Dorrith M Sim

I CAN STILL PICTURE THAT FAREWELL

I was born in Kassel, Germany, on 8th December 1931. Vati and Mutti, my parents Hans and Trudi Oppenheim, were very sporty people, who enjoyed all outdoor activities. They tried hard to give me as normal a life as possible. With haversacks on our backs and carrying our walking sticks, we climbed the hills at the weekends. Occasionally we would reach as far as the Herkules statue, which overlooks the town. Then we would pass the Schloss Wilhelmshöhe – a museum and art gallery, where visitors were obliged to slip their shoes into hessian slippers, a practice which still persists today.

In the wintertime we went skiing. I hated climbing up the hills, but loved coming down. We went skating also and I have a photograph of myself skating between two Hitler Youths. I can still recall how terrified and helpless my poor Mutti felt. I also began to understand that I had to be strong, because I was Jewish.

In the better weather we paddled down the River Fulda in Vati's collapsible canoe and sometimes camped alongside the banks of the river. I recall a festival with everyone dressed up in fancy clothes, the boats all decorated and the river aglow with water lilies.

Other memories are not so happy. We were walking by the Fulda one day when we were approached by a Brownshirt with his wife and daughter. He insisted that I should share his daughter's lilo (inflatable airbed). I was very frightened. The little girl kept bouncing up and down until the lilo capsised and we both finished up in the deep murky water. Our fathers had to dive in and rescue us.

One day I arrived at school to find a large crowd outside and the school being vandalised. Desks, chairs, books, slates and much more were being thrown out of the windows while a large crowd stood by jeering. 'You'd better go home', a man said to me. 'It'll be a long time until you're back here again.' I began running towards my Oppenheim grandparents' apartment, some streets away. Grandmother ('Oma') was horrified by my story, and insisted I wait with her until she managed to contact my parents.

'There will be more trouble,' Vati prophesised. 'The children at the Weisenhaus (the Jewish orphanage) will need our help.' My parents brought some of the children home with us, but that night the Gestapo ransacked our flat and did much damage. They took my father away as well, and dropped him some miles out of town. The Weisenhaus children had been in grave danger too, but they missed the Molotov cocktails that were thrown through the windows of the orphanage.

We had to move house shortly afterwards, but not before my parents had set the wheels in motion for my removal to the UK. This necessitated repeated visits to the Rathaus (town hall) to obtain my passport. Two enormous stone lions guarded the entrance and I was more afraid of them than of any Nazi. They gave me bad nightmares and Mutti had to drag me past them, up the stairs into the Rathaus, for our regular confrontation with Herr Schmidt.

It was 24th July 1939 before I was ready to depart with a Kindertransport. Mutti and Vati travelled with me to Hamburg, where I was to catch the train to Holland. I was wearing a red shoulder bag and carrying my toy dog Droll. Parents were not allowed on the platform at the Hamburg station. There were so many other children... Many were crying. In all the commotion I dropped Droll and he fell beneath the train. I was terribly upset, until a kind helper climbed down to rescue him. Then the helper took me over to where my parents stood behind a barrier, so I could kiss them goodbye. I can still picture that farewell today, although all I can remember about the journey is that some of the children played cards.

In Holland we were taken to a large green field where some Dutch people, including Queen Wilhelmina herself, gave us a picnic before taking us to our boat. I shared a cabin with other children. We left it during the night, to look for toilets, and wandered miserably around the corridors, getting more lost all the time.

The next morning our boat docked at Harwich where a train was waiting to take us to London. My new foster parents, Fred and Sophie Gallimore, were waiting for me at Liverpool Street station. They could not speak German, and all I could say in English was ‘I have a handkerchief in my pocket’. Later on, whenever I learned a new word, I’d put it into that sentence. ‘I have a dog in my pocket,’; ‘I have a teacher in my pocket.’

The Gallimores lived in Edinburgh with their dog Rogie. We drove to Scotland in their Austin Seven motor car. Life was very different there. I was able to play with the children in the street, and soon I was going to school.

The Gallimores tried hard to bring Vati and Mutti out of Germany also, but without success. Then, just after the war began, my aunt Alice turned up unexpectedly. Although they had little room, they let her share my bedroom until she left for New York in 1940. Shortly afterwards I was evacuated into the country for a year. Then, in 1942, my foster parents had their first baby daughter followed by a second girl in 1947.

I stayed with my foster parents until 1952, emigrating with them to Brazil for eighteen months, before returning to the UK to be married. I still live in Scotland, but, sadly, am now widowed. I have four daughters,

a son and eight grandchildren. My children's picture book, 'In My Pocket', tells the story of my journey from Germany in more detail.