

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM MY FAMILY'S FLIGHT FROM GERMANY ON THE LAST FREIGHTER OUT OF ROTTERDAM

April 27, 2014

I did not realize the serendipity in this date, but heard today on NPR that this is the week of remembrance of the Holocaust in the Jewish community.

In sharing "Lessons I Have Learned, the short version, I want to do a shout out to Carol Jean and Janice, your UU pillars, who planned the "Faith and Reproductive Justice: It's Time to Talk" seminar held here recently. The lessons I learned from UU Pastor Kelly from the Minnesota Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, truly turned my thinking 180 degrees on how to approach the honor I accepted to be the chairperson for North Dakotans Against Measure 1.

The proponents of measure one, which reads: "The inalienable right to life of every human being at any stage of development must be recognized and protected", refer to this amendment not as the personhood amendment which it is, but as the "human rights amendment" ----- . Such a blatant twisting of the truth is what drove me to get back in the fray on not just women's rights issues, but the broader issue of human rights.

The over reach of the North Dakota Legislature in passing bills they knew were unconstitutional and then using our taxpayer dollars to defend these intrusions into our most personal decisions is just too much for me to sit by and passively watch happen. My Jewish ancestors would call that, HUTZPA! When North Dakotans understand the true ramifications of this "values statement" as it has been referred to by the proponents, I believe they will defeat Measure One in November because a) it is poorly written, b) it is laden with unintended consequences and c) it is an egregious over-reach of government into our personal and spiritual lives.

To get the message across in a disciplined, civil manner is where I struggled until Kelly's seminar where she provided three important take-aways for me:

1. The 20% on either end of the polarizing pro-life and pro-choice discussion will not change their position, so frame the discussion for the 60% who want to be informed.
2. Our involvement is based on faith and we do not attack others for their faith.
3. Meet people where they are in their life's journey and listen to their story.

I do believe that the majority of North Dakotans, Pro-Life or Pro-Choice, have been touched by personal experiences which will lead them to vote NO on Measure 1 because of all the unintended consequences. Our task is to give North Dakota voters "permission" to vote no based on their own life's experiences. For me that permission is based on three areas:

1. The over reach of government inherent in this poorly written measure, which would have denied me my grandsons who were helped to be conceived by the very fertility specialists who will not be able to practice their miracles of family building in this state if the measure passes.

2. My husband and I have “do not resuscitate” directives. We do not want our lives sustained should we be beyond realistic hope of recovery, but our doctors may not be able to carry out our wishes if this measure passes.
3. If you, your wife or daughter should have a miscarriage, not only would you grieve that loss, but the grieving mother could be investigated if this measure passes.

The coalition advocating for this measure is ND Choose Life supported by the North Dakota Catholic Conference, North Dakota Family Alliance, North Dakota Life League, Love Them Both, North Dakota Right to Life and the ND chapter of Concerned Women for America LAC. The Catholic Conference has already infused \$100,000 into their coffers and more will be coming in from major out of state organizations to set North Dakota up to spend more of your taxpayers dollars to ultimately challenge Roe v. Wade. It is not by chance that so many blue states are considering or have passed similar barrages of bills, but because we are a state that is enjoying prosperity, ND is being set up to be the battering ram to carry the challenge of Roe v. Wade to the US Supreme Court.

While I tell you more about my lessons learned from my family’s history of having personal rights taken away in Nazi Germany, a sign- up sheet is circulating, if you have not yet signed on as a North Dakotan Against Measure 1, we need your support in all the ways listed to defeat this measure. And I know many of you have already sent checks, but we will be up against, at the least a \$1,000,000 advertising campaign by the proponents, so please help as you can. Our minimum to raise so we can begin some media around June is \$100,000. Naturally we need much more to get into high gear in the fall.

And therein lies what makes me soooo sad! Having to waste this money to defend our constitutional rights when those resources should be collectively applied to the real issues of poverty and ignorance instead. If only everyone would listen to Pope Francis who said in essence that we need to address the larger issues and “stop obsessing over abortion and gay marriage”. An aside that I learned recently is that the woman President of Argentina, the Pope’s home country, is attacking the huge poverty problem in her Catholic country by providing free contraception and is in conversation with the Pope about allowing gay couples to baptize their babies and marry in the Catholic church. Let’s get some of THAT Kool-Aid to our legislators!

And now let me share with you the lessons learned from my parent’s flight from Nazi Germany in 1939 on the last freighter out of Rotterdam, the cautionary tale of the erosion of the rights of Jews in Germany.

As I grew up, my family avoided talking too much about the past because it was still too raw and sad and so until recently I did not share much about either. You see I am a first generation American, and a child of the Holocaust----not because I experienced it first-

hand ---- but because my father's family died in Auschwitz. Dwelling in that past is still too fraught with pain.

