

Jewish Children Shipped To Safety

BALTIMORE SUN

April 20, 2001

By John Rivera, Sun Staff

Remembrance: Five who were refugee children of the Holocaust tell the little-known story of America's role.

On Jan. 28, 1935, 13-year-old Erich Oppenheim stood before the congregation of his synagogue in the German town of Nentershausen on the day of his bar mitzvah and for the first time publicly read from the Torah. The next day, he and a younger brother boarded a ship for America to escape Nazi persecution, never to see their parents and two other brothers again. "Our father settled us in our cabin, blessed us for the last time and left," said a tearful Oppenheim, now 79. "I recall feeling sort of numb and lost."

Oppenheim was one of about 1,000 children clandestinely brought out of wartime Europe to America, where they lived with Jewish foster families. Their stories have largely gone untold, until now. For the last year, Iris Posner, of Silver Spring, has been documenting the stories of the children and the people who facilitated their rescue. Six million Jews - 1.5 million of them children - died at the hands of the Nazis. Posner's interest was piqued by the Academy Award winning-documentary "Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport," which recounts the rescue of more than 10,000 children to Great Britain. "That prompted me to ask the question, 'What was the American response?'" said Posner, who has worked as researcher for the National Institutes of Health.

She discovered that 1,000 children were brought into this country between 1934 and 1945 by Jewish relief agencies and found only one book that described it. The campaign was carried on quietly, with the children arriving here mostly in groups of less than 10, for fear that an isolationist and anti-Semitic backlash would bring it to a halt. "You will not find it in American history books and not in the Holocaust museums," she said. "It is our aim to put it into the history books and into the Holocaust museums."

Posner, along with fellow researcher Lenore Moskowitz, formed One Thousand Children Inc., a nonprofit corporation dedicated to identifying and locating the

refugee children - now in their 70s and 80s - and documenting their journeys. Eventually, she hopes to stage a national reunion.

To commemorate Yom Hashoah, the Jewish community's annual remembrance of the Holocaust, five of the one-time child refugees gathered Wednesday to tell their stories at a first-of-its-kind service at Moses Montefiore Anshe Emunah-Liberty Jewish Center, a synagogue in Greenspring.

Erika Danty, who now lives in Arlington, Va., left Germany at age 12 and settled with a family in New York. "My experience does not contain the deep pain and grief so many of our survivors endured, because I was one of the fortunate to be one of the children of the kindertransport," she said. Still, her family suffered. Her father had lost his job as a traveling salesman and then was diagnosed with cancer. He died in 1934. The situation in Freiburg deteriorated to such a degree that when her family saw an ad in a newspaper about foster family adoption in America, Danty applied and was accepted. "Little did I know this ad would save me from the agony of the concentration camps and possible death," Danty said. "My mother was glad I was accepted but found it a hardship to let me go."

Michel Margosis was born in Belgium, but when it was attacked, his family fled to France where they hid at a farm in Marseille. When the Nazis seized France, they moved on to Spain. Margosis came to the United States in 1943 and was eventually reunited with his parents here. "I just wanted to say 'thank you' to this country for being so good and so generous to me," said Margosis, of Springfield, Va.

Trudy Turkel was 14 and living in Germany when her parents arranged for her to join the kindertransport. She traveled with a tennis racket, so if asked, she could say she was on holiday. Turkel boarded the S. S. Hamburg in October 1938 with eight other children, all of whom were seasick during the voyage on rough seas. "Except for me," Turkel said. "I had a grand time." She recalls sailing into New York Harbor. "There was nothing more thrilling in the morning than seeing that Statue of Liberty there," said Turkel, now of Ellicott City. "To this day, when I see it, I remember the day I arrived."

Thea Lindauer also remembers the transport as a happy time, despite being separated from her family. She left Germany in 1934, arriving in the United States on Thanksgiving Day. "All I could think was, 'Oh, boy! I'll go to the United States, and I'll be in Hollywood!'" she said. Lindauer was put on a train and taken to Illinois, where she was greeted by a doctor and his wife, who had a brand new Shirley Temple doll for her. She liked her foster family so much that she remained with

them, even after her family arrived from Germany. Years later, Lindauer, now of Annapolis, admitted to feeling some guilt over her good fortune at having escaped the fate of the children who died and those who suffered in the concentration camps. "For a long time, it made it uncomfortable," she said. "Why wasn't I punished? Why didn't I have to go through that? I wasn't any more religious." For that reason, "I have dedicated my life to making it easier for people," she said.

Of the five Oppenheim children, three escaped Germany through the kindertransport programs - Erich came to America with his brother Manfred. Their sister Berta, now of Baltimore, was taken to England. But Erich Oppenheim felt anguish over the years. He recalls that he began receiving letters from his parents in 1938, three years after he arrived in America. "They were urging us to find someone to put up bond to bring them over," he said. "We could not find anyone. It was so upsetting to be so powerless. "After 1941, the letters stopped," he said. It would be nearly a quarter century before he could bring himself to recite kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, for his parents.

Copyright 2001, The Baltimore Sun