

# Holocaust Survivor Irene Butter: It was three miracles. At least.

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## About the Author:

Caroline Schmidt has worked for ten years together with the authors, Stefan Aust and Thomas Ammann, in a NDR-/Arte-Documentation (“Hitler’s people handlers”) to trace the destiny of the “Exchange Jews”. Since then she has become friends with Irene Butter. They Skype one

another every few weeks and also visit each other.



This week Irene Butter wanted to be in Germany one last time. The Coronavirus got in the way of that. As an “Exchange Jew” she came out of the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp and said, “We can overcome evil.”

When Irene Butter, 89, speaks about the Holocaust, right away one word creeps in, which hardly fits with it – and then soon that word controls her whole narrative: luck. Sometimes she also speaks of miracles, which had to have happened in order for her to survive this time period.

As she recounts her story there are perhaps three miracles in it – and even though she has told about this totally astounding moment in time so often, still sometimes a sly smile spreads across her face. She looks proud then. Like a girl whose father has succeeded in a splendid chess move.

Then just as suddenly, Irene becomes serious again. She is one to whom miracles or luck are bestowed, and she believes this, that one must give these gifts back to the world again. This also is what the Holocaust-Survivor Elie Wiesel would have seen, “Whoever has been in a Concentration camp, whoever has smelled this air and heard the stillness of the dead,” quotes Irene from the Nobel peace prize winner by memory, “such a one as this has an obligation to bear witness. Otherwise, he allows the dead die a second time.”

On April 15, 1945, exactly 75 years ago, British troops freed the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. In order to tell the story of the dead, my friend, Irene, wanted to come to Germany this week for one last time. On Friday she wanted to speak about the Holocaust to Hamburg school children in the Zeise cinema in the mornings, and in the evenings at the Theater. But the Coronavirus got in the way of that. Because of that, I am telling her story here and now. Because in memory there always also lies hope: “We can conquer evil,” says Irene, “and what’s more, we must.

## **She dreamed of Heidi's Switzerland**

Irene Butter was born on December 11, 1930 in Berlin-Wilmersdorf as Irene Hasenberg. Her father was a Banker and lived with the family in a large Gründerzeit apartment. The last time Irene visited it was six years ago. After a long walk through the city, which she accomplished in her comfortable, wide-soled shoes, she stood in front of the house and looked with yearning in her blue eyes high up to the windows at the second floor. It was as if at any moment the little boy, Werner, would look out from there, her brother who was two years older than she.

Instead, a woman came out the door and asked if she had once lived there. Yes, said Irene in English. In the 30's. Oh yes, said the neighbor. Would she like to come in?

The other doors also opened. Then Irene entered the front rooms of her old apartment and commented that right here were the living and dining rooms – and in the back part was where the children had played. The residents asked: Did you all survive? My father did not, said Irene.

A central figure of her childhood was Heidi from the children's book. This happy girl, who never lived in wartime, it didn't matter how ordinary Aunt Dete would treat her. As a child Irene dreamed often about that; that one day she would travel to Switzerland and there she would ski in the mountains, just whistle through them to the place where Heidi and Peter had sheltered the cows. However, at that time there were swastika flags everywhere in Berlin. Her father lost his work. Her brother was tormented in school. And before everything could become much worse, John Hasenberg, took his family away in 1937, and brought them to Amsterdam. The first miracle.

The family father worked there in a Bank also. The children went to school. And soon all of them spoke fluent Dutch. When the Nazis raided the Netherlands in 1940, Hasenberg got a tip from a friend, that he should make passport photos of the whole family, and send them to a man in Stockholm. "Describe your circumstances briefly to him in a letter", said the friend, "he will certainly know, what's to be done." It would take a long time, until they heard from the man in Stockholm again.

## **There stood this train and waited**

In February 1943 there came a ruling that the family should be brought to a camp. They stuffed so many things in their backpacks, as much as they could, and put on many pieces of clothes for camp. In the cattle car they traveled, crammed in together with many other people, to the "Transit Camp Westerbork". That was a large camp with many barracks, where people lived, worked, did sports and could do plays – and for food there was also "nearly enough".

One could call it a very comfortable camp – if there hadn't been this train driven into the middle of it each Saturday afternoon. "And it was totally the same, at any place in the camp, wherever one stood," remembers Irene, "practically from everywhere one could see this train,

which sat there all of Sunday and all of Monday.” In English Irene actually said “there sat”. As though the train was a beast of prey, and at any moment it could get ready to spring at you. “And then each Monday evening at 11:00,” she continued, “the lights went on, and long lists were read out loud with the names of those, who would have to climb on board the train on the next day.” Everyone would listen then, always full of fear. Would they be on it this time?

When the Hasenbergs heard the names of people they knew, they went to their barracks, spent the whole night with them and accompanied them with deep sadness to the train in the morning. “As far as I can remember, we knew pretty positively, that we would never see them again.” Even at that time there was information about Auschwitz and the gas chambers. It was the prisoners themselves who cleaned the empty train cars each week. And there they sometimes found small slips of paper and notes, and on those was written “what happened in Auschwitz.”

