Renate

A Jewish child who escaped Nazi Germany

As reported by Lise Marlowe
This book is dedicated to
my grandchildren who are privileged to
live in freedom in America.

Mrs. Renate (Ronne) Breslow with Mrs. Marlowe's History Kids

Mrs. Renate (Ronne) Breslow lives in
Elkins Park, Pennsylvania
and has 3 children and 9 grandchildren.
Mrs. Lise Marlowe teaches 6th grade at Elkins Park School in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. She was named "The History Channel Teacher of the Year" in 2006 and received grant money to continue saving local history with her students.

To learn more about Mrs. Breslow's story and other local history stories, check out Mrs. Marlowe's History Kids' web site:

www.history-kids.com
In memory of my dear parents
Elly and Gustav Reutlinger
who were forced to flee their homeland
because of their faith
and the many members of my family
who perished in the Holocaust.

"All that is necessary for the forces of evil to win in the world is for enough
good people to do nothing"

Edmund Burke
18th Century British Philosopher
Renate's Father and his younger brother, Uncle Willy. Her Father received the Iron Cross from the German government in World War I for bravery. Circa 1918.
Renate's life before the Nazis.

Renate with Cousin Helga.
The memories of Kirchheim, Germany for a 5 year old little girl named Renate Reutlinger was of a place where Lilies of the Valley filled the forest with a sweet beautiful smell but this powerful fragrance turned sour when Hitler became the German Chancellor in 1933.

Renate was one of a few Jewish children in her small town and enjoyed her daily activities living above her family’s apparel store. Since her parents were very busy with the store, they hired a housekeeper named Sophie to help take care of their daughter.

Renate and Sophie shared a bedroom and ate a lot of meals together. Sophie was Renate’s closest companion and loved her very much. In 1935, The German parliament passed the Nuremberg laws, which enforced strict rules and separated Jews from the rest of the Germans. Sophie was forced to leave because one law said that non-Jews could not work in a Jewish home. Renate was heartbroken to lose her closest companion and confused as to why Hitler and his Nazi party hated Jews so much.

Another Nuremberg law that affected her family was that non-Jews could not shop in her family’s Jewish store; this caused a financial hardship. Renate remembers two Nazi soldiers with rifles pacing back and forth in front of their store to make sure no customers entered the store and broke the law.
Kirchheim, Germany. Circa 1920's.
The next Nuremberg law that affected Renate was that no Jewish child was allowed to attend public school. As a 1st grader, Renate walked to and from school with her friends every day and then would play outside until dinner time. One day, her 1st grade teacher called Renate to her desk and in a firm voice told Renate not to come back to school because she was a Jew. Renate was devastated and waited for her friends in the playground to walk home together like they did everyday. All her friends had left without Renate except for her dearest friend Maryanne who tried to make her feel better. That would be the last time she saw Maryanne. When Maryanne's father found out she tried to still be Renate's friend, he beat her with a belt and made her promise that she'd never play with Renate again.

Renate's life became very lonely, she didn't have Sophie, she didn't have Maryanne and she couldn't go to school. On November 9th and 10th, 1938 life then became very dangerous for Renate, her family, and all German Jews. Kristallnacht is a night no German Jew will ever forget. On this night, all Jews lost their civil rights and 400 synagogues were burnt to the ground. Jewish stores were looted and 30,000 men were arrested. Renate's Uncle Walter was dragged onto a truck and taken to jail where there were no bathrooms, food or water. He was sent to Buchenwald Concentration Camp where conditions were horrendous. One day he saw his best friend hanging from a tree that the Nazis called "The Jew Hanging tree."
Renate in her Kindergarten class.

1st day of 1st grade in front of the store. It was a custom for the parents to give candy as good luck.
As Walter was trying to survive the awful days at Buchenwald, his wife Lisel, who was still living in Germany, was writing to his family in Luxemburg, pleading for assistance. In 1939, Jews were allowed to leave if they had proper proof and paperwork showing they had a destination other than Germany.

