



## From Nuremberg to La Paz

*by John Holzman, edited by Eric G. Yondorf*

### Introduction by the Editor

The following report about his wartime stay in Bolivia was written a few years ago by John Holzman at the request of his son Eric.

The Erich Holzmänn Family was stuck in Nuremberg at the beginning of World War II with no place of refuge. Father Erich (Papa) was fifty years old, his wife Ida (Mutti) in her mid forties. Their oldest son Ernest (18) had been sent to England on a Kindertransport. Their middle son Gerd (Gary) was 16, and Hans (John) was fourteen. Ida Holzmänn was the granddaughter of Ludwig Rosenzweig's sister Gertrud Gruebel. Ida's brother in law, Otto Flörsheim, a Berlin physician who had emigrated to New York some years previously, generously made funds available for the family's last minute emigration to Bolivia after temporary residence papers had been secured.

After their six years stay in Bolivia the Holzman family left for the USA. Today John Holzman and Phyllis, his wife of 42 years, live in a suburb of Los Angeles. After receiving engineering degrees from the University of California at Berkeley and Los Angeles, John spent most of his professional life in aerospace engineering. Phyllis worked as a legal secretary and school teacher. Both are now retired, enjoying travel and a variety of hobbies. They have two grown sons with their own families.

John's original report is very informal and personal. With his permission, I have made cuts.

*Eric G. Yondorf*

*December 2002*

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### Emigration to Bolivia, Nov. 29 - Dec. 28, 1939

The train trip from Nuremberg took us through Munich into the Swiss Alps. We were crossing the Alps in the dark. As I looked out the window I saw ghostly, snow covered mountains flitting by. I remember being disappointed that I couldn't see more of the beautiful mountain scenery. Arriving in Genoa, Gary and I spent hours watching our luggage while Mutti and Papa were picking up the boat tickets and trying, unsuccessfully, to get some money from the Jewish Aid Society (Hilfsverein).

In Genoa, in transit to Bolivia, our funds were very tight and lunch consisted of bread, cheese and milk which we ate while sitting on a street curb. Though we were able to board the ship the next day, our worries were not over. At any moment, Italy might enter the war, in which

case the ship might not leave at all or be called back once it was on the way. None of this happened, fortunately, and we set sail for the New World. The ship, 'Augustus', was a large ocean liner, with two classes of accommodations. We were, of course, in the lowest, cheapest class. The weather and the seas were getting rough. The dining room was empty at meal time. My stomach was slightly disturbed, but Mutti was very sea-sick.

As the storm subsided the sun came out and soon it became hot and tropical. After two weeks and several stops at harbors along the way, we reached the Panama Canal. I was particularly fascinated by the operation of the locks, the ship being pulled by special electric trains, and the raising and lowering of the water level [in the locks]. We traveled another week down the west coast of South America before we arrived in Arica, Chile.

This was the end of the ocean going portion of the journey. Now we joined a large crowd of emigrants, whose destination was also La Paz, in long lines to buy train tickets. We were almost out of money but the Jewish Aid Society (Hilfsverein) came to our assistance. It is my understanding that this 'Hilfsverein' was created and funded by the Hochschilds, a very wealthy family of German-Jewish origin, who at that time were one of the two largest tin mine operators in Bolivia.

Three days after our arrival in Arica we were on board a train to La Paz. Within a few hours the train had climbed from sea level to over 12,000 ft. This change in altitude affected Papa severely. Though he seemed at first to have fallen asleep, we discovered he was unconscious. It was our amazing good luck (realizing that this is the third world) to find a doctor on board the train. He came promptly and gave Papa an injection which revived him. Papa had no known heart problem, but he was almost 51 (it does not seem very old to me, as I write this) and apparently the fairly rapid change in altitude was a serious strain.

The train climbed higher before we descended to 12,000 ft at the Bolivian border. We spent the night there waiting for a Bolivian train to take us the rest of the route, via a high plateau (Altiplano, at almost 14,000 ft) to the edge of La Paz. The last few miles are a descent of about 2,000 ft to the city proper. The Jewish Aid Society in La Paz provided us with shelter in one of their dwellings. The building was crowded with recently arrived emigrants, all German speaking, and we were lucky to get one room for the four of us.

