

**Handout**

# Herta Griffel / German Jewish Children's Aid Packet

## DOCUMENT 1 (Overview)

In 1940, seven-year-old Herta Griffel lived with her mother, Beila, in Vienna, which had been annexed by Nazi Germany two years earlier. Her father, who owned a grocery store, had passed away from illness in 1939. In November 1940, Beila Griffel decided to send her daughter Herta to the United States alone, with the assistance of the German Jewish Children's Aid, an American organization that helped refugee children. Beila hoped to reunite with her daughter in the United States at a later date.

Even "unaccompanied children" like Herta Griffel had to collect many legal forms in order to obtain US immigration visas. Because no passenger ships sailed from Nazi territory to the United States in late 1940, Herta traveled to Lisbon, Portugal, to board a ship. Herta Griffel arrived in New York on December 23, 1940. She then traveled with several other children and was shepherded by the German Jewish Children's Aid to Baltimore, where she was placed with a foster family.

Herta Griffel later learned that her mother was transported from Vienna to the Maly Trostenets concentration camp near Minsk, in Nazi-occupied Belorussia, where she was killed on September 18, 1942. Herta was one of the only children from her class in Vienna to survive the Holocaust. Gertrude Winter, Herta's teacher, was also killed. Some of her students' artwork survived.

## DOCUMENT 2

*Excerpts from Herta Griffel's recorded testimony:*

My — my most vivid memory is of my mother and me going to the streets for a parade. And it was an immense parade, and all the Nazi banners were — and bunting, were all over the place. And I remember the sound of the boots of the soldiers, and loud music, and a lot of sieg heils. And I didn't know anything about what was going on, and my mother just held — I remember her squeezing my hand, and I said, what is this? And she said, it's going to be very bad. That is the only vivid memory that I have . . .

. . . [My mother] did embroidery, and she worked in the store. And I think I was taken care of by another woman when she went to the store. I don't remember the store. I don't — I don't know whether I'm protecting myself, or — I have no memories of hugging my mother, kissing my mother. I don't have those memories.

And I remember being in a chair with her. That — that — that's about the closest memory that I have. Even leaving, I — I remember that she told me I was coming to the United States, and that another Jewish mother would take care of me, and — and that I had to be very healthy. And these — these are the things that I — I remember being in a shul [synagogue]. I think it was a shul, and people were crying, and she made me leave. My father was holding a Torah, and I just assume now that that must have been a Yizkor service [a memorial service held by Jews on certain holy days for deceased relatives or martyrs], because people were crying, and she wanted me to leave.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Herta Griffel Baitch, interview with Ina Navazelskis, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Oral History Branch, May 10, 2016, transcript.

## DOCUMENT 3

**Left:** Herta Griffel's passport photo, 1940.

**Right:** Herta (second from right) with her classmates at her Jewish elementary school in Vienna, ca. 1940. Nazi Germany barred Jewish children from attending school with non-Jewish children



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, gift of Herta Griffel Baich, in memory of her parents, Wolf Griffel and Beila Bertha Nagel Griffel



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, gift of Herta Griffel Baich, in memory of her parents, Wolf Griffel and Beila Bertha Nagel Griffel

## DOCUMENT 4

*Beginning in August 1938, Jews were forced by Nazi Germany to add new middle names to their passports that clearly identified them as Jewish. Men and boys had to add the name "Israel," while women and girls had to add "Sara."*

*This copy of Herta's birth certificate is dated January 8, 1940, rather than the date she was born (March 10, 1933), because only after her mother decided that Herta should try to immigrate were her identity documents collected.*

**GEBURTS-ZEUGNIS.**

Von dem Unterzeichneten wird bestätigt, daß laut hieramtlichem Geburtsbuche

Jahrgang 1933 Reihezahl 179

Herta Sara G r i f f e l

am 10. III. 1933 ( zehnten März )

..... Eintausend neun hundert dreiunddreissig

als eheliche Tochter des Wolf Griffel und der Beila geb. Nagel

.....


