

## The Unknown Kindertransport

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During the Nazi years, 1,000 children came to America alone. Here are three of their stories.

Every evening after lights out, the children watched the spectacle. Born in Vienna, displaced to a summer camp in rural Pennsylvania, they had been warned of the American predilection for violence. But who could have dreamed up such perverse rituals? The children stared out the window at the lighted rec room across the field, amazed at the male counselors tossing young women into the air, yanking them to the side, spinning them forcefully around.

From their perch, the children couldn't hear the music. It was the summer of 1939. "It was the jitterbug," says Henny Wenkart. Some 62 years later, every syllable of her accent is East Coast American. She smiles at the memory.

For Felix Mappen Roth, the first taste of the New Country was Rice Crispies and peanut butter. That was the first breakfast served to Roth and 55 other European young refugees after their trans-Atlantic crossing on a September morning in 1941. "You know, not one child would touch that peanut butter," recalls the 74-year-old Roth, a consultant to the air conditioning industry. He seems light years removed from that day as he sits on the edge of his couch in the immaculate living room of his Fifth Avenue apartment.

Richard Weilheimer, now a soft-spoken, white-bearded man of 69, docked in the United States in July 1942. It was an end to the travels of a boy who had already undergone four months of starvation in a Gurs transit camp and 16 months in a French orphanage. Soon enough, at a public school in Washington Heights, he endured another painful existence: classmates, aware of his German heritage, not understanding his victim status, beat him up whenever the opportunity presented itself.

These three refugees of war-torn Europe, now discovering the joys of grandparenthood and retirement, were among the 1,154 children who made their

way across the Atlantic without parents on group transports, according to Iris Posner, a Maryland-based researcher, who has spent recent months making the public and survivors aware of the extent of the rescue efforts.

The trips, which started in 1934 and continued, though fitfully in the later years, until 1945, were arranged by an assortment of social service agencies, many of them Jewish groups, but also including the American Friends Service (the Quakers) and the Non-Sectarian Committee. Many of the transports were conducted quietly so as not to attract the attention of anti-Semites, but all were implemented in accordance with the strict immigration policy of the time, according to Posner.

It is a little-known episode of Holocaust history, but one filled with the poignant stories of children without parents in a new land, and also one that offers a flicker of faith in humanity at an isolationist time in American history that was otherwise not kind to the Jews of Europe.

"I'm relieved to learn that some people, some organizations responded to the Holocaust," says Posner, who after discovering the efforts last fall, founded the first non-profit organization dedicated to this unique group of child refugees. On the other hand, she adds, "I'm extremely saddened to find out that this is the best this country can do. A million and a half children were destroyed."

By contrast, the British kindertransport, supported by its government, managed to rescue 10,000 children. Although the U.S. efforts were described extensively in the 1990 book, "Unfulfilled Promise" (Denali Press) by Judith Baumel, the endeavor is largely unknown to scholars of the Holocaust. Now a Bar-Ilan University professor, Baumel is also the associate editor of "The Holocaust Encyclopedia," published this year by Yale University Press. In an e-mail, she writes that "Unfulfilled Promise" was an "underground book" because no one responded to its publication, few historians and almost no people in the field."

Michael Berenbaum, former research director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, says, "What startles us again is how much there is to learn. I'm somewhat skeptical in the field that I think I know reasonably well, but open and ready to be converted by the facts." Off the top of his head, Berenbaum knew of two men who came to these shores alone as children during the war. There must be others, he said.

Among the rich or famous, the grassroots effort saved the life of Richard Shifter, who grew up to be the Undersecretary for Human Rights under the older Bush and

an adviser to Bill Clinton. It also rescued Bill Graham, the rock n' roll impresario. Of course, there were many children who became teachers, doctors and lawyers, architects and engineers, painters and physicians.

And there was also a creative little girl, born to an upper-middle-class family that liked to spend Sundays in the solitude of the Vienna Woods. Henny grew up to be a philosopher and poet.

Henny Wenkart:

### The Decision

Munching on a breakfast of bananas and yogurt in her Midtown apartment, Henny Wenkart laughs merrily at the memories of her first summer alone in America. At the camp of the Brith Shalom, the boys learned baseball, the girls sat sewing, but what else was new? That was the 1930s. On Sundays, adults would come by and peer in their window, exploring the idea of acquiring a European foster child. "We were kind of rude to them," says Wenkart. "The boys started throwing balls at them to chase them away."

As for Wenkart, in September of that year, she reunited with her parents, who had managed to secure entrance visas, and moved to Brooklyn. Later, she would obtain a philosophy doctorate from Harvard, and teach at Stern College. And yet, there remained one event that deeply affected her, that continues in its way to plague her life. It was the choice, a decision too overwhelming for a child of 11. At the interview for her seat on the liner President Harding, she was told taking the trip would be her decision. If she wanted, she would set sail for America without her parents, without her baby sister. She understood implicitly that this was no choice, that the lives of her family might be at stake, that Uncle Leo had died in Buchenwald, that her family's affidavit included American financial sponsorship that might not provide enough support for four people, but would definitely cover a family of three.

All week she lay in bed. "I had begun to feel the city like a trap closing in on me, was conscious of the trains leaving in every direction without me," writes Wenkart, a poet and editor, in the 1998 issue of the Jewish Women's Literary Annual. After the decision, Wenkart experienced a strange absence. She felt she didn't exist. Since then, small decisions often take on the magnitude of life-or-death. And that detached condition in which she left the room in 1939? "I have been in that condition ever since," writes Wenkart.

