National Literacy Trust

Change your story

Five Words

Anschluss. Kristallnacht. Kindertransport. Refugee. Alien.

By Tom Palmer

National Literacy Trust

Change your story

Disclaimer

Five Words is the true story of Ingrid Jacoby, who lived in Vienna until 1939. Ingrid, her family and her wider community were persecuted by the Nazi regime, which forced her to flee to England as a young child in order to be safe.

Whilst the story has been written by Tom Palmer for readers aged 11 to 14, it explores experiences including persecution, displacement and life as a refugee during the Holocaust. These themes may be emotionally challenging for some students.

We strongly recommend that teachers pre-read the text and use their professional judgement to assess its suitability for their class. Many sections of the story can be used independently, and teachers may choose to omit parts depending on the needs, experiences and backgrounds of their students.

We believe this story is an important resource for young people, as it helps to humanise historical events and supports meaningful engagement with the lived experiences behind the history of the Holocaust.

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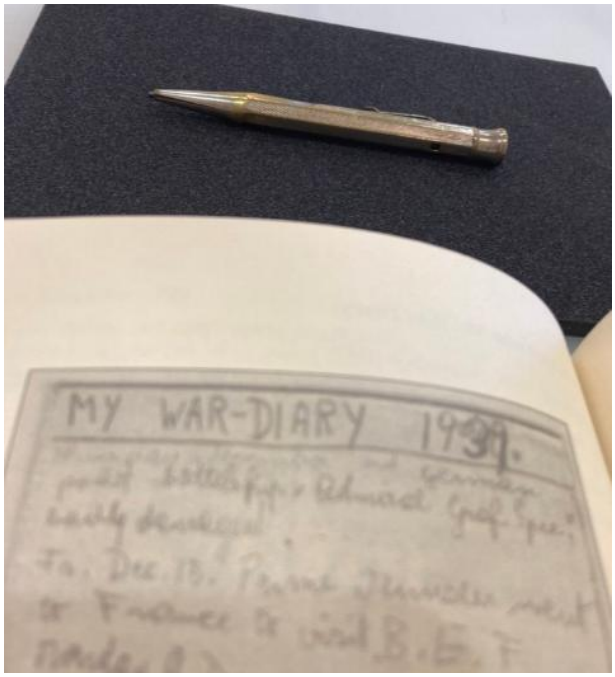
The first word

Anschluss



I

Your life is normal. You live in a flat quite near the city centre with your mum, your dad and your older sister. Your dad is a businessman, but you don't really know what he does.

You don't have a garden, but you wish you did. You go to an all-girls' school, which is a shame because you like talking to boys.

You have good friends at the girls' school. They come and go and change as you get older. This is normal. As you change, your friends change. Sometimes friends annoy you. Sometimes you annoy them. But deep down, you're never that close to any of them and wish you had someone you could really talk to.

So you write a diary. Your diary is who you can really talk to. Be honest to. You love your diary.

II

The thing that makes your life not normal anymore happens just two days after your eleventh birthday.

Your father comes home. He collapses into a chair and says something you will never forget.

'It's all over.'

You and your mother and sister are filled with horror, with dread. To hear your father say such a thing. What does he mean?

And yet, deep down, you understand what he means when he says it's all over. It has been your fear and your parents' fear for a while now. But you could never really know how everything will change from now on, how so much of your life and what you knew is over.

It's March 1938.

You live in Vienna, the capital city of Austria.

Nazi Germany has just sent its army into Austria. They have occupied your country. Annexed it. The first of several countries they will overrun in the next few years.

Austria, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Poland, Denmark, Norway, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Yugoslavia, Greece, Italy and parts of the Soviet Union.

Germany calls its occupation of your country a union. They use the word *Anschluss*.

That word will go down in history. *Anschluss.* Union. But it is not a union. Because not everyone wants it.

Yes, some people are happy about the *Anschluss*. They celebrate. They line the streets with flags and banners, welcoming the Nazis into Austria. They love Adolf Hitler. He is Austrian by birth, after all. They are proud of him.

But, some – many, in fact – are not happy. They have seen what has happened in Germany since Adolf Hitler and the Nazis first took power in 1933. They have seen what happens to those the Nazis don't like. They have seen what has happened to the Jews.

And your father knows that, now, what happened to Jews in Germany will happen to Jews in Austria.

And you are a Jew.

What happened - and still happens – to Jews in Germany?

