

One of "One Thousand Children" Rescued from the Holocaust

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Benjamin Hirsch Searches for His Past

By Jessica Handler

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Ben Hirsch has the tenacious traits of a good detective. He has a courtly, old fashioned demeanor and relishes a good laugh, but his wit belies an unshakeable seriousness of purpose. The Atlanta architect, designer of more than 100 buildings, including the Holocaust gallery at the William Breman Heritage Museum, synagogues Or Ve Shalom and Etz Chaim and the Brookhaven Christian Church, wants desperately to fill in the blanks in his own childhood.

Hirsch, 70, is one of more than 1000 European children who came to America as refugees during World War II. They traveled unaccompanied, brought by a loose web of private rescue organizations determined to save them from certain death at the hands of the Nazis. All traveled without their parents, and few ever saw them again. Hirsch is a "child survivor" of the Holocaust.

His search to piece together fragments of his childhood and others like his is never far from his thoughts. Poring through volumes of documents that crowd his office shelving, he extracts a copy of "Out of the Fire" by rescue leader Dr. Ernst Papanek. He has circled black and white images of his brothers in a group shot on the back cover. The inside flap bears the inscription "lest you forget from whence you came," a reminder from his sister Flora. "I am still looking for pictures of me," he said mildly. "Any verification I get that I exist fills a void."

According to "One Thousand Children," a non-profit organization in Silver Spring, Maryland, established to promote research and education about the rescue by Americans of unaccompanied children during the Holocaust, stories like Hirsch's are some of the most triumphant and tragic episodes in the 20th century. War, politics and bureaucracy thwarted the best efforts of many social service groups in the U.S., and only a fraction of the million children killed in Europe arrived on America's shores. "Part of [Hitler's] final solution was to destroy Jewish children so

that the Jewish culture and religion could be ended forever," said Iris Posner, One Thousand Children's co-founder

The tragedy is in those deaths -- the triumph is in the success many refugee children found as adults—becoming a Nobel Prize winner, an ambassador, authors, scientists, and loving parents. Posner, who is not a Holocaust survivor, launched One Thousand Children in 2000 after watching the documentary "Into the Arms of Strangers" about Britain's rescue of more than 10,000 children during the Holocaust.

The professional researcher wondered why she had never encountered any information on American efforts to save children threatened by Hitler. A solid week of research at the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum unearthed only one book on the topic. Working from the book's bibliography and from records at institutes like the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, in New York, and the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, Posner and fellow volunteers compiled a list of names of the "one thousand children" who came to America without their parents, and were quietly dispersed across the country. Rescue operations were subdued, partially she says, for "fear of an anti-Semitic backlash here in America." Posner said that list of children, now adults in their 70s and 80s, totals more than 1200 names. Fewer than 500 have been located.

Hirsch's journey began in 1938, when Nazis raided his parents' home in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, during the anti-Jewish violence of Kristallnacht – the "night of broken glass." Threatening to shoot each of Mathilda Hirsch's seven children before her eyes, they arrested Hermann Hirsch, Ben's father. He later died in Auschwitz.

Mathilda Hirsch made the wrenching decision to send her five eldest children out of Germany. With his two older brothers and two older sisters, none older than 13, six year old Ben Hirsch boarded a train for Paris, heading for the care of relatives. It was the first stop on what became a long trip to safety. Mathilda stayed behind with Werner, 18 months, and six month old Roselene. Hirsch's older sblings were distraught, but Ben says he was too young to understand the gravity of the day. He never saw his parents or youngest siblings again. An Uncle later recounted Matilda's, Werner's and Roselene's certain deaths in Auschwitz.

When the Nazis approached France, the Hirsch children were put in the care of French social welfare agency Oeuvre des Secours aux Enfants (OSE). They traversed nine cities and as many orphanages (Ben remembers both drinking ink on a dare and plucking bugs from his food) until boarding the S.S. Mouzinho in Lisbon,

Portugal and sailing for New York. 40 children traveled the last miles to the ship under the cover of night to avoid spies. (Brothers Jack and Asher went in June, 1941, Ben, Sarah and Flora two months later.) Hirsch was a "forty three pound nine year old" when he arrived in New York. The first thing he wanted was bubble gum, a treat he had heard of but never tasted.

