

## Chapter Nine

1939 – 1945

This trip to Europe must have taken some considerable planning and as well as concern – was it safe to send the family to Europe? One thing that Huka did, was to write to an acquaintance, Percy Niehaus, an advocate who had lived in Windhoek. He had been sent to the South African High Commission at SA House in London. In his letter Huka asked him to warn Eva if he felt war was imminent. This letter was to be very important later that year.

What about the practical considerations – how were Huka and Hans Ludwig going to cope with the household with Christine as the only help? Walter recalls that they loved her cooking as she made ample use of Maggi!

The year had started with the sad news that Marie had to re-write one of her matric subjects which meant that she could not, as planned, immediately proceed to Stellenbosch where she was going to study Domestic Science. This was at the suggestion of her teacher, Molly Krige, who as Mrs Bram Fischer, was to remain her friend until the latter's death in the late 1960s.

Marie's late arrival at the university was to have unhappy consequences at the end of the year when it transpired that she had missed some essential details right at the beginning of the academic year and consequently she failed the exam at the end of the year. That was in the future, though.

She left Windhoek in April 1939 and described her journey in her own amusing style to her father as her mother and siblings were already on the high seas. Her first days and weeks were a great experience and she soon became part of the student life at university. She recalls that the arrival of her German bicycle created much interest but it also landed her in trouble, as she was not to know that it was a sin to ride your bicycle on a Sunday!

While Marie was becoming accustomed to her new life we arrived in Europe and were met by *Tante* Anna. She must have taken us to her apartment but I have no clear recollection of this although we must have spent a few days with her in Utrecht. She

certainly showed us children around the city and a mass of new impressions had to be absorbed. Walter remembers that we visited art galleries and museums both in Utrecht and in Amsterdam and were shown some of the famous art works. I remember that we were introduced especially to Rembrandt's works. In The Hague she showed us where the royal families resided and we went on one of the many canals to see the tulips.

We went on to Berlin where we stayed with the Otto Loenings in the *Schillerstrasse*. Walter who had developed tonsillitis on board ship, was taken to a specialist while Eva herself consulted a specialist about her problems. Our cousin Edgar kindly took me walking through the streets of Berlin. I certainly became aware of the strained political situation. We went to look at the *Das Schlösschen*, our house in Lankwitz, and I was deeply disappointed that it looked a bit shabby and not quite as I had remembered it. I am grateful though that we saw the city, our birthplace, before it was so badly destroyed in the months and years that were to follow.

Our next stop should have been Polanowitz but we had to break our train journey from Berlin at Bentschen, just inside Poland near the German border, where *Grossmutter* Luise von Gierke met us. She was there looking after her son's duties on the estate he was managing. As related in Chapter Four Fritz was in prison and we went to see him there. For Walter in particular it was an unforgettable experience to meet his godfather in these unusual circumstances.

After a few days we travelled on to Polanowitz. By now it was early summer and at last we could enjoy all the things associated with the place that we vaguely remembered from the days six years earlier. Our mother had told us about her childhood days and it all became more real to us. The Kienitz cousins came and together we could enjoy all the pleasures of country life: swimming in what was called the lake, spending time in the extensive garden, visiting the stables. I have memories of being taken sailing by Hans and Mia - at the time it was a special treat for me as I was his godchild. I certainly enjoyed this extra attention.

We spent a few days with the Kienitz family at Chempin in their home and learnt something about life in a predominantly Roman Catholic region and we were

fascinated by watching a procession through the streets on what must have been a feast day of the church.

Eva had undertaken to do some lessons with us and I suppose we did spend some time doing a little schoolwork. We were sitting at a table in the garden when she was brought a letter. She became very thoughtful, told us to get on with our work and disappeared. To me it seemed hours later when in search for her I heard her voice in the apartment Hans and Mia had established for themselves on the first floor. She was speaking English and later I was told that she had been on the phone to the British ambassador in Warsaw. The letter that she had received was from Percy Niehaus. He had been away from London and had found Huka's letter on his return – had he received it earlier, he would have written much sooner. All he could advise at this stage was that Eva should leave as soon as possible. The call to Warsaw was probably just to have Percy's fears that war was imminent, confirmed. She did not convey all this to me then but I can imagine how hard it was for her to have to tell her mother that we were leaving immediately. In addition she had to make all the arrangements for the return passage.

I have no idea how many days we still spent there but guess it was no more than a week. By some strange coincidence the Polanowitz guest book has been found recently and almost the very last entry shows our names.

Back via Berlin and Utrecht and then some time spent in Antwerp where we embarked on the *Usambara*. It was to be a sad voyage. The ship was relatively empty, but there were a few Jewish people who had managed to escape from Germany. We soon made friends with three other children. Two were twin girls from Pretoria and the third a Jewish boy – we would not have been aware of this if it had not been that he was not permitted to take part in the customary children's fancy dress party – a photo of the twins, Walter and myself in our finery with this boy, Heinz, standing nearby tells this story very eloquently. We should have refused to take part in protest!

