

“Who Do You Want to Win the War?”

Madeleine Schaefer

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Richard Schaefer immigrated to the United States in 1933 to join his father. He returned to Germany two years later and married Madeleine, but the American consulate held up her visa until August 1936. The couple eventually settled in Union City, New Jersey, and Richard worked at a furniture store in Newark owned by two German nationals.

Like other disillusioned Germans, Madeleine found economic conditions in the United States even more dismal than at home. Determined to make a go of it, she resisted the entreaties of family and friends to return to Germany. Richard became an American citizen on the eve of Pearl Harbor, but not Madeleine. After the German declaration of war on the United States on December 11, the government interned Richard's employers and turned over their three stores to the Alien Enemy Custodian, who liquidated them.

The only work I could find was cleaning, though with a high school education, I knew bookkeeping, so I was looking for an office job in imports.

I went to the German consulate because somebody told me they might know of German companies looking for office help. I had no idea; I knew nobody. The consul sent me to another employment agency that handled German Americans. Then I found a job with a chocolate importer, the Hildebrand Shop on 6th Avenue in New York. I started there in October 1937, and I worked un-

til after Pearl Harbor; the imports stopped then.

In 1940 I had the first inkling that I was not welcome in this country. I had the radio on, which announced that Germany had defeated France. It was the 15th of June 1940, America was not at war, but a neighbor hollered out of her window to me, “Shut that radio down, you Nazi, you fifth columnist.” Later she added, “I’ll fix you.” I immediately went to the police and reported her. She got a reprimand for disorderly conduct, but I believe that somehow my whole predicament was based on this incident. She did not leave me alone, so we moved to another address in the same town.

Richard had registered for the draft and was classified 3A (with dependents). However, as he had a high lottery number, there was little likelihood of his being taken early.

About the time Richard lost his job in July 1942, an FBI agent and two Union City detectives arrested Madeleine following a preliminary visit to the couple's home. Within months of the decision to intern her as a dangerous enemy alien, Richard's draft board reclassified him 1A. When his induction notice came, he refused to go, explaining that as long as his wife was interned, he would be unable to fulfill his duty as a citizen. On February 18, 1943, a federal court in Newark, New Jersey, sentenced him to three years in prison; he spent the war behind bars. A local newspaper referred to him as a draft dodger.

In June 1942 the doorbell rang. One FBI agent came in and showed my husband something, stating he had to go through our apartment. He was in there several hours, and he asked if we had anything else. I said, "We have trunks in the cellar." He went through the trunks in the cellar and picked out everything German and took that along: my passport, letters from my family, letters I had written my husband from 1933 to 1936, and photos of my brothers who were in the German army.

In those letters to my husband, while Hitler was in power, they did not find one single mention of Hitler or politics. After a few days he came back with those letters, which would have told more about me than anything else. He gave them back to my husband. Can you imagine that? They would have shown I was not involved politically in anything in Germany. In three and a half years, I would have said something to my husband, because he had left in February 1933, after Hitler was in power. Even he didn't know much about politics, but I never mentioned anything. That was the proof that I was not interested in politics. The only thing I wanted was to go to America to my husband.

They took my passport along. I never got it back. They took other papers, letters from my father, my mother, personal effects. I never got them back. They gave my husband back the camera after I was interned.

My husband had a car, and the FBI man opened the trunk and pulled out his camera and took that along too. Then he left. Two weeks later we wanted to go on vacation to the Catskills, but two FBI agents came and showed my husband something again, I don't know what, and

they said they had to take me along that evening.

I had to dress in a hurry. They did not tell my husband where they were taking me or why. It was about eight o'clock in the evening, dark, and they took me to the Union City jail. I was put in a cell with a dirty bed with bedbugs. The light was left on all night, and there I was. All night I was running around like a tiger in a cage, thinking, "Only because you're German. You're not a criminal." During the night, they had arrested two Negroes. They were looking through the bars at me. Usually they had prostitutes in that room.

The next morning they gave me coffee, which I couldn't drink. They had an air raid drill that day, and this was the 8th of July 1942. I didn't know whether it was real or not. Nobody had come, and I thought the world was ending. Around noon they picked me up and put me in a car with a guy in handcuffs. They didn't tell us where they were going, and they didn't handcuff me. We wound up on Ellis Island. I still have the newspaper clippings about this, and it says:

One woman was arrested in Union City under the Enemy Alien Act, and a man was picked up in West New York. The FBI men who made the arrest refused to disclose the charge against him, saying only that he was held for further investigation. The woman arrested was booked on an open charge.