Felix Mappen Roth:

### Man With Two Mothers

Freudian therapist might expect a field day with Felix Mappen Roth, who grew up with not just one Jewish mother, but two. The first, his European "mutti," raised him until adolescence, in a comfortable home in Vienna until he was 12, and in less ideal conditions for two years in southern France, while his father worked in a labor camp. In 1941, an influential French uncle managed to secure seats for Roth and his sister Edith on a children's convoy bound for New York, where Jewish organizations arranged for foster care.

Soon after, Roth met Mother No. 2, Molly Mappen, who bore a striking resemblance to the young Lucille Ball, and kept a suburban home near Boston. Initially, she had volunteered to house just one refugee, a girl. But when the taxi pulled up with two bewildered siblings, she immediately changed her mind. After two desperate years, for Roth the new home seemed like winning the lottery. There were two cars. His new "dad" Phil bought season tickets for the Boston Red Sox games, where Ted Williams autographed a baseball. The Mappens outfitted Roth in the nicest suit in the class for his start at Penn State University, where he finally learned to appreciate peanut butter.

Roth would never see his European father again, as he had died of a heart attack, after living out the war in Switzerland. But one winter day in 1949, Roth managed to bring his first mother, the one who gave birth to him, to New York. "I see her as if it were yesterday," says Roth, recalling the snowy day of the reunion, as he walks across his sunny, red-carpeted living room and clutches a photo of his mother. The charming Viennese lady, whom he hadn't seen in eight years, slowly came down the gangplank. He was an adult, an engineer working in Iowa, and the owner of a Chrysler jalopy. "My sister was totally Americanized as if she were a young girl who grew up in Scarsdale."

Where did they bring their mutti? To the Mappens', of course. "Now we had two mothers. But it was not complicated for us. We knew the place in our heart for each of them."

Richard Weilheimer:

### Poppy & The Past

There are pictures to prove a young Richard Weilheimer went on outings to local parks with his family, photos of him smiling angelically in a sailor suit on a bicycle next to his identically clad little brother. But his most vivid memory of his hometown of Ludwigshafen, Germany, is Kristallnacht. That was the day he saw elderly neighbors and children beaten and bloody in the streets, the day he saw his synagogue go up in flames, the day all of his furniture was smashed, and the first time his father was dragged away. Weilheimer was 7.

From there, the memories don't get much brighter, though he does recall the friendliness of guards at the Gurs Camp, who would sometimes offer a bit of bread in exchange for making fires for them.

When Weilheimer and his little brother Ernest left for New York, his father somehow managed to negotiate a day out of the French concentration camp, and for many hours he stood on the dock watching the sea, even long after the ship departed. In a letter written to the Quakers, who arranged the transport, Max Weilheimer writes, "My poor children have lost so much of the sun that they should have had, but also we the parents, have been denied the joy of raising children."

In the quiet upstairs office of his Port Washington house, Weilheimer speaks in muted tones. He casts his eyes downward. The memories are painful. He is not sure that he would be interested in taking part in a reunion with other child transport survivors arranged by Iris Posner's organization.

The non-profit organization, called One Thousand Children, began to take shape after Posner watched "Into The Arms Of Strangers," a film focused on the British kindertransport, and this year's winner of the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. Wondering whether the United States had arranged similar rescues, she combed through the archives of the Holocaust museum in Washington, the American Joint Distribution Committee and the Center for Jewish History here in New York, and turned up records of various social service agencies, as well as some visas and affidavits.

Among her aims: to make her own documentary, to arrange a reunion, to create a listserv so the survivors can communicate among themselves.

Henkart and Roth expressed approval of such activities, but Weilheimer, whose parents both died in the camps, and was brought up here by aunts, would rather move on with his life. He does however lecture locally about his experiences, and two years ago, he took part in a reunion to honor Alice Resch Synnestvedt, the

"Quaker Lady," who had arranged his passage to America. He hugged his lifesaver. "I only did my job,' she kept repeating," Weilheimer writes in an article in a local newspaper. Today, she is 92, nearly blind, lives in Denmark, and apparently shuns journalists.

Intent on pursuing the leisure of the childhood he lost, Weilheimer retired young from his job in the fashion accessory business. Finely wrought oil paintings, a testament to this decade of decadence, hang throughout his house.

And let's not forget the new granddaughter, the smiling 6-month-old whose photos dominate other walls and ledge space. Has being a poppy changed his life? Weilheimer's face relaxes into a huge grin. "Oh absolutely. People used to tell me that having a grandchild really changes you, and I do the same thing now. There's nothing in the world like it." As a young father, he had trouble being silly, getting down to the level of his sons. Perhaps he feared separation from those he loved most. Perhaps also, as he says, he didn't have the experience of being playful.

On a nearby file cabinet rests a framed photo of a white-bearded man and his granddaughter. She lies on her stomach, poised to suck her thumb, ensconced in a world of bright fabric toys. Beside her on the floor, Weilheimer forms a giant bridge, his eyes full of baby Arden.

To reach One Thousand Children, write to Henry Frankel, President 10 Ryan Rd Edison NJ 08817 or e-mail contact [@onethousandchildren.org](mailto:@onethousandchildren.org)

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