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Rethinking the American Jewish Experience  
A Memoir of Nazi Austria and the  
Jewish Refugee Experience in America

*Stella K. Hershan*

I was born during the First World War in Vienna, Austria. My father was born in St. Polten, a small town not far from the capital. He came from a poor family and as a self-made man became a quite well-to-do merchant. My mother was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, which at that time was part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. At the schools there only Czech was taught, and therefore my mother went to school at a German-speaking convent. My mother's mother came from a religious family in Nuremberg, Germany. She was married off at a very young age to a man from Prague who was an atheist. Perhaps because she was a late child—her mother was almost fifty when she was born, and she was an embarrassment to the family. Like many other German-speaking people in Prague, they later moved to Vienna.

In my family, though it was not denied that we were Jewish, religion was not practiced. To me, Judaism was a religion, and since we were not religious it did not seem important to me. Mostly I did not even know whether my friends were Jewish or Christian. In my parents' house derogatory remarks such as "Goy" (gentile) or "Schickse" (gentile girl or woman) were never ever used. I personally object to the term "assimilated." Assimilated, it says in the dictionary, means: "to convert from one thing to another."

I was born in Austria, I was Austrian, and I loved my country, I loved the beautiful city of Vienna, the mountains surrounding it, the lovely lakes where we spent vacations in the summers.

Dimly I recall that my grandmother once took me to a synagogue. It was very dark there; the praying men were downstairs, and we, like all the other women, had to sit upstairs. I recall some very loud trumpets and my grandmother told me it was the shofar.

The second time I was in a synagogue was at my wedding. It was the year 1933 and I was eighteen years old. My husband was the most

handsome man I had ever seen. He was tall and blond and had blue eyes. Being nine years older than I, he was the owner of a metal-construction factory which had been in his family for many years. They were Jewish. He knew a little more about Judaism than I did because his mother had been religious while his father had not. By the time we got married his parents were dead. It was a lovely wedding and we went for our honeymoon to Italy. The fact that in neighboring Germany, that same year, a man named Adolf Hitler became chancellor hardly made an impact on us. Returning from our honeymoon we moved into our custom-furnished gorgeous apartment and I had a maid and a cook. They both were much older than I was, and I was terribly intimidated by them. Politics still was something that was not much thought about in my private world.

### *Portents of Disaster*

Suddenly, in 1934, a civil war broke out in our city. Austria, which had been governed by the Social Democratic Party since the end of World War I and the end of the monarchy, got into a terrible conflict with the right-wing Christian Socialist Party. Barricades were put up in the city, Austrians shot at the houses of Austrians. It lasted a short time. The Social Democrats were defeated and the right-wing government of the new chancellor, Dollfuss, took over. Politics now became important to us. For since my husband's factory had contracts with the Social Democrats, his business now collapsed. The maid and the cook were sent packing. It was rather nice to be alone, and I tried out my culinary talents which I had acquired at a cooking school while I was engaged.

Jewish refugees from Germany began to trickle into Austria. They warned us to leave while we still could. Leave? Our city? Our home? Why should we do that? What was happening in Germany could not possibly happen in Austria. Hitler? That clown? Who used to be a housepainter in Vienna? A vagrant? How in the world could the Germans be afraid of him? Those Germans! They never were liked in Austria. With that arrogant clipped way of speaking they had which no one could understand. And now they told us we should leave our country. Yet they looked pathetic, with their gray faces and shabby clothes, and the Viennese Jewish people helped them out with a little money and wished them luck on their journey to America or Australia or wherever they were to go.

My husband's factory had diverted itself to the construction of storefronts and things were a little better. I again had a maid and even hired a nurse because I was expecting a baby. My daughter, Lisa, was born on July 29, 1937. New Year's Eve 1937/38 we took part in an elegant party at Vienna's exclusive Imperial Hotel with some of our friends. At the stroke of midnight we toasted the coming year with champagne.

It no longer was entirely possible to ignore the political events around us. In 1934, the Austrian chancellor, Dollfuss, had been assassinated by a band of Nazis. Dr. Kurt von Schuschnigg had taken his place. The assassination had been an attempt by the Nazis to take over Austria, but Il Duce, the Italian dictator Mussolini, had sent his troops to the border as a warning to Hitler. The Nazi Party was declared illegal in Austria and many were put in jail. Yet the situation was tense and troublesome. I personally had never before experienced any anti-Semitic incidents, not even in school. To see hateful signs about Jews and red swastikas painted all over the city was a jolting shock.

Schuschnigg went to Berchtesgaden for a "talk" with Hitler in the hope of coming to an agreement with the Fuhrer to leave Austria alone. After an unfruitful and violent confrontation with Hitler, Schuschnigg returned to Vienna and set up an election to take place on March 13th. It was up to the Austrian people to declare whether they were for or against an Anschluss to the Greater German Reich. We all were absolutely convinced that the election would turn out in favor of a free Austria.

My parents, who went every spring to the French Riviera for a holiday, made their preparations to depart. "Now?" their friends would ask them. "You are leaving now? Before the election?" My father replied that he would await the result of the election outside of the country.

### *The Anschluss*

On March 11, 1938, the waltz music on the radio was interrupted. We just were eating dinner.

The voice of our chancellor was calm and sad.

"German troops are invading our country," he told the Austrian people. "The world is not willing to help us to defend ourselves, and alone we are not strong enough. We will not fight, not spill the blood

of our German brothers. May God protect Austria—” His voice faded away and the Austrian anthem sounded up, mournfully, sorrowfully.

We put down our forks and knives.

Suddenly we knew.

We had to get out. Quickly.

I don't recall whether we slept that night. My husband went to his office the next morning.

A man with a brown armband with a red swastika was seated there. “Who are you?” he shouted. “The owner,” my husband replied. “Not any more!” the man bellowed, “Your Jewish company is being Christianized. Get out at once!”

He came home.

We took our car, planning to see what was happening in the villa of my absent parents. A maid and a dog were there.

