

Marion Rosen

Who is this woman? Where does she come from?

Remembering Germany

A conversation with Marion Rosen

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Paula: So Marion here we are on a Sunday morning on the deck of your house in Berkeley and at last taking some time to speak together and I have been wanting for a long time now to talk with you about your experiences growing up in Germany, leaving your homeland and coming here.

(Marion's face and upper body tighten up)

So as I was thinking about it, I realized that I wanted to begin actually by asking you to tell the story about a vision that happened to you shortly before you left Germany.

Would you tell that to me now?

Marion: *(a little hesitant)* Yes. Usually I am a bit hesitant to talk about it. But it was probably to me a more important experience than I knew for a long time. It was the night before what they call the Crystal Night when the Nazis came and destroyed the homes of Jewish families. And it was before that happened so when we did not know about it yet. And I don't know if it was a dream or a vision. It felt more like a vision than a dream.

And it as a woman, who's face appeared on the sky and it was the whole sky just that woman's face.

She wasn't particularly pretty or particularly important looking. She was just a person.

And she said to me: "Don't worry, I will look after you. Nothing will happen to you."

And that was all. And I couldn't really figure out what this was about.

It was just – what sometimes, you know, sometimes you have an experience like that. So I didn't think about it anymore. Until the next morning when I had heard what had happened the night before.

That a lot of Jewish men had been taken to (a) concentration camp(s), that many of the homes had been destroyed and I was kept wondering what had happened to my family. I was not home at that time. I was in Hamburg doing some studying in Mensen Dick gymnastics.

Paula: In what kind of gymnastics?

Marion: Mensen Dick it was called.

I don't feel like going into that anymore. I was just there trying to learn something different.

Paula: Aha.

Marion: And so nobody knew where I was. So I was with my sister there in a place where I was very safe. But this is what happened.

Paula: And how about your family?

Marion: My father happened to be on a train during that evening so nothing happened to him. My mother and older sister were at home and one of the SS men who was coming up to destroy some of our furniture – he sent his little boy in the middle of the night to warn them, which was touching because the boy, I think, was nine years old, had to walk in the dark to come up to us to tell us that something was happening to my parents home. And so when they came they had already been forewarned and it was not such a shock but that people did some damage. They broke especially – broke glass and plates that were very beautiful.

But they did not hurt the piano. They put it very carefully on its side so it looked as if something had happened with it. But they destroyed actually as little as possible.

Paula: What is your understanding of the kindness in the middle of that kind of nightmare?

Marion: There were many kind people who had to comply for their own safety and were not strong enough to rebel. If they had rebelled that probably would have meant concentration camp for them or whatever and for their families. But they certainly did not feel good about what they had to do.

Paula: For example the SS man who sent his child? Was he a friend of the family?

Marion: Yes, he was a friend of the family or had been for a long time.

Paula: So take me into the experience a little bit more of before this vision in before this night. What was the impact on you? What was it like for you growing up in Germany with this growing intensity of Nazism?

Marion: I guess I was not aware of the significance of the Nazism until I was about sixteen years old when I was very much in love with a boy who was a bit older and who also was in love with me. And he was a medical student and he came one morning to walk me to school like he did when he was home and the next day his mother told my mother that he couldn't see me anymore. And I was totally crushed. So much so, that I considered doing away with myself.

Paula: Wow!

Marion: Ah, the next day then I got a letter that she had gotten from him in saying that he couldn't see me anymore and that he was sorry about it but that he couldn't see me anymore – without explanation.

Paula: How did she know?

Marion: His mother had called my mother and told her that they had forbidden him to see me because I was Jewish and he wasn't. And I don't know if they told her or heard later that they said if he was going on to see me they would not support him anymore. That he would not be able to go to Medical School and they just would not want to anything to do with him anymore. And he chose that instead of me. And that was an incredible shock for me that this could happen.

Paula: Yes, so with no forewarning.

