

## Phyllis Mattson

Wartime Experience: Sent to the United States on a Kindertransport

I was born on August 9, 1929 in Vienna, Austria, the only child of Laura and Samuel Finkel. My parents came from Galicia, Poland. When my father studied business in Vienna in early 1920's at the Hochschule fur Welthandel, he rented a room from my mother's aunt. That is how he met my mother, and at the time of their marriage in 1928, it seemed that my parents would have an easy life, but fate would have it otherwise. My father was born in Leipzig, Germany in 1901, but he grew up in Lemberg, (now Lviv), one of three children. His father, Abraham, was a greengrocer, while his mother's family, in the fur business in Leipzig, was more prosperous. His brother Max, who did not go to college, joined his maternal uncles in the fur trade and supported my father's education in Vienna. My mother was born in Lawoczne, Poland, in 1903, finished high school, and was a skilled seamstress.

The depression in the 1930's made life difficult. My father was unemployed for a long time, and my mother supported us with her sewing skills. We had a meager, two room apartment in the 9th district of Vienna, on Nussdorferstrasse. I attended public school around the corner from our apartment in the mornings, and in the afternoons I often went to play at friend's houses. In the summertime we often went to Lawoczne, Poland where my mother's grandparents, aunts and uncles lived, and to Stryj where her mother and brothers lived. We would also visit my father's parents and sister in Lviv. I remember my mother's family better because I would be left with them, perhaps for the whole summer.

On March 12, 1938, I was watching out our window as Hitler' army marched down our street, shouting "Heil Hitler." Awed by the unending procession of trucks, tanks and soldiers, I watched for hours, but did not know that our lives would change. I was 8 ½ at the time. Soon, our lives were altered in many ways. Even though my parents shielded me from worry, I knew that scary things were happening. First, I had to go to a different all-Jewish school across town, often harassed by Hitler youth groups. My mother's non-Jewish customers refused to pay for her work, thus creating financial hardships. Then, one terrible night, the SS came, demanding that we pack a few things and leave our apartment. They took us to another Jewish family's apartment, people we didn't know, who had to put us up for several weeks. We were able to return to our apartment, but soon after, in March 1939, my father was taken to a local prison with 2,000 other men. Their crime was being stateless having lost their Polish citizenship by a German decree. I really missed my father because we were really close. After a couple of months of jail, the Nazis, after checking assets and political ties of their prisoners, released most of them on the condition that they leave the country in ten days! Without visas, money and connections, that was almost impossible. Fortunately, Britain allowed these men entry as refugees and housed them in Kitchener Camp, a former army base in southern England. My father promised we would soon be reunited.

My mother and I left our apartment and moved in with a friend hoping to be able to join my father, but in the meanwhile, Britain declared war on Germany so my mother looked for other

ways of escape. She was able to get me on a transport with nine other children going to the United States; these were organized by Jewish charities in New York. She hoped to get her own papers for emigration to America imminently. Thus, on March 20, 1940, I, the youngest of our group, left Vienna by train to Genoa where we boarded an American ship, the SS Washington, to New York. The other children stayed with family on the east coast, while I traveled to San Francisco alone to stay with a distant “aunt” of my mother’s, but under the guardianship of a Jewish orphanage, Homewood Terrace. My mother expected to come within a couple of months but unfortunately her affidavits lacked the required financial backing. Nevertheless, she never gave up hope of coming to take care of me. My “aunt” had two children, older than I, and a sick husband. She owned a millinery shop in the Mission district in San Francisco, and her husband had a similar business. Cousin Cecylia was wonderful to me, teaching me English as well as taking me to the movies on Saturdays, and later to the World’s Fair. I was having a good time, but my aunt was distressed that my mother would not be able to come quickly, so my mother requested that I be sent to a children’s home. According to the immigration rules under which we came, it was forbidden for me to stay in the orphanage, so I was put into a foster home, although later I did stay at the orphanage.

In 1940, my father’s status was changed to “Prisoners of War” as Britain wanted all German speakers out of England. They were sent to the Isle of Mann, behind barbed wire, then on the ship, “Dunera”, where they were badly treated. In Australia, they were again interned behind barbed wire. Meanwhile, my mother was sent to Germany to work in the asparagus fields—backbreaking labor—and later to a cigar factory.

So, my little family was now on three continents, but connected by letters. My father and mother couldn’t correspond with each other after Britain and Germany were at war, so I, in America, also on the move, became the messenger. My life in San Francisco wasn’t smooth either and after a year, in February of 1942, I was moved to the orphanage. I liked it at Homewood Terrace—I liked having so many friends; the home was spacious; we had good food, health care, went to public schools and had many advantages thanks to the generous gifts of “godparents”, benefactors of the Home. I learned domestic skills such as cooking, sewing, and was able to earn some spending money as a dentist’s assistant. Nevertheless, I had some difficulties with housemothers and the director, and was moved to foster homes and back again two more times.

My father finally came to San Francisco in 1946 and we lived together until I went to University of California, Berkeley. He was anxious for me to get a good education and helped me as much as he could, but I also worked while going to college. I majored in Anthropology, later went to the University of Wisconsin for a master’s degree, after which I worked as a social worker in Kenosha. My next job was as a public health analyst, in Berkeley, California, leading me to pursue yet another degree at Harvard for a Master’s in Public Health. I combined the two fields in the rest of my working life as a researcher and college instructor.

I married Richard Mattson in 1957 and had two children, Laurel in 1959 and Jeffrey in 1962. I was happy that our lives were smooth, comfortable, and free from the political anxieties and

discrimination that had troubled my childhood. But this ended too. After divorce in 1971, I resumed my career and wrote a book, *Holistic Health in Perspective* in 1982. I traveled to Europe many times to reconnect with my family. In 1989, I taught English in China, and in 1994 I joined the Peace Corps to work in Nepal.

The saddest part of my story is the death of my mother in May 1942, when 10,000 Viennese were shipped to Minsk and shot into pits at near-by Maly Trostenac. However, I did not know the details of her death until 2001. My father and I never spoke of our lives in Vienna or of my mother, a silence common to Holocaust survivors.

In 2005, I published my memoir: *War Orphan in San Francisco: Letters Link a Family Scattered by World War II* and have often told my story at libraries and schools.