

The girl who knew marinade herring is not caught in the sea: the early life of Inge Herma Lusk

Inge Herma was 13 years old when Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. But anti-Semitism was already a familiar experience, even in sophisticated Hamburg. When she was a little girl in Kindergarten, other children spat at her and told her that she was a dirty Jew, responsible for the murder of Jesus. Nightly she prayed to God: give me blue eyes. She pushed away at her nose to make it less like the pointed beaks depicted in anti-semitic posters. But, growing up, she did well in her English studies, and learnt ballet the Annelie Sauer School.

When new laws drove Jews out of the mainstream of public life, Inge abandoned her dreams to be a dancer. She was apprenticed to an upmarket ladies' fashion house with a Hamburg branch close to the charming leisure spaces by the Alster. She passed her tests to become a 'journeywoman' tailor. Then Jewish-owned firms were all closed or 'aryanised'. The Hirsch and Cie Hamburg operation was among these, and Inge lost her job in January 1939.

This was a few weeks after 'Krystallnacht.' Nazi gangs came to smash and loot and many Jews were driven out of their homes on this 'night of broken glass.' That night Paul and Paula stood in the November cold with their only child Inge for 24 hours, while four boys hid under the bed in their flat. Eventually they were left in peace, maybe due to the intervention of a 'gauleiter' among Paul's network of gentile friends – a remnant of his days as an engineer building U-boats in Blohm und Voss yard on Hamburg's waterfront.

Inge laboured as a conscript in the rhubarb fields of Adolf Putfarken from 26th April to 28th July, 1939. By now her parents were working to get her out of Germany. Britain was issuing work permits for domestic servants, and Jewish networks in London were working on this route. Paul and Paula were busy finding her a suitable berth. German friends helped get the needed exit permit quickly.

Inge sailed out of Bremerhaven for Southampton. She registered with the police in Watford on 29th August, three days before the German attack on Poland which would trigger war between Britain and Germany.

Arriving at a London home on the fringes of the English aristocracy, the 19 year old Inge was immediately introduced to a week's worth of accumulated dishwashing, sent to sleep in a spider-filled attic and told to bring a plate to be served leftovers at the end of meals. She wasted no time in complaining about her situation. For a short time the airmail flowed between Germany and Britain. Paula wrote from Hamburg giving this encouragement:

From your last letter from Watford I learned you are not fond of the Madame, but be brave, one first has to get to know foreign people and you my dear child need to get used to your environment. The main thing is, that first you find your will, you will get used to the work you have to do now.

A few days later this followed:

Today, we got your lovely letter and are glad you are more satisfied now. Probably you got our second letter by now. Dear Inge, you have to be reasonable and should feel home and you must give your best to satisfy your Lady, it has to be. If you get the house clean, things will get better, if she doesn't buy soap, do it without, for your laundry buy your own. Always come home in time, later she will let you off for longer ... Please do not date with strange Gentlemen, you have to consider you are in a foreign county and you are a stranger.

Inge learnt that her employers were planning to sell the house, along with her resident services. She fled. Taken in by a Russian Jew, Dr Supkis, the renamed Ingushka was given pocket money and a bed

in Wembley. Her roles included keeping watch on the Supkis household where two aggressive and promiscuous daughters roamed naked, and escorting the doctor on his social engagements. Inge was fiercely unhappy and determined to find a way out – at this point hoping this would be by moving on to Argentina and marrying a cousin. Supkis appears equally determined to hang on to the services of his young escort. Via then-neutral Holland, he sent food to Paul and Paula. Paul responded with a letter of thanks in elegant copperplate script: in February 1940 writing to the ‘Dear Herr Doctor’ in gratitude

for your very kind letter as well as the nice package which you have sent us on behalf of our daughter Inge. It made us happy that you are satisfied with our dear daughter Inge, as one has to take into consideration that to our Inge everything is new and there are different ethics and customs in every country. Our Inge is well aware that pickles don't grow on trees and marinade herring is not caught in the sea and we do hope that you will remain benevolent towards our beloved child.... these young people suddenly stand totally alone and missing their parents' guiding hand.

At Wembley post office, a ‘gorgeous’ blond counter-clerk swapped positions to serve the queue where she waited. He corrected her English, in a cable to a cousin in Buenos Aires, to change ‘I marry you’ to ‘I will marry you.’ Soon another visitor to the Supkis flat was James Denis, ostensibly for German language lessons.

Inge was refused entry to Argentina, after declining the consul's offer of a visa in return for sexual favours. Denis proposed. Still 19, she could not marry without parental consent. With the help of her uncle Max, from a refuge in still-unoccupied Rotterdam, and of the US consul in Hamburg, a magnificent, bilingual legal document was prepared to confirm this consent. Paul and Paula sank the last of their savings into its creation and despatch, though – not understanding the urgent value of the British nationality being bestowed – they were appalled to think that their daughter had to be pregnant. The day it reached Inge, Holland fell, and Max was shot. Inge and Denis were married on 4th June 1940. Her address on her marriage certificate was 1 Danes Court, Wembley Park. The magnificent consent document was lost in bombing.

