Remembering the Jewish Community of

Konigsberg, Germany (Now Kaliningrad, Russia)

Remembered by Nadine Evans

While Jews first settled in Konigsberg in the 16th century, the community grew and flourished during the late 19th century, and by 1900 had a Jewish population of over 5,000 after many Russian Jews – including my great grandfather - immigrated to Konigsberg to escape the pogroms. At that time, there were over 25 Jewish organizations including Zionist groups, an orphanage, a home for the aged, and three synagogues – the Alte (or old) Synagogue, the Neue (or new) Synagogue, a majestic building that epitomized the growing Reform movement, and a small orthodox synagogue.

Because of rampant anti-Semitism in the 20s and early 30s, Konigsberg's Jews began to immigrate to the US, England and Palestine and by 1933, the population had decreased to 3,000. Those who remained were the targets of continuing persecution. In response, the community created a Jewish school that my father and his older sister Olga attended. The school opened in 1935 with 82 students and quickly grew to over 200. Housed in the "neue" synagogue, the school was a haven for the children, many of whom had been bullied and beaten in the German schools.

The external Nazi threat drew the Jewish community closer. Each of the orphans housed in the orphanage next to the synagogue was unofficially "adopted" by a family. My father remembers feeling jealous of the boy who came to dinner once a week because of the special meals his mother cooked. Michael Wieck, a world-renowned violinist and a student at the Konigsberg Jewish school, wrote in his memoir that "I
couldn't believe these teachers or this new school had anything in common with the school where I'd been. Everything was so intimate and friendly." He also recalled that every week at Kabbalat Shabbat, the headmaster would tie a symbolic "heart string" on the children whose families were about to emigrate.

Although life for the Jews of Konigsberg was not easy during the 30s, everything changed on Kristallnacht - November 9, 1938. The Gestapo went door to door, targeting over 450 Jewish businessmen, doctors and lawyers. After my great uncle was taken, his wife ran over to warn my grandfather. While family legend has my grandmother hitting him over the head with a frying pan to knock him out, she actually put him into bed and told the SS he had kidney stones and could not be moved. Her quick thinking prevented his arrest. The men who were taken were imprisoned for months. Fortunately, my great uncles were among the first to be released because they – along with my grandfather - had served in the Prussian army.

That night, the Neue synagogue was vandalized, and the Torah scrolls thrown into the street. The children from the orphanage were chased onto the street in their pajamas. The synagogue, along with my father's school, was burned to the ground. By some miracle, the building that housed the orphanage was spared and the school reopened in that building.

Emigration accelerated after Kristallnacht, with many families desperate to leave, although at that point, there were few places around the world willing to take them. My father's family was able to leave only because my grandfather had been born in Russia and they were able to enter the US on the Russian quota. They left for New York in May of 1939. Several weeks later, the Nazis shut off all emigration – essentially trapping the rest of German Jewry.
The 1500 Jews who remained in Konigsberg after 1939 were forced into a ghetto. In 1941, deportations to various camps began and the vast majority of Konigsberg's Jews, including many of my father’s aunts, uncles and cousins, perished.

The non-Jewish population of Konigsberg was also destroyed. In 1944, the British bombed Konigsberg and the entire city burned. In early 1945, the Soviet army laid siege to and captured the city, renaming it Kaliningrad in 1946. About 120,000 survivors of the bombing and the siege – mostly non-Jews - were held as slave laborers by the Soviets until 1949. Most of them died and the surviving 20,000 German residents, including the handful of Jews who survived the war, were expelled from the Soviet Union in 1949.

Nothing remains of Konigsberg. Family members who visited report that one of the only recognizable buildings is the Jewish orphanage which miraculously survived Kristallnacht, the British bombing in 1944 and the Soviet siege. In 2009, a memorial plaque to the victims of the Holocaust was placed on the site; since then, it has been smashed and sprayed with neo-Nazi symbols.

What does remain, and which can never be destroyed, are the memories of the young children who attended a warm, nurturing Jewish school during the height of the Nazi terror. Two reunions have been held – one in Jerusalem and one in New York. In 1999, my father attended the New York reunion where 8 survivors came together to remember their classmates, and their teachers.

I want to thank the Holocaust committee for encouraging us to write these stories. Through this process, my father has opened up about childhood memories that he had kept hidden. It has also put us in touch with other children of survivors from the Konigsberg Jewish community with whom we are sharing pictures, stories and
memories. Above all, this process continues to remind us why our Jewish heritage and institutions are so precious and worth saving at any cost.

There is an article about Konigsberg (now Kaliningrad, Russia) in the Yivo Encyclopedia of the Jews in Eastern Europe that includes a picture of the synagogue. This article describes a visit to Kaliningrad in the late 1990s and includes a picture of one of the Jewish cemeteries. The other cemetery was totally destroyed and apartments were built on the site during the Soviet era.