

The obligation not to keep silent

Interview with Ellen Marx

On March 24, 1921, Ellen P. de Marx was born in Berlin; on September 11, 2008 she died in “Hogar Alfredo Hirsch”, a Jewish residential care home in the province of Buenos Aires. During the last decades of her life, Ellen Marx was one of the most important representatives of the Argentinean human rights movement. Ms. Marx came to Argentina in 1939 with a group of Jewish adolescents. Her mother and nine other members of her family had been killed by the National Socialists. In August 1976, during the last military dictatorship in Argentina, her youngest daughter Nora had been kidnapped. To this day her whereabouts remain unknown. Testimony suggests that she did not survive her first days in custody under grave torture. Ever since, Ellen Marx struggled to uncover the truth and seek punishment for the crimes of the dictatorships in Argentina and Germany. Until recently she headed a group consisting of mothers of German origin of disappeared persons and other victims of the dictatorship. In 1998, this group, together with the Argentinean Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Adolfo Pérez Exquível, provided the impetus for the establishment of the German human rights network “Coalition against Impunity”. Since then, the coalition and its lawyers have initiated criminal investigations by German prosecuting authorities in the name of 39 victims of the dictatorship – amongst them Nora Marx – against a total of 90 members of the Argentinean military as well as high-ranking staff of Mercedes-Benz. At least 14 independent unionists disappeared in the company’s Argentinean factory.

In recent years, Wolfgang Kaleck (1999) and Gert Eisenbürger have each interviewed Ellen Marx. Mr. Kaleck spoke with her about her adolescence in Berlin and her emigration to Buenos Aires, while Mr. Eisenbürger discussed her commitment in Argentina. From their interviews, they have composed the following text which provides insight into a great humanist and an exceptional woman.

Ms. Marx, what are your memories of your time in Berlin before you emigrated to Argentina?

I was born on March 24, 1921 in the Oranienburger Straße in Berlin-Mitte. My father, who dealt in leather goods, had an office there with a cellar. First I attended the 24th elementary school which was situated behind the Garnisons-church, then the high school in the Ziegelstraße. After we had moved to Charlottenburg I attended the Fürstin-Bismarck-School. One of my most traumatic memories is related to the “Reichskristallnacht”. On the night between November 9-10, 1938, I awoke because of loud noise. I heard cars driving up and down the street and the sound of glass breaking. I got up and looked through the window. Across the street, windows of a grocery store owned by Jewish widow Köppen had been smashed. The cars then departed. From the distance, I heard fire department sirens on Kurfürstendamm. The next day we heard on the radio that all synagogues not adjoining German civil buildings had been burned down. Nevertheless, I went to school the next morning. There, the deputy headmaster handed out a letter to me in which the mayor of Berlin asked my father to take his daughter from the school. One of my teachers took me aside and whispered that he wished me all the best. Other teachers and classmates looked away. After the Kristallnacht, all Jewish students were thrown out of the school day after day. I received my final marks and that was it. I had not even made my final secondary school examinations (Abitur), and although I later tried to catch-up in Argentina, I never succeeded.

From 1933 onwards I was already aware of a growing stifling atmosphere. The teachers all identified themselves more or less with the National Socialism. Many of the girls at school were members of “Bund Deutscher Mädel” [“League of German Girls”, the female branch of the Nazi party youth movement]. Since many Jewish families had been living in Charlottenburg, there were many Jewish girls at this school in the beginning. The first ones that left the school came from families that had fled Bolshevism in the Soviet Union or anti-Semitism in Poland and Hungary. Apparently these families had preserved their instinct for danger. In contrast, the long-established Jewish educated bourgeoisie felt itself as part of the German culture and people, and chose to ignore the danger.

I had also felt like I belonged to the German culture. By the way, I still do. I still remember verses of Schiller and Goethe in critical moments. I experienced German culture by the Berliner Kulturbund,

which was established after 1933 for the Jewish cultural life. I was also very much interested in history. Already my grandfather and my mother had been members of the Social Democrats. My father and my maternal grandmother had been democrats. I read a lot of authors from the Weimar Republic.

What was your relationship to Judaism at that time?

While I was going to school, I was a member of the “Jüdischer Bund”. My father made sure that I was part of the youth movement of the “Central-Verein,” as I was his only daughter. There we discussed Jewish culture, Jewish history and the development of the youth movement. We acquired good Jewish education. Apart from our group there was the “Haschomer Hazair”, the so-called “Werkleute”. They were oriented towards emigration to Palestine, and they were running farms first in Germany and later on in Denmark. I had become very familiar with these groups. From April 1939, all attention was focused on saving our lives and using every opportunity to leave the country.

