

The Heroes of Neu Isenburg: A Sanctuary Under Siege
Episode 18 of *Exile* with Mandy Patinkin
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SFX: A distant, angry mob approaches

MANDY PATINKIN: Neu Isenburg, Germany. November 10, 1938.

There's growing chaos outside the Neu Isenburg Home, a sanctuary for orphaned Jewish children and vulnerable women.

Housemother, Helene Krämer, gathers residents together in the main building.

A knock on the front door echoes through the halls. Helene approaches the door. "Who is it?" she calls.

"The meat man," comes the reply. She's confused... they haven't ordered any meat. Perhaps it's someone bringing help?

Helene opens the door and her hope is instantly shattered.

A mob of men, faces illuminated by torches, storm into the house shouting: "Out with the Jews, all Jews out!"

SFX: waves, seagulls, a ship at sea

MANDY PATINKIN: At the same moment, Emma Haas, the head of the Mothers', Infants', and Toddlers' group at the home, stands on the deck of a ship, savoring her trip back to Germany. She's been visiting her daughter in New York.

She doesn't know it yet, but the ship is carrying her toward unimaginable destruction and danger.

THEME

Welcome to Exile, a podcast from LBI, the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I'm Mandy Patinkin. When everything is taken away, then what? From LBI's archives, untold stories of Jewish lives in the shadow of fascism.

Today, the story of two brave women who risked their lives to protect the vulnerable people in their care.

THEME UP/OUT

SFX: A murmur of women's voices, excited and happy

MANDY PATINKIN: November, 1907.

It's a day of celebration for the Jewish Women's Association in the small town of Neu Isenburg.

Led by Bertha Pappenheim, an Austrian Jewish women's rights activist, the group is opening the doors of the Neu Isenburg Home—a refuge for Jewish women and children with nowhere else to go.

ELIZABETH LOENTZ: Bertha Pappenheim is, I think many would say, one of the most influential Jewish women of her time. And she was important for several reasons. One, as a very effective feminist leader. She was also a pioneering social worker. She was a prominent activist in many social endeavors, especially the campaign against what they called at the time in English, white slavery, in German, Mädchenhandel. And now we would say human trafficking.

MANDY PATINKIN: This is Elizabeth Loentz, a Bertha Pappenheim biographer.

ELIZABETH LOENTZ: Bertha Pappenheim was chiefly concerned with working with the most vulnerable members of society and in particular, the most vulnerable members of the Jewish community.

MANDY PATINKIN: The opening of the home in 1907 made Bertha's dream of protecting vulnerable Jewish women and girls a reality.

ELIZABETH LOENTZ: These were individuals whom she saw really falling through the cracks. Unwed mothers and their illegitimate children, prostitutes, other at-risk girls who at the time were sometimes referred to even as being morally insane or morally ill.

MUSIC

MANDY PATINKIN: By 1924, the Neu Isenburg Home has four residences surrounded by lush greenery, tranquil walking paths, and a vast vegetable garden.

Residents and staff all pitch in, sharing chores, maintaining the houses and tending the garden.

The young women learn responsibility, and domestic skills like cooking.

The children have a home full of love and opportunities to play. Some are adopted or sent to foster care.

But for many residents, Neu Isenburg remains their home for many years.

That includes Emma Haas and her 11-year-old daughter Else. Emma's husband died fighting for the German army in World War I.

When Emma arrives at Neu Isenburg to ask Bertha for a job and place to live with her daughter, she's given both.

This is Michael Reinheimer, Emma's grandson.

MICHAEL REINHEIMER: I believe that in 1924, when my grandmother became on staff for the home, my mother was 11 years old. So she was probably one of the older children to live in the home. And my mother had very fond memories.

MANDY PATINKIN: These are lovely years for Emma and Else.

MICHAEL REINHEIMER: From what I was told by my mother is that my grandmother was very much beloved by the children of the home and by their mothers.

MANDY PATINKIN: Emma and Bertha are dedicated caretakers, involved in every aspect of daily life, and emphasizing Jewish values.

The residents celebrate Shabbat and other Jewish holidays by writing songs, poems, and plays to create meaning for the adults, and memories for the children.