Marion: No forewarning – from one day to another. There was this most important thing in my life was destroyed. And there I really got a taste of what it was. Maybe of what was to come. Not really intellectually but emotionally. I had been very well liked and had been the Belle of the Ball mostly and all of a sudden I was not only good enough. I was danger. I was something not to associate with. Like a cast-out.

Paula: What do you mean danger, if you were danger?

Marion: Well, I was – the danger was to the people who were with me because then they could not, were not allowed to study. They were not – as later turned out – that there was even more implication about that. A law came out that Jews and Gentiles could not have affairs. That the man would go to prison if that will happen.

Paula: Did that come afterwards?

Marion: Afterwards. Quite a few years after and everybody was – that feeling – that feeling I already had when I was sixteen.

Paula: And before this happened when you were sixteen. I am trying to get a sense that it all happened suddenly? (*Paula flips her fingers*)
It happened suddenly with your boyfriend but was there already apparent changes going on in the culture?

Marion: There were changes coming on. But I guess I did not pick them up that way. I was not that much aware of them so I should have been.

Paula: And your family? Was your family particularly aware of them?

Marion: They may have been aware of it but my father was very – I don't find the word now what to say – he believed in Germany and he could not believe that anything like Nazism could happen to a country like Germany that was so cultured, was so far ahead in so many ways of the other countries. That something would happen as it happened he just absolutely denied it could happen. And this is why we stayed in Germany so long.

Paula: So the changes were coming but they did not affect your family that much and your father's belief...

Marion: ...belief, yes, it did not. It not changed his belief in Germany at that time.

Paula: How about you, your own belief in Germany? Your own experience, do you remember?

Marion: Up till then it was very high. I was very much involved with the admiration for what Germany stood for and very proud to be a German, much more than being a Jew.

Paula: Ah, so your – that's big! So your sense of yourself was as a German.

Marion: Yes, as a German.

Paula: Were you raised as a practicing Jew?

Marion: No, that was the trouble too. I was – by race I was a Jew but I was raised in a Protestant faith.

Paula: Oh, I did not realize that.

Marion: Yes.

Paula: So your religion was Protestant.

Marion: My religion was Protestant and I went to the church instead of the temple. And also most of my friends were not Jewish. So I did have some Jewish friends but the majority of the friends were not Jewish.

Paula: That gives a particular context.

Marion: Yes.

Paula: To have them all just stripped away.

Marion: That's right.

Paula: Starting with your boyfriend at sixteen.

Marion: And that was hard because all of a sudden I did not belong to this – his group, this life anymore and did not belong to the other one either. I was a person without a country, without a home, without an affiliation, except for the family. And I think, what made going away so hard because I really went away on my own.

Paula: You left family, you left homeland.

Marion: Yes.

Paula: How long after? First of all how long was there between your boyfriend not say, he could not – he chose not to see you anymore at sixteen and Crystal Night?

Marion: There was, I think four years, five years in between them.

Paula: And that period was very much then the whole phase of not being the bell of the ball, not being the center of things – having your friends not standing with you.

Marion: There as one thing that happened that made everything very different and it was this woman Mrs. Heyer, who trained me in this relaxation work. And who was willing to train me so she really was not supposed to treat, to train a Jewish person. And that was a very happy two years that I spent training with her in Munich. And really got myself a new identity, gave myself a new identity of being, being myself again, more than before, being stronger. Also, doing something that I felt was extremely exciting and worthwhile for me and having people making all kinds of sacrifices in order to give me what I needed.

Paula: What do you mean by sacrifices?

Marion: By taking chances on being found out that they were teaching me.

Paula: What made that possible? What gave her that courage?

Marion: She was that kind of person – she had it. You know, she was just an incredible person and I think that would make the work so meaningful to me, that a person like that would do this kind of work, fearless and determined.

Paula: Fearless and what?

Marion: Fearless of recriminations – determined.

Paula: Yes!

Marion: Determined to teach me, finding me very worthwhile to teach and being at the same time a very soft and feminine person. I think, she was a wonderful, a wonderful idol to follow and I think of her a lot – always! With lots of gratitude! It was not only she. It was the whole circle she was in of many of the people there who were feeling like she did. Her sister, Edith Grothe, and some of the other pupils that she was teaching, some of her clients that she allowed me to work on.

