

One In a Thousand: Oregon Woman Followed Little-Known Escape Route from Germany to U.S.

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by Jenn Director Knudsen

A film inspired two women to create a community. Iris Posner viewed the 1999 documentary "Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport" and sought a thousand people. The film inspired Oregonian Lotte Magnus, on the other hand, to seek out just a few.

In June 2000, Posner and a colleague, Lenore Moskowitz, formed One Thousand Children Inc., or OTC, a non-profit organization dedicated to documenting the experiences of people who came to the United States as children between 1934 and 1945 to escape persecution and genocide and stayed with foster families and in other facilities across America, according to its website.

Magnus was one of those children on a U.S.-bound transport. A Tigard resident, she's been searching for other World War II refugees like herself who live in Oregon, but the trail to them always goes cold.

She once heard tell of an Ellen Strauss living in Portland, but she's found no record of this woman.

"I'm running into nothing but dead ends," Magnus, 82, said in a recent phone interview.

Posner, OTC president, helped organize the first – and most likely last – 2002 OTC Reunion and Conference, held in Chicago from June 30 to July 2. About 75 of the roughly 800 surviving members of the transports came from states including Virginia, Arizona and California to attend the event.

Magnus was one of them and the only survivor from Oregon.

An independent woman whose husband died in 1999, Magnus continues to lead the active life she has for years, including helping fashion quilts every Thursday at the Tigard Senior Center. But for the last couple years, she's become involved in

One Thousand Children to try to find those like her who share her city and to meet those who live elsewhere but had similar wartime experiences.

"We'd like to know what happened to the rest of them," Magnus said of the refugees who have yet to be located. "If nothing else, it's certainly a matter of curiosity."

Magnus – nee Goldschmidt in Frankfurt, Germany – was shipped out of Europe and settled in Jenkintown, Penn., thanks to a hush-hush American effort to save young European Jews, first from Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and then from the ravages of the Third Reich.

Magnus' parents sent off their only daughter in 1934 when she was 14, and she came to live with a foster family near Pennsylvania's capital.

"...[I]t must have been extremely difficult for our parents to make that decision," Magnus expressed in an essay she wrote following the Chicago conference. "Some of us were not really aware of the seriousness of the situation, as it took place so early during Hitler's regime and our young ages."

According to Posner, many foster families received small stipends from sympathetic organizations not affiliated with the government to help cover some of the costs of taking in a refugee.

"I think I've gotten off pretty easy," Magnus said, comparing her experience both to those who were left behind in Europe and to those who made their way across the Atlantic to the United States prior to and during the second world war.

Life with her foster family "was not a bed of roses," but she counts herself among the luckiest of refugees, she said, ticking off the reasons for her perception of fortune.

She escaped early from Europe; her mother, though once confined to Theresienstadt, a concentration camp in what was then Czechoslovakia, survived the war; her brother made it safely to the United States and now lives in California; and she lived with only one foster family until she was old enough to support herself and move out. (Her father had committed suicide in 1936, prior to the outbreak of war.)

Once in this country, many of the kids from the transports bounced around from family to family, she said.

"I had my emotions; many times I could hardly wait until it was decent to go to bed" to cry, she said, but added, "I've just never been a person to display very much emotion. I'm not very theatrical."

It's believed up to 1,200 children – between ages 5 and 16 – reached America from Europe in the way Magnus did, yet their stories are largely unknown.

The isolationist policies during Franklin Roosevelt's administration, coupled with overt as well as covert anti-Semitism in this country, dictated this Kindertransport program would remain tightly under wraps, according to Posner and other experts.

Jews here suffered "everything from overt verbal and even physical abuse, to discrimination in education, employment (and) housing," Posner said via email.

More well-known – and chronicled in the movie "Into the Arms of Strangers" – are the Kindertransports that took about 10,000 persecuted Jewish children from the continent to England.

Portland is home to a few such refugees, including Helga Relation, a friend of Magnus', and Fred Hajek. They both escaped to England in 1939, Relation from Berlin, Hajek from Vienna.

Based in Maryland, OTC is working to reveal details of the American program through research and testimonials from the refugees and their rescuers. A second OTC conference is not planned; rather, the totally volunteer organization's resources "are focused on making the refugees' history part of the American historical record" through various media, Posner said.

For example, Posner is in the midst of finding a publisher for a first-of-its-kind anthology about the OTC experience, she said. The organization also hopes to produce a monograph and video documentary culled from conference proceedings, which included more than 50 presentations from scholars, children of those on the transports to America and members of the foster families who helped shelter and raise the refugees.

Magnus is happy she traveled to the conference, a trip that cost her about \$1,000.

She learned she was on the second transport to leave Europe for America; only recently had she learned there were transports other than her own. The kids were spirited out of Europe in groups of 14.

"When I learned there were 1,000 to 1,200 (children) brought over, I was just flabbergasted," as were the others she met in Chicago, she said.

"I just feel more gratified that at least that many of us were able to come to the United States," she said, but added the American government should have done more than it did.

She also learned that Quakers and Unitarians played an active role in aiding the Jewish children to escape from their homelands and settle here.

Magnus said she didn't necessarily make any new friends at the conference, but it turned out her roommate during her stay, Erika Danty, who now lives in Arlington, Va., was on her ship "for 11 seasick days" across the Atlantic.

As was Siegfried "Siggy" Bodenheimer, also in his 80s, who at 13 years of age settled briefly in Scion, Ill., before heading to New York, and today lives in Aventura, Fla., with his wife.

Though he didn't attend the conference, he said in a phone interview he is glad Magnus got in touch with him and, like Danty, remembered her from their voyage to this country.

"All of (those) people kind of remembered me because I was the tallest," said Magnus, who in her youth stood nearly 6 feet tall. Today she's closer to 5 feet, 6 inches.

Magnus does not get emotional or feel remorseful when she looks back upon her life, which included active duty during the war in the U.S. Army as a registered dietician – eventually earning the rank of lieutenant – and raising children. A Portland-area resident since 1949, she now has two children, six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Though she approached the Chicago conference with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension, she returned to Portland feeling similarly reflective and inquisitive after viewing "Into the Arms of Strangers."

"I was wondering if this would stir up things I'd completely forgotten," she said. In the final analysis, it didn't.

"I'm no psychiatrist," she said, but she recognizes she may have developed "a hard shell" – as she put it – since her trek to this country seven decades ago.

Another convention, the annual World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust, will take place in Toronto, from Oct. 11 to Oct. 14, but Magnus will not attend.

"Well, at 82, you don't go traveling about quite a bit," she said in the staccato of her still-accented English.

But she is grateful to Posner and her OTC organization, as well as for having gone to the Chicago conference, which she said was "more interesting than I anticipated."

Posner says there are some Portland-area refugees who came to this country via transports, but they want their identities kept private, and Magnus has yet to locate them.

So Magnus' search continues, as does her belief in the legacy all Holocaust survivors should leave behind: "To try to stop it, the persecution of the Jews."