

How words can change your life

How words changed my live

By Carolyn Linz Kaplan

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How many of us will ever forget our child's first word.... or the praising words of a loving teacher, as well as words of reprimand ; the stern words of a parent and those special words of pride, approval , and guidance; encouraging words from a friend and harsh words that caused us pain? All of us have said to ourselves, I should have said something or, why did I say that; words of apology given or received; words that compliment and words that shut us down; words shouted in anger with hate and vengeance ; the words of a soft lullaby ----

All of us sitting here probably can think of incidents when a word made you feel great, and at other times, inflicted great hurt.

Words influence how we feel, how we act and react, how we receive love and return love.

As I reflect on my journey through life, an avocation I have adopted as I grow older, I was astounded by the impact certain words have had in shaping my life. Actually, as I prepared for today's presentation, I was overwhelmed at what my memory evoked.

I began to realize that just about everything that happened in my life, and probably in everyone else's life for that matter, started with something someone said to me , something someone wrote, or the words of a song.

It was those thoughts that prompted me to put together this evening's presentation

Words I've lived by ----- words that changed my life.

Who would think that having been taught to recite a simple little Hebrew prayer each morning upon waking up, from the time I was two years old, would still be on my tongue each morning in my 99th year. MODEH ANI L'FONECHAH, thanking God for awakening me to another day to be fair, understanding and giving!

Words that have made me greet each day with a fresh new outlook

As some of you know, I grew up in Germany. It may be difficult for you to envision the peaceful life that once existed before the tyrannical Germany of the Hitler years. Jew and Gentile lived side by side throughout our village. With my grandfather's hand in mine, our daily morning walk through the village was pure joy. Villagers sweeping their stoops, opening

shutters, setting out for the day, stopping for a brief chat with us and a friendly, “Guten Morgen Lieselschen” had me skipping along happily.

Words and actions that transmitted warmth and security to me, a small child, an integral part of my little community, free of worry, open to a bright and happy world.

Our small synagogue was on our town’s main street, adjacent to the church. Walking down the street on Shabbos morning hand in hand with my parents, and Rosh Hashanah morning on our way to services, dressed in my new Jontef clothes, new black patent leather shoes, was a special experience. Our non-Jewish neighbors along the way extended friendly new year greetings, recognizing and accepting our differences as we did theirs.

Respect for those different in their beliefs, honor and dignity, all were words ingrained in me at a very early age.

A frequent site at my house were wandering Jewish beggars, mostly dispossessed through pogroms in Eastern Europe. They stopped by on a regular basis. Their ragged clothes, dirty and bedraggled appearance did not deter my mother from inviting them in and giving them a wholesome meal. She always bought a trinket or whatever they offered from their knapsack. Although these men and their haunting looks scared me, my mother taught me the meaning of kindness and true humanity.

Treat everyone the way you would want to be treated In my home, these words were lived day by day.

When I was 8 years old, my peaceful world began to crumble. The town’s demeanor changed. Neighbors and customers stayed away from our business. Playmates disappeared. Hatred and fear became the norm. The few Jewish families in town were shunned.

JUDE – JEW – a new word spoken with distaste and disgust became part of our daily lives, not withstanding words such as: FEAR, BETRAYAL, AND LOSS.

The day a tall, frightening man in Nazi uniform came into our classroom and told the class that I and Seppel, the other Jewish child in my class were dirty Jews, unfit to be among them and not tolerated in the new Germany, cruelty crept into my life. As he dragged me and pushed Seppel to the back of the room,

Harsh words that became deeply inbedded in my memory: bewilderment, confusion, unwanted, dirty, alone,

Our teachers were forced to follow the new anti Jewish rules. However, one of my teachers did not encourage my classmates to harass us as some teachers did. In fact, when my parents took me out of the village public school and enrolled me in the Jewish Day School in the nearby city of Darmstadt which was especially created for Jewish children from surrounding villages like myself, she wrote these parting words in my autograph album:

SCHAU FORWARTZ, NICHT ZURUCK, NEUER MUT BRINGT LEBENS GLUCK!

LOOK FORWARD -LOOK AHEAD- DON'T LOOK BACK TO WHAT WAS; RENEWED SPIRIT BRINGS GOOD FORTUNE ALONG ITS WAY!

These words apparently expressed her forbidden feelings. They have become guideposts for me through life's ups and down and have been instilled in my children as **their** words to live by:

LOOK AHEAD WITH CONFIDENCE IN SPITE OF CIRCUMSTANCES THAT BEFELL YOU BEFORE!

Although Hitler songs espousing hatred and bigotry were all around us in the streets and on the radio, at the Jewish Day School, we sang happy songs of childhood, exciting the imagination with poetry by the masters like Heine and Goethe. One song in particular stands out in my memory: DIE GEDANKEN SIND FREI -

YOUR THOUGHTS ARE FREE

Translated from the German, the words of the song are:

YOUR THOUGHTS ARE FREE. WHO CAN TELL WHAT THEY ARE?