I went to Ellis Island and the man somewhere else. They opened a big hall and put hundreds of people in there. I didn't know a soul. Some women came to me and said, "We've been here since December of 1941," and I felt a little better to be surrounded by my own.

I had a hearing on July 29 at Newark. Before the hearing, they made us wait seven hours before being called in. By that time I was tongue-tied, nervous, excited. I would have spoken up more than I did, but they didn't permit you to speak on your own.

Q: Do you remember some of the questions they asked?

Yes. It was about some of the papers they had taken, which of course they called "propaganda material." They said, "Why don't you admit that you were sent here by Germany to make propaganda in this country?" I almost dropped from my chair. I went to work in the morning in the chocolate store for six days and then back home. I cooked, and on Sunday, I did laundry. And they said I was sent here to make propaganda! Terrible things.

Q: What was the propaganda? Pamphlets? Newspapers? Books?

I had two suitcases filled with everything that you can imagine. I worked six days a week. I wanted to read later, the same as now. I have papers all over, religious papers, films, magazines, German magazines they were selling in New York—you could still buy German magazines, and, of course, they gave everything a different meaning. Some of them were still in wrappers. I said, "You can see I never read them."

The Bund had a camp called Nordland. In the beginning, we were looking for a place where we could eat cheap, so we went there a few times in 1938, but most of the people there had been in the country much longer than us. We were always outsiders. We stopped going there before 1939 because my husband

said, "I don't like the lake for swimming." We went to other lakes, Sebago Lake, Pine Lake, but somebody must have taken our license plate while we were at Camp Nordland.

They had a letter that I had written to the consulate when I was looking for work. That must have been in 1937, but all of a sudden, this letter shows up, which I even didn't remember anymore, in which I asked the German consul whether he could assist me. Then the interrogators said, "You were a frequent visitor to the consulate on account of this." The slip they gave me was to the employment agency, on which the consul had written, "Madeleine Schaefer, unknown to us." I was not known at the consulate, yet they claimed, "You were a frequent visitor to the consulate," which I was not. I didn't even have time to go there. I was working.

I was only [in the United States] six years. My English was good but not fluent, and I didn't understand some of the things they asked. I had the feeling that, "It doesn't matter what you answer, they will intern you anyway." I heard this from the other women.

Q: Were other people allowed to speak on your behalf at the hearing?

For the first hearing I got the paper three days beforehand, and it said, "You can have people [witnesses] there." In three days! I'm sitting at Ellis Island. How can I have people there in three days? Later, the two people I worked for were called. I didn't know what they said, and I didn't know what they were asked, but they could only have said that I was a good worker. One of the most vivid things in my mind was that one board member said, "Why don't you admit that you are German, through-

and-through?” Well, what else could I be? If they would have said “Nazi through-and-through,” I could have understood the question. I didn’t have contact with many Americans. I worked in a German import company. My husband was German; my father-in-law was German. Americans were not interested in me; whatever contact I did have with Americans was not pleasant. If you had said that you came from Bavaria, it’s a nice country, they would have said, “Why don’t you go back there?” They didn’t even want you to say that a German city is nice. “Why don’t you go back?” It was not pleasant.

Madeleine Schaefer did not give me permission to access her government files. Instead, she sent a handful of documents selected from her Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) records. Thus, we cannot be completely confident of what was said at her hearing, but from a letter Madeleine wrote to the Justice Department in July 1945 regarding her deportation proceedings, we can infer the charges against her in 1942.

When Germany declared war against the United States, Madeleine sketched an appeal (discovered by the FBI agent during his search of the Schaefer’s home) to Richard’s draft board that she hoped would keep him out of the war in Europe. She could not bear it that he might face her brothers on a battlefield. Madeleine knew that Richard felt differently about his service, so she never sent the letter. Richard never saw it, and Madeleine told the agent who found it to be careful that Richard did not see it or overhear them talking about it. Here’s what her letter revealed:

- Madeleine had sent packages for German prisoners of war in Canada.

She did so, she explained, because the firm where she worked had been asked to do so and, in any case, “I would have sent them to anybody without regard of nationality.... I never question the nationality of a beggar or any other person in need.”