Paula: So they all new that you were a Jew and that she and they all were taking a great risk.

Marion: Yes. One of them was a – one of the princesses or – not princesses, it was a Duke or Duchess of Bavaria. And I would go to their – I don't know if it was a palace but it was a very special place they lived in to give her treatments.

Paula: Yah.

Marion: And I came there on my bicycle and she would be most gracious meeting me at the door and letting me in and greeting me with great respect, so I was only about twenty-two or twenty-three at the time.

Paula: What a vivid, ah, picture of contrast.

Marion: Yes.

Paula: With all that was stripped away; with all that you lost and that you were taken in by this circle and that you could bicycle up to the palace...

Marion: Yes! (*Marion says it with a soft, sweet smile and looks like an excited child.*)

Paula: ...and been taken in, ah, and she would put herself in this, that kind of relationship with you by having worked on her.

Marion: Yes. Acknowledging, you know, to receive something from somebody like me.

Paula: Yes! Yes.

Marion: And of course important also at that time was that I fell in love again the first time after this break-up with the boyfriend. It was about six years later. All these years between sixteen and twenty-one – there was nobody that I got close to, except this man later on and he was, he was – I think thirty and I was twenty-two or twenty-three when I met him.

Paula: Was he part of the circle?

Marion: He was part of the circle, yah, he was also there. And he was also like the previous boyfriend, a medical student, who told me quite a bit about basic things I needed to know, about anatomy, physiology in a very inspired way.

He let me look at the body already at that time with a kind of awe. I think that came from this time that I was so excited about working with the body.

Paula: Say some more about your awe, the awe.

Marion: The way a body works, the connections in the body between – between emotions at that time and the physiology and between the physiology and anatomy. Ah, about the nervous supply to a body in the muscle action.

There was a lot of that got started at that time, a lot of that made me start thinking on my own, I guess. Not just take things out of the book but learning the things the way he presented them.

Paula: Mmm (*sensible listening*). How was it possible? How was it possible for you to, ah, to get so excited and go so deeply into life at this time when all around you was craziness?

Marion: Search me! (*laughter*)

Paula and Marion both are laughing!

Marion: It was just I think the kindness and the power of some of these people that restored my faith into the German people.

Paula: Hmm!

Marion: And maybe into human beings.

Paula: Hmm.

Marion: And it was important. But there were also other friends at that time who made me really believe in the – still – in the German soul so to say. That there were Germans who came up to my beliefs in Germany, like my friend Baerbel who I had met when I was nineteen and who now is sixty years later is still my friend. We still see each other, we still enjoy each others company whenever we can get together and it stayed over the years and she at that time would protect me as much as she could in her own way.

Paula: Mmm. Like how did she protect you?

Marion: Well, take me places that I wouldn't get to otherwise. In the mountains or dancing or whatever I liked to do she would do with me and was always there not allowing anybody to say anything about Jews or about me.

Paula: Mmm. Were you free to move around at that time?

Marion: Yes, I was. I was, except that there were signs all over: "We don't want Jews here."

Paula: Was this also the time when stars had been, ah, required? That Jews wear stars?

Marion: No.

Paula: So it is before that.

Marion: Before that and of course I did not look particularly Jewish. I was much taller than most, most people at that time and I guess my – people did not necessarily know that I was Jewish, looking at me.

Paula: So you moved freely and Baerbel really made that...

Marion: ...made it possible, yes. And there was also another young boy who I was definitely not in love with but who was an incredibly decent human being, who would take me wherever I wanted to go and would see it that I was safe. He was a bit younger than I was but he was so upset about these things happening in Germany. I think that was part of it and his way of opposing them was to protect me.

Paula: I think I am getting more of a glimpse into your belief in commitment into possibilities and magnificence in people.

