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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

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By Annie Nakao, Chronicle Staff Writer

Untold tales of courage and survival

New book describes Jewish children's 'other' kindertransport

By all odds, Werner Epstein, 80, should not be here at all. But there he was, hale and hearty as he served up coffee and buttery Belgium cookies the other day in his tidy Terra Linda co-op.

"I always said to myself, if I die, Nazis have to kill me," he said, with a gleam in his impish brown eyes.

Across the bay stood delicately slender Hanni Schlimmer Schild, 78, of Berkeley, another living rebuke to the Third Reich.

"Fate played a role, but if you knew how to survive, then you survived," she said.

As the Nazis overran much of Western Europe in the late 1930s, a few hundred Jewish children were trapped inside Nazi-controlled Belgium and France without their parents, relying on their wits,



Werner Epstein, who now lives in Terra Linda, with Gertie in 1942.

courage and the aid of others to stay alive.

As Anne Frank's posthumous testimony revealed, children were among Hitler's most defenseless targets; some 1.5 million died in the maw of the Holocaust.

Yet others survived. The Kindertransport program, which brought 10,000 Jewish children from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia to Great Britain between 1938 and 1940, became the subject of the Oscar-winning documentary, "Into the Arms of Strangers."

Far less is known of the "other kindertransport," in which German and Austrian youngsters were sent by their parents to Belgium and France to escape Nazi persecution but fled for their lives when Germany invaded those countries, too.

A new book, "Inge: A Girl's Journey Through Nazi Europe," tells the story of a group of 100 such uprooted youngsters, including Epstein and Schild, who found refuge in an uninhabited 15th century chateau in southern France, protected by the Swiss Red Cross and aided by local farmers. The book was co-written by Inge Joseph Bleier, who died in 1983, and her journalist nephew, David Gumpert, who knew little about his aunt's wartime experiences until her 66-page manuscript was discovered in the basement of her Chicago home 10 years after her death.

"I had almost no conversations with Inge about (the war)," said the former Wall Street Journal reporter from his Needham, Mass., home. "It was very difficult for her to talk about those experiences because they were so painful." The fiercely intelligent Bleier became a noted nursing education scholar, then returned to school to earn a master's in journalism. She was remembered by Gumpert as a doting aunt who spoiled him with boxes of rich pastries and counseled him on high school problems. Yet she was profoundly affected by her wartime experiences; Bleier was nearly 60 when she committed suicide by drug overdose.

Bleier, Epstein and Schild were teens on the brink of self-discovery when Kristallnacht -- the Night of the Broken Glass -- altered the world they knew forever. On Nov. 9, 1938, mobs burned synagogues, smashed the windows of Jewish-owned stores and attacked Jews en masse. After her father was arrested, her mother, like other German Jews no longer allowed to leave the country,

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Werner Epstein, Holocaust survivor

decided to apply for the Kindertransport to get Bleier to safety. (An older sister, Lilo, had already been granted a coveted visa to America.) When Bleier's departure was approved, she was sent by train to stay with a wealthy cousin and

his wife in Brussels. But as the Nazi threat to Belgium increased, the cousin paid another family to keep her, then finally left her in a children's home before leaving Belgium himself. Scared and lonely, Bleier joined scores of other children at the Home General Bernheim, run by Brussels' wealthiest Jews.

"I felt as if I had been punched in the stomach," she wrote years later of the experience. "I now understood everyone wanted to be rid of me."

When Belgium fell, the children and the few adults in charge fled to the isolated village of Seyre in Southern France, where they bunked down on a farm. Girls and boys from two other homes joined them, swelling their numbers to 100 youngsters, from 4 to 19 years old. When the Swiss Red Cross heard of their difficulties, it provided the children a new home at the nearby Chateau la Hille.

The agency became a powerful protector of the children, providing a stable, even idyllic, refuge. Food and clothing was scarce, but they never went hungry, had clean places to sleep and even had classes at the imposing castle. Order soon settled in at the chateau. Older children looked after the younger ones, and everyone did their designated chores, whether cooking, cleaning or gardening.

There were the usual tribulations of childhood. Bed-wetting. Adolescent squabbles. And more.

"After the lice epidemic had been with us for a week or so, Elka made a drastic decision: Everyone would receive a haircut -- a complete haircut," Bleier wrote. "After everyone's hair had been cut, we stared at one another in shock. Gradually, then, everyone began to laugh."

"I worked in the kitchen, making big pots of vegetable soups and oatmeal with cinnamon," Epstein said. "We were like one family. I'm surprised how good we were. But we came from good families, and after what we went through before we got there, it was to be expected."

Among the older teens, hormones buzzed. "There were 60 girls and 15 boys," said Epstein. "I felt like a rooster!"