You know that their businesses were boycotted. That their children were made to go to separate schools. That their books were burned. That they were not allowed to go into cinemas. That they could not sit on park benches. That they had to walk in the gutter. That they were attacked in the streets. That their homes were ransacked, smashed to pieces. That some were sent away to a place called Dachau.

Dachau was the first Nazi concentration camp, where, in its earlier days, political prisoners, Jews and others were imprisoned and brutalised.

Some did not come back from Dachau.

You write in your diary about the evening your dad came home and slumped in his chair.

“My father is in a terrible state,’ you record. “Because Hitler has marched into Austria. I shall never forget the day of the *Anschluss*. Austria belongs to Germany now. It happened two days after my birthday and I couldn’t have my party. I cried.”

III

Your father leaves Vienna immediately. He goes south to Italy.

It is unusual for a man to leave his wife and children like this. Maybe your dad thinks that women and children will be safe under the Nazis. It is unclear.

Either way, things begin to change after the Nazis arrive.

You are made to sit separately at school from children who are not Jews. Then you are made to go to another school altogether, like the children in Germany. You are not allowed to go into cinemas or some

shops. Instead, you go window shopping or to other Jewish friends' houses.

Your mum takes in a lodger. His name is Otto. You love Otto. He's great. But, after a while, Otto is taken away by the Nazis to Dachau. He comes back, but only briefly. Then he goes to China. He will be safe in China. Europe is not a safe place if you are a Jew.

Yes, a lot of Jews are going away. Otto to China. Eva, your friend, to Sweden. And your family friends, the Urbachs, to England.

You have a set of calling cards of your old friends. Their name and the address they used to have in Vienna. You will keep the cards, even if not the friends.

Your Aunt Anna's and Uncle Fritz's flat has been ransacked. They come and live with you. Their cat comes too.

IV

And then something else big happens. Something else monstrous. The something that makes your mother and father, who is still in Italy, decide you should leave Austria too.

It is November 1938.

The big thing that happens was called *Kristallnacht*.

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Change your story

The second word

Kristallnacht

I

Kristallnacht. It sounds kind of nice, doesn't it?

A pretty word.

It means "the night of broken glass". When the SS and children who are in the Hitler Youth set out, over two nights, to attack.

It is 9th November 1938.

Some of the SS do not wear their uniforms. They go about their terrible work dressed as civilians, encouraging thousands more Austrian civilians to join in. Those civilians, people who, perhaps, used to be your neighbours, help break into Jewish homes and businesses, to smash them up, to steal what they can, to set fire to them.

One-thousand-four-hundred synagogues are destroyed.

The fire department comes to make sure the fires don't damage non-Jewish buildings and homes.

Think about that. For a moment.

The fire department let the synagogues burn, but make sure the flames don't spread to non-Jewish buildings.

The Jewish buildings? Well, they can burn.

And it is not just violence towards buildings. Hundreds are murdered that night. Thirty-thousand Jews are taken away to concentration camps.

Dachau.

Buchenwald.

Sachsenhausen.

Hundreds of those taken would die in those concentration camps.

Ninety-one Jews were killed amid the carnage even before they reached the camps.

That is *Kristallnacht.* A word that is not pretty. A word that speaks of death and fear and hate.

You write about it in your diary, too.

“We saw crowds in the streets and knew something was up. We went home quickly… By then thousands of Jews were being fetched out of their homes or rounded up in the streets and taken away. At about 8 p.m. our doorbell rang. We heard men’s voices. Mummy said “Here they are. They’ve come.”

What must your mother have been thinking then? Hiding in her own home, her husband having already fled to another country, her two daughters cowering with her. This, as a mob roamed the streets you used to play on, shop on, walk to the park on. They were looking for Jews to terrorise, to murder. They were looking for you.

Your mother was terrified, of course. She knows that knock on the door was only the start. This will only get worse. She and your father – still in touch by post – understand that Jews have to get out of Austria or those more terrible things will happen to them.

Sering what is happening from afar and under pressure from people who are desperate to do something to help people in another county that are having a terrible time, some foreign governments offer to take Jewish children away and look after them.

This movement of children will become known as the *Kindertransport*.

It is another word that sounds nice, isn't it?

Like *Kristallnacht*.

It is not easy for terrified parents to find a place for their children on a *Kindertransport*. Most children will not be able to leave this way. Many children will be murdered in the months and years to come. Because they are Jews.