## **La Paz, Bolivia, 1940 - 1946**

### **First Impressions of the People and Country**

In the morning I stepped outside to inspect the neighborhood. What I saw was a steep, barely paved street, bordered by one story adobe houses, climbing toward the Altiplano, the high plateau above the city of La Paz. Looking across the city toward the other side of the valley, I discovered several mountain ranges, dominated by a giant, three peaked, eternally snow capped mountain over 20,000 ft high, Mt. Illimani.

The air is thin at La Paz' 12,000 ft altitude. Though at first I had a numb head and wheezed when I walked uphill, soon everything felt normal. I was struck by the clear air, by the bright sunlight. It was January, the height of the Bolivian summer as well as the rainy season, which meant a shower every afternoon. Still the city and surroundings looked exceedingly dry. At this altitude plant life is very limited, despite the closeness to the equator. Over time I began to yearn for the forests and green meadows that I had known in Germany. This is one of the reasons why I found so much pleasure in the camping trips we took later with the Jewish youth group to the lush, semi-tropical lowlands.

Most of the people in the streets were Cholos, a mixture of Caucasians and pure Aymara Indians, a tribe thought related to the Incas. Though the Cholos are in the majority in La Paz, the Aymara dominate the Bolivian countryside. Other pure blooded Indians, the Quetchua live in the Bolivian region close to the Peruvian border. Indian women wore very picturesque clothing. Multiple layers of colorful, woolen skirts were topped off by a simple blouse. A kind of serape, a wide woolen shawl, had the dual function of providing warmth and carrying a baby on the back. Their hair was pitch black, covered with a bowler-like hat. The Indian men wore pants, cut off above the ankles, white shirts, sandals mostly made from automobile tires, a woolen cap with ear flaps and sometimes also a serape for carrying personal items. The Cholos dressed western style, black pants, white shirt and black jacket. Women wore simple skirts or dresses, never slacks. Shorts were only worn by very little boys, never by adults of either gender.

Shortly after we arrived, we witnessed one of the many holidays celebrated by the Indians. They paraded down the many narrow streets, dancing and playing drums and panpipes. They use these instruments to play over and over again a limited number of native tunes that have a very distinct rhythm. The celebration goes on for days and nights. Since our house was in one of the older parts of town, we were right in the middle of the merry making and ended up with some bad, sleepless nights.

All this activity is fueled by a fermented drink called 'chicha' and the coca leaves which they chew continuously. Coca leaves are a staple product used by the Indians on a daily basis. They put several hands full of leaves in their mouth, chewing on them and keeping them in either one of their cheeks for long periods. Apparently chewing coca reduces their need for food, which is expensive for the Indians who are practically penniless. There are no overweight Indians. They are tough and strong while in their prime, but mostly die young. I have seen them with their Llamas, and occasionally mules, on trails. I have never seen a white man who could keep up with these pack animals the way the Indians do. In the city one could see them trotting along the street with unbelievable loads on their back, such as beds, large cabinets or sewing machines still attached to their tables.

Many of the pure Indians live at the undeveloped edge of town or on the Altiplano, the high altitude plateau above La Paz. They speak the native language, Aymara, but know little Spanish. One could find them usually at the market. Some were there simply to offer their services as porters; others come down from the Altiplano to get provisions. They were at the bottom tier of the social stratum, and all the other Bolivians, as well as many of the Europeans resident in Bolivia, mistreated and abused them. They were gentle people, maybe because they felt so powerless.

### **The Rocky Start into Our New Life**

We stayed in the boarding house provided by the 'Hilfsverein' at Calle Madidi, for a number of months. The four of us lived in one room with the bathroom down the hallway, shared with other tenants. It was tight but, I believe, rent free. We had a choice of several nearby restaurants for meals, which were paid with vouchers.

