

Finding Young Survivors of the Holocaust

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by Barbara Nachman

As the train pulled out of the station in Eisenach, Germany, on Nov. 26, 1937, Kurt Rothschild lowered his window, leaned out and waved goodbye. His parents were standing on the platform. They were sending their only son thousands of miles away, across the Atlantic to the United States. There he would live with distant relatives they'd never met. Rothschild was 14. He doesn't recall feeling sadness that day; he may even have had a sense of adventure. But then, he didn't know that after he waved goodbye to his parents that foggy morning, he would never see them again. "If I'd known, it would have been worse," says Rothschild, who is now 79 and living in Yonkers. "The idea was that they were going to join me later. I was going to the United States to try to get affidavits for them." And he did find sponsors who could have saved his family. By then, however, it was too late. His parents and younger sister were deported to Poland, where they were killed in a concentration camp.

You won't read Kurt Rothschild's story in the history books. Nor will you learn about it when you visit Holocaust museums. His rescue from Nazi Germany is part of a little-known chapter of American history, one that even those who were involved didn't fully comprehend. Rothschild is one of the One Thousand Children. For 11 years, from 1934 to 1945, these children were secreted out of Nazi-occupied countries, in small groups, with the assistance of courageous individuals and small private Jewish and Quaker agencies. There was nothing illegal about their entry, which was carried out quietly for fear that an isolationist and anti-Semitic backlash would bring it to a halt, says Iris Posner, a Maryland social-science researcher who named the group.

Unlike the British government, which arranged to take in 10,000 children from Nazi-occupied countries, American officials did not act to save children of the Holocaust. Six million Jews - 1.2 million of them children - died in concentration camps. Posner believes about 1,240 children under the age of 17 were brought into the United States in groups of eight to 14, and that 800 of them are still alive. She has contacted 400 of the survivors, who are now in their 60s, 70s and 80s.

Last month, Posner organized a reunion, which brought together 75 of the survivors and 125 of their children, grandchildren and spouses. Rothschild, his wife, Hanna, daughter Ellen Rothschild Taube and granddaughter Juliana Taube were among those who attended. At the three-day event in Chicago he was reunited with Kurt Carsch, his companion on the transatlantic crossing, whom he hadn't seen since their boat docked in New York on Dec. 4, 1937.

"You should have seen the two of them. It was unbelievable," says Ellen Rothschild Taube, who lives in Briarcliff Manor. "They just clicked." The two men spent hours catching up on the last 65 years, Rothschild says, and talking about a subject that "was not a topic of conversation. My kids knew I'd come from Germany, but they didn't know the details of the trip - not until recently."

After leaving his parents in Eisenach, about 45 minutes from his home in Stadtlengsfeld in central Germany, Rothschild spent 10 hours on the train to Hamburg. He doesn't speak about fear, but there was "a very uncomfortable situation" when a boy about his age who shared his compartment began questioning him about his involvement in Hitler's youth group. "I made up some kind of story," he recalls. "I guess I said enough for him to believe me."

Growing up in Stadtlengsfeld, Rothschild experienced the escalating anti-Semitism after Hitler came to power in 1933. He remembers soldiers in Nazi uniforms stationed in front of his father's furniture store to intimidate potential customers. At school, where there were few Jewish children, he wasn't allowed to speak to the other students. On the way home, he was attacked and cursed by boys who had once been his playmates.

"You knew things were no good and that people were leaving to save their lives." Rothschild spent a night in Hamburg and the next day was taken to the harbor where he and 10 other refugee children and an escort boarded a ship bound for the United States. He doesn't remember much about that the weeklong journey, only the seasickness, and the boy, Kurt Carsch, who became his friend.

A night train to Pittsburgh transported him from New York to the family that would care for him until he reached adulthood. His foster mother met him at the station. "She knew no German," he says. "And I knew very little English."

"Total confusion," is how he describes his first days in an American high school. Still, he adapted, graduated, served in the military and went on to college and graduate

school. He's now retired after serving for many years as the editor of an electronics publication.

Rothschild still has the letters he received from his parents in the years before they were deported and killed. "When I read those letters, I fall apart," says Hanna Rothschild, whose family was able to escape the Nazis and flee to the United States when she was 10 years old. "They said they have faith in him.

They can't wait to see him. There's hope in those letters ... sometimes ... not always." The last letter Rothschild received was from his father's brother telling him that his parents were deported. "Once they were sent to Poland ... " he says, his voice trailing off.

Iris Posner says she became interested in learning about refugee children who came to the United States after seeing the 2000 documentary "Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport," which relates the story of the British rescue program.

"The American experience was totally different," she says. Posner, who has formed the nonprofit group One Thousand Children, plans to create a documentary that tells the children's stories, and hopes they will be included in history books and museum exhibits.

"Some say it was only 1,000 children," she says. "But the 1,000 were saved against all odds. The small number belies the courage, endurance and fortitude that was needed to save these children. It distracts people from the tremendous resistance they faced, not the least of which was from the government."

Ellen Rothschild Taube agrees. "Even though it's only 1,200, each one of those lives has affected so many others. Their survival snowballed into other lives," she says. On the walls and shelves of Rothschild's family room is proof of what she says. There, neatly framed and proudly displayed are photographs of his two children and four grandchildren.

Henry Frankel of Edison, N.J., is forming a chapter of One Thousand Children for those living in the metropolitan area. Frankel was 6 when his parents sent him from Germany to the United States to live with strangers who would save him from the Nazis. Here are excerpts from the letter he carried with him to his foster parents, dated Feb. 15, 1940.

"Honored Sir and Wife:

... With heavy heart we allow our child to go from us into strange country and on account of sad times. Our blessing, our thoughts and our worries follow him upon his way. We will be calmed when we will receive a letter, or perhaps better a telegram, so that we will be informed of his safe arrival and address ...

... as parents, we have in mind the future well-being and happiness of our only child - his physical safety and also his rearing and education.

It is this fact which calms -namely, that you have declared yourself ready to give him lodging and food, and to care for his rearing and education ...

Our request made to you is, to write to us much about Heinz -what he does and how he adjusts himself. By this means you will afford us great joy...

Now I have written you everything which is in our heart. My wife is writing you below ... Once more our many hearty thanks for accepting our Heinz, and may God reward you for this good deed. Looking forward with anxiety to your first letter, I am, with many hearty greetings,

The Father, Abraham Frankel"

"Dearly Beloved Family:

Also I must not delay to thank you from the innermost recesses of my heart for your kindness and love which you have shown my child. More I cannot say

... Heinz will, I hope, give you joy. He is reared easily and one can accomplish more in his case with kindness than with severity. Therefore, please do not let us wait too long for news. Our only joy is if we will receive good reports about our child. With this anticipation that Heinz will afford you only joy, I am, with regards,

Yours gratefully,

Martha Frankel"

Abraham Frankel died in a concentration camp. Martha Frankel lived to be reunited with her son in the United States. Eighty percent of the One Thousand Children were orphaned by the war.

