

REGGIE GOLDBERG



The Ohringer siblings – Leonard, Joseph, Sigmund, Joachim and Lottie – attended private schools in their hometown in Germany. But by the time their little sister, Reggie, was ready for kindergarten, inflation had consumed what little wealth their parents, Jacob and Miriam Ohringer, had managed to accumulate.

So Reggie went to public school, which was fine with her. “Most of my friends were non-Jewish,” she recalls. “I celebrated Christmas with my Christian neighbors and went to midnight mass with them on Christmas Eve.”

Of the 60,000 or so people living in Cottbus, Germany, only a small percentage was Jewish. The German-speaking Ohringers were Conservative. Reggie’s father, a wine merchant, was devoted to his religion. He wore a top hat to synagogue on the High Holidays. When the family was deported, he took one briefcase containing his *tallit*, his prayer shawl, and *tefillin*, which are phylacteries or small leather cubes containing Bible verses on parchment. The Ohringer boys were all *bar mitzvahed*. Reggie, as was customary for girls, had little formal Jewish education.

As the baby of the family, she also had little understanding of the growing menace facing Jews in Cottbus and across Europe. She knew antisemitism had forced her older brothers to transfer from the University of Berlin to the University of Wurzburg. She remembers her older sister crying outside the gates of her private school after being thrown out. She also was aware that her brother Leonard, unable to practice medicine in Germany, had obtained a residency in Chicago with the help of his non-Jewish professor. Once in the United States, Leonard helped Joseph, Sigmund and Joachim emigrate. Jacob Ohringer, who had fought for Germany in World War I, remained convinced the turmoil would blow over.

Nothing prepared 12-year-old Reggie for that day in October 1938 when the police came to her school to escort her to the city jail. Her parents and sister were already there, rounded up for deportation to Poland, her father’s birthplace. The family lived with other Jews in Warsaw until Reggie’s brothers secured passage for them to Cuba on a French ship, the *Flandre*. But, like the *St. Louis*, it was turned back to Europe. The Ohringers returned to occupied France, traveled with fictitious papers to Marseilles, and ultimately bribed a Pan Am official in Lisbon to allow them to board the *Yankee Clipper* on which they had booked seats.

Reggie was 15 when the family arrived in Brockton, Massachusetts, eventually settling in Chicago. She earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology at Northwestern University, trained at Michael Reese Hospital as a medical technologist and later earned a master’s degree in social work at the University of Kansas. She recently retired from Jewish Family & Children Services.

Reggie was 26 when, visiting her sister in Kansas City, she met her husband, Wesley Goldberg. They have had five children, one of whom died from a tumor when he was 7. Linda is a social worker. Steve is a cardiologist. Eddie is a Reform rabbi and his twin, Roy, is a lawyer.



Portrait by David Sosland

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