

## **Sylvia Cysner, Survivor** by **Bonnie M. Harris**

I first met Sylvia Cysner in the summer of 2001, when I was working as the archivist for the Jewish Historical Society of San Diego and Sylvia volunteered at the archives where I was working. We immediately became fast friends, as she took me into her confidences and shared many intimacies with me about her children, her grandchildren, her friends and acquaintances. But she was hesitant in discussing her own life or any details about her long deceased husband, Joseph Cysner. I marveled at her resolve to visit Israel every year, regardless of the violence riddling the land that she loved so much. As her health waned, as it does in those advancing in age, we spent fewer and fewer afternoons together at the archives. News came in early 2003 that Sylvia would be moving to Los Angeles to be close to her children as her health prevented her from living alone in her San Diego home anymore. I knew I would miss her and hoped that she would be well. She had often told me that one day she was going to have to give up her home and what was she going to do with her husband's books and music from his office? I was happy to learn that the managers of the archives had rescued her husband's documents from his office during the move and that I would soon be getting this new addition to our holdings.

I had no idea that when I spent all those afternoons in the company of this energetic woman that I had been in the company of a true hero, who had also been married to one. As I began processing the collection of Cantor Joseph Cysner in the summer of 2003, I knew I had found the story of a lifetime and the subject of my PhD dissertation. I immediately made plans to further my understanding into the life of Joseph Cysner by scheduling interviews with Sylvia at her new residence in Santa Monica. While a more detailed accounting of Joseph's life can be read in other publications of my work, I want to focus here on Sylvia's story and how she and Joseph eventually came together again after the War and the Holocaust. Below I have summarized some of the more important events of her life as told to me in the course of several interviews of January 2004 and January 2007. I did not know that when we filmed our last interview together on January 25, 2007, that she would pass away just one month later. The following narrative is arranged from excerpts of several different renditions of her story.

Sylvia:

*"I was born in Bamberg in 1922. My father's name was David Max Nagler. My mother's name was Cecilia. My older brother was named Leopold and my little brother was Ferdinand, Freddy. And I myself just was a school girl who went to school in Bamberg. From there I went to Jewish High School in Munich. From Munich I was apprenticed after I graduated from the high school to a dentist in Nuremberg until the time when I had an opportunity to immigrate to England.*

*When the Nazis had won their elections in 1933 I remember I was very close then with a girl whose father was the commanding general of the regiment that was stationed in Bamberg, which was a famous regiment. I was very close friends with her in elementary school...going to school in her horse-drawn carriage kind of stuff. The moment it was 1934 – 35, this was finished! She wouldn't even look at me! So when you say persecution...but then you realize that it was all the Nazis who had won everything – it was everything theirs against the Jews you realize that she really had no choice. We understood that there was the shouting on the radio. "Jews", and ahhhh, "they are Jews and they are the evil...the Jews". That's what you heard, that's what you*

*understood. And then you realized that you know that that wasn't true, but...they were the majority and we were the minority. The same as we are now.*

*So, I was in school during this time when the Nazis were really pushing their anti-Jewish agenda. Eventually, we were thrown out of the public school system. I was already in secondary school because in Germany, or in Europe, you go after 4th grade to secondary school. And of course, we were thrown out eventually. At first, they had these little things if your father was a war veteran in the First World War or if he had earned a medal for injuries and stuff like that, then they let you stay longer. I mean, I stayed longer because my father was a veteran and had a stiff finger with...shrapnel. So there were then Jewish members of our community that were being taken and others were being left behind. And the other thing that happened was that the young men were taken already to concentration camps like several Jewish young men who were in concentration camp being politically active in socialism and stuff like that. They were taken to Dachau, which was the first concentration camp. Already, in the beginning, between '33 & '34, there were always riots where Jews were beaten up in the street and stuff like that. You were lucky if you weren't.*

*I went to Jewish boarding school in 1935, 1936 in Munich because of the business of what was happening – being thrown out of secondary school. And then after that I went to the Jewish boarding school and after the Jewish boarding school I went to, ahh, it was a kind of junior college in Nuremberg until I was apprenticed to a dentist to become a dental technician, a Jewish dentist. And then after him some other offices.*

*In 1938, the week before Kristallnacht my father had been taken to prison for a week. But, you see, those were circumstances, they were very individual. He was in the 1st World War even with the Mayor of our home town, who had become an SS Storm Trooper. But he, in essence, still had remembered serving with my father, who protected my father and, instead of sending him to the concentration camp in Dachau, he kept him in the local jail with a couple of other of his buddies. So this thing had blown over, this riot, and so my father was quietly released home. Meanwhile, he had told...I don't know if he had told my father. Anyway, to make a long story short, I was sent to his office in the evening, one evening, and he told me that one of us has to get out, if we want to save our parents or something of that... I had two younger brothers. And I had to get out because he could no longer protect us.*

