

Trudy Link



Trudy Link's eyes well up when she recalls her nightmares. "I see my mother carrying me. The sky is purple. I'm scared." Years later, her mother Anna Jonke would explain these nighttime terrors. During bomb raids in World War II, she would pick up her young daughter and run to the bunkers. One time, she pushed Trudy to the ground and threw her body on top of her to protect her. From her early years of war-time trauma, she would go on to find stability, safety and success through a new life in the United States. Irmtraud Jonke, or "Trudy," was born April 21, 1942 in Rann, Yugoslavia, now part of Slovenia. Trudy's father, Joseph Jonke, had been drafted into the German army, and in her early years she lived with her mother and grandmother. In Yugoslavia during the war, all Germans were given a deadline to board a transport truck out of the country or they would be shot. They could take only what they could carry. Trudy, her mother and grandmother were Slovenian-born but had married Germans, so they were included. The three crossed the border in a tarp-covered truck to a refugee camp in Graz, Austria. Trudy was 3. Not far from the camp, area farm women recruited them to work and live. That's where Trudy recalls playing outside one day when she saw a man with a giant beard and seemingly bulging eyes. She was afraid! He picked her up and called her by her name Irmtraud. She says, "It was my father!" Joseph had been a prisoner-of-war. He had jumped off a train and hidden in the woods for months foraging for food. Finally, someone told him the war had ended. He somehow found his way to the camp where his mother and sister were still living, and they directed him to the farm. He was very weak when he arrived and likely survived only because the woman on the farm nourished him. In Graz, her grandparents became caretakers of an apartment building and found Trudy's family a courtyard building across from them. Even though it had been bombed, Trudy and her parents were able to make a temporary home in a couple of rooms. Her father found work helping to rebuild the Graz train station, which had also been reduced to rubble. Then, the construction company gave him materials to build living quarters in the attic of a house. He made a small kitchen, a sitting room and two bedrooms, and they stayed there until their 1950 emigration to the U.S.

At age 6 that fall, Trudy started first grade in a Graz convent, riding unescorted on a trolley each school day. In second grade, she was supposed to receive her First Holy Communion in May. But to accommodate her family's plans to emigrate, the nuns scheduled a special communion ceremony April 1. To save money, her mother used her wedding gown to sew Trudy's communion dress. "Someone put me in a white fur jacket," Trudy recalls. On April 21, Trudy's eighth birthday, they sailed for 10 days from Bremerhaven, Germany, to New York City. Her grandmother and cousins paid for everything, including her father's first-class status. He slept at the front of the ship in a bunk hammock. Trudy and her mother were in the ship's bottom level, which had one big room with approximately 20 beds for just women and children. They each had a bed. Her mother was very seasick during the trip. Day and night, she sat on an upstairs deck chair covered in blankets. Trudy went alone to all her meals and sat at a table with 14 people. A man sat with her and sneaked food for her mother. He gave Trudy her first glass of milk, which she thought tasted terrible. Between the meals, she sat with her mother. "This forced me to be independent at age 8," she says. "I love my family and have many friends, but I love my solitude." In the U.S., they already had family. A cousin owned a six-family house in Ridgewood Queens and gave them an apartment. Joseph got a construction job, and her mother found a seamstress job in a factory. From the upstairs window of her new home, Trudy watched longingly at two neighborhood girls who roller-skated outside. She had ice-skated at home, but this was mysterious. With her mother's encouragement, she joined them. "I didn't speak English, and they didn't speak German," she says. The girls played beauty parlor and Trudy learned English from them and also from four young adult cousins who lived downstairs and helped with her homework. From third through eighth grade, she attended Catholic school, a four-block walk away. In high school, her family moved to a two-family house, and she went to Grover Cleveland High School in Ridgewood, where she played volleyball and basketball. When she was a young teen, Trudy's father started helping cousins build houses in upstate Mahopac. Her father bought property there in 1955, and they built a summer home. In 1956, they started going up regularly on weekends. It was great boy-watching for Trudy and her cousins Helga and Renatta, all 14. They'd sit on the bridge laughing and leave notes at the toolshed for the boy helpers, including a young German boy named Roland. Helga and Dietmar started dating, but she was required to have an escort, so Trudy and Renatta and eventually Roland went along. Trudy and Roland paired up the next year. During the day, the men built and the women cooked, but at night they barbecued and sang around the campfire and laughed. They have so many memories of fun that summer.

One by one, eight relatives and Joseph's best friend settled with their families in the neighborhood. Everyone helped each other. They slept overnight in hammocks with bedspreads hung between the studs. Construction moved as quickly as their budgets would allow. "Bit by bit, we got finished," Trudy says. The older girl cousins had boyfriends who came up to help on the weekends. The boys would sleep in their cars, but then climb up ladders to peek in the windows at the girls. One time, Trudy's father waited inside the room until they came. "First thing they saw was my father's big face looking at them. They were lucky they didn't fall backward, they slid down so fast!" Trudy says. Trudy finished her high school credits early, so she was able to leave school at half day and take the subway to her first job at New York Life Insurance. First she filed, then was sent to a six-month night course to learn codes for handling claims. She graduated high school in 1960 and the next year entered a different world with a new job at American Airlines. She was the first person in the accounting department to operate a computer. She and her co-workers went out together during the week, but she saved weekends for Roland. On November 17, 1962, Trudy and Roland married. They celebrated at Ridgewood Hall in Queens with 250 people, 200 from her side. With free flights courtesy of her airline job, they flew to Hawaii for two weeks. She stopped working coincidentally the day President Kennedy was shot in 1963 and gave birth to their first child, Heidi, the following February. Next came Eric in January 1965 and Joe in September 1969. For a few years when the children were small, Trudy worked seasonally at Alexander's department store. She did baby doll demonstrations and later worked at the makeup counter. Every lunch hour, Aunt Helen boosted sales when she modeled the false eyelashes Trudy sold. Not only did Trudy rake in \$100 a week, she earned \$20 commission/ Back then, wiglets were a fashionable hairpiece. Her skills styling her own wiglet steered her to a beauty course. Roland set her up with a chair in the basement, where she worked two days a week. Then she moved to another salon three days a week. She later bought one of the owner's two shops and managed 12 employees. After 10 years, she sold the business.

Over the years, she and Roland have enjoyed traveling. Trudy and the children stayed with family every summer in Mahopac when they still lived in Ridgewood. Roland made the 60-mile drive to join them on the weekends. And they liked to visit the Jersey Shore with family friends. The couple's memorable trips have included Roland's high school reunion to Italy with 20 couples. They started in Venice, then cruised from Rome to Florida. They also have visited many places in the Caribbean and cruised on the Danube, Rhine and Rhone rivers. Every year, they stay at their timeshares in Aruba and Singer Island, Florida. What's the secret to their great life? Trudy says, "We understand each other. We have the same beliefs. We can compromise. Roland was my first love and will be always. We have three beautiful kids and 10 grandchildren who are out of this world. We are blessed with what we have."