

# ONE LIFE, MANY WORLDS

KATHE KOCHMAN METZ





**Kathe Kochman Metz, 1946**

# FOREWORD

Over the years, I have become more and more interested in my heritage. Where did my ancestors come from? Who were they and what did they do for a living? What was life like for them? These were some of the important questions to which I needed answers and, like me, future generations too might want these questions answered. If I did not act now, whatever little information is available today about my grandparents, and their parents before them, would be forever lost.

In the beginning, I must confess, I thought recording my family heritage would be a relatively simple task. But as I dug deeper into the past, I realized that it was not so. Since I am neither a historian nor a writer, the gathering of information soon began to seem daunting. Getting first-hand accounts was difficult, most of the previous generation having passed on: there were only a handful of survivors who could tell me about the life and times of their youth and share

stories of their parents. Moreover, not many people like to discuss personal thoughts and memories with others, indeed even with family members.

Fortunately for me, all three concerns were resolved. My 84 year old mother, Kathe Kochman Metz, was happy and willing to share her memories. She is in relatively good health and her memory is, for the most part, sharp as a tack. And, coincidentally, I was introduced to Cherish the Legacy and was happy to give them this project. My good friend, Brooke Thaibault, was kind enough to proof read the edited manuscript and for that I am extremely thankful.

Over a period of three months, Mom spoke about her life in great detail. Not only was she able to vividly describe the troubled times in Europe, between the two World Wars, she was even able to recall and name people born as long ago as the 1820's, even though she had not met them personally. My heritage was coming alive-thanks to Mom. Mom's sister, Beatrice Kochman Kahn, who is now just a couple of years shy of her ninetieth birthday, was kind enough to fill in some of the blanks.

As a result, we now have a wonderful autobiography of Mom. She lived her early years in Germany and, as a ten year old Jewish girl, she saw the rise to absolute power of Adolph Hitler, whose unspeakable cruelty against Jews is part of history's shame. She was lucky that her father had the foresight and means to get his family out of Germany in the very nick of time. If he had delayed their departure,

their fate would have been similar to that of the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust to follow.

Mom, goes on to share personal stories of how the family resettled in New York, how she met Dad, and the struggles and joys of raising three boys with the values that she herself was brought up with: integrity, hard work, saving for a rainy day and being self sufficient.

I am happy that I am able to present Mom with a hardbound copy of her life story on her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday. This is the best way of letting her know that we love and admire her and, in doing so, we are giving our future generations a road map to their past. In that sense, this is as much a gift to them as it is to her. It is important for them to know that they descend from the survivors of one of the bloodiest chapters in modern history, survivors from another world, survivors who pursued and found both success and happiness in this great country, the United States of America. Mom makes sure we know that!

David Metz  
Garden Grove, CA  
December, 2007

# CONTENTS

1.	SILESIA SHADOWS	7
2.	LUCKY TO BE ALIVE	11
3.	BORN IN PADERBORN	29
4.	HOME IN THE MARKETPLATZ	37
5.	MISLEADING CALM	43
6.	THE COLD AHEAD	47
7.	RISE OF THE SWASTIKA	53
8.	COMING TO AMERICA	59
9.	FINDING OUR WAY IN AMERICA	63
10.	MEN AND LETTERS	73
11.	PROPOSAL, MARRIAGE AND AFTER	83
12.	MY CHILDREN	95
13.	MY FATHER AND AFTER	115
14.	PADERBORN AND JOHN	123
15.	LIFE IN WEST HEMPSTEAD	131
16.	THE LAST PILGRIMAGE	143
17.	LIFE TODAY	147
18.	TOLERANCE & COMPASSION	155

-ONE-

## SILESIA SHADOWS

**A**s I sit by my window in life's evening, occasionally grazed by the two silken cats that I have for faithful company, I can see the changes that have come over the community of West Hempstead. I have lived here for 58 unbroken years in this house on Long Island—indeed, a large part of my 84 years—and one could say that it holds most of the memories of my life.

But that would not be entirely true.

Sometimes, we live many lives in a moment. And, sometimes, so much happens in a few troubled years that it makes us who we are in the years to come. Yes, I am a child of one of the most difficult periods known to the modern world: The period leading up to the Second World War in Europe. Though I never felt so at the time—perhaps because the spirit of a child is stronger than the pressures of the world—I can see

## ONE LIFE, MANY WORLDS

from my present-day comfort that it was hard growing up in an uneasy Germany.

It was even harder for a Jew!

That was all a long time ago. And the truth of the matter is that it did not last very long for me, because we came to America before Europe went up in flames and turned into rubble. Yet early life in Germany did shape the way I was to have lived my own life in the melting pot that is now America. Whether we will it or not, early life always does so.

My father's side of the family came from Silesia. It was a region rich in mineral deposits and highly industrialized. In addition, it also had a thriving agricultural sector. It was therefore a much coveted region of Europe and, in time, became home to Slavs, Poles and Germans.

In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Silesia became part of the German Empire. For the most part, it remained so till the end of the Second World War in 1945. Today, most of Silesia is in Poland, though parts of it are in the Czech Republic and Germany. Silesia comprised many flourishing towns and cities, of which one, Auschwitz, was to become infamous later as the most horrific graveyard of the Jewish people. Many members of my family were to perish in the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Terezienstadt.

It is to this plentiful yet troubled region that I trace my ancestry.

## SILESIAN SHADOWS

My father, Friedrich Kochmann, was the eldest of seven born to Heinrich and Ernestine Kochmann. That was on February 13, 1889. It was a time of change. Regrettably, only three of his siblings survived beyond youth: Two brothers died very young, while a sister, Beatrix, perished at the cruel age of 19. My father, along with Adolph, Max and Johanna, were the fortunate ones.

They grew up in a town called Beuthen, which, I understand, has been renamed now. Being the eldest, my father apprenticed as a hairdresser and wig-maker, and did well in taking the family trade into yet another



*The Kochmann family in 1899. L to R Beatrix, Adolf, Heinrich, Ernestine, Friedrich, Johanna and Max (in front)*

generation. For a while, it did not seem to matter really that Europe was getting divided into two hostile camps, and could explode any day.

But when the First World War did come in 1914,

## ONE LIFE, MANY WORLDS

it changed everything. My father was 25. Adolph and Max were younger. But, most importantly, they were all old enough to be drafted into the army and young enough for the cold and damp trenches of the war front.

It is the war that brought my father to my birthplace, Paderborn, away from Silesia. After the war ended in 1918, Silesia became a hot-bed of nationalist feelings, and there were three uprisings in the next two years. The League of Nations then ordered a referendum to decide which parts would go to Poland and which to Germany. It was an uneasy place to be in. However, even though my father had chosen to relocate himself to Paderborn, I am told he went back to Silesia to vote in the referendum.

He had left a part of his heart behind. Moreover, his parents were still in Silesia.

The war had left Europe in tatters. But Germany was worse off than most of Europe. Germany was a nation under severe economic and political stress—and within it, individuals and families were looking for quiet corners. For a while, my father, who entered the uneasy peace a married man, thought he had it in Paderborn. But his brothers, Adolph and Max, knew they would not find it in the country of their birth.

They crossed the Atlantic in 1925 to find their corner of peace in the New Land, America. It was to have a great bearing on our own future.