Eva Gross

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON A NEW LIFE
IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Eva Gross was the first child in a family with a Jewish father and a Lutheran Protestant mother. This is an account of her youth in Eastern Pomerania where she experienced the growing difficulties of living under the Nazi regime and her move, as a teenager, to Belfast where she completed her education and later became a teacher. She describes her early years as pupil teacher in a Belfast boarding school, the restrictions that were imposed during the war on ‘enemy aliens’ and the hospitality and friendship she enjoyed in the country which she now calls home.

My family lived in Kolberg in Eastern Pomerania, where my father practiced as a lawyer and where I were born in 1919. My father’s family was Jewish although he had already left the Jewish congregation in 1911, when he married my mother, who was a Lutheran Protestant. As babies, my brother Wolff and I (he was six and a half years younger than me) had both been baptised into the Lutheran Church. My father decided to convert to Protestantism after hearing through a friend about the Mission to Jews of the Irish Presbyterian Church. He took instruction and was baptised in the Jerusalemkirche in Hamburg in 1936. The question may be asked why my father did not join a German church. Our own clergyman in Kolberg, Pastor Hinz, would have gladly accepted him as a member of his congregation, but the Pastor was already under suspicion by the Nazi regime and had spent some time in a concentration camp for membership of the ‘Bekennende Kirche’. The Nazi party supported the ‘Deutsche Christen’ and stated that Christ was not a Jew but an Aryan and therefore would not have had anything to do with Jews.

Under the Hitler regime my father was, of course, not allowed to practise, but my parents were able to maintain a reasonable standard of life during the war years, as my mother owned a block of 14 flats. They had been bought in the early 1920s, before Hitler came to power, and were registered in my mother’s name so that there could be no reference to ‘Jewish craftiness’. My family occupied one of the flats, which was attached to my father’s office. When my father was no longer allowed to work as a lawyer, the family moved to a smaller flat and an Aryan lawyer took over the office.

In the wake of ‘Kristallnacht’ on 9 November 1938 my father’s former office had been ransacked but the SS did not interfere with my
parents’ home. My mother proved that all the furnishings belonged to her as they were her dowry when she married in 1911. However, like nearly all Jewish males, my father was taken to a concentration camp in November 1938. The fact that, some years earlier, he had been converted to the Christian faith, was not taken into account. Surprisingly, my father was released after a few days. We have no explanation for this, although we think it may have been a question of mistaken identity with his brother. My father never revealed what had taken place in the concentration camp. He was so traumatised by the experience that he never spoke to the family about it. I saw my father for the last time during Christmas/New Year 1937. My mother and brother were still able to visit me in the spring of 1939 in Belfast – after ‘Kristallnacht’ it was not considered judicious for me to come to Germany again. My father died in 1944 as a result of cancer. His GP had made an application for him to be admitted to hospital in Kolberg, but this was not granted and my mother nursed him at home where he died.

Up to 1933 I had had a happy childhood in Kolberg. Kolberg is a seaside town on the Baltic Sea. It has a beautiful sandy beach, as white as the beaches in Ireland, which was enjoyed by the many visitors who came for their holidays from mid-June till the end of August, as well as by the locals. However, from early summer 1933 there were more and more restrictions on Jews. Notices appeared at the entrances to the beaches, making it clear that Jews were not wanted there. Theoretically, being only 50% Jewish, these notices did not apply to me, but my parents felt that if I went to these beaches I would be open to unpleasant incidents and did not allow me to go.

I was also prevented from joining my friends at dances. This was where all the young people went, but notices barring Jews had appeared there as well. In a small town like Kolberg where my father and uncle had held important positions there was always the chance that I could have had unpleasant encounters with aggressive Nazis.

I liked school and had many friends who remained loyal to me, even when Hitler came to power and it became compulsory for them to join the girls’ section of the Hitler Youth, the ‘Bund Deutscher Mädel’. This was essential if they wanted to be admitted to university or join the Civil Service. That meant that on Saturdays – we had school on Saturdays at that time – only girls like myself or those of left-wing parents were in school. Everybody else was away for political training.