The highest priority for our family was to start earning enough money so we could stand on our own feet. There was no question about either me or Gary going back to school. We realized that everybody had to have a job and contribute to the family income. Papa attempted numerous ways to earn some money. Uncle Max, (Mutti's mother's brother) who was also living in La Paz, (in a villa) suggested Papa sell some costume jewelry. He made the attempt

but failed. Next Uncle Max suggested Papa keep books for an enterprise selling hot dogs, run by Uncle David (Rosenthal, married to Gisela, sister of uncle Max). It soon became apparent that more than a bookkeeper, the business needed someone to fill in for the hot dog peddlers, particularly during the late night shift. So Papa ended up doing the books as necessary, and spending many nights selling hot dogs on the streets of La Paz. These late nights were unacceptable to Mutti. After several big arguments, Papa finally dropped this 'job'.

Next Papa attempted to learn cabinet making. He told us that on his first assignment he spent days straightening out bent nails at a pay of 10 Bolivianos (Bl) per day (the rate was 40 Bl/\$) It soon became clear Papa had no future in this trade and he left to work for an upholsterer. Incidentally, both these shops had only a few employees and were owned and operated by European refugees. After a number of months learning to upholster chairs and sofas he became quite proficient and started accepting private orders. Since Papa was very honest and detail oriented, he was not able to make a significant profit in his attempt at free enterprise. Eventually he restricted his manufacture to mattresses and sleeping bags for members of the boy scout organization that Gary and I joined. The business never became large enough to leave us with a substantial profit. All work was done by Papa with the assistance of a Bolivian boy.

Mutti was convinced of the importance of learning a trade. She felt strongly that with a manual skill one could always find profitable employment, no matter where. To this end, Gary became an automobile mechanic. After a rocky beginning, caused by language problems and his ignorance of cars, he learned the trade and never was out of a job for long. I was to become an electrician.

### **Becoming an Electrician**

Through contacts with friends, we found that Adler & Bechtle, the electrical contractor for Christiani & Nielsen, a company that built large concrete commercial buildings, had an opening for an apprentice. For the employment interview I put on my nicest pair of shorts (that is what German boys my age, 14, wore) and accompanied by Mutti, I showed up early in the morning at the construction site to be interviewed by Herr Adler (a German Jew):

"Yes, we need help," he said. "But isn't Hans a little young?"

"Oh no, I can do it" was my response.

Adler: "Are you going to play around? If you do we cannot use you."

Hans: "Of course I am not going to play around."

The pay was about 10 Bl. per day (\$ 0.25). I was introduced to my fellow workers, all Locals, as we called the Bolivians. They looked at me and laughed. "What happened to your pants, did the tailor run out of cloth for the pants' legs?" they teased. The next day I wore a pair of knickerbockers, the most adult trousers I owned. They still laughed, but since I did not own any long pants, they had to do. My clothing was not the only characteristic that made me different. More important, I spoke and understood only a few words of Spanish. My assignment was to take mallet and chisel and carve channels for electrical pipe (conduit) into the hard concrete walls. This had to be done wherever the conduit had not been installed before they poured the concrete. Hard work for a 14 year old! As my arm tired, I missed the chisel and hit my left hand, bruising and weakening it. So, the more I bruised it, the more I hit it. After a week or so, I asked for a different assignment. I was told, "Perfection comes with practice. Just keep it up." Eventually my hands did get stronger, I stopped hurting myself and I graduated to laying conduit pipe.

Some remarks concerning our experience with the Spanish language might be of interest. After we had decided to immigrate to Bolivia I took Spanish lessons while still in Germany. They weren't any use at all in understanding the Bolivians and their culture, but I did learn to read the language and express myself a little in Spanish. When I first started working, spoken Spanish was like noise to my ears. Since it was important that I at least understand instructions on the job, I listened very hard whenever somebody talked to me. After a few months, what seemed like a jumble before began to take some shape and soon afterwards, words emerged and more and more of the speech became comprehensible to me.

