



Martin's Story, Chapter 1

My name is Martin Kapel and I was born the son of Polish parents but I was not born in Poland. But by the nationality laws both of Poland and of the country in which I was born I was legally at birth a Polish citizen. But the country in which I was born was actually Germany where my parents lived at the time. I was in fact born in Leipzig. That was in 1930. So my earliest memories are in fact of Leipzig. I lived there until I was eight years old.

On my father's side all my father's family lived in Poland. It was my father himself who had left Poland as a young man to go to Germany. On my mother's side, although all my ancestors as far as I can trace back were born in Poland, my mother's parents and those of their children who had been born at the time left Poland to go to Germany. They did not settle in Leipzig, they settled in Nuremberg and they lived there for quite a number of years. Until the first Hitler putsch in the 1920s, in 1924 in fact, or 23 I think it was, when they left Germany and settled in Strasbourg in France. Now by that time my parents as young people had already met and they had already decided that they wanted to marry so my father went to Strasbourg and stayed there long enough to establish the residence qualifications which enabled him to marry in France. My parents were married in Strasbourg and immediately after their marriage they went back to Germany and settled in Leipzig where I was eventually born.

My father had come from Poland from a small village in Poland, Brzesko, and of course there the only kind of education which was available to him was Jewish education, studying the Torah, the Talmud, the various Jewish writings. There was very little in the way of secular education. But when he came to Leipzig he wanted to study so he attended evening classes first and then managed to save up enough money to go to the university.

My grandparents on both sides were what we call Hasidim. The Hasidim are the ultra Orthodox [Jews]. Now my parents departed from that extreme form of orthodoxy but nevertheless they were orthodox and I was brought up in an orthodox household as long as I was with my parents, or should I say at least one parent because my father died when I was five years old.

Leipzig itself was a fine city. In those days it was famous for a number of things including its twice-yearly trade fair. It was the biggest trade fair in the world and tourists came from all over the world to exhibit their wares, businessmen to exhibit their wares and to conclude business deals with other businessmen. And of course when you want to attract people from all over the world you've got to give them something to look at. And so in fact it was a very fine city, one of Germany's show cities. Apart from its trade fair all its industries were the sort of industries which do not produce a lot of pollution and a lot of noise and that sort of thing. The main industries were publishing, printing, book binding and in fact if you go into the German section of any library you'll find most of the books were printed in Leipzig. And its other industry for which it was famous was one of which people might disapprove today, the fur industry. Some of the finest furs were on sale there. We might not approve of that today but in those days people saw it differently. So these were industries which do not spoil the appearance of a city.

There was a Jewish area which is being preserved now, the buildings are being preserved, not the Jewish population, that disappeared. But there was this Jewish area but we didn't live in it because we were financially not well off even when my father was still alive, after all he was trying to establish himself and he hadn't got very far when he died and then of course we were even less well off so we lived in what was essentially a working class area in Leipzig.