

KRISTALLNACHT 2019

Shabbat Shalom – or as we German Jewish immigrants say, Good Shabbes!

I'm Gary Thalheimer, for those of you who don't know me, since I don't often come to evening services. I was on the Board for many years and Chair of the Seder Committee.

I've probably sat in a Hebrew Tabernacle pew at the old location on West 161st Street before any of you - since shortly after my parents and I arrived in 1938.

I'm not going to talk about the Horrors of the Shoah tonight. There's another service for that in May. Tonight, I want to tell you about the immigrants who got out in time but struggled to find a place that would accept Jews in the face of a universal anti-Semitism, and of our immigrant experience.

You probably know about the man who trains mules: he grabs a two by four, walks up to the mule and whacks him over the head. "That's to get the mule's attention."

Well, Kristallnacht was Hitler's way of getting the attention of Jews who had not learned from his speeches and writings since 1923 or thought his election in 1933 would not affect them. Not even the Nuremberg Laws of 1936 that barred Jews from schools, most professions, from working for or employing Aryans or mixed marriages.

These were the mostly fairly well-to-do Jews who felt themselves totally assimilated. They built synagogues to look like churches without the cross on top. You can see pictures of some in the staircase leading to the Social Hall. They had professional titles and were (they thought) respected in their communities. Some were even as anti-Semitic as their goyish neighbors, assuming that Hitler's anti-Semitism applied to those caricatured orthodox Eastern Jews. Not to them who wore morning coats and top hats on the High Holidays.

They learned, too late, the Nazis wanted ALL JEWS out of Germany (including the mischlinge who only had one Jewish grandmother) but wanted to keep their money with exorbitant exit taxes and prohibited taking more than \$25 per person. We could take furniture and household goods that would fit into a 50 cubic foot crate, but no valuables, art, jewelry or antiques. I still have the list of what we were permitted to take, signed off on by an SS officer who supervised the packing.

The "Final Solution" would take effect legally in 1942 with cattle cars and railroad tracks leading to the ovens of Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Birkenau and the other locations we name in our Yizkor Kaddish.

Today would have been my father's birthday, so first I want to salute his courage and foresight and thank him for it. Many of us here, like me, never thought to thank their parents or grandparents for their courage in leaving a comfortable middle-class life with cooks, nannies and housemaids, to start from scratch in a new country, learn a new language, a new culture, and often a new trade in a new land. Some may even have been ashamed of their backgrounds.

My father's business was canvas products, tents, awnings and café umbrellas. When his largest customer, the concessionaire of the municipal park café, equivalent to our Tavern on the Green, and a good friend, told him in 1933, "Martin, it's time to get out," my father paid attention.

First, he tried France, working on a farm near Toulouse. But after a year could not get a residence permit. Same thing in Italy. Maybe it was all for the best in retrospect. We finally located a distant cousin in Pennsylvania who was able to supply affidavits for the three of us.

The US did not want German Jewish immigrants any more than Germany did. Most countries wanted high net worth immigrants – Switzerland wanted a million in cash or property. Even South American countries had restrictions.

The United States was as anti-Semiticly restrictive as the others. It had a powerful "America First" isolationist group led by Radio Priest Father Coughlin and Charles Lindbergh. They did not want a war to save Jews. Even President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was casually anti-Semitic.

Congress required immigrants to have a sponsor, to guarantee that they would never be a burden on the state. Sponsors had to prove their net worth or put up a \$10,000 bond – remember this was the depression, when the cost of living and average earnings were low. A hot dog was a nickel. So was a subway ride. Or a coke. A room at the Waldorf was \$7.00. When some wealthy Hollywood producers, like Carl Laemmle, sponsored the entire Jewish population of their hometowns, the requirement became a "blood relative." The Jewish/German quota was reduced by 50% after the 1936 Nuremberg laws.

Here's how immigration affected me and my family,

We arrived on August 8, 1938, after more than a year waiting for our visa number to come up. My father's mother, two sisters and their husbands, the Graus and Neumanns, long time members, had arrived in 1936-37 and were living on West 160th Street. We found an apartment at 15 Ft Washington. That's how we went with them to a Friday evening service.

