never forget that horrible day, all day we heard nothing but shooting. We Poles were not allowed to go out, we had to stay in our houses, until they had sent away the Jews. They put them on trains, and nobody knew where they went. Some of them managed to get away, and were hidden by good people, but very few could do it. A few people came back after the war was over, and they told us what a terrible time they had.

In my next letter, I will write you more about your parents. Your mother gave me the addresses of all her children and friends, and I have written to all of them. Thank you very much for the parcel you sent me, I have not yet received it, but it will be very useful because living is very hard here. I work but get a very poor pay, and everything is terribly expensive.

I send you a photo of mine, but it is an old one. I will try and send you one day another one. I am 26 years of age, about as tall as your mother. You ask whether I need any clothing. Anything you don't wear and can spare, would be very welcome. I would like so much to get out of Poland, it is no peace here, and fighting goes on everywhere. In my next letter, I will write you all about your parents. You can send it to your sisters. I also will send you the papers your mother left with me. My best regards to you and your family yours faithfully Janka

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This is a letter, written by an eye witness to the deportation of our dear parents from Kunow to an extermination camp in Majdanek. The writer was a young boy at that time, but he wrote the letter in 1977, that is 35 years later. I had the letter translated from Polish into English, and I am bringing the translation at the end of the 10 Polish pages.

dn. 25-03-77

Pani Hedy Mechnel.

Dopiero dzisiaj wróciłem z Lublina. Zastąpiłem list od Pani. Pomimo że był przesyłką poleconą, otrzymałem go jako uszkodzony. Do tej pory ani razu nie otrzymałem listu całego. Po drodze uległ rozerwaniu. To jest nie w porządku. Dlatego skrótnie zwrócę się do Urzędu Wymiany Poczty w Warszawie o zapobieżenie ewentualnym podobnym epizodom. Nie wiem czy odniesie to pożądanego skutku. Na dowód w załączeniu wysyłam kopertę tego listu. Są na niej odciski przecięci z tresą, że przesyłka nadeszła w stanie niewłaściwym. W ostatnich dwóch listach napisałem Pani o niedostawianiu przesyłek z USA do adresatów w Polsce, co poparte jest nycinkami z gazet. Z przykrością przyjąłem wiadomość o śmierci Dr. Erica Zieglera. Ciekaw jestem jak długo chorował, co było przyczyną zgonu i czy pozostawił po sobie potomstwo. Kartki z okazji Nowego Roku od Pani i od Pani siostry otrzymałem. Dziękuję za życzenia złożone mi na nich. Z zadowoleniem obejrzałem fotografię rodzinną. Wiele mi ona mówi. Chciałbym ją mieć na zawsze. Nie wiem czy wyrazi Pani na to zgodę. W przypadku braku takiej zgody będę z zalem ją zwrócić. Porównanie podobizn Pani i Pani siostry z tymi z lat młodzieńczych to ogrom zmian. Takie kolosalne przekształcenia są



The last picture of the parents, taken before their abduction by the Huns, taken to Poland and murdered there.

For us our parents are not dead. They live on as shining examples of all that is good in men;

New York Times, Nov. 9, 1976.

Teaching the Holocaust

Why is this atrocity different from all other atrocities in the grim and bloody history of mankind? Such, more or less, is the question raised by those who criticize the New York City Board of Education's proposal to make the study of the mass murder of Jews by the Nazis compulsory in the city's high schools.

The "holocaust," as Jewish groups refer to the Nazi effort at genocide, has been covered extensively in some schools, cursorily in some others and not at all in still others. The new curriculum, which the board proposes for at least two weeks of study, contains excerpts from Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf," descriptions and photographs of the death camps, poems, plays, maps and programs for class discussion. It is designed to fit into the study of contemporary history, as this century's most graphic example of racism.

The objections to the plan are of two sorts. Spokesmen for the German-American Committee of Greater New York and the Steuben Society are distressed that such unpleasant history should be broached anew. "It creates a bad atmosphere toward German-Americans in this country," says George Pape, president of the German-American Committee. "To that I object."

The other objection comes from those who emphasize that not only Jews were massacred by the Nazis. One list includes Freemasons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholic and Protestant clergymen, gypsies, Socialist and Communist leaders, French and Italian hostages, Polish and Russian civilians. This point is well taken. No history of World War II would be complete if it did not direct attention to the many victims of the Nazis. But there are nonetheless good reasons for emphasizing the fate of Europe's Jews. Hitler's "final solution" marked a critical hour for a people with a history of persecution; it destroyed whole communities, an entire culture. Of all the

Nazi victims, Jews suffered the most relentless fanaticism.

