

REFUGEE AID

John Michael Rock: Displaced Persons Camp Director

Early Life in Vienna

John Michael Rock (born Maximilian von Rochlitz) was born in 1922 in Vienna, Austria, to a Jewish family. By 1937, he had to leave school and began working for a Jewish-owned company, wrapping parcels and making deliveries. After the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938, the company was forced into non-Jewish control, and John lost his job. His younger brother managed to escape to Yugoslavia on a Hungarian passport, but John could not leave, as he had become stateless.¹

November 9-10th, 1938, the Nazis organized a violent pogrom [anti-Jewish riot] now referred to as the November Pogroms, but more commonly known as Kristallnacht ("Night of Broken Glass"). During that time, John hid for several days in a building behind his home. Although his family's property was spared, the danger around them was clear.

A sympathetic handyman, who was also an SS member, warned John's family that things would soon get worse.²



^^ Orphaned children who survived the Holocaust. This photo was taken in a displaced persons (DP) camp in Germany directed by Austrian Jew John Rock (second row from the bottom, third from the left with a cap on).



^^ Photo from John Rock's photo album.



^^ The cover of John Rock's photo album.

Leaving Austria

In early 1939, John trained at a Hachshara camp in Austria, where Jewish youth learned farming skills in hopes of emigrating to Palestine. After several months, his mother informed him that papers had been secured for him to go to England. At age 17, he said goodbye to his mother at a Vienna train station, carrying only a briefcase. They never saw each other again.³

John arrived in England in August 1939. Drawing on his training, he worked on farms in Yorkshire and Devonshire before enlisting in the British Army in 1940. Too young at first to fight, he joined the Pioneer Corps, eventually rising to sergeant. By 1943, he transferred to the navy, where he used his knowledge of German to intercept and decode communications.⁴

Loss and War Service

John's mother managed to escape Austria briefly, sending him a postcard from Yugoslavia in 1940, but after 1942 he never heard from her again. His stepfather and mother were later murdered at Auschwitz. His brother survived, escaping from Jasenovac concentration camp in Yugoslavia to join a band of partisans.⁵

Displaced Persons Camps

After the war, in 1946, John became a director for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). He oversaw five displaced persons (DP – refugee) camps near Kassel, Germany, including one camp for unaccompanied children. Many of these children were orphans who had survived in hiding or returned from camps. John later remembered one group of children, the oldest only 13, who had lived in the woods alone for up to two years before arriving at the camp. He described his refugee camp work as the most meaningful of his life.⁶

Later Life

John immigrated to Canada in 1949 and then to the United States in 1951, where he settled in Seattle. He donated his photo album from the DP camps to the Holocaust Center for Humanity, preserving a record of the children he helped. John Rock passed away in 2004 at age 82.⁷

Questions

1. Explain in your own words how this artifact – and the person connected to it – helps you better understand the Holocaust.
2. What is one thing you learned that:
 - a. Surprised you?
 - b. Interested you?
 - c. Troubled you?
3. How might John's story have been different if he had not been able to leave Austria in 1939?
4. Why do you think John described his work with displaced children as "the most important work he ever did"?

Endnotes

1. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Oral History Interview with John Rock, 1996.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Holocaust Center for Humanity, "John Rock," Holocaust Survivor Encyclopedia, Holocaust Center for Humanity.
6. Ibid.; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Oral History Interview with John Rock, 1996.
7. Holocaust Center for Humanity, "John Rock."