

Eve, Rudi and Paul Oppenheimer - The Last Train From Belsen

Every Holocaust survivor has a different story. This is certainly true for the story of the three Oppenheimer children, Eve, Rudi and Paul, who were fortunate to survive for five years under the Nazis in Holland, and in the camps of Westerbork and Bergen-Belsen, and who finished up on 'The Last Train from Belsen.'

Our parents, Hans and Rita Oppenheimer, lived in Belsen. We were a typical middle-class family of assimilated Jews, who rarely ventured into a synagogue. Paul and Rudi were born in Berlin in 1928 and 1931, respectively.

With the advent of Hitler and the Nazis, life became progressively more difficult for all Jewish people living in Germany. Many Jewish families wanted to leave Germany, but most other countries would not accept these refugees. Our father, Hans, worked at the Mendelssohn Bank in Berlin which had a branch office in Amsterdam in Holland. He had managed to obtain a transfer to the Amsterdam branch in 1936 and the family went to live in Holland, near the seaside in Heemstede. These were happy days for the Oppenheimer children, but they only lasted for four years.

In May 1940, the Germans invaded Holland and within five days, the Dutch army surrendered. The Germans occupied the whole country, took over its government, and soon started to persecute the Jews who lived there. Anti-Jewish Laws were introduced in an insidious step-by-step manner to restrict the life of all Jewish people in Holland. We were not allowed into public places like parks, zoos, restaurants, hotels, museums, libraries and swimming pools. We had to attend Jewish schools. We had to live in Amsterdam. We had to wear the yellow star. We had a curfew. We had to hand in our bicycles. We were not allowed on the bus or tram.

Then the deportations started for "re-settlement in the East" and gradually all the Jews in Holland were transferred from Amsterdam to Westerbork, the transit camp in the north-east of Holland near the German border. From Westerbork there were regular weekly transports to the extermination camps of Auschwitz and Sobibor. Out of 100,000 deportees, less than 1,000 survived – 1 in a 100 survived, but 99 out of 100 never came back...

Our family was rounded up in Amsterdam in June 1943 and sent to Westerbork, but we were exempt from deportation to Auschwitz or Sobibor because our sister, Eve, was British. She had been born in London in 1936 during a six-months spell when we were living with an uncle and aunt in London, on our journey from Germany to Holland. This fortunate event eventually saved our lives. In Westerbork, Eve and our family were classified as "Exchange Jew", people the Nazis wanted to exchange against Germans held by the Allies. After seven months in Westerbork, in February 1944, all five of us were deported to Bergen-Belsen in Germany. By this time, Paul was 15 years old, Rudi 12 and Eve was only 7.

Bergen-Belsen

We travelled by train in third-class passenger coaches and arrived early in the morning at another camp, called Bergen-Belsen, or Belsen for short. We had never heard this name before and had no idea what it was like. But as soon as we marched into the camp, we could see that it was even larger than Westerbork – and much worse. In addition to the barbed wire and guard towers, there were electrified fences and lots of SS soldiers with bloodhounds, machine guns and searchlights. It was a real concentration camp.

We had certain privileges in the Exchange Camp in Belsen. We were allowed to wear our civilian clothes with the yellow star and our camp became known as the Star Camp. We did not have to wear the usual black-and-white striped pyjama outfits. We did not have our hair shaved off. We were allowed to keep our luggage, a suitcase full of clothes and books and games.

But like other concentration camp inmates, we lived in barracks, male and female, and we slept in three-tier bunk beds. Every morning, we lined up in rows of five to be counted on the assembly yard. We received three “meals” each day – a mug of warm brown liquid in the morning (substitute coffee), a bowl of turnip soup for lunch and about one and a half inches of bread in the evening.

Although Paul was 15 years old in Belsen, he did not have to work – and Rudi and Eve were also too young. We were confined to the Star camp, surrounded by barbed wire. We had a broom to sweep our barracks, and were not allowed any schooling, or games or sports. We messed around in groups of kids, looking for scraps of food, and wasted our time. We did nothing all day; every day was the same, it was extremely boring.

We arrived at Belsen in February 1944 when it was cold, but we were in reasonably good condition and could cope. Then it was summer and not too bad. But it was the last winter of the war, 1944-1945, when it all went wrong. We had been in Belsen for more than six months and were very hungry, under-nourished, starving, exhausted skeletons. The daily roll-calls became more and more traumatic. We had to stand in line for hours, even in the rain, sleet and snow, when it was freezing cold and the icy winds blew across the heathland area around Belsen.