Why did you and your family decide that you would be the only member of the family to emigrate?

On December 10, 1938 the Gestapo came to our apartment to arrest my father. He had, however, just left for the little synagogue in the Johann-Georg-Straße in order to save ritual objects, among others the Torah scroll. They wanted to bring my father to the concentration camp in Oranienburg. Since he was not present, the Gestapo left. From the window, my mother saw my father coming around the corner. He passed by the Gestapo guys without anyone taking notice. My mother then relocated him to my grandfather’s house. He stayed there until the danger was over. In November and December 1938 many Jewish men were arrested and brought to concentration camps. Most of them could leave after four to six weeks because they had assured the authorities that they wanted to emigrate. Some of them endured forced labor. The winter of 1938/39 was extremely cold. They had to push railway cars that were so cold that some of them lost their fingers to the frost. You could see many men with fingers frozen-off on the streets at that time. In view of these events, everything was clear to us. My mother started making plans for my emigration. She herself did not want to leave Berlin because she was taking care of her 85-year-old father who had only recently become a widower. She did not want to leave him alone. Another reason for my parents and many others choosing not to emigrate was that they no longer could dispose of their savings. Especially my father, who felt too old to start from the beginning again somewhere else. That is why my parents, like many other older families, stayed in Germany. When I boarded the train to Paris, I was conscious that this was a final farewell, although I was of course hoping that I would one day see them again.

How were the preparations for your departure?

The “Jüdische Bund” prepared its members for a joint emigration after the “Kristallnacht”. I had taken lessons in Spanish at the Fürstin-Bismarck-Schule for two years. I had always been very interested in foreign languages and knew Latin, English and French. Apart from that, we had very little time to prepare our emigration, since we were no longer allowed to meet as an overall organization. All Jewish associations were closed. We used to go in pairs to the houses and wait until the others had disappeared around the corner before leaving ourselves.

How was the emigration itself?

Three groups departed from Berlin consecutively, and I was in the third group. On April 13, 1939 we departed from station Janowitzbrücke station. My mother and my grandfather accompanied me to the suburban train station in Bellevue and said goodbye to me on the platform. My father was not able to bear the farewell, so he stayed at home. This was the last time that I saw my family. We then came to Aachen, where we were harassed again but for the last time. They strip-searched us and wanted to see whether we had taken more than 10 Marks with us, the maximum amount permitted. Because of that procedure we missed the train, and our group of 32 or 33 people had to take a local train at around midnight, arriving in Paris early in the morning. There we received visas and tickets for Argentina that the aid organization HIAS had arranged for us. We had to commit ourselves to work hard and to

refund the costs later on. The young people were all between 17 and 25 years old. We stayed in Paris for five days. Our group leader reminded us that we about to say farewell to European culture, so we made visits to Versailles, the Louvre and to the Rodin museum. We all came from various different cities, but we still got to know each other.

From Le Havre, we took a French cargo steamboat to South America. We reached Buenos Aires on May 25th, Argentina's National Day. There we first had to stay on the boat because we only had visas for Bolivia. We had already heard about boats that had been sent back. The next train to Bolivia was not scheduled until five days later. But the Jewish aid organization finally provided visas for Argentina, which were initially valid for only six months. We were completely and officially legalized later on.

Upon our arrival in Argentina we only had ten Pesos in our pockets. If the aid organization had not rented some rooms in a guesthouse for immigrants in Belgrano, we would not have known where to sleep. We were dependent on finding a job as soon as possible. We girls took every job available, as home help or as nannies. It was clear to us that we did not have the possibility to choose. Most of the boys started working as Peón – unskilled workers. At my first job, where I stayed for five months, I was asked to teach their child English. This child was only a little over two years old! The parents believed that the most important thing their child had to learn was English. Both parents and the grandparents had been born in Argentina, but since the father was in charge of an English company, it was necessary for his child to learn English.

We earned just enough to survive. Once I lost a button off my dress. Since I could not get an identical button, I had to buy six new buttons, and that was a real financial problem. Moreover, our health insurance was inadequate, which became a problem for me when I came down with polio. I now often hear that people who emigrate to other countries often come down with polio. This seems to be a disease with deeper roots, not just an infection that you accidentally catch.

