

Our Immigration Stories: Ralph Samuel

By Ellen Katz Block

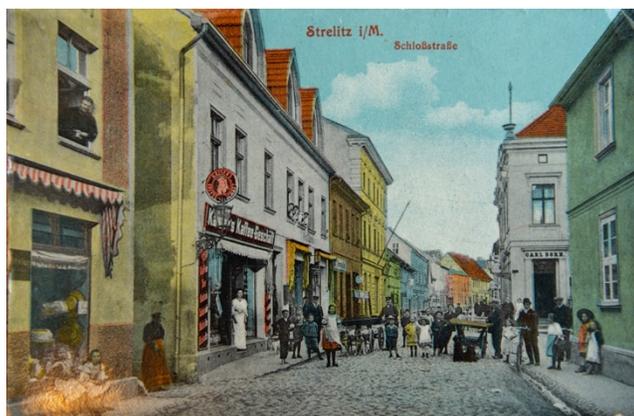
The following story about Ralph Samuel and his family is compiled from an interview with Merle Branner on April 15, 2019 and Ralph's presentation talks for the Holocaust Museum. For more information about topics mentioned in this article, please be sure to follow the links at the end of the article and also see Ralph's photo album.



Ralph Samuel's immigration story is similar to that of others in our congregation – a family fleeing Nazi Germany - and yet, distinctively unique in that the journey of Ralph's parents – Hilda Zimack Samuel, born in Strelitz, Germany in 1906 and Adolf Aron Samuel, born in Damgarten, Germany, in 1900 – took them to Shanghai, China, where Ralph was born, before they eventually emigrated to the United States.

The Samuel family was well established in northern Germany. Several generations of Samuel families had a granary business, Samuel Brothers, in Rostock, Germany, since the early 1800s. The family sold seed on credit to farmers in the spring, then purchased and distributed the crop when it was harvested in the fall. Ralph's paternal grandfather had become very wealthy in this business by 1900, though he downplayed his prosperity as well as his Jewish religion. When he died, the estate was divided among his 5 children, all of whom then became affluent themselves. Four of the five children, unhappy with what was happening in Germany in the early 1920s, left for other countries - three to London and one to Mexico. Adolf thus inherited the family business and stayed in Germany to help his mother run it. The business was dissolved in the 1930's as Hitler's noose tightened around the Jews. Along with other edicts, Hitler declared that all debts to Jews were cancelled. Since the business was run on credit, they were forced to close.

Hilda grew up as the only child in her family in Strelitz, Germany, where her family had a retail store selling dry goods. Her father died young and Hilda helped her mother run the small business. Along with growing inflation and an economic depression, when Nazis papered the windows of the Jewish shops and declared that non-Jews could not buy there, the store had to close. Hilda realized there was no future for her in Strelitz and was invited by friends to live in Rostock where she met and married Adolf. As the situation for Jews deteriorated in Germany, they, like many others, still hoped people would come to their senses and that things would calm down.





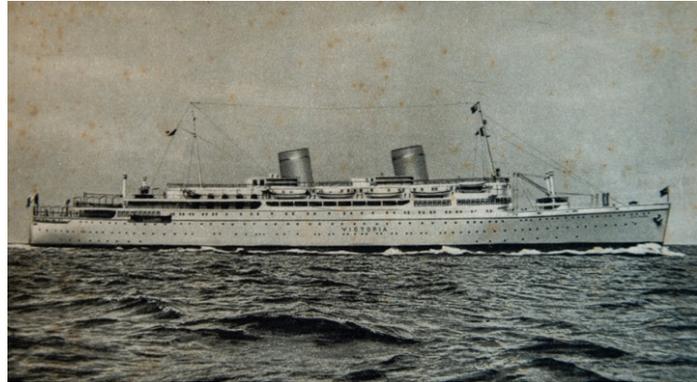
In 1938, right after Kristallnacht, Hilda and Adolf decided they had to leave Rostock. They knew the Nazis were looking for Jewish men and taking them to detention centers. Though they had no specific plan, they tried to maintain a low profile, moving from town to town nearly every day. Tall, blond and blue-eyed, Adolf was able to pass as a non-Jew, once even having a “friendly” conversation with a Nazi SS Officer, and though Hilda appeared a little more Jewish, when she was with him, no one questioned her. The two phoned their mothers from time to time but in secret, with a code established in

advance, because they knew the phone lines were being monitored and they never told their mothers where they were in order to protect them. They maintained communication with their mothers until October 1942 when it suddenly stopped. Later, they learned both of their mothers had been transported to concentration camps.