After marrying, they had a bedsit with the family of Denis' friend Tony Tattersall, whose mother was jealously in love with him. Then Denis was called up to join the forces and went to Trowbridge, Wiltshire, where he trained to become a Morse operator and interceptor for the special wireless service. There, after he knocked on their door, Mr and Mrs Tom Wells gave Inge a room near the barracks, at 2 Waterworks Road. When Inge took the train to join him, she was again the focus of jealousy and was reported as a potential German spy. Special Branch investigators visited Mrs Tattersall who accused Inge of signalling to the Germans. For two years she was followed. However she was never interned and the Special Branch detectives let her know they were following her. So it does not seem that she came under serious suspicion. Inge and Denis looked back at their time in Trowbridge with great affection, especially for the Wells. As a child, I met Mr and Mrs Wells when we visited their home.

In a message through the Red Cross in October 1940, Paul and Paula begged for news and asked if Inge was now married. In early November a letter sent via Switzerland was addressed to her in her maiden name. But then on 7th December there was a last letter from Paula, addressed to Mrs J D Lusk at a P O Box in Lisbon. From Lisbon it was forwarded via Thomas Cook, opened and read by examiner no 2319, and overwritten with the Trowbridge address. By the time it arrived, in January, Denis had been shipped off to Gibraltar, and the letter was forwarded on to the flat in Hitchin where Inge now lived with her parents-in-law Jim and Eleanor Lusk at 31, Garrison Court.

For a few months Inge worked in a ladies' fashion store. Then she volunteered for the Auxiliary Territorial Service, joining up on 14th October 1941.

The next day Dr Max Plaut, the government-recognised Jewish leader in Hamburg, heard a warning from counterparts in Koln of coming events. On 17th October the official message arrived: Claus Gottsche, head of the Hamburg administration, had a week to find 1,000 Jews to be transported to Litzmannstadt (Lodz), Poland. Gottsche asked Plaut to write the list. Draw it up yourself, and put me at the top, Plaut replied: I don't play lottery with the lives of my people. Paul and Paula were among the 1,000 who boarded a train at Hamburg's Hanover station, on 25th October 1941, destined for the Lodz ghetto. They lived another six months. The story of their final days is one we now know, but to be told elsewhere: Inge never knew when, where or how they died.

Meanwhile Inge began her four-year career serving the British army. At first, to her fury, she was back in the kitchens. She objected repeatedly to this misuse of her talents. After tearfully remonstrating with a male officer, she was moved to work in stores and supplies in Essex, and then to a searchlight battery where she broke her leg in an accident. When her whole section was due to be moved abroad, Denis had to give consent to her moving with it, which he refused, fearing the possible consequences of capture by the enemy. Instead she passed a clerk's exam and ended the war with the army's legal services in Royston, Hertfordshire. Dealing with claims arising from traffic accidents, she had access to much information on allied traffic movements. She took great satisfaction in this military career. There was now no question of her being suspected of spying, nor of being reduced to semi-slavery in the kitchens. Her determination to survive, and to have her talents recognised, had been vindicated.

When the war ended the couple were reunited. They returned to Jim and Ellie's flat in Garrison Court. Denis went back to the post office, passed examinations for promotion, and became an executive grade civil servant in the immigration service in 1949, moving to Harwich to begin the career that sustained the family. James Paul was born in Hitchin in 1947, and Andy in Colchester, Essex, in 1952. Sean (1959) and Neil (1963) followed during a later stay in Dover.

Hamburg connections were renewed even as the city stood in bombed-out dereliction, its surviving population close to starvation. Denis took his motorcycle combination over borders in 1948, bearing a cargo of foodstuffs, and advertised in the Hamburg press for friends of Inge. No Jews remained, but out of the old gentile networks many emerged. As the German economy got back on its feet, they started to visit our home in Hull and then later in Dover.

Our boyhood was not as others' boyhood. The trivial persecution at school was for being German rather than Jewish. Our home had lederhosen, pumpernickel and the diamond shaped zalmis that you licked off your hand to suck the taste of sour liquorice. The click and hum of Mum's pedal-operated Singer sewing machine was a usual background to our evenings – we (or at any rate I) thought it normal that a mum make clothes for herself and lady friends, fitting tissue patterns over the cloth they brought, cutting and stitching and adjusting after a first fitting. We ate red cabbage and rote gruetze.

We did not know the great labour behind this, the tenacity, the refusal to be found among life's disposables. There was always marinade herring. We did not need to know it was not caught in the sea.