

**The Experiences of Robert Fischl, a Holocaust
Escapee: Generations of Indifference**

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**Honors Representations of the Holocaust
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December 12, 2007**

Robert Fischl survived the Holocaust as a young boy by escaping to Israel before the Nazis transported the Jews of Prague to Terezin and eventually Auschwitz. While he did not experience the ghettos or concentration camps, he has suffered as other survivors have from the obliteration of every element from his past, including friends and family. He has struggled with the guilt of having survived while his cousins perished, wondering whether his family had committed some crime to escape persecution. His experiences have led him to conclude that the current generation must extract only one thing from their Holocaust studies: the danger of indifference. While he has continued to meet resistance from closed societies that exhibit hostility towards outsiders, since these societies are dwindling in number, he sees far more danger in apathetic societies. In contrast, Israel serves as an exemplary society that has learned from the Holocaust the danger of indifference and the need to fight to preserve one's rights.

Robert Fischl's story is not typical of most survivors of the Holocaust in that the majority of his experiences took place outside of Nazi occupied Europe. Nevertheless, his extensive travels have exposed him to the widespread distribution of anti-Semitism and indifference of closed societies during the war, the post war period, as well as in current times. Robert Fischl was born in 1931 in a small village 7 miles North of Prague, Czechoslovakia called Klicany. His family lived on a large farm purchased by his grandfather in 1906. Many Czechoslovakian villages had one or two Jewish farmers, because in the 1800s Dukes hired Jews to manage their land

and gave them land as payment. This contrasted with Poland where Jews were not allowed to own land (Fischl, 9/16).

Klicany consisted of fifteen families, including two Jewish families. There was a synagogue four or five miles from the village that was used by Jewish farmers in the surrounding villages. His grandfather built the village's one room schoolhouse, which Robert attended until the 3rd grade. His parents attended synagogue mainly during the High Holidays because of the time commitment of farming. The children would go to synagogue with their grandparents, who lived in Prague, every Saturday. The village consisted of his father's 350 acre farm, which was about a third of the village, parcels owned by three other large landowners, and small plots of land owned by the remaining villagers. Eighty farm workers and their families lived on the farm, which kept twelve teams of horses and a hundred cows. The farmhouse was two stories, one of the few homes to have electricity and the only one to have a telephone. His family had a huge garden, a cook, and a nanny. The family had an opportunity to immigrate to the U. S. in 1933 when Hitler took power in Germany. His father had contacts with people in Colorado who wanted him to join them in the sugar beet industry. However, his grandfather did not believe the war would come so they chose to stay in Klicany (Fischl, 9/16).

Jewish families were assimilated into the larger community and Robert noticed no hostility between his family and non-Jewish families. While he did not observe anti-Semitism, this may have been due to his young age or the fact that his

family was the most powerful in the village. The first indication to his family that a war was imminent was the Munich Pact in September 1938. The Czech Army began to mobilize and Robert's father allowed soldiers to use a portion of their home and the Air Force to use one of their fields. Since their house was the only building with a telephone, the soldiers used it as a communication post. Most information the family learned about the occupation came from overhearing the soldiers' telephone conversations. Although his family owned a radio, they rarely believed the broadcasts since they consisted mostly of gossip and rumors (Fischl, 9/16).

German troops entered the country in March of 1939. The Gestapo arrived at the Fischl's house on March 15, 1939 and ordered the family to move into half of the house so the remainder could be converted into their headquarters. Germany soon issued laws prohibiting Jews from owning more than a certain amount of money and property, and so his family was forced to transfer ownership of the farm to a German trustee. In June the Germans seized the entire farm and forced the Fischls to move out, and so the family resided with his father's parents in Prague. Robert's life was enjoyable since he did not have to attend school, he was able to play with his cousin Sonja all day, and was spoiled by his grandparents (Fischl, 9/16; Berenbaum, 2006).

As the realities of the occupation became more evident, his father believed they needed to leave. His grandfather, however, thought everything would pass and if not, the British would save everyone. This contrast in opinion between the two generations was common. The Jewish people have been the targets of Pogroms for

centuries. The elder generation reminded the younger generation that similar occurrences have taken place and there was no reason to leave their homes. Since restrictions were enforced gradually, few people had strong reasons to be alarmed. The Jewish community had to adapt to change and the restrictions did not affect the non-Jews, so resistance to the discriminatory laws was minimal (Fischl, 9/16).

Many people have questioned why so few people escaped the Holocaust but as Fischl explained, no one believed anything was going to happen. People did not try to leave the country and no one thought of going into hiding. The Jews cannot be blamed for not having escaped before the Holocaust; as an unprecedented event, no one could have predicted the truth behind the Nazi's plans. The Germans were extremely successful in minimizing the pain the Jews experienced until it was too late for them to save themselves. Robert would later question how his family managed to escape, whether his father had done something wrong to save his family, or perhaps could have done more to save others (Fischl, 10/7).

