

Ruthie and Bill Katz Archives: Our Immigration Stories

By Ellen (Katz) Block

Last month, our stories about members of our congregation who immigrated to the U.S., featured Lore Kirchheimer and told of her path here from Germany. This article is about Ruth Herzog (nee Schorsch), a venerable fixture at our Friday night services and a long-time temple member with her late husband, Bob, has a slightly different story to tell. Ruth was born in Prague on September 26, 1920, and lived there with her parents, George and Martha, and her younger sister, Marianne. Ruth describes Prague as a wonderful place to grow up. As a child, she and other Jewish families had a lot of freedom in Czechoslovakia, a “new” country, founded in 1918. Ruth’s family was highly educated and cultured, having, for example, a box at the opera and being bilingual, speaking German at home and Czech with their help and in public. Ruth attended a Czech elementary school for grades 1-5, then a German gymnasium, an 8-year school with a strong emphasis on academic learning, but after 4 years, her parents considered the school too German, tending toward Naziism, and she switched to an all-women’s Czech school. Sports such as skiing, skating, tennis, were part of her life.



In 1939, it became apparent that Hitler was not interested in only expanding to a “Greater Germany” but was eyeing Czechoslovakia as his next conquest. Ruth says she will never forget when the Germans marched into Prague on March 15, 1939, just a few months before she was to take intensive tests for her baccalaureate degree in June. There were one or two Jewish girls in her school and the principal said that since no one knew what restrictions the German regime would impose, the Jewish girls should take their tests early, so they would have proof that they had finished their degree. Ruth had two weeks to learn all the material she would ordinarily have learned between March and June and then had 2 days of intensive written and oral testing in front of the entire faculty. Ruth, being Ruth, met this challenge admirably and passed her exams.

As the situation in Prague worsened for Jews, family friends began leaving Prague. Ruth’s father was encouraged by friends in England to register Marianne for the kindertransport, a rescue operation for Czech children, organized by a British humanitarian, Sir Nicholas George Winton. There were painful discussions at home about whether to split the family, but Marianne was finally sent on the kindertransport. She made it to England and lived there for the duration of the war. (Ruth brought her to the United States when the war ended).

Ruth, however, was 19 and too old for the kindertransport. Young people her age could get out of Prague by taking jobs as nannies in England, but Ruth wanted to go to school. Through a friend, Gisbert Flanz, who was a Teaching Assistant at Princeton and, subsequently, a professor and renown author, she was accepted through the International Student Service as an exchange student to Sweet Briar College in Sweet Briar, Virginia. The packet offering her a scholarship, to begin September 1, arrived on September 26th, too late for her to ostensibly take advantage of it. Her father ignored the date, took her to city hall and declared her of legal age. To travel, Ruth also needed a German passport (hers was Czech), which was not easy to get, but her perfect German enabled her to obtain one.

The issue then became how to get out of Prague and into the United States. There was an Italian steamship line, politically neutral at the time, which would only accept cash in dollars or Swiss francs. The manager of the line told Ruth he would accept German or Czech currency if she would take an album to his son in the United States. She agreed and thus was able to get a ticket on the ship. She had to



bring a detailed list of what she was taking and pay the Germans a fee for every single item and was only allowed to take \$10 with her. Eventually Ruth got to Italy and sailed on the SS. Conte di Savoia, out of Genoa. There were U boats and rough seas making a frightening trip alone even more perilous though Ruth said she was excited more than anxious, believing that the German occupation of Czechoslovakia was a temporary situation. The ship stayed for a time in Gibraltar while British troops combed through the ship before allowing it to proceed.

The delays in leaving Europe meant that Ruth's immigration papers had expired by the time she reached New York and she had to stay at Ellis Island for a time for several weeks, seeking a way into the U.S. Ruth had no relatives in the United States and she spoke very little English though she did speak fluent French, Czech, German and some Spanish. Ruth says she was not worried at this time. She thought that between Gisbert Flanz, who had met her at the pier in New York before she was detained at Ellis Island, and the person from the International Student Service, something would work out. One day a woman arrived and told her she was to take a train to the University of Illinois in Champaign. There, Ruth was met by a group of young women from Sigma Delta Tau sorority who helped her and over time, became her friends. They took her to meet Dr. Abram Sachar, then head of the Hillel at the U of I who explained to her that Hillel was taking students from Europe, paying their college tuition and placing them in sorority houses. (Among the people, Ruth also met was Ruthie Katz of the Bill and Ruth Katz Archives.) Ruth started school in fall of 1940 and graduated in June 1942.

Since America was not in the war yet, Ruth was able to correspond with people from Prague until one day, the letters stopped. She subsequently learned her parents had been deported.

Bob Herzog, also an esteemed member of NSCI, had been in the army during the war and, afterwards, worked for NFTY and was active in Temple Sinai's Youth Group in Chicago. He and Ruth met at Sinai and were married in May 1949 by Rabbi Mann at the Graham Taylor Chapel at the University of Chicago. The Herzog's have 3 children, - Martha, Lauren and Roger and 3 grandchildren.