A world without ghosts

She is suspicious by experience. And open minded by her own decision: Ruth Gabriele Sarah Silten, born in Berlin in 1933, has survived Westerbork and Theresienstadt. Her family has suffered from antisemitism, long before she knew the word. She has lost close relatives at young age and the confidence that human beings necessarily act human. No way to turn the time back, no way to get rid of the ghosts. But she can deal with some of them, she has learned to enjoy good moments. Everyone can make a difference, is what she tells those who listen to her story. And she has found her place to be. Her mails come from California, USA, where she lives with her spouse Meg and with another survivor, her 85 year old teddy bear Brunette. A bear bought in Berlin.

They have spent most of her life together, the bear being a present for her first birthday. Amsterdam has been their home for a while, a safe place at least till 1940 and from 1945 on, far away from what had been home and what had become the capital of Adolf Hitler's "Third Reich". Ruth Gabriele Silten was five years old when her parents decided to go with her into exile. "I wanted to stay", she remembers. "I didn't understand why I had to leave my toys and friends. The only toys I was allowed to take with me was my doll, Peter, a squirrel from Steiff and my teddy bear Brunette." The park benches, restaurants and playgrounds of Berlin were already off limits for Jews, the family's business sold. The anti-Jewish laws of 1935 had been restrictive, a violation of human rights, but obviously not the end of

legalized discrimination, just one more step on the path to robbery, deportation and murder. Still, many Germans of Jewish decent, orthodox families and members of reform temples as well as atheists, communists, socialists, devoted Catholics and national conservative Protestants, hesitated to leave their Heimat, their home country. Among them Gabriele's grandmothers Gertrud Teppich nee Herz and Marta Silten nee Friedberg and her paternal grandfather, the pharmacist Dr. Ernst Silten.

"I remember the day we left", R. Gabriele S. Silten writes in one of numerous mails in July 2019. "Everyone was at the station and I kept being afraid that the train would leave without us because to my, then five-year-old mind, it seemed that the steam of the locomotive meant that the train was leaving any minute." It was beyond imagination to see only one grandmother again. "Nobody explained to me why we were going to Amsterdam. I had no idea that this move was going to be permanent", the Holocaust survivor, book author and poet continues, going through a long list of questions. "I don't remember the journey at all and not much of my childhood in Berlin. I do remember walking in the park with my Omi Marta and her dog, Piet, a Bedlington Terrier. Also I remember going to my Omi Trudel's house and being allowed to play with the stuffed dogs she had."

Ruth Gabriele Silten did not know her maternal grandfather, Richard Teppich, Opa Richard, as he had died in 1931, before her parents married, and was buried in Weißensee. Her grandmother Gertrud Teppich was Omi Trudel to her. "She and Richard had three daughters, Anita, the eldest, who died at age 8 and 3/4. Then my mother Ilse, born in February 1909, and last my aunt Ursula, called Ulle, born in December 1914, who went to Switzerland and stayed there." Another child of Gertrud and Richard Teppich was stillborn. Anita who died so young had suffered from polio.

Before departing to the Netherlands in 1938, Gabriele and her mother had visited Ulle in Lugano, and it was only after the war that niece and aunt got to know each other better. Maybe Ilse Silten had tried to find out if there was a chance to escape to Switzerland, as well, maybe she had longed to see her little sister again, and maybe both. At the border no one asked for passports with a stamped "J" for "Jude" (Jew), yet, something the Swiss had suggested to the Nazi administration to enable custom's officers to distinguish tourists and business travelers from haunted ones and refugees. "Das Rettungsboot ist voll", stated a Swiss politician, Eduard von Steiger.

The rescue boat is full. About 11000 refugees had been in Switzerland at that time, uncounted others were sent back at the borders. In 1938, the conference of Evian had encouraged expectations without fulfilling them in the least. Doors closed all over the world, some silently, others with a slamming noise. Even countries like the Netherlands changed their policy. Any minute counted. Any straw could become a beam.

The Siltens, for a long time a well-respected family, resided in 28, Knesebeckstraße, in bourgeois Wilmersdorf. As a child, R. Gabriele S. Silten did not know anything about Jewish religion. She has learned all about it by a Hillel rabbi in the USA, loves Jewish traditions and the music and since the 1980s, she goes to the temple. Her parents had not been religious. They did not celebrate Chanukkah, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur or Passover, did not eat kosher or respect the rules of Sabbath. To the Nazis it did not make a difference.