A band of young fellows with brown armbands and red swastikas stopped us. “Is this your car?” “Yes.” It was an American car. A red Ford. My husband's wedding present from my father. “Are you Jewish?” they asked. “Yes.” “Let's have the keys and get out!” The faces were like stone.

We were Jewish. Suddenly we were Jewish.

We took the trolley car.

A crowd of people was on a main business street.

Nazi soldiers had dragged the Jewish owners out of their stores. On the sidewalk, clubs in hand, they forced bearded old men to do calisthenics. They seemed to think it was great fun.

### *Life Under the Nazis*

That was the beginning.

Now we no longer had a business or an income.

The nurse was ecstatic that Hitler had arrived.

She left us at once.

The maid stayed but soon had to leave because Christian maids no longer were permitted to work in Jewish households. We moved into my parents' house.

Black cars with red swastika flags stopped before it almost daily. Where was my father, the SS officials demanded. They were not impolite. Their clipped German was alien to me. I was young and naive and

not really frightened. Not as long as my husband was not home. They did not like Jews to be tall and blond and blue-eyed. "My father is old and sick," I would tell them, "he will come back when he feels better." There was a new law against having money in a foreign country. It had to be brought back. Perhaps they felt sorry for me. I was so young and I had a baby. "If you have any trouble with those Austrians, just call me," one of them told me once and gave me his phone number. "Those Austrians are like wild animals."

During those very first days of the Anschluss, while we still were in my own apartment, the Nazis pulled Jewish people out of their homes and forced them to wash the Austrian campaign slogans off the streets. They had the list of Jewish residents from the Jewish Religious Community, to which everyone who was born Jewish belonged. (The government collected an extra tax which they turned over to it. If you did not want to belong to it, you had to declare yourself without religion. Austria was a Catholic country and religious education was compulsory in the public schools.)

One morning I had just bathed my baby when the doorbell rang. Shrilly. Loudly. Without stopping. I opened the door. A troop of young fellows with brown armbands and red swastikas stood there. "What do you want?" I asked, holding my baby. They were young, Younger even than I. "You have to come with us," they told me and grinned. "What for?" I asked. "To wash the streets, of course." They talked in heavy Viennese dialect and thought it all very funny. "I have no time," I told them. "Don't you see, I have a baby." They were taken aback. "She says she has no time." They turned to the oldest one, who seemed to be their leader. "What should we do?" He looked puzzled, then shrugged. "If she has no time we can't do anything. Let's go." They marched off looking disappointed.

"They could have killed you!" my husband said when he came home and I told him the story. "Yes," I said, "I guess so. But they didn't."

### *Efforts to Escape*

Long lines began to form before the American consulate. People searched the American phone books for possible relatives. We too filled out the application forms.

The entire world, it seemed, had closed its doors. France, Italy, Switzerland. No one wanted the Jews trapped in Germany. Austria too was now Germany. England accepted refugees on domestic visas. Doctors went as butlers, opera singers as cooks. One country that had no restrictions was Japan. Some Viennese Jews went to Shanghai.

Latin American countries will let you in, we were told. But you have to have papers stating that you are Catholic. Catholic! Well, you could buy those papers. (Many things could be bought in Vienna in those days. False passports, false identification papers. People could even be bought to stand in line for you at the foreign consulates.) But the papers stating you were Catholic were a mere formality, of course. It did not mean that you really converted. Just a means to get out of the country. Be safe.

One late afternoon my husband and I found ourselves in a dim loft. A handful of shabby, dejected people were gathered there. In front was a lectern on a podium. A priest appeared. He had a white collar, a black robe. His large golden cross sparkled on his chest. His face was kind, illuminated with a warm smile. He went to each of the huddled figures and talked to them in a low voice. I showed him a picture of my little daughter. His smile deepened. "I would love to get this little soul." Something within me stiffened.

He went to the lectern, raised his arms. "Now we shall kneel," he said, "and learn how to cross ourselves."

In the darkness I glanced at my husband. He looked at me. My knees had stiffened. They were rigid. We slunk out.

Friends began to leave. Some without papers. They planned to go secretly over the border in the mountains. My husband said he would not go to any country where he could not work. We waited for our affidavit from America. My sister-in-law and brother-in-law had left already, and she tried to find someone who would sponsor us. My parents never came back.

My girlfriend's father was the owner of a large chain of shoe stores. The night of the Anschluss he tried to leave for Switzerland. At the train station he was arrested and later taken to the concentration camp at Dachau. Her mother jumped out of a window and was killed instantly. At the funeral members of the Gestapo were present, intending to arrest her brother. The brother, who managed the family stores in Hungary, disappointed the Gestapo by not coming back for his moth-

er's funeral. My girlfriend refused to leave the country without her father. Somehow, to this day I do not know how, she managed to get him released. Together they came to America. When she was thirty-four years old she died of cancer.

*Incidents of Terror*

We lived from day to day and we did not sleep very well. The world at large had disappeared. So had Austria. It now was something called the Ostmark. The radio had one voice only. That of the Nazis.

Foreign newspapers no longer were available. We only knew what the Nazi papers told us. Young men had stopped looking at pretty young women. Everyone's eyes were directed at one thing only: Did you or did you not wear a swastika? To avoid the probing glances I remained standing on the dim platform of the trolley car one late afternoon. Just before, walking to the stop in the Inner City, I had seen a truck crowded with men, all wearing coats and hats, standing in the swaying vehicle packed like sardines with terrified faces. The truck swerved around a corner into the street where I knew the Gestapo building was. With the vision of this still on my mind, I noticed a young policeman standing near me. He was reading the *Stuermer*, the infamous Nazi tabloid. Fat black letters on the first page spelled out that it just had been scientifically proven that the Jews were direct descendants of the devil. The policeman looked at me, I looked at him. The corners of his mouth twitched. He got off when I got off and, without a word exchanged in the dark street, escorted me home. He probably was a Sozi (socialist). The Sozis did not love the Nazis. Our greengrocer was a Sozi. The day Hitler entered Vienna, an enormous mass of people surged to the Inner City to welcome him. Except those people who had good reason not to welcome him. We were among them, so we stayed home. Our doorbell rang and we jumped. The blood froze in our veins. It was only our greengrocer, who wanted to know whether we needed anything.

