

## **Rede von Judith Elam bei der Gedenkveranstaltung zur Stolpersteinverlegung in der Thomasiusstraße am 24. Juni 2015:**

Hello Everybody!

I am so very happy to be here today, back in Berlin and reunited with my Berlin friends! It is truly an honor for me to speak to you on the occasion of this 3<sup>rd</sup> Stolperstein ceremony.

For those of you who don't know who I am, my name is Judith Elam. I was born in London, the daughter of two Holocaust survivors. My mother, who is still alive, was born in Leipzig, and my father was born here in Charlottenburg. My grandparents and 3 great-grandparents were also born in Berlin. In fact I have more than 100 ancestors and relatives buried at the Jewish cemeteries at Weissensee, Schoenhauser Allee and Grosse Hamburgerstrasse. My family history in Berlin goes back 6 generations. It begins in 1671, when 50 Jewish families were allowed to settle in Berlin – they were called Schutzjuden. They had paid for a residence permit allowing them to engage in certain businesses and professions, and for the right to practice Judaism in their homes. Amongst these 50 families were my 7<sup>th</sup> great-grandparents. In 1812 Jews were finally allowed to become Prussian citizens, with virtually the same rights as their non-Jewish neighbors. And they were also required to adopt surnames. So my ggg-grandmother, Taeubchen, who was one of just 20 Jews living in Spandau, became known as Taeubchen NATHAN. Since then, the surname Nathan has been carried down 5 more generations in my family! NATHAN is my maiden name!

My family prospered in Berlin, like so many Jewish families. And like most German Jews, they were very patriotic, and considered themselves German first, and Jewish second. My grandfather had lost a lung fighting for the Kaiser in WWI. Ironically, it was this patriotism to Germany that was to save my grandparents' life. In 1942 they were deported to Theresienstadt, but a Nazi guard gave them a slice of bread to eat every day, out of respect for my grandfather's patriotism – and this slice of bread is what saved them, what kept them alive, while my great-grandmother, who was with them, was being starved to death.

My father, Max Heinz Nathan, attended the Jewish ORT school here on Siemenstrasse in Charlottenburg, and at this school he learned plumbing, engineering and welding – skills which would save HIS life. It was the only Jewish school the Nazis allowed to function for a while, because the boys were acquiring skills that could be of use to them. My father was too old for the Kindertransport, since he was already 18. But he was lucky. He was one of 100 Jewish men selected to go to England in March 1939, to refurbish the abandoned camp that was soon to become the home of more than 4,000 Jewish men who would follow within a few weeks - leaving behind loved ones who were still trapped in Nazi Germany.

November 9th, 1938. We all know that date. Kristallnacht. In Leipzig my grandfather, Peisech Mendzigursky, was hiding in the attic in the family apartment. My terrified mother would bring him up food, stay with him a while, then come back down and take away the ladder. After 4 days my grandparents thought the danger had passed, and Peisech came down from the attic. But the SS came back again and got him, and deported him to Buchenwald. He was forced to chop wood for 6 weeks, and then released. When he arrived back in Leipzig, he was so thin and covered in bruises. The Nazis had beaten him up – or as they put it, “given him something to remember them by”. They ordered him to leave Germany as soon as possible, or next time they would beat him to death. By then it was a race against time for

the Jews, and like all parents, my grandparents' priority was the safety of their children and to get them out of Germany. The departure date arrived for the LAST Kindertransport out of Leipzig. August 8<sup>th</sup> 1939. It was too dangerous for my grandfather Peisech to leave the apartment. As the train slowly pulled out of Leipzig train station, my grandmother waved goodbye to her two beloved daughters, and she told them - "learn, learn, learn, they can take everything from you except what's in your brain". My mother always repeated these words to my sister and myself, and they have always been my mantra in my own life. And so my mother and her sister got out on the Kindertransport to England, and were taken in by cousins. My grandfather soon followed, arriving in England on August 31st – just one day before Germany invaded Poland. His life was saved by one day! But tragically, my grandmother Frieda was eventually deported with her youngest daughter, Etti Lea, to Riga, in January 1942, although they never arrived there. My mother tried her whole life to find out what happened to them, but all we know is they died en route in that cattle truck.

Both my parents suffered terribly in England, not knowing what was happening to their parents and families left behind in Nazi Germany, and coping with a new life and a new language in a new country now at war. My mother and aunty only ever received 3 short letters from my grandmother Frieda – and then no more. Frieda never talked about herself, she just was worried how her Geliebte Suessen Kinderchen were doing. "Seid Ihr sonnst brav, ist man mit Euch zufrieden." My mother Feige was not able to continue her education, and had to work in a factory in England, making gas masks. Nobody had ever taught her how to sew, but somehow she just knew how to do it. She was just 15 and all alone. Her father was interned twice, and her sister Margo had caught tuberculosis, and had been sent to a sanatorium in the countryside to recover. There was no communication between anybody.

