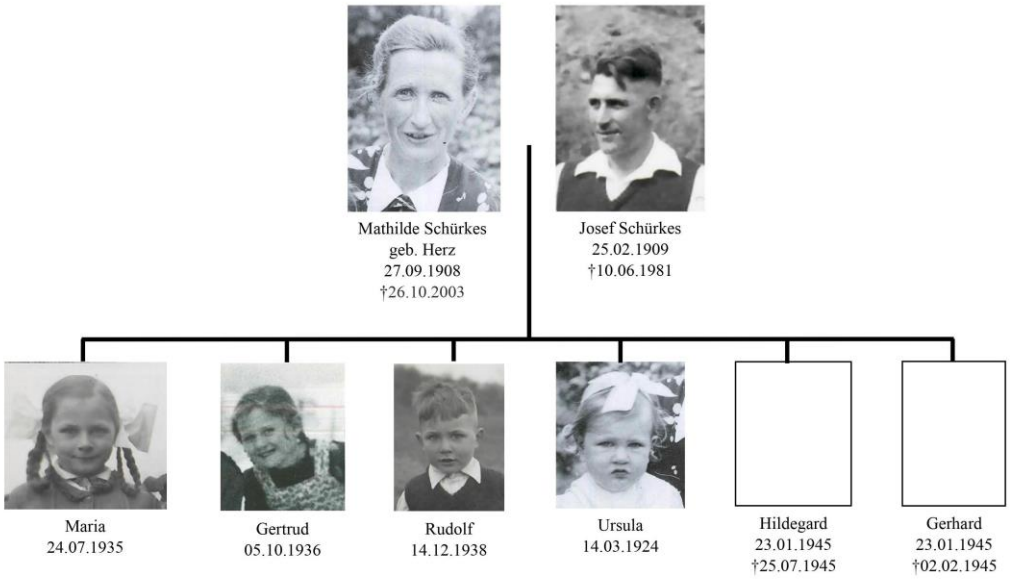
The Escape from Poland in 1945
A memoir.
Trude Walter (neé Schürkes)

Translated by Heike Evans (neé Schürkes)
with explanatory additions



The towns in Poland are indicated by their Polish and German names.

Mother, Mathilde Schürkes with the children
(from right, Rudolf, Ursula, Maria and Trude)
Posnan 1944

Posen-Demsen, Poland January 1945

Happily, I pushed a cart, that my sister Maria and a friend, Thomas, were pulling down the empty avenue. Sunbeams found their way through the bare trees flickering on the swaying suitcase on top of the cart. In my wool coat and thick gloves, I felt warm and enjoyed the little outing. The suitcase in the small cart was for a friend of my father's who had fled from Litzmannstadt (Łódź) with his wife and son and had been living with us in Posen-Demsen (Poznań-Dębiec) for a week.

Although there were sounds of thunder and crashing, as every other day, and the smell of fire hung in the air, it didn't bother me much. There were always fires and the noise seemed far away. In addition, Father had explained to us that such things belonged to the war, which also explained his absence to us children. Due to the "Aryanization" of the Reichsgau Wartheland (Wielkopolska – Poland) by the National Socialists (Nazis), our family had to relocate to Posen, Poznan, Poland, to run a hatchery. This was a forced relocation.

"Aryanization" of the Reichsgau Wartheland refers to the Nazi policy of confiscating property and businesses owned by Jewish or Polish / Slavic people and other minority groups in the Wartheland region of occupied Poland during World War II, and transferring ownership to ethnic Germans who were considered to be "Aryan". The term "Aryanization" was used by the Nazis to describe this process of removing Jews and other non-Aryans from the economy and society and confiscating all their property. This policy was a part of the broader Nazi program of racial purity and the elimination of Jewish influence in Germany and occupied territories.

Father, Josef Schürkes first moved from Michelnau (Germany) to Posen in 1942 after he was conscripted. Since Father was handicapped by a stiff hip, he was not drafted at first. Our mother, Mathilde Schürkes, moved with her four children from Michelnau to Hadamar, to the home of her mother Maria Herz in 1943, but soon followed her husband without the children.

Train Station (Photo March 1991)

On November 24, 1943, our grandmother finally brought us to Posen, Poland as well. A Poland that had been occupied by Nazi Germany at the beginning of the war a few years earlier. As our train passed through Berlin, we saw many clouds of smoke. The train stopped at Bahnhof Zoo and Grandmother got off to buy something to eat for the journey. Us four children stayed on the train and could see the square in front of the railway station, because the windows of the railway station had been blown out by the bombing. When Grandmother got back onto the train, my sister Maria shouted loudly: "Look, Grandma, an elephant!" Grandmother said it was a

monument, but Maria insisted that the elephant was moving. In fact, there was really an elephant there, as the zoo had also been hit by bombs and many zoo enclosures were open.

From Berlin, Grandmother took us to our parents in Posen and then returned to Hadamar.

Our home in Posnan-Debiec next to the train station (Photo March 1991)

Father was drafted as a soldier to the fortress in the city center at the end of 1944 and could no longer work at home in the hatchery. For me, life at that time was uncomplicated, I was happy. It therefore came as a complete shock, when we came home with our cart with the suitcase and our heavily pregnant mother had packed baby clothes, clothes, papers, and even our dolls on top of a large, light coloured reed basket with the help of Mrs. Käuflein, a cousin of our mother, who she had met by chance in Posen. Mother told us to get dressed very warmly right away. She said we had to leave immediately. Father had called from the fortress that morning. He had told Mother to come as quickly as possible with us children to the Central Dairy, bringing only the essentials. From there, civilians were to be taken by truck to the west of the German Reich as a precaution, in view of the approaching Russian army.