In Westerbork one could receive mail. Sometimes, the Hasenbergs received wursts or other meat from Amsterdam friends. Mostly the food arrived at the camp totally spoiled, because the delivery took so long. However, they were always happy for the gesture.

One day they got a package again. This time there was no food inside. It contained false Ecuadorian passports with their names and passport photos. The stranger in Amsterdam had kept his word – the second Miracle. These passports might be their salvation.

## **Bellowing Nazis on the Platform**

It was told throughout all the Ghettos, that The Nazis wanted to exchange Jews for goods, weapons or currency. At that time their commercial partner, the Allies, no longer allowed any Germans in their own country however. The only eligible Jews were the ones who had foreign passports – in total about 14,000 men, women and children. There had been arranged one particular spot set aside for them, the “exchange place” in Bergen-Belsen. In 1943 it still had even a comparatively good reputation.

And so the Hasenbergs maintained that it was a great bit of luck, when their names finally surfaced on a list. They traveled to Bergen-Belsen in March of 1944 in a passenger train car, in a real compartment. Irene was 13 years old. The parents, she remembers, relaxed the whole way due to a good mood. They all made jokes and laughed a lot together – even while she couldn’t let go of her fear, that it might be a trap.

Irene describes the moment when they arrived like this: There stood many Nazis on the platform and they screamed at us. Out, out, quickly, quickly. The German shepherds barked loudly. Irene was petrified with fear. Would the dogs be let loose on them now? They walked through a forest for a long time. Then the camp appeared, and a tall barbed-wire fence. The people behind it were shrouded in rags and emaciated. “Their faces alone told us what awaited us.”

The barracks were scant and drafty, the toilets smelly holes. There was no food. The daily soup was a thin broth, in which sometimes something swam. They hungered, they froze, they stood in the heat, the cold, the rain and the snow at the roll-call spot. In five rows, for hours. No one was allowed to move. No one was allowed to sit down. If anyone did that, they would be beaten to death. Sickness was rampant. People died painfully.

### **Irene was mistaken for her mother**

In the summer of 1944 the SS began to dissolve the concentrations camps near the Front. In the winter when the first prisoners from Auschwitz set foot in the camp, chaos broke out. Now so many people were dying at the same time that the keepers of the corpses could no longer burn them fast enough. Bergen-Belsen only had a small crematorium. The dead bodies lay soon all over the place. Next to the roads, in the forest – and then on the roads.

What's more, Irene's mother and father were now sick. They were not counting at all on an exchange any more. Until the camp directors suddenly shared the news in January 1945, that it would indeed happen: all Jews with Latin American passports were to report to the Selection Doctor, because only the healthy would be allowed to travel on this trip. Her mother tried to get up there, but was brought back together to the barracks. So Irene went there first with her brother, and then again along with her father.

And now happened the third and last Miracle.

The doctor behind the desk inspected the passports and observed John Hasenberg and his daughter quickly. Then he nodded once, and made a checkmark after the names of the parents. To this day Irene can hardly believe her luck. He took her for her mother. At 14, she was so big by then, that she passed as an adult. Everyone looked the same way here, thin and shaky, with a face as exhausted as any other.

They supported their mother on the long road to the platform and climbed on the train with much misgiving. Again they were in train cars with real passenger compartments – but would they really travel to freedom? It was when they first climbed into the Red Cross compartment that they embraced hope. Four days long they rode through Germany, as the train had to find tracks there, which hadn't already been destroyed.

### **Her father said: "I'm not going to make it"**

This week, Irene wanted to go back for the last time to Bergen-Belsen, and she was "very sad", when she had to cancel the trip due to Corona. She would so gladly have walked once more between the dark trees and through the heath, past the mass graves with the stones and numbers on them, one thousand, two thousand. "Somehow", she says, "Bergen-Belsen belongs to us in the meantime. We were indeed made free there."

It is also the place, where the family was together for the last time. The father died on January 23, 1945, still in the train, shortly before the Swiss border. Like so many men, he made it to the exact moment, when the family was finally safe. "He said to us, 'I will not make it'", remembers Irene in this moment, and her voice still trembles today as well.

In Switzerland Mother and Brother went into a hospital. Irene had to go on alone. First to Algeria to a refugee camp. Then she traveled on a ship to America and lived with relatives in New York, until her mother and brother came later. Here she went to school, studied, married, had two children and became Professor of Economics at the University of Ann Arbor, where she has been engaged as a peaceful participant of religion for decades.

How could she do it, not be broken by these experiences? As a youth, she had so many wishes, hopes, dreams, said Irene Butter, 89, one of the last witnesses of the time of the Schoah/Holocaust. Without a doubt, she wanted to live and one day go skiing in Heidi's Switzerland. "I think, that saved me."