

Marc Feldman

Wartime Experience: Immigrated to US

I hereby submit my remembrance and personal narrative of events surrounding my family's emigration from Europe to America during World War II. We were refugees from war-torn Europe, and very fortunate ones.

My immediate family consisted of my father, Eugene Feldman, born 1900 of Hungarian origin my mother, Esther, born 1905 in Poland, my sister Helene, born 1927, and myself, born Nov. 30, 1933. Both children having been born in Antwerp, Belgium, where my parents resided in a very comfortable, middle-class existence for many years. Virtually all both my parents' families lived in Antwerp, my father's parents and siblings having been tailors and my mother's having been in the diamond business which was (and still is) common for Jews in Antwerp. My father learned and entered the diamond trade through my mother's family and was an independent and successful dealer. My mother was a housewife. The entire family on both sides was large, very close and loving.

My earliest recollection of the beginning of the war was my mother hurriedly rounding us up on May 10, 1940, the day the Germans invaded the Lowlands, Belgium, Holland and Luxemburg. I was six years old. During the beginning of the Nazi occupation of Belgium, I have memories of German soldiers marching up and down my street, often in a military band (of which they were very fond). But my most vivid recollection was standing before our picture window in our 4th floor apartment, watching nightly air raids by British airplanes attempting to bomb the port of Antwerp, a major Nazi, strategic facility during the occupation. Our apartment overlooked the large Antwerp railroad station with its huge glass, arched vault (so typical of European stations) to the left, and to the center we had a clear view of the zoo and the entire city beyond. I believe that the most frightening event of the entire war experience for me was during one of these British raids. The entire night sky was brightly illuminated by hundreds of German searchlights, when I witnessed two English airplanes being attacked and saw one of them being shot down by German anti-aircraft fire, all happening about one or two miles in front of my window. This told me, at the tender age of 6, that war had truly arrived.

In this period of terrible uncertainty, many family members made decisions to leave Belgium, to head in different directions, to face extremely varying fates. Many simply elected to stay, for better or worse, inevitably for worse. My parents, in a somewhat panic-driven decision, elected simply to escape Antwerp, leaving everything behind and make for the coast (which was the English Channel) in the hope, I imagine, of being picked up by a British ship destined for England. We found ourselves wandering around Boulogne, a French coastal city somewhat south of the Belgian border, trying to obtain a pushcart to hold our meager belongings with which we left Antwerp. We saw previously wrought destruction, but we did not experience any bombings or battles while we were in Boulogne. There were plenty of German soldiers, but no British ships to pick us up.

After realizing how futile this chaotic flight to safer ports was, my parents made the fateful decision to return to our home in Antwerp in order to try to secure legitimate and legal passage to a neutral country. It should be noted here that, at this particular juncture in time and place, the German occupiers were benign to the Jewish population in Belgium. This was not at all comparable to the situation in Poland, where the Jews were virtually imprisoned in ghettos until they were led off to Auschwitz or other concentration camps. In their typical propensity for methodology the Germans had not yet set the specific timetable for the Jewish deportation to the death camps in Belgium – each country and city apparently had its calendar for that horrific event. So, in this climate of uncertainty but relative freedom of movement, Belgian Jews were still allowed to leave, but inevitably, with nothing but the proverbial shirts on their backs. Given this fast-diminishing window of opportunity, my father, once back in Antwerp, in an act of desperation and profound prescience, contacted all possible diplomatic sources with the goal of securing an entry visa to a neutral country. As it turned out, the consul of Panama was sympathetic to those seeking escape in this increasingly hopeless time and so he issued to us an entry visa on a Panamanian passport! My parents then obtained legitimate train passage south, through France and Spain to Portugal, a neutral country.

My memories of that train passage to the south are filled with vague recollections of meeting many refugees, sleeping on straw beds in barns, obtaining freshly laid eggs from chicken coops and having to prick holes into them to suck them out of the shells since there was no way to cook them while we were on the run or waiting for the next train. But perhaps the most important memory was that, incredibly and ironically, there was at least one occasion when German soldiers brought food onto the train for the refugee passengers! This was somewhere in France. As for being able to sustain ourselves monetarily during all this, my father, a diamond merchant, hollowed out the large handle of a kitchen knife wherein he hid a cache of diamonds. This emerged as our main asset, other than what money we had at that time.