*Whether he sent for me to come see him or if my father sent me to go see him, I don't remember. Maybe it was my father who sent me after he was released...was released from prison, from jail. That particular incident with the mayor was before Kristallnacht but Kristallnacht followed before I could get away. But he had told me, he evidently knew something, but he said, "...one of you has to leave because I can no longer protect your parents."*

*And anyway, so, that then started the ball rolling about who would go. I was the most urgent to go – one, I was the oldest, two, I was a girl, three, I looked very, you know, grown up, I had long blondish hair, braided like a nice German girl, at that time. And so they did... We decided as a family that I would go.*

*But before I could leave, Kristallnacht happened, not very long after I met with the mayor. He must have known something was going to happen. I was in Bamberg, cowering in the cellar with my family while we heard everything smashing around us. You know, my family's store, and we heard all of the glass but we didn't know what it was exactly. I mean, we knew things were going on in the street and, of course, we had no idea whether we would come out of it alive or not. And the weirdest thing was, as horrible as the whole night was, in the morning it was like, other than all of the destruction, as if nothing had happened. It was as quiet in the street as it could be. People went about their business. It was the most unreal experience. But we knew then. It was hard times... And still you couldn't persuade my mother to leave because her mother was in Berlin. That was unbelievable.*

*And, of course, then, that morning we saw the fire glow, and from the direction we realized it was the synagogue - it was burning in the city. Because from where we lived we just, you know, cities were such that you could see the glow in the sky. Then, eventually, my father, who was also pretty gutsy, made his way there in the evening to see what had happened. But they had taken then...our cantor, oh yeah, he and his wife and their younger daughter were taken to a concentration camp. They had taken him, the cantor of Bamberg, and, who was also our Hebrew teacher.*

*They arrested a lot of the men, thousands of them, but they didn't take my father and it was through the protection of this guy. And the other thing I would have to say, which was our house, as you know, there was a hat factory in the back and the man who had, you know, leased the factory, also didn't squeal on my Dad ... I mean, there were some good people, I know that not all Germans were bad, no such thing. I remember now the wife was daring and the daughter of this hat manufacturer would go and buy milk and cheese and stuff and bring it to my mother.*

*Those days after Kristallnacht were the scariest days of my life. I mean, all of us, we wouldn't go anywhere out of the house for days after, and we tried to get everything together for me to go. Kristallnacht was November 9th, I won't forget. I left in December ... for Cologne where I had friends, so to get away, on the way, I went...I left for Cologne in...it must have been right around December 1st because I arrived in England on January 1st or 2nd...something like that.*

*Yes, the plan was for me to appear as a German girl on holiday going to see her friends. That was the plan. And then, how...I don't remember...we had a message that I was to send after I had crossed the border. There was a telegraph office, I remember... something that I had met someone that - Yeah OK! Liesel Lotte. Yes. She was one of my friends who lived in Cologne and I was telling them we had agreed to say that, um, I met Liesel Lotte so that my parents would know that I had made it to the border. As a code - "Ich habe Liesel Lotte getroffen."*

*I left my home in Bamberg, December 1939, I believe, but had no visa, no nothing. I did not know where I was going just by train across the Belgium border. But on that train, I had told myself I wouldn't go into a compartment if there were Jews because the Nazis would take them off. And so I ended up with the German SS trooper in the compartment. And he had no idea; I was very blond looking with braids.*

*My parents put me on the train, I was 15 ½, never to know if they would ever see me again. I came with no papers in the suitcase. You see there were all these laws in Germany. It's too detailed to go into; you could not take anything out from Germany that had not been permitted and no more than 10 marks. And I had obeyed none of those laws. I just left, my clothes were all new, which we were not suppose to do. And nothing, I had no permission slips, and I had money on me, and just the chance I would be able to make it through.*

*I went from Bamberg, I was overnight at, I think, it was 6 or 7 hours to get to Cologne and it was from Cologne to Brussels. I think we traveled through the night, because I remember boarding the train in Cologne at night, so as not to have too many questions to answer and stuff like that. Next day was about noon or 1 o'clock that I got to Brussels*

*I left for England with a suitcase full of pretty girl clothes and I went into the train without proper papers or proper permit to leave Germany. I remember when the Germans opened the luggage and the suitcase I carried, on top in the suitcase was a navy blue taffeta dress. It was a party dress; it was the first thing they saw as if I were going to a party someplace. Everybody's, even non-Jews luggage was searched when you came close to the German border.*