My book club for several years has chosen holocaust related selections and last year's reading "The Beast in the Garden" by Eric Larson lead me to share more of my family's odyssey than I had shared previously, because that book chronicled the years that more and more freedoms were taken from the Jews in Germany while the world watched and did little to help them. My family's harrowing exodus from Germany began in the years described so well in that book. I also shared a bit of that history in an OLLIE class at BSC on WWII which led to more and more questions from family and friends.

Marnie suggested I tell my family story in this presentation to explain my renewed involvement in women's rights and reason for accepting chairmanship of North Dakotans Against Measure 1. The introspection and revisiting the very sad past has been emotionally draining, but also therapeutic.

And for that I want to thank the UU for enabling this reflection on why I am determined to defeat Measure 1. To me, this outrageous overreach of government into our most personal of decisions on reproductive rights and end of life decisions, is just as egregious as the way the rights of Jews in Germany were eroded by incremental acts of a totalitarian regime.

My father, Siegbert Schoenthal, a Jew, married my mother, Margaret Vienna, a Christian, in 1932 in northern Germany in the small village, so small that it has coordinates, Schott bei Marienhaf, Kreis Aurich, Ostfriesland, Germany where they were both born and raised on farms not far from each other just over a couple of canals, dikes and bridges. My mother's family roots in Ostfriesland date back to 1599. My father's family is believed to have arrived in Schott in 1769. My parents courted for seven years before marrying because my grandfather Nathan, having suffered financial setbacks that led to depression and finally his suicide in 1927, left his widow and primarily, my father, to save the family farm.

During those seven years, my mother was acting as the head of her household of two brothers and three sisters, the youngest of whom was an epileptic with other special needs who died shortly after my parents left Germany at the age of 20, on her family farm. Her father died in 1912 and her stepfather had been killed in WWI with her mother dying in 1925 when my mother was 20 years old. She saw to it that the farm succession for her brothers and marriage for her one sister were accomplished before she got a life of her own. In 1934 another of her sisters aged 23 died, as family lore had it from complications of the flu; however the man with whom she had a long term relationship never was

allowed to cross the threshold of any family member ever again, and hearsay has it the brothers beat him up severely.

So, my mother already had her mettle tested when she married my father in 1932, only to take on more hardship and heartbreak.

About the time he had saved the family farm, begun a family himself and had time to look up from his labors, my father realized that the stoic, fatalistic Jews, religious Germans and German intellectuals had totally misjudged how Hitler would seize power and use anti-semitism, always under the surface when times were tough in Germany, to focus hate and place blame for all the woes of the lower classes, the jealousy of the middle class/merchant class and the snobbery of the upper classes, on the Jews.

The Nuremberg Laws were passed in September of 1935, forbidding mingling of the races, which meant my parents were criminals and my siblings were all "Mischlinge" ---- mixed race. About that time, my mother took my oldest brother to one of the many healing baths in Southern Germany, Bad Piedmont, because he was sickly and while traveling through Nuremberg witnessed one of the huge Nazi rallies bringing home the reality of what was happening around them.

I believe that was about the time my mother undertook contact with an old friend from their village who had left Germany where he had been trained in his father's bakery, and settled in Gordon, Nebraska. He at first was unable to help because he could not employ my Dad in his agricultural occupation as he did not own a farm. Fortunately for us, he did eventually acquire a ranch so he could offer work for which my father was suited which was a prerequisite, at that time, for immigration.

My oldest brother, Nanno, sister, Foli, and brother, Gerhard, were 6, 4 and 2 respectively, when my father was picked up from the beet field, where he was working, on November 10, 1938 by local Nazis, men he had known all his life. He was taken to a slaughter house which had been turned into a holding facility for the Jews from Norden and the surrounding area rounded up on Krystal Nacht (called that because of the breaking of windows and breakable goods Nov. 9 when the round up began.) From there they were transported to Oldenburg by bus and then by train to Sachsenhausen near Berlin where they did forced labor, were harassed and humiliated and generally shamed for being Jews. At that point they were harassing but not killing Jews. My mother's relatives who had joined the Nazi party helped get my father out after he spent a month to six weeks in the concentration camp.

After my Dad was released from Sachsenhausen, my parents were forced to sell their livestock and worldly goods because Jews were not allowed to keep their property and

my grandmother had to “sell” the farm which was in her name. The auction took place in January and the sale of the property in July. In September they applied for exit papers, the same day Poland was invaded.

Their sponsor was in place and with the little personal property and money they were allowed to take with them, they headed for the Dutch border and were turned back at least once before succeeding to get into Holland where my grandmother, my father’s three sisters, his niece and nephew and their father lived near Leyden, Holland.