But you and your sister are lucky. Your parents work hard to find a place for you and on 5th April 1939 an English couple in a place called Falmouth in Cornwall agree to take you and your sister into their home.

It is arranged for mid-June 1939.

II

But, then, before that day, on May 4th you are at home and your mother is not.

You write about this in your diary, too.

"Mummy was very late home from shopping and I was frantic. I thought she might have been rounded up and taken to prison. When she finally arrived I cried because I was so happy."

You used to think that, when your mother was late home, that she had missed a tram or had stopped to talk to a friend. Now you worry she has been taken, that you will never see her again.

III

On 7th June 1939 your visas to travel to England arrive.

One for you. One for your sister. But not your mother. No.

In England families have been asked if they will take Jewish children in from Nazi Germany and Austria and look after them until it is safe for them to return home.

Mr and Mrs Robbins of Falmouth were kind enough to offer to take both you and your sister, Lieselotte. They do not have any children of their own, but they do have a fabulous house by the sea. And two maids, three dogs, two cars.

What an adventure!

But your mother will not come to England. Only children can go on the *Kindertransport*. Your mum will stay in Nazi-occupied Vienna. Without you and your sister. Without your father.

But, still, you are excited.

'On Tuesday our journey begins,' you write in your diary. 'Lieselotte and I are going to England on a children's transport. I am terribly excited.'

You will go to Cornwall. You will be a refugee.

You confide in your diary more and more at this time. That you are excited. But why are you excited?

In an interview fifty or more years later, you will say: 'None of us knew it was the end of life as we knew it. We thought it was just temporary.'

But it is not temporary.

You will never see you mother again.

But you don't know that.

Not yet.

What a thought. What a terrible heartbreaking thought.

So, not knowing this, on Tuesday 20th June 1939 you say goodbye to your mum to catch a train across Europe, then a ferry to England, then another train on to Cornwall.

On the *Kindertransport*.

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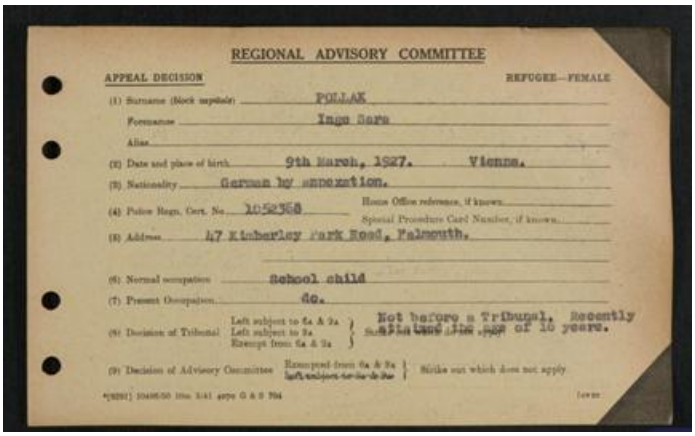
The third word

Kindertransport

I



REGIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

APPEAL DECISION — REFUGEE—FEMALE

(1) Surname (block capitals): POLAK

Forenames: Inge Sara

Alias:

(2) Date and place of birth: 9th March, 1927. Vienna.

(3) Nationality: German by annexation.

(4) Police Regn. Cert. No.: 1052368 — Home Office reference, if known:

Special Procedure Card Number, if known:

(5) Address: 47 Kimberley Park Road, Falmouth.

(6) Normal occupation: School child

(7) Present Occupation: do.

(8) Decision of Tribunal: Left subject to 6a & 9a / Left subject to 9a / Exempt from 6a & 9a — Not before a Tribunal. Recently attained the age of 16 years.

(9) Decision of Advisory Committee: Exempted from 6a & 9a / Left subject to 6a & 9a — Strike out which does not apply

Form

You can't eat on the day you are due to travel on the *Kindertransport*. You are too excited. It feels like a great adventure to you. Some of your friends have already travelled to other countries: now it is your turn.

Your mum and Aunt Anna hire a taxi to take you and your sister to the railway station. The taxi takes you through your beloved Vienna, past the places you have walked with your parents. The Ring. Stephansplatz. The Opera.

Your city. Your home.

Vienna is beautiful. Where you have spent the first twelve years of your life. Do you wonder when you will see it again?

Or are you too excited?