We landed in Walvis Bay on 19 or 20 August. Later we heard that the *Usambara* had been the last German ship to reach South African waters before the outbreak of

hostilities in early September. The next German ship due had to turn back and some of the passengers disembarked somewhere in North Africa and had a difficult long journey back to Windhoek. Our family's gratitude to Percy was made clear to him. Some time during 1940 he returned to Windhoek and he rented the room that had been *Tante Anna's* in our house at the *Ausspannplatz*. Hans Ludwig who had first moved into that room was in the room that had been Ernst Rudolf's domain. Percy did not have meals with us but he spent the odd evenings in our comfortable sitting room with the parents. This arrangement did not last very long but it was a very amicable association. I remember that he helped me with the first Afrikaans lessons I had to cope with when I had changed schools in January 1940.

Just how distressing the outbreak of war was to the adults we can only guess. That the situation in Poland was dire we were only to hear much later and the worry about those members of the family whom Eva had seen so recently must have weighed heavily on her. For a time she could get some news via *Tante Anna* while Holland was still free, but soon that line of communication was also cut off. Huka spent his free time reading whatever newspapers he could get and many hours trying to get news through the radio. He kept a diary of events starting in September 1939 and noted South Africa's declaration of war on 6 September. He obviously took an avid interest in troop movements and made many separate entries re the losses occurred on both sides. I have a clear memory of how excited he was when on 22 June 1941 it was announced that the German forces had attacked Russia. To him this was the turning point as he predicted correctly that history would repeat itself – recalling Napoleon's defeat more than a century earlier.

Walter and I were sent back to school – Walter spent some time in Swakopmund at the advice of a doctor, a family friend, with whom he stayed. He had grown very quickly and it was thought – erroneously as it turned out - that his heart had been affected. This doctor was a bachelor and we had met him while on holiday in Swakopmund. He had offered to have Walter to stay and the eleven-year-old boy attended the German school there for two terms. By the time he came back to Windhoek he was the proud owner of a bicycle. I was given an old one left by one of Marie's school friends. It took much patience on Walter's part to teach his sister to ride this bike but once achieved we both had much pleasure from the bikes throughout

our school days. We became aware of rubber shortage as the tyres and inner tubes were irreplaceable.

South Africa being at war meant that German nationals were being watched and were detained if there was any political involvement. Farmers who had been too vociferous in their support of Hitler were locked away, much to the outrage of the community. It became a reality to us at the *Ausspannplatz* when one of the young family friends, an immigrant from Germany, phoned to ask Mu for help as he was being interned. As he had left Germany because he had a non-Aryan girl friend we knew him to be strongly anti-Nazi and were very distressed about this obvious error by the officials.

Censorship of all outgoing mail had been instituted and in a small place like Windhoek it soon gave rise to much gossip even if the censors were not permitted to divulge what they read in the letters. Huka was, however, fully aware of what he was doing when he wrote to Marie to tell her about this friend who had been interned adding that he felt there must have been a mistake somewhere because he could vouch for this man's political integrity. The result was that he was called to the office of the Secretary for SWA to explain his letter. He did so explicitly – if this man had been in any way sympathetic to the Nazis he would not have been welcome in our home.

Within a few weeks we could welcome this friend back in our home; he could collect his belongings and move back into the boarding house where he had lived prior to this unhappy incident. It appeared that his name had been found among papers that the German consul in Windhoek had left behind – we can only guess that this may have been done intentionally.

Our friend Ilse decided to do her bit for SA and joined the SA Women's detachment of the army. She was sent to Johannesburg where she met, and later married, an artist, Otto Fleck. Subsequently they moved to Cape Town where their flat in Kenilworth was to be a refuge to both Walter and me when we were students soon after the end of the war. Marie, Walter and I all own paintings by Flecky, as he was affectionately known to us.

The forming of a SWA regiment was an event that caused much excitement among our schoolmates. I was most impressed when a boy in the class above me ‘joined up’ the moment he had completed his primary school career. I cannot think that he was more than 16 even if that was the age that the army accepted youngsters. More important though was that the teacher who had made my transition into the English school acceptable and who was a very capable and much loved teacher, left to ‘join up’. I don’t know where he ended up and even whether he survived the war– but a good teacher was lost to the profession.

Eva joined the Women’s Auxiliary known as SAWAS. This involved making life more comfortable and acceptable for the regiments stationed in Windhoek. Among other things she was called upon to cook for soldiers on their free evenings at the *Turnhalle* – the equivalent to a modern gym. I was encouraged to join the Junior SAWAS – and we raised funds by selling sweets before the show and during intervals at the local cinema. As we girls were given free seats at the cinema we became very knowledgeable about current films and film stars as well as newsreel which gave us some inkling of the war that was being fought in Europe, Northern Africa and Asia.

Both Walter and I were permitted to join the Boy Scout and Girl Guide movement respectively and became enthusiastic scouts and guides. Prior to the war I had longed to join the German *Pfadfinder* movement – the local equivalent of the *Hitlerjugend* - that had been very active then. Naturally our parents could not allow this. We both loved all the activities connected with scouting and guiding and learnt much. We also became great admirers of Britain, took up to speaking English to each other and gradually learnt something about British traditions.