Using an address book that Mathilda had tucked into Asher's coat, the Jewish Children's Aid society contacted an uncle in San Francisco and a cousin in Rome, Georgia. Economically strapped new refugees themselves, neither was able to provide a home for the Hirsch children. The cousin in Rome, a rabbi, suggested that they stay in Atlanta, close enough so that he could visit. The five children grew up in a variety of Jewish foster homes in Atlanta, and Hirsch laughs now that after reading agency records, he sees that "I was not an easy child!"

He got in his share of schoolyard scrapes protecting his yarmulke, daily attire for an Orthodox Jew. "I came to this country and the only thing I had left was my Jewishness," he explained. Today, Hirsch continues to cover his head in deference to his faith, wearing a jaunty wool cap. His teen years at Atlanta's Hoke Smith High School included pursuits like comic books, stamp collecting, and a sharp eye for cards.

The Georgia Tech graduate served in the U.S. Army during the Korean conflict, volunteering in gratitude to the country that sheltered him. He remained close to his surviving siblings, but the search for the others never waned. He sought assignment to Germany hoping to find proof of their fate.

In 1965, Hirsch, married and father of two (he now has four grown children and 20 grandchildren) designed the "Memorial to the Six Million" at Greenwood Cemetery for the Holocaust survivor group Eternal Life Hemshech, for whom he later served 14 years as president. The monument's high walls and narrow paths shelter memorial plaques. One inscription reads, "In memory of one million Jewish children, victims of the Nazi barbarism in Europe, 1939 - 1945." Jews traditionally pray at the gravesites of loved ones in the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Because Holocaust survivors don't know where their loved ones are buried, the memorial has to suffice. "We go there and pray," he said. Anyone is welcome to attend.

More than three decades after it was built, the Memorial to the Six Million was the key that connected Posner to Hirsch. Searching the internet for clues about the people on her list, she found Hirsch in Atlanta. "You put Ben in Google and he

comes up because he designed the Holocaust memorial, and he wrote a book," she said, referring to his memoir, "Hearing A Different Drummer: A Holocaust Survivor's Search for Identity" (Mercer University Press, 2000.)

While most of the "children" contacted are surprised to know that they were part of an organized rescue effort, Hirsch is unusual in knowing much of his own story. "Some were so young they had no memory of it, and if their parents didn't survive, no one is there to tell them," she observed. Hirsch shared his memories with One Thousand Children. "It gave us insight into what occurred at the time. We learned more about the operations and their effect on the children," said Posner. Hirsch attended the group's first conference last summer in Chicago. He called it "amazing," heartened by seeing people making connections and sharing sometimes murky pasts. "I got a great feeling from the good it did."

Key pieces are missing from Hirsch's story, including how his family fared before their deaths. "It was about a year from the time [Mathilda, Werner and Roselene] were expelled from Frankfort and the time my uncle saw them at Auschwitz," he explained. Where and how, at the height of World War II, did they spend that year?

Hirsch's detective instincts have been ignited on behalf of a stranger, too. He responded to an email from a woman in Louisiana asking for help from One Thousand Children's members in tracing her true identity. "She's desperate to find out who she is," Hirsch said. Her original papers were destroyed, and Hirsch has donated hours of his time tracking down any information he can. The fierce, former skinny nine year old boy comes out fighting when Hirsch considers the plight of the child survivor, a term he first heard at the "Hidden Child" conference in 1991, a gathering of Holocaust survivors who were children during World War II. (The conference is now a project of the Anti-Defamation League.) Mocking an insensitive adult, he scoffed, "you're a child, what kind of memories could you have!"

Apparently, plenty. Hirsch, who takes every opportunity he can to educate people about the Holocaust, said "God has things he wants me to do." Hirsch wants his parents and siblings' lives to have meant something. "There's nothing left of them other than a memory."