Photos from this time show joyful children in overalls and long simple dresses, sitting together on the vast lawns in front of beautiful, white houses.

Neu Isenburg isn't just an institution—it's a loving home.

MUSIC

MANDY PATINKIN: But over the next decade, the world around them changes. By 1936, Hitler's control is tightening.

Bertha, now battling cancer, is summoned before the local Gestapo after one of her residents is reported for disparaging Hitler.

She is eventually released, but never fully recovers from the taxing experience.

Bertha dies not long after.

For the residents of Neu Isenburg, the loss of their Housemother is devastating. Bertha has created a close-knit community, referring to many of the orphans as her 'daughters'.

One of those “daughters” is Helene Krämer, who came into Bertha's care as a small child and later worked for her.

Rick Landman is her great grand nephew.

RICK LANDMAN: Bertha put her in charge of the orphanage that she was growing up in. That whole side of the family from my grandfather and my grandmother's side were always very social justice oriented.

MANDY PATINKIN: Now, along with Emma Haas, Helene begins to guide the home through the challenging years leading up to World War II, anxiously observing the rise of antisemitism under Hitler's fascist regime.

SFX: Army approaching

MANDY PATINKIN: Some German Jews, including Emma's daughter Else, now twenty-four, recognize the danger and decide to leave Germany.

MICHAEL REINHEIMER: Hitler came to power in 1933 and shortly thereafter, people like my parents had a sense that Germany was not going to be a place they could live in peace going into the future. So my mother and father were engaged in Germany but did not marry until they both came to the United States. My father came in 1936 and my mother followed a year later ~~in 1937~~, and they married in 1937 in New York City.

MUSIC

MANDY PATINKIN: October 1938.

In a modest living room in Manhattan, newly married Else Reinheimer sits across from her mother, Emma, deep in conversation.

Fearing for her mother's life, Else had persuaded Emma to leave Neu Isenburg for a few months and come to New York on a visitor's visa - but that visa is almost up.

Else tries desperately to convince her mother to flee to Cuba instead of returning to Germany.

It's a safe haven, where many Jewish refugees are heading, to await residency in America. It might take a few years, but it is far safer than Germany.

To Else's surprise, Emma says no. She feels a deep responsibility to the women and children in Neu Isenburg. The thought of abandoning them is unbearable.

So on November 5, 1938, much to her daughter's dismay, Emma boards a ship.

She writes a letter to Else and her husband during the voyage to ease their fears.

EMMA HAAS: My dear children, I hope that you, my dear Else, have calmed down. It won't be too long and I will be with you again. It's a beautiful sunny day, I hope you've gone for a walk too. So far I don't feel like I'm on the high seas. Everything is very quiet and very comfortable, the only thing missing for my happiness is you.

MANDY PATINKIN: But while Emma sails across the Atlantic, enjoying the sunshine and calm waters, the horrors of Kristallnacht grip Germany.

This night will go down in history as a pivotal escalation of the violent Nazi campaign against the Jews... the first flickers of the Holocaust.

MUSIC

MANDY PATINKIN: In Neu Isenburg, the torch-bearing mob chase frightened children and their caregivers—almost 100 people—into the courtyard.

It's a cold November evening, so they huddle together in their night clothes. Helplessly, they watch as men throw furniture out of the windows and set fire to the main building.

Firefighters arrive but are forbidden to help the Jewish residents, and can only stand by and watch the house burn to the ground.

The world's response to Kristallnacht is, for lack of a better word, disappointing. Most countries do little to change restrictive immigration policies, leaving many Jews trapped in an increasingly dangerous reality.

However, US President Roosevelt did take an action that could have changed Emma's situation.

ELIZABETH LOENTZ: He issued a statement against the actions and against the violence and also made provisions that the roughly 12- to 15,000 German Jewish refugees who were already in the United States would be permitted to stay. So not necessarily allowing new refugees, but those who had already made it to the US would be permitted to stay.

MANDY PATINKIN: If only Emma had stayed with her daughter in New York just a few days longer, she would have been allowed to remain in America indefinitely.

She writes to her daughter in distress.

