

# A Memorable Journey

By Ernest Stiefel (Fall 2000)

On Saturday morning, August 3, 1940, the Japanese passenger and freight ship *Hikawa Maru* docked at Pier 89 in Seattle and 82 refugees from Hitler's Germany disembarked. The *Hikawa Maru* was the first boat to bring refugees from Yokohama to Seattle. The event was duly noted the next morning in the Sunday edition of the three Seattle newspapers. The Jewish Transcript, in its August 9, 1940 edition also carried an article about the new arrivals.

The voyage took place six weeks after the fall of France. Travel from Germany to the United States via the Atlantic had been halted and only the Pacific route remained open.

For most of the travelers in this pioneering group of refugees, the journey had started in Berlin on Thursday evening, July 4, 1940. All were fortunate to have American immigration visas. In addition, they had managed to obtain the required transit visas for Japan, Korea, Russia, Latvia and Lithuania. Following an overnight train ride, the group crossed the German border at Eydtkuhnen and entered Lithuania at Virbalis. After changing trains and crossing into Latvia, they traveled on to Daugavpils (Duenaburg) where they switched to a Russian train. At the Russian border, in Bigossawo, they were subjected to a particularly thorough passport and customs check; all belongings, every scrap of paper, even toilet tissue, were inspected.

It was Saturday evening by the time the train with its refugee passengers arrived at the Byelorussian station in Moscow, six hours late. The travelers spent the night in Moscow at the Hotel Metropol, near Red Square. The next morning, Sunday, July 7, a German speaking Russian guide gave them a city bus tour. After lunch the group was taken to the Yaroslav station to board the Trans-Siberian Express.

Most of the group traveled second or third class; those in the latter class had to make do with bunks consisting of a wooden bench covered with a thin mattress. Food was plentiful but so fatty that many people became ill. Passengers were free to move around the train and at each stop could get out and fill their containers with hot water for tea. On Friday evening and Shabbat morning ten men managed to squeeze into one compartment for a minyan while another man kept a watchful eye outside.

The route east wound through Perm, Sverdlovsk, Omsk, Novosibirsk, Krasnojarsk to Irkutsk, and from there along Lake Baikal to Chita. The train did not break any speed records. The following Sunday morning, July 14, it arrived in Otpor on the Russian side of the Manchurian border, over seven hours late. After another thorough Russian passport and customs control, the train took off for its final destination of Manchouli, the border town on the Manchurian side.

Again there was passport and customs control, this time by the Manchurian authorities. Then the group learned that the daily train to Harbin was full and that they would be delayed. They spent the night in Manchouli in Japanese style hotels, sleeping on mattresses on the floor.

The next day they began the 24-hour train ride to Harbin. On their arrival the group was met by representatives of the Jewish community of Harbin and taken to the basement of the

synagogue where they were offered a meal. In order not to call attention to so many Caucasians traveling together, the group was split into two with each assigned to a different train.

From Harbin the journey led through Mukden, Hsingking, into Korea to Fusan, from there by boat to Shimonoseki, Japan, and then again by train across Japan. In Kobe, representatives of the Jewish community boarded one of the trains and hustled the refugees off over concern that too many of them would be congregating in Yokohama. After two days in Kobe, the group proceeded on, rejoined the others in Yokohama and waited there for the Hikawa Maru to take them to the United States.

To their dismay, the group found that the ship's passage had not been paid. Thanks to the generosity of a Japanese Jew who advanced the funds, the refugees were able to continue their journey on time, before their American visas expired.

On the afternoon of Monday, July 22, 1940, the M.S. Hikawa Maru left Yokohama Harbor for the last leg of the journey to Seattle. It was an uneventful voyage of 13 days. Amongst the few activities available on board were English lessons, given by a Christian Missionary returning from the Far East.

The boat stopped over in Vancouver, BC, but since most of the refugees were considered "enemy aliens" by Canada, they could not disembark there. In Vancouver harbor, a US inspector came on board ship to complete the American immigration process. A major problem suddenly arose. One of the US consulates in Germany (Hamburg) had not attached the requisite Affidavit of Support to the Immigrant Identification Card, and the inspector was not willing to admit persons without such papers to the United States. Emergency calls were made to Seattle. Only after a group of Jewish businessmen, headed by Hermann Schocken, hastily issued a second affidavit, were these individuals granted permission to immigrate.

Early the following morning, Saturday, August 3, 1940, the Hikawa Maru docked at Pier 89 in Seattle and all 82 refugees from Nazi Germany were able to walk off the boat, without any further formalities. The first to welcome them were representatives of the Washington Emigre Bureau: Mrs. Clara Nieder, social worker, and Marianne Katz, clerk. They escorted the newcomers to the Frye Hotel, where they were greeted by members of the Jewish community and offered lunch.

Thus ended the month-long trip, the first of approximately 25 similar journeys to freedom. Every two weeks until about May of 1941 ships brought refugees from Yokohama to Seattle. Most of the immigrants left Seattle after a few days but some, like the writer, made Seattle their home.

On August 3, 2000 a few of those who had braved the trip through Russia and the Far East in 1940/41 marked the 60th anniversary of their arrival in Seattle with a reunion on the shores of Puget Sound. They gathered at the Camano Island home of David and Carrie Reibman to celebrate, reminisce, and record their experiences. Attending the memorable event were one-time travelers Alfred Adler, Edith Baer, Norbert Freedman, Fred Hirschel, Ursula Jackson, Gerald Oppenheimer, Walter Oppenheimer, Henry Oppenheimer Stevens, Carrie Reibman (Adler), Ernest Schlesinger, Laura Selig, Martin Selig, and Ernest Stiefel. Several had come from as far away as Connecticut, Georgia, New Jersey and New York. Family members and friends joined in the celebration.

