

“That’s the way it starts.”

Those were the words of my late mother, a German born, Jewish refugee back in 2016. Those words have lived with me since that day, reverberating as the events of the world have unfolded, leaving us today in a time of racism, bigotry, and of course, anti-semitism.

Born in Leipzig, Germany in 1922, my mother witnessed the rise of the Nazis. She experienced discrimination and saw their violence first hand. She was fortunate that in 1939 her father wisely was able to get her family out of Germany. By 1941 she had made it to California, where she settled. She was 19 when she crossed under the Golden Gate Bridge. She did the best she could to assimilate and live the life of an American. But she never forgot what she had witnessed during her youth in Germany.

In January of 2016, my mother had just turned 94. A proud woman, she was fading away, losing strength and functional capacity. She gave in to the concept of caregivers, but still held on to whatever independence she had. One day that month, we thought we were going to lose her, as she spent the whole day in a barely responsive state. But to our surprise, she awoke the next day. I was happy to hear that she had awakened and was able to sit up for breakfast. I stopped by for a visit. Too proud to be fed, and too formal to eat in bed, she sat at a breakfast nook and attempted to eat the fresh strawberries that had been laid out for her. She loved berries, not only because they are good, but because she appreciated the luxury that they represented. German kids and refugees didn’t get such luxuries. She never forgot that.

Right about that time, the Presidential primaries were occurring in California. In an effort to engage her in conversation, I asked whom she was going to vote for. “Hillary,” was the answer. I could barely hear or understand her, but since it was down to Hillary and Bernie, I knew what she said. “Why not Bernie?” I asked. “Can’t win,” she mumbled. She was practical and insightful even at the end. All this time, she sat with her head down, eyes mostly closed, struggling to get each strawberry loaded onto a spoon and then lifted to her mouth. She would not accept help.

She was so weak and quiet that I thought I needed to agitate her a bit. So I asked her about something that I thought would get a rise out of her. “What about Trump?” I queried. That startled her. Whereas she was barely audible when responding about Hillary and Bernie, this was different. She sat up, opened her eyes, and said clearly and loudly, “That’s the way it starts.” She had heard Trump, the chanting crowds, the yelling and screaming as he demonized the “Mexicans” and their “drugs and rapists.” It was eerily familiar to her. There was something so different about the tone of her response that it struck me and has stayed with me ever since. I realized at that point that for my

mother, and Jewish refugees and survivors, the possibility of a recurrence of what they had witnessed was very real. My mother passed later that month, but her words live on. Now her memories and fears do as well.

That was in 2016. Since then, we have seen the Tiki torches in Virginia and some “very fine people” who were part of that event. We’ve seen the demonization of Muslims, Chinese, and Hispanics. We’ve seen families separated at the border, with children placed in cages, separated from their parents. We’ve seen Jews murdered in synagogues. And now, we’ve actually heard of humans being referred to as “vermin,” who are “poisoning the blood” of this country. Whereas Jews had seemingly been spared of the bigotry, it’s out in the open once again. What is worse, by the way, that a former president says he didn’t read *Mein Kampf* and came up with the terms on his own, or that he did borrow from The Fuhrer himself and lied about it, or that he did at one time read those words and doesn’t recall that he internalized them? He might as well have said them in German. What is worse, the fact that the ex-President has uttered those words, or the fact that he can go to rallies and people yell madly for him? What is worse, that fact that he says what he does, or the fact that the Republican Party won’t flat out denounce him? Remember, Adolph Hitler got the rallies going, but he didn’t load the trains.

I was born in 1954, nine years after the end of WWII. I was told about “The War,” the Holocaust, and the fact that my father’s parents died in Thieresenstadt. It’s not that I doubted the reality of it, but to me at that time it was a distant event. It would be impossible, we thought, for anything like that to happen again. We all saw the black and white pictures of Hitler and the grotesque photos from concentration camps. But those horrific pictures seemed like a fluke. They were as scary as watching Boris Karloff in *Frankenstein*, and in some ways similarly unreal. Nothing like that could happen again. Or so it seemed. But now, as the events have transpired, it seems once again believable that humans could act so barbarically.

Post World War I, Germany faced skyrocketing inflation and unemployment. It was an opportunity for a charismatic fascist leader to exploit. Contrast that to the United States, where today both inflation and unemployment are relatively low. Imagine what could happen here if the economic conditions in this country deteriorated.

We are in a troubling time. We need to be aware of what is happening around us. We need to keep our eyes open. We are being torn apart as a nation. In the 1930’s, German Jews believed that the Nazis and their movement would soon pass. They would fade away. They also believed they were different from other European Jews and would be spared. It took a long time for them to realize that neither belief was true. We can’t be

naive to what is happening. But it's not just Jews who are at risk of persecution, bigotry and discrimination. It's anyone that the former president, and his followers think is not "us." That list is long.

My mother was so right when she said those words. Yes, "That's the way it starts."

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