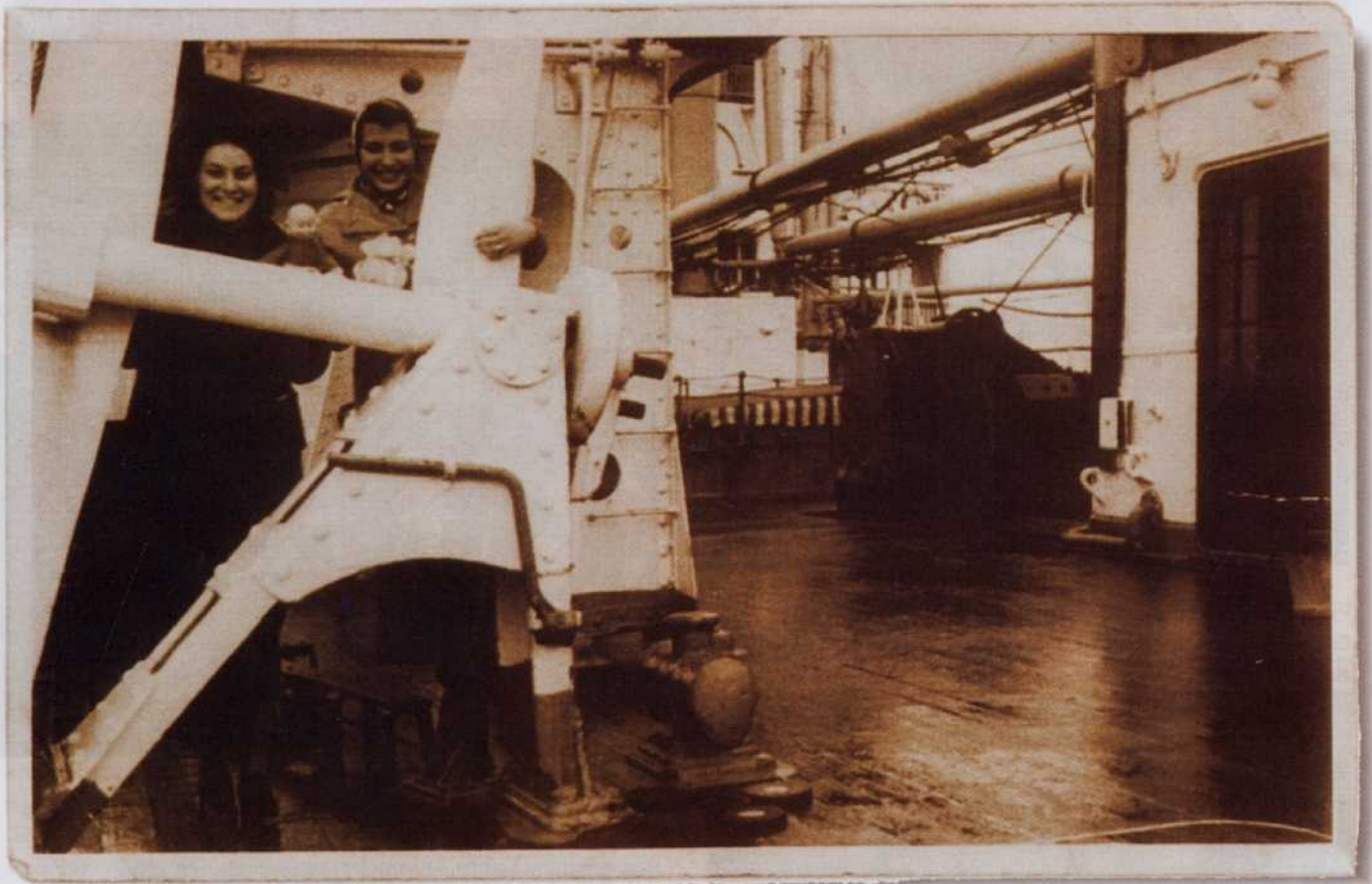


Haven from the Storm

BY MOLLY LEVITE GRIFFIS

Photos courtesy Trude Turkel



Traveling alone, frightened and yet excited, 14-year-old Trude Kirschhausen, right, came to America aboard the *SS Hamburg*, where she is pictured above with an American who became her friend during the voyage.