Marion: Yes. I definitely got that at that time. There were magnificent people. Not the one's I had expected it from but these people I did not expect it from, that were fantastic.

Paula: So now at time that you are studying, are you living separate from your family?

Marion: Yes, I was in a different town. I was in Munich. First with an aunt of mine and then later I had a room with another person who was renting out rooms, who also was magnificent and who told me that I would never have to worry if I wanted to see my boyfriend at my room. That she would absolutely watch out and that I have the security of that.

Paula: Hmm...

Marion: And she had no reason to do that or be that way, except also as a protest of what was happening.

Paula: Aha.

Marion: Also courageous.

Paula: People taking stands...

Marion: In their way! (*Marion looks and speaks with emphasis*)

Paula: In these very ordinary ways which made a tremendous difference.

Marion: Tremendous difference in my life because it gave me freedom to learn, gave me freedom to go around.

Paula: Well, tell me what was it that, ah, made you decide to leave? How did leaving Germany came about for you?

Marion: Well, in the end I was not allowed really to do anything anymore. We were not allowed to go to restaurants, to theatres, to university. We were not allowed to work. I could never have made a living on my own anywhere in Germany and then really conditions got worse and worse, more and more frightening. People going to concentration camps and then by that time they would take the property away from Jews. My father, my father's business was taken away and our house was going to be taken away, so there was no place to stay.

Paula: Was your house taken?

Marion: In the end it was, yes. In the end it was, everything was taken.

Paula: So finally it was getting so bad that you no longer could move about even with the protection and support of your friends.

Marion: Yes, that's right. And I could not have a life there. Most of the young Jewish people in my age had immigrated and of course the Germans could not, could not marry me – could not be with me. So there was nothing I could do. I could not work, I could not get married. I could not have a relationship. So there was nothing left and then I was very glad to leave. To not be under that pressure anymore.

(Marion takes a few deep, forceful breaths)

Paula: How did your decision get made to leave? Was it a long time coming? Did it happen quickly?

Marion: It happened really after that "Crystal Night", that a friend of my father's from Sweden came and said: "I would like to take the girls, take them in. Send them in as soon as possible."

And that was in November '38 and in February '39 we left. My sister and I left to come to go to Sweden.

Paula: Together?

Marion: Together, yes – that was good.

Paula: Oh, that's wonderful that you could go together.

Marion: That meant a lot that we went there together. My older brother had already left and was living in England and my older sister was married at the time and she didn't live with us. She lived with her husband's mother and she left pretty soon afterwards too for Switzerland.

Paula: For Switzerland.

Marion: Yeah. Her husband was an actor and he had to be somewhere where German was spoken.

Paula: So they left together?

Marion: No, he left first to get a job and she followed him.

Paula: And your parents?

Marion: And the parents left finally about a week before the war started, to go to England. They came by in Sweden where we were to see us and then went to England. That was by that time about two days before the war started that they got into England.

Paula: So all of your family got out.

Marion: They all got out, yes. Alive.

Paula: Alive.

Marion: With no money but with – (*shaking her head with a smile*) – with optimism in a way. That is the wonderful thing that, that I think I got from my parents.

Paula: So your parents, even losing everything and family...

Marion: (*with a big positive smile, almost triumphantly*)...they didn't lose everything. They lost their money, they lost their possessions. They still had us alive and been alright. They had each other and my father got a job immediately again in England because he had worked with them in business and he was again having a job as a businessman. And then they found a little house they rented and my mother took in paying guests. She had been quite a spoiled lady and without minding, you know, she would cook and clean and whatever for them to have them there.

Paula: So their lives really radically changed.

Marion: It radically changed but also in a way that they didn't mind that. What they minded was that we were not with them anymore. That was difficult. But otherwise I never – I have never heard from my father complain and if I am fair, I did not hear my mother complain either.

Paula: So how was it for you in Sweden? What was it like? You had already been living separate from your family. So that wasn't the new part.

