

## Voluntary Internee

### **Elizabeth Kramperth — New Jersey**

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In 1938, a German American couple, Volker and Marta Reingold (pseudonym), went back to Germany for a family visit. They returned with a favorite niece, Elizabeth Kramperth, who had always wanted to see the United States. The war, however, prevented her planned return to Germany, and she settled in at the Reingold home and helped at Marta's ice cream parlor. When required in 1940, Elizabeth registered as an alien and again as an enemy alien in 1942.

Then, in late 1942, the FBI arrested the Reingolds as dangerous enemy aliens, and the Justice Department interned them. Elizabeth lived alone at the Reingold residence in North Bergen for a time, then she moved in with a friend.

On December 9, 1942, the FBI returned to the Reingold premises for another search and discovered one piece of incriminating evidence: Elizabeth's unexpired Hitler Youth membership card. On this evidence alone, the U.S. attorney recommended she be taken into custody, although the FBI did not pick her up from another month, at which time officials granted her an interim parole.

Elizabeth had gone to work at a local drugstore shortly before her arrest. She had never filed first citizenship papers ("Declaration of Intention") because she did not intend to remain in the United States.

Elizabeth admitted she had belonged to the Bund's *Deutsches Mädel* (Hitler Girl's Movement) since 1937. According to her, their only activities, for which she paid fifty pfennigs a month, were

summertime camping and wintertime crocheting and knitting. Her father worked as a railroad engineer for the German government, and before that he had served in the German army during the First World War. Her older brother was in the Wehrmacht.

At her first hearing on February 15, 1943, the FBI revealed that it had arrested her because of Elizabeth's membership in the *Deutsches Mädel*, which she had denied on her visa renewal application, and also because:

- She did not plan to remain in the United States (this raised doubts about her loyalty).
- Her father and brother's connections to the German government.
- Her sponsors in the United States had been interned.

Since Elizabeth was alone and not self-supporting (she had lost her job), she requested to be interned with the Reingolds. The board accommodated her, but its recommendation implied that the decision rested on the FBI's accusations, and it charged her with "pro-Nazi sympathies."

Two days later, and now at Ellis Island where the Reingolds were detained, Elizabeth again requested voluntary internment. Elizabeth felt confident, she said, in making enough to live on in the future, but she "did not want to live alone in this country." Then a second board recommended her internment.

Late in March, the reviewing officer from the Alien Enemy Control Unit con-

cluded—doubtless based on the Hitler Youth membership issue—that Elizabeth’s “sympathies ... are evidently thoroughly with Germany.” He dismissed her request for voluntary internment, stating that “her expressed sympathy for Germany was so strong as to warrant this action” rather than her request. The pro forma order from the attorney general on March 24, which he never altered to fit a unique circumstance like Elizabeth’s, and probably would not have in this case anyway, ordered her internment; she was “potentially dangerous to the public peace and safety of the United States.” Kramperth had already surrendered to the FBI on March 22, 1943, and, along with the Reingolds, arrived at the Crystal City, Texas, internment camp three days later. Elizabeth mistakenly assumed that her internment was voluntary, and that she could leave Crystal City whenever she wanted.

*I couldn’t take care of a home alone. I had to look for work; I had to do something, but I had no social security card. I worked in a household, then in a liquor drug store. I was there not even a week when, bingo, the FBI came.*

*The unpleasant thing was that they followed me like a criminal. I couldn’t even go out dancing. I always had the idea that somebody was in the corner looking at me. They said, “You have two brothers. One is a flyer. What would you do if he came over here and wanted to take shelter with you? He’s going to bomb New York. Would you report him, or would you, for brotherly love, let him do it?”*

*I said, “Blood is thicker than water. Naturally I would discourage my brother and say, no, don’t do that.”*

*I went from job to job, but every time they were at the doorstep, talking to my*

*bosses, and then out the door I went. Every job I had they were following me like I was a crook. I had to look over my shoulder, but I also had to make a living. I didn’t want to be a welfare case.*

Q: Did your bosses tell you that the FBI was asking questions?

*Yes, right away. They called me over and said, “Elizabeth, you are an enemy alien. We have to discharge you. We can’t have you working here.” Imagine.*

*Then it was said that my aunt and uncle were being transferred to Crystal City. So naturally, my aunt said, “I can’t go and leave my niece here.” She begged them to take me along, so I went of my own free will. We had to take care of the house, sell all the furniture and everything in the household; she only could take a few odds and ends. They lost everything. We all went to Crystal City, Texas, by train. That was from ’42 to ’45—three years.*

At Crystal City, Elizabeth gained the reputation of an excellent nurse’s aide in the camp hospital. But by October 1944 she had grown increasingly restless in confinement and asked to be sent back to New Jersey. An old friend there, with whom she had lived briefly after her relatives’ internment, offered to rent her a room.

By now, too, Elizabeth had decided that she wanted to stay in the United States permanently and become a citizen. She “got used to everything” here, she said, and her parents in Germany had accepted that decision. Elizabeth also hoped to be able to bring them to America after the war.

