

■ PREWAR NAZI GERMANY ■

JACK ESCAPES AT AGE 14

Born in 1924 in Poland, Jack Hoffmann was two when his family moved to Vienna, Austria. After Hitler took control of Austria in March 1938, the family registered to get visas to emigrate to the United States—a wait of two years or more. After the mass attacks of Kristallnacht eight months later, they decided to send young Jack to England on the Kindertransport.

From the first moment [of the Nazi takeover], things changed radically. Unlike in Germany where it was a gradual approach, with us all the anti-Jewish legislation that had been passed in Germany went into effect almost immediately, including the Nuremberg Laws.* The non-Jewish Viennese, of course, fell in love with this thing from the word go. We were touched by it to the extent that an Aryan could walk into your apartment, into your business, and help himself to whatever he wanted. We had no police protection. You could try and call the police department, but they wouldn't respond to it. The non-Jewish Viennese could also apply to have your apartment, and you were given about a couple of weeks to get out. This happened to us, and we had to move to a smaller apartment.



Jack at age 10 stands behind the right shoulder of his teacher in his public school graduation photograph, 1934.

There was no resistance whatsoever. Hitler was welcomed with open arms. The night before they marched into Austria, we like all others were listening to the radio and listening to the resignation speech.† And while he was making the speech, we could hear and see Nazis all over the place, on streetcars and trucks, with partial uniforms, most of them wearing armbands, but all with these swastika flags and shouting all these slogans—"One People, One Empire, One Leader"—and anti-Jewish songs. The

There was no resistance whatsoever. Hitler was welcomed with open arms.



USHMM/US Natl. Archives
Non-Jewish Austrians welcome German troops as they arrive in Vienna, March 14, 1938.

following day, my father was

locked out of his office and on his way home somebody pressed a sign in front of a Jewish store, "Don't buy from Jews," and he had to walk back and forth in front of that.

We went to school for a couple of days. We were told that we couldn't continue. One of the things that we noticed right off the bat was that my English professor showed up in a SS uniform. All the others wore swastikas. Two professors were pretty much on our side. One was the German professor. He was very very friendly with us and he would frequently run into my mother on the street—and she noticed almost immediately that when he saw her he would cross over to the other side of the street. He wasn't a Nazi by any stretch of the imagination, but he was scared. The music professor with whom we were also very chummy, he did show up, but he also was afraid to talk to us.

* The Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935 enforced the Nazi ideology of Aryan supremacy and severely restricted Jewish identity and rights.

† Realizing he could not prevent Hitler's takeover of Austria, Chancellor Schuschnigg announced his resignation in a radio speech on March 11, 1938.

As far as our non-Jewish friends are concerned, most of them were afraid to be seen with us. There were some exceptions. One was a young man whom my father had helped get into the business. He would come at least once a week, leave a laundry basket with all sorts of food items, newspapers, everything you can imagine, even some money, ring the bell, and take off. We never saw him, but he made this his regular stop. The other one was a retired Austrian colonel, and he wasn't afraid to be seen with us. He came to our house; he invited us to his house quite regularly. He was severely hurt in the First World War, had a very bad limp, but he really didn't care. I don't imagine that anybody would have done anything to him: he was a national hero—before Hitler came, of course.

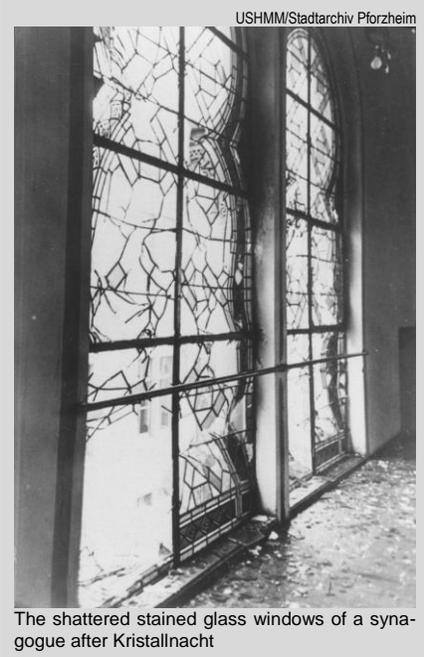
KRISTALLNACHT ___ **November 9-10, 1938**