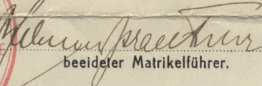
.....

.....

in Wien ..... geboren wurde.

Wien, am 8. Jänner 1940

**MATRIKELAMT DER  
ISRAELITISCHEN KULTUSGEMEINDE  
IN WIEN**


  
 beider Matrikelführer.

Kollationiert.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, gift of Herta Griffel Batch, in memory of her parents, Wolf Griffel and Beila Bertha Nagel Griffel

## DOCUMENT 5

*Oral history interview with Herta Griffel Baitch:*

May 10, 2016

**Q:** Do you remember anything of the journey? We kind of stopped your story there. You get on a train, your mother says goodbye, she hopes to reunite with you via Cuba, and then what happens? What do—

**A:** As far as I remember—

**Q:** Okay.

**A:** —we were in Lisbon, and we were . . . walking to the—to a boat.

**Q:** Were you accompanied by an adult?

**A:** I didn't know. I — I — I didn't know.

**Q:** Do you—

**A:** I just remember the children, there were—there were children.

**Q:** All girls? Boys in there?

**A:** They weren't all girls.

**Q:** I mean, there were no girls, there was all boys, except for you?

**A:** No, no, was two—two boys, and the rest were girls.

**Q:** Okay.

**A:** There were nine of us.

**Q:** Okay.

**A:** And I—the only thing I remember of the trip was the cobblestones in Lisbon, going up to the boat. And I saw water that I had never seen before. And I remember the boat had—was black, black side. It had a huge American flag painted on it. And of the voyage itself, I don't remember where we slept or ate.

**Q:** You don't remember if you were seasick?

**A:** I — It was cold, it was December, I don't remember being cold, I don't remember being seasick. I've never gotten seasick. And I remember being on a deck, and some sailors were trying to teach me some English words. And then I remember one morning everyone was running to the railing, and they were pointing, and it was—they told me that it was the Statue of Liberty, and that we were in America.

**Q:** Do you remember seeing her?

**A:** No, I didn't see the statue, because it was very misty and—and raining. And I didn't see it. I couldn't even get to the railing, But I — I think I asked what was going on, and—

**Q:** And then—

**A:** —that's what it was.

**Q:** Do you remember leaving Vienna? Do you remember leaving Vienna?

**A:** I do, but my next memory was, I was being examined.

**Q:** Okay.

**A:** And I have a vaccination scar on my thigh, but I didn't know what it was. And that was the only mark that I had. And I remember keeping my arm up against my thigh so that nobody would see it.

**Q:** During the examination?

**A:** During the examination. And the next thing I remember is my mother packing a suitcase, and we went to the train station.

**A:** But I remember that at the train station it—there was a lot of commotion. And I really don't — I'm not sure, but I think there were other people there besides the children that got on the train. Maybe they were hoping that their children would, at the last minute, be able to come. But that—that's the sense that I had.

**Q:** So you—

**A:** Because there were a lot of people there, more than just the mothers of the children that left. And it — I understand that the children were chosen because we didn't have a father, that our fathers were—

**Q:** Had died.

**A:** —either killed, or were — had died during that time.

**Q:** So you were one of nine children?

**A:** One of nine.

**Q:** And you don't remember those children?

**A:** No.

**Q:** Okay, so you—your mother was not on the train, but you were.

**A:** No . . . no, just the children. Just the children were on the train. And my friend that I met through that list, Stella, was 13, I was seven. So she remembered everything, and told me how the whole process was—was put into place. The agency that bought us was the German Jewish Children's Aid Society. And that's the agency that I — when I got to the United States, there was . . . a social worker from that agency in Baltimore, that brought me to Baltimore, to my first foster home.

**Q:** So this agency, was it based in the United States, or was it based in Germany?

**A:** I think it was based in the United States.

**Q:** Okay, but it was called the German Jewish—

**A:** German Jewish Children's Aid Society.

**Q:** Children's Aid Society, okay. And why wasn't your mother able to accompany you?

**A:** Adults could not come. I — I think the immigration was very tight. I don't know how we . . . got out, but no adults were allowed to leave at that time, 19 . . . November, 1940.