Our best friends left for England. The husband had been picked up in the street and arrested. While he was being held at the police station with a number of other "Jewish-looking" men, a jovial Viennese sausage vendor appeared at the jail. The crowd of arrested people jostled each other to buy a sausage. My friend was not hungry. He drifted into

a conversation with a policeman, who told him that he had trouble with his wife and did not know how to go about getting a divorce. My friend gave him some advice and the policeman arranged for him to be dismissed. But he had to sign papers that he would leave the country within two days (during the first few months of the occupation things like that were still possible).

### *Visas and Passports at Last*

Spring 1938 was gorgeous in Vienna. The city parks were overflowing with lilac, its scent perfuming the air. Flower beds burst out in reds, blues, and yellows, and the chestnut trees put on their pink blossoms. The newly painted park benches carried black signs: "Jews not permitted to sit here." Signs like that sprang up all over the city. On movie houses, on restaurants, on stores.

The shiny black cars with the red swastika flags still came to our building. When was my father returning and bringing back all his foreign money? demanded the officials in their black uniforms. Our passports were confiscated.

A young attorney sporting a small silver swastika appeared in our lives. He told us that he had a drawer filled with buttons. Communist buttons, Socialist buttons, Christian National buttons, whatever the occasion asked for. They came in handy. He also had connections. He could get almost anything. A passport? No problem. A little expensive perhaps, but it could be done. Papers stating that you owed no taxes whatsoever—something completely unavailable for Jews about to leave the country. Of course. For cash only, however. We got a new passport. It said that we were citizens of the German Reich. What had happened to Austria?

We hid the passport beneath the rug covering the staircase.

A new complication arose. The good Swiss people demanded that passports issued to Jews be marked with a red *J*. They wanted to assure themselves that they would not be burdened with travelers who had any intention of staying permanently in their country with the beautiful mountains, chocolate, and watches.

A red *J*. Our friend with the small silver swastika appeared again. A *J* on the passport? Things were more difficult now. A friend of his had been arrested. He would see what he could do. But it would be expen-

sive. He disappeared with our passport into the yellow castle of Schoenbrunn, the former residence of the emperor, which now housed the government offices of the Ostmark. I waited for him in the park. A long time. Had he been arrested? With our passports? Finally he returned, looking drawn and exhausted. "I am having a terrible time," he told me. "Many of the people for whom I get passports no longer have any money. So they pay in kind. All night long I do nothing but commit *Rassenschande* (racial treason) and get no sleep. He handed me the passport. It now had a big fat red J. I gave him an envelope, he vanished into the shadows.

### *Kristallnacht*

I don't know how we managed with money. My husband took care of that. It did seem we had some. At least to survive for a while. Until our affidavit for America arrived.

The summer passed. We took English lessons, making sharp sss sounds out of "the" and trying to force our lips to produce a proper English w. My girlfriend and I went to beauty school. In America, we thought, we would be able to support ourselves. But we burnt the hair of the customers who came for a free hairdo. Suddenly it was fall. November 1938.

On November 7, a seventeen-year-old German Jewish refugee, Herschel Grynszpan, shot and killed a secretary of the German embassy in Paris. The news was screamed from the radio. "Those filthy Jewish swine will pay for this!"

We sat at home like cattle waiting to be slaughtered. The sounds of the first broken glass drifted through the windows. My husband put on his oldest clothes. Put a little money in his pocket. This time they would take him away for certain. At dusk there was a commotion in front of our gate. The doorbell rang as if someone were leaning against it. Six, eight, ten young thugs with brown armbands and swastikas stormed into our house. They raced through the rooms shouting they were searching for hidden weapons. My husband followed them from room to room. He looked much like one of them. The baby stood in her crib and smiled at them. For a split moment they stopped. Finally turned and marched out. They had never even noticed that my husband did not belong to their troop. He came inside again quietly.

## Adieu, Vienna

Shortly before the year was over our affidavits arrived from America. My sister-in-law had succeeded in finding some people to vouch for us that we would not become a burden to the United States of America. One sponsor was a physician who made the condition that he would never have to see us. The other was Tante Bertha, a long-lost relative of my brother-in-law.

Now we could buy the tickets for the S.S. *Queen Mary* to take us across the ocean. With our last money. I visited my grandmother for the last time. She was eighty-four years old and lived in a furnished room with some relatives. My father had arranged for a pension to be paid to her before he left. I did not have the courage to tell her that we were about to leave. She walked me and the baby to the trolley stop, and I still see her standing there waving to us nearsightedly.

The American consul who wrote the visa into our passport was jovial. "Good luck, folks," he said as he handed it to us. Suddenly the doors swung open for us. The French consul saw the American visa, the tickets for the boat, and at once gave us permission to travel through France.

The Swiss official carefully examined all the issued visas.

"You may stay in Switzerland for eight days," he explained as he wrote it into the passport. "But it cannot be extended, You understand?" We understood.

"When do you want to leave? Tonight?"

"Tonight?" My husband looked stunned. "No, I don't think—"

"Why not?" I asked quickly. "What are we waiting for? The Gestapo?" I did not say it but we all knew what I was thinking.

"All right, then," said the Swiss official as he stamped the passport. "Eight days beginning today. Bon voyage."

We took the trolley car home. It was January and very cold. Snow was on the branches of the trees on the Ringstrasse. I looked at the white edifices, the Parliament, the State Opera House. Was I never to see all this again? Never again? But I barely saw it now. Enormous red flags with black swastikas were fluttering everywhere.

At home we packed a small overnight bag. I dressed my daughter. She had a new traveling outfit. A pink quilted coat and pink leggings. Tied to her blonde hair was a matching hat that tied beneath her chin.

