

Beyond Hitler's Reach

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By Susan Levine

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They were the fortunate few, Jewish children who threaded the needle of Nazi regulations and American reluctance, finding refuge in the United States. All they had to sacrifice was their childhoods

His mother rode with him on the train to Mannheim. The day was bitterly cold, and she made certain he wore his dark, heavy overcoat and wool cap. She sat close and held his hand. Surely they talked. But about what? How brave he would be? When they would meet again? Years later he could not recall the conversation, only the sense of momentousness that threatened to overwhelm them both.

He was a sweet-faced boy of 12, small for his age and quiet. In appearance as well as worldliness, he remained very much a child. Though the city was less than 40 miles to the north, he had never seen it. The radius of his life had covered little ground to that point.

At the station in Mannheim, his mother broke down. He told her not to cry. She told him to try to smile. Then he boarded the train to Hamburg and found a seat by the window. He waved to her as long as he could. Then he was alone.

As the German countryside swept by, all he knew was this: That in Hamburg, someone would meet him and take him to a ship called the SS New York. That he would journey across an ocean and on to a place called St. Louis, where he would live with a foster family with the same name as his home town. He could speak no English. They could speak no German.

But he would be out of Hitler's reach.

And so Werner Michel came to America.

Now, at 77, he has come to Chicago, to a hotel ballroom with a faux-elegant chandelier, a long, draped dais and the milling of people he does not recognize. They wear name tags and looks of tentative anticipation. A poster on display

around the room features a grainy photograph of boys and girls -- young Werner among them -- who have just gotten off the boat in New York City. Superimposed on the picture are a Star of David, the dates 1934-45 and the words "First National Reunion."

A lifetime ago, the men and women gathered here were children voyaging on their own toward a future of vast uncertainty. They were brought together only briefly for transport across the Atlantic, then scattered to foster homes in cities across the United States. To Boston, to Baltimore. For how long? No one could say. To Detroit, to Atlanta. And their families back home? Many would perish. To El Paso and Los Angeles, to dozens of other alien dots on the map. Like Michel, most of the refugees were taken in by strangers.

The exodus drew few headlines. On the German side, it proceeded quietly by Nazi edict. On the U.S. side, the private groups leading the effort feared inflaming anti-Semitism and nativist demagogues. They chanced none of the heartstrings appeals that would be mounted so publicly for later causes.

The lasting legacy: silence and ignorance.

Even today, the arrival of more than 1,200 unaccompanied Jewish children on these shores is a virtually unknown, undocumented chapter of the Holocaust. Holocaust museums in the United States do not mention it; many Holocaust scholars remain unaware. "You will not find this story in the history books," the reunion's organizer, a Silver Spring woman named Iris Posner, declares from the dais.

Until a year or two ago -- until Posner called -- most in the ballroom had no idea of the dimensions of the rescue. They could recount their own stories, of course: how parents, motivated first by foresight and later by desperation, kept them safe by sending them away. And how scared or bewildered or exhilarated they felt, as well as how fortunate.

Yet few realized they had been part of something much larger, that the guilt or grief or gratitude they'd carried for years had been shared by so many others.

In Chicago they will piece it together.

Michel has flown from his home in Alexandria. He sits with Trudy Turkel, his cousin from Ellicott City, who was a kerchiefed 14-year-old when she and seven other youngsters landed in November 1938. "We were a deep, dark secret," she says.

A microphone circles the room for introductions.

A woman: "I came from Vienna on April 1, 1940."

A woman: "I arrived November 6, 1936."

A man: "I came on July 2, 1937 . . . If there is anybody else who was sent to San Francisco, I would like to meet them."

At a boisterous table toward the back, half a dozen people who sailed from Lisbon aboard the Serpa Pinto in 1943 have found one another. Two men named Kurt, one from Houston, the other from Yonkers, are backslapping more than six decades after sharing a cramped cabin on the SS Hamburg.

The microphone is passed to Arnold Weiss, a Washington lawyer, immaculately dressed. He offers a nominal biography. He does not mention, not yet, his years in a Jewish orphanage outside Nuremberg, or his departure, with a paper suitcase, for America. For a time, he stayed in an orphanage here, too. He was 13.

They are painful memories, and Weiss at first had no interest in reliving them in Chicago. Slowly he changed his mind. He wondered whether his experience was really that different. He wondered how others had moved on from theirs. Maybe everyone else wondered, too, he thought. Maybe, despite the decades spent forging an identity, they all still had blanks to fill in.