After a year at the camp, the papers came through and he was one of the lucky few allowed to leave. A German guard escorted Walter to a bridge that would take him toward Luxemburg and get him out of Germany. Walter's wife Lisel and young son Kurt were waiting anxiously on the bridge to greet him. Walter saw his family and went to hug them. The German guard grabbed Walter's arm and said "no!" This guard did not have orders to stop him from seeing his family but he had a deep personal hatred towards Jews and forced Walter to walk to the border away from his wife and son. He didn't get to see his family again until they left Germany months later. When he reached the border, the guard said "Don't ever step on German soil again, Jew!" Walter never got over these awful experiences.
Cousin Kurt, Renate, her Dad, Aunt Lisel and Uncle Walter

Her Mom, Cousin Helga and Aunt Lisel
After Kristallnacht, it was very difficult for Jews to leave Germany. Renate’s father’s family had lived in Germany for over 400 years. He had in his possession his grandmother’s bible. On the back pages in the bible were the names and addresses of family members that had emigrated from Germany. He wrote to all of them pleading for help to get his family out of Germany. One distant cousin in America, Henry Katz, said he would help them get to America. The family discussed different ways to get out. Renate’s mother insisted that her father go on a ship headed to Cuba when a friend, who worked for a travel agency, called and said a passenger had died and therefore they had room for one more. Renate’s father did not want to leave his wife and daughter but her mother said that this was their only chance. Her father leaving Germany and her mother’s wisdom would eventually save their lives.

Another law passed demanding that Jews turn all their valuables over to the German government. Renate remembers going to Stuttgart with her dad and entering a large bank. Her father was carrying a big basket loaded with treasures gathered from their home, such as a big silver bowl and sterling silverware. The line they stood in was huge. Renate became bored and being small, she noticed people’s shoes. Standing directly in front of her was an old man with worn shoes and holes in his pants. She searched for his basket but could not see it. When his turn came, she stood close to him because she was curious what he had for the German government. In a shaky voice, he told the clerk that his only treasure was a gold watch given to him by his father. It was a family heirloom handed down from generation to generation. He pleaded with the clerk to be allowed to keep his watch. The clerk grabbed the gold watch and in a cold voice said, “Where you’re going old man, you won’t need a watch!” The callousness of the clerk frightened little Renate.
Kristallnacht
November 9th and 10th, 1938
Before her father left Germany for Cuba, the family had to sell their home and store. During Kristallnacht, the head of the Gestapo (secret police) in Kirchheim protected their home and store because he wanted it for himself and wouldn't allow anyone from the town to buy it at a fair price. He was able to buy the home and store at a ridiculous low price and the money went into a bank account. The Nazis then seized all the bank accounts and Renate's family never got the money from their home and store.

Renate and her mother became homeless and moved to a boarding house in Stuttgart, Germany. Before Renate's father left for Cuba, he knew there was another ship coming on June 1st and booked it for Renate and her mother so they could leave Germany and join him. He had to pay for a round trip even though they were only going one way and weren't planning to ever return to Germany.
Renate and her mother - The Reutlinger Residence and Store, Kirchheim, Germany
Even though Renate's father had booked two tickets for Renate and her mother to escape Germany on June 1, 1939, Renate's mother heard that there was another ship, The S.S. St. Louis, coming earlier on May 13, 1939. Her mother decided to get out of Germany as fast as she could and paid for the S.S. St. Louis trip. She felt the urgency to get out of Germany immediately. Her instincts were correct because the June 1st voyage never left Germany. If Renate and her mother had never gotten on The St. Louis, they would've been stuck in Nazi Germany and may not have survived. Other ships that left Germany after the St. Louis departed were ordered back by the Nazis.

Renate remembers The S.S. St. Louis as a prominent cruise liner. It had a ballroom, swimming pool and pictures of Hitler throughout the ship. There were 938 Jewish passengers, 400 women and 200 children, many of whom were under the age of 10, including 8-year-old Renate. Every passenger purchased a legal landing certificate signed by Cuba’s minister of immigration. Freedom at last!! But this freedom would sadly be short lived.
Renate’s Mom Elly and Renate Reutlinger aboard the St. Louis.
When Renate showed her passport as she boarded The S.S. St. Louis, it said “Sarah” was her middle name. This was not the middle name she had at her birth, but the Nazis made females add “Sarah” and males add “Israel” so they would be easily identified as Jews. There was also a big red “J” on the front of the passport which stood for “Juden” and meant "Jew" in German.