By happenstance, Hilda and Adolf were walking on the street in Hamburg, when they encountered a couple they knew who had 4 tickets on an ocean liner, the Victoria, which was sailing from Genoa, Italy to Shanghai, China. The couple had intended to take their parents, but the parents had decided they were too infirm to travel. They offered the tickets to Hilda and Adolf who bought them immediately. Eventually, they made their way by train from Berlin to Genoa and boarded the ship traveling in first class accommodations. Though they had money, they were so late in leaving Germany that the Nazi restrictions, which had previously been more lenient, did not allow them to take much with them- only \$4 apiece and their wedding rings. Valuables, such as jewelry, were prohibited though they did have some steamer trunks with clothes. Their documentation – all legitimate – identified them as Jews with a big red J.

The two-month sea journey followed a route across the Mediterranean, through the Suez Canal to the equator and then north to the hot and humid city of Shanghai. No visas, passports or entry papers were required for entry into Shanghai which had been a bustling port since the 1800s and had many foreign residents including Americans, British, French, Russians and middle-Easterners. At the time of the Samuels’ arrival, Shanghai was home to approximately 700 Sephardic Jews whose families had arrived from Iraq, comprising a very wealthy segment of the population. There were also several thousand Ashkenazi Jews, a far less affluent population, earning their living as small businessmen, who had fled to China from Russia following the Russian Revolution in 1917. About 17,000 refugees, like Hilda and Adolf, arrived in Shanghai fleeing persecution in Germany and Austria.¹ HIAS – the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society - as well as the Committee for Assistance of European Jewish Refugees in Shanghai, formed by prominent local Jews, met the Jewish refugees as the ships arrived from Europe and transported them to the Heim, a reception center providing temporary shelter and basic necessities. Conditions were crowded and difficult. Since they had not been allowed to take money out of Germany and had few other resources, most of the Jewish refugees settled in the impoverished Hongkou neighborhood because they couldn’t afford anything else. It was here, on October 2, 1941, that Ralph was born. His sister, Ruth, was born a couple years later on March 27, 1944.

Without the resources that refugees who had arrived earlier were allowed to take, the couple survived by selling off some of the things they had brought with them – Adolf’s violin and the stamp collection he had cherished since childhood. Adolf did not have formal schooling past high school since in those days, if you were coming into a family business, it was not deemed necessary. He had wanted to go to engineering school, but his mother had wanted him to learn the business. Hilda had learned typing and shorthand and had some retail experience from helping her mother run the dry goods store. At first, Hilda and Adolf formed a business selling women’s blouses because they discovered a distributor who would sell to them. The business was so successful that it closed a month later because the distributor’s other clients were being hurt by Hilda and Adolf’s achievements and he would no longer sell to them. Next, Adolf discovered a factory making sausages. He bought a rucksack, filled it with sausages and went door to door selling his goods. Again, he was successful, selling all his sausages every day and taking orders for more.



Eking out a living became even more difficult in December 1941, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, when the Japanese took control of Shanghai and

created the Shanghai Ghetto,² an area about one square mile, formally known as the Restricted Sector for Stateless Refugees. According to Wikipedia, the area included the community around the [Ohel Moshe Synagogue](#), but about 23,000 of the city's [Jewish refugees](#) were restricted or relocated to the area from 1941 to 1945 by the *Proclamation Concerning Restriction of Residence and Business of Stateless Refugees*. It was one of the poorest and most crowded areas of the city. Local Jewish families and American Jewish charities aided people with shelter, food, and clothing. The Japanese authorities increasingly stepped up restrictions, but the ghetto was not walled, and the local Chinese residents, whose living conditions were often as bad, did not leave. The ghetto cut off the Jews from the Ohel Rachel synagogue³ where many of them had worshipped.

After the war, there was a brief period between the time the Americans landed in Shanghai and when they actually took charge. The Japanese left quickly which created a power vacuum, but normal commerce eventually resumed as people could get out of the ghetto and into the city. At this time, Ralph began to attend a school which had been created by a wealthy benefactor for Jewish refugee children. This was his first education in English since German was spoken at home.



Adolf learned that as the American army was sending their troops home, they were looking for people in the local population to fill in, so he obtained a job driving a truck for the U.S. Army. Two years later, in early 1947, he learned that he could apply to go to the U.S. Many countries, including Canada, were still overtly anti-Semitic and while Adolf’s sister in Mexico encouraged the family to come there, a

\$10,000 to \$20,000 stipend was required to enter. The emigration process took some time as not only paperwork, but x-rays and vaccinations were required. On October 25, 1947, the family left Shanghai on a U.S. military ship which had been decommissioned and converted to a passenger ship though with sparse conditions. They slept in hammocks in a women's or men's "dorm" but arrived safely in San Francisco in early November. Ralph was 6 years old.