Moreover, schools in cities like New York have a compelling concern with the tribulations of certain groups. It is essential, for example, that this city's students understand the impact of black slavery in America—which has properly been given extensive attention for several years. Just as the subject of slavery must not be consigned to "black studies," so the gas ovens ought not to be consigned to "Jewish studies." The young cannot understand the present circumstances and feelings of the people they live among unless they understand something of their past. That goes as well for the famine that drove the Irish to these shores, the prejudice that Italians found when they arrived, the harassment of German-Americans during World War I, the forced relocation of Japanese-Americans during World War II. The cataclysmic events of the 1930's and 40's, still painful in the memory of many New Yorkers, require special attention. They dramatize the danger of all intolerance.

Even on those who escaped the Nazis' final solution, the experience has left deep scars. "Under Hitler," Saul Bellow reminds us, "the Jews were the lepers of Europe. No, they were worse than lepers. Lepers are isolated, nursed and treated. There is no word for what the European Jews were between 1939 and 1945." But words must be given to it, and they must be taught to the young.

Perhaps the proposed curriculum does not merit two weeks; that is for educators to resolve, without undue pressure from outside organizations. And certainly note must be taken in the classroom of the remarkable post-war transformation of West Germany into a democratic society. But the annihilation of European Jewry should be a mandatory subject. As for Mr. Pape, who thinks "there is no real proof that the holocaust actually did happen," let him sit in on the course.

In the meantime, my medical practice had grown and I worked all day long. My fee was very small, but at the end of the day I had accumulated a nice amount of money, and since our expenses were relatively small, we could save some money. Very often, a few times a week, I took the children to the movies, for which I did not have to pay, as a patient of mine, a Cuban, always supplied me with tickets. We also had a nice social life, had friends whom we visited or who came over to visit us.

One day, a patient and his family moved to Mexico, and they had offered me to buy their piano for a relatively small amount of money, which I did. I had it moved to our apartment, without telling the children anything about it, when they were at school - they both attended an American school, Miss Phillips School at that time - and when they came home they were surprised to find the piano in the house and were very happy. They were both very anxious to play and were in the beginning almost fighting to get the seat at the piano. I bought music books and Francis advanced very rapidly, since he had still some knowledge from the time he had learned piano in Vienna with Miss Feucht. Johanna had to start and I spent quite some time with her to give her the basic instructions.

There came a time when we had decided to move to a better apartment, as our apartment was quite primitive, especially the kitchen, and very hot in summer. We found an apartment in Vedado in a very good neighborhood on the Linea, in a modern building. It was on the ground floor and we liked it very much. But we soon became very disappointed, when we noticed that a construction of a new house was going on right next to

our apartment, with a lot of noise from early morning till late in the afternoon. Otherwise it was a great improvement of our situation. Lisa and Paul lived very close by, and they made a living by renting two or three rooms and also providing meals for some of these people, a Mr. Adler and a Mrs. Gerenday. Besides, she had another flourishing business, baking cakes and cookies in good Viennese style, for which she had always had a great talent. Paul had a job in the diamond cutting and grinding industry, which was started in Havana by Jewish immigrants from Belgium. He had learned it quite well, did the cutting of raw diamonds into two halves, and earned a nice income with that. I should also mention here that Francis took piano lessons in Cuba with a Mrs. Freund for a few months.

We had the good fortune that Mr. Bernhard Reder, an old friend and schoolmate of mine, and his friend Mr. Lerner, a painter, lived nearby. They both liked Francis very much and started to give him instruction, Mr. Reder in sculpture, and Mr. Lerner in painting. Mr. Lerner visited us for months every afternoon and sat there for hours, while Francis was painting still-lives, making great progress. Mr. Reder had met Francis on the boat, when he happened to hear the name Mechner. He asked and found out right away that he was the son of his former schoolmate. He was then very helpful to Lisa and Francis, since they were travelling in the tourist class, where the food was very bad, whereas Mr. Reder was in the first class. Mr. Reder was a great sculptor in Europe, a friend of Maillol, but all his works were lost, after he left, stolen by the Germans. He became famous again in the U.S., showed his new sculptures in many exhibitions.

I should have mentioned that Hedy and Johanna had come from New York with so-called Re-entry Permits. Hedy had made out, shortly after she had come to the United States, a so-called Declaration of Intention, also called First Paper, in which she applied for United States citizenship. She had to stay in the country for 5 years, before she could get her Second Paper, the Citizenship Certificate. But there was a provision that she could leave the country during that 5-year period for 6 months with a Re-entry Permit, and possibly for longer on application for an extension of another 6-months period. But before the first 6 months were over, Hedy had applied for an extension for another 6 months. When we did not get an answer, we wrote to the Immigration Department and got a reply which said that her papers had been misplaced and that she will be notified when they will be found. We were extremely happy about it. We applied anyway every 6 months for an extension, by registered mail, of course. We were all together, had a relatively pleasant life, but still, I saw no hope for the future. I was a few times close to getting my visa, but the American consulate got usually only a few visa numbers for the Rumanian quota, but never enough to include me.