

It's All Relative: One Thousand Children

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By Schelly Talalay Dardashti

From 1934-45, 1,000 children traveled an underground railway spanning two continents and an ocean. This is their story.

FOR 11 years, a handful of children, ages 1-16, were part of one of the most triumphant and tragic stories of the 20th century: the rescue and placement in foster homes and other facilities across America.

While a generation of 1.5 million children perished in the Holocaust, about 1,000 unaccompanied Jewish children were brought to America in a very low-profile operation. In fear of a backlash from isolationist and anti-Semitic forces that could shut it down, the secret mission was funded by donations of ordinary people and the work of hundreds of volunteers.

American history books do not mention it, nor do Holocaust museums and memorials celebrate the lives of these rescued children and those people and organizations who rescued them. There are no movies about it, and its heroes remain unheralded. Few Americans know about this project; only one sole scholar has studied and written about the subject.

Even worse, most of the children themselves (most now in their 70s-80s) are unaware they were part of an organized effort to bring to America as many Jewish children as possible. And they don't know that this was accomplished in the face of powerful economic, social, political, religious and government constraints that had such a devastating outcome for the millions who did perish. This is the previously unknown story of courage, sacrifice and triumph.

One Thousand Children (OTC) was founded by social science researcher Iris Posner, 56, and researcher Lenore Moskowitz, also 56. Its staff is solely of unpaid volunteers, and 100% of donations goes to programs and projects.

When Iris saw the Academy Award-winning documentary last year, *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport*, concerning 10,000 Jewish children saved

from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia who were taken into British foster homes, 1938-40, she questioned whether there had been any similar US efforts.

She discovered some information that efforts had taken place, and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (Washington DC) provided some sources.

Only one book, published in 1990, *Unfilled Promise* by Dr. Judith Baumel, a professor at Bar Ilan University, has been written about the experience. Baumel's brother and sister were OTC children. Baumel is also associate editor of *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, published by Yale University Press in 2001.

Following the efforts of Iris and Lenore, the story was pieced together beginning with the 1933 meeting of such groups as HIAS, American Joint Distribution Committee, National Council of Jewish Women, German Childrens' Aid, American Friends Service Committee and others, which laid the groundwork for the mission.

The first group of children arrived in New York, in November 1934. There was no press coverage and no publicity. Small groups were taken directly to foster homes, which had been arranged through appeals to synagogue congregations and organization memberships. The groups, in addition to raising needed funds, also arranged for escorts who brought the children from Europe to America.

The escorts were women who traveled back and forth to Europe in dangerous times, spending a lot of time away from their own families.

The children they escorted had been told various stories by their parents. The younger ones heard they were going to camp or on a vacation. Perhaps the older ones knew the real reasons.

Prior to 1941, small groups were brought, because there was hostility to allowing foreigners to enter the US during the Depression. Sponsors wanted to avoid drawing undue attention to the children, who came in on quotas of their countries of origin.

In the later period of 1941-2, when news of Nazi terrors were circulated, larger groups arrived, while 250 French children arrived in larger groups after their parents were deported. Foster families in the US agreed to care for the children until age 21. Each child was assigned a social worker from a Jewish social service agency until they attained that milestone.

OTC has identified 1,054 unaccompanied children brought to the US. Iris believes there may be about 125 more.

The group also checked records of the USHMM, Yivo Institute, Leo Baeck Institute, Shoah Visual History Foundation and the Wiesenthal Center, which were asked to compare their databases with that of OTC and to contact those whose names are on both lists, saying that OTC wishes to talk to them. Iris says lists were prepared by various organizations, with names, date of birth, city of arrival and ship the child arrived on. Medical records also exist as they were prepared when the children arrived.

Privacy is assured, says Iris, and only "bona fide researchers will be given data access, and must sign agreements not to divulge information. No identifying information on any person will be made public without that person's agreement."

Among its ambitious plans, OTC wants to produce a documentary. Iris, with a background in film, has contacted a New York film company, but money is an issue. She needs to contact those foundations and groups which provide documentary assistance. Iris and Lenore have funded the nonprofit OTC themselves since its inception.

They want to help OTC children to find and communicate with each other, and to organize a first reunion of survivors. OTC also wants to publish memoirs and educational materials related to this activity.

The maintenance of an archive of related materials is important, and they also wish to organize traveling exhibitions.

Iris and Lenore have so far been in contact with about 200 survivors, and in communication with 100 more. Iris hopes they can communicate with the remaining survivors during 2001.

In April, the first ever Yom HaShoah remembrance program honoring the approximately 1,000 people brought to the US as children was held in cooperation with Rabbi Elan Adler of the Moses Montefiore Hebrew Congregation of Baltimore, Maryland. OTC children spoke at the ceremony.

Most of Iris' efforts are now directed to finding and communicating with the surviving OTC children, and to organizing a reunion. Such a meeting could bring

together scholars to make presentations resulting in a monograph of the proceedings.

Unfortunately, says Iris, Yad Vashem does not have the resources to help using their own staff and, additionally, as a public institution it could not protect the confidentiality of the names they would receive.

She hopes that through this column, the organization could locate volunteers who could assist by working with Yad Vashem or organize such an event. Because of the advanced age of many survivors, Iris and Lenore have an acute sense of urgency to move ahead on these projects.

The website, onethousandchildren.org provides much information. OTC survivors can contact the organization, volunteers can help, press articles are reprinted, and there is a public bulletin board.

For more information, contact OTC Inc., Henry Frankel, President 10 Ryan Road Edison NJ 08817 email, contact@onethousandchildren.org; website, www.onethousandchildren.org.

It's All Relative welcomes readers' questions, although personal research cannot be done. Write to It's All Relative, City Lights/Jerusalem Post, P.O. Box 28398, Tel Aviv 61283; fax, 03-639-0277; or email, .

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