Marion: But I was there waiting to get a visa to America. And this is where I wanted to go. I wanted to go to a place where I was free. Where I could work at whatever I wanted to and where I could, ah, where working was appreciated. In the other countries in Europe it was still when you were a worker, you were a second class person.

Paula: Ah!?

Marion: And I just love to work, to do something.

Paula: And this wanting to work is connected to your zest, your awe that you found for the body and the relaxation work?

Marion: No, this was connected to my temperament.

Paula: AHA!

Marion: I just love to do something. I could not sit and not do anything and so I didn't mind what I would do as long as I was allowed to do something.

Paula: So this was you already?!

Marion: Yes, this was me! That was there! And also in Germany to be not allowed to do something that really made it come out more that for – I just wanted to go somewhere where I could do something. (*Insightful self-reflection*)

Paula: And so in Sweden this wasn't as possible either.

Marion: No. You had to have a permission to do any kind of work which I did not have. But I did work anyway. Ah, black market work. I would treat people at that time but I also took this course in physical therapy at one of the hospitals there. I got a special permission to join them and that was very, very interesting to me. And I not only learned, again about physical therapy, but I also learned Swedish without knowing it. All of a sudden I could speak Swedish. I know it because I would write my notes in German and at one time I would start writing them in Swedish.

Paula: haha. (*soft laughter*)

Marion: So then I knew that I had gotten what was going on.

Paula: How long where you there in Sweden?

Marion: About a year and a half.

Paula: Wow. A year and a half and you really learned the language in that time.

Marion: Yes. At first they always talked English to us and we didn't learn and after six months they decided if we wanted to talk to them we would have to do it in Swedish and so we did. Then it came. I also had lessons in Berlitz School. It was good.

Paula: And your intention all along was to come to America?

Marion: To go to America, yeah. I had planed to go to New York because I had a job there waiting for me with a friend of that woman who was teaching me. And she had a lot to do. She was working with Karen Horney at the time. A pretty well-known psychiatrist and she had so much work there that she would have liked me to come there.

Paula: So she wanted you to come and do bodywork for her?

Marion: Yes, yeah.

Paula: So why didn't you go to New York?

Marion: Well, the Germans invaded Norway at that time and I could not take a boat straight from Stockholm to New York which I had planned to do. So I had to go through the Far East in order to get to America. So I first went to Estonia and then through Russia, then through Japan and arrived in San Francisco on my way to New York. And I had relatives who lived in Berkeley at that time. They picked me up and it was very close by here where they lived, on Euclid Avenue.

Paula: To where you are living right now?

Marion: Yes. About five blocks away maybe and I decided that was the place where I was going to live for the rest of my life.

Paula: Oh, my...

Marion: That was fifty-three years ago. I never had a hard time making up my mind when I wanted something, when I knew something I wanted. And I wanted to stay in Berkeley!

Paula: Marion, where did you get this kind of clarity and knowing what you want and living it?

Marion: No idea. *(shaking her head)*
Doesn't one come that way?

Paula: *(soft laughter)*

Marion: Either one has it or one doesn't?

(Talking about intuition and take a stance on it!)

Paula: Maybe? I don't know, but you know – it's really fairly amazing. How many years ago is this we are talking about?

Marion: Fifty-three years.

Paula: Fifty-three years ago you arrived here unexpectedly – you decided this is it.

Marion: And stayed.

Paula: And here you are five blocks from where you first stayed.

Marion: Maybe, you know, it's kind of boring to never go anywhere else, to just stay instead of experimenting with other things, with other places.

Paula: Well, we can't hardly say that you stay in the same place all the time since you travel so much with your work.

Marion: But I didn't mean to travel a lot. It just came by itself.

Paula: Phew.

Marion: But the traveling of course now is very wonderful to travel, to have that possibility to go back – to go back to Sweden, Scandinavia, to go back to Germany.

Paula: I was wondering, how is it, what is it like for you to go back to Germany? You have gone there now a couple of times, ah, taking your work back there.

