

Those Saved from Nazis Honor Hero

Brith Sholom and other Efforts Removed about 1,200 Jewish Children from the Reach of Hitler.

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Clutching a teddy bear, a packed lunch, and a small suitcase, 8-year-old Helga Weiss begged her parents to let her stay with them in Nazi-occupied Austria. "I don't want to go," she cried. "I want to stay and die with you." No," her mother said adamantly. "Be a good girl and don't cry. We'll see each other soon."

As the train pulled into the station in Vienna, Helga fought back tears. Her mother kissed her cheek and tried to be reassuring. "She said 'Auf wiedersehen,' which means, 'see you again,' Helga Weiss Milberg recalled. "But I never saw her again."

Milberg, now 72, and living in Tucson, Ariz., was among 11 of the 50 so-called Brith Sholom children who reunited Saturday in Philadelphia to honor the group and particularly the man they credit with saving their lives. Brith Sholom's effort was one of the largest and earliest of America's little-known children transports, which removed about 1,200 Jewish children from Hitler's reach. Led by Gilbert Kraus, a lawyer who practiced in Philadelphia and Doylestown, and his wife, Eleanor, Brith Sholom's 1939 rescue of Austrian Jewish children was unknown for decades beyond the families of those involved.

Though Great Britain's efforts to save 10,000 Jewish children attracted worldwide attention, efforts here went largely unnoticed. In fact, they went mostly unchronicled until Israeli historian Judith Baumel published a book on the subject in 1990. Even at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, the escape of children to the United States is absent from the permanent exhibition.

Two Maryland researchers are committed to changing that. Iris Posner and Lenore Moskowitz started a nonprofit, One Thousand Children Inc., in 2000 to document the stories of those rescued. "This is a virtually unknown story," said Posner, the organization's president. "It is even unknown among the children themselves."

Unlike in Great Britain, where Kindertransport was backed by the government, children rescued through the United States were brought here privately and under strict immigration laws, Posner said. Great Britain's effort spanned two years, but the effort to bring children here spanned more than a decade, from 1934 to 1945, she said. In that time, dozens of Jewish organizations and others, such as Quakers and Unitarians, raised money to ship 1,253 Jewish children from Europe to the United States. Ranging from 14 months to 16 years old, the children - most of whom lost at least one parent - were brought to live with Jewish families until they could be reunited with relatives. Posner believes that about 800 of those rescued are still living. She and Moskowitz have located more than 450 and organized a reunion of the "children" in Chicago last summer. The women are chronicling the stories in a book that they hope to publish next year. "The real story very well may be the rescuers and the organizations who had to fight the most vehement anti-Semitism this country has ever known," Posner said.

Among those rescuers were the Krauses, who interviewed 600 or so children who responded to a newspaper advertisement to emigrate to America. Accompanied by a pediatrician and at least one nurse, the Krauses picked children who were healthy and deemed able to be separated from their parents for an extended period. Most of those selected had parents who had already applied for visas.

Kurt Herman's parents had been trying to get out of Austria since Germany annexed it in March 1938. Their effort became urgent in November of that year when Hitler's plan became apparent with Kristallnacht, a campaign of violence against Jews and vandalism of their property. After that, Jewish children were segregated. Former playmates started calling Kurt, 8, names and sporting swastika armbands.

"I wasn't able to play anymore," he said. "I was to go to school and go home. There was no more fun." Men were being plucked off the streets by the Nazis with their families left to wonder about their whereabouts. Knowing he wasn't safe in Austria, Herman's father set out with Herman's maternal grandparents for Cuba. But they were denied access and later landed in France. Like Helga, Kurt knew his and his mother's lives depended on the Brith Sholom interview. He jumped for joy at being selected, but parting from his mother was painful. "We made a point to say, 'Don't worry, we're going to see each other soon.' I didn't see my mother cry, but I was crying," Herman said. He went to live with a foster family in Allentown. Within two years, he was reunited with his parents there. His grandparents, however, had been killed at the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. A retired financial officer,

Herman, of Philadelphia, has three daughters and eight grandchildren. He credits the Krauses with saving his family.

It's said that Gilbert Kraus secured 50 unused American visas through the help of his influential friend, Francis Biddle, who two years later became U.S. attorney general. He chose 25 boys and 25 girls. He and his wife had a boy and girl of their own and took in two of the Brith Sholom children. Gilbert Kraus was 41 at the time of his trip to Austria. During his career, he was a partner in a Philadelphia law firm and vice president of the now-defunct Philadelphia Record newspaper. In Bucks County, he was a member of a committee of lawyers that represented poor people pro bono in a precursor to the Legal Aid Society. An accomplished artist and pianist, he retired to a farm in Furlong, Bucks County. He died in Philadelphia in 1975. Eleanor Kraus died in 1989.

Milberg said she grew close to the Krauses aboard the ship that brought her here. In a 1945 letter signed "Uncle Gilbert," Kraus gave her fatherly advice about her studies and added: "I have great hopes for you because you have always been a child who was very ambitious and very talented." Milberg married, taught music and early-childhood education, and still volunteers for a number of organizations. She and her husband, Morton, have three sons and four grandchildren. Her father spent time in the Dachau work camp in Germany before making his way through Italy to the United States in 1940. He died of a blood clot in Detroit in 1952 after slipping on ice. Her sister, eight years her senior, waited out the war in what is now Israel and still lives there. Milberg's mother, Rosza, went into hiding and was last in touch with her family in 1941. She died in the Sobibor concentration camp in Poland in June 1942, shortly after her 42d birthday. "If I had been mature enough and smart enough, I would have asked Mr. and Mrs. Kraus to help my parents get out," Millberg said, racked with guilt. "If I had been a smart girl, I would have done something."

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