ORAL HISTORIES: WORLD WAR II REFUGEES

The horrors of Hitler's Nazi regime and the persecution of Jews and other targeted groups during the Second World War (1933–1945) drove many Jewish refugees to leave Europe at the time. In this packet, you will read about two immigrants impacted by the Nazis, Howard Melton, who came from Eastern Europe in 1950 and Philip Fruend who left Germany in 1938.

Howard Melton, born in Lithuania in 1929, describes the conditions after the Nazis took over:

You couldn't partake in any natural activities that a normal human being were doing...You couldn't walk on the sidewalk; you couldn't go to cinema; you couldn't use public transportation; you couldn't do anything that a normal person would do; you couldn't be on the street before 10 o'clock in the morning or after 4 o'clock in the afternoon...All the Jews had to wear the Star of David front and back, and then they picked Jews—men and women—off the streets and they just killed them; any Lithuanian or any German that didn't like the way you looked or the way you acted could just kill you without any consequences whatsoever...A Jew's life was worthless.

He powerfully evokes the extreme physical and emotional stress of the concentration camps with a description of his deepest dreams during his time there: "My dream was, not to be free, but to have a loaf of bread all to myself...[With true hunger] you don't think about anything else."

Howard came to America a few years after the war when he was 20 years old. He describes his decision to leave Europe:

In December of ’47 my friend [who had experienced the Holocaust with Howard] decided to come to the States; I stayed in Germany. And I kept getting letters, you know, about how wonderful the people are here so I decided to come...I came [to America] in August 1949.

Like many immigrants, Howard, formerly “Hersch Mickelson,” changed his name upon arrival in America:

When I came to New York, a man brought me over here; his name was the same as my name...He thought I was a relative, so he sponsored me to come over here to the States. He changed his name to “Mitchell” and he said, “The first thing you gotta do is just change your name...” So I changed my name to “Melton”...I took his advice, become Americanized.

Howard describes his initial experiences in the United States:

When I came here to the States, the man who brought me over here got me a job in a factory in New York City, a plastics factory...I was making $28 a week...I was living— a Jewish woman had a room, no food, you know—and I was spending $20 a week for the room, and I had about $7 or $8 left over for myself. And after about a couple of months I got myself a different job delivering zippers in a zipper factory. I was making $32 a week, so a little better. But my friend was in Milwaukee, and he asked me to come here, so...in April of 1950 I came here to Milwaukee.

Before long, war again played a role in Howard’s future:
In 1950 the Korean War broke out, and my friend got drafted into the United States Army. I didn’t want to get drafted in the Army so I enlisted in the United States Air Force. I served for four years in California. I married a woman from Milwaukee in 1951, and in 1954 we returned to Milwaukee because her family was here and I didn’t have any family, and I’ve lived there ever since.

Despite the horrible experiences of Howard’s past, he was able to create a new life for himself in America. He describes the direction of his life after World War II: “when I awoke on May 2nd, 1945, if I could have written my own future I don’t think I could have done a better job because my life has just been wonderful after that.”

Philip Freund also came to America as a World War II refugee. Born in Munich, Germany, in 1931, his family decided to emigrate when conditions deteriorated even further for German Jews after Kristallnacht. Philip traveled on the famed SS St. Louis. The ocean liner left Hamburg, Germany, for Havana, Cuba, under Captain Gustav Schroeder on May 13, 1939, carrying almost 1,000 passengers, who paid exorbitant sums escape the Nazi regime and obtain Cuban visas. The Cuban government, however, only admitted 28 passengers, rejecting those who held landing permits from a corrupt Cuban immigration official. Still under the restrictions of the 1924 Johnson-Reed act, the United States declined to accept the passengers. During a 2001 reunion of the St. Louis survivors in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, Philip recalls:

400 people came from all over the Western hemisphere to ask for forgiveness for not letting us in. The Canadians asked for forgiveness also for not allowing us to disembark the St. Louis. Down in Florida they had a huge showing asking us to forgive them; in fact, we even threw a wreath into the estuary but the Coastguard came out and drove us off...Well, [when on the St. Louis] we were sitting right outside of Miami in Ft. Lauderdale and as a little boy I could see the cars on the causeway and we couldn’t understand why we couldn’t come off the ship...They asked Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor Roosevelt] to intercede on our behalf; they cabled FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt] and asked him to please let us get off, and his comment was, "I don’t want them in the Western Hemisphere." So nobody wanted us, so that’s why we had to go back to Europe.