The Nazi occupiers had made it a treasonable offence for anyone to flee the town previously, as that would be taken as a sign of weakness. They were quite willing to sacrifice their civilians, rather than admit defeat and retreat. These were direct orders from Hitler. Now however the Russians were already on the borders of the city.

Since Father was not allowed to leave the fortress, he could not help with packing. In the few days of his time as a soldier, he mostly had to peel potatoes because he was unfit for army service due to his stiff hip.

Suddenly the phone rang. It was Mrs. Käuflein's husband. He was calling from the tank factory in Posen-Demsen, telling her to go home immediately and pack a suitcase. She ran out of the house crying. Now Mrs. Rataycsyk, the former polish owner of the hatchery, who had a very good relationship with my mother despite the complicated situation, helped us children, Maria (9 years old), me (Gertrud, called Trudchen, 8 years old), Rudolf (6 years old), and Ursula (called Ursel, almost 3 years old) pack. Underwear, washcloths, towels, soap, and official papers were put into the school satchels. Sweaters, pleated skirts, coats, and socks were put on on top of each other. Mrs. Rataycsyk also placed a large can of milk next to the reed basket.

Mrs Rataycsyk, March 1991

When the Nazis placed their own people onto the farms, the Polish owners were forced to leave their houses and live in a shed on the farm, to make way for the german occupiers and then to work as servants on the farm. This was the case when our family arrived on the hatchery farm of the Rataycsyks. The Rataycsyks had 2 children, 17 and 19 years old. A boy and a girl. One of Rudolf's most vivid memories of the time is the arrival of Gestapo soldiers in their black boots and black leather coats, forcibly removing the children. Mother immediately went to the town where the children were detained and negotiated the release of the children, by saying that she needed them for the smooth running of the hatchery. They came home the next morning. They were alive, but they had been severely mistreated.

While we were packing, Mother rushed to see the midwife one last time. The midwife said that there was still time until the birth, but with a lot of movement and

excitement, the child (she guessed a big boy) might come into the world earlier. She quickly explained what Mother should do in case of a sudden birth. A butcher from the area was supposed to take us with his three-wheeled delivery truck to the Central Dairy "Wartheland" in the city center. When he saw our highly pregnant Mother, he refused to take us. Only when Mrs. Rataycsyk loudly scolded him in Polish he agreed to transport us. At the courtyard of the Central Dairy, there were many trucks filled with people sitting and standing on them. They were the "employees of the Reich" who were all fleeing from the advancing Russian troops.

And suddenly, Father was there in front of us. He wanted to see us one last time and make sure that we managed to leave safely. He asked his secretary from the hatchery to help Mother with the children. For us children it was an adventure climbing onto the big truck, but Mother could hardly get onto the truck. Suddenly Maria shouted in a bright, loud voice: "Mother, we forgot the violin!" The people laughed. For a short time, I felt joy.

Soon Mother became terribly ill. She also felt huge pressure on her bladder. The truck stopped and Mother was lifted down.

During the trip, this happened several more times and some people started grumbling about the delay. We were also held up by trees lying across the road that the partisans had rolled there to obstruct the German soldiers. It became extremely cold and the trip no longer felt like an adventure for us children. The only thing we could still enjoy was the food during the trip. Someone gave us bread with butter and honey. Late in the evening we arrived at Birnbaum (Międzychód) at the dairy. It was a large room and icy cold. Mother could no longer move. She was terribly sick. So she was carefully seated in an armchair, where she felt a little better. We and other children huddled closely under the tables. We suffered from the cold, cried, screamed, quarreled and kicked each other until we finally fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. The employees of the dairy in Birnbaum didn't yet know that they would also have to flee the next morning, because the Russian army was approaching much quicker than anyone had been told. Mother still believed we could return home soon.

Birnbaum - Międzychód, Landsberg an der Warthe - Gorzów Wielkopolski, January 21-26, 1945

Early in the morning, after Mother and Mr. Heuer had provided all the children with warm milk, we continued westward by truck to Landsberg an der Warthe (Gorzów Wielkopolski) to the large Town Hall. The hall served as both a refugee reception center and a hospital. Refugees and wounded soldiers walked around, trying to find their way. The severely wounded soldiers lay on straw against the walls. Sisters and helpers from the Red Cross took care of the people as much as they could. Mother was taken to a side room with four other heavily pregnant women. Here, her water broke. After a lonely and painful 30-minute walk to the hospital, she had to lie all alone in an ice-cold delivery room. The temperature at this time was around – 20

degrees and no heating available anywhere. The other, approximately forty heavily pregnant women, lay in the basement to protect them against a bomb attack. The Russian army had arrived in Landsberg and most of the staff had fled the clinic.

The impact on Mother of most of the staff fleeing with the rest of the population was that there were no nurses or doctors to monitor the labour or assist with the birth, there were no cleaners, there was no food or preparation of food or water, no medical equipment, no medication being issued, no clean clothing for Mother or the babies and the list goes on. And the same for all patients who were in the hospital at the time. The announcement that was made in the hospital when everyone fled was "save yourself if you can."

The midwife had to care for the patients in the basement. She spoke briefly with Mother and said, "You know what to do," as it was supposed to be her fifth child. After 36 long, lonely, freezing and painful hours, the midwife finally came back at midnight of 22 to 23 January and realized something was not right. To her surprise, she saw another baby come after the first one. She had also expected a large boy. The twins were both breech births – it is a wonder that they were born naturally. Mother must have been totally exhausted and was left alone immediately with her two newborn babies. We hungry children received Schmalzbrote (bread with lard) in the Town Hall, which we ate quietly, earning praise, and most likely gratitude, from the overworked helpers.

