



The Eastern Route Fleeing Germany

Two Eyewitness Stories from 1940

My parents, two twin brothers and myself fled Nazi Germany in October 1940. I was 10 years old and my brothers 6 years old at the time. We had visas for Ecuador in South America. The only route left at that time was by way of Russia and Japan. The Battle of Britain in WWII was raging at the time. Ships were being sunk in the Atlantic Ocean and were not available. Until Hitler's invasion of Russia in June 1941, this was the only route of escape left for the Jews of Germany and Eastern Europe.

We took the train from a small town in Hessen to Berlin and from there after two days to Königsberg. On the route, the train was attacked by British bombers. From Königsberg, we flew to Moscow with Lufthansa. The plane waited for us due to the train delay.

In Moscow we stayed at the Intourist Hotel. After two days, we continued our journey by the Trans-Siberian Express Railway to Vladivostok. We traveled for 9 days and nights on the Trans-Siberian Express, with very few stops in between.

After a brief stop in Vladivostok, we continued our travel by train via Harbin in Manchuria (China) through North Korea and South Korea and by boat to Kobe, Japan. In Kobe, we were lodged by the JDC with the other refugees at the Jewish Community Center.

After a few days in Kobe, we continued our journey by train to Yokohama, where we boarded a converted freighter, the Ginyo Maru, to Panama City, Panama, by way of Honolulu and Hilo, Hawaii; San Francisco and Los Angeles, United States; and San Salvador, El Salvador. We had to wait in Panama for another freighter, one of the Santa ships of the Grace Line, which sailed by way of Buenaventura, Colombia to Guayaquil, Ecuador. We arrived in Ecuador after a three month journey.

Leaving Germany was very chaotic. In the last week before our departure from Nentershausen, my father had to travel to various cities in Germany to obtain the proper travel permits from the various German authorities and transit visas from the consulates of the countries through which we had to travel. Conflicts arose. The Japanese consul did not want to issue transit visas because the passports with the Ecuadorian visas had expired in the meantime, despite the fact that my father possessed new passports and a note from the consul of Ecuador that the visas were still valid for entry to Ecuador. The outcome was that my father had to obtain new visas to Ecuador, which at first the consul refused to give. Then, the Russian consul refused to issue transit visas because the children were included in their mother's passport rather than having individual passports. In Berlin, we had more problems. At first, the travel permits and tickets were not ready until train departure time. Then, at the last minute, we were notified that the crates with our belongings were shipped to the wrong train station and would follow us instead of going with us. And, on top of all this, our train was attacked by British warplanes shortly out of Berlin.

I am in the process of writing the history of the Willy Katz Family of Nentershausen, County of Rotenburg a.d. Fulda in Hessen.

Bert Katz (bertkatz[at]verizon.net)

My late husband Ernest R. Stiefel was one of the fortunate ones to escape by the eastern route. He kept a diary of that epic journey and recorded a memoir describing the journey and the harrowing events in Germany that preceded it.

These events included growing persecution and incredible bureaucratic hurdles that had to be overcome. His memoir is entitled *The Story of My Emigration*.

As one of a group of 82 Jewish refugees, Ernie left Berlin on the evening of July 4, 1940, and arrived in Seattle exactly one month later on August 3rd. He sailed on the Japanese passenger and freight ship *Hikawa Maru*, the first boat to bring refugees from Yokohama to Seattle. From then until about May 1941 Japanese boats alternated destinations weekly between San Francisco and Seattle.

In the summer of 1940, after the fall of France and with the closure of Italy as a transit route, travel through Russia, Siberia and the Far East was the only viable option. In late 1940 the Atlantic route opened again and some Jews were able to travel by sealed train through France and Spain to Portugal and from there by ship to North or South America. My husband's grandmother was able to escape by that route in January, 1941 to join her son in Uruguay.

Ernie's passport was issued in Frankfurt. He had to travel to Hamburg to obtain the Japanese and Manchurian transit visas and from there to Berlin to deliver the passport to the *Hilfsverein* who then obtained the Russian, Latvian and Lithuanian transit visas. On July 4, 1940, the last of these visas was issued at 8:00 pm. Ernie received his passport back at 10:00 pm and barely made it to the Berlin-Charlottenburg station to catch the train for Kovno that left at 10:46 pm!

Ernie's memoirs have not been published. I would be interested in finding a publisher.

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