This was when many people fell ill with diarrhoea, pneumonia, tuberculosis and various other illnesses, and they were unable to resist or recover. In January 1945 our mother fell ill; she went into the hospital barracks and we visited her every evening. We never knew what precise illness she had because there were no doctors, no nurses and no medicines. And there was no extra food. We could see that she was getting worse, but there was nothing we could do to help her. And one evening when we came, she was no longer there. She had died and her body had been taken away to make room for someone else in the hospital barracks. Our mother was not yet 43 years old and we realise now that we never really got to know her very well.

It was particularly bad for our sister Eve because she was only eight years old at that time and all alone in one of the female barracks. Fortunately, an Orthodox family called Birnbaum, who had six children of their own, offered to look after her during the last few weeks in Belsen.

Early in 1945, a typhus epidemic broke out in the camp, transmitted by lice. There were lice everywhere – in the barracks, in the bunk beds, on our bodies, in our clothes. We were

always itching and scratching and we spent hours “hunting” the lice. They used to breed in the warm parts of our bodies and we were never able to get rid of them. Most people who died in Belsen, died of typhus – along with other diseases, starvation and exhaustion.

In March 1945 our father fell ill and he went into the hospital barracks. We went to see him every evening, but after a few days, he was no longer there. He had also died, almost certainly of typhus. He was 43 years old; he had survived for almost two years in the camps and died within one month of Liberation. It was very sad.

At this time, 600 people were dying in Belsen every day, including Anne Frank and her sister Margot in another section of the camp. But we realised that the Allies were winning the war. Eventually we could hear the Allied guns approaching Belsen and we looked forward to our liberation and freedom. But there was another ordeal in store for us because the Germans wanted to keep the “Exchange Jews” as hostages and the Star Camp was evacuated. All the inmates were marched to the nearby railway loading ramp and we boarded the third of three trains. The other two trains departed; the first one was liberated by the American army within just a few days, the second one may have reached Theresienstadt, the perceived destination of all three trains.

The Last Train

The third train – the one we were on – was the last to leave Belsen, on 10 April 1945, composed of passenger coaches and cattle trucks. It travelled in a northerly direction, taking the remnants of the so-called privileged prisoners from the Star Camp; some 2,500 people out of the original 4,000; the others had died. Another 500 unfortunate “Exchange Jews” would not survive the train journey and the Liberation.

On the day we left, the British army was just 20 miles from Belsen. We missed being liberated by this short distance. Five days later, on 15 April 1945, the British army liberated the camp, but our train had travelled some 25 miles north towards a town called Lüneburg. And this became the pattern of our train journey; we slowly moved forward ahead of the British army. We had SS guards on the train, but no food at all.

Our train was attacked by Allied planes on several occasions because the Germans had attached military equipment to the back of our train. Whenever we had an air attack, the Allied planes swoop down and attack the train. It was very exciting, but we did not feel in danger. On the contrary, whilst experiencing the air attacks, we would look for food because we had absolutely nothing to eat on the train. We collected anything that looked edible, such as grass, leaves and raw potatoes. After the air attacks, we carried our “food” onto the train. We lit fires on the train platforms and cooked our grass, leaves and potatoes for our meals. That is how we lived on the train as we slowly moved across Germany in an easterly direction.

We passed through Berlin on 19 April 1945, just before the Russian army got there and just before Hitler committed suicide in his bunker. We remembered that we used to live in Berlin ten years before, but it was not a happy home-coming. We saw Berlin in ruins, bombed, flattened, destroyed, and in flames, but we felt no pity for the German population. We saw schoolboys dressed in military uniforms, ready to defend the German capital. We fancied our chances of survival better than theirs.

As the Russian army approached from the east, our train turned in a southerly direction, and we continued our nomadic life: whenever the train stopped, we collected food.

Unfortunately, the typhus epidemic never left us and many dear colleagues died during the journey. There were regular burial ceremonies every day by the side of the railway track.

Eventually, on 23 April 1945, after we had been on the train for two weeks – but travelled only about 500 miles – we woke up in the morning and noticed that the SS guards had disappeared. And when we looked out into the distance, we could see soldiers on horses. They were Russian Cossacks from the Red Army and we were liberated; we were free...

Liberation

Liberation was a massive anti-climax. There was no hugging, no kissing, no laughing or singing, not even hand-shaking or dancing. Most of us had not been “free” for five years, since the German occupation of Holland in May 1940. We were in no mood and in no condition to celebrate. Perhaps surprise, relief and excitement best describe our feelings when we realised that we had finally been liberated.