It was often very difficult for us to get used to the Argentinean way of life. For me it was shocking to see how servile employees who were in my situation behaved towards their masters. They did not even dare to think on their own. This made me realize that even then, colonization had never really ended and that there existed many people who never experienced the feeling of being a free human being. In Germany, no one had even the faintest idea about how big the gap was between the poor and the rich in Argentina.

In the course of time we succeeded, step-by-step, to leave these first jobs behind us. I was lucky to find a job in a day nursery, which had just been founded for children of Jewish emigrants. Through this work I learned a lot about the problems of emigration. Not only did we look after the children during the day, but we also took care of their health and possible psychological problems, though this began later. There was not a lot of knowledge about psychology in Argentina in the beginning of the 1940s, but some immigrants brought this knowledge with them. We also took care of the parents who came to us with their problems. We came to learn of all their stories and hardships.

Did you have any information about the destiny of your family in Europe during the years of war and did you and other emigrants know of the extent to which the persecution of Jews in Europe had reached?

I had written to my parents. However, after the war began only open postcards were allowed. Sometimes you received air post on very light paper. The cards wore stamps with the swastika. They were very bland and scripted postcards, in which you talked about the weather or about the visit that an aunt had paid. One day, towards the end of 1942 or the beginning of 1943 there was a remark on the edge of the postcard: "Ms. Pincus is now just by herself". That meant the news of the death of my father. I only learned of the exact date of his death in 1983, and that his grave was in East Berlin. Through my visit to the memorial of Yad Vashem in Israel, I learned that my grandfather was brought to the Theresienstadt concentration camp. My father had a school friend who had left for Sweden and he had the information about that.

At the memorial I found out all about my family. In total, ten people were hauled-off. The transports had different numbers. My mother was on the 31 Transport to Auschwitz. There she had to do forced labor. Prior to that when she was still in Berlin, she also had to do a year of forced labor. One year later she was gassed. I found that out through a remark on a postcard to me, and later through my research at Yad Vashem.

In Argentina I received periodic hints about what was happening in Germany. One aunt had escaped to Brazil. Once she wrote a letter to me in which she explained a few things to me. During the war, we learned more and more about what was happening in Germany. It caused daily fear and depression. After the disappearance of my daughter, all of that came to life again: the feelings of despair, insecurity, the flaring hope and then the disappointment.

In the evenings, after the daily work, the moment where you laid down and wanted to relax, everything fell down on you.

I wasn't into politics back then, but I met a lot of emigrants at concerts, and we all had a really strong instinct to live. I only realized that later on. Just a few of us got depressed. Most of those that had come from Germany with me got married after two years and had given birth to at least two children. I married in 1942 and bore four children, the last one, Rubén, was born on November 18, 1964.

After the birth of your children did you continue to work?

Between the births of my children, I worked 14 years in total with the day nursery of the Jewish relief organization. For the last seven years I was in charge of the nursery. Afterwards I taught at the Pestalozzi-school [an antifascist school founded in Argentina in 1934 after the "Gleichschaltung"/alignment of the German schools. It was mainly attended by the children of Jews and leftists who had escaped for Germany and Austria], when my boy was two years old. In the first grade I gave German courses for children from non-German speaking families. From 1970 to 1990 I worked as a secretary in the Jewish community and was very familiar with those with Jewish and German connections.

When the war was over, there was the possibility for emigrants to leave Argentina again. Obviously few wanted to go back to Germany, but many of the Jewish emigrants that had escaped to South America went later to Israel or the USA. Did you consider a second emigration?

Naturally, Israel had always been quite attractive. The great emigration wave from here to Israel took place at the end of the fifties until the mid-sixties. That was a politically terrible time in Argentina, the anti-Semitism of nationalist groups was then enormous. One very aggressive group was named Tacuara. Their leader, Padre Filipo, a catholic priest, was living right in our district. Right in front of our Synagogue he opened a bar. There were a lot of street fights, demonstrations, anti-Semitic graffiti and smashed windows in Belgrano, our district, where many German and Jewish migrants were living, and even at our day nursery. My children were also very conscious of it. These movements made them realize that there was no safe place to live as a Jew. All of our children were therefore organized in Jewish groups that formed a counter movement. There they were politicized and our eldest daughter and eldest son later migrated to Israel. I was thinking of emigrating myself the moment my eldest daughter Miriam moved to Israel. But then my husband said exactly what my father had said in 1938. He could not face starting from scratch again. We lived modestly in Argentina, but we were OK.

The emigration of my daughter was the final push for me to go to the German embassy and get a German passport again, to reacquire German citizenship.

