

A Child Survivor of the Holocaust Speaks

By Ruth Bolliger

My name is Ruth Bolliger and I am both a Child Survivor and a child of Survivors. I tell you that because it is important for you to know that I was a baby when my parents and I fled Europe, eventually finding refuge in the United States. What you are about to read are not my own recollections—I was too young to remember—but what I have been able to piece together from the little my parents ever told me, some surviving documents, and all that I have learned over my lifetime.

My story starts just one week before my birth, when the Nazis entered Austria and incorporated it into Germany. After World War I, Austria entered a period of economic stagnation and political dictatorship. This made the country susceptible to intense Nazi propaganda. Therefore, when the Nazis marched into Austria in 1938, most Austrians enthusiastically welcomed the German troops. My mother's Jewish family, who lived in Austria, were not among the people welcoming them. Furthermore, all of the restrictive anti-Jewish laws that had been imposed on Jews and other groups in Germany were now suddenly applied in Austria.

My mother's father, the only Jewish faculty member at the University of Graz in Austria, had won the Nobel Prize in Medicine just two years earlier, in 1936. Being such a well known Jew meant that he and the rest of my family in Austria were targets and in immediate danger. Winning the Nobel Prize, however, also provided my grandfather with connections that ultimately helped him, my grandmother, and my parents and me escape and survive.

Now on to me. I was born on March 18, 1938 in Bohemia, Czechoslovakia—an area that makes up part of what is now the Czech Republic. I was born into the chaos of a world which wanted to rid itself of Jews—including newborn me.

On September 29, 1938, when I was just six months old, the Munich Agreement was signed. This allowed Germany to seize part of Czechoslovakia, which meant my parents and I were no longer safe and needed to escape as quickly as possible. And so began our odyssey of flight and hiding, which lasted nearly 36 months and spanned five countries with us eventually emigrating to the United States.

The complications started as soon as my parents decided that we needed to get out of Bohemia. They aimed for Prague, where my father's mother still lived, and where we could more safely "hide in the open." At that time the law stated that only those born in Prague could travel to Prague. Since my father, Ulrich, was the only member of our family born in Prague, he went ahead while my mother and I moved to a town nearby. Realizing how difficult it would be to enter Prague illegally, let alone with an infant, my mother contacted her Czech language teacher (who was born in Prague) for help. She carried me into Prague as her own infant

and kept me for a week. My mother then hired a truck to take a few furnishings to Prague and hid under the furniture. Not even the driver knew she was in the truck. If the truck had been searched and she had been caught, I would have lost my mother at six months old.

From the end of December 1938 through March 1939 we hid in the open in Prague. Hiding in the open may not sound like hiding at all, but at that time Jews were not forced to wear a Jewish star or any other distinguishing mark. So, as long as no one was able to identify us as Jewish, my parents could work, shop, and live—albeit with extreme caution. My mother and I were at higher risk because we were immigrants who had entered Prague illegally. On March 15, 1939, just three days before my first birthday, the Nazis occupied Prague; we needed to escape as soon as possible.

My grandfather's connections from winning the Nobel Prize were critical to our flight and survival. At the prize ceremony, he met the Queen of Belgium, who offered assistance if and when my grandfather ever needed it. Because of this, my parents were able to secure an extremely time limited visa to Belgium, and on March 31, 1939, we fled to Brussels, where we stayed until May 25, 1939. Life in Brussels was extremely difficult since as Jews and immigrants, neither of my parents could work. It was a time of heightened uncertainty and anxiety as my parents figured out where to try to go next.

The same Czech language teacher who smuggled me into Prague, helped my mother secure temporary work as a nanny in England. This helped us flee the main continent of Europe. At that time, it was common for many countries to prohibit foreign men of working age from entering, fearing they would take jobs away from the local citizens. My father could not join us in England. Instead, he made his way to Paris and we were separated again for about six months.

During that time so much changed. On September 1, 1939, the German army invaded Poland and on September 3, 1939, Britain declared war on Germany. The British family that my mother was working for had their own children and were also caring for the children of extended family members to keep them safe. I was the twelfth and youngest child in that house. When Britain entered the war and the parents of the house were called to serve in their country's war effort, they had to close the house and disperse the children they had been protecting. Fortunately, my mother and I went with one of the children and ended up in another home.

During our time in England, the Nazis occupied all of Czechoslovakia and made it a German protectorate. As a result, Czechoslovakia was no longer a recognized independent country. This was devastating for my family because our Czech passports were no longer valid. We became stateless. This meant we were without citizenship or legal protections. One of the immediate consequences of this was that my mother's visa was annulled and we had to leave England.

Years later, my mother told me of the agonizing decision she had to make about getting to France to rejoin my father: either risk German mines hitting a boat attempting to cross the Channel or risk anti-aircraft bombs hitting a plane. She decided to fly, and we were lucky to arrive safely. We reunited with my father and lived in a tiny, overcrowded house in a suburb of Paris. All the while we were waiting, hoping for our U.S. immigration quota number to come up so we could escape Europe altogether.

It wasn't long until we had to flee again. In June 1940, the German Army occupied Paris. This time we headed south. Many years later I learned of the panic and chaos that occurred in the crammed train station. My parents told me that my mother kicked, elbowed, and even bit her way through the crowds to get us on the train. My father used his suitcase as a "weapon." It was a miracle that all three of us managed to get on the same train together. We ended up taking the train to a town called Vertolaye. When we arrived, my father wandered around and found an old, leaky farmhouse. We lived there for the summer of 1940 until it became too cold and wet to stay. We ate wild mushrooms and whatever other vegetables my mother could glean (gather after the harvest) from nearby farms.