For those fleeing Hitler in the 1930s, the odds of making it to America were poor to perilous. With the United States racked by economic depression, officials had tightened already restrictive immigration quotas. Jews merited no exceptions.

Iris Posner knew snatches of this history when she caught a spur-of-the-moment matinee at Mazza Gallerie two years ago. "The day that changed my life," she says.

Playing was "Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport." The Academy Award-winning documentary film recounted the emigration of 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish children to Great Britain from 1938 to 1940. The initial contingent left three weeks after Kristallnacht, the terrifying night of "broken glass" when Jewish businesses were destroyed, houses ransacked and synagogues burned throughout Germany and annexed Austria. The British government officially signed off on the Kindertransport, hoping the United States might follow

its lead. At that point, the Nazis were still trying to force Jews out of Germany, not slaughter them wholesale.

Posner felt unsettled as she left the theater. Why hadn't she ever heard anything about Americans saving Jewish children? The question nagged at her, and before the week's end she headed to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The permanent collection yielded no clues. The staff could provide no answers. She made more visits, futilely scouring books and materials. Finally, near closing one afternoon, an archivist discovered a single, modest volume by an Israeli historian named Judith Tydor Baumel: *Unfulfilled Promise: Rescue and Resettlement of Jewish Refugee Children in the United States, 1934-1945*. Posner started reading, stunned.

She learned that of the 175,000 Jews admitted during those years, fewer than 1 percent were minors traveling by themselves. The government rebuffed entreaties to allow more, despite refugee groups' contention that children would trigger less public opposition than adults. The young immigrants were dispersed as quietly and quickly as possible, to families, all Jewish, who had agreed to provide foster care.

Baumel estimated that 1,000 boys and girls had been part of the venture. That was it? Posner asked herself. The best my country could manage? She decided to track down their names. Names would be a historical record, a collective witness that could not be overlooked. "It was the right thing to do," she says.

Soon her dining room was overrun with boxes, filing cabinets, documents and computer paraphernalia. She is by training a nurse, but her career has ranged from health care administrator to social science researcher to theater director. She also is Jewish, though her family lost no relatives in the Holocaust. Posner herself was born the year the war ended.

The search consumed her, became her mission. She enlisted a longtime friend, Lenore Moskowitz, and using Baumel's bibliography as a guide, the two trekked again and again to New York for tedious, eye-bleary encounters with the microfiched archives and dusty records of long-defunct organizations. Most were dead ends. Then one day, in the collection of German Jewish Children's Aid, they stumbled upon a report prepared after the war's conclusion. By date of arrival and country of origin and ship of transport, it catalogued some 600 names. Posner and Moskowitz practically danced in the stacks.

Among the ships, the SS New York. And among its passengers, on December 4, 1936, 12-year-old Werner Michel.

Michel was deposited in St. Louis with a tag on him, like a piece of baggage. Also deposited were his small box camera and the modest square-cornered suitcase in which he'd packed his clothes, several adventure books and a Jewish Bible from his mother. He'd brought along the meager English he'd learned, but in this strange place the words got jumbled up badly. "Goodbye" he confused for an all-purpose salutation, suitable when coming or going. "Fine" and "how are you" were the only vocabulary he understood with certainty.

His new home offered maids and a Cadillac, just none of the affection and caring he craved.

His foster mother reveled in causes; Michel was her latest. His two foster brothers tormented him from the get-go, and the neighborhood kids followed suit. They'd choose sides for a wartime version of cowboys and Indians. Michel was the Kraut whom everyone else chased down the street.

He was frightened and unhappy and terribly lonely. School officials gave him an aptitude test -- in English -- and judged his lack of comprehension harshly. They consigned him to kindergarten, where he sat in a tiny chair parroting singsong rhymes and trying to slough his guttural tongue.

"You want to belong somewhere. I belonged nowhere."

After their breakthrough in New York, Posner and Moskowitz spent the better part of a year trying to add more names to their database, poring over old manifests and e-mailing research centers around the world. By the summer of 2001, they'd amassed a listing of 1,243 children.

For Moskowitz, it was enough. They'd spent thousands of dollars. Stop, she told her friend.

Posner could not. Rather than simply finding their names, she was determined now to find the children. Some had been as young as toddlers when they came over. Most would still be alive. Why not pull them together, she thought, and allow them "to take their rightful place in the community of survivors"?

Why not plan a reunion?

One of the first people she located was a mere 45 minutes away in Annapolis. She traced her through a letter to The Washington Post about a review of "Into the Arms of Strangers."