*Not only that, but they said "Juden raus" = "Jews out of the train". I didn't even move. I just continued to sit there. They took a lot of Jews who had exit permits off the train. I do not know what happened to them. I remember myself standing in the window of the train as it went past from Bamberg to Nuremberg and I thought to myself, how far will I go or be able to go until someone catches me, because I had no passport.*

*The funny things that happened. The first encounter I had was with a Storm trooper on the train – and for the first time in my life I ate non-Kosher food. The guy, SS guy had bought me a hot dog, this long German hot dog. I nearly choked but I ate it. And I got to Cologne and from there to Brussels. He asked me where I was going and I told him I was visiting, ahh, friends and he said that he was going also somewhere...Brussels, something. And, uh...oh sure. And so I had a very nice conversation with this Nazi and then I vanished as fast I could near the border. Friends of mine met me in Brussels and I went to the British consulate in Brussels, who helped me and I got to England.*

*I went to the British Consulate and I told them to call, um, these friends of mine in London. I had a telephone number to call them and, uh, they were to verify who I am, ya, that they are expecting me. And they gave me a visitor's visa for three months. First I went to the Jewry shop...what was it called – Immigrant Office – people, immigrants such as I, and you talked to the lady who was, ah, director, and I told her my whole tale of woe. And she said, "You're not the only one – there are thousands like you." And so she said after our interview what do you do? And I told her what I can do and I was able to stay with friends and then I managed to get a job at a dentist office where I studied dental mechanics.*

*After that I was able to bring my 2 brothers because they came on the Kinder Transports and then my parents came later. She helped me with my two brothers who came separately on what was this famous children's transport... First my older brother, who was...fourteen, and then, um my little brother, who was eight or nine...scarlet fever...(chuckles) oh God, on the ship...they*

wouldn't let him off the ship and I couldn't (chuckling) leave the ship for a day or so because they had a quarantine...let me see, there was something else. And that was June, July of 1939.

I had then met this old English rich gentleman at the synagogue, and, ah, he took a shine to me and invited me home to lunch. So, I told him about my parents and he had a cocoa plantation in Trinidad – Port of Spain, Trinidad. And he signed some papers so it appeared to the whole world as though he were an employer...I have that piece of paper, don't I? Do you remember? Where it said on there that my mother and father were to be hired as housekeepers or something or other on his plantation... This enabled my parents to get visas for Trinidad because Trinidad was part of English colony... ..they got a visa in Munich to come...they left on the first of September.

I was the luckiest girl alive. On that Friday, I am on the train and I heard the chamberlain say, "...and we are at war with Germany." And I was hoping they were arriving, I was hoping because they had left and they were going via Amsterdam. I cabled my cousin in Amsterdam, who was there, that this was no time to make business. We didn't know when or how but we felt... In London we were sure it was going to be war. I think my father said they got his visa in Munich the 23rd or something of August or something. My father is an orthodox Jew (chuckle) and it's Friday afternoon, you see, before the Sabbath and there are 3 ferries coming. Don't you think they are on the last ferry? And they came in with the people coming.

I waited at the ferries all day, from early morning...from when they first started. Same day...My parents didn't see my brothers until maybe two weeks later, or whatever. Because they were with me in London...and they put the children in with families in England. And when war was broken out they had evacuated the children out of London. It was something else.

You should have been in our place. We took the mattresses off the beds and put them on the floor and I don't know how many people would sleep there...at times. My mother cooked for the whole lot. The other thing which was amazing was...Friday war broke out...by Sunday morning you couldn't buy anything in the market. They locked up all of the stores in town because they were afraid they were running out of food. My parents and my brothers never left England after that. England became our home. What was your life like in London? I had a wonderful life in London...I had friends. In the wonderful business I was a dental technician, I had a dental lab. I worked for seven dentists...and I was the only female dental technician in London at the time, because the men had all been called into the army. So they had to trust me once in a while. I really wished I had stayed in England.

I came to America 9 years later. Let's see, the war was over in 1945, I think Joseph came to San Francisco either at the end of '46 or '47, because we had been corresponding, while I was in England, first with Red Cross messages when he was a prisoner in Santo Tomas. How this came about was because his sister Henrietta, the young one, had come from Berlin to London. She was walking across Oxford Circus and she saw my father whom she recognized. So we made contact. She begged me too write to him on her behalf. Why I don't know, maybe she thought her English wasn't good enough. I started to write Joseph first on her behalf, and he sort of fell for my letters. Eventually, we began writing to each other.