At the station there are hundreds of children all making the same journey as you. From Vienna. Across the Austrian border and through Nazi Germany. Then through the Netherlands, which has not been invaded and occupied yet.

In the Netherlands there is another young girl called Anne who has had to leave her home country. She is from Germany. She lives in Amsterdam with her family. She has a mum and dad and an older sister. But they are all together. For now.

The young girl likes writing a diary, too. But you will never meet Anne Frank. She is another of the millions of victims of the Nazis.

At the railway station, you are given a piece of cardboard on a string to put around your neck. It has your number on it. These are your last moments in Vienna.

You record them in your diary a few weeks later.

“As I lay in mummy’s arms,” you write, “saying goodbye to her for heaven knows how long, I still didn’t realise what was happening.”

You join a queue. You have to queue for a long time. Then you are inside a railway carriage.

This is it. 22nd June 1939.

“Suddenly we were on the train and waved goodbye to Mummy and Aunt Anna until the train took us out of sight.”

II

Mr and Mrs Robbins come to collect you at Exeter station – half way across a continent from home – in one of their two cars. Then they drive you down to Falmouth over moors and through valleys to the sea.

And the sea is beautiful. Cornwall is beautiful. You were brought up in Vienna, hundreds of miles from the sea. Now you can see the ocean every day.

But, even so, now that you have arrived in England as a refugee, you are no longer as excited as you thought you would be. You have a different feeling. And you cannot tell your mother about it: she is not with you. Or your sister: she is acting like she is too old to bother with you. And you have no friends here.

Not yet. But you will. You will soon have friends.

For now, you can tell your diary how you feel: “Something travelled with me,” you write. “Something I didn’t want. It is homesickness. Not a pleasant feeling…”

How must it feel to leave your home country, your mother, your friends, everything you have ever known and go somewhere where you don't know what anyone is saying because you don't speak their language?

You can answer that now.

"Everything is so strange here,' you write in your diary. "It seems to me that I have been torn out of my warm nest and it hurts terribly... If only I could be back in Vienna, going for walks on Sunday mornings with my parents."

III

You do not settle well in Cornwall. You feel, almost immediately, that your guardians, Mr and Mrs Robbins, do not like you.

They complain that your bedroom is a mess. When you are asked to sweep the floor you are told off for scratching the furniture. You hear Mrs Robbins tell Mr Robbins that you do not work hard enough.

They ask you and your sister not to speak German. Even when you are alone in your room together.

Imagine that. Not being allowed to speak in your own language.

You do not like being told what to do by these people. You do not like being told that you cannot speak in your own language. Even though Mr and Mrs Robbins are good people and have taken you in, they are not your parents, are they?

One day Mr Robbins says: "Even the dogs know there is only one master in the house whom they must obey and I hope I won't have to show it to you in the way I did to them."

How do you feel when he says that? What can he mean?

This is a foreign country. You do not belong here. You are low and you are lonely.

And you feel bad for feeling bad. Because you know that there are children in Austria who must envy you being here, all safe away from the Nazis and what they are doing to the Jews.

It is so confusing. It is impossible.

And it comes back to you again and again that you cannot talk to the Robbins. You cannot talk to your sister. And you do not have your mother with you anymore to speak to her, to be comforted by her. Yes, your diary is the only place you can speak about how you feel. About how confused you are, how unhappy.

“When I was at home,” you tell your diary, “mummy always kissed and comforted me if I had something on my mind, now there is nobody.”

You have not even had the letter from your mum that you were expecting. It is three days late. Who can you speak to about that? Who can you explain to that you are sick with worry about what might have stopped your mum writing to you?

“We were very worried because mummy’s letter was three days late. I thought she might have been taken to Dachau, but then her letter came and I cried with relief.”

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The fourth word

Refugee

I

And then you hear that Great Britain is at war with Germany. France too.

On 1st September 1939, both countries said they would declare war on Germany if it did not withdraw from Poland.

There was no reply from Germany.

The Prime Minister of Great Britain spoke to the country on the wireless. “I have to tell you,” he said, “that no such undertaking has been received and that consequently this country is at war with Germany.”

What does this mean for you?

Your life?

Because you and your sister are from the country the war is with, your sister, sixteen now, has to go to register as an alien at the police station.

Alien?

What does that mean? Are you and sister the enemy? You would be the enemy in Austria if you were still at home. Because you are a Jew.

Is there a place you can go to where you will not be the enemy, an alien? Is there a place you can be safe?