By the summer of 1939, it was difficult for Jews to leave and even harder to find a place to go. The U.S. embassy, and many other countries, would not accept applications for visas. However, Robert's family had an opportunity to escape when his father managed to obtain visas to Australia. To leave the country one needed exit visas, passports, and ship passage tickets, which his father managed to obtain. They planned to leave in mid-September; however a few days before their planned departure, on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. England declared war

on Germany and Germany withdrew all visas to England, including Australia, which was under the British Empire. Their grandparents insisted that they stay to say goodbye to friends and relatives, leaving as planned rather than rush because of the start of the war. In the middle of the night the SS came to collect all their papers, and so they were unable to leave (Fischl, 9/16; Berenbaum, 2006).

Their second opportunity four months later, in January 1940, was successful, and they were likely one of the last Czech families to escape. Due to restrictive immigration quotas to Israel, Britain sold a small number of entry certificates to the Jewish Council in Prague. Individuals could purchase these certificates for a thousand dollars per person and were partially reimbursed by the British government upon arrival in Israel. His dad, who had connections with the Jewish Council, bought the certificates when another family that could not afford to buy the certificates surrendered them. He went to the Gestapo to obtain exit visas but the SS officer refused to grant papers. Fortunately, the German trustee who took over the Fischl's farm was by chance at the Gestapo and convinced the SS to supply the exit visas motivated by the knowledge that he would obtain complete ownership of the farm if they left the country. The Fischls left that same night, knowing that the SS often distributed papers only to seize them in the middle of the night. Robert's father warned Sonja and Renee's mother to leave, however their father, who was in England, insisted they stay behind since he had no job to support them.

Unfortunately, they did not leave and were deported to Terezin and then Auschwitz, where they were gassed as soon as they arrived (Fischl, 9/16).

The influx of Jews into Palestine was met with resentment by the Arabs. In response to terrorist attacks in the early 1930s, Great Britain limited emigration of Jews to pacify the Arabs. If Great Britain had facilitated the movement of Jews into Israel rather than pose an obstacle, many more lives would have been spared. Most who arrived in Israel in the 1920s and 1930s were Zionists; consequently the country had a different religious environment than Europe. Most Jews did not go to synagogue regularly except on the High Holidays. Since children studied Hebrew and could already read the Torah, children received a Bar Mitzvah but the event did not have the same significance as in the U.S (Fischl, 10/7; Cohen, 2002).

Robert attended a Hebrew primary school until his Bar Mitzvah but for high school, his father transferred him to a British Secondary school where instruction was in English. The school was a mix of British, Jewish, and Arab students. Most after school activities in Israel were related to the scouts program, which was run by upperclassmen of the Hebrew high school. At fourteen years old the scouts received pseudo military training but they would also plant trees, raise vegetable gardens, hike, and work on a kibbutz. One activity Robert remembers vividly is a day hike the scouts took in 1942. As the group passed through new villages, invariably, nothing would happen until they left, at which point they would be pelted by stones. He used this example to explain the community system within Palestine, which was

centralized around the family in tribal units. No one outside of the tribe was to be trusted. This type of closed society that divides the population into insiders and outsiders has continued to fuel the Middle Eastern conflict that persists today (Fischl, 10/7).

The Fischls lived on Mt. Carmel above Haifa, a large port, and consequently an important British naval base during the 2nd World War. There was a refinery with a pipeline from Iraq that was a target for bombing, first by the Italians and then by Germany. By 1942 the attacks were continuous, especially when the Germans conquered North Africa and drove for control of the Suez Canal. The Fischl family spent many nights with their neighbors in bomb shelters. His father volunteered to join the British Army but, at 46 years old, he was rejected. Instead, he became a truck driver to supply the British Army. The Fischls found life in Israel hard but manageable through the war and until 1947, when the fight for the formation of a Jewish state began. During his senior year of high school, the fight for independence and the revolt by the Arabs became extensive so that going to school, which was in Haifa, was a dangerous journey from his home on Mt. Carmel. In 1947, his father lost his business because of bombings during the unrest before independence, and so decided to return to Prague to attempt to get his farm back leaving Robert and his sister, Doris, in Israel (Fischl, 10/7).

Once in Prague, his father learned that the family who had taken over his farm after the end of the war had initiated a petition. His father hired a lawyer to

fight the petition, which claimed that the Fischls had collaborated with the Germans and were therefore not entitled to recover their property. The petition was signed by villagers, many of whom had watched as the Gestapo forced the Fischls off of their property. Later the villagers, when approached by Robert's father, claimed that they did not know what the petition was about. Immediately following the war, this type of behavior was common, since the families that occupied the houses and property that Jews were forced to leave, did not want to return the possessions. This closed type of society that condoned the Holocaust continued to thrive, similar to the tribal units of Palestine. Meanwhile, in Israel, the shooting increased and Robert would have to run across the streets while snipers were shooting at him. Since it was too dangerous to attend school, his father decided that he should finish his studies in Prague. At the age of 16, he left Palestine by himself for three days of flights from Palestine to Prague (Fischl, 10/7).