The review "evoked memories that I have lived with since I was 11 years old," Thea Lindauer wrote, explaining how a fleeting experiment had brought her and about 100 other Jewish children to the United States in the mid-1930s. She was flabbergasted when Posner contacted her. To think that the experiment had lasted nearly a dozen years -- and that it had saved not 100, but 12 times that many!

Lindauer's transport was the third to leave. Her father, a prosperous German businessman, insisted she be on it. He promised her it would lead to a wonderful education, and lovely people with whom she would live. More than that, it would lead to safety. When Thea's grandfather protested, suggesting she stay instead with relatives in Luxembourg or Holland, Samuel Kahn was firm.

"No," he replied, "I want an ocean between us."

His daughter sailed on the SS President Harding in 1934 and wound up on the North Shore of Chicago with the very wealthy, and very loving, family of a Pabst brewing executive. Her new life was everything her father had promised and more. She had summer camps, horseback riding, music lessons. Celebrities like Eddie Cantor were regular guests.

But the fairy tale had a nuanced subtext, which for the longest time was tucked deeply away as Lindauer pursued an art career and married and had children. She and her military husband settled in Annapolis, and she immersed herself in its arts community. Not until 2001, at Posner's urging, did she untie the thick bundle of faded letters she had received more than a half-century earlier. They were in formal German script, mainly her father's.

The first was dated November 1934. To "Theachen," his dark-haired, apple-cheeked little Thea. She began reading.

"You looked so eager, excited and small waving your goodbyes," he wrote. "What awaits you in the United States of America, we cannot say. We can only hope that wherever you go, people await you eagerly and will be kind to you. I have the fullest confidence you will not disappoint them . . . I wonder if you know the great responsibility we all have laid on your shoulders. I hope it's not too heavy a burden. Your loving Pappa."

Emotions flooded back, "all these things I had buried": Her anxiety about leaving. Her guilt over leaving her younger sister, Ruthie, behind. The pressure to do well. The debt she felt to others. The contrast between her own abundant comforts and her family's worsening privations. The nightmares. The headaches. The crying. The fear that her parents and sister would die.

For despite the upbeat tone of Kahn's weekly correspondence, life had begun closing in. By 1935, the Nazis had shuttered many Jewish businesses, seized Jewish homes and banned Jewish children from schools and parks. Hitler youth roamed the streets. Ten-year-old Ruthie fretted in a note that she was growing "old and gray before my time." But every attempt to secure visas fell through.

By 1937, her father's veiled worries turned to desperation. "I am hoping you have not forgotten the urgency of these matters," he wrote that spring, suddenly upbraiding his daughter for not seeking her foster parents' assistance in helping them escape Germany. She ran in hysterics to the couple, Aunt Anne and Uncle Harry. They agreed instantly to help push through the exit papers.

It would be years before Lindauer grasped what her parents had suffered in sending her off. She tried once to ask her mother, only to be hastily dismissed. The message was clear: No good could come of remembering.

On November 11, 1937, a week before her family set sail for New York, her father penned his final letter: "I hope you will not be disappointed in the change in us. Your carefree parents do not exist anymore."

Lindauer brings translations of the letters to Chicago. Others bring photos and old passports. One thing becomes apparent as stories and mementos are shared and compared. For all the disparate elements, their experiences were strikingly similar. Not just in how they started, but in how they ended.

First, the departures. Mostly they were rushed and confused. So much had to be done, documents collected, forms approved -- in triplicate. The luckier children had a month or two to prepare, enough time to master those English phrases. Others were gone in a week.

Parents seldom revealed the depth of their anguish, in part because they wanted to put up a brave front, in part because German authorities did not condone displays of emotion on the railway platforms and gangplanks. Children were ordered not to wave, lest someone mistake a raised Jewish hand for a "heil Hitler." The reunion

ballroom is hushed as a man from Michigan retraces his farewell, pressed against the railing of the SS Hansa as it began pulling out. His parents followed numbly along the dock.

"They kept walking along the quay, to the end of the quay . . . and the ship kept going. And they got smaller and smaller. And then I [couldn't] see them anymore."

He would never see them again.

Yet for many of the children, the lengthy passage across the Atlantic also meant a freedom they had not felt in years. They were loosely chaperoned by young women escorts, and some had ample opportunity to slip into first-class quarters. There were dances to watch and Ping-Pong to play. There were exotic desserts like ice cream sundaes and Jell-O.

A scrawny and starved 13-year-old like Arnie Weiss relished all of it. Especially the food. "I wasn't going to miss a meal," he says. "They had eggs, for God's sake."

