

Roy Calder

Photographed with his wife Alice

Wartime Experience: Went to England and served in the British Army

I was born Hans Guenther Cohn on April 10, 1921 in Berlin. My parents were Georg and Lotte Cohn, my father – and his father before him – were also born in Berlin, my mother and her family came from Elbing in East Prussia. My only sister, Steffi, was born in 1925. My father owned a ladies hat factory in Berlin and Dresden and, when I was 9 years old, we moved from Berlin to Dresden. My father came from a strictly secular background, whilst my mother and her family were quite religious.

From the time the Nazis came to power, we experienced the same problems and the same persecution as all other German Jews. My father was arrested after Krystallnacht (November 10, 1938) and sent to Dachau concentration camp, and was released some time later. The factory was confiscated and, eventually, my parent moved back to Berlin. From 1937 I was no longer allowed to attend public school and since there was no Jewish school in Dresden, I was sent to Switzerland to attend school there. In the meantime my parents tried to obtain entry visas to Brazil or any other country that would take them, but all to no avail. My sister, in the meantime, went to a Hachscharah camp in preparation for eventual immigration to Palestine. That also never happened. On May 24, 1942, my sister was arrested, together with approximately 70 other Jewish kids at the farming commune, and there is absolutely no trace of what happened to her or where she was sent to. My parents were arrested on August 15, 1942 and deported to Riga on transport No. 18 and were murdered there upon arrival. I am the only survivor of my family.

In July 1939 I obtained an entry permit to England, after the Swiss had been trying to get rid of me for some time by threatening not to renew my temporary student visa. Together with many other “refugees from Nazi oppression” I was interned in England in May 1940 (after Dunkirk) and sent to Canada on the infamous ship, the Ettrick. I returned from Canada to England six months later, joined the British Army and spent the next 6 years in uniform, received an officer’s commission without obtaining British nationality (which we did not get until after the war) and saw service in British West Africa, India and Burma.

In 1942, while in the Army, I met and married my wife Alice, who was also a German Jewish refugee from Hamburg. We married in East Calder (hence the name) near Edinburgh and both of our children were born in London, Michael in February 1944 and Jacky in January 1950. We found it very hard to make a living in England after the war, with no training and no completed formal education, so we decided to move to California (not the U.S.A. – but California) in February 1953. Relatives in New York, who had survived the war in France, provided the required affidavit and encouraged us to stay in New York, but we headed straight for San Francisco and have never looked back.

During the following years, I had a series of jobs. Selling office equipment and later working for 15 years in the Trust Department of a Bank. In 1976 I went into professional fundraising and opened the first Pacific Northwest office for the American Friends of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It was while working to the University that we visited Israel many times and made many friends over there, foremost them Avraham Harman, then the President of the University and formerly Israel Ambassador to the United States. A wonderful human being and a great friend.

I continued to be active in Jewish and pro-Israel organizations. From 1969-71 I was President of Congregation Rodef Sholom in San Rafael; in 1986 I founded the Northern California Chapter of the Society for Humanistic Judaism and was its president for the first 4 years; I was a member of the Board of Directors of the Holocaust Center of Northern California and am active on its Speakers Panel. I also serve on the Board of the Jewish Community Relations Council.

But the memory of the Holocaust and the lost family lives on. Our children grew up never knowing grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins. It is only since they got married and started their own families that we are somewhat back to normal. In 1996, we even accepted an invitation from the Senate of the city of Hamburg, extended to Alice and spouse, to revisit Hamburg, the city of her birth and childhood, and meet its current citizens and see for herself the “new” Germany. It was an interesting experience and we are glad we went, but it really doesn't change anything and the memories of that period will be forever with us.