



# Holocaust Refuge in India

## Excerpted from *Eleven Years in India*

This article is the first in a series of articles that will touch on the Jewish experience in India during the Holocaust. The history of Jewish Holocaust refugees in India is one that is little explored.

The excerpt published in this issue has been taken from a larger text written by Elise Braun Barnett. The publishing of this text is made possible through assistance from the archives of the Leo Baeck Institute in New York.

Ms. Barnett's sojourn to India as a Holocaust refugee was one of three trips that she made there. Each one made a

lasting impression. Born in Vienna in 1904, her first trip to India was for professional advancement and a spirit for adventure, something rather uncommon for a young woman of her time. After two years, she reflected that, "I had time to reconsider the purpose of my life. I realised that I was not meant to stay in India, away from Western culture, my friends and family."

She however returned to India to flee the Nazis in 1938, relying on contacts she had made there previously. She stayed for nine years and was able to secure visas for her daughter, husband and parents as well, saving them all from the horrors of Europe.

She eventually emigrated to the United States where she continued to excel in the field of music education. She made a third trip to India later in life, which she referred to as her "red carpet" visit, where she was essentially a tourist in a place she had once called home and that had so deeply guided her professional career.

She authored a memoir detailing her connection to India, "Westward through the Orient: Glimpses, Impressions & Recollections" (1965) as well as other books on music education, music theory and Indian music.

# Feature

by Elise Braun Barnett



The events of 1938 in Austria put an end to our happy life. We foresaw these events most strangely only ten days before the Anschluss. I then wrote to my friend Kitty, who was married to an Indian politician in Delhi, and implied that we might have to leave our homeland. She answered with a cable with the news that a visa for my husband, my child and myself had been sent. Luckily, I was offered a job as a Montessori teacher at a newly opened school in Rajghat, near Varanasi, because one of the teachers had a sabbatical. We left Vienna with heavy hearts, leaving my parents behind. We were penniless because we were not allowed to take any money along. But we knew that in India we would have dear friends. We stayed for a few days in Bombay with Nehru, now married, Krishna Hutheesingm her husband and two little boys with whom Heidi (our daughter) made friends. Kitty had sent 100 rupees—what a blessing this money was. The transportation that was necessary to go from Bombay to Varanasi had been cut off by the Nazis with the advice that “one can walk”! We arrived in Varnanasi and were met at the

station by some of my old students, now quite grown up and were garlanded by them. What a change from the hostilities of Vienna.

We were given a little bungalow on the school compound. I was in charge of little boys and girls, three to six years old, who were day scholars. The Montessori classroom was beautiful indeed. It was in the building erected by an architect of Shanti Miketan, Rabindranath Tagore’s school. It was on the banks of the river Ganges. My daughter, the only European child, attended the school. She and I walked on the banks of the Ganges every evening. The impression of the river, naked holy men besmeared with ashes, temples half sunken into the river water, huge pipal trees and the wonderful atmosphere, are in my memory. Broken remnants of old temples, which we found, are precious antiques. My daughter uses one of them as a paperweight.

The Rajghat school was a wonderful one. It followed the highest ideals of education. We had frequent teacher’s meetings. Once when Hedi saw a group of birds sitting on the ground, she exclaimed, “Look Mummy, the

birds are having a teacher’s meeting.” During this time, Indira Gandhi, then a young woman, came to visit the Rajghat school; she recognised me from Allahabad, where I had visited her home so often, and she was very kind to me.

Unfortunately there was no chance for my husband, an engineer, to find work in the holy city of Varanasi. He went to Calcutta and soon found work at Phillips, the Dutch firm. It was sad to be separated, but we were better off than other refugees. Meanwhile, our furniture, piano included, arrived in Varanasi. Our things had been packed under the supervision of the S.S. after we had left Vienna. We sold our dining room set to a Maharaja, which aided our survival. I practiced the piano, and during one of our visits to Calcutta, I auditioned for the radio station there. I got a contract for a broadcast, which enabled me to travel to Calcutta and see my husband.

Meanwhile, the situation in Vienna had deteriorated. The wish that my husband and I had was to get my parents and other friends out of that hell. To get a visa to India was very difficult; however, we found friends to guarantee it, and



in 1939 my parents arrived in Calcutta. They stayed with my husband, since the Rajghat school had no accommodation for them. At this time, I had to think of giving up my wonderful job at the school because Hedi could not stand the climate, and was constantly sick. She had malaria and other ailments. By this time, Britain had declared war on Germany. British factory managers who were living in India were most concerned by this, since many of them had children attending British boarding schools. They started a school in Darjeeling with staff from England and called it the "New School". I was the only non-English teacher, but due to my training in England. I was asked to join the faculty. I have described Darjeeling as my Shangri-La.

When Holland was overrun by the Nazis, my husband lost his job. In addition, my father was arrested as an "enemy alien". There was great confusion among the British Police. My father was very upset at having been put together with the Nazis, whom he had fled. My husband was arrested as well, but released when he promised not to leave the house, except between 2 and 4 p.m. These restrictions were later abolished, but we


were only able to travel five miles without permission of the Police Commissioner who allowed me to accept contracts for my radio broadcasts, and go to Calcutta once a month for a weekend to see my husband and parents, and give my radio broadcast.

Luckily, my husband found a job in a factory near Calcutta which was operated by Baghdad Jews. The owners were very educated people members of the Elias and Jacob families. They had come to India at the beginning of the 19th century. My husband air-conditioned their factory with materials made locally, and even my father got a job in the lumber yard. We all became friends with the Elias and Jacob families. Now all the members of the family have left India, the factories are in Indian hands, and they live in England, Israel and America.

After several years in Agarpara, my husband took a job with a British firm, who had a land-rolling factory. By that time my father had passed away. The war was over and the New School was closed, since the British children had returned to England. Hedi attended another school in Darjeeling, and I was able at last to stay with my husband and

mother near Kamarhati, near Calcutta where the factory was located. I was offered a job as the Director of Western Music at All India Radio, a job which was most exciting. It consisted of auditioning artists, giving them contracts, playing piano broadcasts once a month, accompanying artists and scheduling the playing of recordings. I performed with the Symphony Orchestra once every season. I was invited to play in other cities: Luchnow, Delhi, and Lahore, which is now in Pakistan. I took Hedi along and on this occasion we visited the Taj Mahal, one of the World's Wonders.

However, we felt that our time in India had come to an end.

I owe India many wonderful experiences, and I will always be grateful to fate, to have been connected to it. 

Braun-Barnett, Elise, "Eleven Years in India", Center for Jewish History, Leo Baeck Archives, LBI Memoir Collection (PID: 407409, Call Number: ME 854. MM II 9), Leo Baeck Institute, New York, New York.