THEY FLOAT RIGHT BY YOU WITH ALL KINDS OF IDEAS

NO HUMAN CAN KNOW WHAT THEY ARE, NO HUNTER CAN SHOOT THEM DOWN

THEY KEEP FLYING RIGHT BY YOU. YOUR THOUGHTS ARE FREE!

The words in that little song empowered me. They worked on me like magic. They induced self worth and encouraged creativity within me at a time when hopelessness could easily have killed my spirit.

In spite of atrocities perpetrated on the outside, in my new school we put on a musical play with every child in school having a part. The play was about two aviators who travelled around the world DIE REISE UM DIE ERDE, THE JOURNEY AROUND THE WORLD. My part was in the dance of the cherry blossoms as they visited Japan. It was a fun way for us to learn about world geography, customs of each land and its people.

Words like creativity, art and fun cancelled words like defeat and sorrow.

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Over the years, I have marveled at parents like mine who rallied the Jewish community and enabled the establishment of Jewish community day schools in larger cities throughout Germany to educate children like myself. All of these make shift day schools remained open until Hitler closed all Jewish schools as well as forbade Jewish children's attendance at Public Schools and the organized deportations to concentration camps began.

The teaching staff at these day schools were fabulous educators who had been dismissed from their positions at universities, colleges and the public school system, in keeping with the Nazi laws because of their ethnicity. These teachers stressed the importance of education and

that education and morality go hand in hand. They isolated us against hatred. Our minds were encouraged to explore to hope and to dream.

How very fortunate that the adults of my childhood followed these precious words from the Talmud:

Who is ignorant? The Talmud says: He Who Does Not Educate his children.

Probably of all the words that changed the course of my life more than any others were spoken by my mother. As Hitler's edicts against the Jews increased, the town's 10 Jewish families decided to emigrate together to nearby Holland, to remain together as a community, look out for each other, establish some temporary livelihood there and return to Germany when all this blows over.

This was the mindset of most Jewish German citizens at the time. My mother disagreed. She said:

'IF WE LEAVE, WE CROSS THE OCEAN. HOLLAND IS TOO CLOSE TO GERMANY'

Thank God, this is what we and two other Jewish families in our little town were able to do. With approved sponsorship of my two uncles who had been US citizens for decades, all legal requirements for us to enter the US as permanent residents were met. Sadly, those who escaped to Holland fell under Hitler's evil and perished.

It would seem ironical, but in spite of the Nazis wanting to get rid of Jews, local Nazi officials kept delaying to relinquish our passports. After repeated demands from the buyers that we vacate our premises, my dad told them, **"As long as officials are withholding our passports, we will not leave this house."** With pressure from the buyers, our passports were released.

I am often asked what made your parents leave so early on in the Hitler period? I can only guess, but I think that the one incident that caused my parents to act so early on was NOT the bricks thrown through our windows, the anti-Jewish graffiti on the sidewalk and walls of our house, nor the boycott against patronizing ours as well as all Jewish business establishments.

I believe that the incident that occurred one day on my train ride home from school with two other classmates of mine from neighboring villages, a Nazi entered our compartment, dragged me toward the door of the moving train and was about to throw me out. In harsh hateful words he exclaimed laughingly,

"This is what we will do with you dirty Jews"

Upon hearing the two girls' screams, the conductor pulled me away from his clutches. When my dad heard about this he said words that remain etched in my memory:

"I will not raise my children in a country whose government condones throwing children out of a moving train".

The expediency to act when all around him decided to wait, his willingness to sacrifice and to face unknown hardships , prompted me to adapt the words in Rudyard Kipling's poem entitled, **IF**, which Kipling wrote to his son. I changed the words to fit my dad's courage and dedicated it to him.

**If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs,
And you pursue the path you sense is right for you,
And neither cost nor sacrifice for those you hold most dearly
Deter your efforts in seeking a life that's new
Then, no matter if the world about you is cruel and falls apart,
You achieve the impossible with courage, determination, and a
loving , giving heart.**

Sometime in late January, 1936, preparations for our journey to America were in progress . Our steamship tickets had been purchased for our departure on March 10, 1936, from Hamburg, on the Hamburg-Amerika Line

Loyalty, trust, daring and resourcefulness, were words that created a change in our plans.

Perhaps it was a loyal neighbor, a town official, someone in the underground, or anyone who cared enough to risk his/her life to warn my dad that the gestapo were planning to arrest him at the Hamburg Harbor and would prevent us from leaving Germany . The reason of the arrest probably was initiated by someone filled with hatred.

Although I could never discover who warned us, upon going through Nazi records with a friend who had access to the Nazi files, there was an official memorandum stating:

We were at the Hamburg harbor and could not locate the Neu family. We found out that the family no longer is in Germany.)

