

Erika Meier

Wartime Experience: Fled to Shanghai

I was born on March 7, 1921, in Klosterneuburg, a small town about 15 miles north of Vienna, Austria. Our house was large enough to accommodate my family, consisting of my parents (Max and Bella Resek), my grandmother (Elsa Fischer), and my great-grandmother (Lina Strakozch). My father who was an architect and civil engineer had his business office in Vienna, as well as road improvement and razing of old buildings. My mother had a career as an opera singer until I was about eight years old. Then, after getting her M.A. in music, she started teaching voice, a career she kept up very successfully until the end of her life. My parents were both born in Vienna; my four grandparents came from Czechoslovakia.

My first seventeen years were spent in a most harmonious environment between school, family and friends. During summer vacations I went with my parents on trips to Italy or one of the beautiful Austrian lakes. During the rest of the year Grandma was always with me and saw to it that I did my homework and practiced piano. When I think back to that time in my life it seems to me that the word "stress" was unknown to us then.

Our life changed very suddenly in March 1938, when I was seventeen and Hitler's troops marched into Austria to "incorporate" it into the German "Reich". I remember the day vividly, when Austria's chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, announced on the radio that the German troops had crossed the border. His last words were: "Gott schuetze Oesterreich!" (May God protect Austria).

I wish I could say that the Austrian people were shocked and horrified about what happened – and I know that many of them were- but it turned out that most people welcomed Hitler and his hordes and overnight became enthusiastic Nazis. Apparently there had been an illegal Nazi underground movement for some time, especially among young people. A couple of days after the Anschluss, our doorbell rang, and there stood my best friend's brother in full Nazi uniform. The Boy Scout troop in which he had been so active, was really a disguised Nazi den. It was the first of many disappointments in people I had thought I knew. I was allowed to finish my school year which ended in June, but could not start the final year of my studies the following September. As it happened, in July a bunch of Nazis burst into our house in the middle of the night with drawn guns and ordered us to leave within 24 hours. Because my family was well known and liked for so many years in our town, my father could arrange for us to take a few days in order to have most of our furniture and belongings packed into containers and stored with a storage company in Vienna. Our neighbors watched us pack and asked to take vases, pictures, clocks, etc. "as souvenirs". Unfortunately, we never saw the containers again. Several years after World War II ended, we found out that they had been broken into and looted almost as soon as they arrived at the storage company.

We moved to a pension in Vienna and kept mostly indoors, since it was not safe to walk on the street or ride on a streetcar unless you could prove that you were not Jewish. My father's

business was taken over by a Nazi commissar who walked into his office one morning with a locksmith who changed the lock on the door while the commissar informed Father with a pleasant smile that as of now the business as “Aryanized” and he was taking it over.

Our car had already been brought to the party headquarters by our chauffeur (who undoubtedly received a commendation for such a patriotic act).

It became obvious very quickly that we would have to leave the country as fast as could be arranged. This, however, turned out to be very difficult. On the one hand, we had to get permission from the authorities to leave; on the other hand, we had to find a country that would issue us a quick visa to enter. Like most people in our situation we wanted to go to the United States, but the quota for people born in Austria was so small that it would have taken several years before we could hope to obtain a visa – and time was running out fast. When word got around that no visa was necessary to get to Shanghai, China, my father contacted his cousin, Margarete Kann, who had moved to Shanghai with her banker husband some fifteen years earlier. She enthusiastically answered Father’s letter, saying that they would certainly welcome us and see to it that we would have a place to stay. Now we had to get permission from the Nazi authorities to leave Austria; and after weeks of delay and paying a hefty tax a “Reichsfluchtsteuer” – we got our “stateless” passport with a big “J” in it. Now we had to find transportation that would get us out of the country and to our destination.

Everyday life as a Jew in Austria became more dangerous and already several of my parent’s friends had been arrested and were not heard from again. Luckily, Father was able to obtain three tickets on – of all things – an Italian luxury liner, the “Conte Grande”. Unfortunately there was no ticket for Grandma at that time and since it was of utmost importance for us to leave while we still could, it was decided that Grandma would stay for the time being with her sister in Vienna, whose late husband was “Aryan” so she was not bothered by the Nazis. Saying good-bye to her was terribly difficult, although we hoped to be reunited once she could get passage. My father’s family, however, consisting of his mother (my other grandmother), his brother and three sisters with husbands, hesitated to leave, although everybody urged them to. To say good-bye to them was heartbreaking, since we knew that we would not see them again. They all died in a concentration camp. Only his brother got out and joined us later in Shanghai.