As Jews in Vichy France, we were under enormous tension and pressure. Realities were harsh and everyone lived in constant terror. By this time I was two years old and spoke three languages as best a toddler can! If I had spoken the wrong language at the wrong time I could have given us away as Jewish. I never did. My parents were also horrified by the rumors that the authoritarian regime that controlled Vichy France was specifically hunting down young, male Czech "deserters" like my father. The network of laws, and specifically the travel restrictions, against Jews created a catch-22—a lose-lose situation. In order to retrieve special documents, ship tickets, or money to escape, you had to travel. However, traveling required crossing boundaries which required special permits that were often difficult or impossible for Jews to secure. On more than one occasion my parents had to risk their lives and travel without a permit. If they had been caught, the consequences could have been fatal.

Finally, after two and a half years of flight, hiding, and pervasive terror, our wait ended; our U.S. immigration quota number came up. It took another six weeks of (illegal) travel and narrow escapes to round up the money (which we received through the Joint Distribution Committee) and secure visas. As stateless people my parents had to do all this without valid passports! In early March 1941, our family arrived in Marseilles, hoping to find a ship leaving for the United States. Because Marseilles was so overcrowded with frantic refugees trying to leave, my parents ended up staying at a house of prostitution about an hour outside of Marseille. We stayed there until we left Europe for good. It was also where I spent my third birthday.

At the end of March 1941, we boarded a cargo ship (Le Capitain Paul Le Merle) and headed towards the United States via the Caribbean Islands. We escaped Nazi Europe, but not the dangers: the coast waters were full of mines. The conditions on board were also horrific. Two hundred and fifty families were jammed into two cargo holds for an entire month. I was one of six very young children on board. All of us contracted whooping cough, a highly contagious respiratory disease that can be fatal in children. Obviously I'm still here, so I survived.

Our ship sailed to Martinique, a Caribbean island and territory of France, where we were put in a refugee camp for two months. The conditions there were no better. We “lived” on the beach with barely a roof over our heads, and the ocean was our toilet, our bath, and our entertainment. Food was minimal and often infested with worms.

We then sailed to Ciudad Trujillo (now Santo Domingo City) in the Dominican Republic. After about a week, we boarded a boat, the Borinquen, and were on our way to New York. It was not stress free from here though. Another thing my parents feared was that at the immigration checkpoint at Ellis Island I would either cough or “whoop” or both—exposing my whooping cough—which would have caused our entry into the U.S. to be delayed or altogether denied. Luckily, I neither coughed nor “whooped” and finally, on June 2, 1941, we were allowed to enter New York. We had finally escaped Nazi Europe.

My grandparents, the ones who emigrated to the United States previously, picked us up from our entry point and brought us back to their apartment in New York City. We stayed with them until my parents found jobs. Eventually we moved to Queens, New York, where I went through high school. Between getting my bachelors degree from Oberlin College and my masters degree from Western Reserve University, both in Ohio, I married Ted, a medical student. We eventually had three daughters, and now have two grandchildren. Ted’s medical training required us to live in several different places. We finally ended up settling in Oregon.

Now 75 years later, the constant, all-consuming terror is, of course, gone. However, given that the Holocaust so impacted my formative years, it has, of course, had life-long effects:

- I have lived with constant underlying anxiety, perfectionism, lacking a sense of safety anywhere, and never really knowing how to belong nor whether I have a right to; i.e. do I have the right to take up space on this earth?
“Once a refugee, always a refugee.”
- I grew up, and remain, pathologically obedient, even to unspoken rules. For example, I mentioned earlier that by age two, I spoke three languages. I “understood” that if I had spoken the wrong language at the wrong time, it could have killed us.
- Being born into the trauma of the Holocaust, I have no experience or memory of “before the Holocaust”—no sense of normal family life, let alone of a normal Jewish community life.
- I never wear words on my clothing (my body is nobody’s billboard). Even though I have strong political opinions, I can’t make myself put up a lawn sign nor a bumper sticker. I only wear a Star of David necklace when I am among other Jews; I even keep it hidden en route.
“Once a Hidden Child, always a hidden child.”
- I also think about the burden I must have been to my parents. To have escaped with an infant must have been extremely difficult when every decision might be a matter of life or death. Even now, if I sense that I am not welcome somewhere, or that I am in the wrong place, I am out of there.

- A pair of unspoken messages I grew up with was: “Be (a little) better than everyone else but don’t stand out in the crowd.” My family was saved more than once by my grandfather’s Nobel Prize. As a Jew we needed to stay hidden from the Nazis in order to not be rounded up and killed.
- My father was a “gloom and doom” pessimist. Although pessimism is usually seen as a negative trait, my father’s pessimism saved us several times. Unfortunately, I have inherited his pessimism. I am still learning how to tone it down.
- We very young Child Survivors were always told that we were too young to remember. **True.** That, therefore, we suffered no ill effects of our experiences. **Not true.** My story is more subtle than those of concentration camp survivors; the after effects are also more subtle, more hidden, but just as damaging.

All of this being true, I have nonetheless enjoyed a good and fortunate life. I had a good education, raised a great family, practiced two fulfilling careers (as a mental health therapist and then a home hospice nurse), befriended more people than anyone deserves, traveled widely, volunteered meaningfully, and found a real home in (mostly choral) music. In my late fifties I was introduced to the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors and Descendants. At their annual conferences I am able to share some of the trauma of my early childhood with new friends to whom I don’t have to explain myself. They know! It was at my first conference here that I felt true safety for the first time in my life.

Even with its precarious beginnings, I am hugely grateful for the life I have lived. ■