

Kenter's Early Years
based on his stories and his files
and additional research
compiled by Susan
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Kent Roger Manning, nee Kurt Raphael Manneberg, died at his home in Chicago on October 9, 2012. Born in Breslau on July 29, 1923, he was the son of Ismar Manneberg, a lawyer and decorated officer from the First World War, and Susanne Zweig Manneberg. Before Kurt was a year old, Ismar died, perhaps the result of war wounds, perhaps of other causes (accounts differ). As a young widow, Susanne (known as Susi) went to work to support Kurt and his older sister Eva. Susi became the manager of Kempinski's, a well-known restaurant in Breslau, and the assimilated German-Jewish family lived in an apartment on the third floor above the restaurant. Kurt played table tennis in the spacious apartment, studied piano, attended the opera on Saturday afternoons, and enjoyed the company of his maternal aunt and uncle, Lizzie and John Wasbutzki, and his mother's companion, Herbert Sandburg, a composer and orchestra conductor.

"I never knew I was Jewish until Hitler came to power," Kent later recalled. After 1933, the family's life changed, first subtly, then shatteringly. Since Jewish students were no longer welcome at German *Gymnasien* (college preparatory high schools), Kurt first went to a school set up by the local Jewish community, and then in fall 1936 Susi sent him at age 13 to a boarding school in Britain. Eva pursued training as a medical assistant at the Jewish Hospital in Breslau, and in fall 1937 she left Germany at age 19, first for Britain, where she spent a year as an au pair, and then to the U.S. to join her fiancée Dr. Franz Steinitz in Chicago. In fact, Susi traveled to England in fall 1938 to see Eva off to America and to visit Kurt, and then returned to Germany. Kent later recalled waving goodbye as her plane took off, "a DC-9, the same plane that takes off at the end of *Casablanca*," he explained. That was the last time he saw his mother.

Through letters Susi sent to Eva and other documents, we can piece together why Susi decided to return to Germany, an inexplicable decision in retrospect. Although we do not have the exact dates, we know that Susi's older sister Lizzie was widowed in the late 1930s and that Susi promised her brother-in-law John to take care of his wife, who had never had to support herself. We also know that during these same years Susi was forced to give up her position at Kempinski's and that she took a position as office manager of the Jewish Resettlement Agency in Breslau. Although Susi did consider immigrating to South America and even started learning Spanish, she could not leave Lizzie behind. Susi and Lizzie were sent to Theresienstadt in June 1943. Susi died six weeks later from a lung infection, according to her death certificate. In October 1944 Lizzie was sent to Auschwitz, where the Nazis no longer issued death certificates.

Kent never fully grasped these facts about his mother and aunt. For decades, he believed that his proud mother "committed suicide before the Nazis took her." This was what his older cousin Heinz, who had settled in Nottingham, had told him. In fact, Susi's death

certificate noted a “suicide attempt” from an overdose of the barbiturate veronal, although it is unclear whether this happened before, during, or after her deportation. What is clear is that Kurt wanted, indeed needed, to remember his mother as an agent of her own fate, not as a victim.

That was certainly the way he viewed himself, especially after his immigration to the U.S. in 1946, but also during the decade he spent in Britain from age 13 to 23. For his first three years in Britain, Kurt was a student at Shoreham Grammar School, a boarding school near Brighton on the South Coast. Although he barely knew English when he arrived in fall 1936, he studied ferociously hard, memorizing enough Shakespeare to pass his final exam in English and excelling in mathematics and science. He also played soccer and was a proud member of the “Football First Eleven,” roughly equivalent to the varsity team at an American high school. He graduated in July 1939 and then studied for a school-leaving exam administered across Britain and its colonies, called the Cambridge Local Exam. He received top scores, and this gave him the opportunity to make his case to the Refugee Children’s Movement, his legal sponsor in Britain, to support his bid for a university degree.

In December 1939, just a few months after Britain went to war against Germany, Kurt moved to London. He lived in a boarding house with other émigrés, working during the day while attending classes at night and on weekends at Northampton Polytechnic. An affiliate of the University of London, the technical college offered an accelerated degree course for engineers, due to the exigencies of wartime. After one semester of study, he was interned in the north of England as a German national and hence “enemy alien.” As he reported in letters to Eva in summer 1940, he quite enjoyed his “holiday” at state expense: “Here is everything I need. I don’t need to work, nor do I have to pay anything, and the main thing is I can study as much as I like. The food here is good and plenty, and there is also much entertainment and fun. There are quite a number of my friends here, and we play football, etc. etc.” As a 17-year-old, Kurt was one of the first internees to be released, and he returned to his life in London, living in a boarding house, working during the day, and studying nights and weekends. At one point, German bombing of London was so severe that night classes were cancelled and students had to attend classes all day Saturday and Sunday.