A pleasant memory for Renate on the ship was when the captain of the ship hosted a ball for his passengers. She wanted to attend the ball but her mom insisted she was too young and should go to bed. Renate snuck out of bed and went to the stairway of the ballroom. She could see her mother and everyone laughing and dancing and Renate thought about how happy everyone was that they were escaping the dangerous life they had in Nazi Germany.

As the St. Louis approached the shorelines of Cuba on May 27, 1939, Renate could feel her excitement that she would see her father again. She adored her father and missed him terribly. Renate went onto the deck and could see her father in a row boat waving at her. He had stood all night at the Havana Harbor to be the first person to reach the ship. He had a huge smile on his face and Renate recalls this being her happiest moment on the St. Louis.
Elly and Renate Reutlinger’s passport

Elly dancing in the ballroom on the S.S. St. Louis
Even though all the passengers had their bags ready and were prepared to leave the St. Louis, the Cuban government refused to allow the passengers to get off the ship and step onto Cuban soil to freedom. Many boats with reporters surrounded the St. Louis and broadcasted their story to the world. The Captain of the St. Louis, Gustav Schroeder, sent cablegrams to President Franklin Roosevelt asking him to allow the passengers to enter America, but he never responded. Other captains of ships, who were also filled with Jews fleeing Germany, turned around and returned to Germany. Once the Jews were returned, they were sent immediately to concentration camps. Gustav Schroeder refused to follow Nazi orders to return to Germany because he knew what the fate of his passengers would be.

As the days passed, Renate would ask her mother "when are we getting off the ship?" and her mother would always answer "tomorrow." One day as Renate played on the deck, she felt the ship move away from Cuba. She panicked and rushed to her mother’s cabin where she saw her mother lying on the cot sobbing uncontrollably. Captain Schroeder sent one final cablegram to President Roosevelt asking to at least allow the 200 children on board to be safe and come to America. There was still no response. Renate wondered how America, this huge country that stood for democracy and freedom, couldn’t make room for 200 children who now faced grave danger.
S.S. St. Louis in Cuban Harbor

Renate’s Father Gustav, in Cuba, waiting to hear status of passengers on the ship
As the ship left Cuba on June 2, 1939 and traveled toward America, all the passengers could see the shimmering lights of Miami Beach. Coming toward the ship from Miami Beach was a U.S. Coast Guard cutter with guns ready to fire. Renate remembers waving to the Captain on the Coast Guard cutter. Their job was to force the St. Louis out of American waters. Captain Schroeder slowly began to circle the Atlantic Ocean trying to figure out what to do. He was constantly getting threatening cablegrams from Germany, demanding he return to Germany with the passengers. He ignored these orders, even though he had a wife and children living in Germany.

Only because Captain Schroeder was adamant in his refusal to abandon the passengers was Morris Troper, the European Director of the Joint Distribution Committee, able to help. On June 17, 1939, after more than a month at sea, Captain Schroeder finally succeeded in protecting the Jewish passengers from the Nazis when four countries offered sanctuary: England-287; France-224; Belgium-214 and Holland took 181. Sadly, when the German forces entered Holland, France and Belgium, many of the passengers were re-captured and sent to concentration camps where they were killed. According to some historians, an estimated 600 St. Louis passengers of the 938 were murdered.
Renate's notepad from the S.S. St. Louis.
On June 17, 1939 Captain Gustav Schroeder delivered the passengers to Antwerp, Belgium. From Antwerp, the individual families were disbursed to the host country that had offered them sanctuary. Captain Schroeder and his crew returned to Germany with the S.S. St. Louis. Fortunately, he was never incarcerated for disobeying the orders of the German government. Near the end of the World War II when the Germans were having a difficult time, some of the passengers from the ship sent him money to help his family survive.
Captain Schroeder

He was determined not to return the S.S. St. Louis with the passengers to Germany, even though he was threatened by the Nazis. He was a hero to all those aboard.
After landing in Belgium, Renate and her mother went to Holland with 181 other Jews from the ship. They were placed in a detention camp called Rotterdam West. Renate and her mother were separated into different compounds. The camp had a tall fence, guards with dogs that constantly growled and were frightening. In the camp everyone needed a pass if you wanted to leave. Since the camp was by the sea, Renate remembers always being very cold. Renate’s mother only packed summer clothes when they left Germany because they thought they were going to Cuba, which was a warm climate.