In the evening, Ruth, a young girl from the BDM (Bund Deutscher Mädel, the female branch of the Hitler Youth) who was working as a helper there, brought us to an empty apartment in Landsberg (the owners had already fled) and for the first time in our lives we had potato pancakes with syrup. After a night in proper warm beds again, the children visited every room in the apartment and discovered a full pantry. Jars of preserved fruit were lined up on shelves, like in a fairy tale. Our supervisor Ruth first forbade us to take any of it, but after some tears she opened a jar of plums. Delicious! (Amazing what one remembers after all these years!) Days later it would all be ransacked by the invading Russian army.

Landsberg an der Warthe - Gorzów Wielkopolski, January 26, 1945

After 4 days, in the early morning, Mother suddenly arrived at the Landsberg apartment and to our utter delight brought two babies with her. One can only imagine how exhausted Mother would have been after this lengthy difficult birth in such a freezing environment and without the basic necessities for herself and the babies. We were even allowed to hold them for a short time each. An indescribable feeling of happiness. The time with Mother and the new babies in the large, unfamiliar apartment seemed to me like a very long time. In reality, it was only a few hours. Already at noon, we had to pack and, in the afternoon, the whole family and the BDM girl marched up a ramp to the railway station in Landsberg. When the train

came, the conductors shouted: "Quick, quick, get on!" We caught an empty compartment that could only be entered from the platform and Mother and the girl lifted us and the luggage into it. When the girl got on with our baby Hildegard and pulled Ursel in from the steps, only Mother was left standing on the platform with little baby Gerhard. Just as she was about to get on, a conductor appeared and pushed all the people back with the words: "Step back please, the train is moving a little bit forward." Mother, being polite as always, stepped back and the train moved off, getting faster and leaving the station. Mother was left alone on the platform with her one twin. All her other children were gone.

Postcard „Deutscher Jugend-Verlag GmbH“,1936

She was unable to reach the final evacuation train for civilians, about six kilometers away in Gorzów-Wlp-Wieprzyce, due to her weakened condition. Fortunately, as I was later told in Berlin, as this train was blown up on a bridge and most of the people in it died. Mother would also have died. However, I never believed in Mother's death. After her children left on the train, Mother dragged herself to a hotel near the Landsberg railway station, where many refugees were staying. After four days, Russian soldiers occupied the hotel, raped all the women, regardless of age, and drove the survivors out onto the street. It was minus twenty degrees.

The physical and emotional trauma for Mother, who had just given birth to twins, and all the other women and their young daughters is unimaginable. This trauma that is stated in one short sentence, that irrevocably changed the lives of so many so dramatically or ended their lives abruptly is given so little weight in the history of war crimes! And is still part of every war since then. The women, the civilians, are made to pay with their bodies. What is it that turns men into monsters? Men that have wives, sisters and daughters at home and then have no regard for other women. Women, who history has thrown in their path.

Although rapes happened under Nazi occupation and in all the zones of Allied occupation, it seems to have been far more prevalent in the areas occupied by the Russian army.

A statement about this willingness for violence, especially by Russian armed forces, was clarified in a ZDF talk show hosted by Markus Lanz: The talk on May 18(2023), in which the Russia expert Boris Schumatsky spoke about the culture of violence in Russia. This conversation focused on the Republic of Moldova and also on the violence perpetrated by Russian troops against the civilian population in the Ukraine.

According to Schumatsky, who grew up in Russia and also served in the military there, the culture of violence has been promoted in all institutions: schools, the army, prisons, families, and even in pop music.

Domestic violence has generally been a problem and has even been decriminalized in Russia since 2017. This means that a woman cannot report her husband if he assaults or rapes her.

The culture of violence is particularly promoted in prisons. There is the concept of the "Untouchables" (Herabgesetzen) If you are classified as one of the "Untouchables," you can be beaten, raped, or murdered without consequences. Once you have been a victim, you remain a victim without any concept of human dignity. To protect yourself from becoming a victim, you must become a perpetrator of violence. You have to assault, beat, rape, and kill to protect yourself. If you touch one of the "Untouchables" without violently attacking them, you also become one of the "Untouchables." Considering that 30% of all Russian men have been in prison at some point in their lives, one can understand how violence continues to spread in society.

There are only two groups: victims or perpetrators. No middle ground. Being evil is fashionable. Being evil is good. Violence is legitimate. Violent energy is the way forward.

Systematic rapes are promoted and allowed as part of the subjugation of enemies.

The saying from the Russian folk tradition that is said to describe this concept:
My beauty, you must submit.
Whether you like it or not.

Another reason that most likely contributed to the vicious retribution against German Civilians or any persons deemed to have German heritage or who were seen to be working with the German occupation forces was the following :
"My main aim is to show that Germany's war against the Soviet Union was much more brutal and ideologically and economically driven, as well as more destructive and genocidal, than its conflict with the Western Allies, which was conducted mostly according to the Geneva Conventions on war.Germany's wartime conduct was undoubtedly influenced by Nazi racial ideology. Soviet Prisoners of war were treated like animals and often starved to death, while Anglo-American POWs were treated well and given Red Cross parcels."
Frank McDonough, The Hitler Years Disaster 1940 – 1945 pg.13

So, Mother lived with the infant for three days on the icy streets of Landsberg in house entrances and other slightly sheltered places. When a teacher let her take refuge in her apartment, the baby had pneumonia and diarrhea. A doctor, who Mother eventually found, would not open her door because she had recently been attacked and abused by several Russian soldiers. While searching for food, the infant died in her arms on the street. She put him in the icy open mass grave.