"As a child, I hadn't had any idea who Hitler was, just some idea that there was a 'bad man' who did things", R. Gabriele S. Silten remembers. "The word antisemitism I learned when I was twelve, but I knew earlier what it was to hate Jews." In Berlin, "Stolpersteine" (stumbling stones) have been placed for the Siltens and one for Gertrud Teppich who had lived in Luisenstraße with her stuffed dogs and her souvenirs of happier times. A beautiful photo had been taken in 1923, when she had been on holiday on the isle of Norderney with her husband and her radiant daughter Ilse. The sun was shining, but there were already dark clouds at the horizon: In other touristic resorts, like the isle of Borkum, hotels already did not accept Jewish guests anymore. Jewish organisations advice where to go and where better not to ask for a room. Meanwhile, in Berlin and all other towns in Germany, there were signs on restaurant doors, theatre entrees and other places: "Für Juden verboten! Juden unerwünscht!" Forbidden for Jews! Jews unwanted!

In 1940, Gertrud Teppich nee Herz was forced by the Nazis to sell her spacious flat. Her housemaid managed to buy it and the widow could stay. She did so till she was supposed to go on a transport to a camp called Auschwitz in occupied Poland. Did she know what that meant? If she had heard about it, she decided not to find out whether the rumours were true. On the 11th of November in 1942, the 62 year old took her own life. She was prepared. Her daughter's father-in-law had provided her with the

poison. It was his profession that opened the last door. In other times, it was supposed to restore health.

In the economical ups and downs of the Weimar Republic, the head of family Silten had been succesfull both in his science and his business. "Opa Ernst was a pharmacist, his pharmacy was called the Kaiser Friedrich Apotheke in the then Karlstraße", Ruth Gabriele Sarah Silten knows. The pharmacy still exists, though under another name, in the now Rheinhardtstraße. It was not the only case of renaming. After WWI, Ernst Silberstein, born in 1866 in Königsberg, East Prussia, had chosen the family name Silten. He went to Berlin, made several inventions and founded a pharmaceutical's factory, the "Sauerstoff Centrale für medizinische Zwecke Dr. Ernst Silten". They produced inhalers like the one that was named "Atmos".

An Antidotarium made in Ernst Silten's factory in the 20ies or 30ies, a handy leather case with medical supplies for immediate help in cases of poisoning, is part of the collection of the Deutsche Apothekenmuseum in the castle of Heidelberg. Poison was, as fate had it, the only weapon Ernst Silten had left. When the Gestapo came to get him in March 1943, he was warned and took Veronal. Four months later, his wife Marta did the same in Westerbork, when her name stood on the deportation list to Auschwitz. "They are my heroes", R. Gabriele S. Silten says about her two grandmothers and her grandfather.

Marta and Ernst Silten had two sons: Heinz was born in 1901, Fritz was three years younger. Fritz Silten also became a pharmacist, and like his father, wrote a doctoral thesis. In 1929, he took over the pharmacy. In 1936, the family was forced by the Nazis to sell the business to an "Aryan". The factory in the Eastern part of the capital was closed in 1938. Three years later, it was reopened under the new name "Atmos", and in 1942 it moved to Freiburg. On the company's homepage the story reads like this: "In einer Berliner Apotheke fing alles an.1888 wird in Berlin die Kaiser Friedrich Apotheke von Dr. Ernst Silten gegründet, 30 Jahre später ist aus der Apotheke eine Sauerstoffzentrale geworden. Hier entsteht 1926 der erste so genannte ‚Saug-, Druck- und Heißluftapparat für medizinische Zwecke', die Kernkompetenz von ATMOS ist geboren. 1941 erhält das Unternehmen den Namen ATMOS und wechselt 1942 von Berlin nach Freiburg im Breisgau." No word about what happened to the man who had invented

the medical equipment. “After the war arrangements were made for payment instead of giving it back”, the granddaughter of Dr. Ernst Silten remembers. Today, the company has customers all over the world, and its slogan sounds like a promise fullfilled: “Inventions for a better life.”

A better life. Ernst Silten had hoped for it when he went to Berlin. Decades later, he and his family lost everything they had, piece after piece. “My father decided we should move to Amsterdam where it was safer for Jews”, recalls R. Gabriele S. Silten. Her uncle Heinz also thought it was better to leave. He went to England and called himself Henry. At the age of 52, he died of cancer, leaving a widow, a woman who had helped him when he came to England. Eventually, they had married.

