

Germany: The Early Years

I was born on November 23, 1944, in Graudenz, West Prussia. My older brother Gunther, born in 1939, was five then. It is unclear if my father was present at my birth; being baptized shortly after my birth, my grandmother and aunt Rulli, were my god parents. In the few pictures we have of that, my dad was nowhere to be seen.

In January 1945, my mother took me and my brother and as many of our belongings as she could carry and left Graudenz. Again, it is unknown if my dad was with us because there are several pictures in the next year or two which lists my dad not being present: "Ohne Vati" (without dad) is written on the back.

When we left Graudenz, the troops of the 2nd White Russian Front captured this ancient city of Poland, which at that time was part of Germany. In Poland, this town is known as Grudziadz; in German it is Graudenz. When the Russians captured the city on March 6, 1945, five thousand citizens surrendered.

In the meantime, my mother continued to go west and ended up in a refugee camp called Lockstedter Lager. We stayed in the refugee camp from the early part of 1945 until December 1948. The refugee camp consisted of Quonset huts, and according to some of my dad's writings, there was no kitchen or bath in the individual housing, but only a communal kitchen and bath.

I grew up as a toddler in these Quonset huts and have very little memory of the time there. One incident that I do remember, however, is when my younger brother, who was born in March 1946 in the camp, was attacked by a rooster. I remember very vividly my younger brother, then an infant, being under the rooster with the rooster furiously pecking on my brother's body and face. One can still see the scars inflicted on my brother by the rooster.

The only other memory I have is more pleasant. Lockstedter Lager was very near to Hamburg, and for some reason or another my parents took me to Hamburg, to a park with a lake. I had never seen a lake before and that stuck in my memory.

At some point my father joined us. He began inquiring and writing letters to see where he could practice dentistry. I remember his saying that he wrote letters to dentists in Kassel, who wrote back that they didn't need a dentist in that city but that a city south of Kassel was in need of dentists. This city was Bad Hersfeld. Consequently in December 1948, we moved to Bad Hersfeld. I then grew up in this town from 1948 until we immigrated to the United States in 1957.

We rented a second story floor in a three story house. It consisted of two bedrooms, a kitchen, bathroom and living room. We celebrated the holidays (Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and birthdays) in the living room. Otherwise we primarily lived in the kitchen. My two brothers and I shared one bedroom and my parents occupied the other. I have fond memories of that home.

I made friends and played soccer, as well as other games, and had adventures as young boys do. It wasn't that we lived in poverty or that life was so different than before WWII, since I had no comparison. On the whole, it was a happy time.

My dad started practicing dentistry in downtown Bad Hersfeld and my mother was his assistant. Initially, we were not welcome in the town because we were refugees from the East. In post World War II Germany, the city being poverty ridden and with little resources including food and clothes being scarce, we were actually competing for these resources with the local people. We were constantly referred to as "flüchtlings" (refugees) which indeed we were.

I started school at Linggchule at age 6. In Germany it is tradition to give a child a large cone full of sweets and delicious items on their very first day of school. I remember vividly how I enjoyed the food and sweets.

School for me was initially quite difficult, although from the report cards my mother kept of my school days, apparently I was somewhat of a decent student. I remember my first teacher was Mr. Sprenger, and he was my teacher from grade one to four, which was not unusual in Germany at the time, where the same teacher had the same students for several years.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, I grew up in a country after World War II where poverty was quite extensive. At the time, I believed that the way we grew up was normal.

School in Germany would start around 8:00 a.m. and finish at 1:00 p.m. Then we would go home, have our midday meal, and do our homework. Usually after that we would have time to play, and I started playing soccer with the neighborhood children. Soccer was the only sport I was really exposed to during my years in Germany. I also remember very vividly the World Cup held in Switzerland in 1954. Germany had lost against Hungary, the favorite to win the World Cup that year, 8-3 in group play. Germany did indeed make it through and ended up in the Final to play Hungary again. I can remember listening to the match on the radio with my older brother and several of his friends. Hungary went ahead 2-0 and everybody thought we were going to have a similar result as in the group play, but Germany made two goals and it was tied for a long time. Then Rahn, a player for Germany, made a goal and the game ended soon after. It was an unbelievable feeling as all ran outside; people were yelling, screaming, hollering, and hooting that Germany, being the great underdog, had indeed won its first World Cup. I can't remember if we went to school the next day or not, but I do remember that there was a very celebratory mood

in all of Germany, which was desperately needed since the country was suffering from the aftermath of World War II.

I have been playing soccer for as long as I can remember, though in my youth not in formal play, which was not available in Germany at the time, but pick-up games after homework. This was ingrained in us, always to do the homework first before we could play, and my parents, especially my mother, certainly made sure that is what we did. Besides the midday meal, my mother would usually have bread with “Schmaltz,” which is lard, as a snack around 4:00 p.m. This was something I always looked forward to and really thought it was very delicious. After playing outside, either soccer or some other games, we would then have the evening meal and then we would usually read something and retire for the evening.

The other custom was that every Saturday we would take a bath. Because of the water shortages and other reasons, we only took a bath only once a week. I can remember having school on Saturday and then a bath in the afternoon. My mother would run a bath and we three boys would get our turn, one after the other. Then my mother would inspect our fingernails and toenails, and if they were too long, she would cut them as well.

In fall 1952, my dad took sick with what appears to be flu-like symptoms and remained in bed which was very unusual for him. I can remember very vividly the evening the doctor came and examined my dad in my parent’s room. When my mother came out of the room she fainted and crumbled to the ground. Once she came around, she stated that my dad would have to go to another hospital because he might have a problem with his brain. He left soon afterward and went to Goettingen, where he remained for several weeks. I didn’t know it then, but my dad had an operation on his brain with a preoperative diagnosis of a malignant brain tumor, but at the time of surgery they found an abscess in the right parietal lobe. This was removed and my dad

remained in the hospital, in the rehab unit, for several months. Then he went to stay with his brother in North Germany for further recovery. It seemed forever, but I remember his coming home in the summer of 1953, not being the same person and being somewhat estranged from us.

The Christmas of 1952 was a very sad affair. My Dad was obviously not present, but we three boys and my mom were there. Because of my dad's illness, friends and relatives sent us a tremendous amount of packages which we were very excited to open on Christmas Eve; however, the usual celebrations were subdued or left out.

With my dad unable to work and my mom working intermittently as a dental assistant, life was very difficult. We rarely had meat to eat. Our meals consisted of potatoes, oatmeal, schmaltz bread, and sometimes fruits and vegetables. We had very few pieces of clothing. Somehow, some way, we survived. About a year after my dad returned home, my mother and dad decided to immigrate to the United States.

After doing a preliminary inquiry, they received a letter which stated that they had received the appropriate information concerning my family's desire to immigrate but it would take six to nine months to find a sponsor. My parents continued to get letters that the search was continuing and on November 15, 1956, a letter was sent to the Lutheran Refugee Service in New York: "We do not know whether or not Dr. and Mrs. Heinz Sonntag are on your list of approved refugee services subjects. We realize that time is getting short and we are anxious to expedite this matter in any necessary way that Mr. Beuchel might be enabled to sponsor this family which he is financially capable of doing."

My parents were delighted, excited and filled with joy. I was not so sure. This was November 1956 and then multiple visits to government agencies were done by the whole family, including getting vaccinated for small pox. Eventually, we ended up in a camp in Bremer Hoffen,

where we were with many other refugees seeking to cross the Atlantic to America. It was actually quite sad to leave Bad Hersfeld, since I had made friends, played soccer, and enjoyed my first years in gymnasium, taking many courses including mathematics, religion, and Latin.