I wish that my dad could have seen these **words** in writing.

Upon receiving the information of this planned arrest, my parents secretly made arrangements to purchase duplicate tickets on the Berangaria, a Cunard White Star steamer leaving from Southampton, England which was scheduled to leave sometime around the 18th of February. My parents kept the February departure a secret and made sure to spread their March departure date everywhere they could.

One day in mid February, (two weeks before our announced departure, on the pretense to visit my Uncle Nathan to say our good byes, each of us carrying a small suitcase, did not go to the city where he lived. Instead, we went to Cologne and boarded a train to take us across the border to Brussels.

Upon our arrival in Brussels, as we stepped on Belgian soil, my parents hugged and my dad said:

NOW WE ARE FREE!

From Brussels we crossed the English Channel, stayed in London a few days till we could board the Berangaria.

Although some people smuggled jewelry out of Germany to help them establish livelihoods in America, my dad told one of our fellow travelers on the train to Belgium who gloated about how successfully she hides her gems, that no monetary gain would be worth gambling with his family's safety. He said:

IF THE RISK IS GREATER THAN THE GAIN, IT ISN'T WORTH THE RISK'

Words that taught me the true meaning of character, principle, and priorities.

The most poignant words ever spoken to me were my grandfather's blessing when we said our good byes before leaving for America. He (benched) blessed my brother and me:

"GO WITH GOD", he said," SURROUND YOURSELF WITH GOOD TEACHERS AND LOTS OF LOVE"

He perished in the Holocaust.

We did go with God. America was our haven as it had been for those of us fortunate enough to be the recipients of its welcoming arms.

We settled in Chicago where one of my uncles resided. **Struggles and hardships** became **stepping stones** to creating a new life **and hope and striving to better ourselves** became words of my new vocabulary, a new language, new customs, and new friends.

Words of humor crept into our new life. A friend's favorite news program was "Fascination" – he meant Face the Nation; another friend thought that a family named Hamburger must be extremely rich because they seem to have restaurants all over the city. But it was Mr. Horwitz, the president of Habonim, the congregation created by the newcomers who proudly stood in front of the congregation and said **LET US FEEL YOU AT HOME**. My children break out in laughter to this day. **We laughed** again and knew that we DID feel at home in this lovely land.

I loved singing "America the Beautiful", its words became imbedded in my heart. Words of the poem 'America for me' by Henry Van Dyke which Miss Baron my 5th Grade teacher taught me, fired my imagination about the beauty of this country, the carefree casualness and generosity of its people and the freedom to express myself.

Whenever I travel throughout this beautiful country, **the words of this poem stir me each time**. I'll just read a few lines:

**It's great to see the old world and travel up and down
To admire the crumbly castles and the statues of renown
But oh, to hold your hand my dear and ramble for a day
In the friendly western woodland where nature has its way
In this blessed land of room enough beyond the Ocean bars
Where the sky is full of sunlight and the flag is full of stars.'**

During the years, words of encouragement to develop and grow came from all sources. Adulthood and maturity introduced new words such as

**love, marriage, my children who taught me the substance of life and words
that gave comfort for heartache and loss**

And through it all, my faith and words of prayer gave me strength and vitality. Old age has given me a whole new set of words to live by and understanding of

What was-----was! What isis! which at times is hard to admit.

When it comes down to words that inspire and urge me on to lead a satisfying and productive life each day, I go to PIRKEY AVOT, ETHICS OF OUR FATHERS, and I submerge myself in the wisdom of the ages, ignore the aches and pains which try to infiltrate my being and proceed with words of inspiration from the Talmud..... Among my favorites which have guided me throughout my life are:

**DUTY'S HOUR IS ALWAYS NOW, OR THE OPPORTUNITY MAY GO FOREVER! and
DON'T HOLD OFF ON WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY – YOU MAY NOT GET THE
OPPORTUNITY AGAIN."**

Hopefully. as you reminisce about YOUR life, words that impacted you will infuse your spirit with understanding, joy, and hope.

Thank you for letting me share MY special words with you and I will be glad to answer any questions you may have.

Carolyn Linz Kaplan

Nee: Liesel Karoline Neu

Born in the Hospital and delivered by Dr. Rosenthal in Darmstadt, July 27, 1924.

(Dr. Rosenthal who was Jewish died at the hands of the Nazis. His non-Jewish wife and son escaped to live in Lengfeld with the help of their housekeeper who was from Lengfeld. The son who witnessed atrocities against the remaining Jewish residents and subsequently himself was arrested by the Nazis, survived the camps. This information came from a published article written by Dr. Rosenthal's son who testified at a trial after the war, against those who were

involved with his incarceration and his father's death . I was shown the article by one of our former neighbors.)

I grew up in Lengfeld, im Odenwald, now known as Oetzberg-Lengfeld im Odenwald.