EMMA HAAS: As far as I have heard, only the visiting travelers will have their visas extended. If I had postponed my trip, everything would have been fine, "the treachery of fate.

MANDY PATINKIN: Still, Emma remains focused on the remaining residents of the Neu Isenburg home.

She continues her efforts to find adoptive homes for the children or, where possible, sends them back to towns where they have relatives.

But new residents keep arriving on their doorstep.

Some days, desperate Jewish parents appear with their children, leaving them in the hopes that they'll be safer in a Jewish institution than at home.

Other days, it's pregnant Jewish women, abandoned by their Christian partners, seeking refuge.

Despite the swelling numbers, the home manages to feed everyone with its large garden. Patrons from Holland and America continue to supply them with meat.

Risking his life, a brave local doctor visits the home to provide medical care.

MUSIC

MANDY PATINKIN: By early 1939, German Jews are trying to escape Germany en masse. By any means...at any cost.

Emma and Helene Kramer are keeping the Neu Isenburg Home afloat, but times are desperate.

Helene's great grand nephew, Rick Landman again.

RICK LANDMAN: When people are fleeing, you do what you do to live. And the American laws, because of what happened, and our treaties and conventions on torture and everything actually allow you to do whatever you can to get here. You don't have to have documents and visas if you're seeking asylum and are a refugee. So that's what my family did. Everyone tried whatever they could to get out. And some did. On my father's side, 17 of his immediate family didn't make it.

MANDY PATINKIN: The 1921 American quota system already drastically limited immigration. The quotas for Germany were much smaller than the number of German Jews seeking safety in the United States.

Thousands are waiting, uncertain of their future. Emma and Helene are among them.

In New York, Else is constantly worrying about her mother's safety. She writes a letter to family to share dire news.

28,000 people are ahead of Emma in line to emigrate to the UK.

Helene's even further behind.

ELSE REINHEIMER: Fräulein Krämer and my mother are now waiting for their permit for England, Mrs. Posen's sister has found a place for them in a home there. I will be glad when they are at least out of Germany and my mother could so easily have stayed here, she really liked it here.

SFX: war planes and and gunfire

MANDY PATINKIN: Dawn. September 1, 1939.

News reaches Neu Isenburg that, at 4:45 that morning, German forces attacked Poland.

World War II has begun.

It confirms what Emma already knew: Germany is no longer safe for Jewish people, especially the children in her care. She must get them adopted out of the country.

One of those children is two-year-old Ilse Bauer.

Today, at 86, she remembers the stories of her tumultuous childhood.

ISABEL LANGSDORF: My mother came from a small village, and, uh, she met my father, who I'm still not sure if he ever knew that I was on the way. She came from a religious Jewish family, and she was pregnant, and she went to Frankfurt. That's where I was born. And she spent two weeks there.

MANDY PATINKIN: But Ilse's mother is not allowed to keep her newborn.

ISABEL LANGSDORF: After being in at the hospital, we went to this orphanage or the Jewish association, uh, which Pappenheim had started. And they asked if they, if they could adopt me. And I guess they got approval for that.

CUE

MANDY PATINKIN: Emma writes to her daughter in New York to share the hopeful news about a potential plan to secure Ilse Bauer's adoption abroad.

EMMA HAAS: It is quite possible that I will bring a 2-year-old girl to Cologne on the 19th, she will be picked up there by a Dutch woman, travel by ship to New York, from there she will fly to Trinidad. Lucky Ilse, right?

MANDY PATINKIN: The Dutch woman Emma mentions is Truus Wijsmuller, a resistance fighter who dedicated herself to helping German-Jewish children find their

way to safety.

Due to the bravery of Truus and Emma, by May of 1940, Ilse ends up in Aruba - not Trinidad - but she is free.

She remembers her first years with her adoptive parents.

ISABEL LANGSDORF: We went to live on a lovely little farm, in a way—it was a completely unkept land. And my father grew vegetables and we lived in a little, literally a little shack. And we had all kinds of animals there from goats to chickens to, you name it. And even donkeys. So it was really good for me.

MANDY PATINKIN: Lucky Ilse, indeed.