When it rained, the camp was muddy and disgusting because there was no grass, only dirt. Renate recalls always being hungry. One day her mother came to visit her at the children’s compound and brought an uncooked egg. She tried to make it a bit more edible by running it under the faucet in the bathroom, but the water was only luke warm. Renate ate it raw and recalls it actually tasting pretty good.

One day, a large truck came into the children’s compound and stopped in the middle of the camp. The back of the truck was released and a whole bunch of children’s clothing was dumped on the dirt. Some kids rushed over and grabbed clothes. Renate just stood there for a few minutes watching and then she realized she needed to help herself and grabbed a blue coat. Renate lived in that blue coat; she slept in it and wore it during the day. It kept her warm and she adored it.
S.S. St. Louis landing in Antwerp, Belgium after the long voyage

Telegram to Renate’s Dad in Cuba from her Mom, stating where they landed.
One day while still in the detention camp, Renate’s mom was able to obtain a pass to visit her friend Herta, a German Jew. Herta had fled to Holland where she found employment as a housekeeper. Renate’s mom took Renate with her on the visit. It was exciting for Renate to be able to leave the camp and actually walk on the sidewalk like other kids in Rotterdam. She passed many outdoor cafes where children were eating with their families. Oh, how she envied these kids! She shut her eyes tight wishing to exchange places, but nothing happened. After the German forces invaded Holland, Herta was caught and deported. Escape during World War II was exceedingly difficult for German Jews.

While Renate and her mother were trying to survive daily life in the detention camp, her father was able to leave Cuba and legally enter the U.S on September 1, 1939. He went straight to Washington D.C. to fill out paperwork to bring Renate and her mother to America. When the people in the camp found out that Renate and her mother received the paperwork to go to America, they were happy for them but wished they also had someone on the outside trying to get them out; it was very hopeless for the other people in the camp to leave, even though they all had low quotas. Everyone from the detention camp was legally allowed to enter the U.S., but they needed an organization or private American to help.

Renate’s mother went to the American consulate in Holland to show them her documents for departure. The consulate hated Jews and told her that there were no more ships leaving for the U.S. and that she had to wait until the war was over. Renate’s mother was determined to find a way out and refused to listen to him. If her mother had listened and stayed, they wouldn’t have survived because all the people in the Rotterdam West detention camp who could not get out were eventually transferred to a newly built camp called Westerbork. When the German troops occupied Holland, they took over Westerbork. It became a notorious concentration camp from which Jews were daily deported on trains to Auschwitz and other death camps, unfortunately that included many of Renate’s playmates.
Fellow St. Louis passengers in Detention Camp, Rotterdam West, Holland.

Telegram from Renate's Father in Washington to her mother.
Renate's mother knew the commander of the camp, who was also a Captain in the Dutch Navy, was a stamp collector. Renate's mother wanted to take Renate's prized stamp collection to the commander because she thought the collection might influence him to help them escape. Renate refused to let her mother have it. When Renate left Germany, her mother told her she could only take one thing and she took a lot of time deciding what to take. Renate decided to take her stamp collection because of its sentimental value. Her favorite Uncle Willie, who had fled to Shanghai, had given the collection to her. Renate's mother didn't listen to Renate and she took the collection when she went out to play. Renate was so angry with her mother for not listening to her and taking her collection anyway. It was difficult for Renate to have to give up another important childhood item, but her collection may have helped to save their lives.

When it was time for Renate and her mother to finally leave Holland, Renate had to pass a health test. Renate was in the infirmary feeling sick when she saw her mother come in with a special comb. Renate had lice and had to have the bugs removed by putting chemicals in her hair and cutting it short. She also developed an eyelid infection and was quite thin. Even with all these medical problems, her mother was able to convince the Dutch authorities to let them leave. Luckily, the commander in charge of Rotterdam West camp was able to help Renate and her mom. They had to travel to Antwerp, Belgium. He obtained passage for them on a ship called Veendam. Coincidentally, also traveling on the same ship was her 2 year old cousin Kurt and his parents. How amazing to have her family all together and heading for freedom.
Renate and her Mother’s passport.
Renate and her mother left for America on October 29, 1939, she was finally going to see her father who was waiting for her ecstatically in the New York harbor. She hadn't seen her father for almost a year and missed him so much. Renate's first glimpse of America was one of bewilderment as she saw masses of people rushing around the New York Harbor. She asked her dad "What was wrong? Where are they all going?" He laughed and said "this is America!" Renate also saw her first person of color, everyone she saw in Germany was Caucasian.

