

Dear Gail Halvorsen,

I, Karin Hess, was born in Berlin in May 1938. My sister was born 14 months earlier.

My father was working for I.G. Farben as a buyer and as his position had to be covered, he was deferred from the service.

My mother, my sister and I were evacuated to Koelschen/Warthe, which is near Frankfurt/Oder, now belonging to Poland. (Hitler ordered all women and children out of Berlin because of the bombing). My father used to take the train on week-ends to see his family. On January 27, 1945, the Russian army reached our village and the occupation began. My father was visiting us, could not get back to Berlin and was eventually deported by the Russians. We never heard from him, or ever saw him again, although the Red Cross and the Organization for Inhumanity had all the information about him from my mother. Most likely he was transported to Siberia with all the other German men and put into a labor camp where he did not survive.

As there was no more transportation available, my mother sewed a backpack for each of us kids and one for herself and stuffed each one with some of our clothes. With one other family (mother and 3 children) we started walking towards Berlin. Remember that we were only 6 and 7 years old.

We walked 30 kilometers when we came to a little train station and the station guardian stopped a passenger train bound for Berlin after having been bribed with a gold watch. He shoved us into the compartment and the train left again. I only remember that we stood in there like sardines, I dropped a little spoon which I had in my hand, not being able to pick it up or ever find it again. Arriving in Berlin there was a curfew until morning. The train station was packed with people and my mother was afraid to lose us, so we had to hold on to her at all times.

I do not think that we slept, but waited until morning when the curfew was lifted. Then we walked to our apartment, which was standing, surrounded by other buildings which were bombed out and in ruins. A family was living in our apartment and we had to share with them, as living space was very scarce due to so many ruins.

As we had no father, we were regarded as 1/2 war orphans and had the possibility to partake in a holiday camp on the Pfaueninsel, (an island near Glienicke which was the summer residence of queen Luise), now in the American sector and at that time not open to the public. We slept in army tents with 20 cots. In the morning we received tea and bread with jam (no butter). A military tin container was issued to each of us with which we collected our hot lunch and a hot dinner. We washed it with sand and cold water in the river, ready to use the next day for our meals. It was not that difficult to wash them clean, as there was not much fat in the hot meals. I do not remember what we ate, but we were happy to have something.

The highlight of our one week's stay on the island was when once a plane flew over and parachutes, made out of handkerchiefs with a candy bar attached, floated to the ground. We never had candy before that. I think I got two of them. A few of the parachutes got stuck in the very high trees on the island and for us kids it was very sad to know that we would never be able to reach them.

I want to thank you again for the kindness you brought forward to us war children and the happiness you created with it.

I am so glad to have learned that you were the wonderful, kind person who put smiles on the Berliner kids' faces.

Thank you again, even after so many years I will never forget it.

Sincerely, Karin Hess

October 12, 2014