

Brought up to be American – The Assimilation Process of Children and Teenage Refugees from Germany in the 1930s and 40s in New York

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Between the years 1930 and 1949, more than 200.000 German Hitler refugees came to the United States, half of them before the Second World War. About fifteen percent of them were under sixteen years of age.¹ The majority settled in New York, where they found a German-speaking community, including stores, restaurants, clubs, churches, and newspapers, already existent. Unlike their parents they usually assimilated quite well to the new environment.

The situation faced by the German-Jewish immigrants coming to New York is predominantly described from the point of view of the parents' immigrant generation. There is still not much material available about the immigrant children, mainly because they were still too young to write or even publish their memoirs and autobiographies. Only in the last few years has the situation changed and memoirs are being collected. Additionally, the Jewish community in New York and various other organizations started to listen to their stories while they are still able to be interviewed.

My research project concentrates on the refugee generation who immigrated between the ages of five and twenty, on their difficulties facing the new society and their performance and achievements in America. After interviewing thirty refugees in New York and studying autobiographies, unpublished memoirs and the *Aufbau*, a German-Jewish newspaper in New York, a picture of a strong-minded, well-focused young immigrant generation emerges. Working hard, they generally reached their goals. Some were forced to cut on their education because of economic reasons; they had to enter the work force and seldom could go back to their intended professions. Others were able to take advantage of their German education. An American education helped them to act and look like their American friends, as many refugee children did not want to be associated with Germany or preserve

German values and traditions. They all reached a certain, somewhat similar degree of assimilation in American society. In the following paper I want to illustrate their integration process, focussing on various aspects of assimilation such as language, friendships, social life and school. Even though my study investigates the consequences and effects of Americanization and examines the immigrants' own evaluation of adjustment in terms of resettlement, changes of religious beliefs, cultural aspects, political views, and attitudes towards their new home country, limited space does not allow to go into detail.

Before they came to the New World, children and teenagers had little knowledge of America and what to expect. Rabbi Robert Lehman, who was born in Germany in 1927 and came to America in 1938, said: "Being eleven, I didn't have any concept of what it meant to go to America or be an American. I was reading the stories of Karl May then, which were Cowboy-and-Indians sort of things. I think I associated that with America."²

The children and teenagers, however, were young and usually without prejudice, ready and willing to assimilate instantaneously. Nevertheless it was difficult for them to feel at home in strange, unfamiliar surroundings. Friends were left in the old hometowns; new friends had to be made. Parents had their own problems and only little time to look after and help their children. In general, however, assimilation was much easier for the children and teenage immigrants than for their parents' generation. The young refugees were much more flexible, open and tolerant. They were anxious to learn the language and adjust to the new ways of life. The changes in their families after arrival were not easy to comprehend, especially their view on their parents altered. Children from middle class backgrounds were used to their father being an authority figure. The role of their mother was that of a housewife, mother and their father's companion. The new roles of their mothers as family supporter and their fathers as homemaker was difficult to accept. An American social worker who spoke with German-Jewish refugee children expressed their frustration: "The boys looked upon women as housekeepers and could not imagine requesting guidance from a woman." Those boys, she continued, felt "contempt for women as anything but the mother and housekeeper."³ Although

the prestige of women grew as many of them started working, the former prestige of the father continued to exist and the patriarchal way of decision-making was maintained. Generally this situation resulted in a middle-of-the-road compromise. Many children understood the situation of their parents very well, but judged it probably easier than their parents did.

In contrast to immigrant children of earlier generations, these children did not have to work but could go to school. Only teenagers in their late teens had to help support the family during the first months. Parents were expected to help their children with home work and emotional problems, but many were not able to do so because of their own problems and their inability to speak English. Therefore, the children often had to rely on themselves and on help they could receive at school. The first day at school was usually difficult. Everything was new and strange to the children. Many were put back one or two grades because of their language problems. Trudy Jeremias, who came to New York at the age of fourteen and was put back one grade, tells about her first day at school:

The terrible thing was, I thought I knew some English but I really knew nothing. And the system being so different. In Europe you have a classroom and different teachers come. Here the bell would ring and everybody disappeared and I was always left in the hall, crying bitterly, because I had no idea where I belonged or what to do. It was terrible. I remember coming home the first day, saying to my mother, I'm never going back there. But I did go back. And I don't know whether on the second or third day something happened that was very nice. I befriended a girl who sat next to me. She was Puerto Rican and only spoke Spanish. I only spoke German, but we had the same problem. That made all the difference in the world. When the bell rang I remember we held hands. And at that age you pick up the language very fast. As soon as I got to know the language I skipped a few classes and got into my regular grade.⁴

Immigrant children were unusually industrious and highly competitive, which was not only due to their strong desire to adjust to the new surrounding and to establish themselves. They managed school well, learned English easily and in many subjects went ahead of their classmates.