Our entry into Portugal symbolized our first and immediate refugee “safety net.” Portugal was a neutral country during World War II and its capital, Lisbon, became a port city from which many European refugees sought passage to the New World. With my father’s “assets” stuffed into his bread knife handle and some business contacts made in Lisbon, we began a 3-month, stay in that city toward the end of 1940. Some of my memories of Lisbon are of my 13-year-old sister taking me to American movies, experiencing the ubiquitous aroma of bacalhau, the local codfish smoked on open grates, hand-fanned, a staple food. I recall a hurricane which knocked down the basketball hoop stanchions on the court of the high school across the street from our apartment. I was always artistic, (becoming an architect in adulthood), was constantly drawing or making things with my hands. A trivial but deeply imprinted memory is that good drawing paper being, for some reason, scarce or expensive, I anxiously awaited my mother’s return from the food market where she bought butter in large slabs which was always wrapped in wax paper with an outer, white, heavy paper stock which, although it had a few folds in it, served as beautiful drawing paper. I was forever drawing airplanes, with which I’ve have had a life-long love affair.

It was never my parents' intent to go to Panama, for which we had a passport and entry visa, but to New York, for which we had no legitimate entry papers, but which was the destination for so many refugees, Jewish or otherwise, past and present. So, after about 3 months, in April 1941, we secured passage on a cattle steamer converted to passenger use, the Nyassa, another name imprinted on my memory. I remember this to be an uneventful, 10-day journey, more like a cruise than all the steerage horrors one has heard about in much earlier immigrant crossings. I don't have a specific memory of the ship's arrival to the Port of New York but the next and last venue of our emigration saga from Europe and immigration to the United States is described in the next paragraph.

Upon our arrival in New York, we were unceremoniously herded onto Ellis Island, the historic and traditional immigration facility through which so many millions have passed for the past half-century. The only difference for us and the thousands of refugees who were pouring into New York at that time was, whereas the stay on Ellis Island was usually a 24 or 48 hour one, we were destined to spend three months there. Because we were stateless and had no legal documents to enter the United States, just a useless Panamanian passport, as thousands of others at that time, and place, we were labeled "Enemy Aliens," and were consigned to unremitting uncertainty, constant worry and fear for our future, the worst possibility of which was that we would be sent back to Europe and certain death. The immigration officials were on constant alert for true enemy agents, trying to infiltrate the United States in a wartime situation. This was the bad news.

The good news was, although Ellis Island was, in fact, a fortified prison floating in the middle of New York harbor, we were well-treated, with food and shelter being provided, as well as medical care when needed. As a boy I slept in the men's dormitory with my father in 3 bunk-high bed arrangements and my sister slept with my mother in the women's dorm. "The Big Hall" was then (1941) subdivided by benches, tables and storage bins where we and hundreds of other families sat around all day generally doing nothing. We were given an "airing" once a day for about an hour and were under constant surveillance. Every once in a while, a nice young lady came to teach us English and the "American Ways". I remember these "teaching" experiences to be very happy ones. But my personal, greatest enemy was simply boredom.

After 3 months, not knowing our immigration status, whether we would be returned to war-torn Europe or when or if we were ever going to be released from Ellis Island, in an act of faith and desperation, my mother wrote a personal letter to Eleanor Roosevelt describing our plight, pleading for help, especially for her young (7 and 14) children. Two weeks later we were given the incredible news that we were free to leave Ellis Island and enter America via New York City.

A last bit of trivia is lodged in my memory: at the time of this desperately happy news, I was during making one of my models – this time a boat. I was always extremely possessive of my craft projects (usually airplanes) and guarded them jealously and with great care. The moment my mother surprised (and shocked me) with the news of our imminent departure from our benign prison, with a burst of ecstatic joy I literally dropped my model ship, never to want to see it again. To this very day, we cannot be certain that we were given our freedom due to the

direct intervention of Mrs. Roosevelt. We would like to think so. As for this 7-year-old, it was, and remains the happiest day of my life.

Thus ends the final chapter of our flight from war-torn Europe to what, for us, was the land of refuge, salvation and promise. We entered New York, went to live in the Bronx where my father had a cousin, lived there for about two years, then moved to Manhattan in 1943. Just after the war, in 1946, we received the heartbreaking news and official confirmation that my father's entire family and my mother's parents were killed in the concentration camps. My mother's three siblings and their families survived. We lived a safe and happy existence where my father became a diamond dealer in his own business on 47th street, my mother remained a housewife and the loving and loved center of our family, my sister married, and I went on to become an architect.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that it was through my father's persistence, perseverance and most important, prescience – that ability to sense what was coming – that we were among the fortunate ones on this earth at the beginning of and during World War II. Had he and my mother faltered in their decision and efforts to implement that decision by perhaps only 6 months, I would not be here to tell about it.