[Hi]stories of the German-Jewish Diaspora
A Publication Project

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A Photographic Record of German-Jewish Refugees in Kobe, 1940: The Escape Journey of the Katzenstein Family

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

This photograph captures the Katzenstein family, German-Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution. It was taken at the *Ichinomiya* Shrine, a sacred place in the Japanese religion, Shinto, in the port city of Kobe in September 1940. Irmgard Ellison (1922–2009), born Katzenstein, can be seen in the second-row center, while her parents, Robert Katzenstein (1880–1955) and Christine ('Toni') Katzenstein (1882–1959), born Koehler, are in the third row, on the left. During their stay, the family prepared meals for other German-Jewish refugees shown in this photo.

After escalating antisemitism in Nazi Germany, the Katzenstein family escaped through Siberia because other escape routes were blocked during the Second World War. They fled from Germany to Moscow, crossed the Trans-Siberian Railway to Manchukuo, a Japanese puppet state in northeastern China, and reached the Japanese port city of Kobe via the Korean Peninsula.

Previous research has primarily focused on Eastern European Jews who arrived in Kobe with transit visas issued by the Japanese diplomat Sugihara Chiune (1900–1986) in Lithuania. Therefore, this photograph is an important historical document that highlights the experiences of German-Jewish refugees in Kobe who did not have 'Sugihara visas.' Furthermore, it exemplifies that Kobe, today a city with a population of around 1,5 million on the north shore of Osaka Bay, became ultimately a place of transit for Jews fleeing Nazi Germany.

The Reasons They Came to Japan

Robert and Toni Katzenstein were married in 1908. The Katzenstein family lived in a small village in Germany called Gau-Odernheim (Rhine-Hesse). They were relatively conservative, keeping kosher and attending the synagogue on holidays. Before the First World War, Robert Katzenstein ran a butcher store, but after the war, he engaged in various businesses to support the family.

After the establishment of the Nazi regime in 1933, the family was forced to flee abroad one by one. First, the eldest son, Alfred Katz (1909–1982), born Katzenstein, immigrated to the United States in 1934 at the suggestion of his uncle. Their second son, Hans ('Harry') Katz (1914–1980), moved to Mandatory Palestine in 1935, then to Chicago in 1937. Their first daughter, Ruth Betty Heilbrunn (1915–2003), born Katzenstein, also emigrated to the United States in 1938. Later, the

remaining Katzenstein family members sought refuge in the United States, where they were ultimately reunited. Their journey exemplifies the pattern of chain migration, which was common among German-Jewish refugees.

Their second daughter, Irmgard Katzenstein, and her parents remained in Gau-Odernheim, but after the November pogroms in 1938, persecution against Jews intensified, forcing them to flee to Frankfurt. By 1940, obtaining visas had become exceptionally difficult due to the sudden surge in demand. However, on April 16, they finally secured immigration visas to the United States. Having family members already in the U.S. appears to have facilitated the process. On July 13, they received transit visas to Japan and Manchukuo, and on July 29, they acquired visas from the Soviet consulate in Berlin.

There was a reason the Katzensteins had to travel through the Far East to get to the United States. After the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, Nazi Germany launched a major offensive in the West in May 1940, and Fascist Italy joined the war, effectively closing off the Southern route. The only escape route left for refugees was the *Trans-Siberian Railway* until Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941.

The most well-documented Jewish refugees who came to Japan were those who received transit visas issued by the Japanese diplomat in Lithuania, Sugihara Chiune, between July and September 1940. At the time, Japan was already a member of the Axis and an ally of Nazi Germany. However, defying orders from Japan's Foreign Ministry, Sugihara issued transit visas to thousands of Jews fleeing Europe, allowing them to travel through Japan. Most of the visa recipients were Jews from Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, many Jewish refugees from Germany appear to have escaped by following travel guidelines like those preserved in the archives of the *American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee* (JDC) in New York City, at least after June 1940. These guidelines presented Japan as a transit country. This was because the Japanese government granted visas only to those with valid immigration visas for the United States or another destination, along with proof of onward travel – specifically, a ticket for a ship departing from a Japanese port. The Katzenstein family received their visas in much the same way as outlined in these guidelines, with the assistance of the *Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society* (HIAS).

Their Escape Route to Kobe

The Katzenstein family arrived in Kobe after a long, arduous journey. There were two main escape routes to Japan from the eastern part of Siberia. Many Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe who obtained 'Sugihara visas' usually traveled by ship from Vladivostok to Tsuruga, a small port city on the Sea of Japan, and then continued by train to Kobe. German-Jewish refugees, on the other hand, had an additional route: through Manzhouli (a city in Manchukuo) to Shimonoseki (the westernmost port on the Japanese mainland), and from there continued on to Kobe or Yokohama. After leaving Manzhouli, the refugees had two main options: one via Busan (a southern port on the Korean Peninsula, which had already been annexed by the Empire of Japan) and the other via Dalian (a northeastern port in China then under Japanese control), both leading to Shimonoseki.

The Katzenstein family chose the Manzhouli route via the Korean Peninsula.

Robert, Toni, and Irmgard Katzenstein traveled from Königsberg (Kaliningrad) to Moscow by plane. Unable to board the same flight, they journeyed separately and were reunited in Moscow. A travel guideline suggested that air travel reduced both the burden of travel and the cost of food. Such considerations may have influenced their choice of route.