She gave us a big smile and settled in her daddy's arms. Our train to Zurich left late, and it was after midnight when we walked out of my parents' house. For a moment I leaned my cheek against its cool wall. We locked the gate in front and tossed the keys over it onto the snow on the lawn.

I no longer remember how we got to the Westbahnhof. A taxi? The trolley car? I don't know. The main thing was not to draw too much attention to ourselves. We did not talk about our fears. People had been turned back at the border, we knew. The train station was swarming with people. Our tickets were for a sleeping car. Our last money. The very last. One could not take any money out of the country anyway. I put the baby to sleep. We sat up and waited. In the morning we arrived at the border. Nazi officials stepped into the compartment. "Your passport." The voices were as cold as their faces. No human emotions showed in them. My husband handed them the passport. They took it, studied it for a long while. Then they disappeared with it. We sat frozen. This surely was the end. We would be taken off the train. The official came back. Returned the passport and asked for the tax statement. My husband handed it to him. It fluttered in the air. He studied it. For a long while. Then he handed it back. Stretched out his hand. "Heil Hitler." We saw his broad back as he walked out.

Outside the window we saw dejected, pathetic figures carrying small suitcases like ours being led away. We did not dare to breath. The baby woke, cried a little.

### *In Switzerland*

Slowly, we did not notice it at first, the train started to move. We stared at each other unbelievably.

New officials came into our compartment. They spoke in a Swiss dialect, smiled at the baby as they inspected our passport. We were in Switzerland.

I think the first thing I did when the train gathered speed was to put on some lipstick. In Nazi Vienna one did not dare to draw attention to oneself. My gray face looked at me in the mirror. How did I feed the baby? Change her? I can't remember. "We are safe!" I said to my husband. "We really are safe!"

He looked at me like a forlorn little boy even though he was nine

years older than I. "But how will we live? We have no money. We are going to America. What do I know about America? I don't speak English."

"I don't know," I said, and a new heaviness started up in me. "I just don't know."

Desks with representatives of Jewish refugee organizations lined the train station in Zurich. "You people have any relatives here, any money?" We shook our heads.

The lady at the desk inspected our passport. "I see you are going on to America," she commented. Then she wrote something down on a piece of paper. "Here is a pass for a small rooming house," she told us as she handed it to us. "You can stay there free of charge for three days. You will get your meals there also."

Charity. We were receiving charity! We were refugees. Homeless. Penniless. Foreigners. My husband and I could not look at each other. The rooming house was clean and pleasant. We got a room with two beds and a crib. Then we phoned my parents in Nice. Collect, I believe. My father did not have the fortune in foreign currency which the Nazis thought he had. But he did have some money and he wired us a little.

The Swiss burghers walked with firm steps on their solid pavements. When we tried to tell them about what was happening in Austria, they shook their heads incredulously. "How lucky you are that nothing happened to you." "Yes," we said, "we are lucky. Very, very lucky."

My husband and I took turns carrying the baby. A store displayed baby carriages in its windows. We stepped in. Would it be possible to rent a baby carriage for a few days? New was our humble attitude, our feeling of shame. No, the man said in his comfortable Swiss German, they only sold baby carriages. My little daughter, in her pink hat and coat, smiled at him with her sparse teeth. "Wait just a moment," he told us and disappeared down a staircase which seemed to lead to the cellar. He returned with a stroller. It was old-fashioned but new. "Would that do?" he asked. "Yes!" we said. "Oh, yes! But—how much will you charge?" He shook his head. "No charge." "We'll bring it back in three days," we assured him. "Our address here—" "Never mind," he interrupted us. "Just bring it back when you no longer need it."

*France*

The Mediterranean was a deep blue. People strolled on the seaside promenade, palm trees swayed in the mild breeze. Tourists walked into the casino to gamble a little. My parents lived in a small, shabby flat, but they liked the climate there. Also, life was cheap in France. With the little money they had left they could manage until the Hitler craziness had blown over and they could return to their home in Vienna. We said goodbye and the train took us to Paris, from where we would go to Cherbourg to embark on the *Queen Mary*.

Paris. I had never before been in Paris. Never seen the wide boulevards, the parks, the cafes. The French seemed oblivious of the fact that they were living not far from a neighboring country which had turned into a real hell. We ourselves could hardly believe it, being here in what seemed Paradise to us, and the past eleven months seemed like an awful nightmare. Suddenly we felt young again, carefree, almost like lovers. On the Champs Elysée we passed an exquisite little boutique. A black straw hat trimmed with violets was on display in the window. I gazed at it. "Let's buy it," my husband said. We went inside, I tried it on and we bought it.

*America at Last*

"Where did you get that hat?" asked an elderly American lady who picked us up together with my sister-in-law in the harbor of New York. "I bought it in Paris!" I announced proudly. "Well!" the lady said, and her voice was not too friendly. "I never owned a hat from Paris."

That morning, our ship had sailed toward the Statue of Liberty. It was February 9, 1939, a cold gray day. But everybody crowded on deck to see the lady holding high the Torch of Liberty.

"Welcome!" said the customs official who inspected our passport with our immigration visa. "Glad to have you here, folks." We did not understand the words, but the face was good-natured, the voice kind. My sister-in-law cried when she embraced us, and the lady who did not appear happy about my Parisian hat turned out to be one of our sponsors, Tante Bertha.

Our little furnished apartment on upper Broadway was not very elegant. There were big waterbugs in the kitchen, and once I saw a rat

scurrying into a hole in the wall. Not so much different from us, I thought. But when the doorbell rang it was a neighbor. "My name is Gert," she said. "Whatever you need, just call me and I will try to help you." She brought a jar of ruby-red jello for "that darling baby." *Adjusting to a New World* My husband got a job working as a mechanic. He earned \$15 a week. I stayed home with the baby and tried to learn English by reading *True Confessions* magazine and the cartoons. The American Jewish people we met did not seem to like us very much. Why did we pretend that we did not speak Yiddish, they asked. Why were doctors insulted when it was suggested to them that they work as butlers? Many of the refugee doctors did wash dishes while studying for their American certification.

