



MY STORY: BENNO BLACK

*Benno Black is a Kindertransport survivor, husband, father, and grandfather. He has shared his story for World Without Genocide at several events in the past few years. He spoke at an event in St. Paul on April 29, 2016 to commemorate Genocide Awareness and Prevention Month. Mayor Chris Coleman declared the day to be **Benno Black Day in the City of St. Paul**. We are honored to make his words available to the public.*

I was born in Breslau, Germany in 1926. I started school in 1932. My father owned a drugstore, a “drogerie,” as it was called, in Germany.

Things started getting bad for the Jews around 1933 when the Nazis came to power. By early 1936, my mother was called to the principal’s office. She was told that I was no longer welcome in school, and that I should be transferred to one of the two Jewish day schools in town.

By 1936 my parents realized it would be best to leave Germany. We got registered with the American Consulate of Germany.

At the time, immigration into the U.S. went by a quota system. My mother and I were born in Germany and we were part of the German quota. However, my father was also born in a border town in Germany, which became part of Poland after WWI. As far as U.S. immigration laws were concerned, he was to be part of the Polish quota, and there was a much longer wait for that.

My mother’s brother and more distant relatives lived in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and we also had more distant relatives in Fargo, North

Dakota, and New York. They all provided affidavits, the legal document guaranteeing their financial support, until my father could provide for us.

On November 7, 1938, a Jewish student from Poland, who was studying in Paris, attempted to assassinate the German ambassador. He shot a German diplomat, who was severely injured. The next day, our teacher talked about it. She said, “Let’s hope he doesn’t die, because if he does, there will be major repercussions here.”

The next evening, as my father and I were listening to the evening news, it was announced that the diplomat had died.

My father said, “There will be repression here; let’s hope it won’t be too bad. If he dies there will be repercussions.”

The next day my father left to open his store, and I left for school.

When I arrived at school a teacher was standing at the door and told me, “No school today; go right home—don’t linger anywhere.”

I was happy: no school! I was going to ask my mother if we could go to my cousins' house so I could play with them.

But when I arrived home my father was sitting in the living room. He told me that the store had been broken into that night and it had been ransacked. Merchandise was thrown into the street.

My father gave me some pocket money and told me to take the bus to my grandmother's house.

At the time my parents thought I should go to my grandmother's apartment, that it would be safer for me to be there. This was after our teacher announced that there would be no school that day.

When I arrived at my grandmother's house, she was so surprised to see me. She said "No school today? Where is your mother?" It was the first time I went to her house without my mother.

She said, "Come, let's take a walk. Let's find out what's going on outside."

A Jewish department store was about five blocks away. "Let's see if it's damaged." A block away we noticed people on the street were cleaning up merchandise that the Nazis had cast out into the street. We went right back to my grandmother's house.

When my mother came over, she told us that the Gestapo came to our house and arrested my father. She didn't know where he was taken.

Six weeks later, when I was coming home from school, my father was sitting in the living room. He had been in Buchenwald concentration camp. He had been released because he had fought for the Germans in World War I and had received the Iron Cross. (The Iron Cross was a military decoration in the Kingdom of Prussia,

and later in the German Empire and in Nazi Germany.)

As a result, my father needed to report to the police department once a month, and to let them know about the progress my parents were making in emigrating from Germany.

Emigrating

My mother started writing letters to relatives in America, hoping for a quick reply. Meanwhile, my father started looking like he had aged at least 10 years.

I think it was at that time that my parents decided to get me out of Germany while we were still waiting for U.S. visas. I was already registered to go to Palestine on a farming program when I was 14. I was only 13, though.

In November 1938 the British House of Commons was discussing what to do about Jewish refugees from Germany. At the time, the unemployment figures were very high.

Member of Parliament Mr. Lipson suggested admitting just the Jewish children, as they wouldn't be competing in the labor market. A vote was taken, and the measure passed, admitting 10,000 Jewish children from Germany and Austria who were ages seven to 17, without their parents. That legislation later became known as the *Kindertransport*.

In the spring of 1939, my parents registered me for the *Kindertransport*. Holland was admitting Jewish children up to the age of 18.

In June of that year my mother told me that I had been accepted for the *Kindertransport*. She gave me a choice of going to Holland or to England. I chose England as I could already speak a little English.

It was a wise choice, as Holland was invaded by Germany a year or so later.

I left in early July 1939, at age 13, on a train to Berlin. No parents were allowed on the train platform.

A room was set aside inside the train station for parents to say goodbye to their children. They were told there were to be no “scenes” and no intermingling with the general public.

My mother said it would be too hard for her to say goodbye in the station. So she, my grandmother, and my aunt stayed outside and planned to stand on the street just below the first viaduct, where the train would pass over at a slow speed, and they would wave to me.