After arriving in Moscow, they boarded a second-class train on the Trans-Siberian Railway and arrived in Manchukuo on August 8, 1940. Irmgard Katzenstein recalled the support of HIAS staff and the warm welcome at the Harbin station. They entered the Korean Peninsula on August 11, boarded a ship in Busan, and arrived in Shimonoseki on August 12. It appears that the Katzensteins traveled by train from Shimonoseki to Kobe.

Many German-Jewish refugees chose the Manzhouli route most likely because Nazi Germany was one of the few countries that recognized Manchukuo at that time. This recognition made it relatively easy for them to pass through the Japanese puppet state in Northeast China. As a result, an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 German-Jewish refugees used this route as a shortcut.

As for the destinations of the German and Eastern European Jewish refugees who came to Kobe, sources vary. According to the Jewish community of Kobe, of the approximately 4,600 refugees, about 40 percent went to the United States and about 20 percent to Shanghai. Among German-Jewish refugees in particular, more than half (1,246 out of 2,111) emigrated to the United States.

The Katzenstein family acquired immigration visas for the United States, making America their final destination. Thus, their case can be seen as typical of many German-Jewish refugees. What was different in their situation, however, was that they could not immediately board a ship for Seattle. After missing their scheduled ship, they realized that their visas would expire before the next one arrived, so they had to stay in Kobe for three months until they could secure new ones.

The City of Kobe and the Jewish Refugees

In 1940, Kobe was the second-largest international port city in Japan, with a foreign population of about 3,000 out of one million, including Jewish families engaged in import-export business. This Jewish community emerged in the late nineteenth century and expanded by the 1920s, as Jews relocated from other major Japanese ports due to the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) and the Great Kanto Earthquake (1923). Both Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities in Kobe coexisted in roughly equal numbers, totaling about 100 to 200 Jews.

Nevertheless, the prevailing view among Jewish refugees and scholars was that German refugees primarily went to Yokohama and Polish refugees with ‘Sugihara visas’ to Kobe. Indeed, Hanni Vogelweid (1923–2006), a German-Jewish refugee, testified that the Jewish community in Kobe told her that the city was only for Polish Jews and that German Jews should transfer to Yokohama.

However, a report by the local Jewish community contradicts this view, stating that of the approximately 4,600 Jewish refugees, about 2,200 were from Poland, 2,100 from the Greater

German Reich (including Austria and Czechoslovakia), and about 300 came from other countries. Notably, the local Jewish community employed a Jewish woman from Germany to assist refugees who spoke only German. These records highlight the need for further research on the German-Jewish refugees to Kobe, who have received little attention in the media and academic circles.

Everyday Life in Kobe

The photo of the Katzenstein family was taken at the *Ichinomiya* Shrine in Kobe, which still exists today. It was located less than 100 meters from the German Club (*Club Concordia*), where the Nazi flag was reportedly displayed at the time. However, the recollections of several refugees suggest that it did not make them feel unsafe. Anatole Ponevejsky (1900–1969), head of the Kobe Jewish community who moved from Siberia in the 1920s with his two brothers to Harbin, Manchuria, commented that the German refugees might have been classified as tourists rather than refugees. While one might find an exotic or travel-like element in this photograph, their lives were far more complex than mere sightseeing.

The primary organization providing refugee assistance in Kobe was the local Jewish community, known as *Jewcom*. This organization, founded in 1937, provided housing and food to Jewish refugees who had fled Europe without any possessions. It is said that they even baked bread with flour supplied by the local government. Funding came from the New York-based JDC and HICEM (the European branch of HIAS), which provided about 1.2–1.5 yen per day in aid to each refugee (equivalent to about 10 dollars in today's currency). It is unclear whether German-Jewish refugees were eligible for this financial assistance.

During their stay in Kobe, the Katzenstein family prepared meals for the German-Jewish refugees featured in the photo. Irmgard Katzenstein and her father were responsible for grocery shopping, while her mother cooked and invited other refugees to their meals. Their accommodation had a kitchen where Toni Katzenstein prepared the meals, eventually cooking for up to forty people. Since everyone contributed to the food expenses, the Katzenstein family was able to take nearly the same amount of money with them to the United States as they had when they arrived in Japan. This suggests the possibility that they were supported by *Jewcom*.

According to the account given by Irmgard Katzenstein in 1997, they received support, including housing assistance, from HIAS while in Kobe. Since there was no HIAS office, they probably received help from *Jewcom*. They lived in a large house, but twenty people shared a single room, sleeping on Japanese mattresses (perhaps futon or *tatami*), essentially in a camp-like situation. Despite these conditions, Irmgard Katzenstein reminisced about Japan as a beautiful country. She recalled being welcomed upon her arrival in Kobe by women holding bouquets, and although she occasionally saw Nazis in city restaurants or their ships at the port, she felt nothing in particular about it.

The Katzenstein family finally secured their visas at the U.S. Consulate in Kobe and left the city for Seattle in November 1940. They arrived in Chicago on November 29, marking the end of their long journey. While Irmgard Katzenstein's daughter later immigrated to Israel, many of the descendants live in the United States, where their parents and grandparents had ultimately found

refuge and a new home.

Conclusion

The three-month stay of the Katzenstein family in Kobe, captured in this photograph, deserves attention, as German-Jewish refugees in Kobe have not been extensively covered in previous research. While the Katzensteins' story underscores the survival and mutual support of German-Jewish refugees, it also reveals that Kobe was ultimately not a place where a German-Jewish Diaspora emerged, but rather a transitory place of refuge. Incorporating these historical connections into Japan's collective memory is crucial for preserving Shoah remembrance and preventing future tragedies.

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Further Resources

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