Things were different here. Jews were not ashamed of being Jewish, as were many in Vienna. Delicatessens had Hebrew letters on their windows. The first time I had seen Hebrew letters in Vienna was when the Nazis forced them onto Jewish stores. We tried to tell everyone about what was happening in Europe. We were convinced that there would be a war. They laughed at us. What was happening in Europe had nothing to do with America. Except that all those refugees were taking jobs away from American people.

I met an American lady. She was the guest speaker at a gathering of German and Austrian refugees arranged by the National Council of Jewish Women. She greeted us with a big smile and then said that she wanted us to know that our being here in this country was a two-sided affair.

"While it is true that we here in America are giving you a new home and a haven, you on your part are bringing us your culture, your talents, and your skills. In the tradition of America, which consists of immigrants just like you, you are enriching our country and broadening our horizons. We are glad that you are here, and we thank you for your gifts."

That woman was the First Lady of the country. The wife of the President. Eleanor Roosevelt.

From then on I read her newspaper column, "My Day," religiously. She taught me about democracy and freedom, what it meant and how every citizen had to work for it. She made me feel like a respected human being again, she gave me the courage to go on.

People asked me whether I found it hard to "integrate" and whether

I felt different from other people. In America I think everyone is different from each other. Why even in an identical family each member is different. It would be very dull if we all were the same. From whom would we learn? I personally never felt alien in America. In a way I liked having two different cultures within me. And as to integration, if you are interested in the world around you, in the people and their lives, why then you can “integrate” wherever you may find yourself. I personally loved being in America. Even with \$15 a week.

*Wartime Memories*

December 7, 1941. Pearl Harbor. I still hear the voice of my president. “This day of infamy—”

War. We had known all along that it was bound to happen. We had known it when Chamberlain went to Munich, when Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia and then Poland. We knew it when England went to war against Germany and some Americans still insisted that it was not “our war.” Now it was here.

And now we suddenly were enemy aliens.

Though immediately after our arrival we had applied for American citizenship, our passport still said that we were German nationals. German! We, who no longer spoke German at home, we, who were trying so hard to become good Americans. My daughter’s first words were in English. My husband and I had decided that as far as we were concerned Austria no longer existed (it didn’t, actually). Not the country and not the language. We ourselves were not conscious of our heavy accents, which gave us away instantly. But now there were new restrictions. Enemy aliens had to be registered. Enemy aliens were not permitted to own cameras. Enemy aliens could not join the army. My husband had talked of trying to find a better job. Now, for security reasons, enemy aliens had a hard time getting any sort of job. Living on \$15 a week was not very easy. I shopped for groceries for \$1 a day. One could make a very good goulash out of potatoes and one pair of cut-up frankfurters. But my husband’s face was grim, and he looked more and more unhappy.

I called one of the Jewish organizations and inquired where jobs were available for an excellent mechanic who used to be an engineer. They told me that men like that were badly needed at the Brooklyn

Navy Yard, for instance at Bethlehem Steel.

I left my small daughter with my sister-in-law and told her that I was going to try finding a job for my husband. She thought I was insane.

With my husband's photograph in my purse, I took the subway to Brooklyn. A long line of men stood in front of the employment office of Bethlehem Steel. I joined them. I was the only female and they craned their necks. The man standing behind me told me that not far from there was a smaller company, North American Steel, which made small essential parts for warships. They didn't pay as well as Bethlehem Steel but they needed good workers very badly. The boss was Mr. Michaelman.

I went to North American Steel.

Mr. Michaelman was sympathetic. He smiled when I showed him the picture of my husband and explained that he could not come himself because he could not afford to take the day off. Mr. Michaelman said he would see him at his house on Sunday.

On Monday, my husband started his new job. He worked many, many hours of overtime. But now he earned almost \$100 a week.

While the country went to war, I myself went to work. My daughter was four years old and she needed other children to play with. The Children's Colony was a Montessori school run by an Austrian educator for children whose emigre mothers worked. I registered my daughter there and found a job selling cosmetics for Elizabeth Arden at a store on Thirty-fourth Street called McCrory's. Now I earned \$15 a week. My own paycheck! I think that never before in my life had I been so happy.

Meanwhile the war raged on. The news in the movies—there was no television as yet—showed the Nazi boot marching across Europe. The worst was when we saw them goose-step past the Arch of Triumph. Paris! Paris gone too! Hitler doing a little dance there!

A letter from my parents. They had been transported from Nice to a detention camp in Gurs in the Pyrenees. My neighbor with the jello asked her parents to issue an affidavit for my mother and father. Somehow, even though it was wartime, through the help of a Jewish organizations we managed to bring them to America. My mother went to work sewing in a factory. My father, quite old and ill with a heart condition, became a traveling salesman.

We managed. And we all agreed that Vienna was a place to which we would never ever return. Most of our friends were Viennese also.

Not everyone felt as we did. "The French people went back after the Revolution," some would argue. "Why shouldn't we?" Besides, everyone had left all of their worldly possessions there. Why not try to recover something afterward? For a while it seemed that there would be no afterward. Hitler's victories were announced day after day. The only consolation we had was the voice of our president. FDR's voice coming over the radio telling us, his fellow citizens, that the only thing to fear was fear itself.

*Peace*

And one day it was over. Really over. Hitler and the entire brown horror had been defeated, wiped out. My husband started his own ironworks company with his brother. They worked day and night to make a go of it. We moved to a nice apartment in Forest Hills. I quit my job selling cosmetics and took courses at New York University. My childhood dream was to write. Now I tried doing this in my new language. Oddly, most of the stories took place in Vienna. I could not understand why. But suddenly I was fascinated by Austrian history. For the first time I also became conscious of a famous fellow Viennese, Sigmund Freud. The professor who taught the course came from Poland. He had survived eleven concentration camps. And now we all learned what had happened in Europe while we had tried to build a new life in America. We learned about the gas ovens, the millions and millions who had been murdered. It was too horrible to believe. Then came the pictures. My mother found out through the Red Cross that my grandmother had died in Theresienstadt, the concentration camp for the old. She had died of "pneumonia."

