

## Children Who Escaped Holocaust Celebrate Life

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When 12-year-old Trude Kobler boarded a train in Vienna, clutching her porcelain doll on the eve of World War II, she knew she was leaving to escape the Nazis.

As the train pulled out of the station that day in August 1939, Kobler saw something she'd never seen before. Standing on the platform, her usually composed father bowed his head and wept.

"I don't remember being that unhappy," recalled Kobler, 75, who lives in Wilmette and whose married name is Weiss. "I just assumed I'd see him again." Weiss, who never saw her father or mother after that final parting, was among about 1,200 Jewish children whose parents sent them to the United States to avoid the Nazi threat.

On Sunday some of those children, now adults, gathered in Chicago for a first-ever reunion that runs through Tuesday. More than 150 people, including survivors and their relatives, attended the opening ceremony.

Most of their families died decades ago in concentration camps. So did a million and a half children who were unable to leave Europe.

With few instructions, those who escaped boarded trains and traveled distances they could barely comprehend without knowing what lay ahead, whether they would be reunited with their parents.

"[My mother] said to `look for the woman with the white handkerchief when you get off the train,'" said Manny Steinfeld, 78, another refugee. "`That's the woman who's going to pick you up.'"

This chapter of the Holocaust era, little known today, wasn't highly publicized because of the anti-Semitic climate and isolationism in the U.S. Legislation that would have admitted 20,000 refugee children from Germany was introduced in Congress in 1939 but foundered in committee.

Assisted by various organizations, the young refugees who entered the country arrived legally and received no special privileges.

"The Jewish organizations on the European and American end and Quakers realized there was tremendous hostility toward immigration," said Severin Hochberg, a historian with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

"One way around that was by sending unaccompanied children. People would not object so much if you kind of frame the whole question around children."

Many children lived with foster parents and some with relatives and in orphanages, integrating quickly into American society.

For some, separating from parents and encountering a new culture and family was difficult, even traumatizing.

"After you get here and the excitement wears off, it gets pretty depressing because you're living by a whole new set of rules," said Edith Schumer, 77, who left Germany when she was 12. But many of those children became "inordinately successful" as adults, said Iris Posner, who organized the reunion in the Palmer House Hilton Hotel along with Lenore Moskowitz. Both of them founded One-Thousand Children Inc., a non-profit group based in Maryland that seeks to document the refugees' stories.

It will be the first time--and probably the last--that the survivors, now in their 70s and 80s, gather as a group, said Posner, a former researcher and health-care administrator.

Of the roughly 1,200 children who came to the U.S., Posner said she has located 400.

Many were unaware they were part of this special group of Holocaust survivors, making the need to document their experiences more urgent, she said. Some have already died.

"We do hope when this reunion is over ... that this event will make it a part of Jewish-American history," Posner said.

Judith Baumel, an associate professor of Jewish history at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, has written what is considered the only published historical account about the refugees, a book called "Unfulfilled Promise."

"These kids would have been dead had they stayed in Europe, as were a million and a half Jewish children killed by Hitler and his henchmen," said Baumel, whose older brother and sister were among the refugees who came to this country.

After Hitler invaded Austria, Weiss' mother, Hermine, went to the U.S. Consulate and began thumbing through phone books for every major U.S. city, she said.

Her mom was looking for Jewish organizations and people who shared the family name, Kobler.

One refugee agency, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, found a man in San Francisco willing to pay for Weiss and her two older sisters and brother to come to the U.S.

"If it were not for that, we all would have been dead," Weiss said.

Weiss brought her favorite doll, a gift from her mother's friend.

After the train ride from Vienna, Weiss and her siblings sailed to New York on a boat overflowing with college-age American tourists. She spent about a month with a foster family before coming to Chicago to stay with another family.

She was excited to be in a new country, one with so many opportunities, but she frequently thought about her parents and wrote to them until 1941 when the letters stopped. Both were killed in the ghetto in Riga, Latvia.

"You can actually make yourself dream," Weiss said. "You can think about them long enough, particularly in the beginning, the memory is so deep it comes to you."

Weiss, a mother of three and a substitute teacher in Evanston for 31 years, said the love of her parents stayed with her and helped her succeed.

During high school, she worked at a bakery so she could put herself through the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, where she earned bachelor's and master's degrees.

Steinfeld, who lives in Chicago, was 14 when he left his hometown in Josbach, Germany, in 1938. His widowed mother had secured a visa for him to come to the U.S., also through the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

"My mother took me to the train station, and I said goodbye to her," Steinfeld said. "She gave me all these instructions--just remain quiet, just keep reading the book you're reading, don't pay attention to anybody else."

That same year, his younger brother was sent to Palestine while his older sister awaited transport to Britain.

Steinfeld left Germany with a "certain degree of anxiety and fright," he said.

"No one really knew the extent of what the Nazis were planning as far as annihilation or killing centers," he said. "You couldn't imagine what was going to take place."

Steinfeld's sister never made it out of the country. She and their mother were killed in 1945 in Stutthof, a concentration camp in what is now Poland.

His brother was killed in Palestine that same year defending survivors of the concentration camps who were trying to enter Palestine illegally.

In the U.S., Steinfeld lived with his aunt and two cousins in Chicago. He worked in high school, earning enough money to put himself through the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Steinfeld, a father of three, went on to start a furniture company.

"I was put on this earth to be a survivor," he said.

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