My childhood was very difficult. My father died suddenly, when I was only 11, and we were quite poor. I remember my mother would fall asleep over the sewing machine, as she made and repaired our clothes. She had been raised Orthodox but had stopped practicing her Judaism soon after the war was over. She said "no God could allow such a thing like the Holocaust to happen". And so we never went to synagogue, or really celebrated anything Jewish. I never learned Hebrew. Sometimes I wondered if we were really Jewish at all and why we never went to synagogue. It was very confusing. But one memory stands out above all others - my mother would tell my sister and myself never to talk about anything Jewish out in public. If she heard anyone speaking German she would freeze in a panic. The fear and the paranoia of all things German have never left her.

It is hard to be raised this way, to hear and feel your mother's pain for all she suffered, and not to be able to make the pain go away. To feel her guilt at surviving, when her grandparents, her mother and her little sister did not, and were brutally murdered. She had named me Judith Ellen – Ellen after her little 7 year old sister, Etti Lea. I couldn't understand why she would name me Ellen, after someone who was murdered. After all, this was a name I would have for the rest of my life. But now I understand it was the only way my mother could preserve her little sister's memory. All she has of Etti Lea is one tiny faded photo – which to this day is on the wall opposite her bed. Like most survivors, my mother talked very little about the past, it was too painful. But one thing she was very vocal about when the subject came up – she hated Germany, she hated Germans and she would never ever set foot in Germany again.

And so you understand it was impossible for me not to feel the same way as my mother did, about Germany and Germans, even though in my heart I knew most Germans today weren't even alive at that horrible time, and were not to blame.

But then in August 2008 something happened which changed the rest of my life. I listened to my childhood friend Annie being interviewed on BBC radio, and talking about what happened to her mother and her mother's family, who were Viennese Jews. It was extremely emotional and painful to listen to. And then, all of a sudden, I heard a female voice inside of me say, very clearly "Judy, you need to find out the truth about your own family". The very next day I got on the computer, and I have not got off it since. I have found out so much about my family history and the incredible ancestors I have. It was extremely painful to learn about the Holocaust era and my hundreds of murdered relatives. For months I had nightmares dreaming the Nazis were chasing me. I thought, "I can't do this anymore, I will go crazy", but my ancestors just kept pushing me forward all the time. And then I found out I was directly descended from one of the most famous Jews of all, King David, and it had a huge impact on me. He is my 100<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather! I am also descended from his son – the famous King Solomon. I felt this blood was running through my veins for a reason - which I still had to find. I started to go the synagogue on Maui and to become actively involved with the Jewish community. I started to celebrate the Jewish festivals - and I loved it! I started to speak the Yiddish words and expressions my mother used to say. I started to feel REALLY JEWISH for the first time in my life - and I loved it. For the first time in my life I was finding a Jewish identity with the PRESENT – and not with my family's tragic past.

I then decided to request 7 Stolpersteine to be laid for some of my murdered relatives. The last stone to be laid was for Walter Weisstein – in July 2012. Walter was a 2<sup>nd</sup> cousin of my father's. I didn't know that Walter's stone was the only one on Thomasiusstrasse at that time. I had wanted to lay one for his wife Lotte too, but this was not possible. I didn't know that Oliver Geiger had stopped to read Walter's inscription, and had been so moved by the stone. I didn't know about the spark that had ignited this tremendous "fire" on Thomasiustrasse, uniting you the residents, in your determination to memorialize the street's former Jewish nachbarn. When I received Oliver's first e-mail in November 2013, I was speechless. I didn't know how to react. Here was a German man who was reaching out to me on behalf of several people on Thomasiusstrasse. Kind, caring people, who wanted to right a wrong - that touched me so deeply. It was all overwhelming and it brought me to tears.

Over the next few months, I started to get to know Oliver by e-mail. I always looked forward to his beautiful e-mails, which were filled with such sensitivity and emotion. I also started to correspond with other residents involved in the project, trying to help you all find living relatives of the victims. I was overjoyed when we were successful. I am proud to know I have been able to contribute to this amazing project, to have helped both the residents and the living relatives to unite in such an emotional and meaningful way - to extend bonds of friendship that will hopefully last for life now. This project has changed so many people's lives - forever. We all have shared memories which we will never forget.

But then there came the moment when Oliver asked me "why don't you come to Germany, to Berlin?" He told me "You are German, don't ever forget that. Your family has been here in Berlin for hundreds of years. You just happen to be Jewish as well". These words had a huge impact on me. You see I had only ever thought of myself as Jewish, never German Jewish (from my father's side) or Polish Jewish (from my mother's side). Now Oliver had given me a new identity, and it felt strange - but good! And for the first time in my life I could think about a possible trip to Germany not with hatred and fear, but with love and friendship. So I knew what I had to do. I responded, "Yes, I will come. I want to see where and how my family lived before the Holocaust. I want to feel my roots. And I want to meet you and the Nachbarn of Thomasiusstrasse".

