

Lily Gerson

Wartime Experience: Immigrated to the US

Vienna was the place where I was born, and where I grew up. My name then was Lily Zimentstark. We lived in the Leopoldstadt, the 2nd Bezirk (District), an area jokingly called the "Matzesinsel" (Matzo Island), because so many Jews lived there. My father, Sigmund, was a "Meister" furniture finisher, he painted, lacquered, polished, whatever it took to finish fine furniture. He was very good at his craft, skillful, artistic and meticulous. It was not easy to become a "Meister" in Vienna. His business was on Mariahilferstrasse in the 6th district, in a large shop on three levels. I loved going there, smelling, the paints and watching him work. His clients were furniture stores and well-to-do individuals. I remember how excited I was when I found out that one of his clients was an actor at the Burg Theater on whom I had a crush.

My mother, Anna, was busy at home, occupied with running the household and raising her two children, my brother and me. We had a maid, but my mother did all the marketing and cooking. She kept a kosher kitchen and was an excellent cook and baker. Our apartment was small but cozy and warm and always filled with wonderful aromas of cooking and baking when we came home from school. We were middle class, certainly not rich but comfortable enough. My childhood was happy. I always had friends. I liked school and wanted to go to university and become an interpreter.

My mother, brother and I went to the countryside for several weeks every summer. My father visited us on weekends. I was always glad to get back to Vienna for I loved the city. Both my parents were born in Poland, my father in Lemberg (Lvov), my mother in a small village. She was the youngest of sixteen children, eight of whom reached adulthood. Two of those immigrated to America. A sister who settled in Chicago and a brother who went to Hollywood and became a film writer. A few years later, he was killed in an automobile accident.

When my mother was 19 years old, she went to America to visit her older sister and stayed for two years. She was a beautiful young woman and had many suitors and probably would have remained in America, but she returned to Europe when her father was dying. Then she met my father. They were married and moved to Vienna. My mother loved America and often talked about wanting to go back, but it never happened.

When I was eight years old my mother took my brother and me to Poland to visit her family there. I have many good memories of that visit, both of the small villages and the big cities of Krakov and Bielitz, where my uncles and aunts lived with their families. They all perished in the Holocaust, with the exception of my cousin Morris from Krakov who was saved by Oskar Schindler and immigrated to Israel after the war.

Our comfortable life in Vienna came to an abrupt end when Hitler marched into Austria on March 13, 1938. I could not believe my eyes when I walked out into the street that day and saw the huge Swastika flags hanging from the windows. Overnight the city and the country had

changed. And the nightmare began. Looking back at it now, it is difficult to understand how we could have been so naïve as not to see it coming. But hindsight is easy.

Within a few weeks my father's business was taken over by an "Arischen Leiter", an Aryan manager who closed it after a few days. My father received no compensation whatever; Shops, stores; all businesses were simply taken away from their Jewish owners. Fortunately, my father had a few faithful clients who let him work illegally in their furniture stores, taking considerable risk upon them selves. Soon it became too dangerous, and he had to stop. My parents had some savings. They sold their life insurance, and later, one by one, their belongings. Looking back now I really don't know how they managed.

On "Kristallnacht", November 10, 1938, a group of S.A. men came to our apartment, looking for the "the men". My father and brother were hiding, certainly my father would have been sent to a concentration camp if they had found him. Our cousin in Chicago sent us an affidavit, but her financial circumstances were not good enough to guarantee for the whole family and she had to find another sponsor who finally agreed to send an affidavit, but only for my brother and me. It took nearly two years before we could overcome all the diffulties and obstacles of emigration and immigration. Ironically, the Nazis, so eager to rid the country of its Jews, did everything they could to make it incredibly difficult to get away. And the U.S. did its part in creating delays and problems with visas.

My brother and I left Vienna in February 1940, on a bitter cold winter day. I was seventeen years old and my brother was fifteen. Our cousin met us in Chicago. We stayed with her for two weeks. Then a Jewish children's organization placed my brother in a home, and I went to work as a nanny. Later I worked in a factory and went to business school at night to learn the skills that I would eventually enable me to get a job as a secretary or bookkeeper.

We made every possible effort to get our parents out of Austria. I cannot enumerate all the problems we encountered, from finding a sponsor, to obtaining visas, to getting money for their passage. Every time we overcame one problem two new ones appeared. We heard from our parents for the last time in the fall of 1941. They perished in Auschwitz, as did the rest of our family, our aunts, uncles, and cousins.

My brother served in the U.S. Army and after the war became a designer and engineer. I worked in offices in Chicago, New York and Miami Beach and finally came to California where I met my husband, Ray Robbers, a veterinarian. We were married in 1947 and had a wonderful marriage until he died of cancer in 1974. Our son and two daughters are all married, and I have eight grandchildren. I am remarried to Hans Gerson, an architect, now retired, and from him I have two stepsons and a stepdaughter and three more grandchildren.

Several years ago, I started a small pastry catering business, using many of my mother's recipes. In my portrait it is my mother's book "Die gute Wiener Mehlspeise" (The Good Viennese Dessert) that I am holding.

America has been my home for many years. I have a good life here. But the memory of the Nazi years, the horror and the despair of those years, the anguish and pain over the fate of my parents and all the victims of the Holocaust never leave me.