



# From the diary of Ilse Düring

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
ALEJANDRO GONZALEZ, HER GRANDSON

The war was finally over. Millions of people were killed and many of those who survived were left alone in the world. Most of them lost everything: their family, their home, their identity. All they thought about was to “get out.” And many did. Ships full of immigrants departed from European ports, with people filled with hope, people who believed they could start a new life somewhere else. Among those people were my grandmother, Ilse Düring, her mother and her sister. Born Jews, they stayed hidden during the war after living through the tragedy of the death of their beloved ones. Now they were given a chance to start again far away from the place where they had suffered so much. These excerpts from Ilse’s diary tell the story of their journey to their new life.

– Alejandro Gonzalez, Colombia

**Brussels, January 5, 1947, Midi Station 22 hrs. –** It is terribly cold and standing on the open platform doesn’t give one a happy feeling. We are a group of 23 departing from Brussels. There is a committee (HIAS) who cares for us and for publicity reasons we got to face the camera with a big cardboard in front of us “People departing to South America with *The Argentina*.” There seem to be hundreds of people to wish good-bye. We have only asked my uncle, aunt and cousin. The last minutes before a long departure are always the same. One does not know what to say, what more to wish. I feel sad, not only because this departure may mean a lifetime departure from Europe, but as it definitely means good-bye to all my personal plans and to the realization of my wishes. I believed I would not be sorry, but must admit that only during the last minutes one realizes how many friends one leaves behind.

Finally we move out of Brussels towards Anderlecht. We pass the tunnel and I remember Danckaert and my first job and all the happy Sundays that used to start at the Midi station. It is

black outside and the windows are so frozen that it is impossible to see something. The train is not heated and we are happy to have a few blankets with us. Exhausted we arrive at Paris at 6:20 a.m. A representative from our committee rushes us to customs and a big lorry takes us to the hotel. We receive a hot cup of coffee and a piece of dry bread.

At 7:30 the light goes out. Paris, the town of lights, is dark. I am tired, so tired that I don’t care what I drink or eat, and there is only one wish: go to sleep. Finally men, women and children are rushed together in one big room. Without any wash I fall on my “bed.” I believe that this “hotel” has previously been a barrack room, as the beds are similar to those used in hospitals. I get a little idea what this travel will be like, but now it is too late and when one is exhausted it is impossible to judge the situation. A dreamless sleep until 12 p.m. It is cold and

cleaning up seems impossible. Despite being broad-minded, I have not yet the courage to wash and dress in front of a lot of men.

**January 6, 1947 –** At 7 o’clock in the morning the light goes on. After breakfast some of our friends, who live in Paris, went to see us and invited us to



**Leaving for Colombia - Ilse Düring, left, accompanied by her mother, far right, and two companions.**

have dinner together. The dinner was very poor and we had to take it sitting on the bed, as there was no other space. Anyhow, we felt very happy as it was a holiday from the “hotel.” Straight after dinner the gentleman showed us around Paris. St. Paul and the Invalides marveled me and the Champs Elysées and avenues around the Arc de Triomphe astonished me by their generosity.

There was nearly no traffic and it could not be compared with the busy boulevards at Brussels.

Returning to our refuge we found out that somebody forgot our passports at the committee. Well, Marion and my mother went to the station and our friend and I rushed to the committee.

Fortunately we reached the train in time and then started one of the most terrible parts of our travel. We left Paris at 9 p.m. The train was very old but at least heated. Just before midnight the heating went off and it became freezing cold. To my great astonishment, the temperature grew more and more cold and everything was covered with snow. At 8 a.m. we reached the French border. The worst part of the train was the water calamity. There is nothing worse than traveling 22 hours without a drop of water to wash or drink. The panorama was wonderful and this was a great compensation for all the other inconveniences. The mountains covered with snow, what a sight. As there was not a chance to get a

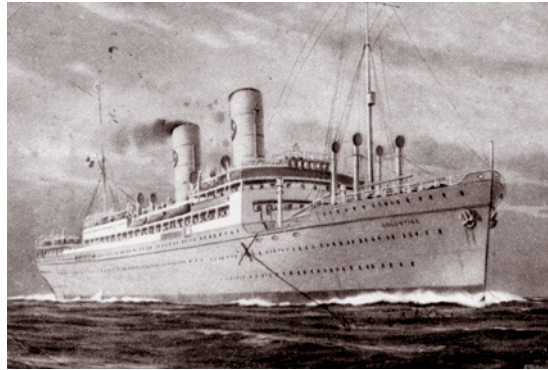
drink, we organized some snow at the French border. When I washed my hands and face, the snow dropped as black water on the floor.