Memorial at the location of the Mass Graves in Landsberg, where mother laid the twin Gerhard to rest.

On the train, our supervisor Ruth tried to calm us down. I usually looked through the curtain slits of the darkened windows of the train, although it was forbidden, and held Rudolf, who was restless and wanted to go back to Mother. The journey through Küstrin (Kostryn) is strange to me in memory. The train was moving slowly, sometimes I heard a loud howl and then it cracked like thunder. At that time, the "Red Army," the army and air forces of the Soviet Union, had already broken through to the north and south of the old town and fortress of Küstrin to the west and the fight for Küstrin was in full swing. On the bridge over the river Oder, the menacing, black iron bars towering in front of the window especially frightened me. The crossing of the wide, shimmering water at night seemed to take an endless amount of time. After that, the train became faster and ran non-stop to Berlin.

In Berlin, helpers immediately received us at the railway station, looking for children without parents. Ruth took us to register at the "Red Cross stand," where we were also photographed so that we could be found if someone was looking for us.

Bridge over the River Oder at Küstrin

Maria, Rudolf, and Ursel went to a reception center for motherless children in Neukölln. The baby Hildegard was taken to a home in Pankow-Buchholz. The infant Hildegard was sick for a long time in the Charité and died on July 31, 1945 in the children's home in Buchholz from malnutrition and diarrhea.

Food was hardly available in Berlin in the months before and after the end of World War II (September 2, 1945). You ate whatever was available. So, Maria, Rudolf, and Ursel, like all the children in the home, were fed with sausage noodles and blood sausage for eight days. Ursel was the first to be picked up from the home and taken to foster parents. In May, a Russian discovered her in a cellar hole. He cursed all Germans who locked up their children and ran away.

Ursel was taken to Birkenwerder to the "St. Josefsheim" of the Carmelite convent, where the nuns ("Carmelites of the Divine Heart of Jesus") took care of war orphans and children without parents. Rudolf was also already in the home. He was returned by his foster parents, an older couple, after a short time because he was allegedly too wild. Maria was taken by a couple to Bergfelde/Hohen Neuendorf to a garden colony. The daughter of the couple regularly took her bread and other food away, so she became ill of starvation. As a result of her hunger, she pulled carrots and other plants out of the garden and was accused of being a thief. At some point, someone found her almost starving on a basement staircase and took her to the Red Cross. Through this aid organization, she also came to Birkenwerder to the St. Josefsheim. She received clothes and was vaccinated against typhus. For a while, she also went to school in Birkenwerder until she became too sick. The convent had a huge garden

and there was a lot of vegetable soup. Every day, nuns went begging with a child to get food for the many children. When Maria made a comment about the food at the table one day, Sister Beate took Maria begging with her for an entire day. They took the S-Bahn and walked very far. In the evening, they had only managed to get a tiny white bread. That was in September 1945.

Maria - Red Cross Photo Berlin 1945

Trude - Red Cross Photo Berlin 1945

I was taken home by our BDM supervisor Ruth to her parents who lived in an apartment block in Müggelstraße in Friedrichshain, Berlin. I was enrolled in school and in the BDM, where I received a beautiful blue jacket. I was very proud of it, because now I almost belonged to the adults.

My foster parents, strictly devout Adventists, probably did not know what to do with me. They liked me, called me their sweetheart, but gave me a lot of freedom. They only cared about my cleanliness. I hated washing or being washed with cold water. Soon I also stopped thumb sucking, because they considered it a great sin and so it also became a sin for me. My foster sister was rarely at home. Therefore, I often hung out on the streets looking for food and coal, which we needed for heating and cooking. I went to school less and less. When it got dark, I went home. The air raid sirens increased. At night I was often awakened and stumbled half dressed with the other house residents down the stairs to the basement. Later we didn't even undress at night. We lay on the bed in our coats, with our packed suitcase next to us, ready to run at the first sound of the siren, because often the planes came with the alarm. We spent more and more time in the basement, where it was usually very quiet. We listened to the impact of the bombs, whether the crash was getting closer. One day there was a deafening blow, it thundered terribly, the back wall at the basement window collapsed partially and people started sliding out through the hole. I clung to my foster father and we stayed below. The house had been destroyed by a bomb and we moved into an abandoned building in a side street of Frankfurter Allee. There

was less and less to eat and the hunger became painful. Searching for food among the ruins of the houses no longer brought much. The streets became narrower and more eerie due to the piles and piles of rubble.

I was also always on the lookout for the infernally howling and shrill whistling planes that plummeted from the sky, which terrified me. In addition, there was often hours of howling and many houses burned and smoked. Once I saw burning people (phosphorus bombs). During a particularly unexpected alarm, I sought protection from a fighter attack under high, black concrete and iron pillars. I felt very safe there and was comforted by the soft cooing of the doves that nested there.

Bombed Street in Berlin, 1945

I felt very safe there, even though all around the world was crashing with a single huge crash, it smelled of smoke and I heard fire crackling. When I finally dared to crawl out again and climb up a slope, there were, as usual, many stiff, waxen figures lying in the street. A large building was burning brightly and through a half-collapsed red brick wall I saw meat hanging. At the other end of the house, people were snapping up meat chunks. Everyone was starving. But I didn't dare go into that hell and ran home. Later I learned that the large slaughterhouse had been bombed.