When 14-year-old Trude Kirchhausen escaped from Nazi Germany, she had never heard of Oklahoma, much less imagined that she would find a home there in an OU sorority house.

They called it “Kristallnacht,” a night of unmitigated terror, marked by the smashed windows of Jewish homes and businesses, as the world got its first glimpse of what horrors Nazi Germany had in store for the Jews.

Forty-eight hours before that infamous night, 14-year-old Trude Kirchhausen’s ship to freedom docked in the cold, black waters of New York harbor. She still clutched the tennis racquet she carried for “cover”—if the Nazi stopped her on the way to the boat, she was to explain that she was on vacation and then take a few leisurely practice swings. The frightened but eager Jewish teenager lifted her suitcase and prepared to exit both the ocean liner and the life she had known in Heilbronn, Germany.

On that cold November day in 1938, the young girl, whose parents loved her enough to let her go, never imagined she was taking the first step in a “. . . journey of a thousand miles . . .” That journey eventually would lead her to Norman and up the sidewalk to the Sigma Delta Tau sorority house at the University of Oklahoma.

But first she was sent to a foster family in St. Louis, Missouri, for “the duration.” When she enrolled for the second semester of the ninth grade at Soldan High School, Trude Kirchhausen quickly Americanized her name to Trudy House (hausen is house in German). The school just as quickly changed it back when they saw the correct spelling on the legal documents she had to present for admission.

Life in the “home of the free and the brave” was not as she had dreamed when her parents accepted the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society’s offer to place her with an American Jewish family until they could join her in immigrating to the United States. She was relegated to sleeping on a rollaway bed in the dining room and



In 1942 Trude Kirchhausen, four years a refugee from Nazi Germany, walked up the steps of the Sigma Delta Tau sorority house, then at 820 University Boulevard, and began a whole new, welcoming life in America.

quickly realized that her foster family was more interested in the monthly stipend they received for keeping her than they were in her well-being. If it had not been for the company of her cousin, Werner Michel, who had been brought to St. Louis two years earlier by the same HIAS, she would have been a lonely girl indeed. But she had promised her parents she would stick it out no matter the circumstances, so as the rest of the war-torn world of that time, she bit her tongue and prayed daily for “the duration” to end.

Trude was able to keep in touch by mail with her older sister, who was in Palestine, as well as her parents and the British foster families who had taken in her brother, Martin. Trude had been more like a mother than a sister to her eight-years-younger baby brother, who had been only five when he was sent to England. She was still chilled by the memory of rescuing him when he, a happy, excited three-year-old, charged into the street to direct a band marching past their house—a brown-shirted, goose-stepping Nazi band. Time would have lain even heavier had she known that eight years would pass before she would see her beloved brother again.

The best hours of Trude’s days were spent in school; she vigorously applied herself to her studies and was rewarded with good grades as well as her teachers’ admiration. To her great relief, before her third year in St. Louis ended, her parents escaped from Germany on what they believed to be the last sealed train to leave the country. They, too, were able to gain entry into the United States. They settled in Brooklyn, but by that time Trude only lacked one semester finishing high school, so she remained in St. Louis and anxiously awaited the day she could be reunited with her family.

As her midterm high school graduation drew near, she was called to the principal’s office and was given some amazing

news. An officer of Sigma Delta Tau, a national Jewish sorority, was there to offer a full scholarship—tuition, room, board, travel arrangements and all the money needed for a college education—to one of the HIAS-sponsored refugees, and she, Trude Kirchhausen, had been selected for the honor. The college chosen for her was the University of Oklahoma.

The month was December. The year was 1941. And she had to accept or reject this marvelous opportunity right away.