The Reutlinger family moved to Germantown in Philadelphia where they lived in their cousin's attic for 2 weeks, even though the home was very large. Their cousin's wife celebrated Christmas and given Renate's family experience in Germany, they were nervous to mention it was also Hanukkah. Renate's father bought wood to make a menorah and the family had their first Hanukkah in their cousin's attic. They sang the blessings very quietly so no one would hear them. Her father said he had a surprise Hanukkah gift for Renate and her mother. He reached down and pulled out a paper bag with 3 apples in it. Even though the family barely had any money, her father still managed to buy a gift, it was the best Hanukkah present she ever got! Renate felt lucky and happy because she had the two most important people in her life, her mom and dad.
Renate’s immigration card to the U.S.
Renate went to school immediately but didn’t understand a word of English. Even though she lost 2 years of school, she was put into 3rd grade. She remembers being quite a sight to the other children, a skinny German girl who had a severe eyelid infection, outgrown clothes and spoke no English. It was hard again to make friends but she was alive and survived the terrors of Nazi Germany! Renate walked 45 minutes to school even when it rained. Because there was so little money, Renate received no allowance. Only when it rained did she receive bus fare, which was $.10 at that time. She chose to save her money so that she could purchase either paper dolls or a comic book, which cost $.10. She deliberated a long time before deciding which to buy.

Even though the Reutlinger family was safe from Nazi Germany, they had tough years living in America. They didn’t receive any assistance from the U.S. government or Jewish organizations. They desperately tried to rescue Renate’s cousin Helga out of Germany who wanted to be a dancer and was already performing on stage when Hitler came to be elected. Renate's family received letters from Helga's family begging them to get them out. The German government sent Renate's family a letter saying that Helga was 18 years old and now an employee of the state. She worked for the German Red Cross and rolled bandages. By the time the family had saved enough money to get them out, it was too late because the government said she couldn't be spared. Helga and her parents were sent to Izbica concentration camp where they perished, Helga was only 18 years old. All of the other members of Renate’s family- aunts, uncles, cousins were also killed by the Nazis.
Cousin Helga, who was killed in Izbica concentration camp.

Helga’s parents, Uncle Otto and Aunt Ittel (Elly’s sister), perished in a concentration camp.
Renate will never forget her family and wants the world to know that if you are determined, you can overcome anything. We need to learn from Renate’s experience that we should all appreciate the life we have and never take freedom for granted. If you see injustice in the world, we all need to actively be involved to stop it, there are many children today who still live in prejudice communities like Renate did, we need to care about all people by educating ourselves and listening to their stories.
Switzerland International News. Family members sent this to Renate’s mother. It shows Renate and her mother on the St. Louis.
THE AMERICAN RED CROSS
SOUTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA CHAPTER
511 NORTH BROAD STREET
(2. E Cor. Broad and Spring Garden Streets)
PHILADELPHIA
Phone—FREEmont 0100
April 15, 1944

Mrs. Elly Reutlinger
443 East Wyoming Avenue
Philadelphia 20, Pa.

Dear Mrs. Reutlinger:

We have received the following letter in reply to your inquiry of February 5, 1943 concerning
HISPANPOL, Inc., Block 7/1920, P.E. 28:

"Mr. Strauss has written to us that last year, immediately after her deportation, the
above named did write to her from Izibac.
Mrs. Strauss sent her at once a parcel and a letter but has not had a reply to it up
to this day. She says that she does not believe that one can write from Izibac, as
she has several relations there and never has received any news yet.

Unfortunately we are not in the position ourselves to make an investigation at Izibac at
the actual moment."

We are extremely sorry that the International Red Cross Committee was unable to send us more
definite news about your sister.

Very sincerely yours,

(Miss) Mary E. Vogt
for (Mrs.) Teresse Chambers
Chief, Information Service

Response from The American Red Cross documenting Renate’s parents’ efforts in trying to locate Otto, Ittel and Helga.
Renate's housekeeper Sophie, was forced to leave Renate's home. Here she is with her children. She named her daughter "Renate".
Doppelschrauben-Motorschiff
"ST. LOUIS"
HAMBURG-AMERIKA LINIE