At the end of April, the bombing stopped and it became quieter. Hitler had committed suicide in a bunker in Berlin and on 8 May the war ended in Germany. WWII officially only ended on 2 September 1945 when Japan unconditionally surrendered to the Allied forces, after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I was totally unaware of that at the time.

My foster sister disappeared. My foster parents no longer left the apartment out of fear of the Russian soldiers. It was a difficult time for me. The wet coal dust from the basement was especially hard to carry up to the third floor. In some courtyards next to the Frankfurter Allee, Russian soldiers squatted and cooked over open fires. I stared at them and my looks must have been very hungry, because I rarely had to leave without something edible. Not all Russian soldiers were monsters. I always had a pot with me for things I could collect.

Children looking for coal in Berlin 1945

My walks became longer and I managed to get chocolate and cookies from American soldiers somewhere. Very soon I learned - soldiers quickly yelled - that there were now zones in Berlin and I was not allowed to go everywhere on every street. Finally, it became warmer. All children had to attend school regularly again, but I was still rarely there. A gang of boys picked me up on the street, looking for food. From then on, I often trudged with the boys to Lichterfelde station. There were coal, potatoes, cabbage and other things on the slope there. These survival delights fell from the open goods wagons when the trains stopped there, or were thrown down by especially brave boys who climbed on the wagons. Russian sentries marched along the railway embankment with machine guns. When they were far away, at the front of the station building, the boys and I jumped out of the ruins, ran over a small street and collected everything. Until a sentry turned around, raised his gun, and called "Stoj, stoj!"

Over time, my fear grew infinitely. I preferred to roam alone again. In addition, I tried to find stores where you could sometimes get more for the food stamps. And I always had to think up the most adventurous stories, because my foster parents would not accept anything "dishonestly acquired." After a while, I also started attending school more often. In August, a couple from our house secretly wanted to cross the border into the English zone to Hanover. Germany had been divided into 4 zones by the occupying forces, an English, French, American and Russian zone. My foster parents suggested that I write to my grandmother Maria Herz, whom I always wanted to visit and whose address I knew. The post was not transported across the Russian zone border at the time. Berlin was in the Russian zone. So, I wrote a postcard to Grandmother in Hadamar, and the couple took it into the English zone for me. The card arrived at Grandmother's in Hadamar only at the end of October and even later at Mother and Father's. At least it arrived!

Children searching rubble for coal and anything edible. Berlin 1945

Mother - Mathilde Schürkes – February 1945

Mother - Mathilde Schurkes 1945

Mother walked towards the town of Gralow with another young woman from Landsberg after the death of the infant Gerhard. There was supposed to be work and food there. Without knowing it, they walked right into the advancing Russian army and the fighting. Gralow had been occupied by the Russian army on Tuesday, January 30th 1945. They saw dead and injured people everywhere and shots were still being fired. After some horrendous experiences, they ended up in Russian captivity before Gralow. Mother now had to work in the former Gralow Rittergut of the Honig family, which had been converted into a Russian horse hospital. It was a difficult environment to work in, as injured and traumatised horses were kicking and biting and difficult to calm. *Everyone who worked for the Russians, the Italians or the Germans in the large horse hospital went about their work - all for the*

enemy. [...]. All agricultural machinery had been taken by the Russians, all barns were cleared for the horse hospital, [...]. (Konrad and Irene Honig: Heimat vergißt man nicht, Rückschau auf ein langes Leben, Köthen 1999, p. 192)

Gralow Manor House *(Konrad and Irene Honig: Heimat vergißt man nicht, Rückschau auf ein langes Leben, Köthen 1999, p. 192)*

The German word "Rittergut" does not have a direct equivalent in English, but it roughly translates to "manorial estate" or "knight's manor". In historical terms, a Rittergut was a large agricultural estate or manor that was owned by a noble family, often with a castle or manor house as the main residence. The Rittergut was typically operated by serfs or other laborers who worked the land and paid rent or taxes to the lord of the estate.

In the horse hospital, Mother often calmed the injured horses with French words, as she had grown accustomed to handling animals as a child on her aunt's farm in Alsace/Lorraine during the holidays. This was heard by a Russian officer who was happy to be able to speak French with her.

It was this officer who issued Mother a pass to Berlin in August. After an arduous journey to Berlin and in spite of all her efforts, Mother couldn't find us in Berlin and she decided to make her way to Hadamar, which was in the American Zone, to her mother. She had tried the Red Cross, she had scoured all the trees for messages, as the trees were plastered with messages from people in Berlin and passing through Berlin trying to find their family members. She had no idea whether her children were still alive.

American Zone in bombed Berlin 1945

Always on guard, as she didn't have a pass for the zone border crossing from the Russian to the American zone, she managed to arrive in Hadamar on foot, by hitchhiking, on horse-drawn carts, by train, etc., dirty and stinking. A short time later, Mother's brother Rudolf also arrived in Hadamar from a Wehrmacht (German Army) collection camp in Schleswig-Holstein and told my mother, to her great joy, that he had met Joseph in a prisoner of war camp and that he would be coming home on the following Monday.