Because America was now at war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had declared all non-citizens residing in the 48 states—those stateless individuals whose former residences were in enemy nations—to be “alien enemies.” Those over the age of 14 were required to register with a U.S. attorney and be issued a passport-like booklet containing their photo and fingerprints. Travel beyond a 10-mile radius of the official residence of record had to be approved by the U.S. attorney for that region.

Trude had neither the time nor the money to travel to New York and then all the way back to Oklahoma before the second semester began at the University. Besides, obtaining permission to make such a trip was bound to be difficult for an “alien enemy.” Torn between her desperate desire to see her family and her equally desperate desire for a college education, Trude called her parents for guidance.

“There is no choice to be made,” her father assured her. “Go to college. Go to Oklahoma!”

So in January of 1942, 18-year-old Trude Kirchhausen, clutching a pink booklet which branded her an “alien enemy,” a ticket stamped “Oklahoma City,” and an enrollment catalogue for the spring semester at the University of Oklahoma, boarded a train and headed for the Sooner state.

“My life changed drastically the day I left St. Louis on that train,” Trude wrote years later. “The trip was wildly exciting, so much to see, so much to learn, but my biggest surprise came when, somewhere between Tulsa and Oklahoma City, I saw pumping oil wells sitting out in the middle of nowhere!”

She took the bus from Oklahoma City to Norman, where she was deposited at the downtown station. Carrying a suitcase containing all her earthly possessions, she asked for directions



Life was good in Heilbronn, Germany, for Trude, left, and Irene Kirschhausen, ages one and three, with never a thought that the Nazi terror would one day tear apart their family, sending them to seek refuge thousands of miles from home.

and then made her way to the address printed on the letter sent to her by the sorority—820 University Boulevard.

“It was a lovely, three-story brick building, the place that was to become my new home,” she reminisced in a letter written some 60 years later. “I was warmly greeted by some of the girls, and they called the president, Elaine Kopp, who informed me that I was to be her roommate. She was a senior and from Oklahoma City. She took me to our room and made me welcome. She explained the rules and regulations of the house and the procedure for meals. She then introduced me to Miss Hortense Bondy, the housemother, a truly wonderful lady who became my dear friend and adviser.

“Miss Bondy directed me to the J.C. Penny store where I bought all the things for my room—sheets, pillows, cases and blankets, every single thing I needed, all with money furnished by the national office of

the sorority. Xi chapter of Sigma Delta Tau furnished me with free room and board, and the national treasurer, Mary Arbitman Fellman of Omaha, Nebraska, made sure my check for expenses was waiting for me upon my arrival.”

Trude’s first visit to the OU campus was to the office of the counselor of women, Margaret Stephenson, who had been notified by the SDT scholarship chairman of her impending arrival. Stephenson showed her where to register for classes. Trude wanted to major in landscape architecture, which was listed in the catalogue, but she discovered that low enrollment had caused the program to be discontinued. She opted for her second choice, physical education for women, with the idea of going into physical therapy when she graduated.

Never one to take the easy road, Trude enrolled in 18 hours that first semester. “I found the professors as well as the members of my class most congenial,” she recalls. “Two of my teachers, (physical education professor) Irma James and Dr. R. T. House, professor of modern languages, were willing to testify in my behalf (in 1946) when I needed recommendations for my citizenship application.”

The only downside to Trude’s time in Oklahoma came from her “alien enemy” status. “That cause me a great deal of trouble



The 1942 SDT pledge class at OU welcomed Trude Kirschhausen, front row, third from left, and made her their "gift to the sorority," paying for her initiation and pin.



On Mother's Day, 1939, Trude Kirschhausen was an "outsider" in St. Louis, Missouri, far from her own mother and the love, warmth and caring that her family always had provided.

"There is no choice to be made," her father assured her. "Go to college. Go to Oklahoma!"

as the U.S. attorney was in Oklahoma City, and I was in Norman. I had to get him by phone and explain where and when and why I was going and then wait until I got permission to do so. I had several long, lonely stays on campus during breaks and vacations because I could not get the permission."