At Modane the Italians were gentleman-like and came with the stamps to our compartment. It was amazing to see such a lot of good-looking young men together. The station of Geneva is virtually destroyed by bombs so that the waiting room looked like a shelter. Lots of rude looking types were around and I regretted already our start to the new life. The atmosphere was terrible and, exhausted as we were from 22 hours without sleep in the train, I thought I would go mad. If

somebody had told me, “Here is the train for Brussels,” I would not have hesitated for one minute to get on it. At 12 o’clock the representative of HIAS came and at 2 a.m. we had a nice bed in a rather bombed hotel.

**January 9, 1947** – Breakfast and hot water for a wash; wonderful things. The bed was clean and even WCs existed. After breakfast, we went to see our ship, *The Argentina*.

**January 12, 1947** – Instead of 7 a.m. the bus only turned up at 9 a.m. and we were all rather nervous as the ship was supposed to leave Geneva at 11 a.m. It actually left at 2 a.m. Now started a terrible day.



A picture postcard of *The Argentina*.

First we had to queue up for about two hours to get our papers checked and stamped. At 10 p.m. we had a sort of a meal. Six persons shared a table and we had three Greeks at our table. One of them understood a little English but the other two, not a word. We spoke with our hands, got along fine and had a pleasant time. We were lodged in a large dormitory, 120 women together, and rather no ventilation.

**January 13, 1947** – The sea was calm, but most of the people started already to be seasick. It was very cold on deck so I took our two blankets around me. Sitting there a young man, who looked like Christ – the same kind of beard – approached Marion and me. He spoke very little French and had a bottle of cognac. I appreciated the opportunity and took some of the cognac and felt wonderful afterwards. After supper we organized a dance in the eating room.

As the Greeks have names impossible for us to pronounce, we called them Jim, Van and Sim. The music is played by two Italians and one Swiss fellow. Mandolin and guitars and accordion. I am doing not too bad considering that the Greeks don't know how to dance themselves. We had a lot of fun and went to bed by 12 p.m.

**January 18, 1947** – Mr. Babene, one of the Greeks, calls me as he has something to tell me and then he started to speak. I guessed right away what he actually wanted but made a fool of myself. He wanted me to come to his cabin and spend some sweet hours with him. He displayed then his theories about modern youth, etc. As I did not agree with him, he got mad and we parted.

**January 21, 1947** – Heat, heat, heat and to think that people in Europe would give a fortune to get some of this heat. I accompany my mother to the recreation room. Here the Greeks are making their national music and dances. It is interesting to watch and amazing with what grace they are executing their dances.

**January 22, 1947** – In the afternoon there is supposed to take place the baptism of the third class passengers. Nothing special, just some salty water on the head. They gave me the name of Orata. That is a little red fish.

In the evening we all go dancing. An Italian took me to dance. He is a professor of German language at some Italian university. He must have been a fascist, as he cannot give me the reason why he is leaving Italy and going to a new continent. The conversation with him is very interesting. At nighttime it is impossible to sleep in the dormitory. 120 women and children without any ventilation or open doors.

**January 25, 1947** – The whole day goes by packing and cleaning our stuff as good as possible, without water. At about 8 p.m. watching the stars, we see the first lights of the Brazilian coast. Just the last evening I met the nicest person of the ship. It is a 30-year-old Italian, who speaks fluent French and we start a conversation about the economic, social-politic and other problems of Europe. He is a man with whom I can actually have a conversation. We both felt sorry that we only met on the last night on the ship. However, as he has a camera he promised to look for me the next morning to take some snapshots of Rio. Perhaps I was lucky to meet him only

for a few hours and had the illusion he was a real nice man. His wife was still in Geneva.

**January 26, 1947** – At 4 a.m. we went on deck to see the lights of Copacabana beach and the dark skyline of Rio. Here we watch the sun come out and it is about 6:30 a.m. when we finally approach the port. There is quite a big crowd gathered around the ship to look for their families or friends. I look for the Italian from the previous night, as to make the promised photographs, but cannot remember what he looks like as it was too dark the previous night. It is a funny feeling to arrive at a strange continent and knowing there is nobody to expect you. Many of our group have finished their trip and are crying of joy to meet their families.