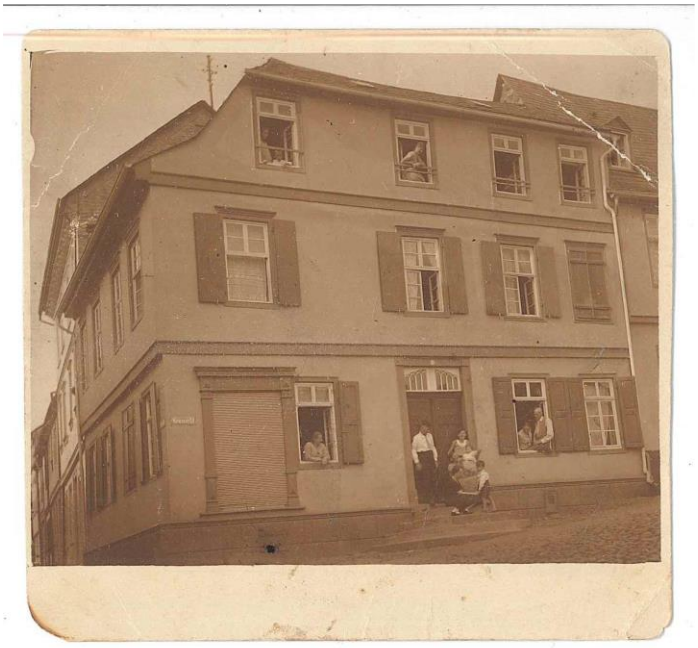
Father - Josef Schürkes

After Father and his one-armed friend, a veteran of World War I, realized one morning that the fortress had been evacuated and they had been left behind, they tried to get civilian clothes. The two of them began to march west from village to village begging for food. Father had a map in his luggage that they followed. When they came across individual Wehrmacht units, they claimed to be stragglers and went with them for a time. The months-long march and the constant hunger wore down their strength. Father's stiff leg hurt and his one-armed friend could hardly walk anymore. As there was absolutely nothing left to eat, they decided to go to a Russian prisoner of war camp and

go into captivity. When the Russian guard at the gate saw the two pitiful figures, he refused to let them in. They were chased away with bread and sausage. After a while, Father and his friend reached the American zone. Now they tried to be captured by the Americans. But they were chased away even faster here. But they were also provided with a supply package. They dragged themselves on to Kiel in front of a barracks occupied by the English. The English also did not want the lame man and the one-armed man. Once again provided with bread and sausage, they were rejected. As they slowly slunk away, an officer in a carriage came towards them. He stopped and spoke to them. After a brief explanation from Father, he invited them into the carriage and took them to the Wehrmacht collection camp at the barracks, where Father met his brother-in-law Rudolf among the captured officers. At this time, the Allies were sorting higher and lower ranks of the Wehrmacht in the prisoner of war camps. Rudolf was able to use his influence as an officer to advocate for his brother-in-law.

The Reunion and the Journey Home
October 1945 - November 1945

After Father and Mother were reunited, they worked very hard to find their children. They even traveled to Schleswig-Holstein, where we four children were reportedly seen. However, they could not stay with Grandmother for long, as there was not enough food and the living space became too cramped as more and more family members came to stay with Grandmother. So, the parents searched and found work and a home at Father's former teaching farm in Nordeck. In Hadamar, the Catholic community prayed to the "Mother of God" for help in finding the lost children of the Schürkes family. When it became known that the children were alive and in Berlin, the Catholic community had a gratitude tablet installed in the pilgrimage chapel on the Herzeberg in Hadamar.



Home of the maternal Grandmother Maria Herz in Hadamar

Mother immediately set out on the dangerous journey to Berlin after receiving my card from Berlin and struggled to get travel papers. It was too risky for Father, as he was a former soldier. In Berlin, her friend Lisa from Wilmersdorf Berlin, whom she had met in captivity, helped her look for us. When she found my foster family and me, Ruth told her that we had all been properly registered as living in Berlin in January 1945. This made it very easy for her to find Maria, Rudolf, and Ursula at the Carmelites Monastry in Birkenwerder. On a Sunday morning, as all the children were sitting in church, a tall, thin woman appeared in the portal. Maria turned around: "Mother! Mother! Mother!" She could not stop calling out: "There's food

here!" After Mother discovered Hildegard's death record, they attempted to get back clothes, papers, and savings books (around 500 marks per child) that had been in Maria's luggage and were meant to serve as security from Maria's former foster parents. However, they got nothing. The foster parents claimed that everything had been spent on Maria. Mother now tried to leave Berlin with her four children.
We traveled to Magdeburg using several trains, with multiple connections. One time, we could not find a compartment and climbed into a brakeman's cabin with the help of the conductor. There was already a man sitting on sacks there who pushed us away and wouldn't let us in. We were relieved to get out of the cramped and intimidating space at the next stop. Shortly before the Elbe the trains stopped. The food had been finished long ago. With great effort, both Maria and little Ursel had difficulty walking, we dragged ourselves with many refugees over the heavily damaged railway bridge (Herrenkrug bridge) towards Magdeburg. From Magdeburg we went by train to Halberstadt, where mother dropped us off in a hotel lobby to look for food and further transport possibilities. She was almost at the front of a long food queue when she heard about a train. She ran to get us and we boarded another new train. This is how we got close to the border of the American Zone.

Herrenkrug Bridge - Magdeburg - 1951

We eventually arrived in Arenshausen, where we found many women and children lying on the floor in a large barn. We were given warm soup there as well. All the people, big and small, tried to keep warm and sleep by huddling together. Very early in the morning, I was driven by my usual desire to find food and picked up a milk jug. I stepped over the sleeping people and walked from door to door on the large courtyard. At one door, women were actually setting up a stand with milk. They sternly warned me, telling me it was still too early for milk distribution, as they filled my jug. I quickly brought it back to my mother, ran back and joined the line that had formed in front of the stand. After a brief scolding, I was able to bring more milk back to my mother. However, it did not work a third time.