- Madeleine and Richard had gone to Camp Nordland in 1937 and 1938, and as she says above, we “did not find what we were looking for.
- Madeleine had purchased *Rückwanderer* marks, \$500 worth, sent to a bank in her parents’ town so she would have money should she visit.
- The FBI found the “propaganda material” at her home in the form of papers and magazines from or about Germany, all of them readily available to the public. Madeleine explained it as only natural that a German should receive such material in the mail from time to time, and she had saved it along with many other papers. She thought the propaganda was about 1/20th of the total amount of junk in her house. Call me a poor housekeeper, she allowed, not a Nazi. Had Madeleine been prescient enough to give these explanations at her hearing there was still no possibility of her avoiding internment.

The INS sent Madeleine to its Gloucester City, New Jersey, facility, a large, white clapboard house.

We were four in a room in the beginning; later, when some left, there were three, then two. We had to entertain ourselves. Some women taught literature. We went through “Hamlet,” and we learned French. Most of us knitted sweaters for the matrons for five dollars each, so we had a little money in our hands. We could play ball in the yard.

We did a Christmas play every year, and they even had officials from the immigration station over to watch us. There were dances in the summer, and again a whole group of officials came. We wanted to show that we were good girls.

Families could visit on weekends for an hour or two. On Sundays they permitted the men to come over from the immigration station. We had an evening of singing, poetry reading, and making jokes for a little diversion; we made do with what we had. Still, if you're locked up, no matter how pleasant it is, the feeling that you're locked up against your will without, any rhyme or reason, never leaves you.

There were times when I was bitter, but then I looked at the advantages: I could correspond with my family in Germany, although the letters took a long time. I did get some bad news. When I had that first encounter with my neighbor, it was that day that my oldest brother was killed in France, the 14th of June 1940. I received notes from my father or mother that another brother, nineteen and a half years old, was missing in Russia in August 1943.

I had hearings in 1943 and 1944, but they were the same. At one, it must have been 1944: "Mrs. Schaefer, as sure as there will be either sunshine or rain tomorrow, I want you to tell me, which of the two countries do you want to win the war?"

I said, "Neither."

They threw the paper down, "You're too evasive!"

Remember, the war was not over, so you had to be very careful what you said. I wanted to see my family again, so I could not say anything against Germany that would have hindered me if the war had turned the other way. I couldn't say anything against the United States,

because I didn't feel that way. It was terrible to be put in that situation!

For instance, one of the women told me that they said to her, "Now, Mrs. So-and So, if we give you a gun and send you to Germany and ask you to shoot your brothers, would you do it?" Things like that!

They knew I was a little more intelligent, so they didn't ask me that question. Even if we had said, "We want Germany to lose the war," there was no guarantee that they would have let us out. It was impossible to answer either way. Then they would have figured, "If she wants her own country to lose, what might she do to America?" You have to show some respect for your country; I was still a German citizen. How can I say I want my family and everything in Germany ruined and shot to pieces? Three brothers in the war, only one survived.

After a rehearing in early 1944, Attorney General Biddle determined that Madeleine should be continued in internment. Toward the end of that year, and again in March 1945, reconsiderations of her case brought no change.

At Ellis Island, following the German surrender, Madeleine took up her typewriter on behalf of the single (married and unmarried) German women. In letters to Attorney General Tom Clark, Edward Ennis, President Truman, and the Citizen's Protective League, among others, she painted a portrait of prisoners in a state of nervous anxiety and psychological distress: "Why weren't we released after the German surrender in May? Will we be released? Deported? If deported, what about our families? Why the 'absolute standstill and silence' that has 'plunged us in terrible suspense and uncertainty ... unbearable from day to day'?"

In July 1945 President Harry Truman ordered all remaining internees, still deemed dangerous, out of the country. This put all of the women at Ellis Island under threat of deportation for adherence to an enemy government and its principles. Madeleine was determined to explain why this was a lie. She termed her attitude toward the Nazis as indifference and contempt, never adherence. Indifference because she was a young woman with neither “interest in nor understanding of political affairs.” Indifference because she had decided in 1932 to cast her lot with “democratic America.” Contempt because the Nazis had plunged her country into war and destruction. Contempt she could not express for fear of retribution against her family in Germany. What she felt toward Germany in the 1930s and early 40s was homesickness, nothing more.