On January 4, 1939, we took the train from Vienna to Trieste, and the relief we felt when we crossed the Austrian border into Italy is almost impossible to describe. The journey that would bring us to our new home was incredibly interesting. It lasted almost three weeks in which we saw a fascinating part of the world. When we finally arrived in Shanghai we felt more like world travelers than refugees – at least for the moment. Fortunately, optimism runs in my family and my parents did not give way to despondency or fear of the future. And as for me – well, when you are seventeen years old, everything is an adventure! The sights and sounds of the Far East were fascinating to all three of us and Aunt Margaret had gotten a very nice furnished apartment for us in the French Concession. It was fortunate that I had studied English in school, because a week after our arrival I got a job with an American family where I was to be a companion to their 12-year-old daughter in order to practice German with her since she

attended the German school in Shanghai. My knowledge of English came in handy, however, when I talked with her parents who did not speak German. I stayed in that job for about a year, during which time I learned typing and English shorthand and then got a position as secretary at the office of the American Express Company. My grandmother joined us in Shanghai a couple of months after our arrival, and it certainly was good to have the family together again.

For a while it seemed as though things were going to be all right. Although the war had started in Europe, it did not change much in our way of life, nor did the rumors of impending trouble with Japan; until December 7, 1941 – Pearl Harbor –when Japanese troops entered the city and took over all “enemy” businesses which included the American Express office. Once again, our lives were disrupted when the Japanese made all stateless refugees move into a designated area – Hongkew – on the other side of the Soochow Creek where living conditions were crowded and most housing was way below standard. Living under Japanese occupation became more difficult all the time. To get a job outside the “district” we had to get a monthly pass, which the Japanese official in charge would either give or withhold, depending on his mood. I was fortunate to find a job with a “neutral” firm outside the “district” where I stayed until the end of the war.

Amazingly, life in the “district” took on an almost normal aspect. Businesses were started, musical and stage performances took place, and people had even a kind of social life. During all of this there was always the threat of air raids, nightly blackouts, barbed-wire barricades, sirens, etc. But somehow life went on. In the spring of 1944, I met my future husband, Kurt, at a friend’s birthday party. He had come from Drefeld, Germany, in 1938, and had hoped to eventually get his parents out too. Unfortunately, time ran out for them and they became victims of Hitler. Kurt had studied at the Textile Academy in Zurich as a young man and was able to establish himself in his line of work as much as was possible under the circumstances. We got married on March 30, 1945, while the sirens warned of a possible air raid. A few weeks later the war ended in Europe and later that year the Japanese surrendered, the district was opened, and we could finally make plans to go to America. We quickly found out that our family was on three different quotas- German, Czechoslovakian and Austrian, depending on the place of birth. The earliest we could hope for was about a year and a half wait. I got a position as secretary at the office of the American Army Post Exchange, where I stayed until Kurt could get an affidavit from a relative in California and eventually a visa for the two of us in November, 1947. My parents were on the Austrian quota (which was extremely small) and my grandmother, who was on the Czech quota, would have to wait in Shanghai.

In December, 1947 we left for California where my husband established himself rather quickly in business, importing textiles. On August 27, 1948, our son, Robert, was born and on November our daughter, Patricia, arrived. Grandma joined us six months after our arrival in San Francisco and half a year later we moved from San Francisco to Mill Valley. It seemed impossible to get an immigration visa for my parents before the Chinese communists would overrun Shanghai. Finally we arranged for a visitor visa for them, which was good for only six months. For the next three years we had to go through incredible difficulties before they could become legal residents and later, citizens. My mother quickly established herself – like she had

done in Shanghai – as a well-known and well-loved voice teacher. As was customary in our family from the time I was born, we again lived all together in one house – four generations – happily united.

Unfortunately, I lost my husband in 1962 when my son was 14 and my daughter was 9 years old. I took over the business and I was lucky to have had my parents help me raise the children during those years. My father died in 1969 at 86 and my mother in 1988 at 93. I closed the business and became a secretary a large bank where I stayed until my retirement in 1989. I still live in Mill Valley, in the same house to which we had moved in 1952, just before my daughter was born. Now both my children are married and I have three lovely grandchildren, all of them living within easy reach. We do not want to forget the past- but it is important to enjoy the present.