Just as we want to go down for lunch, somebody calls us. There are some people expecting us. We hurry upstairs and see a big family we don't know. They are friends from our friends in São Paulo who are waiting since 6 a.m. to fetch us. We do not know them but we are very happy to know that somebody will help us to get acquainted with this new, strange world.

Coming down from the ship, the Committee, consisting of a lot of elderly, but very modern dressed ladies, is receiving us. A taxi brings us to our home, called in Rio "the house of immigrants." Here are already plenty of people who want to know where we came from, or if we by any chance know their sister, father, etc. Finally we are brought to a dormitory with lots of beds. The room seems clean and we get a wonderful Brazilian coffee and bread with sardines, cheese, etc.

At 6 p.m. our friends come to pick us up. We get

some grapefruit juice, delicious cakes and then walk a little on the beach to get an idea of Rio by night. There are houses all of marble.

**January 27, 1947** – Mum goes to the HIAS in the afternoon and learns that we cannot travel any further as a cable has arrived from Colombia stopping us.

**January 28, 1947** – Mum goes again to the Committee and I try to locate some friends we brought a letter for. I go by bus. After some looking around I found the friends and got correspondence from Brussels. We had an interesting chat, I had lunch with the lady and she brought me back to the hotel. Marion got the luggage and at last we were able to change our dresses; what a relief.

**January 31, 1947** – The HIAS committee has got the permission for us to go to São Paulo and so tomorrow we will leave.

**February 1, 1947** – At 5 a.m. we were called to get ready for the train to São Paulo. The trains, in comparison to European ones, were luxurious. The distance from Rio to São Paulo should take us 12 hours.

It is late when we arrive at São Paulo. Our friends waited for two hours for the train, but apparently that was quite early by the standards of this train. We get in a car, have a nice bath and meal and conversation goes up to 2 a.m.

**February 6, 1947** – We got up early to go to the market. It is amazing to see the different kind of fruits we have never seen in Europe. There is lots of

color and it is very picturesque. Here everybody hires somebody to carry the stuff for you. It is too hot to carry the products oneself.

We report to get our visas extended. They promise us to do everything and to wire to Colombia.

**February 16, 1947** – In the morning we went to mass. The service is quite different from ours. Plenty of noise and music, all the women are wearing veils in white or black.

Coming back to town we go and watch the carnival procession. This is celebrated every year for a period of one week, most of the people are drunk. Everybody is dancing in the streets, even the babies wear fancy dresses. They are in a state of ecstasy and dance, and dance. Everybody dances alone for himself and they are dancing through the whole town. In front are the runners: a few strong men who push the people aside for the other ones to pass. First I was a little scared to watch people in this state, to see the human nature in this state, but then I found it interesting to watch. It was very late when we returned home.

**February 17, 1947** – A telegram arrives from Bogotá saying that we are permitted to proceed with our travel. On the next evening we leave, this time in a sleeping car and we have a good sleep.

**February 19, 1947** – At 7 a.m. we arrived at Rio, a powerful rain was falling. As it was Ash Wednesday we could not arrange anything about our traveling. All the people who had arrived with us had gone but there were a lot of newcomers. It was raining on my bed and everything was wet.

**February 23, 1947** – In the afternoon friends picked us up and took us to the Corcovado. When we returned to the center of town all the streets were under water, impossible to walk through as the water was 15 cm high. We had some sandwiches and coffee and as it was getting late, we decided then to take off our shoes and tried to get through. We were quite a sight! The Brazilians prefer to stop and not move; time does not matter.

In the evening, Bubi, the youngest of the Hungarians, tries to be funny and discovers his love for me. He wanted to get married right away. I really must be old-fashioned as I cannot understand how people can propose without even knowing each other. That must be the effect of the war. Always in mind that tomorrow I may be dead, so who cares. Bubi is very disappointed and, at least, leaves me alone.

**February 25, 1947** – We go to the Colombian consulate in the morning. Mr. Consul is in a very good temper and we get through all the necessary red tape.

**February 27, 1947** – There is no plane to Colombia and we have to wait again. (Later we learned that this plane crashed in Colombia against the Tablazo.)

