

## **Norbert Friedmann**

Wartime Experience: Camp survivor

I was born January 10, 1911, in Vienna, Austria. My parents, Leo and Regina Friedmann, were born in Poland and immigrated to Vienna before the First World War. They met and married in Vienna. My father was a struggling salesman who spent much time in the corner café with his "cronies". My mother was a poor housewife who stayed at home with me and my brother, Max, who became an actor at the Vienna Theatre.

When I was twenty years old, I met and fell in love with Charlotte. After a three-year courtship, we married on May 27, 1934, a special "Day of Children," in Vienna for that year only. Charlotte and I were married for over 60 years when she passed away on her eighty-second birthday on February 28, 1995. She saved my life on several occasions, most dramatically getting me from Dachau to America in May 1939. But that is the essence of the story of our lives, which she wrote in her book, "Our Story" with which I am photographed.

When Hitler first came into power in Germany, I was offered an opportunity to get a position in Cape Town, South Africa, but Charlotte would not consider leaving her parents and her country. But on March 11, 1938, the Hitler forces marched into Austria and Chancellor Kurt Schuschnig had to abdicate. The lives of all Jews and Jewish sympathizers changed overnight. What took four years to accomplish in Germany took four weeks in Austria. Our only concern now was to find a way to leave our country, and then to find a way to have our parents follow us.

On the evening of November 9, 1938, we listened to our underground radio and heard with horror that a young Jewish man named Greenspan had killed a German official named Rath, who worked in the Paris embassy. I immediately gave my previously prepared power of attorney to Charlotte because I knew this was the beginning of the end for us.

The next morning, November 10, 1938, I went to my father-in-law's upholstery shop, under the false security that he possessed a letter from the Gestapo to protect him to teach others his trade so they could immigrate to a new country. Ten minutes after the store opened a squad of storm troopers in khakis stormed into the shop, tore up the letters and took all of us along, threw us into a police wagon and transported us to the nearest police station. On our way, I witnessed our synagogue where Charlotte and I had married four years earlier, going up in flames.

Upon arrival at the station, we were herded into small, crowded cells where we remained without air, food, water or bathroom for five hours. Then we were taken to the main police station where we were given a sausage and a piece of bread, which we were unable to eat before we began the interrogation by the Gestapo. I was asked what I had done to prepare for leaving the country. I responded that I had a cousin who was sending an affidavit to enter the United States. One of them took large scissors, grabbed my head, and cut off part of my hair which he stuffed into my coat pocket with the uneaten food, took all my papers, money, and

screamed, "You Saujud you don't go anywhere." He marked a D on his record and pushed me into the corner. About three hours later our group was transported to the railroad station and lined up according to size. Being as short as I am, I had the privilege of facing a soldier with a gun pointing at me. It amused him that my knees started to shake in fear. I was relieved when the order came over the loudspeaker for us to get onto the train, of course, not realizing what lay ahead.

Our first endurance test was for eight of us to sit in a small compartment, made for four, with a Nazi policeman ordering us to lift our heads and stare into the ceiling lights without moving. One of our members couldn't continue and dropped his head. I was told to hit him in the face. Since I couldn't do it, the man from the "Master Race" did it to me instead. After continued harassment, the train stopped, and in the middle of the night, we were transferred into cattle cars. The doors were closed and locked from the outside. We were standing pressed against each other, totally exhausted and irritated. It was completely dark, without a breath of fresh air. People became hysterical, some cried, others prayed. Some of them fainted and had to be held up to prevent trampling.

Finally, after endless hours we were marched into the concentration camp of Dachau. There we were once again kept standing in a huge open area. With horror, I noticed that the man who had been next to me throughout this ordeal had his black hair turn white instantly. Suddenly he jumped of the line, ran to the Gestapo man, and screamed, "Enough is enough, stop this nonsense, we can't take it any longer." The soldier shot him dead. The daily routine of the camps is known by now. This was before the ovens became gas chambers. They had us stand in line in the cold of the early morning, but the preparations were not ready for use yet. They did not let us shower, but they returned us to our barracks, frustrated that they had not succeeded, in operation. We were disappointed that we had not had our bath. We did not know at the time what the plans were, and what the true reason was for not letting us in. We were always kept in the dark and lived in terror of the next movement or decision.

My wife was able to gather the necessary papers by the end of April and on May 10, 1939, we were able to leave Vienna. On May 24, we left Cherbourg on the Aquitania, arriving in New York on Memorial Day, 1939,

We were the sole survivors of our families. Our parents were deported; my parents' destination is unknown; Charlotte's parents were deported to Lodz, Poland, where they perished. My brother died in the concentration camp Gurs after fleeing across the border to Belgium and France. Charlotte's sister, Martha, was killed by the Germans in 1941 in Yugoslavia, according to the Red Cross. Her son, Peter, was sent from Holland to Germany to do forced labor and was never heard from again. His father, Hans, had joined the British Army to search for his son. He returned to England, beaten and exhausted, and died in a fatal accident, also a victim of the Holocaust.

Charlotte and I had a life in New York with our only daughter, Joyce. In 1966, Joyce met and married her wonderful husband, Herb in San Francisco. We followed Joyce to San Francisco

when our twin grandchildren were one year old. We have three grown grandsons, who have let us into their lives. The Holocaust is always a bitter memory, but I am 87 years old, and I have had a fulfilling family life in San Francisco. Charlotte and I owned our first home; we had successful careers; we took spectacular trips and cruises, but we never returned to Vienna together. The pain was still too strong.

This can never happen again. We must all fight to prevent it.