My father and his brother, my uncle, took me to the station. I didn't realize at the time that I would never see my parents again. They told me that I was going to England and they were waiting to be included in the upcoming U.S. immigration quota. In a year or so we would all meet in Minneapolis where one of my uncles lived, they said.

As the train approached the station, we were looking for the compartment marked “Jews only.” Already a couple of kids who had come from towns further east had arrived at the station and we all got on board.

Minutes after the train left the station and crossed the first viaduct, my mother, grandmother, and aunt were waving to me. I didn't know when I would see them again.

In an instant the departure was over, the train picked up speed, and we were on the way to Berlin. About four hours later we arrived and were taken to a hostel, had something to eat, and were sent to bed.

The next morning we were given breakfast and then taken back to the train station. I was quite surprised to see another 200 boys and girls waiting for the chartered train to take us to Holland.

After the train left Berlin, we traveled across some of the prettier areas of Germany and later in the afternoon we crossed the border into Holland. We all cheered. We were happy to be leaving Germany, but we worried about when we would again see our parents.

The train stopped at the first station in Holland and women were there handing out candy, chocolate, and ice cream.

Late that evening we arrived at Hoek van Holland port and were ushered onto a very large ship. I fell asleep instantly.

The next thing I knew we were already docked in Harwich, England. We were served a delicious breakfast on tables with white tablecloths by waiters wearing white jackets. I felt I was on a luxury cruise. I was so impressed and I wrote my parents about it.

After breakfast we were divided into groups, and a man took about 35 of us boys off the ship. We crossed the street and got onto a bus. After being counted and recounted several times, the bus left.

After driving along some winding roads, we arrived at a camp, which became my home for nine months.

The camp was called Barham House. It had three buildings with sleeping rooms. I think the camp was an old barracks for cavalry units from World War I; there were horse stables in back.

The camp was located about two miles from the Village of Clayton, which was five miles from Ipswich.

Our building had three sleeping rooms, each with about 10 to 15 boys. We were divided by age; our room had boys all about the same age. In the middle of the building was a common room that contained a ping-pong table and various other games.

The first weekend our housemaster took us to Ipswich. I was quite impressed; it looked so different from German cities, but maybe just because all signs were in English. Right after that weekend, one boy came down with a childhood illness and we were all quarantined for two weeks.

As soon as the two weeks were up, someone else got sick, and that went on for the whole nine months. We were never able to leave camp.

World Events

There was increasing talk about impending war. The camp staff placed the newspaper on a camp bulletin board every day. The headlines read:

“German Troops Dispatched to Polish Border. Hitler sends Foreign Minister Rippentrop to Moscow, where he and Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov signed a ‘Non-Aggression’ Pact.”

In September, German troops marched into Poland.

Britain gave Germany an ultimatum: Get out of Poland within the next 48 hours. In the evening of September 3rd we boys were ushered into the camp dining hall to listen to King George VI announce that the British Commonwealth was in a state of war with the Third Reich.

It affected us instantly. How were we going to communicate with our parents? I was lucky. Since we had relatives in Switzerland, my parents would send their letters to the relatives, and they, in turn, would mail them to me. I did likewise.

Our letters were censored and took a long time to arrive, but nonetheless we were able to keep in touch. However, I started receiving only one Red Cross postcard from Theresienstadt once a month, and with only about 25 words.

In November 1939 I received the dreaded news that my father, who was only 52 years old at the time, had passed away from the illness he had picked up in the concentration camp a year earlier.

He had been admitted to the Jewish hospital, but because the Nazis had already removed all the X-ray equipment, the doctors couldn’t diagnose my father’s health problem, so he died a few days later.

I was staying at that time at the Barham House until April 1940, at which time I and two other boys were sent to a British family in Northampton. I was sent to London for the trip.

Actually, the day before I was supposed to leave I came down with an ear infection and was put into the sick ward. A few days later I was taken to the train station in Ipswich. I was told to take the train to London—to the Liverpool Street Station.

From there I was supposed to go down into the Underground (the Tube) and take a train to Euston Station, and then take a train to Northampton, where someone would meet me and take me to the family.

When I got to the Liverpool Street Underground, I was looking for the train to the Euston station but couldn’t find Euston marked on the board.

I must have appeared very confused, as a gentleman asked me where I wanted to go. He told me that Euston was on the Northern line, and I was on the Metropolitan line. He told me I had to take the Northern Line to Kings Cross, and the Euston station was the next stop.

Then he said, “Here, I’ll take you.” I offered to give him a shilling or two, but he wouldn’t take any money.

When I arrived in Northampton I looked up and down the train platform, but I couldn't find anyone who was looking to meet me.

Again, a man noticed my confusion and asked me where I wanted to go. With my limited knowledge of the English language, it was hard for me to explain the situation. Besides, I didn't even know the names of the people who were supposed to take me in.

This man took me to the police station. There, the police tried phoning various people for about half an hour. They finally located the person who was supposed to meet me at the railway station, a Mr. Hall Todd, who was in charge of the Jewish Refugee Committee.