Again, HIAS was on the scene, meeting the Shanghai refugees, taking the Samuels to a single room at the Powell Hotel in San Francisco where their first event was taking a bath. Ralph and Ruth were in awe, never having seen a real bathtub as bathing in Shanghai occurred in a wooden tub. HIAS told the family that San Francisco could not absorb all the refugees it was receiving, and they would need to move on unless they had a profession or a relative who could employ them. They were also told that the East Coast was receiving its own overwhelming number of refugees, that the southern states were not particularly friendly to Jews and that the northern part of the United States was cold. The Samuels wanted a city that had potential job opportunities and they knew of families who had gone to St. Louis. HIAS had contacts in St. Louis so the family traveled there by train and were met by HIAS personnel who took them to the Hamilton Hotel which was in a Jewish neighborhood. They needed to find an apartment at the very time when service people were returning from the war so that a severe housing shortage existed. Even when they would find an apartment to rent, a small sign was often posted stating: "No dogs. No Jews." Suddenly, HIAS contacted them with news of a 3-room apartment at \$23 a month—a kitchen, one bedroom and a living room - which, unbeknownst to them, they were actually subleasing from a previous tenant who didn't tell the apartment's owner that he had subleased to them. This caused some problem when the owner found out, though HIAS was able to intervene and rewrite a new lease for Hilda and Adolf to be the new tenants.

Once established, the Samuels had decided it was important for their family to be affiliated with a synagogue. Feeling the Orthodox were too strict and the Reform too liberal, they contacted the Conservative synagogues in the city. Ralph recalls that every one of them would only accommodate refugees if they could pay the synagogue's dues as well as extra for religious school and Bar Mitzvah training. Hilda and Adolf thus gravitated to the Reform synagogues, specifically to Temple Israel where Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman, was known nationally as a Reform clergyman active in social justice. The temple administration welcomed them with open arms. The leadership told them they would not have to pay any dues and the children could attend religious school.

Hilda, who had learned English in school in Germany, found an office job in the garment district at Forest City Manufacturing, a dress manufacturer. Adolf, whose English was more limited, had part-time work and eventually got a job doing basic accounting work in the same firm as Hilda. After a few years, she moved to a job in a men's clothing firm whose owners were big donors to the synagogue. They generously arranged for Ralph and Ruth to go to day camp and, later, for Ralph to go to overnight camp in the Ozarks.

Ralph and Ruth attended public school in St. Louis. After a few years, as the neighborhood was becoming more racially divided and as Ralph and Ruth would have been the only white children in their school, the family moved to a larger apartment in a more Jewish neighborhood, closer to the temple. This was the first time Ralph had his own room. He was 12 years old.

At the first opportunity, in 1953, Hilda and Adolf became U.S. citizens which meant Ralph and Ruth also became citizens. Citizenship meant so much to all of them because, prior to that, since Germany had disowned the Jews, they were people without a country. Ralph became a Bar Mitzvah on Simchat Torah in 1954. Rabbi Isserman had told the family that in the Reform movement, children were confirmed but not Bar Mitzvah, but Adolf and Hilda insisted they wanted a Bar Mitzvah for their son. The Rabbi arranged a private tutor for Ralph and involved the entire congregation by holding the ceremony on Simchat Torah.

Ralph received an Engineering Degree and then a Master's Degree in Business. In 1968, while living in a small town in Michigan, he realized he needed to be in a bigger city. He didn't want to return to St. Louis so ended up in Chicago where he met his wife, Shelley, who grew up in Highland Park. They were married in 1971 and came to NSCI when Rabbi Bronstein was its spiritual leader. Ralph served on the Board of Trustees and as the Temple treasurer. Hilda, his mother, was also a member of the congregation.

Hilda and Adolf never returned to Germany, harboring very negative feelings toward it. This attitude was passed on to Ralph who says he would never have gone to Germany except for a delayed flight while in Europe one time which necessitated his staying overnight in Frankfurt. He has never owned a German car. He and Shelley did, however, return once to Shanghai where Ralph found the family's names on a wall at the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum which is located near the remaining part of the old Jewish ghetto. Ralph sees the immigrants at our borders today as trying to escape tyranny similar to that which the Jews experienced in Germany and feels, not surprisingly, that there needs to be compassion and accommodation for these refugees.

¹<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/german-and-austrian-jewish-refugees-in-shanghai>

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shanghai_Ghetto

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ohel_Rachel_Synagogue