

HISTORY

Passport from the past

American Jew reclaims her family's German citizenship, and her roots

BY ERIKA DREIFUS

Eight years ago, some college friends and I were planning a trip to Europe. I, the granddaughter of German-Jewish refugees who fled their homeland in 1937 and 1938, vetoed any stops in Germany. This year — while retaining my American citizenship — I took advantage of a German law that allows descendants of people like my grandparents to become German citizens. Something had changed.

I first heard about the citizenship possibility six years ago from an American acquaintance, like myself of German-Jewish extraction, who told me that he and his family had recently become German citizens. The notion intrigued me, and I telephoned the German Embassy. "Were your grandparents victims of persecution by the Third Reich?" the voice at the other end asked. Old images and sto-

ries poured into my mind, and with my heart beating very fast, I responded, "Yes."

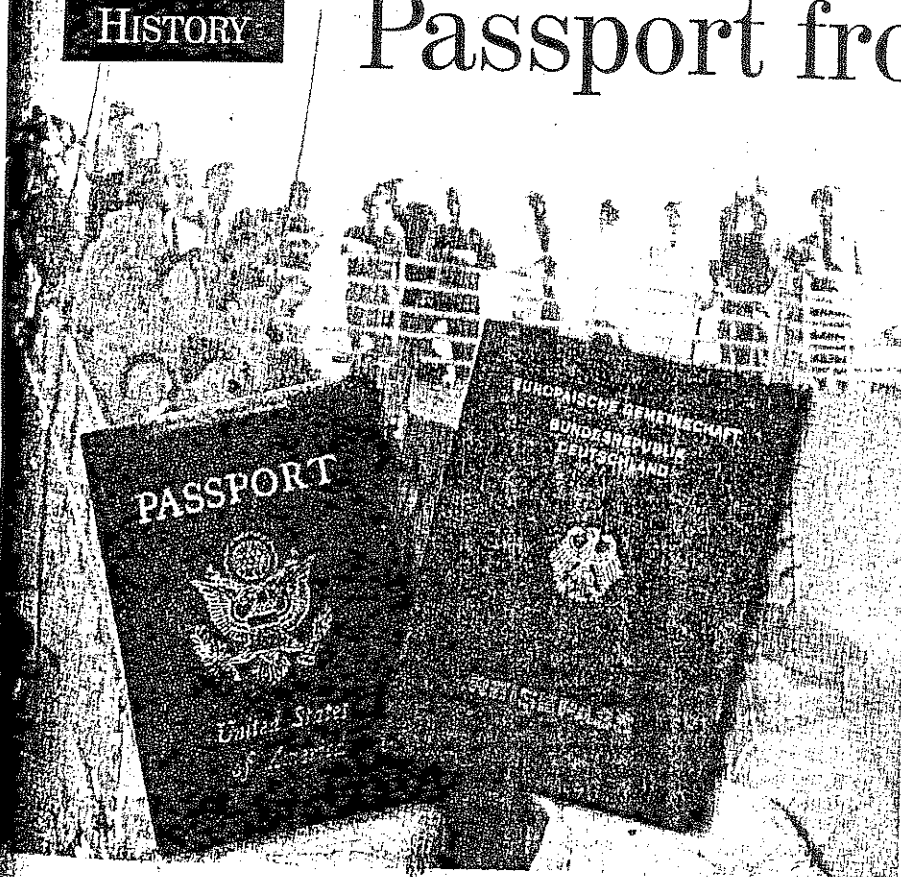
The embassy sent information that I shared with my father, my grandparents' only child. We learned that Article 116 (2) of German Basic Law provided that "Former German citizens who, between 30 January 1933 and 8 May 1945, were deprived of their citizenship on political, racial, or religious grounds, and their descendants, shall be regranted German citizenship upon application" (emphases mine).

But how German was I?

All my life I had understood myself in a variety of roles: an American, a Reform Jew, a native New Yorker, a Harvard student, a reader and a

CITIZENSHIP, Page D5

Erika Dreifus is an associate at Harvard University's Mindes de Gunzburg Center for European Studies.



An American Jew gets a passport to her German past

■ CITIZENSHIP

Continued from Page D1

writer. My parents' child. My sister's sister. My grandparents' granddaughter. These aspects to my self had either been fixed since birth or had developed more or less naturally. Germanness was never central to this picture.

Still, I had usually thought of my grandparents, whose speech had never lost its original accent, more as German Jews than as Americans. As a child I heard their own stories and the ones they read from the gruesome "Strowwelpeter" book. Grandma seemed to favor the tale of Konrad, who, like me, sucked his thumb. Unlike Konrad, however, I escaped having my thumbs severed by the local tailor - *klipp und klapp* - in the untimely absence of *Frau Mama*.

I came to know all my grandparents' refugee friends and relatives. I listened as in their native language they discussed matters they didn't want me to understand. I ate their German foods. I realized that my names, first and last, were utterly Germanic, and learned that my grandmother, too, would have been called "Erika" had her father, in 1915, not disclaimed it as "too modern."

Germany and things German had played some role in my life from the beginning. But these thin threads soon retreated into the shadow cast by the Holocaust.

I remember hearing adults mention the name "Hitler" when I was a young child living in a predominantly Jewish Brooklyn neighborhood, and I remember reading Anne Frank's diary when I was about 8 years old. It was also around that time that the miniseries "Holocaust" aired on television, and visual images of everything from the prewar persecution to the gas chambers confronted me for the first time.

