

Surviving "One Thousand Children (OTC)" Gather in New York

THE AUFBAU

June 5, 2003

The Future Was Important

By Kristina Maroldt [Translated by Gregory F. Mehrten]

[This article is used with permission of the author and publisher]

On his 15th birthday, Felix Roth from Vienna, together with his sister Edith, his friend Norbert Rosenblum and 54 other children, stood on the railing of a great ocean liner and let the wind tousle his hair. He was happy. He had just seen the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor for the first time. Soon they would dock at the feet of the great skyscrapers. It was September 23, 1941, and for Felix Roth it was the first day of a totally new life. Whatever had happened before was now completely unimportant. The future lay there, over on the other shore called America.

Even today, almost 62 years later, Felix Roth smiles when he recounts that very special birthday and the beginning of his life as "an American boy." He is sitting with two reporters from Aufbau at a table in the conference room at Temple Emanu-el on Fifth Avenue. Felix Roth, along with Aufbau, has a very special story. One which he is happy to tell. But on this day, Roth has no patience for such a thing – so great is the excitement around the first official gathering of New York's "One Thousand Children (OTC)" on May 18, 2003.

Voices fly through the wood-paneled room on the fifth floor of the synagogue, and with them the histories of roughly 30 people. Each one so full of adventure, tragic and dramatic that a single story could provide material for several books, films and plays. Each one unique, though in one respect all alike: They are the stories of approximately 1,200 Jews who, as children from Germany, came to America between 1934 and 1945 with the help of Jewish and Quaker organizations. Without parents, without relatives. With only the unshakable hope that the new life in the strange new world would be good.

For a long time, no one wanted to hear these stories. American museums and history books did not document them at all. And even of the people involved,

hardly any longed to tell their stories. Daily life, daily problems were more important.

Many had also repressed their memories. Perhaps because their stories could not match the success of the new life of Felix Roth, who found "a second home" with his American host family in Boston and who was even able to reunite with his mother in 1949. His friend Norbert and Norbert's sister Friedel were not so lucky. Their mother perished in Auschwitz – shortly after saying goodbye to her children in France with the promise that they would see each other again very soon. In their new home, the Rosenblum children had to battle anti-Semitic and anti-German feelings: "When I took a German book out of the library," explains Friedel Rosenblum to her companions in fate, "I always thought twice about it. I didn't want to get picked on."

But telling your story also helps. Above all when you realize that your story is not unique. Three years ago, Deborah Oppenheimer's "Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport" opened in movie theaters. Many former OTC children saw their lives reflected in the fate of the 10,000 Jewish children who arrived in Great Britain without their parents between 1939 and 1940, and began to reconstruct their own pasts.

Iris Posner, a social scientist, also saw the film when it was released. She herself was not a former refugee, but an American Jew interested in history. As she left the movie theater in the spring of 2000, one question pounded in her brain: What did America actually do during that time to help Jewish children? Was there by chance anything similar to the British "Kindertransport"?

Iris Posner began to do research. For a long time without success. But then, in the archives of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, she came across a dissertation (published in 1990) by the Israeli historian Judith Tydor Baumel: "Unfulfilled Promise: Rescue and Resettlement of Jewish Refugee Children in the United States, 1934-1945." In it she found that, in fact, approximately 1,000 unaccompanied Jewish refugee children came to the United States during the Nazi period. Not, however, through a government program like the British Kindertransport, but rather solely through the intervention of private organizations like the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society or the National Council of Jewish Women. At the time, the U.S. economy was not good. Accordingly, there were strict limits on immigration and there was no sentiment in favor of relaxing them for Jewish refugees. To avoid anti-Semitic sentiment, immediately after their arrival, the children were very

quietly placed in host families or orphanages. And after that, nothing much more was said about it.

Iris Posner decided: This must change. And so, over the last three years the now 58-year-old has gathered almost 1,200 names and addresses of former refugee children and made contact with many of them. Together with her colleague Lenore Moskowitz, she founded a not-for-profit organization, "One Thousand Children – OTC," which compiles the experiences of the people involved to save them for posterity, and holds talks with museums to encourage them to include OTC histories in their exhibitions. In addition, one year ago she organized the first national meeting of the OTC in Chicago.

