

Recollections of an “Ethnic German” Girl in Litzmannstadt [Lodz] (Retrospective account, 2004)

Abstract

The Polish industrial center of Lodz—Poland’s second largest city—was conquered and annexed to the *Reichsgau* Wartheland in 1939. With a prewar population of approximately 60,000 so-called *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) and 230,000 Jews, the city was a perfect example of how Germanization and the Holocaust went hand in hand. In early 1940, the city’s first major ghetto was renamed Litzmannstadt. The following recollections have been excerpted from the memoirs of a member of one of Lodz’s “ethnic German” families. Even a young child could register that Germanness conferred social status on those who were able to claim it.

Source

First Episode—September 1939 to January 1945

Wartime, the big change ... and now we had the war and German soldiers in the country! Of the so-called roar of war [*Kriegsgetöse*] we heard almost nothing. Apart from the few bombs and cannon shots during the invasion in early September, things were relatively calm.

The German troops had moved through our city of Lodz in the direction of Warsaw, the Poles behaved very calmly, and we waited anxiously for what would come.

And after a few days it came! And so fast that we were all amazed by how well it all worked and functioned.

One morning, placards, and regulations were posted everywhere in German and Polish, saying where and when we all had to get registered. The schools and larger police stations in the various districts were the registration offices. We flocked there together in droves, for we were all very curious. Once there we got there, we were put in two lines, one for Germans and one for Poles.

All personal information was recorded. That took many hours. We were told to pick up our papers in a few days. When we all had our new ID cards in hand—the Poles had green and we had blue—we wondered how they had managed to get so much green and blue cardstock, and how they had gotten it so fast.

With the new “cardboard,” as Papa renamed it, we went to those places that we knew already and picked up our food ration coupons. I don’t remember how different looking our coupons were from those of the Poles, but comparing them, we noticed one thing immediately: they got barely half of what we did. Well, why, we wondered, since they were just as hungry as we were?

In the evenings, we sat, as before, at our pump house and talked everything through. Surprisingly, our relationship with each other had improved a bit.

When we picked up our first food rations, we were filled with wonder and amazement. For the first time in our lives, we got to see and taste artificial honey and margarine! That was great fun for us.

We sat by the pump house and nibbled the honey cups and margarine cubes, which we held in our fingers. The slightly sweetish margarine was a special treat for us, and we gobbled the cubes right up.

My little brother and I got slapped by our mother for being so greedy. That night we both got bellyaches and had to go to the outhouse several times!

In the beginning, it was still amusing to all of us. But little by little, things happened that weren't so funny anymore. First off, all the small Polish shops and kiosks were closed down. Then came the bans for all Poles. There was a sign at the cinema: "Prohibited for Poles." In the cafés the same sign: "Prohibited for Poles." All Polish schools were banned and closed.

Since it was still vacation time, it was hard to figure out what these changes meant for everyone. We also hoped that everything would normalize a bit more. But it stayed that way until the end.

Our Jewish fellow citizens were the worst off. Not only were they dispossessed of everything and forced to move from large into smaller apartments, they were also ordered to "decorate" themselves with a yellow star.

At first that was just a laugh for Poles and Germans. But then there was nothing more to laugh about! Because we heard in a roundabout way that something was brewing and going on behind the scenes. But that did not become clear until the beginning of 1941.

Initially we, too, were busy coping with changes in our small family group. Since Papa was unemployed, he went to the employment office every day, and one day he came back with some big news. He was to report to the newly staffed police station the next day and would become a police officer.

Our Papsch in a uniform? Well, what would that look like? But when he appeared in his police uniform, we were flabbergasted. He looked chic! If we hadn't always known it, it finally became clear: Our dad was an absolute hunk of a man!

Our Polish neighbors also told him how good he looked. He was as proud as a peacock! But there was a catch. Since he couldn't read or write, he wasn't qualified for office work. So he was assigned to patrol duty. But never alone, always with a colleague who could write.

That, of course, bothered him and he regretted that he hadn't gone to school. But his anger was short-lived. Always in a good mood and full of jokes, he was very popular with his comrades and everyone wanted to go on patrol with him.

But the uniform slowly began to change him, and he became very distant toward our neighbors. Mama and we children got along with the neighbors as we always had.

In the middle of October school started up again. When we left home with our rucksacks on our backs, but saw that the Poles had to stay home, it was a bit strange. At first, I envied them, because they stayed home, and I had to go!

But then my curiosity took over. What kind of teachers would we have? How would it be without Polish? Who would be the new school director? Question after question! But everything had already been figured out. When the Germans marched in, they must have already had plans in the drawer for all possible scenarios. But the biggest surprise for me was the new head teacher!

Who greeted us, then, in the large schoolroom as director? Our former German teacher, the creep who always

punished us so severely for the smallest infraction! I was so angry that I felt sick! The first day of school was already spoiled!

It looked, however, as though the other teachers were alright. There were also some new faces. Two chic young men from Germany in yellow uniforms. As expected, I repeated fourth grade, since I had to stay back.