We finally became American citizens. No one swore allegiance to the United States of America with more fervor and loyalty than the European refugees.

Some of our friends went back to Austria to vacation in the beautiful mountains and at the lovely lakes. Had they no shame? No character? We, wanting to see our new homeland, went with our daughter on a cross-country tour. We saw the high mountains of Colorado, the waterfalls which seemed to come straight from the sky in Yellowstone Park, San Francisco, Yosemite, Los Angeles, Hollywood, and the Grand Canyon. Our country. Our wonderful country!

President Roosevelt died. I cried just as much as when my parents died a few years later. My daughter got married. To a young Jewish

American man. His parents had come long before from Russia. Their stories were different from ours. Yet we shared a related fate.

My husband got ill. For several years he suffered from heart failure. Suffered a few strokes. At sixty-two he died. Suddenly I was alone. Of course I had my daughter, her husband, and her children. But there was no one any longer with whom I could speak my native tongue. No one who shared my memories. More and more the plots in my writing took place in Vienna. And then, through an odd chance of circumstances, my first novel was published in translation in Vienna. I had to see it in the stores. I just had to. And so I planned a trip to Vienna. How can you do this? I asked myself through sleepless nights. Are you just like those others who went back? Have you too no shame? No character? The German translation of my book seemed more mine than my English original. I was split in two and I could not get the two parts together.

#### *Return to Vienna*

Ernst Papanek came to my aid.

Dr. Papanek was Viennese. Very, very Viennese. I had met him while I was working on a book about Eleanor Roosevelt. He had been minister of education in Vienna under the Social Democrats. At the time of the civil war in 1934, he fled to France. During the time of Hitler, a French Jewish organization made him the director of housing for several hundred children whose parents were killed in the Holocaust. Ernst's only aim in life was to help all the children in the world. He was the kindest man I had ever encountered. When he realized my distress he came and spent several hours with me. He told me about his youth as an Austrian Social Democrat, his loyal friends who had protected him when he was in danger, who worked with him in the underground. "Not all the Austrians are Nazis," he told me over and over. "And why do you have to blame yourself for going back? Why, it is the most natural and strongest of human emotions to want to see the soil on which we were born."

I left something out, and I think it was deliberate.

The year before, I had gone to Vienna with my daughter, her children, and her husband. It was not a happy experience for me. Driving into the city of Vienna, the past sprang to life. A past which, of course, there was no way that my family could share. My daughter was a baby

the night we left. Now she was a grown woman. How could she possibly have any feeling for the land where she was born? She was American. So were her husband and the children. I could do nothing but cry, and they wanted to eat hamburgers. I fled into St. Stephen's. But the wall there against which I leaned was not the wall of my house. A waiter with a wooden leg brought me a glass of wine in an empty cafe. "Welcome home," he said when he heard me speak, "I have no good memories of Hitler either," he added as he touched his wooden leg. We took a horse and buggy for a ride through the city. "You are Viennese," the driver said as he heard me speak. "When did you leave?" "1939." My answer was short. "Ah, Hitler," he said and flicked his whip. "Now things are completely different," he added as he turned a corner. "In what way?" I inquired. "Oh, for instance if I would say now that Hitler was quite right in gassing all those Jews—of course, I am not saying it, but if I did say it, I would get arrested right away."

Stop the car, I wanted to say. Stop it at once.

But the children were enjoying the ride so much. How would they understand? How could they understand? We soon left for Paris, and I promised myself that I never, never would return.

### *Another Return*

I guess one never should say never. The book came out in 1972. It looked beautiful. A historical novel with a big part taking place at the time of the Congress of Vienna.

This time I went alone. Many ex-Viennese told me that they felt as if they were in a foreign city when they went there. A foreign city? I stepped off the train and I became Viennese. I spoke the language with the same lilt the people around me spoke with. I could close my eyes and find my way. I went to the house. It still was there. A little smaller perhaps than how I remembered it, but still the same. Strangers lived there now. Since my father had not been in Vienna at the time of Hitler, they had not been able to force him to sign it over. So later it was legally sold. I got perhaps \$3,000 for it. Now it is worth more than \$300,000. Vienna still was my city. It hurt to see how beautiful it was. The flowers, the palatial white buildings. And the book was a best-seller. It was in the windows of all the bookstores. I chatted with a young salesman. Unavoidably we talked about the Hitler times. "If

someone told me that my father had murdered hundreds of people, I simply wouldn't believe it," he told me. I said nothing. His blue eyes were imploring. "Tell me, *Gnaedige Frau*, just tell me, what else could I do?" "I don't know," I said. "I just don't know."

I left Vienna reluctantly this time, and I was so happy when I got back to America. Home.

### *Memories of the Holocaust*

Back in New York I soon realized that a book could not support you. The manager of the international bookstore on Fifth Avenue, Rizzoli's, asked me whether I would like to work there. He needed someone to run his German department, The German department? Me? "Well," he said with his Italian accent, "with your background it would seem natural, wouldn't it?"

