

Ruth Wolman

Crossing Over: An Oral History of Refugees from Hitler's Reich

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Excerpts from the Preface:

My interest in gathering histories of the Gruppe members is traceable to a song I heard in an oral history workshop. "Tell me your story . . ." began the song, which continued with themes of immigration, rootlessness, and the value of sharing one's life story. As a participant in the workshop, I was asked to note my thoughts while listening to the song. I wrote, "It reminds me of the years when I tried so hard to assimilate, to be just like the kids around me. I did not like being the only child in class whose parents were immigrants, Jews, Democrats, nonsmokers, nondrinkers, both working, etc. My parents encouraged me to be like other children, while no doubt they tried to be more like the American adults whom they met. Many years passed before I began to feel comfortable with the ways in which I was different. That happened when I observed that people could really be interested in hearing about these differences." Certainly issues of being a first-generation American Jew are central to any story I now tell of myself.

Given the impetus of this workshop experience, I wanted to learn more about my heritage. I decided to interview my parents, to record what they would tell about their lives. Immigration years were of particular interest to me, and I had not heard much about this period. I wondered if other children of the Gruppe had the same interest. In the summer of 1989, I arranged a meeting with several of them. It was immediately evident that as children of Hitler refugees we shared some disquieting "baggage" and that we were eager for a forum in which to discuss it. Also, we each felt deprived of a portion of personal history. My unfamiliarity with my parents' past was not unique. We made a list of questions with which to structure interviews with our parents. I edited these questions and added others--some that interested me as a psychologist and a few that I borrowed from the oral history workshop.

Each interview would begin with an open-ended question: "What was your life like during the few years before immigration?" And later, "What was your life like during the first years in Los Angeles?" We wanted to understand how our parents had experienced those years in practical and emotional terms. Beyond addressing these transition years, questions extended to other issues: feelings of "being at home" in the world, use of German language, sense of identity (European, American, Jewish, enemy alien), ability to adapt, role of the Gruppe, experiences of anti-Semitism in the United States, return to city or town of childhood, awareness of destruction of European Jewry during the war, and inclination to talk about the immigration period.

Although the plan was for each person to interview his or her own parents (or grandparents), I conducted most of the interviews in their entirety and completed those begun by others. Fourteen members of the Gruppe were alive and all were willing to participate. The histories of two couples who had died were written by their children, relying on memory and whatever they could find in writing by their parents.

A benefit of doing so much of the interviewing myself was that it gave me the opportunity to know the older generation of the Gruppe in a new way. As an adult, I could now talk individually and at length with exceptional people whom I had known all my life and taken for granted. I also enjoyed an intimacy with them as I transcribed the interviews. Sometimes long into the night, I listened to their taped voices telling me about adjustments to uncertain and often threatening conditions, adventures, fears, loneliness, pain, and sadness; also about hope, optimism, and excitement. I was the recipient of a generous gift as these true life stories were spoken directly into my ear. It was fascinating to hear how a similar set of circumstances could affect people so differently. Personality and style were reflected in what each person remembered and in how they reported their experiences, choices, and feelings. Not surprisingly, the histories told by husbands and wives often included discrepant, sometimes even conflicting, details.

The process of editing the transcripts was a challenging one. Each participant took a first and generally cursory pass at this. Then I had to decide how much to include, how polished it should be, and how to make it most coherent to other readers. I wanted the written words to reflect each speaker's style, but still be certain they flowed smoothly. Although I did take some editorial license, the contributors clearly remain the authors of their histories.

Excerpts from the Interviews:

What can you tell me about yourself that you think enabled you to cope with the many transitions of emigration/immigration?

I was fearless in many different ways. I never felt, like many others under severe circumstances, that anything like this could really happen to me. That's of course, denial. It never occurred to me that the Nazis could grab me. I was very fortunate that nothing ever did happen. I think whenever you go into any kind of difficult situation with some assurance and being fearless, it is helpful. It is not being fearless, but rather acknowledging that being afraid is okay.

Anything else?

My father was the kind of person who was very adaptable, and I think he had the aim not only to teach and preach social democracy but really live it. For that I am very grateful. I learned from his example.

Also, both my sister and I were brought up not to rely on a man for sure but really to rely on ourselves. And when I came here, and Sepp and I married, I insisted that I have a job and support him while he looked for a job that was appropriate for his education. I saw nothing wrong in that. I firmly believe now, as then, that a woman has to be absolutely self-sufficient. I was not brought up to be only a good housewife and mother! That's the last thing on earth my father had in mind. We were brought up to be self sufficient women, period. Both my sister and I are.

Another thing--I was brought up to do the best I can. I try to do that whether it's scrubbing my kitchen floor or writing an academic paper. That general idea has certainly helped me. It didn't matter what I was doing as long as I was doing it well. I get impatient with people who do slipshod work, whatever it is. Also significant is that I have somehow known who I was. I have always had some feeling of self--whatever that was and no matter how criticized I've been for that. Sometimes that sense was of being very insecure and sometimes OK. I think those two things about me helped me. They would have helped no matter where I was and what circumstances may have happened. Certainly having become blind has put a damper on my life, but it hasn't kept me from living.

“Of course we also looked at all the classified ads in the Los Angeles Times and made some calls. I was referred to a place on Broadway, a sweatshop on the fifth floor. There was a Mr. Cohen from Iraq, who was head of this factory that manufactured brassieres. The place was named Gay Paris. That factory was anything but gay and certainly didn't invite any comparison with Paris! There were about 20 Russian women from a group in Los Angeles, I think called the "milk eaters," all middle aged or older women with babushkas. They sat at sewing machines and worked very busily and didn't get much pay, of course. There was a vacancy for someone who would run the office and sweep the floor, also do some errands and deliver merchandise. There was another candidate for that job, a doctor of law from Germany, but I got the job. Maybe the other fellow didn't look strong enough or his German accent bothered Mr. Cohen.

I stayed there for several weeks or maybe months. Mr. Cohen was himself the cutter of the brassieres. He had a wife and daughter who helped him to distribute the materials. These three were in constant arguments about money. It was not the job I dreamed of, and I wanted to get something better and more promising.

Based on my studies in the making of ladies' purses while in London and waiting for a visa to the U.S., I considered myself as having some idea of how to make leather goods or manufacture them. I thought I might find work in such an enterprise. So while working at the brassiere factory, I looked for some companies that made bags. Where would I find such companies? In the yellow pages!

I looked in the Yellow Pages for names that somehow were promising, that is, Jewish names. I saw there Friedman Bag Company. I thought it was worth trying. I called and said I would like to apply for a job. They didn't say no and didn't go into any details. I took the streetcar to Friedman Bag Company. I was looking for a firm that made bags. The bags were there, but they were bags for potatoes, onions, and other agricultural products! That was a disappointment. But since I was there, I asked about a job. What could I do? We talked about an office job. The owner was a short Jewish fellow, his English was pretty good. He was a "successful" immigrant from Russia, had started up the company and hired his two brothers.

When you applied for jobs like the previous one or this one, did you tell them anything about your background? Did they know how well educated you were? Or would that have been a liability for such positions?

I couldn't tell Mr. Friedman that I had a doctor's degree in business economics because he would have sent me on my way. So I didn't say anything about my education. I just said that I had business experience and was willing to work hard. He hired me. . . .”

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