His younger brother had a wife and a daughter to care for. In August 1931, Fritz Silten and his bride Ilse Teppich got married. In May 1933, Ruth Gabriele was born, a little girl with dark hair and big brown eyes. Gabi as the family called her would remain an only child. There is a photo of of her, entering a room, guiding her distinguished looking Opa Ernst. And a double portrait exists of the two year old and her Omi Marta, snuggling. Moments of pure peace and happiness.

Leaving Berlin meant tearing the little girl out of familiar circles. “My first impression in Amsterdam actually was the boarding house where my parents and I lived for a while till my mother found the apartment”, R. Gabriele S. Silten remembers. “I was left in the care of the boarding house lady while my father went to work and my mother looked for an apartment.” They found it in the then Noorder Amstellaan in Amsterdam Zuid, which was named Churchilllaan after the war. The exile in the Netherlands was supposed to be temporary, but no one knew how long it would possibly take. “I had to learn a whole new language when I began Kindergarten”, R. Gabriele S. Silten writes in a mail. “But I soon began to make new friends there.”

At that time many German speaking Jews, refugees from Germany, Austria, Breslau (Wroclaw), Prague and other parts of Europe, lived in Amsterdam Zuid, and their children were well integrated. In 1939, Marta Silten, Omi Marta, came to stay with the little family. After the “Anschluss” of Sudetenland and Austria, after the pogroms of November 1938 in Germany and the deportation of Thousands of Jewish men to concentration camps

like Dachau near Munich, Buchenwald near Weimar and Sachsenhausen near Berlin, even those longed to escape who had been convinced for long that it could not become worse.

In May 1940, the German Wehrmacht crossed the Dutch border and invaded the neighbour country. “I saw the soldiers march in from our window”, R. Gabriele S. Silten remembers. “After that I was afraid. Mostly when I was in the street and didn't know whether I should speak German if they spoke to me or Dutch. I didn't know which was better and safer. When I went to school I had to wear a yellow Jewish star, and I couldn't play with my Christian friends anymore.” At least not outside. Luckily, her best friend Carla lived in the same house. “Carla's family were nominally Catholic but never practised that. Carla and I played together and went to each other's apartments to play.” The attics were connected by a narrow door and so Gabriele and Carla got together even when it was forbidden.

Soon, the young Jewish refugee learned about the different uniforms. Black meant it was a Dutch police officer. “And you stayed.” Green meant it was a German soldier. “And you ran.” In the Jewish school that Gabriele had to attend now, the teachers told the kids to be careful and to lie should a

German in uniform ask, for example, what this or that fruit tasted like. "We were not supposed to have fruits." In the Dutch series of books "Witnessing the Holocaust", edited by Tom Bijvoet, R. Gabriele S. Silten was one of sixteen eye witnesses who wrote in English about what they had experienced: "First, when we came into class in the morning, the teacher would check that we all had a yellow star. If a child did not have one, they had to borrow a sweater or some other garment from another child. That was illegal, but at least everybody wore a star. The next lesson was: 'What would you say if a soldier came into the class and asked you at what time your parents came home last night?' The answer had to be 'before 8.00 p.m.' (curfew hour) of course, but not too close to it. Something like 7.30 p.m. or 6.15 p.m., so that it would sound like the truth." And she added: "As Jews, we were not allowed to go to the movies or the public swimming pool, sit on park benches, play in the park, own radios, shop at any time except between three and five o'clock in the afternoon, go to plays, concerts or even the circus. We were not allowed to use public transit. Jewish men lost their jobs; they were not allowed to be journalists, symphony conductors, doctors, lawyers and many other professions." And there were moments of German inquisition, also for kids. "Once", Gabriele Silten remembers, "they came into the classroom, and once they stopped me in the street..."