He arrived in January of 1948 but less than a month later the Communists seized power. Since one of the first laws prohibited anyone from owning more than fifty acres of land, the state created a large collective farm. The other farms were also confiscated and the Fischl's farmhouse was used as the collective farm's headquarters. Under Communist control, the village soon collapsed. By March, they realized they needed to leave while they were still free to do so. Since his father did not have a valid passport while Robert did, Robert left for Paris where he would wait for him. After two months, Robert could no longer renew his transit visa, and

since he refused to leave Paris without his father, he discarded his passport and became stateless. He moved into a displaced persons camp organized by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). HIAS accommodated immigrants, mostly teenagers from Romania, Poland, Hungary, and Russia in large family houses (Fischl, 10/7; Berenbaum, 2006).

Once his father arrived in Paris, in July of 1948, they decided that they needed to leave Europe because of the upheavals that were occurring. They applied for immigration to Australia, Canada, and the U. S., although his father preferred the U.S. since his only surviving family member, his sister, was living there. His father had applied for entry into the U. S. back in 1944 but since immigration was strictly limited, their number was not selected until four years later, in 1948. Once the visa came through, Robert needed to obtain a new passport before they could immigrate to the U.S. The only two ways to obtain a passport in France was by joining the Foreign Legion or working on a farm, so they worked on a farm in Alsace during harvest time doing hand labor in the fields. However they were not fed well and were mistreated. The farm owner became very suspicious because they did not attend church on Sunday mornings. They were fired without pay because they were Jews, but fortunately they still managed to get the documents needed to obtain passports. Even within a country that provided hospitality to thousands of Holocaust survivors, anti-Semitism continued to thrive (Fischl, 10/7; Berenbaum, 2006).

On May 3, 1948, Robert and his family arrived in New York City. Once they reached the U. S., there was a tremendous relief as they got off the boat and saw the Statue of Liberty, leaving behind the rationing and threats of Communism. Their uncle, who emigrated from England, aided in their entry, which required an affidavit proving that they would not be burdens to society. Many discriminatory laws issued during the Depression were still keeping individuals out of the country to avoid further unemployment. While waiting for the visa in France, his uncle suggested that Robert learn an occupation. Although Robert wanted to study electronics, his uncle suggested that he learn something more useful, like how to fix typewriters. This helped him get a job a week after he arrived in New York City. He completed high school, taking evening and summer courses, in one and a half years. After, he was an evening undergraduate at City College, graduating in 5 years. In 1956 he started his graduate work at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. After receiving his PhD in electrical engineering from the University of Michigan, he started teaching at Drexel University where he is now a Professor Emeritus of Electrical Engineering. In 1996, after 30 years of teaching at Drexel University, he co- founded and is the President of F & H Applied Science Inc (Fischl, 10/7).

In the 1990s once the Communists left, his father took his children back to Prague to see the farm and village. While they were in Czechoslovakia, his father tried once again to get his farm back and hired a lawyer to attempt to overturn the town records that they had been German collaborators. Planning to pay for the

lawyer by selling the farmhouse, they found a buyer and signed the papers. The man took over control of the house and never paid in full, but legal actions were futile. Fischl characterizes the entire post Communist Czech society as one that condones lying to, and does not trust, others like the Fischls because they are no longer members of their community. He sees progress in the more trusting younger generation. Nevertheless, the disregard for outsiders was what allowed the Holocaust to occur, yet over half a century later these attitudes are still strongly rooted in these societies (Fischl, 10/7).

In 2000, Fischl went back to Prague with his children and grandchildren to visit Terezin, which had an artwork display inside the synagogue. His daughter, Ellen, noticed a drawing by his cousin Sonja Fischerova, who he last saw sixty years earlier. First he was not convinced that Sonja was actually the artist until he saw a drawing of their grandparent's living room. Finding the rest of Sonja's artwork and putting together an exhibit, "Sonja's Legacy," became a family project and allowed him to slowly begin to tell his story as it related to Sonja. He had not talked about his story before because he felt guilty that he had survived when millions of others perished. Many people thought survivors must have collaborated and had done something immoral. He actually wondered whether his father had done something wrong or why they could not have managed to save others. He does not feel he deserves to be called a Holocaust survivor, but rather a Holocaust escapee. His

father, who lived to be 104, was a true survivor who was responsible for saving his family (Fischl, 10/7).