Soon after losing my job with Adler & Bechtel, I found employment with 'ALPHA', another electrical contractor. Here I learned how to install electrical power in new residential wood framed homes. The method differed drastically from the approach used in commercial concrete buildings and was more interesting to me. We frequently were at the job site at the same time as the framing carpenters. Among this group was a non-Jewish German discussing the progress of The War (WW II). "You wait and see," he would tell everyone, "the Germans are going to have their Secret Weapon soon, and then it is going to be over." The Bolivians liked this talk. Their sympathies were mostly with Germany and they were hoping that Germany would win the war. They certainly did not like the US, or the few Americans that came to Bolivia mostly in connection with the tin mines.

The dislike of the Americans was in part based on politics and envy, but it was also caused by the behavior of the individuals that came to La Paz on business. They were arrogant, noisy, reluctant to learn Spanish, and had no consideration for Bolivian customs. They would walk down the street with shirt tails hanging out, acting as if they owned the land. Jews were also disliked, but not as much as the Americans. Once in a while, as I walked down some of the lesser traveled side streets, some boys would yell: "Judio sin patria!" (Jew without a homeland) Anti-Semitism was not strong, but it existed.

I stayed on this job a while longer, until I had learned most of what they were willing to teach me about electrical power installations. I was now ready for a change to more interesting type of work.

Next I was hired as an apprentice by Andreas Bekey, a Czechoslovakian (Hungarian?) engineer who was in the business of rewinding and repairing electric motors. He taught me most of what is needed to rewind motors up to 5 - 10 Horse Power in size. Work was steady; I was given bigger and bigger rewinding jobs. Time passed and I was given a rather large motor to rewind. I had spent well over a day preparing the coils and had begun to install them, when it became apparent that the coils were too small to fit in the slots. Both the copper wire (very expensive during World War II years) and my labor turned out to be a total loss. Mr. Bekey was furious with me. Not only did he fire me, but he also made disparaging remarks about my ability, about my future. I pledged to myself at that moment to prove him wrong.

My next employer was Alfredo Riesenfeld, also a European immigrant, who ran a small electric appliance repair shop. There was practically nothing electrical he and I would not repair: sewing machine motors, blender motors, record players, radios, transformers and even electrolysis machines used for the removal of unwanted hair.

It was 1943 and WW II had been raging for over 3 years. The import of goods and materials had almost stopped. As a consequence everything was repaired, even the smallest items. Riesenfeld's business was flourishing. He paid me 80 BIs (about \$2) a day, quite good by Bolivian standards. For example, the rent for the room in which our family lived was approximately 400 BIs per month. In addition to servicing appliances, we also took care of electric power problems in private homes. One day, a boy, a Cholo, came to our shop asking to

have the lights in his family's home fixed. I followed him into a neighborhood of many narrow streets where most of the Cholos lived. Eventually we arrived at his home, a room without windows. The lights had gone out and it was quite dark. When my eyes got used to the lack of light, I saw a woman lying on a double bed nursing a baby with one breast and a little dog with the other. I am certain that I saw correctly, since the sight startled me so much at the time that I took a careful second look.

### **The Development of Our Living Conditions**

Even with Papa, Gary and I working, the family income during the first few years was insufficient to cover our expenses. So Mutti found a job as a domestic in an affluent, Bolivian household, supervising the schoolwork of their four children and doing some light housework. I don't see how she could have been of much help to the children with her very limited knowledge of Spanish. The pay was relatively good, but she had to sleep there many nights, whenever the parents went out in the evening. She felt like a bird in a golden cage, a luxurious prison. It was not very long before she gave the job up and started repairing shirts, collars and cuffs.

Our first independent residence, after leaving the accommodations provided by the Hilfsverein, was a large, dark room in the back of a house. Water and toilet were outside, in the courtyard. It was a miserable, cold, damp place. We called it the 'Grabgewölbe', the tomb. Mutti's arthritis became so aggravated that Gary and I had to do more of the manual tasks than ever before. I recall washing and hanging clothing on lines in the courtyard.

After a few months we moved to another single but bright room, facing the street, in a better part of town, on Avenida Saavedra. The room served as kitchen, living room, bedroom and bathroom (a sink) for the four of us. We had to share the toilet down the hallway with others living on the same floor. As crowded as this was, we considered the living conditions quite pleasant when compared to our prior quarters. Now that we had come up in the world and no longer depended on the Jewish Aid Society for supplemental funds, I scanned the paper for a low priced radio, our first radio ever.