At home, a rucksack and a "Brotsack", a bread sack, stuffed with clothes and documents, were at hand, to be ready for leave. Children and their families vanished from one day to another as they were "taken away" or went into hiding. Teachers were exchanged on a regular basis, as the 49 year old recalled in an interview in April 1983 at a Holocaust Survivor's Convention. The audio and a video from another occasion are documented along with other files on the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). Other than families like the Franks from Frankfurt/Main, Fritz and Ilse Silten decided not to go into hiding. "Better to live or die together rather than to be split up", Gabriele's father had said. To separate from his only child was no option. A hard decision for parents. Betty and Karl Baer, other refugees, had manged to put their younger son, Herbert, on a children's transport to England, and went with the elder one, Alfred, to Amsterdam Zuid where they lived in Biesboschstraat, in the neighbourhood of the Siltens. Ten year old Gabriele was a Puppenmutti, a little mom to her toys, and when more and more Jews were deported, she was ready to give away her bear and the squirrel.

"I asked Carla whether Brunette could 'untertauchen' in her house and she said yes."

Razzias were taking place. The first time the Siltens were arrested was in the night. They were taken to the Municipal Theatre which had become a pick up place, but were allowed to go home. And then came June 20th in 1943, a warm, sunny Sunday, the day of an enormous roundup. In this big razzia, the grandmother, the mother, the father and the daughter were led down the stairs, while Christian neighbours were staring, some of them crying, unable to help. "Many people were standing in the street and hanging out of windows, watching what was going on", R. Gabriele S. Silten wrote in the Dutch books. "Not everybody was hostile though. I remember clearly how Mrs. Gijtenbeek, the lady who owned the corner grocery store came to me with a small bag in her hand. In the bag were sweets that she wanted to give me." Gabriele quickly had written a note for her friend. She took her doll Peter with her, knowing that Brunette was in safety. A bit later, Carla's parents went to the orphaned apartment and took a few things to keep them for the Siltens.

The group was taken to a square in Amsterdam and then to the Central Station. In a cattle car, they were brought to Westerbork. The doors were open to the width of a child's hand, enough to let some air in, not enough to see much or to get out. It took them twelve hours though it wasn't far. "Everybody was very afraid, we did not know where we were going." After the arrival, Ruth Gabriele Silten found herself sitting outside one of the baracks. "We had to register in Westerbork. My parents went in and left me on a chair outside. After a long time, I cried." Somebody must have informed her mother, so she came to get her. The people slept in dormitory style furnished barracks in bunk beds, on one side women and girls, on the other the men and boys. The food was scarce. R. Gabriele S. Silten only remembers bread though she is sure that there had been other things to eat. During the day while her parents worked, Gabriele learned to steal things to barter for food. When the grandmother had taken the poison and died, Ilse and Fritz Silten told their daughter Omi Marta had been ill. In an e-mail interview for the online memorial "Never again" of Chris Doyle in 2009, the granddaughter recalls what she had felt: "I missed her a lot, especially at first. She was the one, when she lived with us, to help me with multiplication tables, sewed clothes for my doll, taught me how to braid hair. I missed all of that. But then, Westerbork was such a bad

place that children grew up overnight and I became more independent and played less if at all."

In 1944, the three of them were brought to Theresienstadt (Terezin), a former garnison town near Prague that had been turned into a concentration camp. "In Theresienstadt I was hungry all the time", R. Gabriele S. Silten states. What they got there was mostly potato soup that was more like dishwasher water with some potato skins in it. When the SS made a propaganda movie, known as "Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt", Gabriele and her mother were forced to be "extras". Their hair was made, make-up and clothes were provided. And for a change, not everyone was wearing a yellow star above his or her heart.

In 1989, R. Gabriele S. Silten was chosen by a group of other survivors to give an interview, a video testimony, about the reality of the camp. "There were people that died, day and night, there were people hanged in the middle of town", she told the interviewer. "There was a lot of desease. The survival rate of Theresienstadt is absolutely identical to the survival rate of Bergen-Belsen. One third of the people that went there survived." Either they died in Theresienstadt or were deported to Sobibor or Auschwitz and other places. Most of the "actors" and "extras" of the movie had been put onto a transport to Auschwitz and were gassed, including the director and script writer, the Jewish actor and singer Kurt Gerron (Gerson), and Gabriele's friend Hans Cossen from Amsterdam. "Hans died on the 19th of October 1944", she found out decades later by putting a request at a museum in Israel. Kurt Gerron who had played in "Der Blaue Engel" with Marlene Dietrich, and had directed the show "Muziek! Muziek!" in the Hollandsche Schouwburg in Amsterdam in 1941 had hoped to save his life by cooperating. He was killed on the 30th of October 1944 at the age of 47 in Auschwitz. His film script survived. Kurt Gerron had entrusted the papers to Fritz Silten who seems to have given them to the writer and Holocaust survivor H. G. Adler ("Theresienstadt 1941-1945. Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft", published in 1955) as documents of the Wiener Library for the Study of the Holocaust and Genocide in London suggest to presume. The Library is named after Alfred Wiener (1885-1964) who had founded the Jewish Central Information Office (JCIO) in Amsterdam in 1933, aiming to collect material related to Nazism and its crimes. Six years later, he had taken the documents with him to London. The Wiener Library is the world's oldest archive on the Holocaust.