Marion: I still love Germany. That is still so and I love the people that I am with when I am in Germany. And I am still furiosus that the Nazis – so furious! I don't think its hate, it's just absolutely fury that they did something to Germany that was the worst thing they could have done to any country. The degraded Germany, they degraded everything it stood for! And this fury has never lessened its still there.

Paula: Fury and love.

Marion: Fury and love, yes.

Paula: Both there.

Marion: Both there. I love the countryside, I love the music, I love the people that I know there.

Paula: Is there anything that you particularly miss about Germany? That you don't have in your life when you are not there?

Marion: (*laughing with amusement*) They have a way of flirting with each other, of looking at each other, of noticing each other that I like very much which I miss here. People even with an old woman, you know, it is kind of nice to exchange glances with people. That is something that is very special.

(What a declaration of love)

Paula: Ah, well – maybe this is, has something to do with this charme I see, the fortuitousness I see that comes out in you, particularly when I see you doing exercise classes.

Marion: Yes, something like that, I feel when I am there.

Paula: Aha.

Marion: And yet I know I wouldn't want to stay. I would never want to stay.

Paula: You wouldn't want to stay in Germany.

Marion: No, not at all. *(Does one see a deep hurt feeling, pain there?)*

But when I visit of course I have these very close friends that I visit. I visit her, Baerbel, who helped me so much at that time. But I am still – I am in contact now again with the friend I had the first day at school. I was sitting on the same bench with her and I lost her for many years. She got married to a Nazi General and she was not allowed to communicate with me.

And after the war she wrote to me again and she said she was wondering if I would be willing to have contact with her. But she felt it so strongly and I wrote back and maybe a year or two later one of her sons came here to visit. He wanted to see what I was like and we got to be understood each other immediately. He became like a son and the terrific thing now is that he and his wife both are studying Rosen work in Germany and are totally enthralled by it, allowing themselves to grow and to expand in a wonderful way. I also got than back to see my friend there again and it was very good to be with her.

Paula: Your friend from the first day of school?

Marion: Yes, who was married to the Nazi General and somehow it was alright. I am amazed how little of a grudge I feel. I could understand the difficulties that happened at that time, you know. We were not free as a German. Many ways things you could not do. I also been back once and stayed with another friend who during the war and many years I had no contact with. And at that time their children were visiting and the children were maybe at that time in their late 30ies. And the girl said she was teaching the Holocaust in the school where she was working. And all of a sudden she looked at her parents and said: “Where were you at that time?” And they couldn’t answer. It was I who answered.

Paula: It was what?

Marion: It was I who answered and I said: “At that time there was nothing you could do anymore. You put your family in danger, you put your life in danger and yet you could not really accomplish anything.” And that’s how it was.

But they were more cowards than people like Mrs. Heyer and Ernst Hofmann who were not cowards, who stayed by their conviction to took a chance. But I still could understand them.

Paula: I am really – I hear that, I hear that you are able – somehow you are able to hold it all.

Marion: Yes. But also the grouch, the grouch against the Nazis, the new Nazis and everything that has to do with that philosophy is huge! That is there. I don’t think any, any mediating circumstances that could make that feel better.

Paula: This stays.

Marion: This stays, absolutely.

Paula: Yes!

Marion: Yes, it stays. *(Deep breath up to the top of the sternum)*

Paula: Is there anything that I haven’t asked you about that you liked to say about your experiences in Germany, maybe Germany?

Marion: I never thought I was homesick.

I always thought it was just wonderful that I could get away when I did and that this wonderful life here – but when I was visiting my home town and we went for a walk at one of these places where we used to go as teenagers bicycling and hiking – and all of a sudden I had almost a heart attack.

It was something – such a strong feeling and beating of the heart that came in. And then I realized that there was much more than I had allowed myself to feel, that there was something that I deeply had missed. I really had missed a big part of my youth there and I was sad about it, yeah. That was a lot of missing. I guess, life would have been different if I had not gone away. But there was some sweetness about it that I never regained. So I love it here. I love it in many ways but some sweetness got lost there.

Paula: Thank you, for speaking with me about this.

Marion: It was very nice to be asked.