The books on the shelves suddenly were old friends. Goethe and Schiller—some of their long poems I still knew by heart. My uncle had once implored me not to discard my native language. "German is not the language of the Nazis," he told me over and over. "It is the language of many great men and women." Suddenly I was ravenous for German books. I read Thomas Mann and Zuckmayer and, and, and—

A young woman needing some information drifted into the store one day. She was Austrian and told me the name of the little village where she was born. My father had been born in the same village. There was an instant bond between us. We did speak the same language, and she became one of my best friends. Through her I met many other older and younger Austrians. I felt at home with them. There was an elderly woman, Grete Bush. In Vienna she had been a musician. Now she helped emigré musicians from all countries to settle in America. I visited her at the American Council for Emigrés in the Professions. For ten years I stayed there and wrote a newsletter about what was happening there. It was like paying back just a little for the help we got when we came to this country. In the bookstore I met many young Germans. They too had their stories about carrying the legacy of their parents. A young German priest became a customer and one day his face was ashen. He just had seen a film about what had happened in his country during the Hitler time. "I wish I could tell people that I am Norwegian," he said. "But I am German and I have to live with it." In his house he started evenings which he called "A

Bridge of Understanding.” He invited young Germans who worked in this country, Jewish ex-refugees, Jewish university professors, for an exchange of experiences and thoughts. Many young Germans told of the resentment they experienced here as Germans and how for the first time they really understood what had happened. The priest soon was recalled to Germany.

My background began to blend more and more into my present life. The heavy stone of hatred which I had carried within me for so long became lighter. In spite of the fact that tied into it inexorably was the Holocaust.

Earnest young Austrian and German students drifted into my home to interview me about my experiences. “Can I do something for you in Vienna?” one of them asked. “I read somewhere that a book has come out called *The Death Book of Theresienstadt.*,” I replied. “You see, my grandmother died there. I would like to order it but I don’t know where.”

A large package arrived in the mail. The book was big. Very big and really beautiful. A kind of coffee table book with many pictures. A long, very long list of names. Under *P* I found my grandmother. She was born on January 28, 1855, and died in Theresienstadt on October 24, 1942. Her transport number was 8-977. She had left Vienna on August 8, 1942 with one thousand other people. She was eighty-seven years old. Her name was Elise Pick.

One day, after I saw an especially horrendous film on television, I could not bear it any longer. Mountains of skeletons loaded on trucks. But for the grace of God, I thought for a moment. God. Where was His grace for *them*? Perhaps it would have been better to die with them. Then one would not have to live with the knowledge of the unspeakable horror. But I did live, and in order to preserve my sanity I would no longer watch the films or read the books.

*Simon Wiesenthal*

A publisher called. They needed a bilingual writer to help a writer in Vienna. Was I interested? “No,” I said at once. “I do not do translations.” But it was a special case I was told, I had been highly recommended, it was very, very important. I became curious. “Who is the writer?” I asked.

“Simon Wiesenthal.”

My heart sank, I felt a chill.

No, I thought, I can't!

I had just excused myself from any further exposure to the horrors of the Holocaust. And now was I to delve even more deeply into this awful, awful happening? Working with the famous Nazi hunter, learning still more about the murders, the ghastly camps, the crimes committed. I could not do it, I was not strong enough. It would kill me.

"Tell Mr. Wiesenthal I would be honored if I could be of assistance to him in any way," I heard myself saying.

And so I went to Vienna once more.

This time I felt certain I would die there.

Mr. Wiesenthal's house had been bombed just a few months before. It was a miracle that he and his wife survived. If I showed myself on the streets of Vienna with him I surely would be shot. Well, if that was to be my fate, I thought, so be it. Born in Vienna and died in Vienna, it would say in the papers.

Before my departure, at Mr. Wiesenthal's suggestion, I had read some of his books. They had been translated into English by Mr. Wechsberg, a Viennese writer who once wrote for *The New Yorker*. Now he was old and ill, too old and too ill to work on the new book. After I had read Mr. Wiesenthal's "*The Murderers Among Us*" and several other books by him, I thought that I soon would be too old and too ill to continue. Reading those books one has to steel oneself to deal with bestiality. One reads one paragraph and then has to stop. Now, one thinks, now I have read the absolute worst that could have happened at that time. You fight down the nausea, you struggle for breath, then force yourself to read the next page. What you read before turns out to have been mild in comparison.

Mr. Wiesenthal is a strong man. He picked me up at the airport and swiftly lifted my rather heavy suitcase. On the ride to the city he told me about his trip to Israel, from which he had just returned. Mr. Wiesenthal is a man who, though he is seated there right next to you, is not really there. His every thought circles around one issue only: justice. Justice and not revenge was the force that drove this man to work day and night to bring surviving Nazi criminals before a court of justice. For several days I listened to Mr. Wiesenthal, searched through the files in his Documentation Center. My fingers picked up a photograph of a smiling blonde young woman. I was told that she had been a concentration camp matron who kicked children to death with her

boots. Mr. Wiesenthal's secretary helped me in my search. She told me that her father had been an ardent Nazi and she was grateful that she could work like this to atone for what he had done. With all the horrors in the files I also found stories of young Austrians who volunteered to help Mr. Wiesenthal for the same reason. I wrote a sample chapter about the concentration camp matron whom Mr. Wiesenthal had found living the life of an ordinary housewife in Queens, New York.

But in the end it did not work out. Mr. Wiesenthal wanted the book to be written in the first-person. I did not have his voice.

I was not shot after all and I returned home.

But the experience taught me that there is no escape from the Holocaust. It is there in the morning when I read the newspaper, it is there in the evening when I turn on the television, it is there whenever I meet a new person and am asked about my accent.

### *The New School for Social Research*

Throughout the fifty years of my life in America, my being a refugee has been an invaluable experience. Perhaps the most important influence on my life was my studies at the New School for Social Research.

This leading adult education center was founded by Dr. Alvin Johnson, who, when fascism engulfed Europe, decided to "pick up the apples which Hitler shook from the trees." With funding provided by the Rockefeller Foundation, Dr. Johnson brought to his faculty the finest minds from European countries. The New School became "The University in Exile." Never before and never afterward existed a university where the likes of Thomas Mann, Hannah Arendt, Albert Einstein, and Karen Horney were part of the faculty. I, who had been a poor student at the Gymnasium in Vienna, found a home where my mind was stretched and where I started to think. It was there and also at New York University where my childhood wish to write finally took on a concrete form. To all those extraordinary professors I owe what I am now.