As of autumn 1944, everyone as of the age of ten had to work in Theresienstadt, and Gabriele became a messenger first and had another task, then. “They did cremate people who had died from starvation, illnesses, torture or other reasons.” Kids became a living chain, passing cardboard boxes with ashes from one to the next, from the crematorium to a van. For this work children were getting a small piece of sausage, R. Gabriele S. Silten remembers.

The concentration camp was divided between the nationalities. Like in exile, the Siltens lived together with Dutch Jews in the then called “Hamburg baracks”. Fritz Silten worked as a streetcleaner, first, then as a pharmacist, Ilse Silten first as a cleaning woman and then in the mica factory. The family eventually had a room to itself, together with a lady and her son. R. Gabriele S. Silten remembers illegal schools and meetings and that people were sent to the East from there, “East” being a euphenism for Auschwitz.

She did not know at that time that there was someone holding a protecting hand over them. In 2012, the journalists Susanne Krejsa and Johanna Lutteroth wrote about Heinrich Dräger’s initiative for the German news magazin „Der Spiegel“. The factory owner from Lübeck had been producing gasmasks for the Wehrmacht and was a member of the NSDAP. He had been cooperating with Ernst Silten for about 30 years. In November 1940, his friend had asked him to help his family ("Wenn Sie helfen könnten, würden Sie mich zu großem Dank verpflichten"), hoping that Dräger could make use of his good connections to the Nazi regime. He knew the town commissioner of Amsterdam, Hans Böhmcker, who had been Senator in Lübeck. Fritz Silten still hoped to get visa for Argentina and for Palestine, and Böhmcker was the person in charge. But he rejected, said he couldn’t do anything about it at the moment. Later, Ernst Silten heard of a lawyer and SS-man, Helmut Pfeiffer, the right hand man of Hans Frank in the Reichssicherheitshauptamt.

Dräger bought time from Pfeiffer, paid him well for a trick to postpone the deportation of Ernst Silten at first. It was said that the pharmacist and scientist was important for the purposes of war, that he was working on something in his former factory, a method for a faster healing of wounds. After the big razzia in February 1943 in Berlin, after Ernst Silten had taken his life, Heinrich Dräger tried to rescue his friend’s family in Amsterdam.

In a secret mission, Franz Missfeld of the Drägerwerke brought the research documents of Ernst Silten to Amsterdam, together with a note of the head of the clinic in Lübeck that he thought Fritz Silten capable to continue his father's studies. Dräger urged Pfeiffer to do what seemed impossible and paid him, between March 1944 and January 1945, some 75 000 Reichsmark, the equivalent of about 240 000 Euro. "I learned about Mr Dräger only three or four years ago", R. Gabriele S. Silten writes. "I knew we had had help, but did not know who it was or how he helped. I learned from Susanne Krejsa that it was Heinrich Dräger, a good friend and business partner of my Opa Ernst. I vaguely remember going with my father to visit him, but not anything else. He is dead by now, but I wrote to his son to thank him for his father's help."

As from May 1944, Fritz Silten had his own laboratory and another place to stay for his family. On the 9th of May 1945, the Soviet Army liberated the concentration camp and the Russian soldiers opened the doors, including the ones of the quarantine section where those were kept who had caught typhus. Fritz Silten had to assist bringing them back. The dying went on, anyway.

Ilse, Fritz and Gabriele Silten were among those who returned to the Netherlands in June 1945. "We went home in army planes and then in trains", she remembers. They stayed in the Philipps factory in Eindhoven for about a week. Then they were brought to the capital that was decorated all over, celebrating its liberation. They were awaited. Carla gave Brunette back to Gabriele. The Steiff squirrel was gone. "It didn't survive the war. Carla gave it to a soldier who liberated Holland, by mistake. I now have another Steiff squirrel which I bought here. It's not the same as the original, but it does the trick."