Your father – who you have not seen for years – is in Paris now. He had to leave Italy to be safe because the Italian leader thought he was the enemy. How long will he be safe in France? How long until he is seen as an enemy? Maybe they have already got him?

Your mother? You are not sure.

II

But, even though there is a war on... and even though you are sick with worry about your mother... and even though you want to be seen as an English girl and not the enemy or a refugee... you are sometimes happy.

You are happy because one thing, at least, has changed.

Something good.

Your guardians – Mr and Mrs Robbins – are going to have a baby. And, because of that, you are going to be looked after at the local Catholic School.

You will live there at the school and not with the Robbins.

The schools is run by two ladies, both called Miss Davies. The Miss Davieses are nice and kind and let you meet friends and go for walks and have fun. You are with other children your age. Sometimes you forget about the war and the fact that you are not with your mother.

Sometimes.

III

But most of the time you do not forget?

Where is your mother? Is she well? Is she happy?

You receive fewer letters from her now the war has begun.

When you receive the words of your mother you want to read them over and over. It means she is still there. That she is thinking of you.

Your mother writes in one of her last letters (although you do not know it is one of her last letters): “I am constantly with you in my thoughts…. How happy I should be to hear from you – and better to see you… I long to be with you and pray that God may soon grant that wish.”

That is what you pray for too. But when will it be?

You mother never tells you about her life and how she feels. Like you never tell anyone how you feel.

You write about it in your diary. You write about how the other children you know have no idea what it is like to be away from their mums and dads. They don’t know how it feels. That every night they go home to kind words and cuddles and you do not.

You don’t speak about it to anyone. You don’t want to stand out. You don’t want the others to think you are different, a refugee, an Austrian.

You want to be an English girl like all the other English girls. That is how you can be happy.

IV

The war goes on. 1939 into 1940.

For the first few months nothing happens in Cornwall. Not really. The British Army is out in Europe trying to defend the Netherlands and Belgium and France, but it is not going well.

And here? In Great Britain? You see barbed wire being strung up on the Cornish beaches you like to play on. And sandbags up against other buildings like the library you have now joined because your English is so good you can read books in English. You love English books, English stories.

But the sandbags and the barbed wire? Does it mean war coming here?

In Europe the Nazis are sweeping through country after country. The Netherlands falls. Belgium too. And maybe France, soon? France, where you father is.

Then England? Will they come here, too?

Something you father said in a letter comes to you. That the first thing the Nazis will do if they invade England is come after the Jews.

And you know that you are not safe here. Not really.

When will you feel like you can just live? And when will you see your mother again? And when will your life be normal? And what is normal? For you? For anyone?

You have not heard from your mother in weeks. Where is she? Is she in Vienna? Is she in Dachau, the place where Otto was sent?

Otto. Vienna. Your mother. That all seems so long ago.

When France falls to the Nazis in June 1940 you wonder where your father is, too.

Around that time, you walk in to Falmouth to go to the cinema and notice the harbour is full of boats. Then you find that the cinema is closed because the British Army has had to escape across the channel from France. Along with refugees from France. The soldiers and refugees – wet and exhausted from the sea – are all being cared for there after the Germans chased them out of France with tanks and aeroplanes.

Your father is one of the refugees. He comes to Plymouth across the English Channel. He has nothing. Just a blanket he was given when he arrived in England. He is a refugee now, too. Like you.

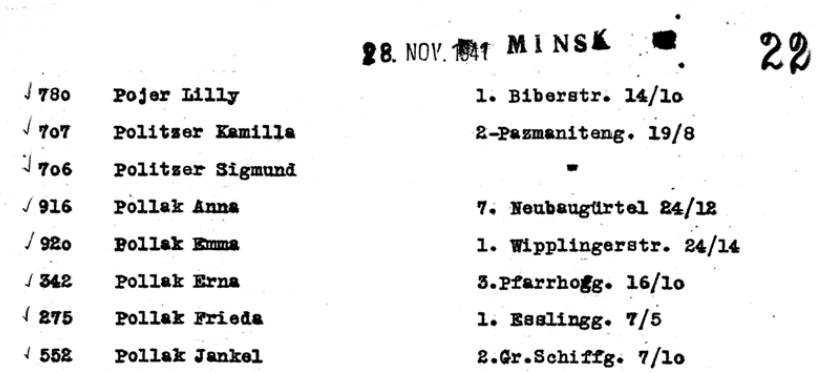
When he comes to see you at last, you and your sister have to give him your pocket money. So that he can buy a toothbrush.