In the beginning, however, language difficulties appeared and led to misunderstandings. When fifteen-year-old Karl Heiman and his cousin were interviewed by students at school in New York, they were asked whether they had ever tasted American hot dogs. Both were shocked and could not believe what they were hearing. No, they had never eaten dogs and had no intention

of doing so. Next day when they saw the headline in the Asbury Park newspaper “Two German Boys Never Tasted American Hot dogs” they realized what they were talking about.⁵

Finding new friends was of utmost importance for the young refugees’ Americanization. First they tried to find friends among the fellow immigrant children, but very soon they wanted to meet American peers. Tensions and conflicts between immigrant children and native born were normal, cutting and hostility rare. It was not always easy for immigrants to meet and get to know Americans, because different language, interests and especially fewer financial means meant difficulties. “Is it possible that young emigrated men without secure income and a good existence have any chance at all to become friends with American girls? I mean such young men who are not able to give their girls a good time” asks a mother in the *Aufbau*. An immigrated young man answered:

It took a couple of months until I dared to ask a young girl I had set my eye on for some time already out for a drink with my last dollar. The conversation was so amusing that we sat four hours on one Manhattan. (Had she ordered another one I would have busted miserably.) And when we parted we agreed to meet again. I had the courage to speak with this working young lady who did not understand a single word of German about the most important problems and issues while having the cheapest drinks (2 cups of coffee for 10¢) [...] And here you have the result: For more than a year now I have found a wonderful mate in her [...]⁶

Friendship with a native-born girl or boy accelerated the young immigrants’ process of assimilation. Even though the majority did not have great difficulties making friends in America, the common associations through children of their parents’ friends did not exist. One possibility for the young refugees to meet American youth was through school or work. Others joined clubs and organizations, such as those Benno Silberman speaks about:

I belonged to the East District YMCA, that is where all my friends were, and we had basketball teams, baseball teams and we went swimming, and we did everything else a child does. [...] My father occasionally would take us to the movies. [...] I raised pigeons and flew them.⁷

An American education helped the German refugees to act, think and look like the rest of the population. Parents were relieved about the development of their children, but they also had difficulties to keep up with their pace of adjustment. The fast, unconscious and desired Americanization of the children

very often caused conflicts in the families. The children wanted to become real Americans as quickly as possible, not to be different from their classmates, sometimes changed their names and resisted their parent's wishes. On the street they did not want to be recognized as Germans and spoke English. Some even felt ashamed of their German parents. Arnold Fleischer remembers:

When we moved out of the first apartment we had during the war, my mother would come out and scream and call: "Arno, Arno", in German. She shouldn't speak to me in German, we were in a war, the Germans were our enemies. I would say: "Mom, please, please, don't talk to me in German. When you come out into the street use English." I did not want to be associated with the enemy.⁸

At home, however, German was still means of communication for a long time, even though it went into the subconscious.

Despite the unwillingness of the children the parents tried to teach them German values and traditions. Many parents and grandparents wanted their children to continue their traditions. The children did not always understand why they should do that, since they wanted to differ as little as possible from their friends. Moreover, the parents were not always able to teach these values, because their "Germanness" was rather a question of atmosphere and style than of articulate ideology, as Lowenstein argues.⁹ The combination to continue the German style together with the lack of formal means for it often caused serious misunderstandings between young and old. While some families clung to traditional values, including the language and the way of raising their children, it was deliberately diminished in other families.