"The next day, after another round of soup was distributed, groups formed and set off. From Arenshausen, we had to walk five kilometers on foot from the Russian zone to Friedland in the American zone. Mother, with our few belongings and Ursel in her arms, went begging with us. On a farm, each of us got a piece of fragrant bread with

quark (creamed cottage cheese). Delicious! Later, we walked on a muddy field road to bypass a mountain, passing by a sugar beet field and I picked up a beet from the muddy field. Mother cleaned the beet with the leaves and bit off pieces for us, but we couldn't eat it because it was too bitter."

Shortly thereafter, I helped two old ladies push a broken cart on the bumpy field path. But one of the wheels buckled. So, I gave up and ran on the path covered with colorful leaves behind my mother. Suddenly, everyone was in a hurry. Some overtook us with big, fast steps. Their backpacks bounced heavily on their backs. It was said that the Americans will only let a certain number of refugees cross the border. We also ran faster, me in the lead, Rudolf behind me in front of mother, holding Maria's hand and Ursel on her hip. Suddenly, the refugee stream behind me was stopped. A boom began to lower. The greatest scare of my life: "Mother, run, come, or we'll lose you again!" I shouted as loudly as I could. Mother also called. She wanted us two to come back. But I stayed where I was and held Rudolf tight, and because mother had been so polite, not pushing, she was allowed to pass with Ursel and Maria. Pushing people were loudly yelled at and pushed back. We came to a tent city that the Americans had set up on an open field. Between the tents were boards on tree trunks and wooden stakes in the mud, on which we were directed to a long line of waiting people in front of the reception tent.

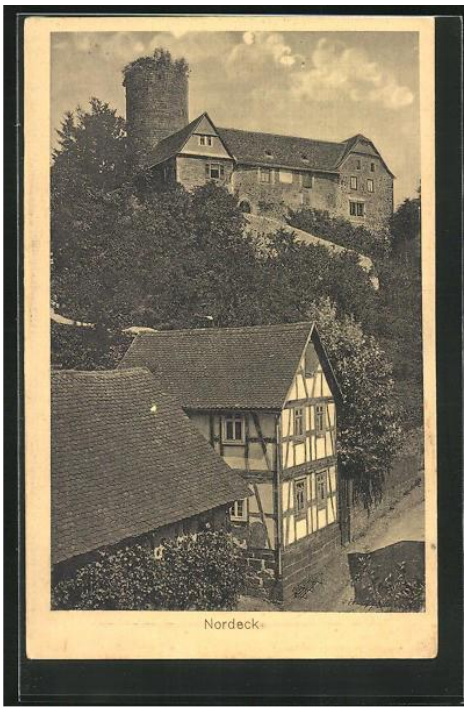
Soon I was tired of waiting and, as usual, went looking for food. My instincts led me to the Americans' supply tent. I had never seen anything like it. There were white loaves of bread next to each other, sausages, cucumbers, and much more. It was steaming from large, thick pots. I stared dumbfounded at these overwhelming delights. Suddenly, a soldier stealthily handed me a large piece of sausage and white bread and gestured for me to run away quickly. Mother was still in line in front of the tent. She and we four children were repeatedly pushed aside by stronger women and children. Suddenly, Mother cried out loud and collapsed on the boardwalk. Hunger, weakness, the long journey, Maria's apathy (she no longer ate and only dragged herself along at a slow-motion pace), and Rudolf's painful furunculosis (boils) had pushed Mother to the end of her strength. A Red Cross sister appeared. As a result, we were led past the queue and processed faster. First, we were deloused. The sisters powdered our hair, sleeves, and legs with a large dust spray. Then we received transit papers at a long table. In the next tent there was milk and a food ration of white bread and butter, and in the evening, we managed to get a compartment in a train heading to Kassel at Friedland station.

We had not traveled very far, in Eichenberg the train already stopped again. The English and American zones crossed here. American and English soldiers asked all travelers to get off, which Mother promptly did. The situation - Mother alone on the dark platform - reminded me so much of Landsberg that I desperately shouted out of the door: "Mother, come back, quickly, hurry!" Suddenly an American soldier stood in front of us, put his finger to his lips with a "shh!" gesture, and signaled for us to stay in the train and remain quiet. Mother got back in and the soldier closed the compartment behind her. Maria's condition kept getting worse. Mother comforted her endlessly that we would soon be home with father. There was no train to Gießen

from Kassel station in the evening, so we stayed overnight in a refugee shelter. When we arrived in Gießen the next day, we were fed in the warm kitchen of the Bonifatius church rectory (Pastor Deuster was a friend of our parents). Mrs. Hofmann cooked us semolina pudding. In Londorf, station manager Menges and his wife (Pastor Deuster's sister) took us in. They gave us apples to eat and made sure that Father was informed of our arrival in Nordeck. Father came with a small cart to the station, loaded our luggage, put Ursel on the cart, and together we struggled up the steep hill to Nordeck.

