

Story of John Chillag (1927 – 2009)

John was born in 1927 into a large Jewish family in Vienna, but spent most of his childhood in Hungary. His family owned a building materials business and his father was the accountant.

When the Nazis invaded in 1944, his family were taken to two ghettos, then to Auschwitz concentration and death camp, in Poland. He, his father, and uncle, were chosen for forced labour, but his mother and 58 members of his family were immediately killed upon arrival.

John and his father were transferred to another camp called Bochum, Germany, to make munitions, where his father died. John was then transferred to Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany, where he was liberated on 11 April 1945 by Allied troops. At 17 years old, he weighed just 4 stone. In the camp John was given little food, made to work long hours in harsh conditions, with no access to health care and slept in a bunk with five other men without blankets.

It took many months, but he recovered his strength and decided to return to Hungary. Sadly, John discovered that none of his family had survived, and half his family home had been destroyed by bombs.

John tried to rebuild his family business, but the new Communist government nationalised it. This meant that John didn't really own it anymore, and most of the profits went to the government. John was then conscripted into the Hungarian army. For John, that was the last straw. To avoid conscription, John fled in 1949.

It was a difficult journey out of Hungary. He climbed over the mountains to Bratislava (then Czechoslovakia), then onto Vienna, Austria, where he arrived at a centre run by the American Joint Distribution Committee. However, John had no papers, and was categorised as a "displaced person".

At the time, Australia offered passage and support to 170,000 displaced persons, so long as they fit a certain fitness and ethnic profile. John was accepted and secured passage to Sydney on the USS General M B Stewart on 17 April 1950.

John worked at a hydroelectric company. He married an Englishwoman, became an Australian citizen, and had 3 children (his youngest daughter had special needs). In the 1960s, John and his family decided to emigrate to Britain, because the NHS would provide good support to his daughter.

John soon found a job as a specialist in German and Italian languages at the British Library in Boston Spa in Yorkshire. John worked there from 1963 to 1991. He then worked at Leeds Metropolitan University until retiring in 1997. John passed away in 2009, aged 81.

Story of Marion Camrass (née Schoenthals) (b. 1932)

Marion Schoenthal was born in 1932. She was the only child to a wealthy Jewish family in Krakow. Her father was a lawyer and her mother's family owned factories in Poland. At age 7, while her family were at their holiday home in the countryside, the war broke out in September 1939.

Her family travelled east towards her aunt's estate, not realising that portion of Poland came under Soviet control (as per a secret agreement called the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact). As a result, the Soviet officials kicked Marion and her family off the landed estate, and they went to Brody (modern day Ukraine) for a few months.

Soviet officials then ordered Marion's family to take Russian citizenship, but her family refused. They were then sent by train (in cattle wagons) to Siberia on the grounds they were 'enemy aliens' as they were Polish (being Jewish was irrelevant to the Soviets).

They arrived to a forestry camp in Siberia in June 1940. The conditions were very grim as 4 families were housed in 1 room, and it was infested with bed bugs.

In June 1941, when Germany invaded Soviet Russia, it meant these two countries were now at war. It also meant that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was no longer honoured. Thus, Marion and her family were no longer considered 'enemy aliens', but allies. They were now allowed to leave Soviet Russia.

Instead of heading west towards Germany, Marion's family then fled east and south to Uzbekistan, the last stop on the cattle-train to Central Asia (Marion remembers the weather was "lovely" in contrast to Siberia). Sadly, her father died of typhus in Uzbekistan, and Marion spent some time at an orphanage because her mother couldn't afford to feed her.

In 1946, Marion and her mother returned to Poland, hoping to start a new life. But her family's property had been confiscated by the new Soviet government, and her extended family had been killed in the Holocaust.

In November 1946, Marion's mother decided to send Marion to her paternal aunt, Regina Schoental, who worked in Glasgow as an accomplished scientist.

At just age 14, Marion spoke no English, but quickly learned. She studied Medicine and married a General Practitioner. She has 3 children and 8 grandchildren, and lives in Scotland today.