Because of the rapid assimilation of the young immigrant generation, the old refugees had doubts if their cultural heritage would survive. Articles in the *Aufbau* show how difficult it was to maintain European customs in this rather free and open society. The dowry and arranged marriage almost disappeared. The generation born between 1920 and 1930 often found their mates in organizations and at work. Even though the parents often tried to persuade their children to look for "good families," this was a secondary factor for the young people. American working rhythms changed the German eating habits; the main meals were usually not taken at lunch time during the week anymore and the habit to have coffee and cake in the afternoon was only performed on

special occasions. Some families introduced the all-time-favorites Hamburger, hot-dogs and Spaghetti; juice had to give way to coke and other softdrinks. Many children did not accept religious education either, Benno Silberman being one of them:

My father, because of my uncle who was quite orthodox, decided to send me to a *Yeshiva*. In Germany we were raised secular, we were not religious Jews. I went with my *Lederhosen* and my little briefcase on the back, and they wore the Chasidic type and they went crazy and I went crazy. The Rabbi would pick me up and hit me and I took a ruler, hit him over the head and ran out and that was the end of that. My father couldn't get me back there.

Then I went to public school, which is PS 16 in Brooklyn... I had to fight my way into school in the morning because I was Jewish, and I had to fight my way out of school in the afternoon because I was German. So it didn't take me very long to get established.¹⁰

Often the parents were not sure of how to influence the career of their children. On the one hand they needed the extra money of their children to feed their families, but on the other hand they wanted their children to rise to better positions than they had achieved, and this was only possible with a college education. In the state of New York children had to attend school until they turned seventeen. Girls over sixteen years of age could be dispensed from school if they took on a position as a domestic servant. Even if the financial situation was desperate the majority of parents rather took support from organizations or relatives than to use their daughter's little income in household occupations. Some parents strove even higher for their children than those did themselves. They did not want to force their children to take a random job but saw to it that they were able to choose their education and professions themselves.

Even though many who came over as children had to cut their education because of economic reasons, the majority received a college or university education and went into higher occupations or self-employment. A surprising amount of social and economic mobility enabled the refugee children to climb the ladder to high professional standing. The women found work to be a necessity, at least on a part-time basis. While many older immigrants did not belong to the elite, many of their children became part of it. Upward mobility also meant leaving old neighborhoods. The majority of young immigrants who had moved with their parents to Washington Heights after their arrival later

moved to the suburbs of New York.

The children did not only show great success in school and a certain amount of wealth, but among them was also a surprising number of prominent and famous people.¹¹ My thirty interview partners became teachers, doctors, artists, managers, directors of their own companies, professors and authors. They all worked and some still work an average of 70 hours a week. The majority sees their economic situation in America in a more favorable light than the average American does. In many cases they judge their status a cut above their parents' situation in Germany before the rise of Hitler. Most are completely satisfied with their accomplishments in their new home country and feel very American. At the same time, however, they cherish their Jewish heritage and underline their European background. The question: "Are there any aspects German or European left in you?" is answered positively in many cases. They consider themselves European, Jewish, or citizen of the world and in terms of culture, political standing and social questions many feel a strong difference to the average American's opinion.

Rejecting the traditional values of their parents, the majority embarked on a process of full-fledged Americanization in their teenage and middle ages. They assimilated easily and soon felt as Americans. Their integration process, though, was difficult and brought many problems not only with their parents, but also with their own search for identity. At a more advanced age, therefore, all my interview partners remember German values and their cultural heritage. Those who have been back to Germany since the war or travel quite regularly have certain knowledge of the present cultural and political situation in Germany. Others who have never been back and reject reading anything about Germany have quite a different perspective. Although the children immigrants did only for a very short time consciously experience the social situation in Germany because they left at such an early age, they miss the intellectual atmosphere of the Weimar Republic, the openness and avant-garde their parents praised. Even though they all feel American or Jewish at heart, they still identify with their German-Jewish background and regret not having made a greater effort to teach their children and grandchildren the

values they connect with it.

¹ Specific numbers in Besch, 93.

² Kisseloff, 241.

³ Hoerder, 379.

⁴ Interview with Trudy Jeremias, September 7, 1999.

⁵ Interview with Karl Heiman, July 21, 1999.

⁶ *Aufbau*, March 7, 1940, p.11.

⁷ Interview with Benno Silberman, April 1, 1997.

⁸ Interview with Arnold Fleischer, March 30, 1997.

⁹ Lowenstein, 191.

¹⁰ Interview with Benno Silberman.

¹¹ Lowenstein, 98.

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