Officially the Tabernacle welcomed the immigrants. But it was many years before a refugee member was invited to join the board. And a lot longer before Kurt Schloss became the first German immigrant president. And even at the 50th Anniversary celebration, to which Rabbi Opher (an Israeli) was invited, he referred to "refugees" as if we smelled bad. But the service was familiar to our German conservative background.

The beautiful building on West 161 Street between Broadway and Ft. Washington Ave was in the heart of the neighborhood frequently called the "Fourth Reich," because of the many German Jews and refugees. The area was pretty much west of Broadway to the Hudson. A few charismatic clergymen, Rabbi Koppel in the Audubon Ballroom (now landmarked because of the Malcolm X slaying), and Cantor Lieber on Amsterdam had started orthodox congregations. And Hugo Hahn founded Habonim in Midtown.

On our corner was Nedick's, a low-end hot dog chain with a ten-cent breakfast of coffee, much watered orange drink and a donut or hot dog. It's now a McDonald's.

Across Broadway was a tiny Kosher butcher, Bloch & Falk who still make great salami. Our side of Broadway had a large 24-hour produce market and a Woolworth below 159 Street. A Block North was Loew's Rio, very big, but nothing like the Loews 175th Street – now the United Palace. Around the corner from the Tabernacle was Slatkin's Jewish (preferable to Kosher) deli, attracting customers from all over; I never even saw the inside: way too expensive for us. A Daitch dairy store, which had the best tub butter, eventually to become Food Emporium; and at the upper corner Gold's jewelry store (this may be Armin Gold).

On the east side of Broadway was a shoe repair shop where our member Fred Meyerhoff, a lawyer in Germany, repaired shoes. He eventually got his CPA accounting license. There was also an A & P service Grocery Store, selling only their own Ann Page brands and not considered Jewish-friendly.

By the way, those of you who live along Cabrini Blvd, may not be aware or remember that those buildings with river views were all known to be restricted. They didn't even resort to the euphemism, found in "for rent" or resort ads, "churches nearby." Just like the Swastika symbol with the phrase "Juden Unerwünscht" in German stores.

Two more bits of neighborhood lore. Orner's Cafeteria on Broadway just north of the 157th Street IRT station, where the unemployed and the "retired" sat over cups of coffee for the 10-cent minimum check and read newspapers – the 2-cent Daily News or the German language weekly AUFBAU. This had the hard news from Europe, plus wedding, death and bar mitzvah announcements, and listings of people being sought by relatives or friends.

The other is the low wall along upper Riverside Drive from 158 to 165th Street. "Klagemauer" – German expression for Jerusalem's Wailing Wall, where the local emigres would bring their cushions or folding chairs to gossip, complain (usually about how much better things had been in Germany), exchange tips about apartments or jobs, or to talk about lost relatives and friends.

Transportation was by subway (unchanged), streetcars, and the double decker Fifth Avenue Buses. 1 through 5, plus 19 which had an open upper deck like today's tourist buses. But the double-deckers were a dime, collected in a hand-held fare box by the conductor. Funny aside about a woman and her husband on a Fifth Avenue bus: She found a seat downstairs; the husband went to the upper deck. When the conductor approached her for the fare, she used the wrong definition of a German word with multiple meanings, pointed up and said, "The Lord above will pay."

Learning English, we all took courses of some sort, many retaining our accents. We had our own version of Spanglish, mixing languages and tenses, called 72nd Street English, as in "Ich bin in die Seventy-second street gemoved." And mispronunciations, like a relative who asked a policeman for directions to Onion Square.

There was another new language: Yiddish, which German Jews do not know, the language of the garment industry and the brassiere factories, with names like Bali Bra, Playtex or MaidenForm at which my mother and several aunts worked. All owned by Yiddish speaking Eastern Jews. At her first job, the boss distributed small bonuses at Rosh Hashonoh, and told my Aunt Hilde, "Shana tovah, and Hitler should have a miese meshineh." To which my Aunt replied "Thank you. The same to you."

I was an 8-year old "latchkey kid" – both parents working, and of course no nanny.