It was, I believe, in 1974, that the West German chancellor, Willy Brandt, visited the New School and brought a check for \$1 million to establish the Theodor Heuss chair. He also brought iron medals of merit for the professors who, thirty-five years before, had been forced to flee their native land. Most of them quite elderly and not well, they marched in, in their purple and black caps and gowns from

Heidelberg, and their hands shook as they received their decorations.

“This is the New Heidelberg in Greenwich Village,” Willy Brandt announced. “And these wonderful professors here, while they are the gain of America, they also represent the great loss of Germany.” And then everyone wept.

### *What I Have Learned*

To the question “Did there come a time when you felt totally integrated and no different, or are there times when you still feel somewhat of an outsider, and are there aspects of being a European left?” I can only say that yes, of course I still feel European, but I also feel very strongly American. And no, I do not feel like an outsider anywhere. I think it is the individual who makes himself an outsider. If you like people and are interested in what is going on in the world around you, you do not have to be an outsider wherever you find yourself.

Yes, of course I do have a special rapport with some ex-refugees, but by no means with all of them. I have a special rapport with people who feel much as I do about vital issues, whether they are European, American, Japanese, or whatever.

I think the most important thing that has happened to me is that I no longer hate. And I no longer blame everyone. For now I realize that in all honesty I do not know what I would have done had I been one of “them.” Would I have had the courage to help during the Hitler time? To hide people? To save children or at least try to? Even if it had endangered my own family? I wish I would have done that. I doubt, though, that I would have had the courage.

Vienna, It is still a big hurt, and I suppose it will remain one for as long as I live. I had not known before how deeply imbedded in my heart is this city. Now actually more than before. While I would never live there again, I do miss it and think of it always. Much is being said about “those Austrians,” but I have made some very wonderful Austrian friends. One of them was the Austrian consul general, Dr. Helga Winkler-Campagna. Working in New York for five years she took the plight of the Austrians who had to flee their homeland during the Hitler time very, very seriously and tried to make friends. In 1986—in spite of my protests—I was awarded the Golden Medal of Merit of the City of Vienna. I laughed and made light of it. But I would be less than honest if I were to say that it did not mean anything to me. It was like

an ointment on a wound that won't heal. Another Austrian friend, who also works in the Austrian consulate, recently converted to Judaism. Having been raised as a Catholic, she just could not find any peace within herself without doing something actively to say to the world how deeply she feels about her country's Nazi past.

As I mentioned somewhere before, I myself do not believe in organized religion. How can I believe in a God who is all-powerful or in the saga of a chosen people after Auschwitz? But I deeply respect the belief of others, and perhaps I even envy them a little.

### *Reconciliation with Vienna*

And then something happened that at long last made it possible for me to go to Vienna again without shame or feelings of guilt about lack of character.

My daughter Lisa now lives in Arizona with her husband Allan and her two grown children, Sheryl and Larry. Lisa teaches first grade to little Mexican children at a public school and she also is a reality therapist. Though she loves to eat Wiener Schnitzel and especially apricot dumplings, which she ate for breakfast every day on her last visit to New York, she is, as we wanted her to be, totally American.

In the spring of 1989, the Jewish Welcome Committee in Vienna, in conjunction with Austrian Airlines and the mayor of Vienna, extended an invitation to 100 grandchildren of former emigrés to "get to know the country of their grandparents." Since the grandchildren themselves had to write an application explaining who they were and why they wanted to participate, I sent the papers to my grandson, Larry, not really thinking that he would follow up.

"I have always felt deprived of my Austrian heritage," Larry wrote, to my utter amazement. Then he went on to explain why he wanted to partake of the journey.

To the surprise of the Austrian consulate, 250 young people applied. Larry's letter was so convincing that he was one of the 100 who were accepted. I saw him off at JFK, and it was a strange and quite moving experience to see elderly grandparents coming with their bright, intelligent grandchildren dressed in jeans. In Vienna, 1,200 host families had volunteered to take the Americans in. Larry stayed with an elderly couple, Herr and Frau Smejkal. They did not speak a word of English and they treated him like a son. The stay in Vienna

included visits to the local high schools where discussion groups were formed, a visit to Parliament, and a visit to a concentration camp site accompanied by the host families. There also was a ball at the ornate Viennese City Hall where an Israeli band played the hora, a boat trip on the Danube, and an interfaith Seder to which 1,000 people were invited. While Larry was there my old anxiousness and mixed feelings sprang to life. Perhaps there would be a terrorist attack! I could not sleep at night worrying. Vienna. It was always Vienna that set me into such a state. But Larry came back well and healthy. Full of Wiener Schnitzel. It was fantastic!

Frau Smejkal and I began to exchange letters. They were Larry's host family in Vienna. They were the first Viennese who showed in action that they cared. Cared about what had happened.

Last summer I spent three days in Vienna. I have a new book coming out in German, and I had a meeting with the translator. Her name is Christa, and she and her husband took an entire day off to show Larry the countryside while he was there. The Smejkal's seemed excited by my visit. They treated me like a lost relative. And for the first time I could walk on the streets of Vienna again and smell the flowers.

What would have happened to me if there had never been a Hitler and I had lived out my life in the beautiful city of my birth?

Well, while I was there last summer I went to one of those wonderful *Konditoreis*, the pastry shops where you sit down at a marble-topped table on a chair upholstered in red velvet and gold to eat a Sachertorte. I was alone. Seated next to me were two elderly ladies—my age, really, I realized with an unbelieving shock. I listened to their conversation.

"Tonight," said one of them, "I'll make myself a nice veal cutlet. I'll dredge it in flour on both sides and then fry it in butter." "I still have some mushroom soup left from yesterday," said the other woman. "I think that's what I will eat for supper tonight," They fell silent.

I waited for the conversation to continue. But there was nothing else. Not another word.

Had I been able to stay in Vienna until I grew old, would I be sitting there now just like them? Perhaps—.

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Stella K. Hershan is a writer and teacher. Among her numerous publications are *A Woman of Quality: Eleanor Roosevelt* (1970), *The Naked Angel* (1972), and *Daughter of Revolution* (1991)