**A:** She . . . did tell me that she was going to try to find me. She was — her plan was to go to Cuba—I didn't know where that was—and then to United States, and that we would be — that we'd be reunited.

**Q:** Mm-hm. So it wasn't — it wasn't that she was saying, I may not see you again?

**A:** No, I — I remember her saying that was her plan.

**Q:** Okay.

**A:** That was her plan. She didn't know when, but that was her plan.

**Q:** Did you ever hear from her after that?

**A:** I received letters for about six months, and I wrote to her. And after about six months, the letters stopped, and my foster mother told me that something must have happened to her, because obviously she knew where I was.

**Q:** She had your address.

**A:** She had the address.

**Q:** Okay. This was already in Baltimore? She would have had [a] Baltimore address.

**A:** Yes, she had the address of my first foster home.

**Q:** Okay. Do you remember what she packed in your suitcase?

**A:** I remember what I brought here. There was a — there was a picture of my mother and me, and I was wearing a dress that she had packed in the suitcase, a very pretty dress. She packed a doll, and when I look at the doll, I don't remember — I don't have any connection to this doll. I don't know whether it was a doll that I played with, or that maybe she put in there for later. I — I don't have a connection with this doll. And she packed em . . . other embroidered nightgowns.



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, gift of Herta Griffel Barch, in memory of her parents, Wolf Griffel and Beila Bertha Nagel Griffel



Suitcase that seven-year-old Herta carried when she arrived in the United States, ca. 1940.



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, gift of Herta Griffel Barch, in memory of her parents, Wolf Griffel and Beila Bertha Nagel Griffel

Herta Griffel with her mother, Beila, ca. 1938.

## DOCUMENT 6

*On December 24, 1940, the New York Times reported on the arrival of the SS Excambion, which brought Herta to the United States. The ship also carried prominent American journalist William L. Shirer, as well as 25 refugee children whose passage was arranged by the Unitarian Service Committee and the US Committee for the Care of European Children (USCOM).*

### 25 CHILD REFUGEES HERE ON EXCAMBION

New York Times

First Group to Arrive Since  
Britain Halted the Movement  
Represents Five Nations

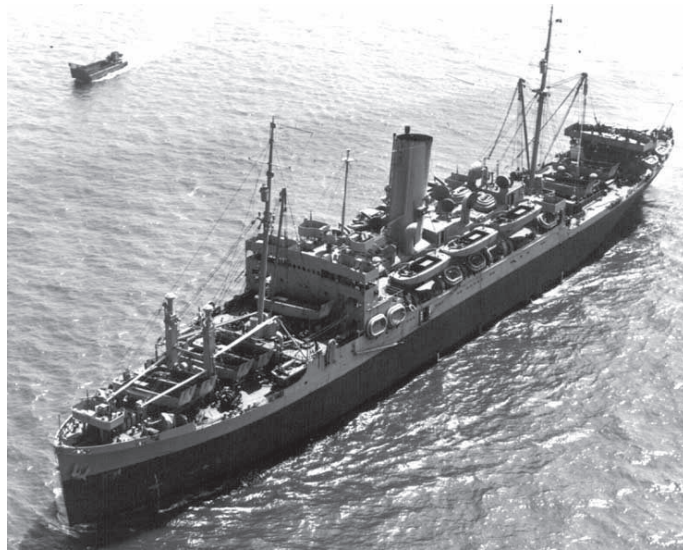
SHIRER BACK FROM BERLIN

Says Little Bomb Damage Is  
to Be Seen—Also Germans  
Will Not Go Hungry

The American Export liner Excambion arrived here from Lisbon yesterday with 185 passengers including twenty-five refugee children of five nationalities, the first group of its kind to come here since the war began and the first refugee group of any sort since England put a stop to the movement of children several months ago.

The children were from France, Austria, Germany, Czecho-Slovakia and Russia. All will live with relatives and friends in the United States.

The Excambion arrived lacking



US National Archives photo #80-G-10847