Soon my family moved from Brooklyn to a mostly non-Jewish New Jersey suburb, where I read every Holocaust narrative I could find. I recall in particular one autobiography, penned by a German woman who had grown up as a "Mischling, second degree," a child with one Jewish grandparent, her tainted ancestry marking her wartime adolescence.

Later came the work by William Heyen in which he described the mass graves at Bergen-Belsen: "You will

see that the graves are covered, as is the whole area, with Erika. Erika, bell-heather, *heide*, a heath plant, wild and strong. . . . It must be very beautiful and very terrible at Belsen when each fall the Erika blossoms. I do not think I will ever live a full day when I do not think of Belsen. . . . I will think of Erika blowing green or blooming violet-red over the dead."

I read such books again and again. I absorbed more of my grandparents' stories, learning about why they emigrated and who they left behind and the relatives who suffered and died in places called Gurs and Dachau and Auschwitz.

But I also learned what came before, that my grandfather had been born in Altdorf, the same Black Forest village his family had lived in since the middle of the 18th century. I knew he had been orphaned and then denied an education when, still a child, he began working full time in the family's bakery.

I learned about my grandmother's bourgeois childhood in the city of Mannheim, which struck me as idyllic in many ways, replete with a successful father to spoil her and close links with her extended family. Her own parents were cousins whose family had lived in the Baden region for more than a century. Her early life history heightened the sadness of the losses she faced when boarding an American ship at Hamburg at the age of 23, alone and destined for a series of jobs considerably less fulfilling than the University of Heidelberg education and medical career she had planned.

But as a child I never put words to my increasing fears, never found answers to my troubling questions. I certainly never mentioned the recurring nightmare in which the SS soldiers stormed into my suburban fourth-grade classroom, tore me from my desk, and isolated me - the only Jewish student in the class - to be taken away in a big black truck.

Morning always came before the truck reached its destination. Only years later, after I read Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On's 1995 book, "Fear and Hope: Three Generations of the Holocaust," did I realize that mine were not the only third-generation nightmares.

For a long time, something kept me from visiting Germany. My grandparents have revisited their homeland twice, once in 1972 and again in 1989 - the same year I refused to go there with my friends. Neither

time did they sleep in Germany, choosing instead to cross the Rhine and rest easier in the home of French cousins.

But the next year, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, I was studying in Europe. When the opportunity arose, I traveled to Germany. The six hours I spent exploring Berlin by myself before meeting my friends were tense ones. Clinging to my familiar "Let's Go Europe" volume, I was acutely aware of my aloneness, my disorientation, my inability to speak the language - in short, my weakness and vulnerability - in a country where I would have been murdered only decades earlier.

But the trip proved pleasant, and paved the way for two successive family pilgrimages to my grandparents' birthplaces, where old neighbors and current residents welcomed us literally back into the family homes. Photographs of me standing in the back-yard garden where my grandmother had played as a child, she said later, "gave me the chills." In Altdorf, one resident recalled most vividly the family's bakery and Grandpa's baby brother - or, more precisely, Uncle Bob's striking red hair.

Still, my father, sister, and I did not act immediately to start the process of becoming German citizens. Maybe we realized our actions held more significance than mere document-filing. Maybe we weren't psychologically ready; my visits to Germany and some study of the language that I did partly for academic reasons precluded the bureaucratic steps.

And on a practical level, my father took time to consult lawyers and State Department officials to ensure - and ensure again - that we would in no way jeopardize our US citizenship. He learned that unless we declared outright that we were renouncing our US nationality, or were convicted of treason, or accepted a "policy level position" in the other country's government, or committed some other highly unlikely act, we faced no danger. And he was pleased to discover that there would be no adverse tax consequences or other responsibilities to fulfill.

All three of us spend time in Europe in our professions, and a German passport would make us European, effectively removing visa and other barriers for me as I worked and studied in France.

There followed a process of application and documentation and presenting myself at the *Generalkonsulat* in Copley Place to sign for my *Einbürgerungsurkunde* and to be told, by a consular official with a curious half smile, "You are now a German citizen." That unpronounceable naturalization certificate, ratified by the appropriate office in Altdorf's district, allowed me to file a form, submit photographs, pay a fee - and receive a passport.

And when that crimson-colored *Reisepass* arrived late this spring, the process was complete. Complete, but not to be forgotten or dismissed. The current media focus alone, on struggles to recover lost bank accounts and old insurance policies and stolen art, keeps the subject alive, though not so much for me personally: I really do not expect anyone to replace the feather-filled comforter the Nazis slashed apart - with my great grandfather bedridden beneath it - on the Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass in November 1938.

What concerns me more, as far as public policy goes, is the debate about Germany's practice of extending citizenship to ethnic Germans all over the world while withholding it from many non-German immigrants. I deplore the injustices confronting "guest workers" and their German-born children who remain resident aliens - not citizens - in their new country.

Still, my "blood-based" dual citizenship serves an important, restorative purpose, and its meaning extends far beyond the political arena into a place where public and private history converge. The leader of the Third Reich meant to rid Germany of its Jews. In a small way, reclaiming the German part of my heritage defies the nearly complete success that man attained. Adding my name to the citizenship rolls places one more Jew among the Germans, and it recovers something taken from my grandparents.

And then there's something that more closely resembles personal healing. My struggle with Germany has been long, from the narratives and nightmares to the travel and language lessons. With my passport signed, sealed, and delivered, Germany and I have arrived at a truce, if not a genuine peace. *That may never happen.*