

Reunion Will Honor Rescue of Young Jews

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In the vintage snapshot, the little girl who grew up to be Alice Shlevin wears a beret, a plaid dress, and a smile so appealing that it saved her from the Holocaust.

A Detroit-area woman, Carolyn Wolfstein Levin, saw the photo among hundreds of others at a New York relief agency and chose the German Jewish 12-year-old as her foster child.

Shlevin -- then Alice Doiny -- happily climbed aboard a French ocean liner bound for New York, too excited to wonder if she would ever see her parents again, but knowing this: "I was going to strangers." It was early September 1937.

Now 76 and living in Tamarac, Shlevin was among a trickle of European children evacuated to the United States in an organized, though nameless, series of transports between 1934 and 1945.

REUNION PLANNED

Two social scientists in the Washington, D.C., area are planning a reunion next summer. Iris Posner and colleague Lenore Moskowitz believe they have identified all 1,200 children through records of various organizations.

They have interviewed 250, and estimate that 800 are still alive, some in South Florida.

The operation presaged the better-known kindertransports, which sent 10,000 European Jewish children to Great Britain after Kristallnacht, the November 1938 Nazi pogrom that telegraphed Hitler's "final solution" -- genocide.

HIAS, the 120-year-old Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which resettled the youngsters, provided a rich source of information: case files that included applicant questionnaires, biographies, medical histories, visa applications, identity papers issued by U.S. consulates abroad and group escorts' notes.

The researchers have established a website -- www.onethousandchildren.org -- to solicit more testimonies, and funding for a documentary film.

QUIET EFFORT

The rescue was legal, though secretive, in a time of tight immigration quotas and widespread anti-Semitism. Organizers "tried very hard to keep it quiet because of fear of backlash," according to Posner.

The U.S.-based German Jewish Children's Aid Organization -- a coalition of Jewish foundations and nonprofits -- managed the rescue. As the Holocaust progressed, snuffing out the lives of one million Jewish children, Quakers joined the effort, including some non-Jewish youngsters in the transport.

The groups ranged from 11 to more than 100, according to Judith Baumel, 42, an American-born professor at Israel's Bar Ilan University, whose older half-brother and half-sister were among those sent.

Her doctoral dissertation, researched in the early 1980s and published in 1990 as a book titled *Unfulfilled Promise*, is the only comprehensive work on the subject.

SUCCESS STORY

"They're a success story," she says of the relocated children. "They are 100 percent American adults, integrated completely into American life."

In contrast, Baumel says, many Kindertransport children languished in British orphanages "and were treated terribly."

The nameless-transport children, ages 5 to 14, came in small groups escorted by women who made repeat trips. Shlevin, from Mannheim, remembers her escort as a German opera singer in her 20s who had lost her job because she was Jewish.

Baumel says the early transports brought children who had at least one parent in a concentration camp. Dispersed across the country after the voyage, few stayed in touch.

Alice Shlevin didn't realize until she got Posner's inquiry that anyone was looking for the children, or that so many others had taken a similar journey. She had been too young to understand that Depression-era isolationist politics had all but shut

America's "golden door" to immigrants before World War II, yet she knew she was supposed to charm the Levins into also sponsoring her parents and older sister.

OTHERS FLED

They did, enabling Hermann -- "a big soccer player" and tobacconist -- her mother, Margaret, and her sister, now Meta Levy of Margate, to flee soon after Hermann was arrested on Kristallnacht and sent to Germany's Dachau concentration camp for a week.

Shlevin can't give enough credit to the Levins -- Carolyn and her lawyer husband, A.J. Levin, the parents of a daughter and three sons (one of them former CNN Beirut bureau chief Jeremy Levin, held hostage in Lebanon for 11 months in 1984 and 1985). She stays in touch with the Levins' daughter, Nancy Levin Edelstein, a Fort Lauderdale ceramics teacher two years her junior.

A MISSION

"I was taken off the boat to Mrs. Levin, and I'll never forget what she did. She said to me in German, 'Don't call me Mother; call me Aunt Curly, because your mom and dad will be here soon.' I came on a mission to plead with these strangers to help my family, and I didn't have to say a word."

They gave her everything an athletic preteen could want, from love to skating, horseback riding and tap-dancing lessons. They arranged an apartment and a job for Hermann Doiny.

Shlevin says their nurturing fortified her against subsequent heartaches, including the deaths of a son, a grandson and two husbands. She has been married to her third husband, David Shlevin, for nine years.

EARLY DEPARTURE

Siegfried Bodenheimer of Aventura was on one of the early transports, in 1934. The retired greeting-card plant manager and his wife, Ruth, raised two children in Brooklyn.

Born in Mannheim, he spent his early years in the town of Wiesloch. His father, who had a cigar factory, was imprisoned at Dachau during 1938 and early 1939.

"He bribed himself out," and the family fled on the war's eve, says Bodenheimer, now 80. "The tough part was that we could have been here earlier, with a little cooperation from my very, very rich relatives."

His long-dead aunts -- pearl heiresses -- were more than able to sponsor them, but unwilling.

"I had to go to Stuttgart to the [American] consulate and left in November. There were 14 in our group. I didn't know any of them."

Others in the family believed, as did many of their Jewish countrymen, that Hitler's threats were fleeting. Weren't they an integral part of German society? Weren't they accepted?

"The relatives were so Germanized," Bodenheimer remembers. "They said: 'What are they going to do to us? We've been living here for all these years.' Those who had money were afraid they were going to lose something. They lost it all, including their lives."

Bodenheimer spent a few days in a New York orphanage and four months on a farm in Zion, Ill., with other Jewish children awaiting family placement, before a Hungarian family in New York named Leichtman took him in for the next four years: "The nicest people I've ever met."

Bodenheimer graduated from New York's prestigious Stuyvesant High School, was drafted in 1943 and returned to Germany as a counterintelligence interpreter when the war ended.

He made one quick trip to Wiesloch then, and has returned twice since to check the family graves; the Nazis saw Jewish cemeteries as convenient rock quarries, uprooting monuments to be used as paving.

"I was amazed," Bodenheimer says. "You could see where all the stones were turned over but put back."

I'LL SEE YOU

Not all the transported children were as fortunate as Bodenheimer and Shlevin. In fact, Iris Posner says, most lost one or both parents. That's what happened to Sonja Echt, born Sophie Speyer in the town of Guxhagen, 11 when she left her parents, sister and brother in February 1938. Only her sister survived.

Echt boarded the S.S. Manhattan in Hamburg with 16 other children. Nine days later, she was in Columbus, Ohio, with a financially strapped widow named Flora Kaufherr and her two daughters.

Kaufherr "was so good-hearted that even though we didn't have much, every time someone came from Germany, they had their first meal at our house," says Echt, who turns 75 this month and works part time at the Miami Beach Senior Center.

"I insisted on going to Hebrew school," says the twice-widowed Sunny Isles Beach mother of four and grandmother of nine. "The only thing my parents wanted was for me to keep kosher," which she still does.

She cries when she reads the inscription in German, reminding her to observe Jewish tradition, that her father, dry goods salesman Emanuel Speyer, penned in the Hebrew prayer book his daughter carried across the Atlantic.

"He knew he would never see me again. My mother said, 'I'll see you.' Even when she was on her way to Auschwitz, she told my sister that."

Her parents never knew that the same Columbus surgeon who had paid her way also had signed the immigration affidavits for them.

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