Gabriele's childhood was gone once and for all. "I never felt like a child again. The post war years were difficult, because for at least five years everything was still rationed. But though we had the rationing coupons, the things were not available. We had coupons for meat and eggs, but they were not available. Also for all sorts of other things. The Germans had taken all our cattle and fowl and so nothing was left for the Dutch." And who was she? The Nazis had taught her that she was no German any more, but was she really Dutch? Though the Nazi laws had said so, she had not been Jewish, either. This was something she changed in America. And while

from January 1939 on, Jewish women in the “Third Reich” had been forced to take the second name Sara, she decided to be Sarah. Like the wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac whose grandsons founded the twelve tribes of Israel. A mother of many nations and a child of more than one.

It felt great to come back to Amsterdam. “I could finally speak my own language again and was no longer afraid of soldiers.” But life was not back to normal. The winter of 1944/1945 had been a hunger winter, and as the German army had ruined the fields by letting in saltwater, the Dutch were still starving. “We lived with Carla's family for about a year after which we got our old apartment back. It had been inhabited by a Dutch Nazi woman who was reported to the police by Carla's family. When she finally was arrested, we got our pre-war apartment back. Meanwhile Carla's family somehow managed to stretch food supplies from four to seven. They are the unsung heroes.“

After the liberation, no one spoke about what the family had gone through. The grandparents were dead, all the siblings of the grandparents and their offspring had been murdered. “After the war, my parents were silent on the subject”, R. Gabriele S. Silten writes. “Life was difficult for them, I'm sure as we had come back with nothing but the clothes, such as they were, and nothing else. My father went back to work as a pharmacist, in someone else's factory and eventually built his business back up. Before the war, my mother never had worked outside the house and she did not after the war either. I went back to school, elementary school. My parents said that that was my job to get good grades and think of the future. But I had no idea what my future could be. In fact, I did not know what ‘future’ even meant. I had no hopes, no wishes and many fears. I lived from day to day. After all, I never knew what might happen. The Germans came once, they could come again or someone else might. I had trouble in school as well, because I missed 3rd and 4th grade and went directly into 5th grade after the war. So understanding certain things was difficult. And, to top it off, I had become nearsighted and could not see on the board. But I did not know that; I thought everybody saw that way. Eventually my parents found out and I received glasses and could see. I was also ill a lot after the war, probably because of the war. My mother had health problems as well. So, all together, life was difficult.”

It was believed, then, that the children had not been aware of the danger they had been in, that they had been sheltered from the worst. What had become of this or that family, this friend, that neighbour? They have not come back, people used to say. And as soon as the meaning of Auschwitz became evident, the chance for a reunion faded.

Two photos are attached to a mail from California. On the older one, taken in December 1939 in Amsterdam, a schoolgirl is sitting in front of a picture of the Zwarte Piet and Sinterklaas, grinning into the camera. And then there is a portrait taken after the liberation, at the station in Amsterdam, showing a very young grown-up, after two years in concentration camp. It's a contrast that speaks for itself. Was this child able to trust anyone anymore? „I only trusted myself, not even my parents completely because we were sent to the camps. I became very independent there and had become an adult already at age eight, from one day to the next, because of the war and soldiers all round."

To the day of today she hates uniforms, high boots and always looks for a second exit wherever she is. “I still look over my shoulder to see who is there and trust basically no-one. I always think: Would they hide me if the occasion arose? My fellow child survivors feel the same way, they tell me. Until I went into therapy in 1985, I still had the feeling that we (Jews) had been ‘bad’ and therefore the Germans had deported us. I had a sort of ’black spot’ inside of me and fears about being Jewish. That stayed with me until I started therapy. Quite a long time! Therapy helped me immensely.“ Safety, even today, means locked doors to her, a locked gate to the garden, people she knows and places she knows. “Up to a point my synagogue means safety, but not completely.” And freedom? “It means that I can go where I want, when I want. It means having had a wonderful job. It means having warm water when I want it, food in the refrigerator, washing with warm water, sleeping in a clean bed with sheets and a real mattress and no fleas or other insects. I suppose that safety is all that also.“