And so on September 11<sup>th</sup> last year, I set off for Germany from Maui, Hawaii, where I live. To tell you the truth, I was still very nervous when I left, and I wasn't sure I was making the right decision – even when I was on board the plane ready to take off! I was determined to wear my Star of David around my neck, to prove to myself, my family and my Jewish friends, that this was a new and safe Germany now, and the Star was no longer yellow with the word “Jude” on it. That I could walk the streets without fear as a proud Jew – but could I really? The war in Israel and Gaza of last summer, and all the horrible and disgusting, violent attacks on Jews in Europe at that time, all the terrible anti-Israel demonstrations, including here in Berlin, made me feel very, very nervous. But one thought kept me going – “my family had to overcome their fear – they had no choice - and so must I”. If they could do it, so can I.” And I didn't want to disappoint all the people who were expecting me here in Germany, and those friends and family who had given me so much support back home and around the world. One close friend told me “you are making this trip for all of us”.

I have to say it was the right decision! I have never been on a trip like this before. As soon as I saw Peter Sauer's smiling face at Frankfurt airport, I knew everything was going to be OK. As soon as I saw Rita and Heinz' smiling faces at the Berlin train station, I knew I had found wonderful friends here. Rita and Heinz were the best hosts I could ever have hoped for, and I am very grateful to them for making me feel so welcome in their beautiful home. Rita went with me almost everywhere, experiencing all the mixed emotions with me. Every day of my trip last year was a roller coaster ride of tears, joy and laughter – from the anguish of the Holocaust memorials, from the sadness of the Stolpersteine, from the pain of seeing the buildings where my family lived and were deported from - to the joy of spending Rosh Hashanah – the Jewish New Year - in the exquisite Rykestrasse synagogue with my new German family – Ollie, Rita Palla, Rita Buenemann, and my dear friend Ines. To the joy of meeting my “new” 2<sup>nd</sup> cousin, Gil Schwarz and his wife Hana, who had come all the way from Israel just to meet me. To the pain and happiness of visiting beautiful Leipzig, my mother's birthplace. Thank you Ineslein for taking me there. To the pride of unveiling a plaque (tafel) in honor of my great-great grandfather Dr. Bernhard Weiss, the former community doctor of Oranienburg, and feeling like a film star with the mayor, a reporter and lots of people listening to my sehr schlecht Deutsch! And to the laughter, as Ollie showed me the spot where Hitler's bunker once stood – where now all that remains is just bits of rubble - mixed with lots of dog poop – Hitler's final legacy! I still remember every moment of last year's trip like it happened yesterday. I felt in a way I had returned “home”. You see, even though I was born in England, I have no history there. I am not English; I am German and I am Polish – but most of all I am, and will always be, Jewish. And YOU all have helped me to feel both German AND Jewish, not with fear, but with pride and love.

Today I cannot imagine, nor would I ever want to be, anything else but Jewish. Jews have contributed so much to humanity with their philanthropy, their intelligence and their inventions. And they continue to do so all the time. But by the end of 1945, 2/3 of the entire Jewish population in Europe had been murdered. What would Europe be like today without Jews? What would the world be like today without Jews? It would be completely empty and lifeless, like the heart had been ripped out. But what is life really LIKE for today's Jews in Europe? The attacks are more violent and numerous than ever on Jews, on synagogues, on Jewish cemeteries and even a kosher market in Paris. But what about Berlin? Even Chief Rabbi Shaul Nekrich told me last year he cannot walk the streets of Berlin wearing his kippah. It is too dangerous. This is unacceptable, and it makes me very sad. It reminds us all of Nazi times again. It reminds me of my mother's paranoia. Many Jews today feel Hitler's goal of a Judenfrei Europe may actually be happening – 75 years later, as terrified Jews flee to Israel.

Germany, and the people of Thomasiusstrasse, have done an incredible job of making sure the Holocaust victims are never forgotten. “Never again”, we all say. But what can we do to ensure this “never again” will really be NEVER AGAIN? Most of the Ashkenazi Jews who live in Israel today are descended from Holocaust victims and survivors. So as we honor and remember the Thomasiusstrasse victims today, I feel we should also honor and support their descendants - WHEREVER they live today, including the Jewish Homeland - Israel. Israel IS, and always will be, the HEARTBEAT of the Jewish people. Or as cousin Gil told me, “Israel is the fruit that grew out of the ashes of Auschwitz, and you cannot separate the two, no matter how hard you may try”. Israel is the place where Jews are fleeing to, when, once again, they no longer feel safe or welcome in their homelands. Israel is where Rabbi Nekrich can finally put away his baseball cap in the closet, and wear his kippah.

There is one final thing I would like to say. I have often wondered - if the victims of Thomasiusstrasse could speak today at this ceremony, what would they say? Well, I believe they would say “Thank you kind people for honoring us, for making sure we are never forgotten. You have done a wonderful thing, and you should be so proud, because we are proud of you. And as we continue along our path of friendship together, we look forward to the day when Jews in Germany are 100% safe, when there is NO LONGER the need to post a security guard at every Jewish building. We hope our children and grandchildren will be able to say “Germany is where the Holocaust started, but Germany is also where “Never Again REALLY is NEVER AGAIN”.

I thank you with my German Jewish heart and soul for all you have done, and for having me here today!