Lunchtime at Temple Emanu-el. Turkey sandwiches are passed around; there is also tea. Stories are repeated. For example, Rudy and Lotte's story. As part of the second Kindertransport in the fall of 1934, the two arrived in New York as 14-year-olds on the "MS New York" from Bremen. Rudolph Pins from Höxter went to a family in Cleveland, Lotte Goldschmidt Magnus from Frankfurt landed near Philadelphia. Today is the first time they have seen each other in almost 70 years. They sit somewhat shyly across from each other, trying to recapture their own pasts in the face of the other.

"Do you remember, Rudy?" asks Lotte Magnus. Her own past is precisely documented in a photo album: The stormy voyage in the fall of 1934; her years with the U.S. [Armed] Forces, when once she was even allowed to smoke a cigarette with Eisenhower; the reunion with her mother almost 12 years after saying goodbye. She points to a group photo of simply dressed children: "Here, this one was during a party for the children on board. I am the tall girl in the last row and Rudy is the one here in front with the glasses. Do you remember?"

The Rudy in the photo is laughing. The Rudy on the other side of the table laughs as well. But then he shakes his head wearily: "Actually, I can hardly remember anything anymore. Besides, I was seasick. For almost the whole trip!"

Not everyone researches their past with as much passion as Lotte Magnus. For Rudolph Pins, the present is more important. "I live in 2003." All the same, his story is one of the most exciting of today's meeting: In August 1946, when he returned to bombed-out Germany for the first time since his escape, everything had changed. His older brother Jacob had emigrated to Jerusalem. The Nazis had deported his parents to Riga, where they were shot – without him ever being able to see them again. And Rudolph Pins himself was now an interrogation officer with the U.S.

Army. He was there to help uncover Nazi crimes during the Nuremberg trials. The victim would examine the perpetrators.

"It was strange. I sat opposite these people that we had always been so afraid of: Göring, von Ribbentrop, Veesemayer, several state secretaries [high officials in Nazi government ministries] and employees of Eichmann. And the strange thing was that most were very learned people. You always had thought of them as such beasts. With some, like Hans Frank (Editor's note: Governor General of the occupied Polish territories), I even thought: But he's so nice, he can't have been a Nazi! Others were pretty bad characters: Wilhelm Stuckart, for example (Editor's note: a state secretary in the Ministry of the Interior). He denied everything, even though he was one of the ones who came up with the Nuremberg Jewish laws." But at the time, the young man couldn't allow himself to express a lot of emotion. He had to remain neutral and objective. "We just wanted to gather evidence."

Rudolph Pins remained in Nuremberg until early 1948. Some whom he had interrogated were executed. Others took their own lives. In his spare time, he would visit his hometown, Höxter, and talk with old teachers and friends. "The people in Höxter were never unfriendly to us. Not even during Nazi times. Just somewhat cooler."

Perhaps that is why today he feels no hatred toward Germany or German people. He speaks German fluently and can even see himself living in Berlin or in Höxter instead of in his New York apartment overlooking the Hudson.

That would be out of the question for Felix Roth. "I can't forgive the German people [for] what they have done," he says several days later, after the OTC reunion, when he came by the Aufbau offices to continue recounting his story. The 77-year-old former engineer today lives with his wife on Fifth Avenue, has two children and two grandchildren. His family survived the Nazi era, although before most of the family could begin a new life in the United States in the 1950s, they were scattered to the four winds starting in 1938: to the United States, Australia, Canada, and because of the relatively uncomplicated entry there, temporarily even to Shanghai. For a long time, they didn't even know if the others were still alive.

And this is where the story of Felix Roth picks up: In 1941, as he was leaning on the railing with his tousled hair, a photographer standing below on the pier took his picture. The photo appeared on the front page of the October 3, 1941 edition of Aufbau, which is where the uncles and aunts who had emigrated to Shanghai

discovered it. "In that moment they knew that I and my sister were still alive," Felix Roth says and smiles again. The new life could begin.