

## RIPPLE IN A SMALL POND

By Betty Kreinik

In Skokie, Illinois the Nazis demand parade time and the ACLU defends them. The Bill of Rights undergoes additional scrutiny and the ACLU loses membership. The opposing sides expend money and manpower. Again, Jews ask who their friends are. For us, that's all thousands of miles away. We are in Germany, living on a military post, my husband, our three children and I. It's a small post, barely known by most Army people. Many Germans have not heard of it. Travel brochures extol the delights of Bavaria, omitting the farming towns in northern Bavaria which surround our post. This is not a place for visiting Congressmen. It is a training post, weighted with heavy equipment and gray skies, 70 miles from the Communist border. For us, the only Jewish family, it is the scene of this year's annual skirmish ... the Christmas season.

We have fought this microcosmic battle for ten years, in civilian communities and on Army posts, beginning with our first child's entry into pre-school. The goals have been rather modest. Our request, not demand, is that there be no nativity scene at the base of the Christmas tree and that songs with lyrics about the birth of Christ, the Savior, be deleted from the curriculum. We have learned that it is unwise to mention separation of church and state. That has alienated many people and made rational discussion impossible. We could not ban Santa Claus from the classroom. Our two older children managed to get through those experiences; our youngest refused to go to the Christmas party.

The approach to the problem varied with the type of community. Catholics, who were also a minority outside the metropolitan areas, did not consider our request outrageous. The opposition came from Christians who were fundamentalist or evangelical in their beliefs. They had a mission in life; to bring us into their fold and show us the way. Many had never known Jews personally. Our request offended them. It was an attack on their way of life. Worst of all, we were denying our children salvation through Christ. On the lighter side, it couldn't hurt the children to have a tree. Our deprived children were pitied; we were adamant.

The compromise was offered. Let the pre-schools have their religious songs and we could add ours. Better still, couldn't we give a short presentation about Hanukkah and bring along a menorah? When we were

younger parents we tried doing the Hanukkah "spiel". It made our daughter feel like an alien and left us emotionally kicking ourselves. The Christian teacher felt good. She had done the right thing.

In order to give the teacher a better understanding, we explained the celebration of Hanukkah as a non-religious holiday. It was virtually impossible to impart the fact that we are more than a memorable battle and a miracle 2000 years old. The holiday spirit prevailed. The parents wanted their songs. We were cast in the villain's role, taking joy away from the little children. Could they or the little children fathom Herman Wouk's observation that without the victory of the Maccabees there would be no Christmas?

Throughout the years we have had the comfort of other Jewish families to share our Friday night services and holidays. We have done well in the absence of a rabbi and no synagogue. We have built our own ark and had services in a Unitarian church. Dissent has arisen over the rightness of doing the Hanukkah "spiel". There have been arguments with Orthodox Jews who relegate the holiday to a minor observance. The assimilators have told us that it couldn't hurt the children to sing songs proclaiming Christ the king Of Israel. We have never met a Jew who put up a "winter festival" tree.

This year's skirmish was precipitated by the inclusion of "Away in the Manger", which we asked to have deleted. The nearest military rabbi is located about an hour away. He's a busy man, proposing that he will be a circuit rabbi wherever the number of Jews warrant his attention in the several military posts in the area. His guidance to the Christian chaplain on this post was to leave the Christmas carol in, and add the heavy "Rock of Ages". After Hanukkah was over, he gave us the following rationale. He grew up unharmed by singing Christmas carols. It never hurt his identity. We reminded him that his was a comfortable, stable Jewish society, something our children do not get in our wandering existence. Betrayal replaced the expected comfort.

The night before our departure from the United States, a Christian friend and I sat in a motel in the Midwest, delaying our goodbyes. Ending a thoughtful pause in the conversation, she apologized for what she was about to say. "How do you feel about taking the children to Germany where so many Jews have suffered and died?" She was afraid for us. It

was a question I had asked myself. Explaining the answer to my fourth generation American friend wasn't easy. The answer had to start with the fact that we can't live our lives being afraid. Part of our children's history is in Germany. They have been to services. They have seen the plaques and the memorials. They have learned about the Holocaust. Time has insulated them from the hate. It does not erase the facts of heritage. We cannot ignore it because it brings us pain. Nor can we live with it looming so large in our consciousness that we see nothing else. To deny the children the past is to sever them from their link with Jews everywhere, living and dead, The words were said and I was confident.

It is cold and gray in this tiny spot in Bavaria. Walled cities, churches and castles seem to brood in their antiquity, It seems ludicrous to fight so insignificant a battle in a place where one may book a tour to Dachau, preferably in the Spring when the flowers are blooming.

The End