They rounded up at that time about 30,000 Jews, and they were sent to camps.* They went into apartments, they went into stores, and did tremendous damage. They were beating up people in the street. Considering that this thing was done over a period of hours, it's unbelievable. The Austrians didn't need much of an incentive to get involved in these things. Even though this was supposed to be a spontaneous response to the killing of vom Rath in Paris[†]—this is malarkey. We have today proof that this was an order that came in, how this was organized and that the SS took part in it. They were instructed to be very careful to not damage any Aryan property that may be nearby, but they were told to lob grenades into the temples themselves. The fire department was supposed to stand by in case this got a little bit out of control. The only house of prayer that was allowed to keep standing was the main synagogue, and that was because it was too close to Aryan property!—but all the others were torched. The two temples that we went to, one where I was in the choir, was completely devastated, and that was only a few blocks away from us. The second temple, where we went for the Jewish student classes on Saturday: same thing. I have been in Vienna since then quite a few times, and there's nothing left, either place.

We had some friends who were arrested, and what was so typical of all these “actions”—was that when they took you, they wouldn't tell the family or anybody else where they were taking you. Of course, you then tried to find out from anybody, anywhere. The people who knew about it officially were afraid to tell you anything, even if they'd wanted to. Of those people who were arrested then and taken to the stadium, the vast majority of them, well over a thousand, ended up in concentration camps. At that time, it was still possible for some people, if they could show that they had a visa to go somewhere, to actually be able to take advantage of it. Some did, but the vast majority of them ended up in camps.



A synagogue in flames during Kristallnacht



The shattered stained glass windows of a synagogue after Kristallnacht

* Twenty-seven Austrian Jews were murdered during Kristallnacht. About 6,000 Austrian Jews were arrested; most were sent to Dachau concentration camp, released only if they agreed to emigrate immediately. Jack's father was arrested later, in September 1939, but was released three weeks later.

† The murder of a German diplomat, Ernst Eduard vom Rath, in Paris by a Polish Jewish young man on November 9 was used as a pretext for Kristallnacht to present it as a spontaneous outburst instead of a Nazi-planned pogrom against Jews.

KINDERTRANSPORT ___ November 1938 – September 1, 1939

Since we couldn't go to schools, the Zionist organizations* had various schools that were approved by the Nazi government, and I took courses that were to prepare you for Israel—what was then Palestine. I took one course in shoemaking, another in plumbing. I was told then that I

It was difficult for a kid my age. It was an adventure, but by the same token, it was something that overwhelmed me almost completely.

was eligible for Kindertransport. I'd never heard about it before. Neither did my family. I was told to talk to my parents about this thing, to be ready within a week, and this is what it was. My mother thought that she wanted to keep the family together. But my father said, "Look, he'll be safer, and he'll come with us to America, ultimately." So we got instructions on what we could take along—it was rather limited—and when we would have to be at the train station. And, really, it happened awfully fast. I said my goodbyes to all the people we were still in touch with. They came to our house. Then we went to the train station, and

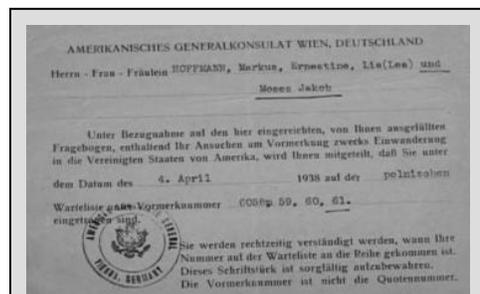
it was a rather teary scene. It was difficult for a kid my age. It was an adventure, but by the same token, it was something that overwhelmed me almost completely.

We got on the train. We went through Germany to Holland. In Holland, Jewish organizations had arranged all these things at the train station itself. They gave us juices and things to eat, but the main thing is that people smiled at us. That is something we really weren't used to.

From there we went to Holland, and we took a ferry across to Harwich, England. From there we took a train to Liverpool station. One of the things I didn't realize was that there were Jewish cab drivers in London. They passed a hat around [to collect money], got us all these chocolates, and talked to us mostly in Yiddish, which most of us kids didn't really know, but it was close enough to German that we could understand it. Since I was sponsored by a Zionist organization, I went to a camp, an agricultural camp, and some of the other kids went to private homes, some went to hostels. It all took a couple of hours, and off we went.