I was pretty fortunate with English. Unlike many kids my age who had to start over, Dr Arnold the principal of PS 46 at Amsterdam and 156 Street, put me in Second Grade (2B), saying "He'll pick up English soon enough from the kids." I did, though also a lot of words I shouldn't have.

Most of all it was the 10-cent Costello Movie Theater, next door to where we lived. It had a different double bill six days a week. The manager asked me to distribute handbill programs on Broadway, for which I was rewarded with a season pass, and spent the 1939 summer seeing a different double bill every day, learning English from the movies. By the way, it later became a synagogue and is now a Baptist Church.

When my parents and I arrived in 1938, just three months before Kristallnacht, we were lucky. My mother got a job with a furrier through some people we met aboard ship, paying \$20 per week – a good salary in 1938 – but seasonal. No fur business in summer, so my mother also worked as a cleaning woman, "companion" meaning drudge, sewing machine operator and such.

My father's first job (he had learned tool-and-die-making at a relative's factory) was as a machinist, working nights in Brooklyn at a factory that made "cleaner tags," the same paper or fabric tags with metal clips that dry cleaners still use. His first pay was \$10 per week. Sometimes, Saturday mornings, I'd travel out there to meet him, and we'd ride home together.

Many Sundays, my father and I would walk across the George Washington Bridge to New Jersey, then down the path along the cliff to the river edge and north to come back on the Dyckman Street ferry.

But I also knew that we all had to pitch in. I sold the "Saturday Evening Post" going from door to door in apartment buildings and stores, making one and a half cents per copy. I learned to wear a coat to hide the bag with "Saturday Evening Post" printed on it, to avoid being accosted by neighborhood toughs

wanting to "borrow" a quarter. I also learned to avoid 160 Street across Broadway, where the Irish gangs beat up Jewish kids. And on 159th it was the blacks.

You can hear similar stories from the few remaining members who came here as kids – Charlie Friedman came on the last ship that was permitted to land with Jewish passengers, Laura Altschuler came with her brother and parents in the late 30s, and others. Frank Hess's oldest brother Walter published a book "Coming to America" last year detailing his family's move to Ecuador and then to New York.

"Hausieren" was a makeshift profession: selling door-to-door. I recall one noted former Hebrew Scholar who would come evenings with a satchel of Bloch & Falk sausages. Selma Sarner, a relative of the Hamburg's, and her husband lived in the apartment next door. He sold things door-to-door.

Otto Seyferth was our organist in the late 1930s into the 1950's. He had been music director of the South German Radio, but would not divorce his Jewish wife Elsa, an opera singer who later sang in our choir. He and my uncle Fred Grau got together to perform the Bruch Kol Nidre to establish the appropriate mood before the actual Kol Nidre chant – still a tradition.

My other uncle, Justin Neumann was able to transfer some money to establish a business employing home workers to make high end shoe vamps by braiding leather straps (like kids make lanyards in summer camp). Mrs. Kunz, who died recently and Toni Lehman, the Rabbi's mother, were among HT members who worked for him.

He, by the way, was very fortunate in leaving. He had a packet of money, which he hid in the toilet tank of the train carriage. At the border, he was stopped and taken off the train to be searched. He caught the next train to Zurich, where on the opposite track he spotted the car he had been in, crossed over and retrieved his packet of money from the toilet tank.

Not so lucky was my mother's cousin Paul Erlanger, a leading ENT Surgeon, who tried without success to take on the AMA which did not recognize German MD degrees. He worked several years as an intern and resident in Rochester, NY before the AMA let him take their exam.

In conclusion, I'd like to thank you all for your attention, and thanks to Rabbi Gale and the Board for the chance to share these memories of immigration, and to ask all of you to talk to your parents, grandparents and other family members who were the unwanted immigrants many decades ago, or more recently from other countries. Ask them about their memories of immigration. You'll find much of interest – many may be reluctant to talk about it unless you ask. Those memories should be preserved and passed on.

Special Thanks also to Dr Ralph Selig, for his programming of tonight's music as I might have heard it in Stuttgart and his attempts to preserve traditional synagogue music. Also special thanks to Robbie for his beautiful singing.