The ship had no choice but to sail back to Europe, disembarking at Antwerp, Belgium. Philip describes the negotiations to get Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands to accept the refugees:

Now, the Captain of the ship, Gustav Schroeder, was a righteous Gentile, who knew that if he took us back to Hamburg, all the males over the age of 16 would be executed because they were released out of concentration camps after Kristallnacht with the proviso that if they ever returned they would be executed...We were split up. One fourth went to England—that was us; we went to England—one fourth went to France, roughly, one fourth to Belgium, and one fourth to Holland [the Netherlands]. And it was done through chicanery with Mr. Troper, from a Jewish

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1 For Philip’s account of the voyage, see: Philip S. Freund and Belle Anne Freund, Denied Entry: A Survivor’s Journey of Fate, Faith and Freedom (Charleston, SC: Philip S. Freund, 2011), 19–23.

2 For a written description of the Ft. Lauderdale reunion, see: Freund and Freund, Denied Entry, 82–83.
Benevolent Society, cabled England and said, "The French are willing to take X number; how many are you willing to take?" And the Brits answered that they'd be willing to take 287, so he pulled the same trick on the French and he said, "The Brits are willing to take 287; how many are you willing to take?" And they said, "Well, we'll take a certain number also," and he did the same thing with the Dutch and with the Belgians.

Philip and his family passed the time in England before finding passage to America:

We lived in a little town called Yelverton, most of the time...It was fine; there was no problem...We lived in a Bed and Breakfast, and I can remember my grandmother and I going into the dark moor to pick blueberries and that was our supper; we only had two meals a day at the Bed and Breakfast.3

Philip finally arrived in America on December 24th, 1939. He eventually contributed his experiences to a documentary about the SS St. Louis voyage (see audiovisual resources).

Once in America, Philip lived with his uncle and cousin in Hackensack, New Jersey, because his mother and grandmother couldn't afford to keep him. He describes starting out:

We were allowed to leave Germany with two suitcases and 10 marks. That was it; everything else had to stay behind. I did bring my stuffed monkey, but that was it, and when I got to Hackensack the clothes didn't fit me anymore and the 10 marks were certainly spent long before that, so we started out really almost naked with literally nothing.

Philip relates how his mother and grandmother had to adapt to life in America:

My mother came out of a home where she was extremely wealthy; [the Nazis] took everything from her...She had to come [to America] and she sewed collars on T-Shirts. My grandmother, who also was an extremely wealthy lady—we had two houses; we had cars, maids; I had a governess; we had a cook, who was my friend—and had to come here. My grandmother became a scrubwoman, cleaning other people's floors and homes...It had a terrible impact on them. It didn't impact me as much because, you know, being a boy it's different, but they suffered terribly all their life, because they lost everything that they had earned—literally earned—and was legally theirs, and all because the Nazis took everything away. So we came to this country, and at least I made use of every opportunity possible.

Philip had some adjusting of his own to do. When he arrived in America and went to school, he was very behind in his studies:

I got kicked out of school in Germany for being Jewish. Then I was supposed to go to the Jewish School, but they burned that down, and so I really had absolutely no education until I came to this country [the United States]...I was 8 and a-half years old by the time I came here and I couldn't read and I couldn't do arithmetic.

Philip describes how he caught up in school:

A friend of mine one day said to me..."Do you have a library card?" And I said, "No, I have no money. I can't afford a library card." And he said, "You don't need money." So he took me to the Main Street library, and we went to the desk, and George [Philip's friend] told the lady behind the desk that I needed a library card, and she asked me for my name and where I lived...and she said, "What do you

3 For Philip’s account of his time in England, see: Freund and Freund, Denied Entry, 24–26.
need?” And George said, “He needs a library card.” So she gave me a library card, and I told her, “First of all I’m Jewish and secondly I don’t have any money.” And she said, “You don’t need money, and it doesn’t matter.” You see, growing up under the Nazis, we were considered vermin, so we were not allowed to get books out of any library.⁴

Philip Freund made use of the opportunities available to him in America; he went on to become a teacher and achieved the rank of a Colonel in the military. Philip believes in the importance of passing down these oral histories:

I think it’s important that we do [oral histories]...for our children, for our grandchildren, for our great grandchildren, so that they can understand the trials and tribulations that those of us who were escapees from the Nazis [endured]. [We] could come [to America], and build a life, and start all over.

