

## Marion's Story

The convoy of war ships, made up of Merchant Marine vessels and conscripted ocean liners, that pulled out from an unnamed English port in December of 1944, had only recently arrived from the United States filled with American service men and much-needed supplies for the Allied Forces. The vessels were now returning to North America for another load and the return trip was not without passengers. Both injured and weary servicemen as well as many refugees from the horrors of war-torn Europe filled its decks and holds. Among the latter, was an attractive young fifteen year-old German Jewess, Marion Schlessinger. It had not been easy for her to win a place on one of the ships; she was bright and intelligent but she was also deaf and America had strict regulations on admitting people with handicaps, even children. They would not add disabled persons to its rolls of those who might need special help and could not be self-sufficient. But through the clever thinking of her father, Marion was granted passage on one of those vessels.



Marion was born in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1928, one of three children of Hugo and Selma Schlessinger. Her father was a prominent business man, dealing in textiles and well respected in the Conservative Jewish community and the German community at large. At the age of two, Marion suffered from a bout of scarlet fever and lost her hearing. Two years later, her parents sent her to a school for the Jewish deaf in Berlin (Israelite Institute for the Deaf), a top-notch and long-existing institution that educated Jewish deaf youngsters in the oral method of communication and at the same time gave them a wonderful background of their heritage as Jews. "I was able to come home only for long holidays and vacations because Stuttgart was 11 hours by train from Berlin," Marion told me and added, "The school was very Orthodox, very seriously observing the Sabbath to every letter of Jewish law. I was sometimes very confused when I got home and saw my parents do things on Shabbat that we never did at school. However my parents were happy that I was learning how to speak and write and could communicate with them so easily."

In 1939, a neighbor informed Mr. Schlessinger that he and his family were on a list slated to be deported to the infamous internment camps. Hugo and Selma realized the time had come for them to leave Germany with their family. Ten year-old Marion was miles away at school in Berlin, but her father called Dr. Felix Reich, the headmaster of the school, asking him to send Marion to Holland immediately and that they would pick her up there. Dr. Felix was leery about sending this young Jewish child out on her own so he traveled with her to Holland, hoping to put her safely into the arms of her family. As things would happen, the Schlessingers were nowhere to be found so Dr. Felix brought this sad youngster back to the school.

Dr. Reich had been negotiating with a school for deaf Jewish children in England to arrange transport and a safe haven for his young charges as it was becoming more and more dangerous and difficult to continue to run his school in Berlin. Almost a year later, Dr. Reich was successful in moving 11 deaf Jewish children, ranging in age from 2 to 11 years, from Berlin to England. Dr. Reich, died in 1950. Most of the 146 students from the school were killed in 1942. Marion was one of the lucky ones that he saved.

Life in the English school was similar to Berlin; they moved around a lot because of the bombing but the children learned to speak English and they continued their Jewish studies. "All this time," Marion said, "I wondered where my parents and sister and brother were and if they were still alive. I really had no idea, for all I knew, I might be an orphan. Still I had a lot of hope and dreams and perhaps said a lot of prayers too." Then in the winter of 1944 Marion heard from the International Red Cross that her parents and siblings were all safe in New York City and anxious for arrangements to be made for Marion to join them. Then came the difficult part...

The United States was willing to issue visas to persons who needed refuge but refused to do so if there was any disability which might keep them from earning their own living. Hugo Schlessinger had, just that week, read that there was a shortage of farm hands in the north central states because most of the farmers' helpers had moved to the cities to take better paying jobs in the munitions plants. Hugo Schlessinger, who had not

seen Marion for almost five years, told the American consul, "My daughter is strong and big for her age. It matters not that she is deaf. She will work well in the fields." The coveted visa was issued. Thus, the convoy had 15 year-old Marion, amongst its passengers, in the personal care of the ship's captain.

As the boats stealthily crossed the north Atlantic, taking care not to show their lights and zig-zagging on sea lanes that were little used to avoid the U-boats of the enemy, Marion anticipated seeing the Statue of Liberty, which would represent a new life back amongst her family. After an arduous month-long journey, the ship finally landed at Halifax, Canada. A two-day train trip brought Marion to New York City where she was, to the delight of everyone, reunited with her family. Wise Hugo Schlessinger enrolled Marion in the Lexington School for the Deaf and even though he would have loved having her at home, he realized that she had to become used to American ways, make new friends and prepare herself for a life in America.