### **Education and Outings with 'Jüdischer Jugendbund'**

After we had been in Bolivia for a little while, we realized that it would take years before we would get to the US, and that something should be done about my education. I enrolled in the local evening High School. One of the courses I took was English. I had had some English lessons back in Germany, and was quite critical of what I believed were errors in instruction. My questioning of the teacher, particularly since I was a Jew, made me quite unpopular with some of the other students who were about my age. One of them after making some anti-Semitic insinuations challenged me: "You want to step outside and fight?" "Oh, I would not want to dirty my hands" was my reply, and I walked away. Soon after I decided that I was not learning anything useful, and I dropped out of the school.

Through friends of the family, we found a Swiss graduate engineer, an immigrant, who was willing to come to us once a week and teach me subjects in the exact sciences: math, geometry, trigonometry and physics. He taught by explaining and simultaneously writing all the material very neatly into a notebook for my use. No textbook was used. In the last year (1946) before our departure to the US we found an American lady to teach me English. I was ecstatic

just hearing her speak American English. She taught by having me memorize some of the well known nursery rhymes. I did learn nursery rhymes but not much useful English.

As my account so far shows, we worked for and mingled primarily with other German speaking immigrants, most of whom had arrived earlier than we did. (Very few Jews left Germany after us.) As I found out much later, a significant number of Polish and other East European Jews had also found refuge in La Paz. We had no contact with them. They were almost more foreign to us than the Bolivians since, for reasons I do not understand, our paths never crossed. Through conversation with acquaintances we heard about a youth group of German Jews, 'Jüdischer Jugendbund', JJB for short.

The most memorable and enjoyable activities of the 'Bund' were the numerous camping trips we took to the Yungas, a semitropical region reachable within a day from La Paz. Typically, we got up early in the morning, had breakfast and met the rest of the group at the place of departure. Our personal equipment consisted of a sleeping bag (made by Papa) and clothing for the 3 - 4 days we would spend away from the city. We always traveled by 'camion', a truck with sides made of wooden, vertical slats, 4-5 feet high. Typically, the truck was mostly loaded with other goods before we got on. Our food, kitchen equipment and other group baggage went on the camion before us and our personal belongings. Sometimes we had to share the camion with Cholos and/or Indians and their own bundles. We would just find the best place we could, far above the ground, trying to position ourselves so as not to fall off.

Soon after leaving town the pavement stopped and the road wound along the sides of an endless number of canyons. On one side was a precipice of hundreds, if not a thousand or more feet. The other side rose just as steeply out of sight. Many long stretches of road were just wide enough for a single vehicle, and the driver had to look a long distance ahead to see whether anything was coming in the opposite direction. Since the road had many hidden curves, oncoming traffic was not always visible, and it was sometimes necessary to back up to the nearest turnouts, possibly hundreds of yards. (This is the reason why the test for a drivers license in Bolivia included the requirement of driving backward along a narrow, undulating lane marked by closely placed traffic cones.)

After a few hours of traveling, the stark, parched scenery changed to an ever greener landscape. Gentle, rolling hills replaced the deep, steep canyons. The air got warmer, so rich with the scent of vegetation, it seemed almost palpable. On most trips arrangements had been made with the manager of a 'finca' (ranch) to let us use an open space near water supply. We set up a primitive form of tent cabin with the frame made of freshly cut stalks, roof and sides covered by crude tent material. The daytime was taken up with walks/hikes, war games, kitchen duty, and some scout rituals. In the evening we frequently built a campfire and sang songs, German songs. Either Rique, or one of the other older scouts would play the guitar. Some of my fondest memories of Bolivia are associated with these camping trips.