My parents tried to persuade my grandmother who was 62 in 1939 to immigrate with them and tried to persuade my uncle and aunt to send their two children, Bernard who was 8 and Dina Ruth who was 13 years old at that time with them. My grandmother felt she was too old and did not want to leave her daughters and my uncle was convinced that they would all be safe in Holland. They were all gassed in Auschwitz around September of 1943 among the two million people, mostly Jews, who were murdered at Auschwitz before it was liberated by the Soviets January 17, 1945. This was also the camp where Ann Frank and her family died in 1944.

I was born in Gordon, Nebraska approximately nine months after my family arrived in America where our sponsor provided work on his ranch for my family.

During the remaining years of the war, my parents were suspect in that Sandhills community for being German and my father felt the sting of anti-semitism there, too. (Gordon is a very conservative bastion even today as it sits on the edge of the Pine Ridge Reservation.) My mother spoke little English and my father spoke his high school learned Oxford English, it was not until my brothers and sister went to the one room school nearby, that they all learned the language.

In 1944, having served out his agreed upon tenancy, my parents returned to the New Jersey dairy farm rented by my mother’s cousin located in the very Dutch Reformed community of Griggstown. We were pretty poor during those years. I remember working hard, but what I remember most is THE day that my father got the official notification that all his relatives had been exterminated in Auschwitz. No one can ever forget hearing the heart broken wail of their own father at such horrendous news.

So, the war was over and my father went back to Germany first in 1950 to begin the process of reclaiming his property and testifying in local war criminal trials. He would not talk much about the whos and whats. It was just too painful. In 1955, my parents decided they had to go back to rebuild the farm to salvage whatever estate there might be.

It was also during that period that Germany was paying restitution for losses, called “Wiedergutmachung” suffered by victims of the Nazis. There were formulas of course for property and belongings as well as education deprivation for children, for example, but I honestly do not know how my father’s loss of family members could ever be tallied.

None of us siblings felt Germany was where we wanted to stay and so they returned to the states after three years of rebuilding and the sale of the farm.

And as happens in so many war torn lands, many of the people who were Nazis picked up their careers and were back in charge of businesses, government and the country when they left but with very few Jews there.

So how does my history bring us to why here? Why now? for my taking a stand on this renewed attack on women’s rights and human rights in general in North Dakota. Frankly, I was lulled into the same kind of apathy as the German Jewish community, believing that previous legislatures and administrations here in North Dakota had discussed but held off previous radical bills on women’s personal choices and that there was always a right to life element in the Republican party, but that most Republicans shared my belief in the separation of church and state on those issues as covered in this snippet from the I am a Republican Because statement of principle:

I believe the strength of our nation lies with the individual and that each person’s dignity, freedom, ability and responsibility must be honored.

I believe in equal rights, equal justice and equal opportunity for all, regardless of race, creed, sex, age or disability.

I believe free enterprise and encouraging individual initiative have brought this nation opportunity, economic growth and prosperity.-----

I believe Americans value and should preserve our national strength and pride while working to extend peace, freedom and human rights throughout the world---  
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However, a few weeks ago I sat in a room full of social revisionists who held hostage the committee which passed many resolutions affirming people’s rights to do with property what they wished without government interference; to have their constitutional rights to own guns with-out federal intervention; to raise and educate their children without government intrusion or imposition of standards or regulation; to not have government tell them how to run their businesses or to whom they provide services. BUT they saw no inconsistency in denying individuals their constitutional rights to make the most personal decisions about reproductive and end of life decisions by almost unanimously voting to support Measure 1.

The resolution process was truly flawed at the GOP convention in that every legislator to whom I vented, said they never pay attention to what is passed and maybe there-in lies some hope; however, I am embarrassed. I am truly saddened that a party that used to be about self-determination and self-reliance is being hi-jacked by, for want of better language, jack-booted thugs and emotionally unstable zealots. Much like those who early on subscribed to the anti-semitic hate mongering in the early 30s.

So, I am on a bit of a crusade here, with Measure 1 and to shoot a warning shot “across the bow” of an all too smug super-majority in the House and Senate in ND. When I hear the echo of jack-boots marching and witness zealots with blinders on, we have to take a stand.

The famous quote from the Protestant pastor, Martin Niemoeller who felt churches were complicit in the perpetration of the Holocaust, could be paraphrased about the rights of women for our particularly unsettled times here in North Dakota. Remember his haunting words:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out-

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out-

Because I was not a Trade Unionist

They came for the Jews and I did not speak out-

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

If Measure 1 passes, we North Dakotans will lose OUR inalienable right to make our own medical and quality of life decisions. This is not just about women’s rights. This is not just about reproductive rights. This is not just about closing down the clinic in Fargo. This is about using this amendment and YOUR tax dollars to challenge Roe v. Wade before the US Supreme Court. So please join me in resoundingly defeating Measure 1 in November.