

Holocaust survivors recall escape

Part of SSU lecture series, German immigrants to share tales of British effort that saved thousands of children

By **KATY HILLENMEYER**
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

At 16, Alfred Batzdorff was the oldest male at home in his family's Breslau apartment when Nazi storm troopers knocked on Nov. 10, 1938, scouring the German town for any Jewish men they'd not yet incarcerated.

It was the second night of the Nazi pogrom Kristallnacht (night of broken glass), when German and Austrian Nazis torched and destroyed 267 synagogues, killed 100 people, ransacked 7,500 Jewish businesses and took nearly 30,000 into custody.

Driven at gunpoint past his burning synagogue, Batzdorff narrowly avoided a train bound for the concentration camp Buchenwald, where his Gestapo captors sent hundreds of other able-bodied Jewish captives.

Instead, he hid among disabled veterans from

World War I and elderly prisoners who were spared that trip. He spent the night in a basement cell emptying their urine from the same bucket police gave them for drinking water.

Warned upon release by a friendly policeman to flee the country, Batzdorff in December 1938 became one of the first Jewish youths to escape Germany through the Kindertransport, a British refugee effort that rescued 10,000 children under 17 from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia by train.

Once in Britain, he secured visas and financial sponsors for his younger brother and parents, who likely would have perished, as his grandmothers did, in a Nazi camp.

"If the Gestapo had never arrested me, I wouldn't have gotten to England," the 84-year-old Santa Rosa and retired engineer said Monday. "What seemed like the most disastrous and traumatic event really resulted in my family's survival."

Batzdorff and two other German immigrants who escaped Nazi persecution in their teens, Santa Rosans Hilde Catz and Hans "Hank" Cohn, will share their stories today at Sonoma State University as part of the Holocaust lec-

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Hans "Hank" M. Cohn escaped Germany as part of the Kindertransport refugee effort.



Cohn, at 10 years old in 1939, when he left Germany by train for a children's home outside Paris.

Alfred Batzdorff was 16 in 1938, when he became one of the first to escape Germany with the help of Kindertransport.



HOLOCAUST:

'I was so lucky to be spared,' teacher said

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ture series.

As Holocaust survivors slowly die out, the trio are resurrecting painful memories they've repeated dozens of times to various audiences, from living rooms to classrooms.

"We have genocide going on in Africa right now, Darfur and other places, and we're not making enough of it," said Cohn, 78, whose parents died in Auschwitz. "In Europe, when this was going on, people didn't believe it was happening, so they didn't react."

Today, he said, feels eerily like Europe in the 1930s and 40s: "There's probably not enough outrage, because action is not being taken."

Though not yet 11, Cohn spent a night in jail, too, on Nov. 9, 1938, with his mother and brother, Bert, age 8. Unable to emigrate because his service in the German army in World War I left him with a combat-related limp, Fritz Cohn and his wife Ilse decided their boys must escape Stralsund, their native town on the Baltic Sea.

In March 1939, when the pair set off by train for a children's home outside Paris for Jewish refugees, "the sense was this will all be over one of these days, and we'll be getting back together," Cohn recalled.

The boys corresponded with their parents until the war deprived them of those ties, but never saw them again.

Cohn sailed to the United States in 1941 with the aid of Quakers and wound up with dis-



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Santa Rosa resident and Holocaust survivor Hilde Catz holds the identification papers she was issued when she reached England after escaping with the help of Kindertransport.

tant relatives in Minneapolis.

Catz also expected to meet again with her parents when, as a 14-year-old, she left her Bavarian town of Aschaffenburg to board a Kindertransport train June 6, 1939.

Her parents, Jacob and Johanna Mayer, assuring her they'd be reunited one day, gently reminded her to be on her best behavior for the working-class Coventry couple who would foster her on the other side of the English Channel.

"They had the grace to take in a Jewish child" at a time when few other countries, including the United States, would provide thousands of European Jews a safe harbor, Catz remembered Monday. "I am eternally grateful to them."

Catz never saw her parents again.

In April 1942, they were transported among 134 people from their town to eastern Poland, where they were either shot on arrival and buried in a mass grave, or sent to their deaths at Belzec or Sobibor concentration camp.

"I was so lucky to be spared, and I've been so lucky in my life," said Catz, a retired teacher. "My life has to count for something. If I can talk to students, this will not be forgotten. . . . If we don't do it, who will?"

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HOLOCAUST LECTURE SERIES

Santa Rosans Alfred Batzdorff, Hilde Catz and Hans "Hank" Cohn will speak at 4 p.m. today at Sonoma State University on the topic "Remembering the Kindertransport."

It is the final event in this year's Holocaust lecture series, the oldest holocaust studies program in the West.

Their talk at Warren Auditorium in Ives Hall is free and open to the public.