Occasionally a day trip was planned to a destination up in the mountains instead of the subtropical lowlands. A small group of us signed up to go to an area called Chacaltaya. We were told it was a ski area at about 15,000 ft altitude where one could also rent skis. This time we were to travel in a closed bus instead of the usual open camion. I expected that after having lived at 12,000 ft altitude for several years, I wouldn't find an additional 3,000 feet a problem. After traveling a few hours we reached a level above the snow line and soon after arrived at our destination. From the bus stop we could see about 100 yards further ahead a smooth, snow covered ski bowl. The moment I exited the bus and walked a few steps I was huffing and puffing. I found it was an accomplishment just to get to the warming hut at the foot of the ski area and sit down. There were only a handful of skiers on the slopes, using a T-bar to get to the top. No lines, no crowds. The thought of learning to ski there vanished from my mind. The

rest of the fellows in our group also abstained. Later, it felt good to come back down to our home at 'only' 12,000 ft.

### **The Town of La Paz**

In retrospect, Bolivia, judged by life in La Paz, was not as primitive and uncivilized as we had imagined before immigrating. Public transportation was quite satisfactory. It consisted of electric trolley cars and numerous buses, all available for pennies. Because of the uneven terrain, few bicycles were on the streets. Sedan type cars, all old vintage models, were mostly used as taxis. New parts were essentially unavailable and as a consequence, everything had to be fixed or remade, but Bolivians were good mechanics. Very few rich individuals owned newer model cars (no cars were manufactured during WW II) even if able to pay the exorbitant prices, because the road system outside of town was underdeveloped and in town taxis were quite convenient.

Architecturally, La Paz had some attractive districts. The colonial buildings which existed in the center of town were well maintained. These were mostly government buildings surrounding Plaza Murillo, a large, nicely landscaped square.

On paper, Bolivia had a democratic government structure with officials elected by popular vote. In practice, however, a coup, a change of president, occurred, on average, almost every year. These mini revolutions were mostly bloodless and always staged with the help of the military. Plaza Murillo would be closed to the public while a few tanks would drive up to the Government Palace. A few gun shots would be heard, and the next morning the papers reported that the country had a new president.

A number of fine, upscale businesses and restaurants were also located at Plaza Murillo. Café Paris was a European style establishment where the new immigrant community met Sunday afternoons. Some of our friends (fellow Scouts) gathered there also, many with girlfriends. They had coffee and fine cake while a small band would play light music in the background. The route to my job at Andreas Bekey took me past the Plaza and a fine, elegant restaurant located at one corner. It looked so appealing with its white table cloths, uniformed waiters and a pianist playing semi-classical music. To be able to join the young crowd in the Café de Paris and to have dinner in that restaurant with a girlfriend remained an unfulfilled dream.

Realizing that most of my life was still ahead of me eased my feeling of exclusion only very slightly. Yet I always was convinced that, once 'I get my act together', meaning get more self-confident, I would be able to do anything I wanted to, both socially and professionally.

### **Family Life and Departure**

Not all my time was taken up by either work or activities with the Scouts. The family, Mutti, Papa, Gary and I, tried to continue our German tradition of going on walks or outings on weekends. Saturday was a workday. For some who were fortunate to be employed by companies that observed 'Sabado Ingles', it was only half a workday. So we went very occasionally on our walks on Sunday, mostly in Miraflores, one of the classier districts in the suburbs. In the same area, Gary and I would at times roller-skate in an outdoor rink. We did occasionally also go to the movies, preferably to American movies which had mostly Spanish subtitles. An American movie was a part of the United States, our destination, our Eden, a world we had no doubt we would get to sooner or later.



The year 1946 had arrived, WW II was over, and our number on the waiting list for entry to the US was coming up. We had saved a little money which would buy practically nothing in the US. So we considered spending it for blankets made of Vicuna fur (an animal related to the Llama) but instead (wisely) bought some gold and silver jewelry decorated with Indian motifs.

We found it impossible at the time to get four tickets (funded by Uncle Otto Flörsheim in New York) to the US on the same ship. Essentially no passenger ships were in service so soon after the end of The War. People suggested we go to Antofagasta, Chile to arrange passage right on location. After several days of negotiating and waiting in Antofagasta, we managed to get two tickets each on two different ships. Gary and I left first on a banana boat with an American crew, destination: New York. Mutti and Papa departed soon after, on a freighter that took them to New Orleans and then by train also to New York.

*John Holzman*

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