There were in fact few true English-speaking children at school with us. Many of our classmates were children of Lithuanian Jewish families who spoke Yiddish at home. There were a few whose fathers were officials – either bank or government. Quite a few German children joined the high school and there were a number whose home language was Afrikaans but whose parents thought it was wise to let their children learn through the medium of English. I must also mention that the girl who claimed to be my closest school friend was the daughter of Jewish parents had escaped from Germany as late as 1938. Her older sister and her husband were among the many

friends who had assembled at the *Ausspannplatz* house. My friend's memories of her last days in Germany were very unhappy indeed. Soon after the war she left for USA where she was married and I have lost contact with her.

In Appendix C are copies of the Red Cross letters that enabled Eva to have some contact with especially her mother and Anna. I have translated them and they give a tiny glimpse of the most important family news – which included especially the shattering deaths of cousins Wolfram Kienitz and Hänschen Loening.

War or not, life was busy and really we knew nothing of the hardships our relatives were experiencing. Holiday times were eagerly anticipated and more so when Marie came home from university and could tell us about her life at Stellenbosch. She had many friends, joined a Ramblers' club and undertook exciting walking tours. Student life seemed very exciting but of course she had to work hard in order to graduate at the end of 1942. As she had a loan from the SWA government she was obliged to accept an appointment in the country and was sent to Ontjiwarongo to the north of Windhoek.

It was fortunate that she was relatively nearby when in October Huka underwent a gall bladder operation. She had just been at home for a short break when she was called back as he was critical. She was not to see him again. He died from a septic inflammation after six weeks in hospital on 15 October 1943. He was only 58 and perhaps it can be imagined just how his death shattered our little family. It was a hard time for each one of us as individually we had to come to grips with this event. Walter subsequently discovered that it probably was not the gallbladder that was causing the symptoms but the pancreas. It would appear that after the operation pancreatic juices escaped into the surrounding tissues as well as into the surgical wound destroying/digesting them as they progressed. It was a very unsatisfactory situation and his eventual death was predictable.

Somehow our mother gathered all her courage and abilities and was encouraged to apply for a position in the Administration. Without any qualifications that would have been acceptable in the country and particularly without a working knowledge of Afrikaans she could not get a permanent position. Bravely she accepted what was she

was offered. As it was, soon before Huka's death, the SWA Administration decided to discontinue the translation of the Gazette. It is a matter of speculation whether they would have offered him alternative employment. Eva was put into a Maize Control office – the control was no doubt deemed necessary, but for her it was a nerve-racking experience especially when she came across corruption and had to give evidence in court. I suppose the salary she earned managed to keep us going but it could not have been easy.

Today Walter and I marvel at the stamina she had – walking to the *Tintenpalast* not only in the morning but also back for the lunch break when we would be home for our main meal of the day. The midday heat was often excessive and must have exhausted her. We had our bikes and cycling home was quite fun yet she had to walk. At times she was given a lift particularly in the middle of the day, by Miss Hall, an English lady whom Huka had befriended during his years in the *Tintenpalast*. She used to come to lunch once a week, even before Huka's death. But how did Mu manage to get a meal on the table? By the time we arrived from school the meal was always ready. Christine was still there as a servant doing washing and ironing as well as keeping the house clean. In addition she must have prepared an adequate meal. In retrospect, as we mull over those days, we admire our Mu even more than we did at the time.

Marie's experience of teaching in Ontjiwarongo was not a very happy time for her as it was made difficult by the school inspector who previously had been her teacher. He gave her a most unfavourable and disheartening report indicating that she was incapable of controlling her pupils. This was quite untrue as she was very popular with the pupils who performed well. As a result she decided to resign, paid off her loan and applied for, and got, a position in Pietermaritzburg where she started teaching in 1945 after a brief interlude at a settlement on the Orange River. And thus started our family's association with Natal. This is not Marie's story so I am mentioning it only here because it is needed to complete the whole picture.

At the time of Huka's death I had offered to go and work and the manager of the Standard Bank with whom we were friendly even offered to employ me. I was writing the Junior Certificate at the end of the year that would have been a sufficient qualification to work in a bank. Much to my relief Mu immediately said that Huka

would never have allowed that, as he would have wanted me to get the Matric certificate. So no arguments and much relieved I could continue at school.

In May 1945 the free world celebrated VE Day as the war in Europe came to an end and in August, after the horror of the atom bombs, it ended in the Far East as well. Slowly we came to hear of the fate of relatives in Germany and Poland and we heard from *Tante Anna* in Holland. As soon as it was possible Mu sent food parcels to help many of the relatives, who all have memories of how these helped them through those very difficult post-war months and years in Europe. Some of them make grateful comments about these parcels to this day.

1945 was a watershed year for me as I wrote Matric and a decision had to be made about my future. This is not my story so let it suffice to say that the secretarial course I started was not ideally suited to my temperament. After six months I was employed as a civil servant and earned enough to keep myself.

The next year Walter entered the University of Cape Town to start his medical career and Mu was left by herself in the house at the *Ausspannplatz*. The highlight of her year would be when we came home on holiday.