The Russians wanted to know who we were. This was quite difficult to explain because we could not speak Russian and the Russians could not speak Dutch, the language we spoke on the train. And we did not dare to speak German in case they thought we were Germans and might shoot us. Eventually the Russians understood that we were on their side and against the Germans, and they let us loose.

Not surprisingly, we were obsessed with food – or rather the lack of food – after more than a year in Belsen. We all went hunting for food. Paul collected loads of grass, leaves and potatoes, as usual, for everyone on the train, because many people were ill and could not forage for themselves. If they encountered any trouble, they got a Russian soldier to sort it out. They came back to the train with bread, butter, milk and honey. They were not impressed with Paul’s grass and told him to do better next day!

On the next morning, we all went off hunting for food again and Paul found an abandoned factory where they made tubes of cheese paste, and he also found a wheelbarrow. He came back to the train with this great, big wheelbarrow, full of tubes of cheese paste for everyone on the train. He thought he had done well this time. But Rudi and his friends went back to the German village and this time they went into the German homes, into their cellars where they kept their goodies, and they came back with preserves of meat, vegetables, fruit and gateaux. They were not impressed with Paul’s cheese paste! They had also acquired watches and radios and Rudi had a motorbike; “organising” we called it.

Rudi and his friends had appreciated the new situation much quicker than Paul, who blames his poor performance on his poor state of health. His body, and especially his legs, were very bloated and swollen and he had some difficulty moving around. Apparently this condition, called oedema, is caused by an excess of fluids in the tissues, in his case due to severe malnutrition. It often precedes death...Paul’s condition actually got worse because the next day he and Rudi had spots all over their bodies. It was typhus and we were both taken to a Russian army hospital in a nearby town called Riesa with high temperatures, fever, delirium and all the other symptoms of typhus. But we must have received very good treatment from the Russian doctors and nurses because we both survived, and a few weeks later were ready to leave the Russian army hospital.

We then found out that the war was over: Germany had been divided up into four parts: British, French, American and Russian, and we were in the Russian zone. We explained to the Russians that we wanted to return to Holland, and as a first step we were transported to

Leipzig, which was in the American zone. We had to explain to the Americans who we were, where we came from and where we wanted to go. It was all quite difficult; we did not have much paperwork or documentation, but eventually the Americans agreed to repatriate us back to Holland. We were put onto an open truck which would take us to a railway station, and from there a train would take us to Holland (and Belgium and France for other survivors). Just as we went out of this camp in Leipzig, another open truck came into the camp with lots of little children on board, including our sister Eve.

This is a very embarrassing part of our story, because somehow we seem to have forgotten our sister Eve and had actually lost her. We cannot explain how this happened, except that life was very confused at the end of the war and we had plenty of problems ourselves. We know that during the last weeks in Belsen, Eve was looked after by the Birnbaum family in their "orphanage". And we also know that they were evacuated from Belsen on the same last train as us, but they were in a different carriage. And they were liberated near Tröbits, just like us. But we seem to have spent all our time looking for food and we never looked for Eve and never made contact with her. Then we got typhus and were taken away to Riesa and eventually finished up in Leipzig. By that time, we seemed to have forgotten about her. There was nothing we could do about it anyway.

Thus it was a miracle when we suddenly saw our little sister Eve in Leipzig. If our truck had left five minutes earlier, or Eve's truck had arrived five minutes later, we might never have seen our sister again. This would have been very bad in itself, but also we had only survived because of Eve's British nationality and we owed it all to her. We now know that without Eve, we would have been deported from Westerbork to Auschwitz or Sobibor, and our chances of survival there would have been slim. It was very bad of us to have forgotten about our sister.

We stopped the other truck, Eve joined ours and we drove to the railway station. The train took us to Holland and we arrived in Maastricht in June 1945. From there we contacted our uncle and aunt in London. Our uncle was in the British army and he came to Holland in September 1945 and took Eve straight back to England. As she was British, she could get in. Paul and Rudi were refugees once more, "Displaced Persons" they called us, and we had to apply for visas to enter England.

It is probably fair to say that Eve was the most affected by her ordeals. She was only a child during her years of captivity, bewildered by the ominous circumstances, terrified by the uniforms of the authorities, unable to understand what was happening and totally devastated by the deaths of her parents. She was lonely in every sense of the word; she had no friends for many years and her childhood had been denied.