Why?

When my first daughter left, I wanted a German passport and citizenship again. By the way, later on I came to know that many emigrated Jews had done the same at the beginning of the sixties.

We needed time before we had confidence in a new Germany. Of course, we followed very closely how the federal republic was developing. To many others and myself, the fact that Germany and Israel started to have diplomatic relations helped a lot. When David Ben Gurion, the prime minister back then, was asked why Israel started to have relations with a German country, he explained that Israel could never have accepted reparation payments from a country if it had not made Shalom (peace) with it. It made ethical sense to me, so I also made peace with the German country.

I believe many others felt the same way. It was also clear to me that the German culture was something I couldn't get rid of, despite my sympathy for the Argentinean way of life and culture. If you were able to admit to yourself and prove that you liked German culture, re-attaining German citizenship was relatively easy. Moreover, if you still had your old emigration passport, the German administration moved along quickly and a new, federal German passport was soon issued to you..

Was the naturalization valid only for you or for your children as well?

I didn't want to do it for my children. The oldest was already in Israel and our eldest son was preparing to go. He died there in a car accident in 1981. My youngest son does have a German passport, but when he applied for it, things were already more complicated because the naturalization period had expired. My husband didn't take German citizenship again. But the two of us followed developments in Germany intently. We read the Frankfurter Schule and felt very strongly about the movement of '68.

Did your younger daughter Nora want to go to Israel as well?

My youngest daughter would under no circumstances want to be anything else than an Argentinean. For that reason she disappeared under the Junta. At day nursery, children had already learned to appreciate life and to sympathize over the problems of other human beings. This was especially prominent at that nursery, where many of the children came from lower social classes. Most of all, Nora developed a strong feeling for social issues. She transformed what she experienced there into ironic wordplays. Her uncle called her the queen of clouds. Her interest lay in the exact sciences. She studied very thoroughly. While studying, she partly moved out, partly came home again and lived here with her boyfriend for a while.

What role did Jewish belief play in your life?

I would be reserved to say I am religious. Imagine the inner situation of teenagers between 13 and 17 years of age: suddenly, we as Jews were grabbed into an atrocious, incomprehensible destiny. How could we live on without finding some sense in this catastrophe and not feeling like helpless victims of a superior power? And where should you look for sense and reasoning if not in the 4000-year long Jewish history, which is so rich in precedence cases and to which the bible and Religion belong as well. That was the common problem of our youth group. At those studies, under the guidance of students, everyone needed to draw their own conclusions, which could naturally change over the years. The only binding thing was the monotheistic belief in a single God as the creator, as the embodiment of love, truth, righteousness and justice. The highest good is life, one's own and those of the closest to you. For me Judaism is an ethical-humanitarian duty not to lose belief in the absolute values and to respect every human being and his views. Everything else is just daily rules that make harmonious living together possible. Of course, the rules have to be adapted to new times and different situations. For that, you can express your own opinions, but the moral basis is categorical.

How has the last Military dictatorship changed your life?

On August 21, 1976 Nora disappeared. With all that I had been through with the disappearance of my daughter, the period under the last dictatorship changed my life the most. I would never have thought I would give an interview to a newspaper, or to speak in front of an audience bigger than my school class of 20 or 30 children. I would never have dreamt of it. Soon after the disappearance of my

daughter, I joined a group of relatives of the desaparecidos with German origin, where I still work today. We still stick together, especially those who have been there from the beginning. Obviously some of them are no longer alive. Now I see it as one of my duties to get the two younger generations to work. There are only five or six left. But now the siblings and children of the disappeared have continued the work. Some are there already, along with two survivors of the secret detention camps who weren't murdered.

Did your commitment in the human rights movement help you cope with the pain that was caused by the disappearance of your daughter?

I believe "help" is not quite the right word for it. But in every part of your life you should raise the question: what can, may or have I got to do? What are my duties now? To me, since the disappearance of my daughter, the answer to those questions was simply the work in our group. And if after all those years and experiences, painful experiences, something stays that makes sense, then for me it is the duty, not to remain silent but to insist on truth and justice. I know that I can't bring her back to life. But then I say to myself, I can and I must put things right, to help the lives of others! And this is only possible by upholding the memories of those that are not alive anymore and the experiences they went through.

The published interview is a combination of two conversations that Wolfgang Kaleck and Gert Eisenbürger had with Ellen Marx.

Wolfgang Kaleck pleaded the case of disappeared Nora Marx in German courts.

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