But Mr. Todd got an emergency call from Nottingham, and he had to be away for a couple of hours. While I waited, the policemen became much more friendly. One even gave me his lunch to eat.

When Mr. Todd picked me up, he took me to the family where I was to live. He introduced me to Mr. and Mrs. Shrigley, an older couple who were already retired.

I also met two boys who had left the camp a few days before I had. The next day we were taken to a nearby leather factory, where I was going to be employed. Northampton was well-known for its boot and shoe manufacturing. One of the other boys was already working there.

The Shrigley Family

The first day Mrs. Shrigley introduced us to tea and biscuits ("biscuits" is the British word for cookies). Brits would add milk to their tea, which was something that seemed strange to me.

Tea and biscuits were served between meals.

After a few days, households were issued ration books. Everything was rationed—oranges, grapefruit, and bananas were impossible to buy. Milk and eggs were available for children only, and we were not children anymore. But we always had enough to eat.

Sundays, everything was closed in town; there were no cinemas open or stores to browse around in. Sunday evenings we would join all the other kids in town and do what was called "The Bunny Run." We would walk up and down Main Street, the boys would ogle the girls, and vice versa. That had been a Sunday night ritual well before we arrived.

As we were not fluent in English, the three of us would always converse in German. One day Mr. Hale Todd called us to his office. He asked us to speak English, at least in public. People were complaining about hearing German and, after all, we were at war with Germany.

German planes were dropping incendiary bombs on London, which started many fires. Because of the danger of these bombs being dropped on Northampton, every factory had to keep two or three employees in the building all night. It was "Fire Watch." We took turns and my turn came around once every two weeks. We played darts until past midnight. Of course we were very tired the next day. As there were no problems in Northampton, the Fire Watch was discontinued after about a year.

One star-studded cold November evening the sirens sounded. Our landlady told us to take shelter under the staircase. We heard a constant drone of German bombers overhead, but after a while, as nothing was happening, we went out to the back yard. We watched a huge display of anti-aircraft guns and searchlights lighting up the sky.

The next day we found out that the city of Coventry, the motor capital of England, which was 32 miles away, was badly damaged. We

were lucky in Northampton; not a single bomb was dropped during the whole six years of war.

The Next Steps

We didn't really like to live with the Shrigleys—we were just teenagers and they must have been in their 60s. We kept complaining to Mr. Hall Todd, but we were told how fortunate we were compared to those who stayed in Germany. Of course he was right.

After about a year, as we were constantly complaining about our lodging, they let us find another place to live. I moved in with a family I knew from work. They had three boys slightly older than I was, but they treated me like I was their youngest brother.

When I became 18 years of age, I volunteered to serve in the British Army. I joined the Kings Royal Rifle Corps, partly because my parents' family had an American connection to the 60th Royal Americans, who had fought the French and Indians in 1758 in Eastern Ohio and Western Pennsylvania.

The Corps built a fort at the junction of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers, calling it Fort Pitt. That location is now the City of Pittsburgh.

I was trained as a radio operator and I was sent over to Europe. That was in February 1945. The war was winding down and the Germans were retreating. I remember crossing over into Holland on Easter Sunday. The Dutch people, as they went to church, were so thankful that our army had liberated them.

After the War

A few weeks later the war was over. We stayed in Germany a few more months as the British Army of Occupation and then we were sent to Tripoli in Libya, where I stayed for six months before I was discharged.

As the Allies liberated the concentration camps, the horror of the Holocaust became apparent. My grandmother and aunt had been sent to Theresienstadt, a concentration camp outside of Prague in Czechoslovakia. I found out from my uncle, who survived Auschwitz, that my mother was sent to a camp near Lublin, Poland.

My daughter lives near Washington, D.C., and whenever we visited her, we went to the Holocaust Museum.

The Museum located the names of my grandmother and aunt. We learned that they both had died in Theresienstadt. But the many times I checked about what happened to my mother, no information could be found.

Finally, five years ago, I learned from the Holocaust Museum that my mother had died in a cattle car of a train that took her to the Majdanek concentration camp near Lublin in April 1942.

[Transcribed by Lisa Pogoff, LP & Associates Consulting, LLC. pogoff@umn.edu. 2016.]

(Mr. Black eventually emigrated to Minnesota. He is married with children and grandchildren, all of whom attend talks that he gives about his experiences.)



Mr. Benno Black, center, with staff from the City of St. Paul, on the right. Left: Dr. Ellen Kennedy, and Jessi Kingston, Director, St. Paul Department of Human Rights and Equal Economic Opportunity, April 29, 2016.



Mr. and Mrs. Black with Dr. Ellen Kennedy at Kristallnacht commemoration, November 2013.



Mr. Benno Black, center, with students from the Summer Institute for High School and College Students, August 2016.