ISABEL LANGSDORF: Emma, and Truus, both ladies who were there to make life, you know, it's not about making life easy, it's just a matter of surviving. Because this was these were the days where you were lucky that you were alive and they were very strong ladies. And without some of these very strong ladies, many of these things would not have happened.

MANDY PATINKIN: It is likely that Ilse, now known as Isabel Langsdorf, is one of the last Neu Isenburg children to escape Germany.

And the next year, Helene Krämer is one of the last caregivers to leave. In October 1941, with her family's assistance, she secures passage to Portugal.

From there, she follows a path similar to the one suggested to Emma by her daughter, three years earlier.

RICK LANDMAN: She couldn't get directly to the United States at that point in time. But Cuba was one of the few countries that was allowing Jews to be able to go to go there. And then it's still during the wartime, she was able to leave Cuba and come to New York.

MUSIC

MANDY PATINKIN: Five months after Helene's escape, Nazi forces attack the Neu Isenburg home, this time forcing its permanent closure.

Bertha Pappenheim's beautiful sanctuary, built to provide protection for those in need, could not withstand the assault.

Forty-seven women, children, and caregivers, including Emma, are still living there. Many of the children are placed with families or moved to an orphanage in Frankfurt.

But their refuge is short-lived.

Before long, most are deported to extermination camps including Sobibor and Auschwitz.

Few, if any, of the remaining children from the home survive.

Emma is initially placed in a "Jewish house", a designated building where prisoners are forcibly relocated, stripped of most of their belongings, and live in fear of transport to one of the camps.

MICHAEL REINHEIMER: My grandmother was one of the last staff people to continue at the home until the Nazis closed the home. She was one of the last to leave. And then she was interned at the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

MANDY PATINKIN: Emma remains at Theresienstadt for two years.

ELIZABETH LOENTZ: It was like ghettos in many ways, and that it was overpopulated, terribly congested, overcrowded. The sanitary conditions were horrible, so it was filthy. There was not enough to eat. Also a great deal of illness.

MANDY PATINKIN: But amidst the horror, there are moments of hope.

In February 1945, a rumor spreads through the camp that 1,200 prisoners are to be freed and sent to Switzerland.

A memoir by another prisoner named Vilma Cohn-Leven, tells the story.

VILMA COHN-LEVEN: The rumors about the transport spread of course like wildfire round Theresienstadt, and heated discussions took place all over the ghetto. Some enthused about being liberated in this way, others started gloomily predicting a trap. It was clear to many now, apparently, that the train would leave Theresienstadt but, somewhere on the outskirts, on an abandoned rail track, the passengers would be left to freeze or starve to death.

MANDY PATINKIN: Of course, their skepticism is warranted. The promise of freedom seems too good to be true.

But still, early the next morning, almost defiantly hopeful, 1200 Jews board that train.

VILMA COHN-LEVEN: Slowly the train moved off, on our journey from imprisonment to golden freedom. The SS patrolled up and down the train, every now and again doors were ripped open, names of passengers shouted out and even checks were made on our new ID cards. All this was probably only to prevent us from finding any peace by unnerving us even more.

MANDY PATINKIN: Among the passengers is Emma Haas.

Against the odds, five days later, the train crosses the border into Switzerland.

VILMA COHN-LEVEN: The door of the compartment was ripped open and a Swiss official greeted us with a friendly smile, the first kind words coming from an Aryan after long years of imprisonment. It was indescribable, with how much love and concern not only the military but also the Red Cross ladies of the volunteer troops sympathized with what had happened to us.

MANDY PATINKIN: By this point, Germany is fighting a war on multiple fronts with dwindling resources. Defeat is on the horizon. And some Nazis fear the punishment that waits for them.

So they free the prisoners, hoping to downplay the gravity of their war crimes.

It is unclear how the prisoners on that train were chosen, but it probably involved bribes

and other demands on their families.

Emma's grandson, Michael Reinheimer, has heard stories:

MICHAEL REINHEIMER: I believe my parents telling me that there was a monetary exchange that occurred, that was facilitated by the Red Cross. And when that monetary exchange was completed, my grandmother was able to be released from the concentration camp and could travel to Switzerland.

MANDY PATINKIN: Many months later, Emma is finally reunited with her daughter in New York.

