

# ILSA COLE



Emil Dahl was fighting for Germany in 1916 when his second daughter, Ilsa, was born. He had a cattle business in Geilenkirchen, a town of about 4,000 near the Dutch border with only a few Jewish families. Some property he owned; the rest he rented. Ilsa, her sister, Hilda, and younger brother, Erich, had a nanny.

Emil was a strict disciplinarian. As for synagogue, he went occasionally. Her mother, Clara Dahl, kept kosher and went to synagogue every week. Ilsa started Sunday school at 6. In her regular school, which was run by nuns, Jewish and Lutheran children were excused from class when it was time for Catholic religious education. In school plays, Ilsa played angels, never Jesus or Mary. The Dahls had friendly relations with their Christian neighbors and shared their holiday celebrations.

Ilsa and Hilda spent summers with their grandparents in Hamm, Germany.

A valedictorian, Ilsa graduated in 1932 at age 16, fluent in French and English. She wanted to be an archeologist but higher education was inaccessible.

Instead, she apprenticed to a French dressmaker in Aachen, who hid her from the Nazi wives who patronized the shop. Ilsa moved to Berlin in 1937 to further her design education, but the school closed a few days after she arrived. She joined a group for Jewish young people, was active in sports, and she met Walter Cole, from Koblenz, who was studying to be a chiropodist. They enjoyed dates on boats, at country inns and swimming.

Ilsa was home in Geilenkirchen, packing to leave for America on *Kristallnacht*, when rioters threatened to burn down her parents' home. Emil Dahl took her to the railway station that night.

Ilsa's parents and most of her extended family died in concentration camps, as did Walter Cole's. For too long, her father had thought that Hitler would not last. "It was a constant hurt that we were unable to bring out parents out," she says.

Unmarried when they arrived in America, Walter went to St. Louis, Ilsa to Kansas City, where she found the biggest challenge was the heat. She and Walter were married in St. Louis in 1940. For two years, they lived near Denver, where Walter, drafted by the Army, served a prisoner-of-war camp interpreter.

After the war, he worked for a floor covering company in St. Louis and was transferred to Kansas City. The family settled in the President Gardens Apartments and later moved to a house in Meadow Lake. Walter started his own business, W.J. Cole Floor Products Co. Ilsa helped him in the office. Paralyzed by a stroke in 1990, Walter died in 1997.

Ilsa and Walter were members of Temple B'nai Jehudah and have three children: Carol, Ann, and Steve. Ilsa has shared little of her past with them because, she says, "I didn't want them to grow up with that burden and to feel that terrible things could happen to them because they were Jewish."



Portrait by David Sosland  
Excerpt from *From the Heart: Life Before and After the Holocaust ~ A Mosaic of Memories*

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