From his experiences, he believes that the most important thing for society to learn from the Holocaust is the devastation that can result from an attitude of indifference. The Germans were successful in instituting their genocide primarily because few felt strongly enough to oppose them. No one group of people is responsible for the Holocaust. It occurred due to the collective indifference of many including the non-Jewish Europeans in Nazi occupied territories, non-Europeans, and even the Jewish people. Germany did not come to power and institute the Holocaust immediately. The Germans proceeded gradually in order to cause as little pain as possible to the Jewish people, knowing that if they incited too much alarm, anyone with means of escaping would have done so. The first restrictions impacted few people and were minor inconveniences. Fischl gave the example that if the Germans forbid Jews to shop in a district of the city except between the hours of 8 am and 8 pm, they would simply adapt. The Germans would slowly reduce the number of hours permissible to shop until they prohibited Jews from shopping in the district completely. However, by this time Jews had found alternatives and resentment was minimized. For example, if the Jews were no longer allowed to take public transportation, everyone would walk (Fischl, 9/16).

Over time, their freedoms were reduced until their suffering became unbearable. The Germans would offer them an escape and so many of the Jews

agreed to relocate to the East. Not knowing about the existence of concentration camps and death camps, the Jews felt that their situation could only improve. Fischl explained that once the Jews arrived at camps such as Terezin, they were relieved and felt their condition had in fact improved. They no longer had to wear a yellow star, were allowed to govern themselves, and since everyone was Jewish they were no longer treated as lesser beings. However, the same gradual degradation of living conditions took place so that by the time the Germans were ready to transport the Jews to Auschwitz, they were willing to leave Terezin (Fischl, 9/16).

The Germans took precautions to ensure their system continued without resistance from their victims or those who had the ability to save them. They employed an elaborate system, including extensive hand written records, while making secrecy a priority. Immediately prior to transports, the Nazis would require all prisoners to send postcards to relatives stating that they were doing well. The Fischls received a postcard from Sonja's mother that she wrote two weeks before they were sent to Auschwitz and gassed. Robert's father did not discover that his sister and two daughters died in Auschwitz until a year after the war. The Germans successfully hid the events of the Holocaust from the general public and it is questionable whether even government officials of the Allied powers knew the extent of the devastation that was taking place within the camps (Fischl, 9/16).

Nazi Germany was determined to succeed in the implementation of their Final Solution yet far too few were equally determined to stop them. Villagers

watched silently as their Jewish neighbors disappeared and the allied powers became absorbed in winning the war rather than ending Hitler's genocide. Many blame those who failed to end the Holocaust earlier; however, the event was unprecedented. People outside Europe did not witness their Jewish neighbors disappear, so understandably, they questioned the veracity of horrific stories about mass murders being committed by the enemies. Americans should not be derided as indifferent to the suffering of the Holocaust victims because evidence was limited and crimes of this degree were unheard of at this time.

The Jewish population, while certainly not responsible for its own victimization, has learned from the mistakes that they did make. As their freedoms were slowly taken away, instead of fighting for each small injustice, they chose to adapt. Many accused the Jews of having been unwilling to fight for their own survival. Once the Jews knew that their deaths were unavoidable, they could have tried to take one German life with each of their own. From witnessing the progression of German control over the Jews, Fischl now urges others to observe how their own rights are being taken from them in current society (Fischl, 9/16).

The way in which Jews were victimized during the Holocaust also aids in understanding modern events such as the Middle East conflict. Without understanding these events in the context of the Holocaust, younger generations may accuse Israel of being uncompromising and overly demanding of their rights. As a community that made the deadly mistake of failing to defend their rights to their

death, they have shown the world that they will not make this same mistake twice. Israel continues to hold true to its promise of “Never Again.” Many of Israel’s actions are incomprehensible out of context and the Jewish state has consequently received countless criticisms. The Lebanese military conflict is one example in which Israel may have, in fact, overreacted. However, understanding how six million Jews perished under Nazi brutality explains why Israel refuses to give up even one of its Jewish citizens without a deadly fight. The Jewish community of Israel has learned from its mistakes and will never again be indifferent as others take away their right to life (Cohen, 2002).

Indifference to modern day genocides receives little criticism but is more inexcusable. Fischl expressed his disappointment that many times when he has shared his experiences he has felt that his audience is not interested and is indifferent to his message. Despite knowledge of the destruction indifference is capable of causing, eliminating this indifference in modern society has seen minimal progress. While genocides in the modern world continue, society can no longer claim ignorance. Modern communication provides us with global news, including pictures and recordings of crimes against humanity as they occur. As a global society, genocides should no longer persist, yet similar events continue to scar history. The commitment of the current generations to those who perished in the Holocaust must be exhibited in our determination in preventing others from suffering similar fates.

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