Eve experienced great difficulties in adjusting to normality in England. She was sent to a boarding school in Hove and hated the school environment. The other children had families and a normal existence, but nobody made the effort to understand her unusual and tragic life. Soon after, Eve was accepted into the Lingfield House children's home. This was a most remarkable home for 24 children who came to England in 1945-46. Most of them had been rescued from the concentration camps. The home was run by Alice Goldberger, a wonderful lady, loved and admired by all who knew her. The children were encouraged to lead normal lives and they received lots of love and care to help them gain the strength to cope with future years. Fellow survivors, such as Rabbi Hugo Gryn and Ben Helfgott, paid regular visits to Lingfield House during that time. Eventually, Eve started work in her uncle's gloves business and she moved into her own flat in Highgate. Eve enjoys her close relationship to

the expanding Oppenheimer family. Indeed, she is the favourite aunt amongst the younger generation. She keeps in touch with her Lingfield colleagues and is happy among other child survivors.

Rudi was always the adventurer. Alert, quick-witted and intelligent, he sensed danger and used his natural abilities to avoid it. He was also tremendously inventive, finding ways of helping the whole family from an early age. In Westerbork, when he was just 12 years old, he watched what was going on and learned the art of survival. In Belsen, he was in charge of dishing out the food in our barracks – a job of the utmost importance. Rudi undoubtedly remembers the war years much better than Eve and Paul. On our arrival in England, Rudi lived with our uncle and aunt in north-west London and with their friends from the refugee community. Rudi became an engineer, studying at Imperial College, London, from where he graduated with a degree in electrical engineering in 1953. After serving a two-year apprenticeship with BTH (British Thomson Houston) in Rugby, he worked for Shell for 34 years and spent time on overseas assignments, including several years in Venezuela. He completed his career with shell at their head office in The Hague, Holland, living in his own house in nearby Wassenaar. Rudi is now retired and has returned to England. He has integrated within the UK survivor community and is a great supporter of Beth Shalom, the Holocaust Education Centre in Newark, Nottinghamshire.

He regularly relates his wartime experiences to students from schools all over the country – for Beth Shalom, for the Holocaust Educational Trust, for the London Jewish Cultural Centre, and he is also associated with the Anne Frank touring exhibition. His speaking engagements have become the major preoccupation in his life and he really enjoys his conversations with students and teachers.

Paul also stayed with our uncle and aunt in north-west London for the first year of his return to 'normality'. He wanted to become an engineer and went to live in Birmingham, in a hostel with pre-war refugees. He completed a five-year apprenticeship and worked nine years for the BSA group of companies, followed by 34 years with Lucas-Girling. Paul studied in the evenings to obtain an engineering degree and became a professional engineer in the motor industry. He wanted to become British and applied for naturalisation at the first opportunity in 1951. His only contact with the Jewish community was via sports: he played football, tennis and table-tennis.

In 1964 Paul married Corinne Orme, who was not Jewish. After the birth of their three children – Nick (1965), Simon (1967) and Judith (1970) – Corinne converted to Judaism and became closely associated with the Birmingham Progressive Synagogue. The three children attended Sunday school and became Bar and Bat Mitzvah, and Corinne and Paul also attend weekly services – a major change for Paul, compared with his pre-war secular lifestyle. Paul and Corinne have been blessed with four grandchildren: Alex (1996), Beth (1997), Josh (2002) and Yoni (2002).

In 1990 Paul was awarded an MBE by HM The Queen at Buckingham Palace. One month later, in April 1990, he returned to Belsen with Rudi and Judith for a commemoration ceremony. That was the beginning of a whole new episode in his life, when he started to remember and talk about his former life, his childhood and the Holocaust. The talking has never stopped: in schools, colleges and universities, at Beth Shalom and to adult groups, beyond 500 talks in total, including more than 100 at Beth Shalom. Despite increasing transportation difficulties, the full attention and positive reaction from students and teachers, in their questions and subsequent letters, makes it all worthwhile and enables Paul

to make a constructive contribution to society, even in his later years. Many students tell him they will remember his lecture for the rest of their lives, and hopefully this will help to prevent such persecutions of 'different' people in the future. Everyone should be equal, no one should be afraid. And doing nothing may not be enough.

Dedicated to our grandchildren, Alex, Beth, Josh and Yoni and their generation.

A more comprehensive version of our story was published by Beth Shalom Ltd in 1996, *From Belsen to Buckingham Palace* by Paul Oppenheimer.

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