But he is remote and cross. A grumpy man. He is not good at being comforting like your mother. You wish your mother was here too.

And then the Nazis come for you.

The fifth word

Alien



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707	Politzer Kamilla	2-Pazmaniteng. 19/8
706	Politzer Sigmund	"
916	Pollak Anna	7. Neubaugürtel 24/12
920	Pollak Emma	1. Wipplingerstr. 24/14
342	Pollak Erna	3.Pfarrhofg. 16/1o
275	Pollak Frieda	1. Esslingg. 7/5
552	Pollak Jankel	2.Gr.Schiffg. 7/1o

I

The Nazis come for you, and they very, very nearly get you. Even here in Cornwall the furthest corner of England.

You are in town. Off to buy a bag of chips with a new friend from school after you have finished your homework. You walk past the Wesleyan Chapel in Falmouth.

“I have just escaped death,’ you write in your diary that night. ‘We heard no bang. But suddenly all around us there was rubble and people were screaming and belatedly diving for shelter… We didn’t know where the bomb had dropped until someone shouted “It’s the Chapel!” Then we saw it was in ruins – and we were a stone’s throw from it. How had the bomb missed us? One minute we were exactly in front of the chapel, the next we were ten steps away, and in the split second the bomb fell.”

You survived. But a boy inside was killed. A boy close to your age. The son of an air raid warden, killed as he waited for his father to do his duty for his country in a church.

II

You think about that a lot. That boy. That child. Dead now. But you are still alive. You are safe. You were not hit by the bomb.

Maybe the next one will get you? Does it feel to you like the Nazis are getting closer? They nearly got your father in France. They have maybe have already got your mother in Austria. Have they? Your father tells you he thinks they might have.

But you don't know that she is dead. You still have hope.

Some of the time, with all this going on, you can forget for a moment about your mother. It is then that you are happier. Your school is nice. The two Miss Davieses who look after you are kind. You have lots of friends.

Looking back, when you are older, you will describe this as the happiest time of your life. Here in Cornwall.

III

Time passes. The war goes on and on.

In March 1943 you become an alien. Like your sister did.

'I've had to go to the police station as I am now 16 and have to register as an alien.'

An alien.

Now someone else is writing about your life. Not just you. There is a small document that explains why you are now an alien.

Name: Inga Sara Pollak

Nationality: German by annexation

Refugee, female

Place and date of birth: 9th March 1927, Vienna

Normal occupation: School child

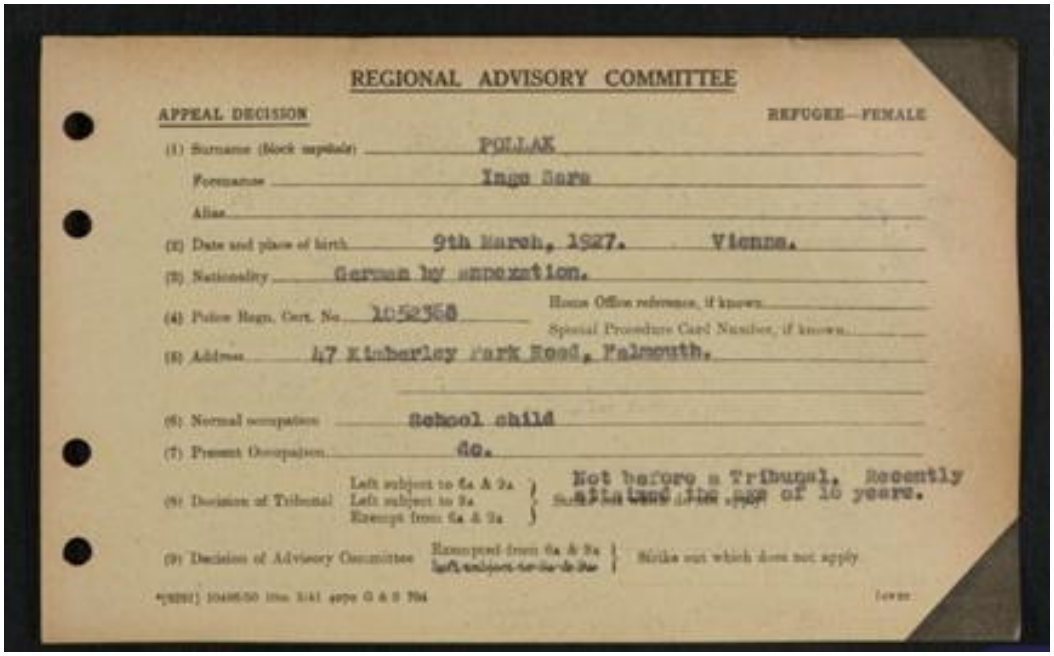
The document shows that the Nazis still have a grip on you, even through you are safe in England. They couldn't bomb you, but they have your identity.