During his early years in London, Kurt remained in steady correspondence with Eva and Franz in Chicago and, to a lesser extent, with Susi and Lizzie in Breslau. (Eva saved his letters as well as letters from her mother and aunt.) Kurt reassured Eva that he slept soundly in his basement room, despite the Blitz, and he thanked her profusely for sending money and packages of clothing. He still held out hope of getting a visa to the U.S. soon, and his letters were filled with strategies for doing so. He was thrilled with the news that Eva and Franz had a baby girl named Gail born in February 1942. He and Eva also shared feelings of frustration over their mother’s situation. On September 17, 1940, Kurt wrote to Eva, “About Mother, you are quite right. She is silly in that respect. Fancy, sitting at the top of the committee and not doing anything for her own sake.” Later he told Eva that his letters to Susi were not getting through and to please report to her that he was doing well.

In June 1943 Kurt sat for his final exams for his Bachelor of Science in Engineering, poignantly enough, during the same week that Susi and Lizzie were deported to Theresienstadt. By this point, Eva had not heard from Susi since November 1941, and there is no indication that either Eva or Kurt realized what had happened until October 1943, when Herbert Sandberg wrote that he had received a postcard from Lizzie reporting that Susi had died of a lung infection on July 17. This was one of the very few letters that Kurt saved, along with stacks of school and university reports, engineering exams, and job recommendations. Yet Kent later could not recall hearing the news or his response. And Eva too forgot the news, for decades later on a group tour of Theresienstadt she rediscovered the place and date of her mother's death.

After receiving his Bachelor of Science in Engineering, Kurt found life easier in London. The tide of the war had turned toward the Allies, the bombing had stopped, and he now had his own flat in Bayswater with his friend from Shoreham Grammar School and fellow émigré, Kurt Harburger. For a while he continued his day job as a tutor for a correspondence course in engineering, but then seeking more "practical experience," he found a position as a designer draftsman. He dated, went to the theatre, even lost some of his hard-won cash gambling on greyhound racing. All the while he waited for his visa to the U.S., which finally came through in April 1946. Leaving £10 in a British bank account, just in case he ever returned and needed to start from scratch, he packed his belongings and boarded the Swedish ship Drottningholm in Liverpool.

In his memoirs, Kent wrote about what happened next: "[The ship] landed somewhere near 96th Street....The immigration officials came on board. When I presented my visa, I was asked what I wanted to be my legal name in the USA. I had known that a name change was possible. At that time it was customary for Germans to anglicize their names [in Britain]. Even British Royalty did it. Battenberg changed his name to Mountbatten.... My roommate Kurt Harburger became Kenneth Harper....Keeping my initials KRM I became Kent Roger Manning. Had I known that many Americans have 'foreign' names, I would have kept mine." The surname Manning may well have come from his father's younger brother, Erich Manneberg, who had emigrated to Australia and changed his name to Eric Manning.

Now a landed immigrant, Kent Roger Manning took a train from New York to Chicago, where Eva met him at the train station and promptly teased him about the Union Jack on his lapel. Eva helped him find a place to live, and within a week, he had found a job. Five years later he became an American citizen. In those five years he had served twice in the U.S. Army, working with Werner Von Braun and other German rocket scientists who would lead the American space effort. He had met the love of his life, Barbara Groenke, who would become his wife of sixty years. He had joined a small and up-and-coming company, Aeroquip, in Jackson, Michigan, where he would make his career.

In his retirement, which lasted for more than 25 years, Kent loved to tell stories about his youth: the story of playing table tennis and hitting a ball out the window and fearing when it landed in the middle of the street just before Hitler's motorcade passed by; the

story of his arrest in London for stealing uneaten rolls while working as a busboy at the Savoy Hotel; the story of his visa interview at the U.S. Consulate when the young consular officer was distracted by a phone call from his girlfriend; the story of accompanying Von Braun on his early trips to Washington trying to convince government officials that landing on the moon was actually possible; and the story of his courtship of Bar.

In this narrative of his early life are found many of the traits of the beloved husband, father, uncle, and friend. His fascination with numbers, with measurements, and with charts. His focus, his dogged persistence, his optimism. His pleasure in gambling, mostly within reasonable limits. His determination to play the hand he was dealt without bitterness, indeed, with a tremendous zest for life. His living on “borrowed time” and his awareness of his own great luck and fortune.

In this narrative are also found the elements that led his daughter Susan to her life-long interest in the complexities of history and memory, identity and trauma in twentieth-century culture. She has told this story through the histories of dancing bodies in Germany and the United States at mid-century, but it is Kenter’s story that is her Ur-text.