At the age of 25, Gabriele Silten left for the U.S. to visit friends of her parents and decided to stay there. It was a new beginning, in many ways, starting with the name. “My parents and grandparents called me Gaby, but the Americans do not know how to pronounce that properly so I went back to the full name. Only some old friends now call me Gaby and they

are mostly Europeans or immigrants." In Amsterdam, she had learned English, French and German in high school. Much later she would also occasionally teach Italian and Spanish as a professor for foreign languages. In the USA, she changed to the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) and started a life on another continent. "It felt liberating to be there, there were no ghosts. Nobody asked, then, about my past and I did not speak about it. That changed when Holocaust survivors began to 'come out' and started speaking and writing about their experiences. Before that, nobody wanted to know or hear about it. With my parents the subject of the war and everything connected with it was totally taboo. It was never spoken about. I do not know how my parents coped." She herself began having dreams and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), so at the age of 52, she decided to go to therapy with a psychologist who more or less was specialised in Child Survivors. "That helped enormously. There are still some ghosts but now I can deal with them."

Like Hilda Stern Cohen from Nieder-Ohmen who had survived Auschwitz, R. Gabriele S. Silten has written poems related to the Holocaust. Several poetry books have been published, one consisting the poem "Passover Story", her version of the Exodus: "When, at long last, our thraldom ended, each of us, alone, incognizant of others of our kind, wandered for forty years in a desert of hallucinations, seeing family and friends, dead long ago; hearing their comforting voices, stilled long ago..."

The first time she shared her story with a group was shortly after she had begun therapy. Her audience was a university class. "After that it was mostly high school classes or other groups, like church groups or clubs. It was very difficult the first time and remained so. After 25 years I found it emotionally too difficult and stopped with some exceptions, like the Hillel group in my local colleges. I have not been in touch with anyone in Germany though a friend of mine who was also in Theresienstadt, goes to Germany on a regular basis to speak to schools."

As others urged her to do it, R. Gabriele S. Silten has written down her story. She did so in English. "There is a home in language", she admits. "Mostly today in English. Dutch as well but as a second. German I can speak but don't like to do it. It reminds me too much of the past." She loves books about Yiddish, like Leo Rosten's "Joy of Yiddish". Like Hebrew it isn't one of the languages she has studied or learned by listening. „In Germany at my

time Yiddish was not spoken by the assimilated people and in Holland not at all. It was only years later that I noticed that my mother used a lot of Yiddish words in her every day speech.“ You can’t do two things at a time, not dance with one bottom on two weddings, her mother said. "Man kann nicht mit einem Tochus auf zwei Hochzeiten tanzen.” And for the garbage pail she used the expression “Treifeeimer”. Those words are like sounds from the past, souvenirs like the stiff, long legged, big, brunette Bear whose snout has been repaired by some stitches and dark wool. Gabriele and Carla stayed friends for life. But as Carla wasn’t much of a correspondent, they rarely wrote and have lost contact two years ago.

The word Wiedergutmachung R. Gabriele S. Silten has learned after the war. Her parents have applied for it from Amsterdam, London and Zurich where they lived then. And she went to Germany to meet her lawyer in the late 1990s. “It was horrible: I saw (in my mind) Nazi flags and soldiers and felt very ill at ease. I had to go that time for the Wiedergutmachung, but hated it and swore I would never go back. And, indeed, haven't.“ Not even when Stolpersteine for her grandparents and parents and herself had been put into the ground in front of their former homes, though she had initiated it. “I think that they are a good idea.“

In the USA she got into contact with other survivors, mostly child survivors. “I did meet child survivors in Amsterdam after the war, but since nobody spoke about it, I did not know that they were survivors”, she says. “There are ‘Europa cafes’ in many places but I have never been, mostly because the drive is too long.” She also wished for Stolpersteine in the Rivierenbuurt in Amsterdam, but was told that it would take a long time as there are so many applications for the international memorial project of the German artist Gunter Demnig. In Amsterdam there are metal ribbons at the rim of some of the Grachten now, the Hollandsche Schouwburg that had been turned into a pick up camp is a memorial now and the former Jewish crèche on the other side of the Plantage Middenlaan has become a museum. There is the Jewish museum, the Anne Frank Huis and other places to remember. At the facade of the former Jewish school in the Jekerstraat, a plate has been installed in February 2018 for the children and teenagers who have been deported by the German invaders and did not return. “Van de Duitse Bezetter weggevoerd”, it reads. “En keerden niet meer terug. Wij mogen hen nooit vergeten.” We will never forget them.