Madeleine had left Germany in 1936 at the height of Nazi power, and never wanted to go back permanently. She had never joined a Nazi political group in Germany or the United States, and she had not affiliated with members or sympathizers of such organizations. In June 1940 she even took out a warrant for disorderly conduct against the neighbor who had called her a Nazi, although the woman had never bothered to speak to Madeleine.

Finally, Madeleine asked in August 1945 what greater testament was there to her loyalty to the United States than her willingness to be separated from Richard for three and one-half years in the early 1930s and the three years of his imprisonment?

In her last letter to the attorney general in December 1945, Madeleine begged Clark to release the women before Christmas.

Sometime in February 1945 I was back at Ellis Island. They knew that the war was going to end. There were only a few of us left at Gloucester City, and they had more personnel than internees. Some had gone to Seagoville, some had gone to Germany, and they released some.

People like me, who were still on Ellis Island when the war ended, received a paper that they were going to be sent back to Germany on account of “adherence to an enemy country.” I said, “Hitler was at the height of his power when I came to this country in 1936. How can you say that I have adhered to the enemy country if I came here during the best years that Germany had before the war? I didn’t give any money. I didn’t join anything before I left Germany. I didn’t join anything after I came here. We didn’t even join a club. How can you say, ‘adherence to an enemy country’?” I let them have it.

All of a sudden they had me up for another hearing; that must have been after the war with Japan stopped. I thought, “Now, I will tell them my story,” and I wrote about it. I made copies and gave one to each of the three men: one from the State Department, one from the immigration department [INS], and another man. The State Department guy started, “Now, Mrs. Schaefer, what did you think when Hitler marched into Austria, or Poland? Did you think it was right?”

I said, “No, I don’t think it was right.”

“On such and such a date, you said we asked you the same question,” and you said, ‘I thought it was right.’” Things like that. They tried to catch you. In the very beginning I thought, what do I know what happens in Germany? I was here. How can I determine whether it

was right or wrong? A young girl who wants to work and build up a home, to ask me silly questions like that. What did I know? The man from immigration, Mr. Kelly, who knew us a little better, stopped this questioning. He said, "They want to go out and read your appeal."

I began writing letters to President Truman. I was sort of a spokes lady for the German women by then, and I said, "Christmas is nearing, and so many hundreds of people are still trapped on Ellis Island. You should unite the families for Christmas." I let some people sign.

You know what? On the 22nd of December, I was the only one let go with two single fellows; they kept all the family men on the island. I had made up my mind after being interned for three and a half years, if ever I was released I wouldn't laugh, I wouldn't cry, I wouldn't do anything.

Then Mr. Clark said—he had papers in his hand—"Sit down."

When he said that, which he never did before, I knew I would be released.

"You're released. Which ferry do you want to leave on?"

"The 2 o'clock ferry." That's all I said. I didn't cry, I didn't laugh, I didn't show any emotion. In fact, when I told the other people, they didn't believe me.

When I became a citizen, I had a hearing. There was a whole file there, and I said, "Is that my file?"

"Yes, he said." They must have gone all over New Jersey and New York and asked many people. Anyway, the fellow in Newark interviewing me about becoming a citizen said, "Mrs. Schaefer,

did you ever make a remark against President Roosevelt?"

"I don't remember, the man has been dead five years."

"If you made a remark, what did you say?"

"If I ever said anything, I must have said, 'He wants this country to get into a war with Germany.'"

"Oh, no, don't say that," he said, "because now I can tell you that that was the cause of your whole trouble!"

"You mean I was interned because somebody reported me for having made a remark against Roosevelt?"

He nodded, "That's right."

"Well, I didn't say it! No, they would have had to lock up half of the country then."

I'm giving this interview because I know that there were about five public laws that favor the Japanese [Americans], and they got compensation. We were told that the German [Americans] were interned "for cause," and that's the reason I'm doing this, to prove that there was no cause. I did not differ from German citizens who were not apprehended. They just picked me out at random.

I would not have spoken up until I heard about the Japanese. Most Americans believe that all the Japanese were American citizens, which is not true. They had just as many Japanese enemy aliens as they had German enemy aliens, and they are going to be treated better than us? They attacked Pearl Harbor; Germany didn't. It made me very angry. It made me angrier than the whole internment.