A black and white family video, donated to the Leo Baeck Institute's archives, shows her happily celebrating Hanukkah with her family in 1947.

Nine years have passed since Emma boarded the ship from New York to Germany, writing the letter asking her daughter Else to stay calm, promising she would see her again soon.

Now a grandmother, Emma's two grandsons, Steven and Michael, are also seen in the video enjoying the party.

Standing around a small dining room table, Else's husband Jack holds their youngest, Michael, while Steven stands beside them on a chair.

Emma and Else look on, smiling.

MICHAEL REINHEIMER: And my father was lighting the candles and my grandmother was holding down my hands that I shouldn't touch the flames. So that's something that's ingrained in my mind that she was very, very protective and she took care of my brother and myself.

MANDY PATINKIN: This evening is about celebration, family... and miracles.

Emma smiles wide as she takes her grandson Michael into her arms.

MICHAEL REINHEIMER: She was obviously thrilled to see my parents, to see her two grandchildren, and to live with us in a very lovely and safe environment. But on the other hand, she saw the destruction of the Neu Isenburg home. And obviously, she was in a concentration camp for three years. So that's something that doesn't leave your personality, doesn't leave your mindset overnight. It takes time. So yes, she felt very safe and very happy living with her family, but the memories could not be erased very quickly.

MANDY PATINKIN: In a wonderful twist of fate, Helene and Emma Haas, are also eventually reunited in New York.

The odds were heavily stacked against even one of them surviving the Holocaust—so for both of them to end up in New York together is nothing short of miraculous.

Emma lives with her daughter, son-in-law, and the boys until, just five years later, she dies peacefully in her sleep;

Like a true friend and lifelong caregiver, Helene steps in to help with Emma's grandchildren.

MICHAEL REINHEIMER: My grandmother died, unfortunately, at an early age. I think she was like 64. Thankfully, Helena Kramer lived many years beyond that. And when my parents would go on vacation, they asked Helena Kramer on numerous occasions if she would live with us in the apartment and look after us during my parents' vacation. And she was happy to do it. And I think she was very qualified. After all, she was the director of a large home with a lot of children, so certainly she could manage two little boys.

MANDY PATINKIN: Helene works as a housekeeper for a few years until she moves into a retirement home, where she lives until her death at the age of 96.

Her great-grand Nephew Rick Landman.

RICK LANDMAN: I do remember going to the Bronx Nursing Home. That is

where Helena died. That was like the Jewish nursing home that most of the German Jews who lived in Washington Heights or around the Grand Concourse that they would go to. So many people who had to flee left lives that we just don't even know about. There were so many heroes. I'm learning about them in my family, but there are just so many heroes. I'm proud of the work that she did for the orphanage, for trying to save people, for standing up for what's right, especially during a regime where any move that you made was life-threatening.

MANDY PATINKIN: It's true. There are so many heroes, many of them women, whose stories are not yet told. But thankfully, their heroism is now being passed onto future generations.

MICHAEL REINHEIMER: Well Emma Haas, my grandmother, was courageous. She was brave. She was selfless. She felt a responsibility, even taking her own life in risk. She had to go back to the home. She needed to safeguard the children and their mothers. So she was a true heroine. And we're just very, very proud of her. And I will talk to my grandchildren and to my great-grandchildren and I will tell them of the bravery that my grandmother expressed.

PRODUCER: In addition to extensive published material documenting the work of Bertha Pappenheim and the League of Jewish Women, LBI collections include a small collection of papers saved by Helene Krämer when she escaped Germany. The Reinheimer Family Collection in the LBI archives includes two home movies made in Washington Heights, New York after WWII. The collection was recently augmented by a trove of Emma Haas's correspondence from Neu Isenburg to her children in New York which formed the basis of this episode and is awaiting further processing. Check it out at www.lbi.org. Exile is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions. It's narrated by Mandy Patinkin. This episode was produced by Joanne O'Sullivan. Our executive Producers are Laura Regehr, Rami Tzabar, Stuart Coxe, and Bernie Blum. Our associate producer is Emily Morantz. Research and translation by Isabella Kempf. Voice acting by Hannah Gelman and Hanna Kent. Sound design and

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