*After Manila was liberated, and then he wrote to me that he was going to San Francisco and he wanted me to come. I said no way would I go to America. And this correspondence went on for, I think, it was almost a year, and then He began to phone saying come for a visit. And I went, going to NY first, and that is what happened. I had not seen him since his father's funeral in 1937. He brought me to San Francisco. I came as a visitor for 3 months and got married instead.*

*My best memories of San Francisco were the kindness of the congregation, the Rabbi and his wife, who were very gracious and generous, because the President of the congregation was not so gracious. He had, since my husband was a bachelor, he tried to match him up with a lot of young, wealthy girls. And when our engagement and forthcoming wedding was announced this President said to me: "And what is it that you have got"? Because I was no raving beauty, "and what is it that you've got that all these young wealthy girls do not have?"? So I said, you would be surprised. That was my answer. But the memories, and of course her birth, my daughter Charlotte, my mother-in-law's 80th birthday. And there were many beautiful things that happened because the people from the Manila community that had settled in San Francisco, where totally in love with my husband. They were just very wonderful. Because my mother-in-law was such an old lady and had lived with him in the Philippines, they granted her visa to come with him. They came together to San Francisco. And I wish I could remember some of the names.*

*San Francisco was good, other than I did not know I was homesick for England. We had a number of offers who wanted to go east but we couldn't because of the climate, and his mother. So we came to San Diego. When the offer came we moved to San Diego, my husband also had a, it was almost an obsession, he would only live in cities with a harbor. He was passionately in love with the sea. So you see you can pick out-Hamburg, Manila, San Francisco, San Diego, it always had the sea. Actually he had a very good offer to go to Sioux City, and the congregation there. It was a lot more money because they were very wealthy these cattle dealers. And he said there is nothing to see but cattle yards. Pittsburgh there was cold and his mother wouldn't go there.*

*We had really 10 absolutely wonderful years with that congregation in San Diego. San Diego was a small Jewish community, and most people, because of parents and, uh, former affiliations, they belonged to Rabbi Cohn's temple, the Reformed Synagogue at Temple Beth Israel. But when my husband came, he taught the young people, the children, just adored him. And so many of the families moved over to Tifereth Israel. So it grew a lot while we were there. Not only had the children's choir and he had...he wrote plays and the love of others and stuff like that. But, um, we had...we had 10 wonderful years at Tifereth Israel.*

*It was glory time. From all the families, whose weddings and Bar Mitzvahs that we participated and were invited in...people who were very gracious in the congregation. I really loved that congregation. There were a lot of wonderful people in there.. And, of course, it all fell apart after my husband died. He was in the synagogue in the morning and chanting, it was the Purim festival, you know, with the chanting...the scroll of Esther and everything...He came home, had dinner. It was a Thursday evening, his mother's birthday was the following Saturday and we had a big dinner. My mother and father were visiting from England and he was teaching a music class at San Diego State. And he said, sort of jokingly, that he didn't feel like*

*teaching...he would like to have taken me out. So I said, "Well, why don't you play for me once.' And he never came back. Finished teaching the class, gave back the tape recorder, joked with the dean, I don't know who he was, it's Smith or somebody...NO, Frank Allman's father, I think was there or something. But anyway, that was it...they found him under the car...no sound, no horn, he was dead. And it was just true...many at his funeral. And he was alone.*

*He was the warmest, kindest, most gracious human being that you can imagine. When he was in Santo Tomas, interned there, they used to call him the Angel of Santo Tomas, the other prisoners, because he went to them and sang to them and tried to cheer everybody up. He was a very gracious human being."*

From these recountings of her life, it was obvious to me that Sylvia had saved her family nearly single-handedly, first by getting herself out of Germany through a clandestine escape; after which she secured passages for her younger brothers on the Kinder Transports, and then she obtained visas for her parents for safe passage to Trinidad. In the face of all this, she still counted herself "lucky" because war had commenced on the day her parents had arrived in England, preventing their further passage to Trinidad, and leaving them "stranded" in London. Her parents and her brothers owed Sylvia their lives.

When you couple this story to the remarkable survival odyssey of her husband, Joseph Cysner, you get a true hero tale of epic proportions, which sadly to say, did not embody the ageless epitaph of "they lived happily ever after." Maybe they did for a few years, but Sylvia lost the love of her life in the Spring of 1961, when, after surviving both German and Japanese internments in the same war, Joseph died suddenly of a massive heart attack at the age of 49 on the evening of Purim, which ironically enough, celebrates the deliverance of the Israelites from death by the hand of the Persians. It seems somehow fitting that he should die on one of his favorite dates, a beloved Jewish holiday, as he anticipated spending the joyous occasion with his family.