Epstein, a strapping young man with tousled sandy hair, first met his dark-haired future bride, Gertie, at the Brussels children's home and was later reunited with her at the chateau, where the two became inseparable.

Despite the veneer of normalcy in their day-to-day lives, Epstein and the other youngsters knew well the precarious nature of their existence. They were desperately homesick and lonely. Many did not know it but they would never see their parents again. Most of their mothers and father were deported to certain death in concentration camps.

From such death camps have come some of the most dramatic Holocaust stories. Less is known, Gumpert said, of the grinding tension of lives held captive by the war.

"There was this tremendous amount of downtime, when people didn't know what was happening, either to their families or to the rest of the world," Gumpert said. Bleier heard nothing from family for months at a time and felt forgotten.

In a Feb. 22, 1940, letter to her sister, she wrote: "Dear Lilo, I'm waiting impatiently for mail from you. Please write me. You have no idea for how long I wait. And you know even less, my dear Lilo, how much I love you. Everyone of our family is alone now in a different country. What crime have we committed? Oh, my dear Lilo, you do not know how I'm looking forward to our reunion, to getting together again. It could be years yet."

"Mail delivery was one of the most important aspects of our lives," said Schild, who was 14 when she was sent from Berlin to Brussels in 1939.

There is visible in Schild's tall, willowy frame the young artistic girl who drew Disney characters that still grace the old goat barn in Seyre, where the children once stayed, and who used to cross her fingers for luck at any mention of the Nazis. She was one of the lucky ones who obtained visas so they could leave for the United States. Most of these children were rescued by Quakers, but Schild's well-connected parents managed to get visas for her family. She was only at the chateau for a brief time.

"I remember meeting them in Bilbao in Spain and taking the long boat trip to New York," she said. "I thought all our problems were over.

En route to America, however, her father took sick and arrived in New York mortally ill with typhoid fever. After he died, Schild and her mother struggled in their new country.

"It was pretty awful for me -- but compared to some other stories, it was not as horrendous an experience, just traumatic," she said

For the children she left behind at the chateau, time was an enemy. As they turned 18, they became subject to deportation, something the Swiss Red Cross could do nothing about. Already, Nazi officers had visited the chateau, demanding a list of the children and their ages. Rosli Naf of the Swiss Red Cross, who oversaw operations at the chateau, took to having the children sleep in a hideaway space at night.

Bleier's book recounts that after the Nazi threats increased, Naf began secretly orchestrating escapes of the older children over the Swiss border. Two groups had made it successfully. The third, made up of Bleier, her sweetheart, Walter Strauss, and three other teens, attempted to cross the border into Geneva but got lost in the snow and were caught.

Bleier, a spirited girl whom Epstein fondly recalled as "a tough cookie," was defiantly uncooperative during her interrogation by a German commander. Somehow, she managed to escape through a bathroom window. She and Strauss were eventually returned to the chateau, but the others were never heard from again. Strauss was rounded up in a later raid and sent to Auschwitz, where he died.

Epstein was sent to the death camp after he was arrested with a few other boys from the chateau while trying to cross the Pyrenees Mountains into Spain. Their guide turned out to be an informant. Epstein, whose deportation order bore the name of Hitler's henchman, Adolf Eichmann, was put to work at the nearby Jaworzno coal mine. He survived the backbreaking work by eating the feed of horses used to haul coal.

"I said if the horses can eat it, so can I," Epstein said. As inmates died all around him, Epstein kept himself alive, even washing the shirts of SS officers to get extra bread.

On the final day before the Russians entered the camp, guards herded

prisoners into a barn, set it on fire and machine-gunned anyone who tried to escape. Epstein and two others hid in a latrine and lived to see the camp liberated.

"I tell you, somebody was there for me," he said. "But you can't look back. If you look back, you go bananas."

It is advice that Bleier, apparently haunted by the traumatic escape attempt that doomed her friends, may have found hard to follow. The loss of her friends, as well as her feelings of abandonment and loneliness while separated from her family, took its toll. Years later, she bitterly noted that the cousin who abandoned her in Belgium had made it to America.

Gumpert saw his aunt's memoir, which was written in the 1950s, as not just as an unbelievable story that had to get out, but a chance for his family to find some sort of closure to the trauma it



Werner Epstein's arm bears the tattoo he received at the Auschwitz death camp, where he survived against huge odds.

experienced.

"In the last few years, nobody had understood Inge's behavior,"

Gumpert said. "She was very erratic, taking all kinds of pills. When I read the manuscript, I remember saying to myself, so this is what it was. I felt badly that I didn't know what she'd endured, how much suffering she went through as a result of her experiences. There is a tremendous amount of guilt and private suffering, which is not unusual among survivors. I felt it was important to get that out there in the open, for her memory, in her memory."

David Gumpert will sign books from 8:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. today at the News and Book Kiosk at the International Terminal of SFO Airport

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