Q: What made you decide not to go back to Germany, after all you'd been through?

*I was the only daughter, and my parents were heartbroken that I decided to stay here. During the war they lost everything. What could I do? Be another burden on them? They got packages from me, starting when it was allowed to send them. I supported my family. I clothed them; I fed them.*

To her surprise, Elizabeth learned she was not considered a voluntary internee after all, and her request to leave needed to be approved by a rehearing board and the AECU. Both eventually agreed to a closely supervised parole, "there [now] being no evidence indicating pro-Nazi sympathies."

Elizabeth left Crystal City by Pullman coach for Jersey City in January 1945, and began a new life in Weehawken as a governess. She had wanted to find work in the medical field because of her training in camp, but she told her parole officer in March that she "had not been permitted to do so." Before the end of the year, Elizabeth moved to Park Avenue in Manhattan.

*One day in January 1945, I was called up to the office at Crystal City, where they told me that I was free to go. My aunt and uncle had to stay, but because I came of my own free will [she was mistaken], I didn't have to stay any longer. They said I had to have somebody, some relative or friend to go to. I had some friends of my aunt, and I arrived in Jersey City, New Jersey, by train. They paid my ticket. If I hadn't had all the trouble with the FBI, I would have stayed in New Jersey in the first place; I would*

*never have gone to Crystal City [again, a mistaken assumption on her part].*

*When I did come back from Texas, I started to work on Park Avenue, New York, as a private nurse for a little girl—for Jewish people. They were very nice to me, but I still had to report every two weeks to a Catholic rectory to tell the priest I was still here and hadn't left town.*

*I left the job as a nursemaid and went into the restaurant business as a waitress, because it paid a little more money. That was in 1946, but the FBI still followed me. They told my boss that I was an enemy alien, and if I made any wrong move, he had to report me. I went to the immigration office and told them what they were doing. I said I couldn't live like that.*

Q: Why was the FBI so interested in you?

*That's what I'd like to know. They had me on the verge of suicide because of the way they were after me, talking to all my bosses. I was always discharged. They'd say, "You have an enemy alien working here." They came; they told me stories about my brothers I didn't even know. I didn't hear from my family for three or four years. They knew more about them than I did.*

*I was at the immigration office in Manhattan, and there was a Jewish fellow, who was giving me such a hard time. I was frantic, I started screaming, I couldn't take it any more. I was a basket case.*

*Then some lady happened to hear me. She was right next to where I had to report every week, working in the welfare section, and she kind of cuddled me and asked if I was Catholic. I said, yes. She said, "I'm going to help you." And be-*

*cause I was a visitor she said, "I'm going to help to send you to Canada so you can emigrate legally to this country." And that woman really helped me; she was like a guardian angel.*

*One morning I took the train to Montreal and stayed all day at the American consulate. Then I entered the United States legally in 1947. When I arrived in New York that morning, my first move was to go to immigration and apply for my first citizenship papers. After five years, I went to Brooklyn for my final papers. I had two friends as sponsors.*

*When I was called in, this gentleman said he had a file on me. I asked him if it was all about me. He said, "Yes, all about you." I couldn't believe it! I just shook my head. It was about five or six inches high; more than that. They asked, "What makes you think that you're going to be a good citizen?" At that time I was pregnant with my first son, and I said, "I'm going to bring the first 'American' into this world. I'll make a damn good American citizen." But what really impressed me was the judge. When he swore me he said, "You'll make a good American citizen if you never forget the home you came from."*

*When I was sworn in, the tears just rolled down my cheeks. I said, "Whoever earned this citizenship paper, it's me," because I worked for it; I suffered for it. What they did to me was impossible, especially for a young girl. I was not a spy. That what's so sad. I said to my children, "You are the first generation here in this country. Your mother really went through hell to get that." I earned my*

*American citizenship. I hope that's never going to happen to anyone else.*

Q: Had your family survived the war?

*Yes, they all did. My brothers came home and my parents survived, even though everything was bombed. In 1945, Wurzburg was 95 percent bombed out.*

*My mother was here twice, in 1954 and 1959, but not my father. My younger brother was here five years.*

*I just wish I could talk to or see those FBI men who constantly followed me and made me lose my jobs. They said they had to be careful: "You're a nice blond girl, and we have to watch you."*

Q: They were joking?

*Yes, but in the meantime I didn't know what to do. I did have long blond hair, and the boss in the drug store said to me, "Elizabeth, if you are not going to go out with me, I'm going to report you." When I got my first papers, I just swung it under his nose.*

*"Now report me! I'm legally in this country and I have my first citizenship papers." After that, he didn't bother me anymore. I kept my mouth shut. I was quiet. I did my job.*

*When I got married in 1949 things looked pretty good. This had happened years ago. I am fifty-six years in this country, happily married with three grown children. I am very fortunate to tell my grandchildren how grandma arrived in America in 1939.*