But even those frustrating experiences failed to blur her memories of the happy times spent on campus, many of which center around the Hillel Foundation, then just getting started at OU as well as on other campuses around the country.

"Hillel was to be a support organization led by a rabbi to provide guidance and education of Jewish values and heritage," Trude recalls. "Max Nussbaum, our rabbi, was a refugee from Berlin, and he had a terrific accent. I took Hebrew lessons from him in my spare time. Hillel became a second home to many of us."

Trude still marvels at the amount of help and support she received from everyone she met, not only in those first months after her arrival but also for the remainder of her stay.

"When I came to school at the University of Oklahoma, it opened the world to me. Everyone I met was willing to go out of the way to help me. I especially remember Sylvia Lichtenstein

and Raymond Feldman, as well as Charlotte Sanditen and her cousin, Louis Fenster, good friends all. I loved the campus, and I lived in the sorority house the entire year and a half I was in Norman. The pledge class of 1942 decided to make me a sister, and they paid for my initiation fee and pin. They even called me their 'gift to the sorority!' This full acceptance, along with being able to live in such wonderful surroundings, gave me a tremendous opportunity to grow as a person."



Trude Kirckhausen, proud Sooner coed, happily settled into her new life on the OU campus unaware that soon the war once again would radically change the course of her life as well as that of the rest of the student body. Because she was majoring in *women's* physical education (no such thing as mixing the sexes in that day and time), many of her classes were all female by design, but as more and more men enlisted or were drafted, even courses such as her human anatomy class, taught by a Dr. Wade, became all-girl events. Norman, like all the other college towns in America, soon found it had a dire shortage of males, but all of that would change in the summer of 1943 when the U.S. Navy sailed into town.

"Many of the dorms as well as the Greek organizations are having to close their doors to students in order to give housing to the military," Trude wrote her parents. "I am very lucky in that I have been invited to live in the Sigma Delta Tau house at the University of Nebraska. My scholarship is still in effect, and my credits have been accepted there."

So, once again, suitcase in hand, Trude Kirckhausen, who had not been Sooner born but by this time had certainly become Sooner bred-in-the-bone, boarded a train, which would take her from one life into another.

Trude met her future husband, Harold Turkel, in Lincoln, where he was practicing law. They married in Chicago in 1944, and by the time they settled in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1952, they had two sons, Steven Charles and James Stuart. Her love of children led her to become the first play therapist for the Department of Welfare at City Hospital in Baltimore. After that, she worked for the Social Security Administration until retirement.

Trude was aware that her brother was one of the more than 10,000 children, mostly Jewish, who were sent to England in the "Kindertransports" portrayed in the Academy Award-winning documentary, *Into the Arms of Strangers*. However, only in the past two years did she discover that her own clandestine journey to America had been part of a much larger effort to save Jewish children than she or any of the others involved had imagined.

"There were over a thousand of us in this one operation," she



ABOVE: Two of her former OU professors testified on her behalf when Trude Kirckhausen Turkel became an American citizen in July 1946 in Chicago. UPPER LEFT: Trude Turkel, now 80 and living in Ellicott City, Maryland, still has fond memories of Sooner friends and the University that welcomed her.

marvels now. "But we didn't know that at the time. Due to the anti-Semitism sweeping the world in those years, we were slipped into the country in groups of three to five to keep from drawing attention to our arrival. Each of us was placed with a Jewish family to preserve our heritage. We were children, frightened little children who didn't even speak the language, so there were none among us to tell our story. Now, however, there is a wonderful Web site, www.onethousandchildren.org, devoted to our journeys. I read it and find myself wondering still how we were fortunate enough to make our way to America, and how I was especially lucky enough to become a Sooner, even if it was only for a little while."

And whom does she root for when OU plays Nebraska?

"It was a mixed marriage, Cornhusker Harold's and mine," she laughs. "You must know that sometimes causes a few problems!"

Molly Levite Griffis, of Norman, is the award-winning author of seven books for young people—including three novels set in World War II-era Oklahoma and the recently released biography of cross-country runner Andy Payne, The Great American Bunion Derby.