**VOCABULARY AND GLOSSARY**

**Causeway** (noun): a highway.

**Chicanery** (noun): trickery, deception.

**Colonel** (noun): the highest or second highest rank of officer in the military.

**Concentration camps**: guarded camps established by the Nazis during the World War II period to detain or exterminate Jews and other targeted groups.

**Eleanor Roosevelt**: wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt, known for her active role in supporting her husband’s policies.

**Estuary** (noun): the widening of a river channel where it nears the sea.

**FDR**: Franklin D. Roosevelt, 32nd president of the United States. Known for his programs and policies designed to help the American people during the Great Depression.

**Gentile** (noun): a non-Jewish person.

**Intercede** (verb): to act on behalf of someone, especially in times of trouble; to intervene.

**Kristallnacht**: “Night of Broken Glass.” Violent pogroms directed against Jews in Germany and parts of Austria and Czechoslovakia that took place on November 9 and 10, 1938.

**Mark**: German currency up until the adoption of the euro in 2002.

**Moor** (noun): a tract of uncultivated land, often covered in shrubs, coarse grass, and moss, characteristic of parts of England.

**Proviso** (noun): a condition or requirement that satisfies an agreement.

**Righteous** (adjective): morally upright.

**SS St. Louis**: an ocean liner under Captain Gustav Schroeder that left Hamburg, Germany, for Havana, Cuba, on May 13, 1939. The nearly 1,000 passengers on board consisted of mostly Jewish refugees. Denied entry by both Cuba and the United States, the ship returned to Europe. Negotiations took place to settle the refugees in Great Britain (288), Belgium (214), France (224), and the Netherlands (181). 254 of the passengers admitted to the European continent died in the Holocaust, while all but one of the refugees accepted by Britain survived.

⁴ To read Philip’s account of his library card adventure, see: Freund and Freund, Denied Entry, 35–36.
Star of David: a six-pointed star made of two superimposed triangles that acts as a symbol of Jewish identity.

Tribulation (noun): an instance of trouble or suffering; hardship.

Vermin (noun): small animals, such as rats and mice, generally considered objectionable to humans; a derogatory term sometimes applied to people.

ACTIVITY

Visit the web site for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s online exhibit, Voyage of the St. Louis: [http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/stlouis/](http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/stlouis/).

1) Click on “The Story” and watch “The Voyage.” What do you think it would have felt like to turn back to Europe?
2) Browse the passengers’ stories. What hardships did they have to endure? How do their experiences compare to Philip Freund’s?
3) Can you find Philip Freund on the passenger list (see “The List”)?

Resources

SUGGESTED READINGS


Philip and his wife Belle Anne recount the trials and triumphs of Philip’s life, from his childhood to his military career. Read about his early years in Germany, the voyage of the St. Louis, his youth in America, his army service, and other pivotal chapters in his life. Photographs included.


AUDIOVISUAL


A documentary featuring Philip Freund (52 minutes). Philip describes making the film:
In 1994, nine [of the St. Louis survivors] made a documentary with Galafilms out of Montreal. And so we got together with the nine of us; two of the ladies have already passed away since that time, but we spent 10 days filming...on a ship in the Caribbean. We went to Nassau; we went to the Dominican Republic; we went right by Cuba...and then we went to Key West. Then we went back to Miami, where we boarded a vessel, and we went to South Miami beach, where they have the Holocaust memorial, and we did some filming there. And this was shown all over Europe and Canada and Finland and even in this country [the United States].


A DVD release of the 1976 feature film by Transcontinental Film Productions. The movie is based on the 1974 book by Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan-Witts (see Books, 137 Minutes).

WEB SITES


A brief article on the voyage with links to historical documents and personal histories of the event