He'd been 4 when his father deserted his family and 6 when his mother put him in an orphanage in Furth. By 1938, it was a grim place. He has no clue why or how he was picked to go to the United States. He simply was informed one day that he would be going to Hamburg. From there, he didn't know.

He folded up the blue suit in which he'd been bar-mitzvahed six months before, and found his grandmother for a parting embrace. Then he left, dressed in lederhosen, the leather short pants he was wearing still when he sighted the Statue of Liberty in a frigidly unwelcoming February.

From New York, Weiss rode solo on a train to Chicago. He arrived unexpectedly at 2 a.m. and waited for hours for someone to meet him, until an announcement blared a track number to Milwaukee, a city where he'd heard that people spoke German. He snuck aboard and locked himself in the bathroom to evade the conductor.

His first weeks became months became a year. He was snagged by a police officer while standing in a soup line for the unemployed and was delivered to a local orphanage. He kept running away, back to the train station. Potential foster homes showed scant interest in a problem teenager, and one home that said yes didn't work out. Finally, he got lucky. A loud, exuberant family in Janesville, Wis., settled for him even though they'd wanted a girl. They accepted him completely. So did their community, a county seat about 70 miles southwest of Milwaukee.

It became the pivot of a new life.

It was in Janesville that Hans Arnold Wangersheim recast himself as Arnold Hans Weiss, the last name appropriated from a University of Wisconsin star football player in the news at the time. It was there that he learned English and graduated from high school, there that he and foster brothers Bobby and Jay enlisted. "We were more, really, than brothers," he says. Each would see action in Europe, but it was Weiss's infantry division that stormed into Nuremberg, literally -- and for him, cathartically -- blasting it apart. In the detritus of the Dachau concentration camp, he found his father's identification card.

"I lived through a miserable experience in Germany, but it has enabled me to live the American dream and I have lived it to the fullest," he tells the hotel ballroom. "I cannot thank enough those people who had the courage and guts to take us in."

But while they were saved by the kindness of strangers, not every stranger was equally kind. Two years after Werner Michel was sent to the Midwest, Trudy Turkel followed from Germany. As difficult as her cousin's foster home was, hers was worse.

She was Trude Kirchhausen back then, and her 1938 passport indicates she was issued Visa Quota No. 8134 by the American consulate in Stuttgart that year. The passport shows the Nazis' requisite branding -- a two-inch-high J -- but she wasn't worried. She affected a sanguine self-confidence, leaving Heilbronn with a wooden tennis racket in hand so she would have a ready answer if soldiers at the railway station questioned her travel.

"I'm going on vacation," she'd practiced, swinging her emergency prop. "I'm going to play tennis."

Prepared as she was, she was just 14 and very alone and very far from the world she had known. And when she got to St. Louis she was greeted with terrifying news accounts of Kristallnacht. She mailed a frantic note to a neighbor back home:

"Leben meine Eltern noch?" Are my parents still alive?

Each family who accepted a Jewish child through the rescue effort agreed to provide for that child's care and education and to guarantee that he or she would not become a public charge. Turkel's foster parents nominally kept their part of the bargain. They were more concerned about the check they received every month

from her sponsoring organization to cover her room and board -- that and the long list of housekeeping chores they assigned her. She was not permitted in their two children's rooms except to clean, and she could go to sleep only after her foster father, an insurance salesman, cleared the dining table of his paperwork. For more than three years, she slept in the dining room on a rollaway bed.

She and Michel would meet at the St. Louis municipal opera to console each other. He would share his latest problem, and she would reciprocate. Every night, though, she dutifully recited a prayer her own mother had written her. It asked that she respect and obey her foster parents and strive to "be worthy of their goodwill."

Be grateful, her mother had urged. Do what they ask, and do it right, her father had stressed.

"I honored that," says Turkel, a short, stout woman with undiminished conviction and zest. "I didn't want anyone to say I didn't last."

Besides, no misery compared to the dangers threatening back home. Her father, a self-employed textile manufacturer who'd already lost his business, was convinced the family's only hope was to flee piecemeal. He got an older daughter to Palestine. His 6-year-old son he entrusted to a Kindertransport to England. Then war erupted.

Julius and Else Kirchhausen hung on until 1941, when they somehow secured tickets on a train to Spain. An overcrowded freighter carried them on a harrowing seven-week journey through the Canary Islands to New York. Their daughter would not learn they were safe until she got their postcard from Brooklyn. She would not see them again until 1943.