The first autobiographical prosa book, published after “High Tower Crumbling” (1991), one of R. Gabriele S. Silten’s books with poems, was titled “Between Two Worlds: Autobiography of a Child Survivor of the Holocaust” (1995), the second “Is the War Over? Postwar Years of a Child Survivor of the Holocaust“ (2004). On the website of the Museum of Tolerance there is an interview with the author. Tolerance is not the word she’d use, and she is always searching the exact, authentic expression, as an eye witness and as a writer, surely as a poet and as an interview partner. “People speak of ‘tolerance’. It means that you put up with people but not that you necessarily accept them or like them. You’re put next to them in school or elsewhere and put up with that.” She prefers the word accept. “To me it means that you make no difference between people. When I speak in schools and other groups, I tell them to accept people for what they are. It is of no importance how they look, what color skin they have or what eye shape. We are all the same underneath.“ It is her message, an advice that would lead to a world of peace, to a world without ghosts.

After-For-Word

At the end of a research there is another research. Who was Hans Cossen? This question has concerned me. Ruth Gabriele Sarah Silten had assumed that her best friend in Theresienstadt had been from Amsterdam. Actually, the boy was from Norden in East Frisia (Northern Germany) and had been in exile in the Netherlands like herself. It only needed one further look at

the website Joods Monument, a request at the Max-Windmüller-Society in Emden and one more e-mail to get me in contact with Dieter Thomsen, a relative of the boy who has been murdered in Auschwitz. Dieter Thomsen's mother Berta Katmann has been a daughter of Hermann Cossen who's buried in Norden. Whenever she visited her non-Jewish mother, Berta Katmann was aware that she had to be careful. According to the Nuremberg Laws, the local Nazis classified her as "half Jewish" or of "mixed race (first degree)". How much safer was it for her in Cologne, then, in a big city where almost nobody knew her!

In the hometown of family Cossen a "Stolperstein" has been placed for Hans who had fled to Amsterdam at the age of four with his family, was deported via Westerbork to Theresienstadt and killed on the 19th of October 1944 in Auschwitz, together with his mother and his older brother. Close to his stone, four others have been placed in front of the former family home in Norden: in rememberance of his parents Eduard Cossen (1899-1945) and Susanne Cossen (1903-1944), nee de Löwe, of his brother Werner Cossen (1932-1944) and of his grandmother Selma de Löwe (1875-1943), nee Löwenbach, who has been murdered in Sobibor.

„When doing research, I have found, with the help of a very good friend in Ashdod, Israel, the offspring of Bernhard Cossen in Buenos Aires", writes Dieter Thomsen who is like his wife Ester a volunteer in the Ökumenische Arbeitskreis Synagogenweg Norden, a historical society. „Bernhard has been a brother of Hermann." And then, everything happens quickly. Claudia de Levie nee Wolff, the friend who's been born in Argentina and has ancestors in Norden, knows Susana Feldmann, a granddaughter of Bernhard Cossen, and was able to get her cousin Jack de Lowe, a cousin of Hans who had emigrated to Israel via the U.S., in contact with Gabriele Silten. Mails are going to and fro, between four continents, in several languages. Long distance calls are made. What has Hans been like? What had they talked about? The timewitness will know some of the answers to questions the family has. Susanne Cossen, nee de Löwe, had surprised Gabriele with a special gift to her eleventh birthday, a gift she has never forgotten: a piece of bread with a bit of so-called "margarine" and a little sugar. It had been the best present ever.

And there's more than correspondence. Jack's brother Peter lives in California, just one hour by car from Gabriele Silten's home. He is about

to visit her. Another relative, Clifford Lester, is interested, as well. His mother Ursula Löwenbach from Hannover went into hiding as a teenager in the Netherlands, his father Harry Lester was able to flee from Berlin to the U.S. in 1939. “In order to honor the memory of those who perished and those who were fortunate enough to survive, so that they will never be forgotten”, Clifford Lester has set about “to capture the beautiful souls of Survivors” he has encountered. He has published portraits that are both full of empathy and impressing. On his website, the professor of photography calls his work „A Celebration of Life“. And meeting Dieter and Ester Thomsen in person in September 2019 in Emden, we have realised once more how much hapiness research can content. To be continued – in real life.