

## Pre-Holocaust Experience With a Jewish Deaf Family

By Lilly R. Shirey



*In the center (l to r) Nellie, Mamma and Lilly posed on the ship "Rex" which sailed on the way to America from Italy. It was very windy that day.*

This is a good time to remember the Holocaust. The U.S. Holocaust Museum, opened last April, is a monument that helps justify hard-to-believe stories of Holocaust survivors and helps present-day visitors understand the pains our ancestors had experienced.

This is a good time for us to explore what had happened must not happen ever again. Steve Brenner asked me to write about my personal experiences. I can not speak for Holocaust survivors as I have not experienced it. But I can share personal experiences during pre-holocaust time. What my family experienced was unique. Four out of five members of the family who immigrated to the United States were Deaf.

I was born in Vienna, Austria to Deaf parents in the 1930's. My family had a good life until the Nazi Germans invaded Austria in 1938. It happened so fast that we were totally unprepared for their arrival. Swastika flags were hung up all over important buildings. Harsh rules were imposed on all Jewish people: We could not have any privileges such as, sitting anywhere in the park, going to school, or shopping for food at any time. They painted the Star of David on the benches where Jewish people were forced to sit; Jewish people had to stand in long lines to get food on a limited time frame of two hours. My mother was the only person who could go shopping because she did not really "look Jewish". What she had witnessed happening to other Jewish people on the streets terrified her.

The Holocaust had not begun yet, but Jewish people were already tormented mercilessly. The Nazis shoved aged Jewish people, forcing them to move faster. The Nazi Youths pulled beards of older Jewish men. Some were forced to wash the streets. The temple, next to our apartment, was destroyed by a big fire. Arson was suspected but they did not bother to seek proof.

My sister, Nelly, and I who were only 9 and 6, could not go to school. Later, they moved several Jewish families into an apartment of one Jewish family in an attempt to form a ghetto in our neighborhood. There were five of us, my hearing grandmother, my Deaf mother, my Deaf uncle, my Deaf sister and myself, in a tiny three-room apartment. Later, they put a family of three to share our apartment. We had to rearrange furniture, moving our bedroom furniture into the living room so that the hearing family could move into the bedroom. Life was getting worse that my strong-willed mother decided it was time to leave Austria. It was either to immigrate to Palestine (now Israel) or the United States. My mother had a hearing brother, living in America who tried to get us visa, passports, and other necessary papers. Even though, my mother was a very simple woman, she had a remarkable vision. She knew Jewish people were not wanted. She knew Jewish people would not have a secure future. She had the guts to make a quick move. Other people took their time and did not see any reason why they had to leave their home country. It was their home, after all.

The Gestapos would invade homes of Jewish families at any time during the night, just to look around and to get people who did not possess Austrian birth certificates. One night, they came in to take a look around our apartment. Even though we were really scared, we stayed calm. Fortunately, one Gestapo saw my uncle whom he worked with as a tailor years before and told other soldiers to leave. He told them that we were harmless. Later, things got worse.

When we got all the necessary papers, we left our homeland in April, 1940. Quietly, we boarded a train to Italy. At the borderline between Austria and Italy, the Nazis checked all passengers. We were lucky that they let us go. Later, I learned that was the last train to Italy before the war broke. We stayed in Genoa, waiting for a ship, for a few days. Finally, the ship came and took us to the United States. The name of the ship was "SS Rex". I remember having Passover seder on the ship.

We embarked at the New York City harbor in May 1940. We were unable to get off the ship because we were Deaf. The United States government did not want to be responsible for us so we stayed in the ship over night with some other passengers who, for some reasons, were unable to get off. Later, they put us on the nearby Ellis Island where we stayed for five months waiting for appropriate papers to go through.

The United States government, not wanting to be responsible for sick and handicapped people, would deport us back to Europe if nothing happens. We learned later that it was the Rex's last trip to the United States. A

few years later, the Germans boarded the Rex but the ship was bombed by the United States and it sank near Italian shores. Luckily, my hearing uncle got us bonds to protect us and a guardian was appointed so that my sister and I could go to school. When my mother and her brother found work as tailors, we were able to move to New York City. That was in September, 1940 in time for the special Jewish holiday, Rosh Hashanah. We all struggled to survive the hard times, paying off the debts and bonds we owed. We had to face a new life in a country with its own language and customs. We were required to learn English. To be prepared for citizenship in the United States, my sister and I went to the Lexington School for the Deaf where we were good students. My mother and her brother went to night school to learn English. My grandmother was too old to go to school but she picked up English by listening to conversations in the streets and on the radio.

My mother took the citizenship test and passed with flying colors. Up to the time of her death in 1991, she was a devoted citizen and had always voted. She claimed it was President Franklin D. Roosevelt who had an influence in her decision to be a Democrat for life, no matter what. She loved the Statue of Liberty and the American flag. She had an undying appreciation for the United States government for welcoming her and her family, loved New York City for living as a free person and had a deep devotion to G-d for saving her and her family from the Holocaust.

What had happened to my father, no one really knows. My parents were separated and they could not get a divorce because they were Jewish. She got him to sign papers, releasing custody of the children. She told him that they were planning to go to either England or Palestine. He signed the papers with no question asked. Had he known that my mother intended to bring us to the United States, he'd want to join us. It was reported that he was last seen in Minsk. A friend of the family reported that he was with a group of Deaf people on the way to the gas chamber. They were signing to one another. Apparently, the Nazis had no need for that group of people.

My sister and I got married and she became loving grandmother of six, two of whom are Deaf; great-grandmother of three, two of whom are Deaf and had a Deaf nephew.

All of my mother's life, she was always a devoted Jew and a proud Deaf person. She went to the temple to pray regularly and kept the tradition of hosting Jewish holiday dinners for her growing family over the years. She told us stories in American Sign Language with German Sign Language accent. She always told us to be proud of ourselves and to watch out for ourselves. We can all learn from this simple Jewish Deaf woman from Vienna.

I will never forget the experience I had. I hope you will make sure it won't let it ever happen again. Shalom!

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*My Grandma -  
Mathilde Wiener*



*My Mother - Hilda Rattner*



*My Uncle Richard Wiener, Mother's brother*

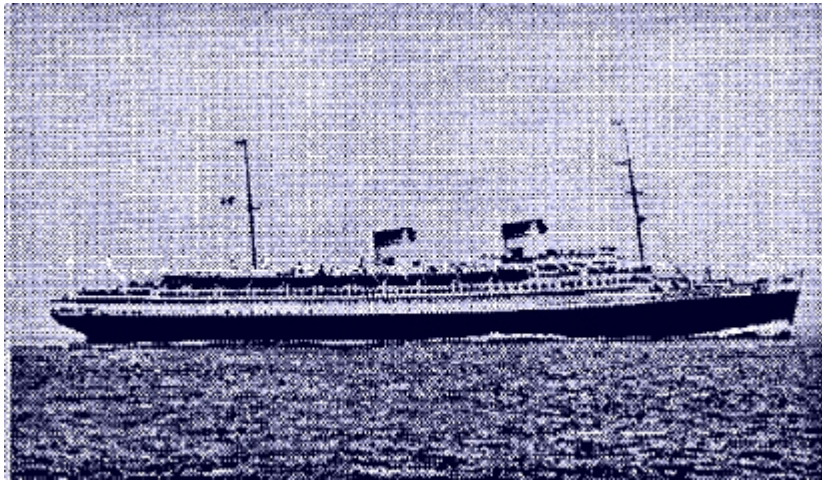


*My older sister*



*Lilly Rattner Shirey (me)*

*Nelly Rattner Myers*



*The ship "Rex"*