Against enormous odds, Michel's mother also managed to reach the United States. The two were reunited in St. Louis. Or, rather, they were pushed together again. After almost three years, Michel left his foster family. He dropped out of school to work as a shipping clerk. An older sister, who'd arrived separately, passed up a scholarship to become a department store salesgirl. His mother rented rooms to other refugees.

They were strangers in poverty.

In dealings with the regular world, their roles were now reversed. He was his mother's voice, turning German into English back into German as she stood by blankly and waited for the translation. By now he was nearly 15, with enough

Americanization to feel how foreign this immigrant woman looked and sounded. He was embarrassed by her -- and ashamed for being embarrassed.

His father, once a distinguished-looking wine merchant, desperately kept trying to escape Europe. His pleading letters found them in St. Louis; if they could get to the White House, he wrote, that's where he'd heard you could get a visa.

The Nazis caught him first, in hiding in occupied Belgium. He was moved back to Germany, put on trial, sentenced to a labor camp and eventually transferred to Auschwitz.

By war's end, he was dead.

In the hierarchy of the Holocaust, the trauma of these children doesn't seem to measure up. They may have suffered fractured and dislocated lives. They may have lost parents and siblings, faced isolation and ridicule. Some struggled through later years, with scars that had healed rough and ugly. Others raised families in silence, because, as they told Posner, declining her invitation to the reunion, they simply could not bear to revisit the past.

Still, none was deported to barbed-wire death camps or secreted in dank cellars. Individuals who were stress the distinction.

"You're not a survivor," a woman once berated Lindauer.

As the group's de facto historian, Iris Posner has been dismissed almost as completely. Publishers have rejected her overtures, saying the Holocaust market is saturated. Holocaust museums have begged off, saying there are too many untold stories for too little space. U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Director Sara Bloomfield allows that "there might be a time when we are in a position to do something." But she doesn't say when.

The answers do not satisfy Posner. What these men and women endured deserves lasting acknowledgment, she insists, as does the sacrifice of their rescuers and the collective generosity of the strangers who took them in.

"It has to be made part of American history . . . What did America do to save the most vulnerable?"

She mulls the future over a cup of coffee, a rare break during these three intense days of reunion. Early on she and Moskowitz dubbed their undertaking "One

Thousand Children." While that number proved too low, those gathered have adopted the name as a group identity. A first step, Posner believes, and just in time. They are slowed and grayed by age, some with hearing aids, others with canes and tremors. This will probably be their only reunion.

At least now they know how they turned out.

The result is not what Weiss expected. "I think we're peas in a pod," he confesses. "I find no difference whether we came in '34 or '45."

And that's the remarkable thing, they decide. No matter what roads led them to Chicago, everybody has covered the same emotional distance along the way -- decades of trying to make good, trying to fit in, trying to repay what the country had given them.

Michel, for one, served three decades in the U.S. Army -- in Europe, Korea and Vietnam -- and almost two more as an inspector general in the Defense Department. As a barely twentysomething soldier, he interrogated German prisoners of war and apprehended top-ranking Nazis. He investigated war crimes and worked in counterintelligence. With each tour, each assignment, he was proving how good an American he could be.

Along the way, he married and had two children, who presented him two grandchildren. He considers himself blessed. "I've had the best existence of anyone," he says. "I've been so incredibly, unbelievably fortunate."

His cousin feels much the same. For more than 10 years, Turkel translated letters and documents for the Holocaust and War Victims Tracing and Information Center in Baltimore. She endowed a scholarship at the sorority that put her through college, an opportunity that would have been out of reach in Germany. ("They treated me like I was one of them, just the opposite of what I had fled.") A lifetime has passed, and so she laughs about her days at the University of Oklahoma, when she was designated an "enemy alien" and prohibited from traveling more than 10 miles out of town without the district attorney's permission.

"Hitler did me a favor," she says quietly, and it is the people around her -- Michel, Weiss, Lindauer and the others -- who understand best what that means. "I tell you, we really have had some life."

The ballroom is flickering now in soft candlelight. The reunion is nearly over. But they stand, no longer strangers, to say Kaddish, the Hebrew prayer for the dead.

Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabah, they begin.

They pray it for their parents and grandparents, their brothers and sisters, their aunts and uncles.

B'almah di v'rah chiruteh . . .

And for their rabbis and teachers and neighbors.

Oseh shalom bimromav . . .

But most of all, they pray it for the 1.5 million children not as lucky -- not as blessed -- as they.

. . . Aleinu v'al-kol-Yisrael, v'imru: Amen.

Susan Levine is a Metro reporter for The Post.

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