

11. “Pflegschaft” (Guardianship)

A compelling narrative was taking shape, starting with an image of how her mother and grandmother survived through the 1930's. Difficult times began in December 1929 just after her mother celebrated her eleventh birthday. She and her sister, who was seventeen, were both at home on this particular day, and the eleven year old was sliding down the bannisters as her sister watched in scorn. The family lived in the largest apartment on the second floor in the most prestigious area of West Berlin. Their accommodation included a play room, piano room, study, bedroom for the cook, as well as three additional sleeping places. The other twenty or so large apartments were ideal for families. The property consisted of two buildings put together. One was located on Guntzelstrasse and the other situated around the corner on the street that ran perpendicular. There were eight shops on the ground floor.

That afternoon, life for the family changed forever. Hilda's grandfather, at the age of fifty, suffered a major heart attack and passed away a few days later. He was a tall, good-looking man, and enjoyed horseback riding, ice skating, and swimming. His loyalty was first to Germany and then to Judaism. He fought on the Eastern Front with the German Cavalry during World War 1, and returned to Berlin in late 1917 as Russia began to negotiate peace with Germany following the Bolshevik revolution. War-time service possibly explained why his two daughters were born six and a half years apart. The year after he returned home, his wife's parents gifted him Guntzelstrasse.

His untimely death threw the household into turmoil. Managing the apartments became the responsibility of his wife, with help from her eldest daughter. Other family relatives provided

guidance and support. The youngest daughter continued her education at a private Catholic school.

Financially the family was well off. A life insurance policy had paid out and there were considerable securities under management at a local investment firm. The apartments were yielding a net surplus, after taxes, maintenance and repair costs, of six to seven hundred R.M. per month (US\$250.00).

The family employed a large household, took regular vacations, shopped at high-end department stores such as F. V. Grunfeld, imported carpets from New York to furnish the building, and both daughters enjoyed a private school education. Hilda's mother had talked about some of her visits to Grunfeld's when she would drink pink lemonade, dispensed through a marble fountain, in the basement of the store.

Nationally, the Weimar Republic was experiencing onerous economic times because of the worldwide recession begun by the Wall Street crash of October 1929. The German economy was in serious decline, unemployment soared, the value of the Reichsmark collapsed, and countries would not agree to a moratorium on World War 1 reparations. One of the German government's most significant accomplishments was the establishment of gender equality. No longer were women considered as merely housewives and mothers. They were encouraged to join the workforce, and by 1930, a third of German workers were women. But attitudes were changing.

As unemployment rose from eight percent in 1929 to nearly one third by early 1932, opinions shifted to blaming women for the economic downturn. As more and more males found

themselves unemployed, the idea of excluding women from the workforce became the way to address mass unemployment. The Nazi Party adopted the slogan for women of “kinder, kirche, kuche” (children, church, and kitchen), and Hitler announced, if elected, he would remove eight hundred thousand women from employment.

There was also the German financial crisis of July 1931 when the banking system virtually collapsed. Depositors panicked as anxious crowds waited in line to withdraw money. Large banks closed. Hilda assumed her grandmother might have stood among these crowds, choosing to convert her bank deposits into cash. She realized that it was very likely that her grandmother did not use banks after the 1931 crash, and certainly not after Hitler came to power. It was probably not an easy time to rent the Gunzelstrasse apartments, but what was about to happen would make this situation many times more difficult.

Germany in 1932 was marked by political and economic instability as the Nazi Party gained influence, culminating in the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor on January 31, 1933. Hilda had been told by her mother how the ascendancy of the Nazi Party worried the family, but as a fourteen year old, she had not understood the danger signs.

A more cheerful event was her sister’s engagement to a Polish Jew in late 1932. He was employed by her grandfather and the wedding took place a few weeks later. The first child was born in September 1933. Her salesman husband contributed to the management of Guntzelstrasse and was granted power-of-attorney to act on behalf of his mother-in-law.

National events in April 1933 brought the first serious consequences of Nazi persecution, following the Enabling Act of March 23rd that gave Hitler dictatorial powers. At first there was a

national boycott of Jewish businesses, but on April 7th, a law was passed that confined Civil Service employment to Aryans only. Regulations impacted Jews who were teachers, professors, judges, or in other professional and clerical occupations under government control. They were fired. A similar law was passed shortly thereafter affecting lawyers, doctors, tax consultants, musicians and notaries.

The repercussions on Guntzelstrasse were quick. Some tenants lost their jobs, others had to move or decided to emigrate, Germans loyal to the Nazi Party exited the property, and a few disappeared. Locating new tenants was not easy and lower rents were in order for those who could no longer afford to pay market rate. The apartments were configured to suit families, the category most harmed by anti-Semitism. The shops on the ground floor soon attracted damage, slogans, and street protests.

Guntzelstrasse started to show the effects of Nazi persecution as vacancies increased and tenants were intimidated. This reduced revenue required deferment of non-essential repairs and maintenance, frightened tenants into staying inside, caused shops to close, and led to the occasional arrest, including the caretaker of the building. Tradesmen began to exploit the situation. For example, the coalman who supplied coke for the central heating and hot water systems demanded immediate payment instead of waiting the normal ninety days. When the remittance was not forthcoming, he sued Hilda's grandmother in court for collection, and threatened to stop deliveries.

The roof of the property began to leak and needed repair. It had not been replaced since the apartments were built. In November 1933 the family was obliged to reregister the building to

record the two daughters and their mother as the current owners of the property. It was at this time that the value of the complex was listed as one hundred and fifty thousand Reichsmarks (US\$60,000). As Hilda scrutinized the papers in more detail, she was shocked by two new discoveries.

First was the realization that her mother had been made a ward of court, so that anything that affected her well-being needed official approval. Because she had lost her father and was under age twenty one, Nazi regulations required a legal representative, appointed by the Guardianship Court, to control her welfare. For whatever reason, a lawyer was appointed to safeguard her interests. In law, she was considered unfit to look after herself, and her mother could not be given custody because of her gender. The published purpose of guardianship was to protect the child's rights, avoid endangerment, and control the juvenile's financial interests. But far more important, it allowed the Nazis to know everything about Guntzelstrasse and reject requests from the family that they did not like. Anything affecting the building's value had to be approved by the Court due to Hilda's mother's inheritance of three eighths of the property. The papers Hilda examined showed that Guardianship Court hearings were frequent and her grandmother risked imprisonment or worse if she failed to appear, disagreed with the Court, or ignored the Court's rulings. Each time there were legal proceedings, Hilda's grandmother would accompany her under-age daughter to meet with the publicly appointed protector.

Hilda was disgusted with this interference of freedom affecting her mother.

The other shock was realizing that the family applied for a ninety thousand Reichsmarks mortgage at the time of reregistration in November 1933. It was granted by a life insurance company, with an interest rate set at six percent, and payments due on calendar quarter dates. Late payments would incur an interest charge of eight percent. It appeared the family needed to extract funds from Guntzelstrasse to pay for certain repairs and remodel several apartments to make them smaller.

It was worrisome that whenever there were financial changes affecting the property they had to go before the Guardianship Court for approval. The Court's intentions could not be trusted. It was part of the machinery established under cover of law to enforce the Nazi's anti-Semitic regulations. Non-compliance was not an option. Any criticism or negative comments could lead to confinement in a concentration camp, and if these circumstances arose, who would take care of a fifteen year old daughter.

Hilda was horrified by these thoughts.