My experience at that point was quite different from most kids because I was shifted around from this agricultural camp, then to a nursery [a business growing trees and plants for sale], from there to a youth hostel in London, from there to a camp, and finally to Wellingborough, in Northamptonshire County. At the station I was met by the secretary of Nicholsons Sons & Daniels, who found us lodging, and we started to work at the tannery.†

We had to take a certain medicine, and at that time we were with a childless couple named Higgins. I and another fellow went there—he also came from Vienna, pretty similar background to my own. The medicine

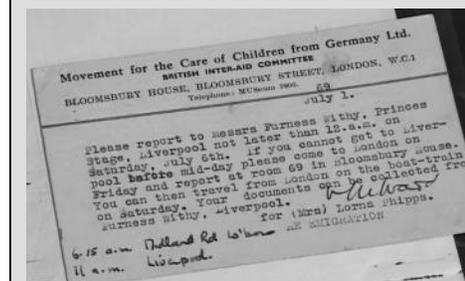


Confirmation from the U.S. embassy in Vienna that the Hoffmann family had registered for visas to emigrate to the U.S., April 1938

USHMM/Steven Pressman



Austrian Jewish children view the Statue of Liberty as they arrive in New York harbor, June 1939 (not Jack's group).



Instructions from the Kindertransport office in London for Jack's travel to Liverpool to board a ship for the United States, 1940

* Zionist: a person or organization supporting the creation of a nation for the Jewish people. The nation of Israel was created in 1948 after the war.
† Nicholsons Sons & Daniels was a British tannery and leather importing company. A tannery treats animal hides and skins to produce leather.

tasted terrible, so we poured it into the kitchen sink. They found it and took us to the fellow who had picked us up at the station. He realized right off the bat that we didn't hit it off with this family too well, and he found us lodgings with Mrs. Dugan. And that was quite a difference. She was a retired nurse and she took real good care of us. Very very kind family. And I stayed with her until I took the boat to America.

That was a little bit of an experience. We got onto the ship in Liverpool. It was a former Polish coastal vessel, the MS *Baltrover*. It was a very small boat, less than 3000 tons dead weight, and we joined a convoy. One or two days out of Liverpool, the convoy left us because we were too slow. I don't think we were too much of a challenge for a German U-boat because of the size and lack of any superstructure; it was hardly visible. But it was a very tough voyage; it took about 15 days to Boston. After a few days, everybody got seasick, including the captain and the first mate. The ship was not really rigged for comfort. We had about 20 refugees who were going to America on that ship—the lucky ones.

Jack left Austria for England in June 1939, and he emigrated to America in June 1940. Earlier in 1940, his parents and sister had finally received exit visas, two years after registering with the U.S. embassy after the Nazi takeover of Austria. They left Austria in February 1940, arriving in the United States five months before Jack arrived.

They took a ship from Trieste [Italy] and didn't arrive in New York until February 1940. We had written to each other fairly regularly until the war began [Sept. 1939]. I did hear from them once or twice, but when we lost touch with them completely we really feared the worst. This was when my landlady said she was ready to adopt me.

The whole idea of being in America was something that was difficult for us to imagine. We came from a country that was at war. To be in America, to be in a country that was not threatened, as such, was just unbelievable. I met my family at the bus depot in New York. My father had aged tremendously. My mother and my sister were wearing lipstick and things like that, and it was strange because I wasn't used to it. Of course, it was a joyous event. We couldn't wait to go home and just talk about what had happened.

Jack's favorite uncle disappeared and the family could never determine his fate. Another uncle died in Buchenwald with his family; another died in Lodz. One cousin survived about four years in concentration camps, including Auschwitz.

Jack graduated from high school in 1943 and was drafted into the U.S. army. Upon discharge in 1946, he went to New York University on the GI Bill of Rights, graduating in 1950. He began a long career in foreign trade, managing the U.S. subsidiaries of two European companies. In 1982 he married his wife Nancy, and in 1997 they moved to Greensboro, North Carolina. They have no children. Jack became active with the Kindertransport Association, and he contributed to Holocaust education throughout the state.



Jack during his 2006 interview in Greensboro

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Oral testimony of Jack Hoffmann, 2006 (excerpted here), video: 1 hr. 50 min. (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum) collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn126354

Excerpted from the oral testimony of Jack Hoffmann, 2006, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of Marcia Horn, collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn126354. Text and photograph/document images (screenshots from video) courtesy of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.