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Andrea Estrada

'We Would Be Separated, Quite Likely Forever'

On Dec. 2, 1938, a train pulled into Harwich, England. On board were 196 children from a Jewish orphanage in Berlin that had been destroyed during the infamous Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass). Part of the “Kindertransport,” the children were on their way to foster homes in Britain.

Operating between 1938 and 1940, Kindertransport was a series of rescue missions that brought children out of Nazi Germany, Austria and other German-occupied territories and placed them with families in England. It is credited with saving nearly 10,000 predominantly Jewish children, most of whom were the only members of their families to survive the Holocaust.

Among those 10,000 were 16-year-old Walter Kohn and his older sister, Minna, who after heart-wrenching goodbyes, had left a mother and father neither would ever see again.

Now a Nobel laureate, Kohn is a professor emeritus and research professor of physics at UC Santa Barbara and was the founding director of the campus’s Institute for Theoretical Physics, now KITP. In 1998, he received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for his leading role in the development of density-functional theory.

In a recent conversation, Kohn recalled his family’s dramatic experiences in Vienna in the period leading up to the Holocaust, and his own survival.

The World Turns Upside Down

“Things happened very quickly after the annexation,” he said grimly of the March 1938 election during which a near 90 percent majority of Austrians voted to become part of Germany. At the time, Kohn was a student at the Akademische Gymnasium, the oldest secondary school in Vienna, founded by Jesuits in 1553. Under his mother’s guidance, Kohn followed a course of study focused on Latin and Greek.

Everything changed with the Anschluss — the political union between Germany and Austria, Kohn noted. Jews in government positions were immediately fired, as were Jewish professors and teachers. Within two weeks, he and his Jewish classmates were told not to return to school.

For the Kohn family, the impact reached even further. Salomon Kohn, Walter’s father, had built a successful business producing art postcards based on paintings by contemporary artists. As became commonplace during that time, however, the business was confiscated by the Nazis. “It was bought,” Kohn scoffed. “Bought meant there was an absolutely correct bill of sale — somebody received the business and my father was paid for it, but only on paper.” In reality, Salomon Kohn never saw a penny.

According to Kohn, the new owners were members of the Sturmabteilung (SA), an organization that functioned as the original paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party. Its main duty was to provide protection at Nazi rallies and assemblies; disrupt meetings of the opposing parties and go up against their paramilitary units; and intimidate Jews, trade unionists and Slavic and Romani citizens.

“My father got a letter from the foreign office informing him that because he was ‘essential for maintaining the business,’ he couldn’t leave Austria,” Kohn continued. “He would not receive an exit visa. He would be hired as the manager, but it was pay that didn’t exist.”

The family had some savings and managed to survive, and Kohn was able to enter a Jewish high school — the Chajes Gymnasium. “It was quite curious,” he said. “While Austria was already annexed by the Nazi Germans, they nevertheless established Jewish high schools of excellent quality. And one of them was even named after a Jewish rabbi.”

The Nazi Germans appointed Jewish faculty members, and in Kohn's school the principal, Emil Nohel, was a well-known physicist. "I found out about 10 years later that he'd been a teaching assistant of Albert Einstein's," Kohn said. "He got me interested in that and I switched very quickly from my main interest, which was Latin, to physics.

"Yes, that was the principal of the Nazi-founded Jewish high school," Kohn recalled thoughtfully. "He was murdered by the Nazis."

Separated Forever

As terrifying — and seemingly unimaginable — events continued to unfold around them, Kohn's parents became desperate to get their son and daughter to safety — "even knowing," as Kohn said, "we would be separated, quite likely forever."

Fortunately for Walter and Minna, Salomon Kohn had a genial business relationship with Charles Hauff, a fellow art publisher in England, and he wrote a letter in which he referred very cautiously to "changed circumstances in Austria." He said he would be "immensely grateful" if Hauff and his family could take Walter and Minna into their home on a temporary basis.

To their relief, a reply came the very next week; Walter and Minna were welcome to stay with Hauff and his wife, Eva. "My sister went first because the papers were easier, and I followed six months later," Kohn said.

Kohn and his sister were lucky. Kindertransport saved their lives and brought them to a family that was not completely unknown to them.

"The British don't get the immense credit they deserve for this," Kohn said of the Kindertransport effort. "There was a coalition that managed to get through Parliament a special law to allow Jewish children from Germany and German-occupied parts of Europe to get special travel visas." That coalition included the British Committee for the Jews of Germany and the Movement for the Care of Children in Germany.

In the United States, similar legislation would have had the effect of saving 20,000 Jewish children under age 14 by allowing them to enter the country from Nazi Germany. Congress rejected the Wagner-Rogers Child Refugee Bill in February 1939 after public opinion polls indicated a negative attitude toward increased

immigration.

Through Kindertransport, however, children 17 and younger were allowed to enter Great Britain as refugees, provided they had financial support from private citizens or organizations. The arrangement was meant to be temporary, with the children returning to their families when the crisis in Europe was over.

For the vast majority, however, that didn't happen — and certainly not for Walter and Minna. Their beloved parents, Gittel and Salomon Kohn, were deported to the Theresienstadt camp in Czechoslovakia and then to Auschwitz, where they were exterminated in 1944.

The Acts of Good People

In remembering the Holocaust, foremost for Kohn are the horrors he and his family, friends and teachers endured. But he also recalls the many good people who, guided by their conscience, took a stand in opposition to the brutality of the Nazis.

Among them are the Hauff family in Sussex, England, and the Mendel family in Toronto, Canada. Bruno Mendel, a medical doctor, and his wife Hertha, took Kohn (and five other refugees from Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied territories) into their home after Kohn was forced to leave England in 1940. They became surrogate parents, encouraging and supporting his studies at the University of Toronto.

"I was miraculously fortunate that two families unrelated in succession — really wonderful people — made it their mission to help children," Kohn said. "Kindertransport is a big thing, but a small part of it are two families who helped me and my sister survive — one in England and one in Canada."

Another of those "wonderful people" was Kohn's "hero," Hans Thirring. Thirring was a brilliant physicist at the Akademische Gymnasium who, following the Anschluss, resigned his position rather than support the firing of Jewish professors. "My hero, who was not Jewish, gave up his livelihood and made his living throughout the war by fixing refrigerators," said Kohn. "Those are the acts of good people."

Everyone Can Do Something

According to Kohn, a conversation about the Holocaust and remembrance must include one very important recurring issue. "And it's in a way not really a philosophical issue, but on the other hand it is also very important, and maybe the

most important issue," he said.

"A lot of people feel — and we're talking about the Holocaust so I'll use it to exemplify — this imaginary person is asked, 'And what did you do during the Holocaust?' and the normal answer is, 'Well, there just wasn't anything I could do as an individual. Was I supposed to stop Hitler? It was impossible.'

"And yes, of course it's true in a practical sense," he continued. "But you can do something. It may not be effective when you do it, but it can affect the future. Don't take the easy route and say, 'It's just me against some huge thing.'

"You have to find the way — not huge — that you can contribute to prevent future catastrophes," he concluded. "Since I'm kind of a practical person, I want to see if there is something that I can do that is going to reduce the likelihood of that horror and magnitude in the future. And I think everybody can contribute to this in some way."

Coming Tuesday: UCSB English scholar Irina Vladi Wender explores the impact of the Holocaust on the children and grandchildren of survivors.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.