**February 28, 1947** – A new transport. This time all women out of concentration camps. They do not seem normal and are a terrible company. There are two nice girls who come from England and one old lady who comes from Germany, Magdeburg, and tells us horrors about the occupation there.

**March 3, 1947** – At last definite news that we shall

proceed to Colombia on Wednesday morning.

**March 5, 1947** – At 5 a.m. we report to the airport. After passing customs and immigration, at 6 a.m., we enter the plane. Rio is still dark. The plane is new from Aerovias Brasileiras. One turn around Rio, the town of 1,000 lights, and then we are on our way. The plane stops at Anapolis and Carolina for fuel. Finally we arrive at Belen, the last town in Brazil. It is great to see the river: large and yellow. At the port everything is written in English and the guards are Americans. The hotel – there is only one in Belen – is very big and I believe it is the only building which has more than one floor. For the first time in our lives we sleep under a mosquito net. One night costs about USD 25.

The next morning we left at 7 a.m. Three hours flying over large woods and over the sea. We stopped at Paramaribo, Netherlands Guyana; here they spoke English and Dutch. The people are mostly yellow but the airport was very nice. The climate was rather hot and we were relieved as it started raining a little.

At about 4 p.m., after having passed a lovely gray-blue sea, we arrived at Port of Spain, Trinidad. Wonderful plantings, sugar cane and coco palm trees, everything is clean, the streets large and the houses colonial style.

We stop at the Hotel de Paris, which is situated right in the center of town and just beside the Pan Air office. We found out that there were no reservations for us as the cable from Rio was never sent. The HIAS committee had given us only a very small amount of money as we were to spend only one night at Trinidad. We cleaned up and took a walk about town. The population was dressed in the fash-

ion of 1930. A great mixture of races: Indians, Spanish and Negroes. They are speaking a mixture of English and Spanish.

We went again to the Pan Air office, but they had not as yet received a cable to confirm our seats. Come back later or we shall ring you up. At the airport they understood our position and reserved us seats for the next day.

After breakfast we had a few hours sleep, then went to town to buy some presents for Bogotá and in the afternoon we stayed at the hotel.

**March 8, 1947** – We leave at last for Barranquilla. This time it is the shortest flight, only six hours. We fly along the Venezuelan coast and stop at every possible airport. One feels that the idea of time has changed already. The general idea of South America is “take it easy.” At 2 p.m. we reach Barranquilla. We got a message that a representative from the Committee is there to help us. We are happy, but have almost to laugh as we look at the people who expect us. One is bald-headed and very small with glasses and the other one very large. They both wear

5-centimeter metal disks to distinguish them as “World HIAS” and they seem very proud to wear them. Also they had a band on their arms informing the same. Just crazy and funny.

After a short talk, a bus brings us through a dead-looking country to the Pan Air office, called here Avianca. No reservations again until Monday. There had been an air crash just now and the people were scared to fly.

We stopped at the Hotel Victoria. The HIAS committee people retreated after having asked Mum if she did not want her daughters to get married straight away as there were quite a lot of bachelors who could not find the right wives; and so we could avoid going to Bogotá. It seems that the second profession of the committee is to get their customers married.

**March 9, 1947** – We leave Barranquilla again at 6 a.m. The plane has to go up very high to pass the Andes. It is a great difference with Brazil. Cultivated land. We are always following the Magdalena River, which is a large yellow band. We arrive at 2 p.m. and

as soon as we leave the plane, we see our family waiting for us. It is cold and we look out of place in the summer dresses we were wearing. My aunt is wearing a fur jacket. Well, that is Bogotá, and the place we are going to pass the next weeks, months or years ...

### Epilogue

Ilse Düring, the author of the diary, was born April 21, 1925, and stayed in Colombia. In 1950 she married Jorge Alvarado, a Colombian civil engineer. They had four children. In 1963 they started their own construction company, Alvarado & Düring Ltd. In 2000 the couple celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.

Ilse's mother, Else, went back to Germany for a while, then returned to Colombia, where she had a peaceful and happy life. She passed away in Bogotá in 1996 at the age of 93.

Years later, Marion, her sister, married, returned to Germany and had a child.

*The full version of this diary can be found at [www.aydconstruction.com/ilse](http://www.aydconstruction.com/ilse).*