Nordeck, 1939

Nordeck Castle



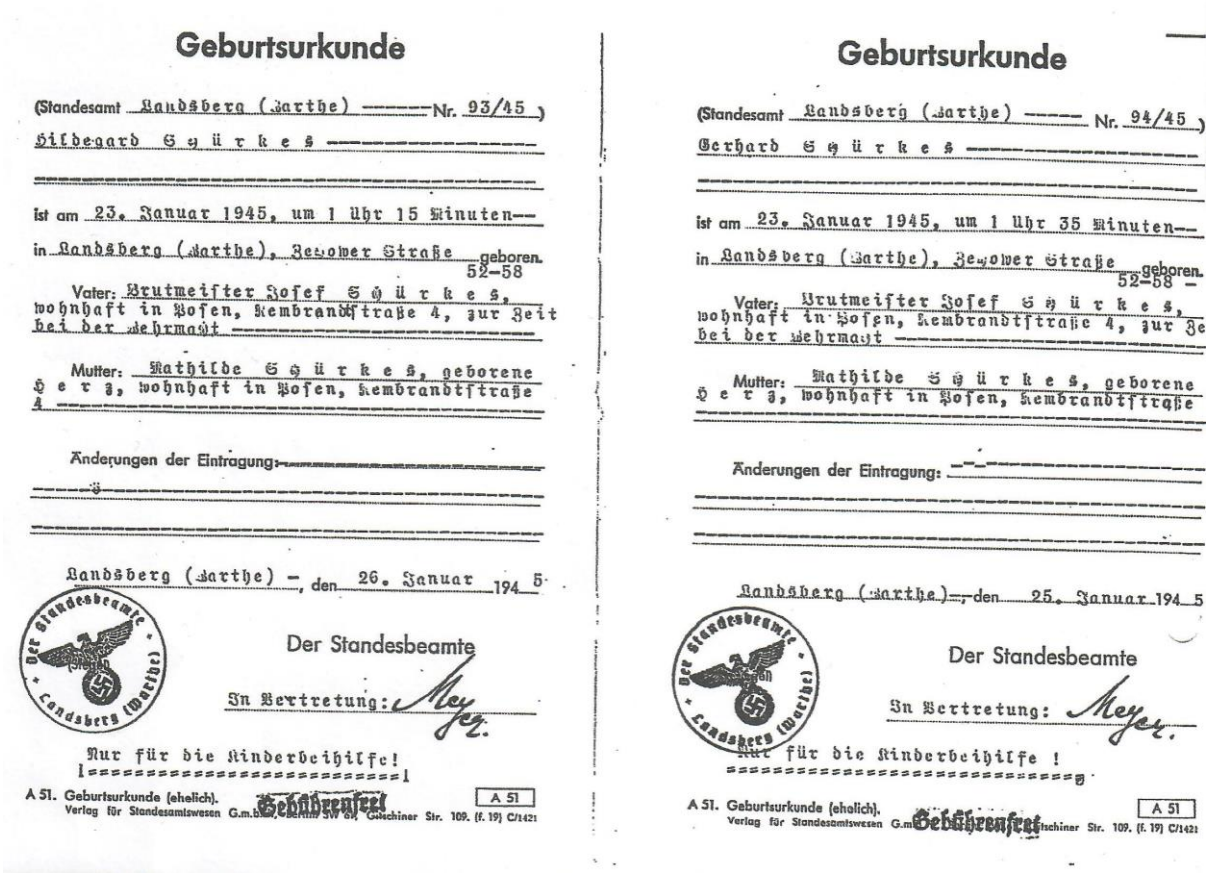
After over ten months and a three-and-a-half-day journey, our family was reunited.
It was a miracle that we had survived, although the loss of the twins was tragic.

The distance from Posnan Poland to Berlin Germany is 280kms

The distance from Berlin to Hadamar is 480kms.

The distance from Berlin to Kiel is 470kms.

This is the story of just one refugee family. One of literally millions. It is estimated that in 1945 more than 12 million people became refugees as they fled the Russian zone, due to the oppression and persecution by the Russian occupiers. Especially people with a German heritage, even from centuries ago, needed to leave the eastern territories. This was deemed to be the biggest human migration in history.



Geburtsurkunde

(Standesamt Landsberg (Warthe) ——— Nr. 93/45)

Hildegard Schürkes

ist am 23. Januar 1945, um 1 Uhr 15 Minuten

in Landsberg (Warthe), Zehdower Straße geboren. 52–58

Vater: Brutmeister Josef Schürkes, wohnhaft in Posen, Rembrandtstraße 4, zur Zeit bei der Wehrmacht

Mutter: Mathilde Schürkes, geborene Herz, wohnhaft in Posen, Rembrandtstraße 4

Änderungen der Eintragung:

Landsberg (Warthe), den 26. Januar 1945

Der Standesbeamte

In Vertretung: Meyer.

Der Standesbeamte Landsberg (Warthe)

Nur für die Kinderbeihilfe!

A 51. Geburtsurkunde (ehelich). Verlag für Standesamtswesen G.m.b.H., Berlin SW 61, Gitschiner Str. 109. (f. 19) C/1421

Gebührenfrei

A 51

Geburtsurkunde

(Standesamt Landsberg (Warthe) ——— Nr. 94/45)

Gerhard Schürkes

ist am 23. Januar 1945, um 1 Uhr 35 Minuten

in Landsberg (Warthe), Zehdower Straße geboren. 52–58

Vater: Brutmeister Josef Schürkes, wohnhaft in Posen, Rembrandtstraße 4, zur Zeit bei der Wehrmacht

Mutter: Mathilde Schürkes, geborene Herz, wohnhaft in Posen, Rembrandtstraße

Änderungen der Eintragung:

Landsberg (Warthe), den 25. Januar 1945

Der Standesbeamte

In Vertretung: Meyer.

Der Standesbeamte Landsberg (Warthe)

Nur für die Kinderbeihilfe!

A 51. Geburtsurkunde (ehelich). Verlag für Standesamtswesen G.m.b.H., Berlin SW 61, Gitschiner Str. 109. (f. 19) C/1421

Gebührenfrei

A 51

Birth Certificates of the twins Hildegard and Gerhard , 23 January 1945

Mother, Mathilde Schurkes with daughter Maria Assmann in Posnan in the Hatchery in March 1991 – Photograph by daughter Trude Walter