After that nobody asked anymore questions, and everything went better than I had expected. Yes, it was so good that I wondered about my own self. Now that everything was in German, it suddenly became easy.

Already in the first dictation, in mid-December, I got an A. And it wouldn't be a lie to say that I became the best in the class over the next few years, especially in essay-writing. I had good and very good grades in almost all subjects. The only thing that I had a lot of trouble with was arithmetic, just like before.

But our new homeroom teacher recognized my problems! He didn't punish me for not understanding the increasingly difficult assignments, but rather gave me free tutoring at his home after school. That was delightful!!! I didn't have to skip school anymore because of arithmetic! Now going to school was really fun!

Now, I was even in a position to pay back those classmates who had helped me with math problems in the past. If we had to write an essay for homework, and they couldn't manage, they always turned to me. On "essay day," we met one hour earlier in the classroom. I dictated the essays to them—there were sometimes three or four students—on the same topic, but I came up with different versions.

Everything kept going well, and the teachers never figured it out. I was happy to go to school every day and received a very good final grade each year. Except in math, where my grades were always a bit worse. But with so many "good" and "very good" grades, the Ds in stupid math didn't matter so much. At the school graduation ceremony in 1943, I was praised by the former creep, now the director, in front of everyone! I was the happiest girl in the world!

There were many changes in our family as well. Since Papa earned good money with the police, Mama didn't have to work and was always there for us. At Christmas time in 1939, Papa told us that we would be getting a little brother or sister in the coming year. All of us were very happy.

But I was also very surprised when my father made a very strange remark. He said: "I hope that it's a boy. We have our work cut out for us, because Adolf needs a lot of soldiers now."

We children didn't know what to make of this statement, and Mama just shook her head. Now a larger apartment was requested and also granted immediately. But only the granting was immediate. It took a long time. My little brother was born in May 1940, still in the same small apartment.

Our Polish neighbors, as in the past, helped us with the delivery and took care of us children and the household. We didn't get a larger apartment until the end of September 1940. And where did it end up being?

It was a huge classroom in a former Polish school. After having been in such close quarters, we felt completely lost in it. Our furniture looked like doll house furniture in this space! The neighbors helped us with the move. We were very depressed and sad when we took leave of our little quarters, of our longtime neighbors, and our beloved pump house. Only our father looked forward to the new surroundings and the big "hall."

We were told that this was temporary, until something larger and more attractive opened up. We were still there

for Christmas 1940—we celebrated in the giant room, and it wasn't at all cozy! Then in January we received the news that a house had been vacated for us and that we should take a look at it.

If only we had known what was in store for us there! When we arrived for the inspection, the Poles who owned the small house were just leaving. We were stunned! They got kicked out just because of us? But everything had already been arranged. They had to move into a small room with their three children, only three blocks away.

Mama wanted to know nothing of it at first. But then we learned that all the small houses up and down the street had to be vacated by the Poles to make room for the Germans. Well, they were really upset, and if looks could kill, we would have been dead. What the invading soldiers hadn't managed to accomplish was now there to see: sheer hatred.

We, however, had no choice but to accept. Otherwise, another family would have gotten the house. And we wanted to get out of the big "hall" as soon as possible.

Since the cottage had a small garden, Mama promised to give the owners some of the harvested fruits and vegetables. That placated the family a bit, and they were a little friendlier when they looked at us. Then we moved into the new house, and after a short time we felt quite good about being there.

But then, all of a sudden, there were so many changes in store for us that our wonder never ceased.

Suddenly, our family name was no longer pleasing to the authorities! It sounded too Polish!

We were thus renamed. Bradatsch became Brade. And my name went from Aurelia to Aurelie! Well, I guess they had their worries!

We had to apply for new papers. My mother's sister, who was happily married to a Pole, was supposed to divorce him. Of course, she didn't do that, so she didn't get a blue registration card and was treated like a Pole.

Since the Poles didn't get very much food on their stamps, or got much less than we did, it ended up being too much to starve on, but too little to live on. Mama helped her sister and her family as much as she could, so that they could make ends meet through the war years.

My father didn't like that at all, and he often quarreled with Mama. But these helpful acts paid off in the end. When the Russians invaded in 1945, our relatives helped us get through that first difficult period. But I'll say more about that later.

In September 1941 we got another brother. Did my father want to make good his threat and set up a whole company for Adolf?

I also got into my first big argument with my once beloved Papsch, after I announced that I didn't want to remain in the League of German Girls [*Bund deutscher Mädchen* or BDM]. I didn't like the constant marching, the standing at attention, and the constant litany of stories about the Führer, which we had to rattle out, again and again, at every social evening hosted by the League.

After I skipped the social evening a few times, the League leader sent an admonishing note to my parents. And then, at age 13, I got not only a few of my father's usual slaps, but the first real beating of my life!!! My dear Papsch, how you have changed! How could this happen?

I started to hate this period in my life!

Source: Aurelia Scheffel, *Lodz-Geschichte(n): Erinnerungen*. Norderstedt: Books on Demand GmbH, 2004, pp. 84-92. Reproduced here with gracious permission from Mrs. Aurelia Scheffel.

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