It says you are German.

But you are not German: you are Austrian. However, because Germany annexed Austria, the British see you as German.

And your middle name is not Sara.

But when the Nazis annexed Austria they made every girl who is a Jew change their middle name to Sara. Like wearing a yellow star. It shows you are Jew. You came to England with that name.



REGIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

APPEAL DECISION — REFUGEE—FEMALE

(1) Surname (Block capitals): POLLAK
Forenames: Inge Sara
Alias:
(2) Date and place of birth: 9th March, 1927. Vienna.
(3) Nationality: German by annexation.
(4) Police Regn. Cert. No. 1052368 — Home Office reference, if known:
Special Procedure Card Number, if known:
(5) Address: 47 Kimberley Park Road, Falmouth.
(6) Normal occupation: School child
(7) Present Occupation: do.
(8) Decision of Tribunal: Left subject to 6a & 9a / Left subject to 9a / Exempt from 6a & 9a — Not before a Tribunal. Recently attained the age of 16 years.
(9) Decision of Advisory Committee: Exempted from 6a & 9a / Left subject to 6a & 9a — Strike out which does not apply

Reasons for Decision.

POLLAK came to this country from Austria on the 22nd June, 1939, under the auspices of the Refugee Children's Movement. She came under the personal guarantee of Mr. G. L. Robins, with whom she has resided since that date. Her parents are Jewish.

Until June 1938, the alien's father owned a textile business in Vienna, then he left owing to Nazi oppression, and opened a similar business in Paris. At the outbreak of war he was interned, examined, and released to join the French Army. At the collapse of France he escaped to England and enlisted in the Pioneer Corps. He was discharged on medical grounds on the 2.5.41, and is now employed as a commercial traveller. POLLAK's mother remained in Vienna to look after the business and her two other daughters. The alien believes that her mother has been transported to Poland. She has a sister in this country, Lieselotte, who appeared before the Committee at Bodmin in July, 1940, and was placed in Category "C".

Miss Edith Frost, of the Girls' High School, Falmouth, and Miss Agnes Davis, who have known POLLAK since 1940, testify as to her loyalty to this country.

The Committee considered the alien to be a genuine racial refugee, whose liberty without special restriction would not prejudice the safety of the country.

Regional Advisory Committee No. 7, SOUTH.

Signature: [illegible]
Inspector,
Secretary of the Advisory Committee.

Date 13th October, 1943.

IV

‘The alien believes her mother has been transported to Poland.’

It is a strange sentence. You read it over and over.

But it was true, then. Your father was pretty sure of that. He had told you she will have been transported. That she may not even have made it to the destination. But died on the way.

People knew then that Jews were being forced into cattle trucks and taken across Europe with no food or water. Knew that many died en route. Then were forced to work as a slave or murdered when they reached a concentration camp.

You tried to find out for years where your mother was. You went to refugee centres, you wrote letters to Red Cross like millions of others did. Some people were lucky and found a relative.

Most were not.

You were not.

You were in your sixties or seventies, most of your life lived in England when you found out the truth.

You found documents. Lists of names. Your mother’s name – Emma Pollak – was on one of them. It showed that she was transported hundreds of miles to Minsk.

It was November 1941. Your mother and your grandmother. Murdered because they were Jews.

Back when you were fourteen.

V

And you? What happened to Emma Pollak's youngest daughter?

You became a British citizen. You moved to Sheffield and worked as a language teacher.

The writer of this story about your life emailed your son to ask if it was okay for him to write about what happened to you. So that children in schools in 2026 could find out about you.

He replied quicky.

"I am Julian, Inga's son,' he said. "I spoke to my mother about your request and it sounds likke a lovely idea. It is so important to ensure future generations don't forget about the horrors of the Holocaust."

Tom Palmer

www.tompalmer.co.uk/after-the-war/